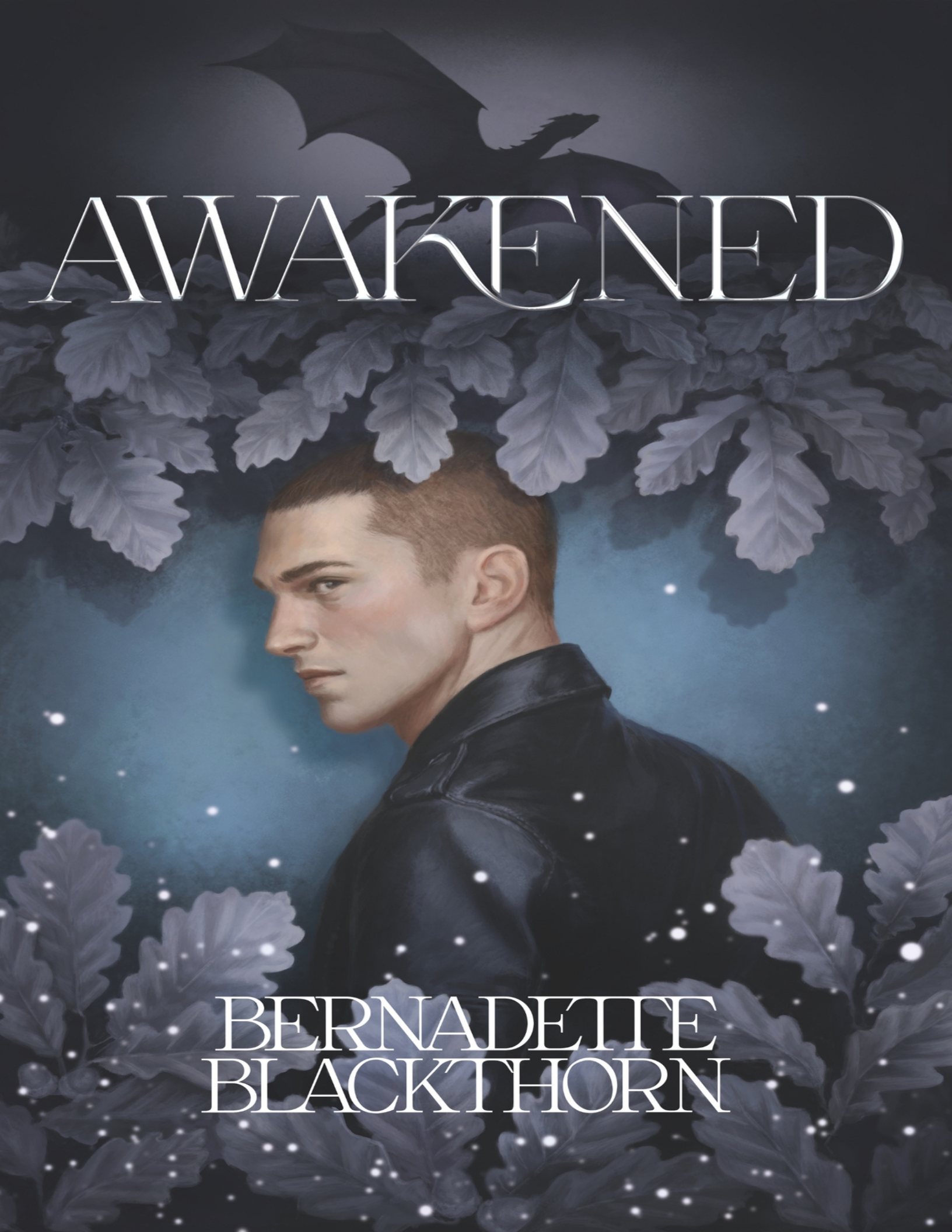
AWAKENED



BERNADETTE BLACKTHORN

Awakened

The Last Daughter

Book 2

Bernadette Blackthorn

OceanofPDF.com

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Editing by @elaines.proofreading.editing

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Acknowledgments
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For my husband—
You are my strength. My calm in the storm.
Thank you for the encouragement, the nights spent entertaining K so I could write/edit, the countless "I'll handle it, you write's," the easy acceptance when I told you I wanted to quit my job, & all the other countless ways (big and small) you show your love and support.
Thank you for being the best husband, father & friend I could ever ask for.
These books are for you, our family, and our future. Together.
I love you.

PS. Now that I'm working from home, I REALLY think we could manage another cat…. Just sayin'.

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Content Warning

Overall Series Note:
As someone who struggles with mental health issues, I want you to know that your mental health matters more to me than finishing this book. Please — don't push yourself to read something that is going to cause you harm. My book isn't as dark as a lot of books I've read but it's definitely not a sweet, fluffy book either. It's okay to step away if something gets too heavy, whether that's my book or any other book. While I don't personally consider this a pitch black book, the MMC's are absolutely more morally grey than not, and the way some of them treat the heroine at the start of this series is not kind. That being said, there is no physical abuse by the heroes against the heroine, nor will there ever be. There is also no injuries to animals OR children, nor will there ever be. (In any of my stories).

Content warnings for Awakened:

- Captivity
- Deliberate Deprivation
- Forced Medication
- Sustained emotional abuse.
- On-page death of a parent
- Child abuse, parental/domestic abuse and neglect, including recollections of physical violence and prolonged mistreatment.
- Emotional and psychological abuse by love interests

- Misogyny and dehumanization of Omegas
- Graphic violence, torture, murder and attempted murder including beatings, impalement and strangulation.
- Prolonged death of a side character by burning alive
- There is absolutely no physical or sexual assault by the MMC's.
- There IS a scene of forced Alpha Command which results in seizures, but it's not purposeful.

Explicit Sexual Content:

- Oral sex
- Physical restraint
- Overstimulation
- Heat spikes
- Biologically compelled arousal
- Possessive/dominate language
- Dirty talk
- Breeding kink
- Praise kink

This story is intended for mature audiences (18+) only.

If you decide to continue, I hope this story reaches you when you need it the most. I also hope Idril's journey from caged to something so much stronger inspires you the way it's inspired me while writing it. It won't be a quick transformation— she will have to work for her strength and happiness, but I can promise, without a doubt, she will see her HEA.

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What Is Omegaverse?

An explanation as it pertains to the lore and world building of The Last Daughter Series

Omegaverse, while a huge part of this story, is not the primary genre. That being said, I know a lot of new readers may be confused by the aspects being worked into what would otherwise be a Fantasy RH romance without some kind of explanation. There are so many variations of Omegaverse in general— there's never really been a strict guideline for the sub-genre. Therefore, I'm going to give you an overall idea and how it applies to my world.

Omegaverse, at its core, is a sub-genre that explores power dynamics, primal instincts and fated bonds. Most readers of Omegaverse love the intensity of the Alpha/Omega pairings that lean heavily on dominance, submission, and instinctual obsession. It is, essentially, a secondary biological designation.

Core Dynamics and Lore in my Series: Long before crowns and castles, skyscrapers and cell phones, before even the vampires and wolven came to be, there existed a biological hierarchy written in the very blood and bone of every species that did— and would ever— exist. It's known as Designation Dynamics (Or, Omegaverse for those not living in this world). It is a biological designation that binds vampires, wolven and humans alike. No matter the species, they all have one thing in common: Designation.

Alphas: Alphas can be either male or female, but they are usually male. Alpha females are incredibly rare. *Alphas make up around 10% of the*

world's population across species. They are incredibly strong and instinct-driven. Their presence, no matter their species, commands obedience. They are the embodiment of dominance and drive, and their instincts often lead them to roles where they can utilize those innate abilities of leadership, control and possession.

- **Alpha Command**: The power to override an Omega or Beta's instincts with their voice. Wielding Alpha Command is supposed to be a way for an Alpha to keep their Omega safe when their instincts are spiraling, but like most things, it has been— and is— used for nefarious purposes. What is supposed to be a way to protect those weaker than them, it also has the capability to force an Omega, Beta, or even a weaker Alpha to do as they're bid. Alpha Command can only be used sporadically. Once deployed, the Alpha requires a period of rest before they can use their Command again. It varies by Alphas, but it can be anywhere from a few hours to a few days. This prevents over-use. An Alpha Command can and will cause the recipient to suffer negative mental, emotional and physical reactions if deployed too often. The Command must be followed as ordered and as determined by the recipient's interpretation if left unclear. For example, if an Alpha Commands someone to "stop," the one being Commanded can choose to interpret the Command however they please. A brief pause in breath, for instance, can be interpreted as "stopping," when the directive isn't specified.

Alphas are highly receptive to **scent**, using it to determine Pack Bonds as well as Scent Match Fated Mate Bonds. Each Alphas scent is unique.

- **Packs**: Alphas tend to form Packs of other Alphas, determined by Fate. A Pack Bond works the same as a Fated Mate Bond— it snaps into place the moment they scent a member of their Pack.
- **Alpha's Anatomy:** while being larger, stronger and more possessive, Alphas also have a unique physical characteristic called a knot. **A knot**: is a large, round muscle at the base of their penis that inflates when they get turned on. This knot provides

intense pleasure for both the Alpha and Omega during sexual intercourse. It expands even further when the Alpha is close to finishing and locks the Alpha and Omega together and for an extended period of time to increase the chances of breeding. In this world, Alpha's knots only expand when they are with an Omega and a lot of Alphas will choose not to knot any female that's not their Fated Mate.

Omegas- Omegas are rare, coveted and often misunderstood. Normally submissive in nature, this is often mistaken as weakness when Omegas are emotionally and mentally the furthest thing from it. Omegas can be both male and female, though almost all are female. Omega males are even more rare than Alpha females. *Omegas make up a total of 3% of the world's population across species*. Because of this, most Omegas bond or mate with Packs made up of multiple Alphas.

- **Heat Cycles**: Omegas have regular heat cycles which are a period of intense sexual desire and need that can only be satisfied by taking an Alpha's knot. Omega's can choose to use suppressants to keep their heat (and scent) at bay, but prolonged usage can cause an Omega's instincts to go haywire once they finally come off of them. Suppressants can be either pills, or much stronger shots. Heat Cycles happen usually once a year and last multiple days to a week.
- **Slick**: In order to ease their passage for a knot, Omegas will produce larger amounts of arousal than a normal human. This is called slick. It is sweet, translucent and is produced in copious amounts when an Omega is turned on.
- **Nests** are very personal to Omegas. Their instincts demand that they Nest in order to feel safe, and Nesting— as well as having proper Nesting materials— is considered a biological imperative for the designation. Keeping an Omega from Nesting can cause mental and even physical decline. This can lead to ***Chronic Sensory Disruption Disorder*** *(CSDD)*. CSDD can cause hair loss, disassociation, chronic fatigue, spiraling instincts, increase in anxiety, etc.

- **Nests** are usually large piles of super soft blankets, pillows, and other soft things. Omegas also love to have their Mate's scents in their Nests and will usually ask their Mates to sleep with them, or ask for pieces of their Alpha's clothing to ensure their Nest smells like their Mates. A Nest is a very personal and private place for an Omega. This is where they will sleep with their Mates, where they spend their Heat cycles, where they go when they feel unsafe, and— after they have their children— where they spend the first few months of the baby's lives. To enter an Omega's Nest without asking is considered a grievous act and breach of etiquette. The position of blankets, pillows, etc is determined by the Omega—their instincts pushing them to create a Nest that looks "perfect."

Betas: Betas are, to be frank, the same as you and I. *Around 87% of the world's population are Betas*, and while they all have a unique scent, their Scent usually is very light or muted. They don't have the same instincts as Omegas or Alphas. Betas can be any gender. They can bond or mate with either Alphas or Omegas by choice, and sometimes even form Fated Designation pack bonds with Alphas.

Marking and Bonding: There are multiple ways to form bonds. Someone can chose to form a Mate Bond and cement that bond by biting and marking their chosen Mate. Most often, these Bond Bites are done on the neck, but a bite anywhere on the body will work. Unfortunately, that makes Forced Bonding rather easy for those who want to commit such an atrocity.

Omega Registry: a Nationally run registry that requires the participation of all Omegas. This registry can be broken down into local and county registries to make looking up an Omega easier. The reason for its existence is two fold. First, it keeps Omegas who aren't being well taken care of from falling through the cracks. Omegas are so precious and so revered in general that it also unfortunately makes them a target for traffickers and kidnappers. Under the guise of protection, the Registry ensures Omegas are not neglected, abandoned or lost in society.

The Registry also acts as a form of control. By binding Omegas to the law, it gives the government the power to "keep an eye" on Omegas. Things

like breeding rights, political gain, leverage and surveillance are a well known, but largely denied, reason for its existence.

- **Scents and Scent Matches**: One of the main tenants of the Omegaverse is Scent. It could be said that almost the entire designation and their lives are based around Scents. Each person across all species have their own unique Scent which becomes obvious when they Designate (usually as a pre-teen). Bonds such as Pack Bonds are determined by Scent and "snap" into place just like Fated Mate bonds do. Fated Mate/Scent Match bonds work the same. Once an Alpha or an Omega scents their Fated Mate/Scent Match, the bond snaps out to connect them to their Mate or Mates. It is immediate and irrevocable. All species have Fated Mate bonds via Scent Matches, while vampire and wolven also have their own Fated Mate bond based on their species.

A vampire's **Blood Mate** or a wolven **Moon Mate** will always be their Scent Matched Mate, *but only 10%-15% of Scent Matched Mates will also be "blessed by Fate" as either a Blood or Moon Mate*. Humans very rarely Mate with Supernaturals. Cross-species Fated Mates are so rare as to be considered nothing more than a fanciful tale to most of the population. That being said, there <u>are</u> human-vampire and human-wolven Scent Matches

- Alphas and Omegas have **Scent Glands** in their wrists, as well as the juncture where the neck meets the shoulder. Scents, while individual, are a great way to tell how an Alpha or Omega is feeling. For example, when an Omega is aroused their scent will become sweeter. Or, if someone is upset, their Scent can turn "bitter" or "singed." Alphas and Omegas like to Scent each other. This usually means a lot of nuzzling, or can even be as simple as an Omega wanting to wear her Alpha's shirts to bed.

Suppressants and Descenters: It's considered rude to "flaunt" your Scent in public. Because Alphas are so biologically keyed to protect Omegas, and Omegas are so biologically predisposed to submit to Alphas, etiquette states that Alphas and Omegas use a descenter when not in their

own homes. Suppressants will not only suppress heats, ruts, and instincts, but also an Alpha or Omega's Scent. Descenters can be sprayed on and last a shorter period of time, and can also be washed off if needed.

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Series Recap

If you're anything like me, you read Caged and now you can't remember what happened even though it's only been 6 months since the book was released. I do the same thing to myself when I'm reading a series. I read so much that by the time the next book comes out, I simply can't remember everything that happened/who everyone was (especially in fantasy!), or my ADHD kicks in and lbvs, anything that happened more than 3 days ago is really hit or miss for me (at no fault of the author lol), or you hadn't planned on reading CAGED at all because you knew it was going to be a series, but then FOMO hit and…well… see points A and/or B.

Regardless, something I always wished for as a reader was a series recap of all the important things that happened and people I met in the last book—just so I didn't feel like I had to go back and re-read it to get the full experience of a much-awaited sequel. There's soooo many good books out there—who has time to re-read every time a new book in a series comes out? Not me, that's for sure.

(Unless it's Brandon Sanderson. His books are always the exception to the rule LOL)

I told myself that if I ever wrote a book, I was going to put a "recap/refresher" at the start of my sequels. Not anything real intensive. Just a recap of what happened in the previous book(s) and a refresher of the magic system/world (or what I've revealed of it so far) and the main characters/side characters.

This is my first time doing this, so shoot me a message on Instagram (@bernadetteblackthornauthor) or email me (berndetteblackthornauthor@gmail.com) and let me know what you think.

If there's a way to improve it, anything I missed that you wish I would have included, or if you think this is stupid and I should toss it as an idea lol!

Alright? Alright!

Here's a very brief review:

Our FMC, Idril, has been held captive at home with her father since her mother's death almost a decade prior. She's forced to use suppressants to hide her Omega perfume by her father and this continues when she's taken by the Bloodbound and held captive at their castle/estate, HQ.

The Bloodbound sent Caelan in to do recon at Varenthrall's estate after discovering Idril's father, Jonathan, was working with the Severed. There, Caelan discovered Idril and their Fated Bond. He also found a vial of blood that had strange properties and a list that they later discovered had the names of missing Omegas on it. But after discovering the list only contained half the names, they sent Caelan back in, where he was ambushed by Idril's father and poisoned with silver. He was so close to death he wound up going into a coma, which meant he was unable to explain to the Bloodbound that Idril had nothing to do with the ambush—despite the fact that her father set her up to make it look like she'd been the mastermind behind it.

Idril was taken back to HQ and held prisoner, believed to have betrayed Caelan and set him up. She was interrogated, punished and treated poorly overall by the everyone at HQ. The only person to show her any type of kindness was Riven, who laid into Vae and Daxen multiple times for how they were treating her and at one point got so angry he punched Daxen in the face.

Daxen, Vae and Riven are spending all their free time researching what they can to discover what the "Gate" and "light" are after the Omegas they found continue to repeat the same phrases over and over insinuating that something is "waking up," and attributing it to a mysterious female third-party. This, Daxen and Riven believe also has something to do with strange happenings all over the world—random earthquakes where there are no fault lines, fire appearing out of nowhere and burning in perfect circles, entire groups of animals running into the ocean and killing themselves, etc. All the strange occurrences are happening along the Ley lines, which Riven believes is connected somehow.

Eventually Dax and Vae discover that the blood in the vial Caelan found contained magical properties and reacted strangely when introduced to any

outside elements. They also discovered the home of Dr Albertson. There, they found a murder board which led them to believe the missing Omegas were being taken by Varenthrall and the Severed and injected with the blood they found in the vials for reasons unknown. They also discovered Varenthrall was attempting to breed the Omegas as well.

Later, they discover that the blood is actually Idril's. At this point, Idril has been experiencing strange things on her own as well—especially during intense, emotional moments where she lashes out. At one point Vaelenor is exceptionally cruel and she lashes out, causing the wooden beams of her attic room to explode into tiny pieces.

Idril falls asleep and has a dream where she's in a cavern and comes across a large pillar of ice and earth. She wipes the soot away and is shocked to find a bright blue eye staring back at her. She screams and jolts awake, only to find her hands covered in ash and soot from her dream.

Vae and Daxen come up to the attic to confront Idril about her "magical" blood. Unfortunately, they do so without remembering to reapply their descanter and the moment Idril scents them, the Scent Match Bond snaps into place for her. But because she's on suppressants, they can't scent her back, thus remaining ignorant to the fact that she's their Fated Mate.

After finding out that her blood is being used by her father in experiments, Idril agrees that the safest place for her until they can find answers is in the cell where these sudden abilities she doesn't know and can't control can't hurt anyone on accident.

Right when Vae and Dax are leaving the cell, Silas appears and tells them there are a group of wolven at the Bloodbound perimeter and one of them claims the Bloodbound have his Fated Mate. Silas assumes, correctly, that the wolven is referring to Idril.

Main Characters:

Idril Varenthrall—FMC, Human, Omega, 22 years old. Mother- Annalise Varenthrall (Deceased) • Father- Jonathan Varenthrall

Vaelenor (Vae)—MMC / Vampire / Alpha / 663 (looks early 30's). Bonded Pack— Matched by Fate with Daxen and Caelan. Member of the Bloodbound. Member of Gavran's inner circle.

Daxen (Dax) Montclair—MMC / Vampire /Alpha/ 668 (looks early 30's). Bonded Pack— Matched by Fate with Vaelenor and Caelan. Member of the Bloodbound. Member of Gavran's inner circle.

Caelan O'Ruaric—MMC / Vampire / Alpha / 665 (looks early 30's). Bonded Pack— Matched by Fate with Daxen and Vaelenor. Member of the Bloodbound. Member of Gavran's inner circle.

Gavran (Gav)— Vampire / Alpha / Last Shield|Leader of the Bloodbound. Lone Alpha/No Pack or Mate.

Ford—Vampire / Alpha / 102 years old (looks late 30's/early 40's). Bonded Pack—Matched by Fate with Evander and Silas. Member of the Bloodbound. Last known TURNED Vampire alive. Member of Gavran's Inner Circle.

Evander—Vampire / Alpha/ 302 years old (looks late 20's/early 30's). Bonded Pack—Matched by Fate with Ford and Silas. Member of the Bloodbound. Member of Gavran's Inner Circle.

Silas—Vampire / Alpha/ 193 years old (looks mid-late 20's). Bonded Pack—Matched by Fate with Evander and Ford. Member of the Bloodbound. Member of Gavran's Inner Circle.

Riven—Vampire / Alpha / 674 (looks late 30's). Lone Alpha. Hasn't found his Pack/Mate. Head of Boston's seedy underground. Owns a gym that doubles as an information way station/other things the Bastards purposely don't ask about. Riven has built his empire on other people's secrets, while holding his own close to his heart. Romantic, but doesn't believe he'll find his Happily Ever After. Is rarely seen dressed in anything another other than a personally tailored, three-piece-suit. Punched Daxen. Would do it again.

Calder—Vampire / Beta / Looks early 40's— one of the Doctor's at HQ. Daxen says he reminds him of a cross between Hawkeye Pierce and Dr. house.

Lenora—Vampire / Beta / Looks to be in mid-30's— One of the Doctors at HQ. No-nonsense. Does her job and doesn't ask questions. No interested in drama. STUPIDLY loyal to the Bloodbound.

Cage—Vampire / Alpha / Looks to be in his early/mid-20's. No Pack. Trainee for the Bloodhound. Family is high profile and his father is super influential and is the head of a major House. Cage is an asshole. He's sadistic, a liar, and a total tool. He hates Idril, and is the worst of the worst of the Bloodbound trainees.

Jonathan Varenthrall—Human / Alpha / Mid-50's • Wife—Annalise Varenthrall (Deceased) • Daughter—Idril Varenthrall

Annalise Varenthrall (Deceased)—Human / Omega • Husband—Jonathan Varenthrall • Daughter—Idril Varenthrall

Dr. Cecil Albertson— Human / Beta / Late 50's. Was a geneticist who was black-balled from the scientific community for taking on a patient for good reasons despite pushback/orders not to. Has a good heart, but found himself working for Jonathan. Idril's doctor her whole life, he hates Jonathan but seems stuck working with him.

Mara— Human / Beta / 60's. Human servant in the Varenthrall house who was Idril was closest to.

Calla—Vampire / Omega —not seen on page. Found her way to Chicago HQ looking for sanctuary. Doesn't remember he past. Gavran sent Ford and Evander to Chicago to facilitate her return to her family. Discovered she can make sparks appear at her fingertips. In her sleep one night, Ford recorded her repeating, *"One thread bound, but one thread frays. She is the flame. She burns to bring light. She is the light. The light wakes the gate. The gate is awake."* Remembers waking up in the trunk of a car and being injected with something. One of the Omega's kidnapped by Varenthrall and injected with Idril's DNA.

Daniella-Human / Omega— found by Riven's men in a dumpster behind Redmark. Will randomly start to glow so bright it's impossible to look right at her. The light is described as feeling "alive," "solid," and "like something terrible and wonderful."Currently being kept in a safe house of Riven's. Spends most of her time sleeping and repeating the same phrase repeatedly. *"Four became one. One became light. Light wakes the gate. She is the*

gate.” One of the Omega’s Varenthrall kidnapped and injected with Idril’s DNA.

Whitetail- Vampire / ?? / Age:?? —Incredibly intelligent female who doesn’t show her face in public. Her real name is unknown, as is her designation and age. She’s got a report with Daxen…kind of. She has no problem calling people out on their shit. Also discovered that the blood Caelan found is Idril’s. Told Daxen that when she put it in soil, flowers started to grow within a few minutes.

Shade—Cat. Panther. Maybe. We aren’t totally sure what he is…yet.

World Building/Magic (what we know so far)

This series takes place in a world identical to our own aside from a few key differences.

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The first is that all species are the ABO Designations (Alpha/Beta/Omega), and that humans live openly side-by-side with Vampires and Wolven (wolf shifters who refer to their wolves as Beasts.)

No one knows exactly where the Wolven and Vampires came from. History shows humans have existed for thousands and thousands of years and then sometime 2,000-ish years ago, wolven and vampires appeared. There are no records about where they came from or if there were, they’ve been destroyed or hidden.

Vampires:

Like fictional vampires, the vampires in The Last Daughter world are abnormally strong, can see well in the dark, heal 10-20x faster than a human—assuming they’ve fed—and drink blood. Unlike fictional vampires, these vampires CAN go out in the sun. If they’re outside for more

than 5-6 hours they'll start to get sluggish, but they certainly won't get sick or die or burn up. They don't turn into bats or any other animals, nor are they allergic/sensetive to garlic/crosses. They also don't need to be granted permission to enter someone's residence. They can die one of two ways: Fire and Beheading. Everything else—again, assuming they've fed/can feed quickly—is healable.

Vampires also have designations. Just like humans, there are Alphas, Betas and Omegas. Vampires can live upwards of 1,000-1,200 years. Some even longer. It is harder for them to have children—science assumes it's because they live so long. Kind of a way to keep the population manageable. Most vampire couples are lucky to sire 2-3 children in their lifetime.

The Bloodbound:

The World's population contains about 20% Vampires, 50% humans and 30% wolven. Because they're the smallest species, they don't have separate entities for military/police. Almost since their inception, vampires have governed themselves. Their police/military/CIA/FBI/etc are all packed into one organization: The Bloodbound (known as Bastards).

The Bloodbound are known to be a highlight skilled, highly trained organization of special operatives. The leader of the Bloodbound is known as **The Last Shield**. This is a voted-in position. Most Last Shields hold office for 300-400 years. There have been seven. Gavran is the eighth.

The Last Shield decides where his stronghold is located. He typically chooses 5-10 males as his inner circle/highest Commanders. Gavran bought land in Massachusetts hundreds of years ago and ordered HQ built on that land. That is where the head of the organization has sat for hundreds of years. Later, Garan ordered the compound to be built—where 200+ trainees and 50 full Bastards live and train.

There are thousands of Bloodbound, however, who don't live in Massachusetts. There are twenty-two additional compounds across the US, Canada and Mexico, twelve in Europe, ten in Asia, eleven in South America, five in Africa and three in Australia.

Their main duties are policing the Vampire race as a whole, rescuing trafficked Omegas/females of all species, and fighting a seemingly endless fight against their enemy—The Severed.

The Severed:

The Severed were once Vampires. Through highly-secret black magic, the Severed go through a process that transforms them. Unfortunately, this magic is the furthest thing from stable and doesn't always work the way it's intended. It's a toss of the dice whether you'll come out the other side with all your wits, or if you'll come out with the mental capacity of an animal—and used as fodder during raids.

The Severed believe the Vampires are too strict, too rigid, and too feudal. They dislike the disparity between Large and Small Houses and dislike the species refusal to touch anything remotely related to magic. Their goal is to turn who they can to their side, force who they can't, and kill the rest.

In order to do that, they need to get rid of the Bloodbound first. Something they've been trying to do for centuries.

Not much else is known about the organization. Most of what is known is conjecture.

Wolven:

Like the vampires, the wolven of this world are very similar to most wolf shifters in literature. The big difference, however, is that they refer to their inner wolves as their "Beasts," and their Beasts are far larger than "normal"/wild wolves. Think dire wolves, but larger.

Alphas with a title/Bloodline like Soren, especially, can grow to the size of Clydesdales. Most Alphas will be the size of a regular horse and Betas and Omegas will reach the size of slightly larger than normal dire wolves.

The wolven are a much more secretive species. They prefer to live in large forested areas set aside for their use by the government. Their Packs are large, but close-knit. In the US there are four major Packs—Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern.

Pack hierarchy is similar to other literature. There is an Alpha of each of the four Packs, and the title is hereditary—passed down to the oldest Alpha child (male or female). You will hear Soren referred to as the Alpha Heir because he is the heir to the Pack Alpha seat. But because of the ABO dynamics, his "beta" is referred to as his "Second," because he, too, is an Alpha.

There isn't much known about the wolven because they are a secretive species. Not because they dislike humans, but because they prefer to live close to nature and their own kind. Their Beasts are very much animals and

wolven simply find the bustle of cities too busy and claustrophobic to live in for long periods of time.

Most of their history is passed down by word of mouth. While all wolven are educated about their species and its history, there are many stories that are only passed on to the Pack Alpha and his/her immediate family.

Fated Bonds:

There are four (known) Fated Bonds in this world. Three Bonds are romance/love based and one is based solely on friendship and are non-sexual/romantic.

Pack Bonds are discovered the same as a Scent Match Fated Bond—through Scent. Packs can be made up of males/females or a mixture of both. Because romance/sexual attraction is based on designations, gender is as much of a precursor. If a female is attracted to other females, there's nothing saying Fate won't give her a Pack Bond with two males, and that all three won't later find a Scent Match Omega who's a female who is also attracted to both males and females. There can really be any mix of gender. Fate never gets that wrong.

Pack Bonds can be metaphysically "seen/sensed" as a *dark green thread*.

Scent Match Bond is a romantic/sexual Bond that is discovered through Scent. The moment an Alpha/Beta scents their Omega, they simply know they're Fated Mates and vice versa.

A few things to note:

-Scent Match Bonds must be reciprocated in order for both parties to be aware of their existence. If an Omega scents her/his Alphas, but the Alphas don't scent the Omega, then the Omega is the only one aware of the Bond. The Bond will appear, and will continue searching for the other half of its soul/thread until the Alphas scent the Omega and get close enough for the Bond to "snap" into place.

-Scent Match Bonds CAN exist unfulfilled for a period of time, despite knowledge of its existence by all parties. There is a level of "proximity" that is required for both halves of the Scent Match Bonds to connect and "snap" into place. Until that happens, both sides will yearn for each other and the Bond will urge them closer.

Scent Match Bonds appear as threads of gold.

In addition to ABO/Scent Match Mate/Pack Bonds, there are also ***Species-specific Fated Mate Bonds*** that can appear in addition to the Scent Match Bond.

Blood Bond/Vampire Fated Bond:

This Fated Bond snaps into place once a vampire has tasted his/her Fated Mate's Blood. Just like a Scent Match, a thread will manifest in the Alpha/Beta/Omega's souls and both halves will reach out for the other and connect.

Vampire Fated Bond threads are burgundy.

Moon Mate/Wolven Fated Bond:

A wolven Moon Mate Bond will manifest when both parties stand together beneath the Full Moon. Just like a Scent Match, a thread will manifest and both halves will reach for the other and connect.

Wolven Fated Bond threads are ice blue.

It's important to note:

—Not all members of a Pack will be blessed with a Species-specific Bond in ADDITION to the Scent Match Bond. A Scent Match Bond is the *only* Bond that is guaranteed to apply to an entire Pack. But ONLY IF THAT PACK ARE ALSO MATCHED BY FATE.

For example, if a Vampire Alpha bites an Omega while they're both wearing descenter/on suppressants and can't smell each other's scent, the Blood Bond can still snap into place for both the Alpha and Omega. If the vampire Alpha is a part of a Fated Pack, he will know for certain that the Omega is also his Scent Match as well as the Scent Match for the rest of his Pack.

However, just because that Alpha and Omega are Blood Mates doesn't mean the rest of the Pack will be as well. There's as big of a chance that none of them will be blessed with an addition Bond as there is that all of them will be.

All Fated Bonds are Scent Matched, but not all Fated Bonds are species-specific.

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Author's Note on Groveling

A Note from the Author on Groveling (and expectations):

I'm sure if you follow me on social media you've already seen me post about this a thousand times. But for those of you who haven't, I thought it prudent to inform you of the plan in regards to everyone's favorite part of angsty romances:

The Grovel.

Awakened is the start of an epic 2-book grovel arc. What Vae and Dax did in Caged requires far more time to come to terms with and make amends for than the limited time they're given in Awakened. As an author, it was important for me not to rush this story—and most of all, not to rush the relationships. It's unrealistic for men who screwed up as epically as those two did to do a complete 180 in mere hours or days.

More importantly, it was important to establish the foundation of a "feelings" between Vae, Dax and Idril organically. Someone like Daxen doesn't go from "she's a manipulative, dangerous, lying Omega who lies" to "oh my god Im obsessed with her I need her in my life and I'll do anything to have her" just because he finds out she was telling the truth.

So for those of you who are expecting a nice, tidy reckoning followed by minimal fallout and 500 pages of grovel in Awakened… you'll want to adjust your expectations because that is NOT this book.

However, by the end of Prophesied (Book 3), and even into Book 4, you **will** get the all-encompassing, on their knees crawling through glass just for a chance she'll forgive them grovel you're dying for. I promise.

I would like to note that, from the start I promised you all a multi-book grovel. Awakened is the START of that grovel. The main bulk of it will come in Prophesied. Please don't be upset because you finish Awakened and think the characters haven't groveled enough. You're right. They haven't. They know it. I know it. And I promise you… Idril knows it. She won't make this easy for these men and neither will I.

The grovel is coming.

But first….it's time for these boys to ***wake up.***

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Prologue

Soren

I'm not worried about staying quiet as I search for my pack's missing Omega. Stealth stopped mattering days ago, once we passed the forty-eight-hour mark without finding her.

My paws pound across the forest floor. Twigs and kindling snap like broken bones beneath my heavy tread. There's a light mist sneaking through the canopy of new spring leaves, shimmering in the setting sun, throwing tiny rainbows across tree trunks older than me.

As the sun sets over the horizon, the light dims until the Mother appears from behind rain-filled clouds, blessing the world with her guidance. My silver coat glints in her moonlight, but for once, the Mother's presence does little to soothe my anxiety.

My overwhelming, crushing sense of failure grows with each day that passes without finding our missing pack member.

My father, our pack Alpha, says I'm too hard on myself—that our missing Omega isn't my fault.

I disagree.

I'm the Heir. It's my job to protect every member of our pack, and I take my job seriously. Each wolven life is precious, but especially the lives of our females and pups. In the eighty-plus years I've been alive, a female has never gone missing from our pack.

Our Elders say I'm still young—and compared to the centuries they've lived, maybe I am—but I still know what it means when a trail goes cold,

same as any good hunter.

Disappearances don't just occur. Our pack is large—in the thousands—but close. We function as a family, as the Mother intended. We look out for each other. Protect one another.

No one runs off to the big city for a *"better life."*

Cities are full of pollution and noise and humans living so close together they have to fight for oxygen. Nothing about that appeals to wolven.

Not to mention, unlike the vampires, we don't blend in with humans. We're too big. Too primal. Even in our two-legged form, there's always something about us that humans can sense. It makes them nervous. Makes them smell like prey.

Still, some believe Saline wanted a life in the city. I know better. I've never been close with the Omega, but I know she'd never leave voluntarily.

She wanted to explore the world, yes, but she loves her home. She loves her pack and family. She's spent the last four years training with one of our most gifted healers and often talks about finding her mate and settling down in a cottage of her own.

When her mentor became too sick to travel and missed the next supply run, Saline came to my father for permission to take her place.

My father allowed it.

By all accounts, everything was fine right up until she visited the apothecary to purchase herbs, tinctures, and a few rare ingredients we can't grow on pack lands.

Her guards waited outside the store. After thirty minutes, they started to get nervous. After forty, they went to find her and instead discovered she was missing.

I was with my father when he got the call, and I haven't stopped hunting for her since. My search has expanded gradually with each passing day, stretching mile after mile further away from where she went missing.

This morning, I stumbled across a forested area I didn't even realize was here. It's secluded—about twenty miles away from the nearest human town—and, if I'm not mistaken, some human's personal property.

It's peaceful, but nothing out of the ordinary, until—

I still, claws digging into the dirt and leaves. Every one of my senses dials up to a thousand, going on high alert. My nostrils flare, searching for

confirmation of what I know I just smelled, even if my brain struggles to make sense of it.

There's something here. Something that shouldn't exist.

My nostrils flare, but the scent doesn't change. This isn't a false alarm or my mind playing tricks on me. I'm not so sleep-deprived that my senses are losing touch with reality.

Against all odds, there's a fucking *panther* out here.

And unless I'm losing my mind, its scent is… not normal.

It makes no sense. Unless it escaped from a zoo, there's no logical reason for a panther to be in these woods. Panthers aren't even indigenous to the area, for Fate's sake.

Even if they were, a panther shouldn't smell like woodsmoke and lightning. Its scent wouldn't make my teeth hum and my bones vibrate.

Warily, I backtrack, ears perked and senses sharp. My Beast pushes for control, and I step back, letting him track the animal's movements.

It takes a bit longer than it should to discern its path, but once I do, I'm even more confused. Rather than staying downwind and tracking its prey like a normal wild feline, it follows a pattern of spiraling loops. The loops repeat over and over until it clicks and I realize—

It's circling the estate at the edge of the forest, circling the secluded home.

Guarding it.

Logically, I know this won't lead to answers about Saline, but I find it impossible to leave it alone. Everything about this whole situation is abnormal, from the scent to its movements; *hell*… its very existence doesn't make sense.

I still can't leave it alone, though. And I'm out of leads.

The wet mist continues to fall. A light fog now shifts along the ground, adding to the eerie atmosphere. The smell of ozone encourages me to keep going, and I do, pushing forward with single-minded determination. The night is still. The air, heavy.

I get the sense that I'm the one being hunted. Or at the very least, toyed with—a novel experience. In this form—a massive silver wolf—my Beast reaches over four feet tall at the shoulder and weighs more than half a ton. Ninety-nine percent of the time, that makes me the apex predator in any situation.

And yet, I still find my ears perked, senses alert for the slightest sound or movement that's outside the norm.

Before I know it, I find myself overcome by a strange sense of melancholy. I don't stop to consider how strange the feeling really is. I'm focused now. *Determined*. I know I'm getting close when the scent sharpens into something ancient. *Forbidden.* A lullaby, forgotten after thousands of years, swept away by the wind to journey through time. I swear I can almost hear it. A gentle voice, singing words in a language I've never heard, but still understand.

With no idea why, I make an abrupt turn to the North. Less than five minutes later, I step from the trees and into a large, empty yard. In front of me is a mansion.

The Panther's scent is strongest here. Whatever it's been guarding—it lives in that house.

It's not abnormal for humans to live far from civilization—to prefer the peace of nature over the bustle of city life. And yet, the large white mansion feels out of place. *Wrong.* Surrounded by what was once a well manicured lawn, a sprawling garden, and a gorgeous hedge maze, it radiates a dark aura that beauty can't hide.

After a quick perimeter lap, I approach the residence along the North end, cutting across a winding gravel drive.

The owners are obviously gone, a fact verified as I get closer and the wind gusts, catching the front door and blowing it open. Right away, I'm hit with an overwhelming stench and a good idea of why this place is abandoned.

Severed.

The second the smell hits, my Beast is on edge—snarling, hackles raised, teeth bared, limbs coiled for attack. The smell of a Severed is just as insidious as they are, worming into your senses, spreading its rot with glee. They're disgusting. *Evil*. Rotting sacks of bottomless hunger, meat and greed.

What reason could a human possibly have to interact with a Severed at their own home?

I'm cautious as I bound up the stairs toward the front entrance. If I shifted from Beast form, the Severed's smell would overpower me. In this form, however, I can also pick out a few other scents—mainly random human males and—

Blood. It’s not fresh, but it’s strong. Which means there’s probably a large amount. Knowing that doesn’t make me any less apprehensive, but I don’t turn back. I can’t.

The door’s open, but the inside is shrouded in shadow. I cross the threshold and blink, grateful this form only needs a second to adjust to the oppressive dark, with no moon or stars to shine light like outside.

I knew I wasn’t walking into anything good, but I’m still not prepared for the sight in front of me.

Once, this entryway must have been beautiful. Marble floors, a massive wrap-around staircase leading to a balcony on the second floor, brass embellishments, expensive *everything*—it practically screams wealth and power.

Or it used to before someone covered the whole place in blood.

Deep, dark splashes of red are everywhere—the stairs, the floor, the walls—like an artist got high and threw a tantrum. The taste of copper sticks in my throat, and even when I breathe through my mouth, I can’t erase the taste of death from my tongue.

My claws click against marble as I make my way across the foyer. It’s so dark that at first, I think the dark groove splitting the floor in half is a weird shadow. It’s not until I’m skidding to a stop, paw hovering mid-air right above it, that I realize I’m about to step into a fucking chasm.

Eyes wide, I follow the trajectory of what I thought was a shadow. It starts at the foot of the stairs and snakes across nearly the whole fucking room—easily ten feet long and, if I had to guess, about three feet deep. It’s not just a crack—it’s a Fatesdamned canyon. In the middle of the entryway. Like a giant walked in and took a sledgehammer to the marble.

What— what could even cause that kind of damage? Certainly no human. I don’t believe for a second it was a Severed. Not a weapon, either.

So… *what?*

A gust of wind rushes through the open door, and the sound of wind chimes explodes through the room. I tense, eyes snapping up to the ceiling where a chandelier swings in the wind directly above me. The attached crystals chime and crack precariously, the entire fixture attached with little more than destroyed mooring and a fucking prayer.

Before the whole thing crashes down on my head, I move. Each step I take exposes more and more damage. Photos in expensive frames lie shattered on the floor. The ones that stayed attached to the wall hang

crooked. Broken glass—some pieces as large as my fist— are scattered everywhere, a trail of sharp shards extending all the way down the hall.

Even the walls are destroyed, with cracks that start at the floor and spider up, like something tried to escape the house by pushing out through the foundation itself.

What the hell happened here?

The dark hallway presses in as I follow the trail of destruction down the hall, past a living room and kitchen. Finally, I arrive at a back exit where I'm forced to stop.

I curse, wondering if I should have gone a different way. I spin in the narrow hall to turn back, but stop when I realize that what I thought was a solid wall to my left is something else entirely—*a door.*

When closed, it would blend in with the wall almost perfectly unless you were looking for it. Thankfully, someone didn't shut it all the way. It's cracked open just enough to be obvious. Curious, I nudge it open further, and somehow, I'm not surprised to find myself at the top of a steep set of stone stairs.

For a long moment I stand there, hesitating. I consider calling for backup, but dismiss the idea before it fully forms. I don't know what's down there, but something inside my chest is urging me not to waste time finding out.

I have an overwhelming feeling I'm meant to be here. That if I don't hurry, it'll be the biggest mistake of my life.

Decision made, I start my descent. With each step, my paws *thud* against the stone with intent.

As soon as I round the corner and step off the landing, it's immediately clear why my Beast—and I—have been so on edge. The air absolutely reeks of pain. It's so intense and thick my nose burns and my gums start to ache.

One look is enough to tell me what I've stumbled into. Between the dank, cold cells and metal gurneys with restraints, I don't need a fucking welcome sign to see this is some asshole's torture chamber.

My claws flex and scrape across the stone as I pass cell after cell. My instincts clash, my brain urging caution while that new ache in my chest pushes me to move faster.

It's unnerving just how silent it is. The only sounds I can hear are my own breaths, the light tread of my steps, and a steady *drip, drip* of water

echoing from one of the cells.

Whoever used this space—they're evil. I can feel it. Worse, I can smell it in the very bones of the house itself. These cells especially are saturated with pain, fear, and heartache. It's enough to make me nauseous.

At the end of the hall, I'm hit with a new scent. This one is sharp, painful, and metallic. It forces its way into my lungs, churning my stomach. My nostrils flare—

And my Beast lunges forward, snarling and growling, demanding control. The way he reaches for it—trying to yank it from me—is primal. There's no fear. No hesitation. This is pure instinct—a hostile takeover in my own fucking body.

Then he *charges*.

There's nothing subtle about it. He's scented something and isn't waiting for the human part of me to catch up. Whatever it is, it's enough to cause a complete split for the first time in seven fucking decades, and I'm left reeling in the wake. My head spins, reality shifting and confusion taking over everything.

I know better than to fight him over something like this. Reluctantly, and with a little irritation, I let go and hand over the reins.

Immediately, he takes off, rushing from one cell to the next, one after another until he finally skids into the last cell on the left. For one long heartbeat, he goes completely still, then snarls and drops his nose to the floor. When I push forward, he growls and—*grudgingly*—relinquishes some of his control, generously permitting me to sit bitch seat on his manic ride.

Nose to the ground, nostrils flaring, we cover every inch of the cell—searching for something he's sure is here. To me, it smells like every other cell in this place, albeit a bit more saturated with pain and despair, as though someone was kept here recently.

Then, like a light clicks on in my senses, I pick up something new. Something cold. Cold and…

Fuck. A vampire?

Another sniff and I'm sure. It's a vampire—I recognize the scent. Cold and sharp, with a never-ending hunger. It's all mixed with agony and rage and terror—

And silver.

Fates. How the fuck did a human find out about silver? How'd a human even get the jump on a vampire, let alone wrangle one into a cell? I've never seen a human overpower a Supernatural. Even imagining it is unsettling. I'll need to tell my dad; he's going to—

Oh….

Oh….

Thoughts vanish.

The world stops.

Everything disappears. There's only me, the cell, and a metal gurney shoved against a wall, restraints dangling over the edges. That feeling in my chest that brought me down here takes over. It pulls and pulls and pulls and—

—*SNAP*.

My Beast howls, low and long and mournful. Before I even understand what's happened, he's at the far wall, claws scraping gouges in the stone, lips curled back from his teeth, muzzle dripping with saliva, every fucking muscle straining and salivating for death because that scent—

That fucking scent.

Honey and wildflowers and smoked vanilla and Omega and mine, mine, fucking *MINE*—

It's here. It's down *here*. In this torture chamber of metal beds and leather straps and iron chains covered in the smell of piss and fear and hopelessness where it *doesn't fucking belong because it's mine!*

My Beast is losing his mind, raging and snarling at anything his senses tell him is a threat, which, right now, is every-fucking-thing. I know on some level that I have to get control back from him. I have to rein him in, because if I don't and he goes feral, there's nothing he won't destroy to get to her.

Fates, there's nothing I won't destroy to get to her, either.

Our Mate. Our Scent-Matched Mate. She was here.

And now she's not.

I give myself a second to adjust to my new reality, letting him sniff around the cell for her scent before forcefully yanking him back and reasserting control. It's not easy. For the first time in seventy years, the fucker actually fights me for it. I focus, asserting my dominance until he whines and slinks back, devastated and confused and desperate to fix this.

My Beast isn't normally like this. He's sensible. Hell, *I'm* normally sensible. But fuck… we aren't sensible now. Not when I can feel that pull in my chest pulsing with its own heartbeat, reaching out, desperate to anchor itself to the other half of our soul. I can see it in my mind's eye— a bright, shimmering gold thread unfurling from my soul and searching for its counterpart with a ferocity I've never felt before.

It keeps reaching, searching, but it won't find anything. Not yet. Not until she scents us back. And I already know, I'll spend the rest of my life— my entire fucking existence— searching until I find her.

Right now…

Right now, I need to plan. I need to consider my options and next steps, and for that, I need the human side of me more than the primal side of the Beast.

The shift tears through me. Bones snap, muscles shift and lengthen, veins and arteries and sinew rearrange themselves to accommodate my two-legged form. Fur gives way to skin and hair. My long blond strands hang over my shoulders, the sides braided back and out of my face. My eyes—a darker green than my Beast's peridot—need only a moment to adjust.

A snarl of rage tears out of me when I take in the nightmare of this place with new eyes. My Mate was here in this fucking hellscape. And I had no idea.

Worse, I don't even know who she is. I don't know anything about her. I don't know if she's hurt, or scared, or in pain. And until her side of the Bond snaps into place, I won't have access to her at all. I'll be completely in the dark, with no way to get a read on her mental or physical well-being at all.

That's a fucking problem. For me, but especially for the primal instincts of my Beast.

I force myself to take a final look. To make sure I haven't missed anything before hightailing it back up the stairs, my boots thudding against the stone at a fevered pace.

The moment I step back into the foyer, I pull out my phone, hesitating before I unlock it as I take in the horror surrounding me. It's hard not to look at the aftermath of whatever happened here with new eyes. Hard not to imagine what went down without the lens of fear for my Mate coloring every possibility.

Was she here for the unknown events that led to this bloodbath? Was she scared? Did she fight? Did she cry, hide, and pray someone would save her?

Fates, I have *got* to get my shit together.

I take a deep breath, unlock my phone, and with a swipe of my finger, I call the one person I know can help.

My dad answers on the first ring.

"Son."

One word and my chest feels like it's about to crack open.

"Dad."

In an effort to choke back my emotions, I stupidly try to distract myself from my fear by letting my gaze roam around the foyer.

In my human form, with nothing more than the muted light of the Mother to illuminate the scene, every dark puddle of blood and burgundy handprint smeared across the floor and walls adds a new layer of horror to this macabre nightmare.

Oh Mother, are those… footprints?

My hand falls from my ear, phone still clutched in my fist. I focus on the patterns of blood on the floor, inching closer until—

There.

Tiny footprints in blood, the size of a small female. I can see where she was standing. Right there, by the stairs. Heels rooted, like she was bracing for something.

And then…

She moved. Exploded forward, really. I count eight perfect, bloody footprints in a straight, desperate line. I can see exactly where she stumbled —*just once*—staggered back to her feet and continued her sprint across the floor, a desperate race that ended in a skidding stop right next to one of the largest puddles of blood.

Terror as I've never known takes over my body. There's a fucking fist around my lungs, and it's squeezing and squeezing as I search for a clue that will tell me what happened next. My breaths stutter and slow until every inhale is a chore, and my mind floods with what-ifs.

I don't even know what to hope for. I don't even know if she was running toward someone, or away. *Do I hope she made it, or pray she didn't?*

The air around me buzzes until all I can hear is static and all I can see is the room where my Mate was possibly kidnapped or caught or tortured *or— or—*

“SON!”

My senses latch onto my dad’s voice like a lifeline. Following the sound of his voice, my eyes snap down to my fist, clutched so tight around my cell that my knuckles are white. Dad’s tinny baritone explodes from the speakers, reeling me back from my panic attack and grounding me in reality.

I fumble to bring the device back to my ear. My fingers feel too big— too clumsy— all of a sudden.

“Sorry, Dad. I’m here.”

“What’s going on, Soren? Are you alright? Did you find any leads on Saline?” Three questions in a row without a pause for an answer. Apparently I really spooked the usually patient male.

I take a deep breath. *Exhale.*

“No, nothing about Saline. I'm still following a lead.”

“Then what’s going on?”

He’s softened his voice purposely, almost like he knows I’m walking a tightrope and am seconds away from falling to my death.

“I found my Mate.”

I choke on the words, barely able to believe I’m saying them at all. They’re words I’ve spent my whole adult life imagining saying to my parents.

Dad, who’s been Mated to Ma for over two centuries. Ma, the light of his life. The star he orbits unfailingly and unrepentantly. They’re not only Scent-Matches, but Moon Mates—the Bond of our Species. Blessed twice, not just by Fate but the Mother as well.

The chances of Fate blessing a wolven with a Moon Mate in addition to their Scent-Match are so rare it’s considered to be a near improbability nowadays. It’s always been rare, but over the last hundred years the chances of a Species-specific Bond have dropped to less than eight percent.

I’ve spent eighty years dreaming of having a love like theirs with my own Mate. I’ve imagined over and over again what it would be like to find my Mate and share in the joy of my discovery with the two people who taught me what true love really is—the only two people in the world who could understand my happiness.

In my dreams, I'd bring her home, introduce her to my pack and my family, and that night we would go running together under the light of the Mother. My family would join with hers, and we would Mate right away, sealing the Bond and promising to love each other for eternity. If we were lucky, we'd have pups right away. A house full of pups. Little ones to teach and spoil and cherish, and a house full of laughter and loud voices and chaos and—

And now that day has come. And it's nothing like I imagined.

Rather than breaking the news to my dad with my Mate safely wrapped in my arms, I'm alone.

Alone in a house, covered in blood, with nothing to hold onto but hope that I'll find her. Find her and love her enough to make up for this fucking nightmare I wasn't here to save her from.

"Oh, son!" Dad laughs. It's a booming, boisterous laugh that's full of love and excitement and pride. It's so full of life, it clashes jarringly with all the death surrounding me.

I scrape my fingers through my hair and lean against one of the banisters, eyes still locked on the bloody footprints of my Mate. The only thing I have that proves she's real, other than the golden thread in my soul.

Whose blood is that? Is it hers? Was she hurt? Did she escape? Who was she running to?

I shake my head like I can shake away the questions. Right now, I have more important questions to answer. Nothing here matters unless it helps me find her.

I don't care if she was running to someone or from someone else. I don't care if she was brave and strong or a timid, terrified mess. No matter what happened here, I know one thing.

She's mine.

She's mine, and she's everything.

And I'm going to find her. I'm going to hunt her down and discover who has her. I'm going to find out who hurt her, if it's the last thing I do.

I focus on our Bond. On the thread that shimmers, searches, and reaches out for her. Needing her just as I need her.

Pressure builds behind my eyes. My chest tightens, and I try to swallow around the ball of emotions lodged in my throat, but can't. My dad is still speaking, asking all the questions I have no fucking answers to, still completely oblivious to my living nightmare.

And in this moment, I make a vow to Fate, the Mother, and every god who'll listen.

I will find my Mate. I will discover who did this, and when I do, she'll never have to question why Fate Bonded her to the Alpha Heir of the Eastern Pack.

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Chapter 1

Soren

The Bloodbound are not our enemy, but if they refuse to hand over my Mate… they will be.

Six days ago, the only clue I had that might lead me to my Mate was that damn Panther that'd been circling the Varenthrall Estate. It seemed mad at the time—and if I'm being honest, I still don't know if my second in Command, Kane, believed me when I explained the whole story—but my instincts were telling me that to find my Mate, I needed to follow its scent.

When it led me straight to the Bloodbound's compound, I thought there was some kind of mistake. *Why, by the gods, would the beast lead me here?*

After less than thirty minutes circling the perimeter of their land, the answer was clear.

I don't know if it was the sheer impossibility of the situation or what, but reality came crashing down—along with my sense of self-importance—when I realized that whatever its reasons for coming here, they weren't to help me.

The feline followed my Mate.

And just like before, it has spent every day running the same looping track around the compound like it's guarding someone inside. Neither my men nor I have caught sight of the feline, but its scent is always fresh, and up until tonight, it had an advantage I didn't—disappearing into the forest, straight onto Bastard land.

Oh, I got close. As close as I could without triggering their security or wards until I was ready. For almost a week I've been watching. *Waiting.* Sometimes with Kane, but more often than not on my own.

Nothing but the scent of pine in my nose, and the taste of rabbit on my maw.

On day two, I found a path through the forest, right along official Bloodbound territory, that led to a gap in the trees with a perfect view of the compound. There, I spent days watching the castle. Bastards came and went —training, leaving and returning from patrols, and sometimes just simply fucking around.

The days blended into one another with no sign of my Mate. Still, I refused to leave. My instincts were more sure than ever that this was where I was meant to be. Even when my body began to ache, and my eyes turned raw from too little sleep, I waited. *Watched.*

Until tonight.

I spend my days around back and my nights rotating between the side and front of the castle, but tonight I decided to switch things up and stayed in my secluded spot behind the Bastard's training yard.

Less than an hour after the sun set, I saw her.

A delicate, feminine figure appeared in the single window of one of the tallest points of the castle, and the golden thread of our Mate Bond shot out in recognition.

My knees nearly buckled in relief.

I raced back to my Second, who was mid-dinner around a campfire with three of my males. This was a small group on purpose. I didn't want anyone but my parents to know what I was doing until I had my Scent-Match in my arms.

The moment I skidded into camp, dirt and debris flying up around my paws, I shifted and turned to my right-hand.

"Call in the warriors on stand-by."

Kane's bowl fell from his hands, landing on the soft Earth of the forest floor. "Ye found the lass?"

My lips twitched as adrenaline buzzed through my system.

"I found her."

"Well, let's go!" He huffed in his thick Scottish brogue. "What're we doin' jus standin' around?!"

I shifted back, surging forward and bypassing him in seconds. With a Gaelic curse, Kane gave way to his Beast as well and followed after me.

The last thing I wanted was to start a fucking war, so once I was sure they knew we were here (thanks to a few strategic laps in sight of their

cameras) I picked the one closest to the compound and waited for someone to speak.

I expected pushback. What I got was a chaotic greeting by a male I'm still not sure should be allowed access to their security, followed by instructions to choose one male and head to the west entrance of the compound.

Now, my fucking heart's pounding in my chest while I wait for someone to open the door after Kane's knock.

This is all *finally* starting to feel real.

My Mate is behind this door. In this castle, s*omewhere*. I'm so close to her I can *taste* it. My Beast paces just beneath my skin, just as anxious as I am to get eyes on her.

Logically, I know she's not going to be the one who opens the door, but rather the staff member or butler—*do these pretentious assholes employ butlers?*— I'm expecting, when the thick slab of iron-reinforced oak swings open, it's shockingly a full Bastard who greets us.

And I think it's safe to assume by the massive grin on his face that this is the same chaotic male I spoke to over the cams.

His grin actually widens when he sees us, as though answering the door at 9 p.m. to two wolven is the best thing that's happen to him all century.

"Hey! I'm Silas!" The male pulls the door wider and gestures for us to step through.

Kane and I exchange a look, but do as we're bid, only for Silas to immediately turn his back on us and take off, gesturing blindly at us to follow.

Ballsy little fucker.

"*Super* excited to have you here, *obviously*," he tosses over his shoulder as we march through a large kitchen. "But first things first. Some ground rules."

Kane raises a questioning brow, but I just shrug. His guess is as good as mine.

"No biting. Not unless someone bites you first. No shifting indoors. Gavran won't like that."

The door slams shut behind us with a *thud* that makes my muscles tense. My Beast bristles, equally as uncomfortable as I am.

As we cut through the kitchen, the scent of slow-roasting lamb and spices hits me hard. My stomach growls at the smell of food I don't have to

chase down and kill myself.

The pup slows to a stop and turns to face us. “Damn, sorry. Are you hungry? Do you want snacks?” He winces. “Wait… is it rude to offer a wolven snacks? You don’t like, have to do any tricks or anything if you want some.”

Kane opens his mouth, but Silas’s whole face lights up before he adds, “Unless you *want* to do a trick. Because it’s *totally* cool if you do.”

I relax my jaw, which aches from clenching it.

Kane’s hand lands on my arm, and he squeezes it in warning. “He does nae do tricks for food,” he answers for me. “He’s more of a… stalk his prey, then rip out its throat kind o’ animal.”

For the first time, I see a crack in Silas’s confidence. His smile falters, and with a laugh that sounds obviously forced he responds, “Ha! That's… That’s great. Seriously. *Love* that for us.”

The pup’s self-preservation instincts—which I was starting to think didn’t exist—finally kick in, and he leads us the rest of the way in relative silence. Twice he opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, only to snap it shut with a grimace and pick up his pace.

We follow him through a dining room containing a table large enough to seat my extended family and all their pups, down several winding halls, before eventually arriving in what must be a rarely-used part of the castle. The air here is stale. Heavy and unused, like this area is simply an afterthought.

“Welcome to the study,” Silas announces, come to a stop in front of a paneled oak door and wrapping his hand around an old brass knob. The metal squeaks as the heavy oak swings open and we step into the room.

Silas flashes us another huge grin. “Whelp. That’s that, then. Gav and Dax should be here soon.”

He turns to leave, but only makes it a few feet before he whips back around like he forgot something. He creeps back, shoulders inching up to his ears as his lips twist in a grimace.

When he speaks, his voice is a whisper—like he’s imparting some kind of insider information and doesn’t want to get in trouble.

“So, listen…I’ve decided you were kidding about the whole throat-tearing thing—”

“We weren’t.”

I fold my arms across my chest as irritation starts to creep in. *Did the Last Shield send the most aggressively manic vampire he could find to greet us? Is this a joke? A test?*

Silas laughs like I'm joking, but when his eyes dart over my right shoulder and land on Kane, who's begun casually twirling a dagger between dexterous fingers, his laughter awkwardly dies off.

"Ah… sure. Sure, sure. Teeth. Throat. Blood. Death. Got it." He raises a hand, rubbing the back of his neck as he continues. "*Anyyywho*… uhm… just wanted to pass on a little advice. You know… Alpha-to-Alpha."

"Spit it out, lad. Dagger's start tae get heavy, aye?"

Silas's eyes widen.

"Right. Okay. So… if Gav's smiling, that's like… bad. Okay? Smiling equals bad. And Dax… well…" He leans in even closer, and lowers his voice even further. "If Dax starts to look at you with the beady eyes, like you're a math problem he's trying to solve? Just do yourselves a favor and beat pavement. Cause chances are he's already decided to kill you."

Kane snorts and barks out a laugh.

"Seriously," Silas whisper-hisses. "If he gets the beady eyes, it's over. His mind's made up, and he's just debating the best place to hide your body."

"I think we'll be alright," I tell him truthfully, trying hard not to roll my eyes. Silas straightens with a jerky nod and a shrug that's not at all convincing.

"Cool, cool. I mean, 'course you will." He shuffles backward, nodding the whole time like a fucking bobblehead until he reaches the hall. He stops and swings his arms back and forth, and his head never stops moving. I follow until he's back in the hall where he raises a hand in a super awkward goodbye when I grab the side of the door, intending to shut it in his face.

Right before the door swings shut in his face, Silas calls out, "Just remember when you're deciding which throats to tear out—I was totally helpful. My name's Silas. Don't forget. Silas! That's me!"

I give him a thumbs up and a thin-lipped smile as the crack between the door and the wall slowly—*So. Fucking. Slowly*— gets smaller and smaller.

When the latch finally catches and snicks shut, I count silently to ten before I hear the sound of Silas's footsteps as he retreats, leaving the same way we came.

With a deep exhale, I turn, fall back against the door, and slam my head against the oak with a groan.

“Well… that twas… unsettling.”

I squint open one eye, glowering at the shit-eating grin on Kane’s bearded face.

“Not a fucking word,” I warn.

“B—”

“Not. One.”

Kane raises his hands in supplication and chuckles. With eyes twinkling with amusement, he mimes zipping his lips, going so far as to pocket the damn *“key.”*

The ridiculousness is enough to make me finally crack. I grin, rolling my eyes at my lifelong best friend.

“Fancy place,” he murmurs, eyeing the rather old-fashioned decor. I hum in agreement, but I couldn’t give a single shit about how fancy this old-as-Fates room is. Not when I know my Omega is somewhere nearby.

I take to pacing a hole in the massive rug, checking my watch every few seconds. My scowl deepens as time crawls by. Only ten minutes have passed when a knock at the door has my head whipping to the side fast enough to sprain my neck.

Without waiting for either of us to answer, the door swings open and I grind my teeth when a Beta male appears, pushing a full-service whiskey cart into the room in front of him.

Another Beta follows, carrying a tray of—*are those fucking scones? Fates.*

The Betas drop off their cargo and retreat nervously, both refusing to make eye contact.

Another fifteen minutes pass, and I’ve just started fantasizing about shifting, rolling my huge wolven form all over every piece of furniture in here until my fur is ground into the fibers so deep they’ll never get it out, when the sound of the brass knob squealing has me snapping to attention.

Out of the corner of my eye, Kane hurries to finish tying his shoulder-length brown hair into a top-knot with a leather cord, before adjusting his posture into a picture of cool authority.

My heart slams against my ribs. *Mother above, is it hot in here?*

It takes everything in me not to rush to the door. Excitement shoots through me, making me fucking dizzy with it.

This is it.

I inhale a deep breath.

The door swings open.

Two males enter the room.

And the door swings shut.

What. The fuck. Where is she?!

I have to force myself to pay attention when the first male through the door heads straight for me. When he's a few feet away, he stops and inclines his head in greeting. He's a big fucker, with broad shoulders and shoulder-length hair a few shades darker than Kane's. Their faces are similar, too—all hard angles and broody stoicism.

But whereas Kane's asshole mask is for show, I somehow get the impression that with this male, what you see is what you get.

"Wolven."

The male's lips tip up the tiniest amount. And, Fates, I wouldn't be shocked to find out he hasn't smiled since the First World War.

Which means this is Gavran—the leader of the Bloodbound.

Behind him is another Alpha. He's shorter than The Last Shield and me, but still a few inches over six feet, which makes him taller than most. He's toned, with lean muscle and a sense of self-importance that I immediately dislike.

I take Gavran's hand when he extends it between us and find myself pleasantly surprised when he doesn't try to strong-arm me as so many other Alphas have.

I'm even more surprised when he turns to Kane and offers him the same courtesy.

"I'm Gavran," he says, confirming my assumption. "Last Shield of the Bloodbound." He gestures to the Alpha at his side. "This is Daxen. He's the head of Operations and Tactics, as well as our Chief Strategist."

Ah… I see it now—the beady eyes. The pup was right; this male is *absolutely* debating where to dispose of my body.

I don't know why, but when his eyes meet mine, my mouth curves into a feral grin. That grin only grows when Daxen blinks, and his eyes widen in shock and confusion.

Yeah… I don't know why, but I don't like him.

Kane coughs pointedly, and I glance back, where Gavran waits patiently for me to play my part in this game of civility.

“Soren Westergaard, Alpha Heir to the Eastern Pack.” I introduce myself before gesturing at Kane. “This is my Second, Kane MacTavish.”

Gavran’s mouth opens, but now that formalities are at an end, I find my patience is as well.

“You have my Mate. I want her.”

Gavran’s amber eyes meet mine, giving away absolutely nothing. His gaze flicks to the side—toward Daxen—and the vampires engage in a wordless exchange that does little more than irritate me.

I don’t know what message they’re conveying to one another, but if it includes holding my Mate from me much longer, they’re going to wish they had dispensed with the games at the start.

After a week spent outside, mostly in my Beast form, living off rabbits and a single deer I ran down, on top of very little sleep, I’ve about reached my limit for civility.

Wolven aren’t as political as vampires and humans. We don’t play these games—at least not to this extent. I don’t care what they want from me; they can have it if they’ll simply bring down my Mate.

I don’t want to, but if it comes to it… I will rip apart every soul in this stone fortress until I find her.

Finally, Gavran’s expression smooths into polite civility, and he extends a hand toward two leather couches at the opposite end of the room, where they sit facing each other with a massive stone-and-bronze coffee table between them.

“Why don’t we have a seat,” he suggests in an even tone. “And you can tell me why you believe we have your Mate.”

I force my face into my best approximation of a cordial smile, but it must look as forced and insincere as it feels because Gavran’s lips thin and, over his shoulder, Kane grimaces and rears back. He slices his hand through the air in front of his throat repeatedly, and with a sigh, I decide to just level with the Alpha.

The smile drops from my face. With as much patience as I can muster, I cut to the chase.

“Listen. It’s late. We’ve shown up here, unannounced and probably interrupted your night. I apologize for that. If the situation weren’t so urgent, I’d have taken a more… diplomatic approach. And let’s be honest, neither one of us wants to do this whole song and dance. I have a feeling you dislike it as much as I do.”

Gavran's expression softens, and he grunts what I'm pretty sure is a sound of agreement.

I push on.

"I don't want to waste any more of your time than I already have. That's the honest truth. I just want my Fated Mate. Once I have her, we'll leave, and I'll be out of your hair."

"What if she doesn't want to leave with you?"

At the sound of his voice, my attention snaps to Daxen as he takes a seat on the couch facing the door. There's nothing on his face to prove otherwise, but I have the overwhelming sense that he's mocking me.

My eyes narrow on the Alpha. "What did you just say?"

"Alright." Gavran moves, positioning himself between Daxen and me with hands raised. I glance down.

When did I move across the room?

"As much as I wish for it to be that easy, Alpha Heir, we should probably discuss a few things beforehand." Once again, he gestures toward the couches, urging me to take a seat. "Please. Let's all four take a seat and get this situation straightened out."

Kane crosses the room, making sure to shoot me a look as he walks by that screams *'what the hell is wrong with you?'*

With a sigh, I give in. Gav and Daxen take the couch facing the door, which makes my Beast twitchy as fuck. My jaw clenches as I sit, falling into the soft brown leather opposite the vampires.

"Let's start at the beginning," Gavran says, leaning in and bracing his forearms on his thighs. "Why do you think your Mate is here? What's her name? Why are you just now coming for her?"

With each question, I relax. It's not like I thought I'd just show up, ring the doorbell, ask for my Omega, and take off… but something about the absolute certainty of our Bond is so overwhelming that I've almost forgotten that I'm the only one who can feel it. Of course Gavran has questions. He's not going to just hand someone over blindly. Not unless he were a really, really shitty male.

"You seem like an honorable male," I tell him. "And I appreciate your due diligence.

He inclines his head in thanks while I lean forward, mirroring his position.

"I'm not saying that to kiss your ass."

To my right, Kane coughs on a sip of whisky.

"If you're as honorable as I think—as I've heard—you are, then it's safe to assume you're fair as well as smart."

"Sure you're not kissing his ass?" Daxen mutters, but I ignore him.

"My situation is… abnormal."

After a long moment, Gavran frowns, tilting his head to the side. "Abnormal how?"

I'm struggling to keep from fidgeting, but it's not easy. It's been decades since I've been this nervous, but if I'm wrong about this male, I'm fucked. If he doesn't take a chance and listen to me… I don't know how the hell I'll get to my Omega. At least… not in a way that doesn't lead to war.

Taking a deep breath, I straighten my shoulders and tell him the truth.

I think I'm going to throw up.

"I don't know her name."

Silence.

Then Daxen throws his head back and howls in laughter.

It's only sheer force of will that keeps my Beast contained, but the longer his laughter continues, the harder it is to hold back. I'm seriously toying with the idea of shifting when Gavran's hand lands on the table in front of us with a barked shout that cuts Daxen's laughter off immediately.

"Enough!"

Gavran glares at Daxen for a solid ten seconds before exhaling a deep breath and turning to me.

"I believe that you believe your Mate is here," he says. "And I have no intention of keeping her from you, but I need your cooperation. This situation isn't exactly… normal."

His words make sense, but the Bond in my chest doesn't care about sense. I keep picturing the silhouette I saw in the window. It was impossible, even with that brief glimpse, to ignore how delicate she seemed. The whole situation feels… wrong. *Why's she in the attic? Why is she here at all? Is she a vampire? Staff? What's her connection to the abandoned estate, and why was she in that basement?*

The questions never end… and I can't ignore the sense that something's not quite right here.

I need to do what I have to do to get to her… whatever it takes.

"Start at the beginning," Gavran suggests.

So I do.

I tell them about our Pack's missing Omega. About searching day and night. About finding the estate thirty miles south of here. I tell them about the basement. The cells. The scent of silver and vampires and Severed.

And then I tell them about the moment my Beast caught her Omega perfume and the Bond that appeared. I even tell them about the trail that led me to the Bloodbound Estate, as fucking unbelievable as it sounds.

When I'm finished, no one speaks. The vampires exchange a long, heavy look that makes me think at least some of what I told them registered.

Then Daxen speaks.

"I was in that basement. In the same cells. I was there when everyone in that house was taken out. I didn't smell an Omega."

Is this asshole really insinuating that I'm lying?

"Perhaps you missed the part where I said my Beast scented her," I snarl. "In human form, I wouldn't have picked up on the scent at all—probably not even the day after she was there. It was faint. Hidden under thick layers of pain, rage, and fear. But for my Beast, it was enough. Enough for the Bond to snap into place."

I know exactly what the next look Daxen and Gavran share means.

They know who she is.

Before I can demand answers, Gavran reaches into his pocket and slides out a phone, swiping a few times and raising it to his ear.

"Bring Idril to the downstairs Drawing Room in the East Wing off the small library." He issues the Command and hangs up, not waiting for a reply.

My heart stops.

Idril.

When I hear my Mate's name, something inside me slots into place; it's… beautiful, like something from a story. I repeat it over and over in my head, like doing so will keep anyone from taking her from me.

"We have her on suppressants."

Daxen's tone is flat, and I narrow my eyes at him in a furious glare.

"Doesn't matter. I've already scented her. She only needs to scent me for the Bond to snap into place."

Why the fuck are they making her hide her scent?

"I was unaware the Bloodbound employed so many Omegas that they're forced to stay on suppressants even in their own home," I snap,

making it clear just how fucking irresponsible that is—*especially* surrounded by hundreds of unBonded Alphas.

Daxen smirks. “Actually, Idril’s the only Omega here.”

His tone puts me on edge—my Beast paces, growling in agitation.

Kane turns and leans closer before whispering, “Why do I get the feeling they’re keeping something from us?”

“I agree,” I murmur. “Something’s… off.”

The squeal of the doorknob slices through the room. My heart starts pounding wildly. I shoot to my feet without making the decision to move, spinning to face the door.

The first thing I see is a male's hand, reaching out and wrapping around the edge of the door to push it open. My own hands shake, and I curl them into fists to keep from reaching for the Omega about to walk through that door.

This is it. The moment I’ve dreamt of for eighty years.

The door opens wide. A short, delicate figure appears, stepping warily into the room. Behind her is an Alpha, tall and firm, just like his friends.

Unlike the other two, this male looks less like a battle-hardened warrior and more like a fucking male model. If I gave a shit about him, I’d probably be shocked by the otherworldly beauty of his dark auburn hair and perfectly symmetrical features.

As it stands, I don’t give a shit about him.

It’s only because he’s in my direct line of sight that I spare him even a glance before my attention drops to the slight form in front of him. Then, I have to remind myself to fucking breathe as my vision tunnels, and the room starts to spin because she’s there. *Here.*

Right in front of me.

My Mate is right in front of me, but her attention isn’t on me. It’s on the ornamental fucker behind her.

She glances at him over her shoulder, and when she doesn’t make any move to continue into the room, he hisses, “Get going, for Fate’s sake. Move.”

His tone snaps my spine straight and flares rage through my blood.

How fucking dare he talk to her that way?

My Omega doesn’t respond. She simply faces forward and hangs her head. Her shoulders curl in, inching nearly to her ears. As she turns, guilt

flashes across the Alpha's face, then disappears behind a mask of indifference.

What. The. Fuck.

I start to move, already imagining how many ways I can rearrange this assholes perfect fucking face when my eyes land on my Mate and every single thought that isn't her disappears.

She shuffles forward, stopping less than six feet into the room. Every line of her frame is strung tight, like she's mere seconds from bolting. She hasn't looked up, choosing instead to keep her eyes trained on the floor as if she looks up for even a second, something terrible will happen. Long sheets of silver hair hang on either side of her face, shielding her further.

What started as a gut feeling that something wasn't right is no longer just a feeling. It's a certainty.

Wrong. Wrong. This is all wrong.

My Beast whines, confused and unsure.

I take a step.

Then another.

One more.

I make myself stop when I'm about three feet away, knowing somehow that if I move any closer, I'm going to scare her. Time feels like it's crawled to a stop. Everything that's not Idril is shoved to the back of my brain. The other males, my Second, the pretentious Drawing Room in this stupid castle. None of it matters.

There is only me, my Omega, and the air we're breathing.

The only thing in this world that matters is her. Her next move. Her next thought. Her next breath. My world is suspended; time and space and life itself sit on a razor's edge, waiting for the moment it happens.

Waiting for the moment she realizes who I am.

But then… a small, insistent voice appears. It pushes and shoves, slithering into my consciousness, repeating a single phrase until I'm forced to acknowledge the words.

This is wrong. Something is wrong. This is wrong. Something is wrong.

In response, my side of our Bond turns frantic. It snaps out, pulling and yanking, sensing Idril's presence and vibrating with anticipation. But she's still too far away. She hasn't scented me, and even if she had—she needs to be closer.

The Bond strains further. *Reaching… stretching…*

“Come here, Idril.”

Daxen’s Command is harsh, snapping me out of the moment and sending rage boiling to the surface so fast my hands start to shake.

Who the fuck does he think he is? What makes him think he’s some kind of authority over her? Over anyone?

My mouth opens, ready to snap back at him, but before I can… Idril moves, obeying his order.

Her shoulders curl in even further as she wraps her arms around her middle protectively. Each step she takes physically hurts to watch. Her movements are jerky. *Uncertain.*

If I could scent her right now, her Omega perfume would be fucking charred with terror.

What the fuck is going on here?

I feel like I’m floating outside my body, suspended in time as my Omega shuffles right past me, stepping to the side when she gets too close, like she’s avoiding a piece of furniture.

And I know… with sickening clarity… that that’s all I am to her right now. *Furniture.* Another obstacle in the room. Something bigger than her she needs to be careful not to run into.

Because she has no idea what’s happening. Refuses to look up from the floor to find out. So wracked with anxiety that she hasn’t even realized there are two strangers in the room.

This is an Omega who can fucking feel the tension in the room and is doing everything in her power to stay out of it.

I can almost feel her slipping through my fingers as she passes. Less than a foot away. So close I can almost feel the heat of her. Can count each strand of hair on her head. Can hear her heart—racing faster than mine—a dove, trapped in a cage and fighting to break free.

She slams to a stop.

I stop breathing right as her breathing accelerates, turning into short, frantic gasps. Her shaking hands fly to her chest as she struggles to breathe. Then her head lifts, and like some part of her knows exactly where I am, her eyes snap to mine.

My world *ends*.

I take a deep breath, and for the first time in eighty years, my lungs fully inflate with air.

I fall.

Willingly. Gladly. Irrevocably.

I fall and fall, drowning in eyes the color of sun on sapphires. She blinks, her long lashes casting shadows along high cheekbones. Full pink lips, with a cupid's bow I want to trace with my tongue, part in surprise.

But almost immediately, her expression changes, morphing into confusion, then fear.

Then terror.

What? What's happening?

She's looking at me like I'm a monster. Like I'm dangerous. Something twists painfully inside my chest, and every second that passes as my Fated Mate shakes in fear mere feet away from me, the dream I had of how perfect this moment would be dies a little more.

Maybe that's why I start to notice things I hadn't before. Little details I somehow missed when I first saw her… atrocities hidden behind an illusion that's shattering with every tremor of fear that runs through her limbs.

Her cheeks are high, but too sharp. Her pink lips are dry. Chapped. Her skin is pale, dull, and lifeless. Her shirt hangs from one shoulder, exposing a too-prominent collarbone. Dark circles under her eyes speak of endless nights of little to no sleep.

She's dehydrated.

Starving.

Exhausted.

I clock each detail, and file it away. As I do, my anger grows, crashing into me in waves until I'm shaking.

Inside my chest, my side of our Bond pulls insistently, demanding my attention. My head swims with fury and a thousand questions, but with effort, I shove it aside. Blinking rapidly to clear the red haze from my sight, I focus on Idril right as she inhales deeply and frowns.

I freeze.

Her frown deepens. She takes another deep breath, and her body instinctively sways closer as she fills her lungs with my scent.

Her confused expression softens. Her muscles relax. Her lashes flutter and her eyes close.

Meanwhile, my side of the Bond is fucking *screaming*. The *instant* her eyes shut, it *snaps* out—

And latches onto her.

Her eyes fly open. She gasps in shock, staggering as she stumbles back a step. Too fast for me to react, her foot catches on the edge of the thick rug, and she twists, falling to land on her back with a resounding *smack*.

I lurch forward, but she's already moving, scrambling away like she's trying to escape. This is *not* a normal response. This is…

Wrong! Something is very fucking WRONG.

Idril tries to stand, but her shaking limbs won't support her, and she falls, collapsing on her hands and knees with a choked sob. Her eyes lock on mine and widen in terror. Before I know it, she's gasping for air, panting and wheezing as she fights to fill her lungs.

Fates. She's having a panic attack!

I have no fucking clue what's happening, but it's obvious that something about me is scaring her. So despite the way my heart twists at the mere thought of putting distance between us, that's what I do.

Backing away feels unnatural, but this whole fucking experience is unnatural. With hands raised to show I'm not a threat, I inch back until some of the fear drains from her eyes.

The Scent-Match Bond pulses between us, alive and vibrating with intensity. That fucking golden thread should be soothing her instincts. The moment it connected our souls, she should have known who I am to her. She should have known down to her very marrow that I would never, ever fucking hurt her.

So why? Why is she terrified of her own Fated Mate?

Once I'm a safe distance away, Idril pushes to her knees. Her eyes dart frantically around the room as raw, broken words fall from her lips.

"This isn't— it's not— it's not—"

With a frenzied, desperate energy, her focus flits from one person to the next, quickly noting their identity before discarding it just as fast.

"Can't—it can't—it's not—not—not p-possible. N-not. It's not—"

Does she even know she's speaking right now? Is she even aware of what she's saying?

In a matter of seconds, she's clocked each male in the room—including me—except for one.

Her eyes land on Daxen.

Like someone flipped a switch, my Omega freezes. It's fucking unsettling, the way her eyes land on him and her body goes unnaturally still.

Right when I think this whole thing can’t possibly get worse, a shrill, terrified Omega whine tears up Idril’s throat. The sound slices through the air, ricochets off the walls and ceiling like the casings of a shotgun before slamming into my chest and burrowing into the fucking marrow of my bones.

I’ve never in my life heard a sound so full of agony. It punches the air from my lungs, and I have to bend over, brace my hands on my thighs, and shove my head between my legs to keep from throwing up.

I can feel my canines elongating, my Beast taking advantage of a rare moment where I’m caught off guard to push through. My head snaps up and the growl I’ve been holding back finally escapes, cracking through the room like a lightning strike.

Not even that is enough to pull Idril’s attention away from Daxen. It’s like they’re in their own little world. Both of them are still as statues as they stare each other down.

A tear falls from Idril’s lashes, streaking down her face and glittering in the overhead lights like crystal. When it reaches her chin, it doesn’t fall. Instead, it sways precariously, like a diamond suspended on a chain.

It’s probably only mere seconds, but it feels like an eternity before it finally falls, tumbling through the air like a white flag of surrender. I glance up, shocked to find Daxen’s attention on that single tear with the kind of intensity that has me questioning everything I thought I understood.

That intensity only lasts until the moment it lands, splashing onto the stone inches from Idril’s shaking hands. As if a spell’s been broken, the Alpha’s attention returns to my Mate and a calculating, smug smile tilts the corners of his lips.

My stomach plummets as he leans toward Idril and lifts a single, imperious brow.

“It would seem,” he hisses, “that you have some explaining to do, little liar.”

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Chapter 2

Idril

I spent the last hour in my cell, waiting for someone to come for me—or maybe even tell me that what Silas claimed was just a big misunderstanding.

Despite my exhaustion, my mind refused to shut off. Which means I spent the whole hour spiraling as my brain looped endlessly between questions and worst-case scenarios.

I've never met a wolven in real life, but I've heard plenty of stories. Supposedly, they're almost entirely wild, living in secluded packs of hundreds or possibly even thousands, deep in the woods. I've heard they live in caves, eat only raw meat, and are more wolf than man.

I try not to think about rumors, but it's difficult not to imagine a future living in a cave, living off wild berries because I can't stomach raw meat.

And despite knowing the odds are slim, by the time Vae arrives to take me upstairs, I've fully convinced myself that by this time tomorrow I'll be bathing in streams and teaching myself how to light a fire with nothing but two sticks and a prayer.

Which is absurd. There's no way even half of that is true. And even if it is… I can't leave here no matter what this wolven says.

I can't leave Caelan.

Vae shoves a key in the cell with so much force it startles me. I glance up, only to meet a glare so full of disgust it physically knocks me back a step. When the cell door rattles open, I hesitate, suddenly terrified to leave the unexpected safety of my cell.

"Let's go," he snaps, tone dripping with rage.

My anxiety surges, and rather than anger him more than I somehow already have, I do as I'm told.

Vae herds me upstairs, snapping at me the whole way. I do my best to tune him out, but the thread of our Bond is clueless about anything outside of how close we are to our Mate. My Omega whines pitifully with every muttered curse, frantic to do something—*anything*—to make him happy.

Eventually we come to a room I've never seen before. At this point, I'm more empty shell than girl. I could tune out most of his muttered tirade, but not the burnt, bitter scent of anger and disappointment pouring off my Mate in waves, battering against my Omega until she's nothing more than a tiny ball huddled behind a makeshift wall of bricks.

A pretty illusion of safety.

Fear clings to me like a second skin, and as the door opens and Vae hisses at me to move, my only hope is that maybe… if I just keep my eyes down and refuse to acknowledge what's happening, it will all go away.

Stupid. Might as well wish for the moon. But it's all I have.

All I need to do is verify this male isn't my Mate like he claims, and this will all be over. Just a few minutes. That's all. I can make it. I've made it through much, much worse.

I shuffle into the room numbly, barely registering when Dax shouts some Command, which I follow by rote. The world feels hazy. *Staticky. Unreal.* I feel like a ghost as I cross the room on shaking legs, extending only as much energy as it takes to edge away from anything larger than I am.

I don't even make it six feet when it hits me.

Cool pine and chestnuts. Cold, sharp wind and crackly, warm fire. The Alpha's scent slams into me, and before I've decided to move, I'm swaying closer, inhaling deep, greedy lungfuls.

This Alpha… he smells like Christmas.

Like moonlight reflecting off the calm, heavy blanket of the winter's first snowfall in the middle of the night, like a crackling fire that never burns out, and every brief moment of hope and peace I tried so hard to cling to as a child but could never keep… no matter how hard I wished to.

My eyes are closed, so I don't see the golden thread of our Scent-Match Bond unspool from my chest the way I did earlier, but I feel the exact moment it explodes, lurching forward with an unshakeable determination. It knocks the air from my lungs, but nothing could prepare me for what it

would feel like when, rather than hitting a wall of rejection before painfully rebounding back into my chest, the new thread unexpectedly catches, latches onto something a thousand times stronger than I am...

And snaps into place.

I gasp for air as my eyes snap open. I know there are others here, but the world is a blur. My lungs tighten to the point of pain, and I know… I know I need to breathe, but my lungs won't expand.

I can't—I can't remember how to breathe. I can't remember. My chest is getting tighter and tighter, but my brain won't work. I can't… I *can't breathe!*

My ears fill with static—buzzing, ringing, screaming. My vision darkens, and I know—I know I'm not, but I'm trapped. I'm trapped in a tunnel, and the walls are closing in, and I can't—*I can't get out! Oh, gods! I can't get out!*

This isn't real. This isn't real. This isn't real. It can't be. He's not yours. Not your Mate.

The next minutes of my life pass in a series of flashes and blurs. I must remember how to breathe, but I don't know when it happens. Every time I look up, the wolven seems to get closer and closer. The fire in my chest flares and somehow—in an instinct-driven need for self-protection I know I'll never be able to recreate again on purpose—a thick, flexible sheet of something appears, immediately covering my Bonds and wrapping around them. It's similar to Caelan's onyx wall, I think, but at the same time… *not.*

Right away, my hearing returns. The Bonds dim, like I've turned down the volume on a radio. I have no idea if he can sense what I've done, but right now, I don't care. It was too much. Too overwhelming. Like it was burrowing into my soul while half of my soul was simultaneously shattering.

The following minutes are a blur, little more than a spinning cyclone of fear and anxiety, flashes of moments and faces, shouts and mocking, cruel words. Sometimes I don't even know if what I'm experiencing is happening now, or if they're ghosts from the past, refusing to leave until I'm finally broken.

Only one moment stands out, crisp and clear amongst a haze of panic and terror. *One* moment. A few seconds when beautiful green eyes collided with mine and refused to let me look away. Immediately, I panicked—

Vaelenor, that's Vaelenor. Those green eyes so full of hate when they should be bright with love and adoration, but they're not. They're—

No.

My Omega's voice demands my attention. It's confident and sure, so unlike the way she normally sounds.

These eyes are different. Brighter. More alive. Like the ivy that grew outside our balcony.

I blink, realizing she's right. These eyes—they're not Vae's. I take a deep breath, trying to focus. Green eyes the color of the fronds of the willow tree where mother and I used to escape. The thought soothes me.

Until dismay starts to creep in, followed by confusion. I have the overwhelming sense that I'm disappointing this person, and the shame swallows me whole. My chest aches when I force my eyes away, unable to bear the thought that I'm not… not enough.

Instantly the chaos returns, as though I've jumped into swelling rapids with no life vest and no hope.

Mate?

My Omega's plea stabs me in the heart, and she whines, a piercing, painful plea that breaks my heart. It echoes in the air—or maybe that's me. Maybe I make the sound this time, a primal scream for someone—*anyone*—to save me.

Or maybe it's all in my head, like the furious sound of an Alpha that I know is a hallucination because none of these males would react to my distress with that kind of feral rage.

I should be used to losing time by now.

I'm not.

When I come to this time, all my senses return with me. It's jarring, like everything just surged back online with no warning. My knees ache enough to demand my attention, and when I glance down I realize I'm on the stone floor, kneeling beside a table set between two couches.

Couches where four Alphas— including one I've never seen before—are seated, watching me with expressions ranging from pity to disinterest.

I'm prey, surrounded by predators.

My first instinct is to find help. My gaze darts to the male closest to me, whom I immediately recognize. Despite only seeing him once, I'll never forget that night at my father's house when this male—*Gavran*—saved me from one prison, just to throw me in another.

I look away, knowing I'll find no help there.

Directly across from him on the opposite couch is the unknown Alpha. He's large—larger than Daxen and possibly even Vae. His long brown hair is pulled up in a top knot, and his clear grey eyes aren't cruel, but they aren't kind, either.

I don't know who he is, but the chances of an unknown Alpha helping me are laughable.

My gaze flicks to Vae, standing behind the new male and looking at me like he doesn't know who I am. The moment our eyes meet, he looks away.

I expected that… but it still hurts.

There's one last male in the room… and somehow, despite knowing logically that this is all real and happening, I have yet to so much as look at my newest Fated Mate.

Pressure builds behind my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Not yet. I can't. Not until I know for sure.

In a way, it doesn't matter. I'm already tied to this Alpha. Our Bond exists, with or without the claiming bite. Nothing will change that.

And still… I can't bring myself to look up.

Because I know—down to the depths of my soul—that if I'm forced to face another rejection tonight, I won't survive it. I simply won't. *Physically. Emotionally. Mentally.* It will break me into a thousand, million pieces.

"And all the king's horses and all the king's men…"

I almost can't comprehend that mere hours ago my faith in Fate was unshakeable. I was so sure that no matter what, my Fated Mates would love me unconditionally and protect me with everything they had.

How could it possibly be any different? Fate chose us for one another. Fate wrote the story of our love in starlight when the universe was born.

All this time… I believed my Mother's stories were real, that she'd never lie to me, especially about the important things. Not when our lives were so terrible. So hopeless.

She had to know I'd find out the truth, and when I did, it would shatter me. Scar me forever.

So… *why?*

Why did she lie?

If this were one of her stories, I'd already be in that Alpha's arms. He'd protect me and love me, and I would have known that the *moment* I scented him.

But that didn’t happen. Because this isn’t one of her stories. And the truth is, my Fated Mates don’t have to love me. They don't even have to *like* me.

There’s no magical spell preventing them from hurting me. Nothing stopping them from hating me. Abusing me. Tormenting me. Rejecting me without even knowing that I’m the Mate they’ve been waiting for hundreds of years.

Fate doesn’t take away free will.

Which means Fated Mates—just like fathers—can break your heart just as easily as anyone else. Fate doesn’t care.

Blindly trusting this stranger is the stupidest thing I could do right now. Not when I’m barely hanging on as it is. Not when another rejection—another male placed on this Earth to hurt me—would kill me.

Dax and Vae have already nearly broken me.

This Alpha could finish the job.

Which makes him the most dangerous male in the room.

My head spins, and my stomach churns. Behind her brick fortress, my Omega cries.

Out of the corner of my eye, the wolven moves, taking a step toward me. The movement startles me, and I flinch. An involuntary whimper slips past my lips, loud and pitiful in the heavy silence of the room.

Daxen jumps at the opportunity to step in before my—*the* Alpha—can move any further. His order snaps through the room like a whip, demanding obedience.

“Stand up, Omega. Then come here.”

I don’t move. I can’t. My limbs feel like they weigh a thousand pounds, weighed down with exhaustion and fear. Adrenaline is still shooting through my veins, ensuring I don’t forget that I’m prey, and they’re predators.

A cornered animal. An easy kill.

Everything is fuzzy around the edges, and blinking does nothing to help. If anything, it makes it worse. The world is blurry and muted, like I’m walking through a dream.

I open my mouth, intending to—*what? Tell Daxen no?*—but before I can speak, a feral growl explodes from the wolven, rough and low and so obviously threatening I can feel the promise of violence in my bones.

“Watch your fucking mouth when you speak to her,” the wolven snarls. He takes a single long stride toward Daxen, rage carved in every line of his

face. “Unless you want to find out how long it takes to regrow every single one of your teeth.”

I…

What?

“She’s our prisoner,” Daxen snaps. “I’ll talk to her however I like.”

He turns to me, eyes bright with anger. “I said, *get up*.”

Too exhausted to fight, I press my palms to the stone and, with slow, unsteady movements, climb to my feet. It feels like I’m lifting a boulder, and I’m panting by the time I take my first step toward Daxen.

Before I can move, the wolven appears, standing directly in front of me, cutting off my path and blocking me from Daxen.

I frown. *What’s happening? Is this some kind of Alpha thing? A sign of possession? Or…*

Is it possible he’s maybe… protecting me?

Daxen’s scent explodes through the air, self-righteous and deep and angry. My Omega curls up tighter, crying silent tears that fall in an endless stream of pain.

Daxen’s rage is wreaking havoc on my instincts, making my hands shake and my sweat bead on my brow. I don’t know what to do. There are two very, very angry Alphas in close proximity, and I’m the source of all this tension. Which means I’m the one who’s going to end up getting hurt when this goes south.

Think, Idril. You’re in pain, but your mind still works. You’ve done this before. Think it through, step by step.

Yes. Okay. Think it through.

For someone like me, survival is never assured. But the most surefire way to mitigate an Alpha’s anger is to appease their Alpha instincts.

With submission. Silent submission is even better.

Long ago, I discovered that when the choice is between submitting or pain and possible death, choosing to submit to stay alive doesn’t make you a coward.

By age four, I already knew to pick my battles. By age eight, I understood that you need to be ready to make a split-second decision at any moment whether something is worth fighting for or it isn’t.

Most aren’t. I knew that by age ten.

So while the Alphas stare each other down and the other three males in the room watch on in useless silence, I push forward and cautiously attempt

to edge around the wolven's massive frame.

I don't make it far.

He doesn't even look before throwing out his arm and blocking what little was left of my path. He's so tall, he almost knocks me in the face.

Suddenly, the reason why he's placed himself between Daxen and me doesn't matter. Possession or protection, either way, this is going to end the same for me—*badly.*

"Please move," I whisper, getting more and more anxious with every passing second. I'm trapped in here with five Alphas, three of whom are apparently my Fated Mates, and the only one who knows is a male I just met who's somehow managed to make my life even more complicated than it already was. Something that seemed impossible two hours ago.

The Alpha turns to the side, gaze falling to mine. His green eyes soften, and when he speaks, his voice is shockingly gentle.

I wish I could trust it.

"You don't have to do what he says. You are my Mate. I am the Alpha Heir. We don't take orders from anyone."

"You may want to hear what Daxen has to say before you start making promises, Soren."

Soren.

His name is Soren.

The knowledge settles in my chest before blooming to life. It's familiar. *Comforting.* Like something inside of me has always known that name.

"I'll pass," Soren doesn't so much as glance in Vaelenor's direction to answer him.

But Vae just shrugs, then pushes off the back of the couch and saunters across the room. Once he's closer, his lips twist into a smug smile, and it looks… *wrong.*

He looks wrong.

There's nothing left of the male who promised to bring me blankets and pillows. Nothing left of the male who spent the last week sneaking me food behind his Packmate's back.

Gavran finally speaks up. I don't know why he's even here. *Just to watch the drama unfold?* Because he doesn't seem to be doing much to keep tensions at bay.

"Everyone take a seat," he orders with a sigh. "We have things to discuss, and I'm not going to have a Species standoff in my study."

No one complains; each Alpha takes their seat with varying levels of irritation. Soren lingers, hovering nearby as I stay where I am. No seats are left, which leaves me with one option—the floor. And I refuse to sit back down after struggling so hard to stand up.

Vae notices that Soren's still standing and frowns, but quickly puts the pieces together once he sees me doing the same. He rolls his eyes before pushing to his feet and striding across the room. There, he grabs a leather chair next to the fireplace and stalks back to me, dropping it at my feet with a barked Command.

"Sit."

Soren's eyes narrow on Vae, who walks back to the couch and throws himself into the seat next to Daxen. My cheeks heat with shame as I follow Vae's order and take my own seat in the large, wing-backed leather chair, which he angled to face everyone.

Wonderful.

"We have things to discuss," Gavran announces, but before he can continue, Soren's already speaking.

"Get on with it, then. I don't know what the hell's going on here, but I've seen enough. I want to take my Mate and leave."

He glares at Gavran with borderline terrifying intensity. His hands curl into fists on top of thighs the size of tree trunks, and his green eyes gleam in the light. For a second, I'd swear they change color, flashing a bright, piercing green like new spring leaves.

His long, thick hair is blond—more golden and darker than mine. He has the top half pulled back from his face, secured with a leather tie. I almost smile when I notice dozens of tiny braids intricately woven throughout the soft strands.

I wonder if his mother taught him to braid the way mine did. I used to spend hours weaving my long white hair into complex styles, armed with nothing but tiny hair ties and silver hairpins of my mother's

There's no denying how beautiful he is—like a Viking warrior from a story. He's certainly large enough to be one, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest, easily as tall as Gavran and packed with muscle.

His massive arms are lined with a dusting of blond hair, and the muscles in his forearms flex as his fists clench and unclench. His skin isn't pale like mine, but the golden tan of someone who spends a lot of their time outdoors.

“Alright, let's get one fact out of the way,” Daxen says, pulling my attention away from the Alpha. “Idril won’t be going anywhere with you. She is a prisoner here. Not a guest. Until my Packmate is well enough to explain her actions, she is officially under Bloodbound protection.”

“Protection,” Soren spits in disgust. “She looks like she hasn't been fed in weeks. She’s either your prisoner, or under your protection. So which is it?”

It takes me a disturbingly long time to realize what’s happening.

Soren is… *angry.*

Fury pulses off of him in waves, filling the room with even more tension.

“Watch it,” Vae snaps. “After what she’s done, your Mate Bond doesn’t mean shit. Not in a situation like this.”

“Exactly what did the lass do?” Soren’s friend leans forward, frowning in confusion. As if he’s just been waiting for the chance to expose my supposed sins, Daxen jumps to answer.

“She betrayed our Packmate. Our *brother*. Lured him in with games and manipulations, then nearly succeeded in getting him killed.”

Each accusation lands like a punch to the gut. None of what he’s saying is new, but the shame of being accused of something so heinous in front of strangers is, and his allegations hit a thousand times harder because of it.

Soren scoffs. “What the hell are you talking about?”

That familiar sense of floating away from my body starts creeping in, and this time, I don’t fight it. I let it pull me under, smothering me in darkness until I’m drowning in it. Wrapped tightly in the silent nothingness of an empty Void, where no one can hurt me.

Here in the Void, I am no one. *Nameless. Faceless. Voiceless.*

Nothing.

Stop.

My mother's familiar voice crashes over me with jarring intensity.

Don’t you dare let him railroad your truth with his lies.

What? What’s happening?

I know it can’t possibly be my mother, but that doesn’t stop me from calling out to her in my mind.

Mama?

I promised you happiness, my love, but I never promised the journey would be easy. Fight, my darling girl. Don’t you dare give up now.

Her words are like glowing embers, spinning around me before settling to land on my skin. One by one, they dissolve, burrowing deep into my bones until they become a permanent part of me.

Fight.

Yes. I know how to fight. And I can't give up now. Not yet.

It's not easy, but I force back the Void and open my eyes. My gaze falls on Soren like it's been drawn to him, but instead of the disgust I'm anticipating after Daxen's list of my crimes, there is only curiosity in his bright green eyes.

He has questions, and I'm not sure I'll have the answers. I understand so little about my life anymore. Nothing makes sense, and the world itself is nothing I believed it to be. *Fate. Mates. Love. Trust. Honesty. Cruelty. Pain. Good. Evil. Honor. Cowardice*—just a few in a long list of fundamental truths I've discovered are lies. Or at the very least, seem to exist almost exclusively in an infinite spectrum of grey.

Even my own identity—my very sense of self—is little more than a giant question mark.

There's just one, single undeniable truth in my life left for me to hold onto. One piece of me that remains undeniable.

I am the daughter of Annalise Varenthrall. I am my mother's legacy, and her blood runs through my veins. Her spirit lives on inside of me, keeping me alive long after I no longer physically required her to survive. Even in death, her love fuels me, and her strength reminds me who I am.

Her strength is a part of me. Possibly the most *important* part.

And I've had *enough* of males who use their words and status the way my father used his fists and belt.

If I stay silent now, I'll avoid more pain. I'll survive another night—if only by the skin of my teeth. Soren will hear their side of the story, and my silence will leave him no choice but to accept their version of events.

Most likely, given the severity of their accusations, he'll leave. Do his best to forget I exist. Find some way to get rid of our Bond—if that's even possible.

If I sit silently by as my chance at a future full of joy and love is ripped to shreds by the two males who have already stolen *so much* from me…

Then what the fuck is there left to fight for?

Dax and Vae already stole two futures from me tonight. Already set fire to every wish and hope and dream I've kept close since I was a little girl.

And in exchange, they left centuries' worth of pain, a secret too heavy to carry on my own, and two half-formed, dying Mate Bonds, I'll have to watch wither to nothing until I take my last breath.

And now they think to take more?

No.

NO.

Daxen Montclair doesn't get to take anything else from me.

He doesn't get to tell my story as though it belongs to him.

Dax shifts, leaning back and adjusting his position like he's getting comfortable. Like he's preparing to tell a bedtime story. The fire in my chest ignites, flames roaring and burning with anger. A sense of determination washes over me, erupting from my chest and bursting through my veins.

Daxen's mouth parts, but before he can speak, the heat in my chest explodes.

Along with my refusal.

"No."

Five sets of eyes turn to me. The focus of so many Alphas makes my skin prickle and itch, but I ignore it, refusing to back down.

I can't.

I won't.

"You aren't telling the truth," I say, sitting straighter even though I want to curl into the world's smallest ball and disappear. "You—you—you can't just *say* something happened without proof and accuse me of lying when you don't like my answers. I did not lie. I did not manipulate Caelan. I didn't manipulate anyone. I never would have led Caelan into a dangerous situation. Especially not on purpose."

Daxen groans, shaking his head as he mutters, "Not this shit again."

Soren levels him with a glare. "Maybe you've heard this before, but I haven't. And I'd rather hear it from her than from you."

His eyes soften when he turns back to me. He inclines his head, encouraging me to continue.

I can tell he's wary of what's coming, but I can handle wariness. Especially when, unlike everyone else, he actually seems willing to listen.

The realization that for once, someone's actually going to listen strengthens me.

“My father is evil,” I tell him, seeing no reason to sugarcoat it. “He’s working with the Severed. I don’t know why or on what, but he’s been meeting with one of them for months. Caelan came to my house one night doing some kind of…” I pause, trying to remember what he called it.

“Recon,” Dax finishes for me with a sigh. “He was on a recon mission after we discovered her father’s involvement with the Severed.”

I nod. My fingers find their way to my shirt, clenching and twisting the fabric in a fruitless attempt to soothe my anxiety.

“Caelan came to my room while I was sleeping. I woke up, and when I saw him, I just… I *knew* we were connected. Instantly. It—It’s hard to explain. It felt like….”

I frown, trying to find a way to explain something that feels impossible to put into words.

“I spent my whole life without a home. Not four walls and a roof, but… the things that make a home. Safety. Love. Belonging. A certainty deep in your soul that you’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

My lips curl as I remember the way my soul had shifted, realigning itself with Caelan’s as something inside of me clicked into place.

“Then, all of a sudden, the home I spent every moment of every day wishing for… it was *right there*. *Right* in front of me. And it was *mine*. It was mine, and it had been waiting and wishing for me for just as long. Longer, in fact. And for the first time in my life I felt like I could actually breathe because finally… *finally*… I was safe.”

When I glance up, everyone’s eyes are focused on me. My cheeks heat with embarrassment, but when I gather the courage to look at Soren, his eyes are bright with unshed tears.

He swallows thickly and whispers, “Go on.”

So I do. I tell him about our conversation. About that first kiss. About how confused I was and how Caelan reassured me, promising that we’d figure this out together.

I told him about the questions he asked. About my father, the Severed, and Alexander. How I’d told him everything I knew, even offered to help however I could… not even questioning the bone-deep loyalty I already felt.

“When he left that night, he promised to come back. To take me away from my father. He told me he’d come back in three nights.”

I don’t realize I’m crying until the first tears fall, splashing when they land on my clasped hands in my lap.

“When that night finally came, something felt off. Later, I realized that there were no guards. No patrols. On top of it, I was restless. It felt like something was coming. Something bad.”

“I decided to go out on the balcony, hoping he’d arrive the way he’d left the last time. I planned to wait up for him. Convince him to leave and come back a different night. I don’t know what happened, but I think… I think I fell asleep.”

Hot shame crawls up my neck, the sticky sense of guilt eating me alive for what must be the hundredth time since that night and refuses to show any mercy.

“When I woke, I knew right away I’d missed my chance. I don’t know how it’s possible, but I knew almost immediately that he was already there. I could feel him. In my chest. Could feel his location in the house—leaving Father’s wing, headed toward mine.”

I brace myself, take a deep breath, and lift my eyes to Gavran. I make myself meet his amber gaze before moving my own to Daxen, then Vae. I need them to see me right now. I need them to hear me. To understand.

This is the first time I’ve actually told my story out loud to anyone. The first time they’ve given me the chance. So not only is my explanation for Soren, it’s for them, too.

“There is a Bond—a bright, thick thread of silver—connecting me to Caelan. The night we met, a pool of silver appeared in… in my soul. It felt alive, like endless liquid starlight that swirled, thrashed, and pulsed. Every day it grew larger… until the night he came back. That’s when it changed.”

I don’t give them any more details than that. I feel almost possessive over our Bond. The idea of allowing anyone a glimpse of its magic who hasn’t earned it yet feels almost blasphemous. It’s mine. *Ours.*

“And this… er… silver thread. It’s what let you sense him?”

It’s Soren’s friend who speaks up, his voice low and deep with a melodic Scottish accent that feels soothing to my senses. His question doesn’t sound patronizing or dismissive, but at this point I’m hard-wired to expect the worst from everyone, so I keep my answer short.

“I believe so, but I don’t know for certain.”

“So Caelan’s not yer Scent-Matched Mate?”

“No. Not that I’m aware of. Our Bond isn’t a Scent-Match Bond. I don’t know what kind of Bond it is.”

“But when it appeared, you were able to sense yer Mate’s location.”

“Yes.”

“At the risk of sounding like a broken record, for the fiftieth time, that is *not* how Mate Bonds work.”

Honestly, I’d expected Daxen’s patronizing tone to cut me off and interrupt me for a while so his clipped commentary doesn’t come as a shock. If anything, his know-it-all attitude infuriates me the most.

I had no idea someone could possibly be as confidently wrong as Daxen is every single day. It’s exhausting. Has he never thought of just… *not talking?*

Getting the chance to speak must have loosened my tongue because before I can think better of it, I throw my hands up in exasperation and exhaustion.

“You don’t *know* that,” I snap. His eyes widen, but I push on before he can talk over me.

“I don’t know when you concluded that being smart and ancient also makes you omniscient, but it doesn’t. You don’t know everything because if you did, you’d know I’m telling the truth about our Bond, and I wouldn’t have spent the past however many days begging my Fated Mate’s best friends to believe I didn’t set a trap so my father could kill him!”

Panting and out of breath, I fall back into my chair. My hands are shaking, and I’m fully expecting Gavran or Vae to lash out at my response, assuming Daxen doesn’t do so himself. When no one says a word to me, I count my blessings and push on, determined to finish telling my side of things.

“It was probably less than three minutes after I woke and realized Caelan was there when my father’s car pulled up in front of the house. I knew right away that something was wrong and I needed to get to Caelan before my father did.”

I swallow thickly, gripping the leather of the chair on either side of my legs for something to hold onto.

“I remember running out of my room and down the hall, screaming at him in my mind to leave. To get out of the house and get away from this place as fast as he could. Either he never heard me, or I wasn’t fast enough, but by the time I got to the foyer, it was too late. My father was already

there with his guards, and they had Caelan surrounded. They had *guns* pointed at him, and I couldn’t—”

A strangled sob catches in my throat, choking off the rest of my words. *Fatesdamnit!* I’ve tried so hard not to get emotional, and I was doing so well. I’ve relived that night in my mind so many times, but still, the memory rips through me, burning a hole through my chest just like that silver bullet burned a hole through Caelan’s flesh.

“I couldn’t do anything,” I whisper, angrily swiping away a tear that escapes. “I tried to shift their focus to me, but it didn’t—I couldn't—there were too many of them. And I was—I couldn’t *think*.”

I ignore the steady stream of tears down my cheeks, determined to keep going. I can’t stop now, right when it gets hard. I just need to push back the pain and… *talk.*

“My father ordered me to come down the stairs. He was smiling, but it was… horrifying. I wanted to tell him no, but that’s what he wanted, for me to fight so that he could punish me. He loves to do that. To push and push just to find out how far he can go before I break—when the threat of an unknown punishment becomes a better alternative to the pain he’s currently inflicting.”

“Gods above,” the Scottish Alpha whispers, and I look up from my lap where my fingers are twisting and pulling at the cotton hem of my shirt. I turn pleading eyes on Soren, begging him without words to understand.

“I had no choice. I had to obey him and try to stall somehow. That’s the only thing I could think of to do.”

“That’s all you could have done,” he replies, tone hard with conviction. He sounds so sure. I almost believe him.

“I went down to the foyer and my father ordered his men to take Caelan's weapons. Caelan let him—”

“Why?”

My gaze snaps to Vaelanor as he repeats, “Why would he just *let* a handful of human guards unarm him?”

With eyes blurred with tears, I glare at him as I answer, “Because my father’s hand was around my neck and he was choking me.”

Vae hums and looks away, muttering, "Convenient."

My stomach twists with pain. The golden thread that would have bound me to Vaelenor dims further, curling into a tight ball like a kicked puppy.

“That’s enough, Vaelenor,” Gavran snaps. “Any more commentary and you’ll leave.”

Vae turns eyes full of rage toward Gav but stays silent.

“Something happened, and my father got really angry, but I don’t know what exactly. Whatever it was, he took it out on me, and threw me to the ground, and Caelan… just… lost it. One second he was face down on the ground, and the next he was moving— throwing Alphas around like a child mad at his toys. They were dying faster than I could keep up.”

He’d been invisible. *God-like.* It was the only time I felt like we might have a chance of escaping.

Until it all went to hell.

“I think seeing him fight scared my father. He pulled me off the floor and dragged me across the foyer. Then he shoved me in front of him and—”

I’ll never forget the moment I realized he was using me as a shield. The fear rushes back, and I have to stop. I have to stop, because I can’t breathe. I flex my fingers, hoping that will help my hands stop shaking, but it doesn’t. I reach for my shirt, pulling, folding, and smoothing the fabric until my shoulders start to relax.

Deep breath. Inhale. Exhale.

Pack all your emotions into a box. Shove the box away as far back as you can.

Good. Now keep going.

“He started yelling about a gun, then silver bullets. Then I heard a sound like thunder that must have been the gun because suddenly Caelan was on the ground and there was blood on the floor and on his hands and—and—and then I was screaming and—”

My hands drop to my thighs, searching for the slightly softer fabric of my leggings. My fingers swipe and rub along the fabric, up and down in a repetitive motion that I can’t control. I pick at the black fabric, folding the little I can grab, then smoothing it out and folding it and smoothing it out.

This still isn’t right. It’s not *right*.

The fabric is wrong. Too scratchy.

I need— I need—

I need—

What?

“Idril.” My eyes shoot open at the sound of Soren’s gentle voice. I shake my head, trying to shake away the itching need under my skin. The need for

—for—

Something. Something missing. It’s missing, and it’s *been* missing, and—

And I can’t do this.

I have to keep going. Talk now, fall apart later.

“I don’t remember much after that. I don’t know how I got away from my father, but I did. Then I ran for Caelan. I remember that. Running for him and screaming at him.

“I don't remember what I said, but… the words didn’t really matter. I just knew I needed to do something to startle him. Just for a second. Just so that when I lunged for him, he’d fall instead of catching me.”

Daxen shoots to his feet, throwing his arms up in exasperation. “Why the fuck would you do that? He was injured! You could have made it worse!”

I blink. Slowly. My eyelids feel like they weigh fifty pounds.

“Because there was an Alpha behind me. And he was about to shoot. If I hadn’t done something to get Caelan down, that bullet would have gone straight through his head.”

“What then?” Gavran looks like he’s on the edge of his seat, like he’s been waiting for days to hear my side of the story. It makes me irrationally angry.

“When I got close to him, I threw myself at his chest, and he fell back as I’d hoped. I don’t know if it was because he was startled, not expecting it, or what, but I remember this… this overwhelming sense of relief.”

“I don’t think he even registered the second shot until he was on his back, looking up at me. I think he was mad that I threw myself in front of the bullet, but he would have been a lot more mad if he knew how close the bullet actually came to hitting us.”

My lips tip into a wry smile, remembering the shock on Caelan’s face when he realized what had happened.

“How close are we talking?”

“Close enough to burn a line across the side of my head near my temple,” I answer, and Gavran’s eyes widen in shock. The fact that he even had to ask tells me all I need to know about how little I crossed his mind once he got me here.

“I assumed you already knew that,” I add. “Lenora put it in her notes. Don’t you read those?”

Soren’s friend throws back his head and barks out a laugh that’s so loud it makes me jump in my seat. Turning to Soren, he shakes his head and grins. “Yer Mate’s got balls. And very little sense.”

Soren returns his grin with one of his own. “I think she’s much smarter than anyone wants to admit.”

His response feels like a warm blanket, and something inside of me starts to thaw. For the first time since I walked into this room, I feel the unfamiliar spark of hope. It’s not much, but I cradle it in my palms, holding it close to my chest.

I need all the help I can get to get through this next part.

“I knew, when I saw Caelan’s injury, that I needed to do something. There was so much blood. A pool of it. I remember kneeling next to him and thinking that there was no way one person had that much blood in their body.”

Wrapping my arms around my middle like that’s going to help, I close my eyes so I don’t have to look at Caelan’s pack while recounting the horror of his injuries.

“I thought… surely it’s going to stop. It has to. But it just—just kept coming.”

I can still smell it even now—copper and iron and the metallic taste of pennies coating the back of my throat like sludge. For days I couldn’t get that taste out of my mouth no matter what I did.

“I put pressure on the wound, but the blood—” I shake my head, like I can somehow shake away the memory. “It was coming too fast, and my hands were too small, so it started to seep between my fingers. I didn’t know what to do, so I ripped off my sweater and wrapped it around his thigh. Right above the wound.”

I can still feel the fabric of my cardigan slipping through my shaking hands. I had no clue what I was doing, but Caelan never once stopped telling me how good I was doing. How proud he was of me.

“I think I read about that once. In a book.”

My voice is raw, but I don’t even know who I’m talking to anymore. I swear I can still feel the way his blood pulsed from that hole in his leg. Red and sticky and unpleasantly warm. An insidious burgundy stream that refused to end. A trickling countdown to death that I had no way to stop.

“Someone—something—there was a sound… A scream, or…” My lips are moving, but I can’t feel them. My face is numb. There’s a ringing in my

ears that won't go away, and the scent of blood and gunpowder fills my lungs with every breath I take.

I'm drowning, drowning in a memory that's turned into a nightmare. I'm drowning, and I don't know how to find my way back to reality.

My Omega whimpers. ***Nest?***

No. We don't get a Nest, remember? Nests are for safe Omegas. Not us.

"Father was shouting, but it's all—everything's fuzzy, like watching the world through static. My memories jump and skip. Disjointed and out of order. It just—it will never end. Never."

"A grand says those missing memories just *happen* to be when Varenthrall mentions literally anything important," Vae mutters.

When my eyes blink open, the first thing I see is the smirk on Vaelenor's face. It's like getting hit with a bucket of ice-cold water, and all my senses come back online at once.

Painfully.

"There's nothing more I can tell you that you don't already know," I murmur, fighting back tears. "My father hit me. I didn't see it coming. I should have. His fist connected with the side of my head and then I was flying. And when I hit the marble, the pain was—"

What am I doing? They don't care about this.

"After that, there was nothing until I woke up in my room." My eyes land on Gavran. "Not until you showed up with Silas. You know what happened from there."

With a sigh, I deflate, sinking back into my chair. My body feels hollow, like the last twenty minutes have drained me of everything that makes me, me.

I just want to sleep. Close my eyes, and let the darkness take me, just for a little while.

But when Soren jackknifes out of his seat on the couch, I know that's not going to happen.

He moves shockingly fast for someone so large. He rounds the table separating the couches, not stopping until the tips of his boots are pressing against the leather. He looms over them both, radiating menace. The room fills with the scent of burnt chestnut and stale pine.

He bends over until his face is mere inches away from Gav's. "You're keeping her prisoner because of *that*?"

Vae stands, moving to stand behind his friends like a sentry. Kane stands as well, sensing the tension getting thicker with pissed-off Alpha pheromones. He steps up to Soren and his face twists in disgust.

Daxen rolls his eyes, leaning back like he's not affected at all by the two angry wolven mere inches from his throat. His expression is smug. *Confident.*

"That is not at all why we're holding her prisoner."

Soren's eyes flash bright green, and a furious snarl tears up his throat. "Enough with the games, leech. Why is she here?"

Daxen's eyes flick to me, then back to Soren. "It's simple, really. Because her entire story is a bullshit lie."

Somehow, despite everything, I'm still not prepared when Daxen's gaze falls on me and his face hardens, eyes narrowing into a glare so full of disgust it sends chills skating down my spine.

"Since day one, I've known you were lying," he says, eyes bright with triumph. "And now I have proof."

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Chapter 3

Daxen

The moment the Omega's Bond with the wolven snapped into place, I finally had all the proof I needed to put an end to this farce.

Lying. She's lying.

I expected to feel triumphant. Instead, an agonizing feeling of betrayal washed over me, burrowing into my chest and growing roots.

It's fucking madness. As if that lying little slip of an Omega could ever possibly make me care enough for her actions to register as a betrayal. As if I'd ever be stupid enough to allow *any* Omega to hold that much power over me.

Especially a sheltered human whose father was too stupid to make sure his pawn had extensive knowledge of Fated Bonds before claiming to have one with my brother.

Careless. Careless and sloppy. Knowledge truly is power, and history has proven time and time again what Idril is about to learn.

I can't believe this foolishness has gone on as long as it has. It's almost impressive that she's lasted as long as she has; I'll give her that. Her dedication to her lie is almost believable. I'm sure many males out there would have fallen for it.

I think Gavran was honestly surprised when I pushed him to allow this little meet-and-greet, but the way I saw it—if she wasn't the wolven's Mate, then nothing changed.

But if she was—

Well.

For almost an hour I've watched the faces of every Alpha in the room, waiting for the moment when the implications of her new Bond sank in for

someone else. For forty-seven long, exhausting minutes, I fought to keep my attention off the Omega, growing more and more uncomfortable with her distress.

By the time she started to dissociate, my fucking chest was beginning to tighten painfully. At some point, her tears began to feel less and less like justice for her misdeeds.

And when she began recounting the moment when Caelan was shot, I couldn't take any more. Couldn't watch her face crumble and her fingers shake as she lost herself in a memory I thought I'd convinced myself was a lie.

I kept replaying that night in the library. The way she disappeared into herself, leaving behind nothing but a shell of a girl with dead eyes reflecting a single, dancing flame.

To distract myself, I ran through the evidence of the Omega's deception, fact by fact.

Then I ran through them again.

And again.

And when the Omega broke down, I ran through them a fourth time. It was either that, or leave the room before my Alpha took over and I started fucking purring for her.

When the asshole got mouthy, demanding I do something to soothe her, I started again. And this time, I made him fucking listen.

Fact One:

Multi-Species Fated Matings don't exist. In all of history, there hasn't been a single documented case of a Fated pack containing all three Species.

Fact Two:

If, hypothetically, a wolven Alpha claims to have a Fated Bond with a human Omega and that Fated Bond is verified, then the human Omega will never share a Bond with another human or vampire.

Which means, hypothetically, any previous Bonds the Omega may have claimed to share are a lie—unless the Bonded is a wolven.

Fact Three:

If the Omega lied about a Fated Bond, it's not a big leap to assume she's lied about everything else.

Fact Four:

The moment her Bond with the wolven snapped into place, Idril officially became our enemy.

And there’s no way in hell I’m going to let my last brother fall prey to her pretty face and whispered lies.

Discovering that the wolven was telling the truth about their Mate Bond was a special kind of betrayal for Vae. I knew when he found out it would gut him, and even though I hated to do it, I knew I had to warn him before he brought Idril up from the cells.

He won’t admit how much it hurt when that Bond snapped, but I can see it. I can feel it through our Bond.

And while he won’t ever admit how much it hurt him to have absolute proof that she’s been lying, he clearly has no problem making his change of heart clear for her now.

“Congratulations, little traitor,” he sneers. Her eyes widen as he stalks closer, not stopping until he’s physically looming over her.

His scent is bitter and burnt. He needs to rein it in before she realizes he’s hurt and uses it against him.

“You’re officially Enemy Number One,” Vae spits. “I hope your cell was comfortable, because that’s your new home for the foreseeable future.”

“You had her in a fucking cell?” Soren shouts, shoving himself between Vae and the Omega and forcing my Packmate to take a step back.

“That’s where she belongs,” Vae snaps back, and the wolven’s eyes flash as his Beast pushes to the surface.

“Fuck that. She’s leaving. No way in seven hells will you throw my Mate in a fucking cell.”

Soren turns and crouches down, bracing himself with a hand on the back of her chair.

“Idril,” he whispers her name with a deliberate gentleness completely at odds with the protective fury of his Alpha pheromones. “Who can we ask to go pack your things? Once we get them, we can leave, alright? Or we can leave them and go right now if you want. You *never* have to see these males again.”

Idril’s head jerks up so fast I’m shocked her neck doesn’t snap. Her eyes are wide and bright with tears. Her lower lip begins trembling violently, and I’m sure she’s seconds away from falling into her savior's arms and sobbing in gratitude, ready to ride out of here on his back like a fucking princess on the back of a pony.

But that’s not what happens.

Instead of the relief I’m expecting at the thought of leaving, Idril… *panics*.

Each breath she takes is a fight—a struggle for air that won’t end. She lifts shaking hands to her chest, pressing her palms hard against her sternum, gasping in between broken, choked-off gulps of air that clearly aren’t making it to her lungs.

My instincts have me moving without thought—crossing the room in four long strides until I’m next to Soren, hovering over the Omega as she fights to breathe and speak at once. When a clearly painful gasp gets caught in her throat, it morphs into a keening whine of agony that slams into my sternum like a fucking dagger.

The pain is so fucking real that I stumble back a few steps as black spots dance in my vision and the room starts to spin. My Alpha screams, a furious roar exploding through my senses in a rush of rage I’ve never experienced from my Designation’s instincts before.

What the fuck is happening to me?

That Omega whine means my Alpha’s attention is laser-focused on her, so even as I struggle to reorient myself and breathe through the ache in my chest, my eyes never leave the female. Soren is crouched over her form protectively, and I’m struck by how fucking small she looks in that chair, curled into a tight ball like she might just disappear if she makes herself small enough. She’s still struggling to breathe, gasping and panting, stealing sharp pulls of air that she chokes on.

Strangled sounds start to fall from her lips, and the harder she fights, the more panicked she gets, until another whine rips from her chest and sends my fucking instincts spiraling.

It takes everything in me to stay where I am. My hands start fucking shaking, and I have to curl them into fists. When her eyes squeeze shut and her face twists in pain, I nearly groan at the overwhelming need inside of me to reach for her.

Soren’s hands hover between them as he tries everything he can to soothe her.

But when he reaches out, doing exactly what my whole fucking body is screaming for me to do as well—she flinches back from him so fast her head cracks against the oak frame of the chair.

I can’t.

I can’t fucking watch this. I can’t do it.

I tell myself she’s faking it. That it’s all an act. The words repeat in my mind, but they feel as empty as I do.

This is fake. This is fake. This is fake.

I don’t remember moving, but when I look around, I realize I’ve backed halfway across the room and into the whiskey cart. Relief pours through me when I realize I can use that as an excuse to turn away. To hide from her pain.

No. It’s not fucking real. It can’t be.

This is what liars do. When things start to crumble around them, they double down on the lie. This is her, doubling down. It has to be.

It fucking has to be.

Distantly, I’m aware of how fucking loud I’m being as I pour myself a drink, but I don’t fucking care. I do what I have to do to tune her out, purposely taking my time so I have an excuse to look away.

After what feels like hours but can’t be more than a few minutes, Idril’s breathing finally starts to even out. When I’m relatively sure it’s safe, I turn around.

Gav, Vae, Soren, and Kane are all huddled around the Omega. Vae’s face is so fucking pale I can see his veins under his skin. Gavran must have offered to call Calder because Soren’s in the middle of vehemently declining, and Kane’s bent over, speaking in a gentle, soothing language that I recognize as Gaelic as Idril—eyes closed and face even paler than Vae’s—cries silent tears that cause that ache in my chest to return.

Soren bends down to murmur something into the Omega’s ear. I don’t know what he says, but whatever it is causes her to shake her head in furious denial.

What the fuck?

I don’t know what he asks her next, but when she speaks, it sounds raw and pleading.

“I can’t. I *can’t* leave. Please. Don’t make me leave. *Please*.”

A stream of tears spills down her cheeks, carving glimmering, wet tracks across her porcelain skin.

My stomach twists. The guilt that's been chasing me like a fucking thunder cloud appears, ready to take over and ruin everything.

Fuck this. I refuse to give in to whatever the fuck this is. Not tonight.

“Why not?” Soren’s voice is tight with frustration. I can’t help my curiosity. This isn’t how I expected her to act, and now that she’s calmed

down—and so have my instincts—anger and paranoia start to creep in.

She doesn't answer right away. I inch closer, watching the way her fingers rub and twist around the fabric of her shirt with jerky, anxious movements. When she finally speaks, her voice is whisper-thin.

Thankfully, my hearing is exceptional.

"I can't leave Caelan. He's in a coma, and I can't—I *have* to be near him to—" She presses her lips into a thin line, glancing anxiously over Soren's shoulder.

Her eyes land on me.

Un-fucking-believable. She can't actually think I'll ever let her near Caelan again after what she's done! Is this a fucking joke?

A disbelieving laugh escapes that I can't hold back. *Fates, was I actually ready to fucking comfort this female less than five minutes ago? All because of a well-placed panic attack and a couple of Omega whines? Gods, what is wrong with me?* I know better. *For Fate's sake, this is exactly what I've been warning my Pack to watch out for!*

I should have known there was a reason for her breakdown, and here it is. *Caelan.*

She wants access to Caelan.

Over my dead body.

I set my whiskey down, slide my hands into the pockets of my jeans, and cross the room until I'm standing next to Soren. Everyone else has backed away, which leaves just the three of us.

"You're right about one thing," I tell her. "You're not leaving."

The way her eyes light up with surprise makes me believe she's thought we'd be trying to get rid of her this entire time.

Ignorant.

We could have let her go any time.

There are good reasons why she's still here. And now, those reasons have multiplied.

"You'll return to the cells, which is the safest place for you as well as us." Soren tries to object, but I cut him off.

"It's also exactly where you belong now that we have irrefutable proof of your lies."

Soren's lips part. I don't miss the way his canines are much sharper than they were moments ago, or how his eyes brighten into a much lighter green as his pupils contract and focus on me.

His Beast is obviously right at the surface. The tension is so thick the air is practically buzzing. Idril's soft, uncertain voice somehow manages to filter through the wall of pheromones fighting for dominance.

"Proof? What proof?"

"Did you think we let you and Soren meet because we were being nice?"

The crease between Idril's brow deepens. She bites down on her lower lip and shrugs. "I didn't think about it, really. I just thought Silas had me confused. I thought maybe Soren was speaking about someone else."

"Nothing Daxen does is without a plan."

She glances across the room toward the sound of Gavran's voice. Now that he has the couch to himself, he's spread out, whiskey glass dangling from the tips of his fingers. He brings the glass to his mouth and sips, looking for all the world like a male just here for the show.

He takes another sip before setting the glass on the coffee table next to Kane's abandoned drink. Clasping his hands over his stomach, he pins Idril with a level stare.

"Do you know how many documented cases exist of an Omega with Fated Mates from both Species?"

"N-no." Her eyes bounce from Gav to me, then back to Gav. Sighing, he looks at me and nods, giving me the go-ahead to take over.

"Zero."

I answer and watch her face pale, draining of color and turning an unnatural grey. "Zero as in none, Omega. There are *no* documented cases of an Omega Fated to more than one Species. On top of that, humans who wind up Fated to a supernatural *only* Mate a lone Alpha. Never a Pack. It simply doesn't happen. It's *impossible*."

Silence. I have no idea what the others' reactions are because I can't look away from the Omega. She holds my gaze, and I get the sense that she's searching for… *something.*

Whatever it is, she clearly doesn't find it. But instead of looking away, it feels like she doubles down, searching harder. Like she's trying to see into my fucking soul.

What is it that she thinks she's going to find?

"Sit down, all of you. You're giving me a headache." Gavran's voice causes Idril to startle and finally drop my gaze.

“What, exactly, does Caelan have to say about all this? Didn’t he tell you the truth before all this shit went down? Did you even bother to ask him?” Soren’s the only one of us left standing, refusing to move from Idril’s side. He looks like a knight guarding his queen.

“What a genius idea,” I reply flatly. “I can’t believe we didn’t think of it before.”

“He’s in a coma,” Idril reminds him gently. “And I don’t know why he didn’t say anything before that night. He never even came right out and told me he had a Pack. Maybe if we’d had more time before…”

“What happened before doesn’t matter,” Vae snaps from behind me. “All that matters is we now have proof that you lied about your Bond with Caelan.”

“It’s not proof,” Idril argues weakly. “You’re just assuming based—”

Now it’s my turn to cut her off.

“Based on science. Based on facts. If Soren is your Scent-Match, then your claim of a Fated Bond with Caelan isn't simply an impossibility backed by millennia of recorded evidence, irrefutable scientific data, and common fucking sense; it’s a lie that was *never* going to hold up long-term. You may as well try to convince us that the sky is green. It’s funny, really. The irony of trying to use Fate to sell your deception. Well… I suppose *you* don’t think it’s funny.”

“Now hold the fuck—”

“I’m not talking to you, wolven,” I snap, refusing to look away from Idril’s bright blue eyes, swimming with tears. “This is the plan moving forward, Omega. Do I have your attention?”

I wait for her nod before I continue.

“You’re going back to the cells. When Caelan wakes up, he’ll tell us the truth of what really happened that night. Once we know exactly what you did to him and the extent of your participation leading up to his attack, we’ll decide your punishment—”

“For what?” Soren demands, leaning so close I can feel the weight of his anger.

“For sabotaging an official Bloodbound mission. For endangering the life of a Bastard. For the near-fatal injury of my fucking Packmate,” I answer, ticking each offense off on my fingers, then return my attention to the Omega. “Until then, as Caelan’s pack, Vae and I will oversee your punishments.”

Soren's fuming, but Idril doesn't react. Her eyes are flat. *Dead.* Then she lifts one hand and curls it into a fist and presses it against her chest, grinding it into her sternum. I have to force my eyes away from her trembling hand to keep speaking.

"You *will* answer our questions. No more lies. This time, I want the truth. And at the risk of repeating myself, need I remind you that there are still missing Omegas out there, kidnapped by your father? Those are the real victims. And we don't have time to wait for you to grow a conscience and stop holding back the information we need to find them. So from now on…"

I don't know why I hesitate. Maybe it's because nothing I say seems to be getting through to her. Maybe it's how she keeps fucking grinding her palm into her chest like she's in pain. Whatever it is, it's got my Alpha on edge.

Like I've suddenly been dropped in the middle of a minefield.

"Dax?" Vae calls out to me, voice thick with tension.

"From now on—" Again, the words break off in my throat, and my throat goes dry; all the moisture evaporates.

Fuck! What the hell is happening?

"From—"

Idril grinds her palm into her sternum even harder. Her face twists in pain, and her vacant eyes stare right through me. *I can't—I can't—*

A hand lands on my shoulder, making me jerk. Gav pushes me behind him, taking my place. I don't know if I'm relieved or pissed because I can hardly think over my Alpha, who's shouting and slamming into the bars of his cage.

Then Gavran speaks.

"Tomorrow morning we will begin a new form of interrogation. To be sure we're getting the truth, we will ask all questions with the assistance of Alpha Command."

The temperature in the room drops.

Idril's hand falls from her chest. Her vacant eyes fly to Gav, filling with genuine terror that makes my chest tighten like a fist is squeezing my lungs.

Then, like it was never there to begin with, the fear disappears, replaced by a red-hot fury I'm not expecting. In a rare show of defiance, Idril narrows her eyes, lifts her chin, and straightens in her chair. For half a

second I get the strangest feeling… like I'm seeing a version of Idril she could have been.

Should have been.

"You cannot Alpha Command me," she responds, forcing each word through clenched teeth.

"I don't like making this decision," Gav replies. "But we've tried doing things the easy way. Now we have to adjust our approach."

There's a part of me that wonders if this might be too drastic. Yes, it was my idea, but… *gods… I couldn't even say the words!* This all seemed so clear before. It made sense, *Fatesdamnit.*

Why am I suddenly questioning things now?

I remind myself that this approach is tame compared to how we treat males in her situation, but the argument feels flimsy, like a cop out. I just know I can't subject her to the kind of physical interrogation I would if she were male. Or not an Omega. Or… anyone else.

I just… *can't.*

I refuse to examine why.

My Alpha takes advantage of my internal struggle and breaks out of the cage I've been fighting to keep him in, more than happy to call me on my shit.

You know why. You can lie to all of them, but you can't lie to yourself. Can't lie to me. Fucking coward!

I pour another glass of whiskey and toss it back. I don't have time to shove this fucker back in his cage, but he must have made his point because he slinks away without any more of a struggle.

Before I can wonder what the hell that's all about, the argument at my back escalates. Soren lunges, shoving his face into Gav's and snarling like a feral animal.

"Absolutely the fuck not. As her Mate, I forbid it. I'll leave right the fuck now, and I'll take her with me."

The male stands protectively in front of his Omega like a mountain of wrath. *Steady. Unmoveable.*

Something about it pisses me off.

"Need I remind you of the Sovereign Accords?" Gav asks. A muscle ticks in Soren's jaw before he throws back his head, laughing in disbelief.

"The Accords haven't been upheld officially in decades," he spits. "They're outdated and in need of a massive overhaul. And regardless,

they’re there to prevent our Species from raiding each other's dungeons. Not to give you the legal right to detain my Mate so she can rot in one.”

“What are the Sovereign Accords?” Idril asks, her soft voice twisting through the air between us.

“They’re a binding law between Species,” I answer, swirling the amber liquid in my glass. “Centuries ago, delegates for humans, vampires, and wolven created and signed them during the Blood Wars. They ensure each Species' sovereignty and right to justice. Which means the wolven have no claim to you so long as you remain our prisoner. Bond or no Bond.”

The Omega nods, sinking back and warily shutting her eyes in defeat.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” Soren snaps.

I shrug. “If we let you walk out of here with her, it violates the same treaty that’s kept the vampires from your throats for centuries. Is that what you’re proposing, Alpha Heir? You truly want to drag your entire Pack into a war?”

Soren looks like he’s struggling not to shift while simultaneously fantasizing about ripping my throat out with his teeth. The rumbling in his chest grows louder. His eyes brighten and don’t turn back.

His second stands, readying himself to intercede.

“Try it,” I dare, sick of this fucking game. “I’ll send your head to your father after I bleed you dry. Your Mate will be all alone without any protection.”

“What,” he bites, “are you suggesting, then?”

I shrug. “You can leave her here alone—”

“Not fucking happening.”

“Then your only other option is to stay. You can both rot together.”

Kane sucks in a sharp breath. “Ye’d have my Alpha give himself over tae a cage?” His voice is lethal. Accent thicker, like he’s too pissed to regulate it.

“I suppose he could make a new home in the forest behind the compound. Spend his nights praying to your moon for the chance to see his Omega again someday.”

Kane rounds on his Alpha. “Ye cannae be considering this farce, surely.”

Soren swallows thickly. His eyes bounce from his Second, to me, then land on Idril—who’s eerily still, vacant gaze glued to the rug at her feet, fingers tangled into the bottom of her shirt, just as still as the rest of her.

My fucking chest tightens further.

“I won’t leave her,” Soren answers, eyes locked on his Mate. “If that means staying with her in a fucking cell, then I will.”

“Yer Da’—”

“Will understand,” he says, and it’s clear his decision’s been made even before he turns to me and says, “Do what you have to do. But I want your word that you won’t separate us. I also need the freedom to meet with my Second daily.”

Kane’s jaw ticks like he wants to argue, but knows better than to do so in front of an audience. His Alpha made his decision, and he can probably tell—just as I can—that there will be no dissuading him.

A knock at the door makes me frown. Whoever the hell is interrupting better be sure what they’re doing. Then again, I don’t know if I can handle another emergency tonight, so hopefully it’s just an overeager Beta with drinks.

Sighing, Gav crosses the room and cracks open the door. I strain to hear, but all I can make out from the brief exchange is a hissed, “You’re fucking kidding me,” then louder, “*Now?*”

“I mean, I can’t exactly tell him she’s busy washing her hair,” who I recognize now as Silas, mumbles in reply. Gav turns, sweeping his gaze around the room with a calculated look.

“What’s going on?” Vae asks.

“We need to go,” Gav replies. “There was an abandoned warehouse located by two Bastards an hour ago.”

“So? It’s like… eleven o’clock at night. Why can’t they take care of it?”

“Well, first of all, because they reported picking up the faint scent of magic. The same as when—”

“I’m out,” Vae announces before he can finish. “I can’t be around that scent again.”

“What scent?” Soren asks.

“None of your business, mutt.” Vae turns a glare on Soren, but Gav holds up a hand, cutting him off with a shake of his head.

“It’s fine if he knows. He’s coming with us.”

My mouth drops open. “Why?”

“Because they found an Omega,” Gav answers, closing the door and crossing the room, not stopping until he’s standing in front of the Omega. The vacant look in her eyes hasn’t left since I last checked, and she doesn’t

notice his presence. Not even when he crouches down so that he's closer to eye level with her.

"Idril." His voice is a gentle rumble, but she doesn't respond

It's not until he places a large hand on her knee that she finally moves. Her head whips up with a jerk, and she flinches back, like she's just been yanked from a dream.

She blinks. "Y-yes?"

"Do you know an Omega named Branwen?"

She frowns, shaking her head. "No, the only Omega I've ever known was my mother."

"My men found an Omega tonight. We believe she was kidnapped by your father."

Her eyes widen.

"They said she's refusing to leave. Not until she speaks to you."

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Chapter 4

Idril

I haven't been outside in over a week, and now that I am, I can't even enjoy it.

Scrunched in the backseat of a huge SUV next to Soren, I've spent the whole ride staring out the window, watching the world blur as we race past it.

The stars seem a thousand times brighter than normal; the moonlight bathes everything in a beautiful silver hue. It must be the middle of the night by now.

Will this day never end?

I've lost count of how many times my eyes have fallen—as they do now—to marvel at the brand new shoes on my feet. When Vae raced out of the room, ignoring Daxen's demand to tell him what was so important that it couldn't wait until they got back, I wasn't expecting him to come back with… *these.*

White Converse low tops. Brand new, and somehow… *a perfect fit.*

Flexing my feet, I luxuriate in the novelty of having new shoes for the first time in what feels like forever. It's the nicest thing anyone's given me in years.

I just wish they hadn't come from him. Part of me wishes I didn't need to wear them so that I could light them on fire.

Is this how things will be the rest of my life? This constant tug of war between my instincts and the fire inside of me that refuses to settle for an Alpha who can't even look me in the eyes when he hands me a gift?

Kane, Soren's best friend, starts to hum a familiar tune I can't quite place from his seat opposite me on Soren's left. I glance at him from the

corner of my eye, and when his attention falls on me, he shoots me a wink that has a blush pooling in my cheeks.

It's almost comical how relaxed he is compared to Soren, who's strung so tight between the two of us I can feel him vibrating. His scent is still a little burnt, and it's driving my Omega wild as she paces behind the wall of her shelter.

I'm really failing at this whole Fated Mate thing. My Omega just wants to curl into his lap and burrow into his neck, but the two withering, half-formed Bonds in my chest keep me still. I can't trust my instincts. Can't trust Fate. And I can't even explain to him why he got a broken Mate after probably spending his whole life dreaming of this moment.

And here I am. *Ruining it.*

Maybe… maybe if I knew what he was thinking. I know he was mad, and I know he wants me to leave with him and doesn't understand why I won't, but … *is that because he doesn't believe me about my Bond with Caelan? Does he think I'm lying like Dax and Vae do?*

If I did leave with him, would I just—once again—*be exchanging this prison for another?*

I want to ask—whisper the question into the silence between us—but I'm too afraid of the answer.

I dart my eyes to the side, intending to steal a glance at my Mate without him noticing, but that fails when his eyes lock with mine and refuse to let me look away.

Smile at him, Idril. Give him something. Anything.

Like he already knows I'm too afraid to make a move of my own, Soren raises his hand, extending it cautiously toward my face. His movements are sure but slow, giving me plenty of time to pull away if I want to.

I don't.

He doesn't touch my face like I thought he would. Instead, he reaches for my hair, taking a thick silver lock and rubbing it gently between two tattooed fingers. For such a large male, his touch is incredibly gentle. And when he begins to twirl my hair, delicately wrapping it around his fingers, the light tug on my scalp sends chills down my spine.

"Are you alright?"

His voice sounds like honey over gravel, rough and thick and full of warmth. The concern in his tone sounds so real I almost believe it.

"No," I whisper. I hate the way his expression hardens, but I won't lie.

“You look exhausted,” he replies, still coiling my hair around his fingers. The touch is somehow personal, and not. He hasn’t touched me anywhere else, and I’m thankful for his restraint.

“It’s been a long… life,” I whisper honestly. He frowns, but doesn’t get a chance to respond.

“We’re five minutes out,” Gavran says, glancing at us over his shoulder from his seat behind the wheel. Next to him, Daxen’s fingers fly across the keyboard of a laptop propped open on his lap, fully focused on what he’s working on.

“Any word on the lass?” Kane asks, leaning forward.

“Nothing more than we already know—we have good reason to believe Varenthrall was holding her. Not sure why he left her alone without any security, but the guy tends to jump from place to place. He’s a paranoid fuck.”

“I would be too, working with the Severed,” Dax mutters.

“Why the hell would a human get in bed with a Severed?”

Gavran's eyes find Soren’s in the reflection of the rearview mirror. “That’s what we’re trying to find out. Whatever it is, it’s got everything to do with the uptick in missing Omegas.”

My lungs tighten painfully at the reminder, and I return my attention to the passing scenery outside of my window. I hate knowing that my father is behind something so horrifying and vile, and it’s so, so hard not to blame myself for all of it. Especially now that I know he’s using *my* blood in his *“experiments.”*

The vehicle starts to bounce as smooth asphalt morphs into gravel. We rock back and forth as our tires bounce over potholes, and dust and dirt spray out from under the wheels, turning into billowing clouds of dust that make it harder to see in front of us.

I squint through the windshield, but the only thing I can see is a large truck building with two SUV’s identical to the one we’re in parked outside of it. Gav pulls up beside them and throws the vehicle into park.

“Stay behind us at all times,” he orders, unbuckling before turning around to face the three of us. “The warehouse is clear, but there were Severed on sight recently. We have four Bastards and a member of our medical staff waiting inside, preparing to transport the Omega.”

His amber eyes fall on me.

“You will remain with either Daxen or myself at all times. Don’t run off. Don’t ask questions. The only reason you’re here is because the female refuses to leave until she can speak to you.”

I nod in understanding, but the truth is… I don’t understand. At all. *Why would an Omega be asking for me? Did my* father *leave her here as some kind of trap? Is she a message? A threat?*

“I will not leave my Mate.” Soren cuts in, narrowing his eyes in challenge. When Gavran answers, his Alpha pheromones explode through the air, making my skin itch and my Omega whine.

“You can stay behind us, or you can stay in the car.”

Soren clenches his jaw and growls. He looks a breath away from turning this into a fight, which will only make everything worse. I’m surprised he hasn’t lost control already tonight. His restraint is… *remarkable.*

So much for the rumors that wolven sleep in caves and eat nothing but raw meat. No one as restrained and in control of his primal side as Soren is sleeping on a pile of leaves and bathing in streams.

Still, with everything that’s happened tonight, I’m barely holding it together. That knife’s edge is getting thinner and thinner with every snarl, growl, and almost-explosion.

I need to calm Soren down before things escalate. The only problem is, I have no idea how to do that.

So I do the only thing I can—follow my instincts.

I shift, turning so that I’m facing Soren completely. I lift my hand and reach out, hesitantly resting my palm against the solid muscle of his chest. When he doesn’t pull away, I relax, letting my palm rest against the soft cotton of his shirt. I can feel his muscles under my hand—the way they tense, pulling tight under the fabric of his henley.

The sheer strength beneath my fingertips is incredible.

Caelan is a powerhouse—compact and broad and graceful all at once. So much larger than me, yet he moves with the fluid grace of a dancer.

But physically, Soren is just… *more.* He can’t be more than an inch or two taller than Caelan, but his presence fills every room he enters, quietly demanding recognition.

He moves, and his muscles shift under my hand as his head drops, eyes landing on my hand, then darting up to my face. His gaze locks with mine, holding me captive with only a look.

He takes a deep breath. Then another. And another. His frame relaxes on his fourth inhale, and the strange, primal presence under his skin starts to recede, taking all his tension with it.

Kane throws back his head and laughs, making me jerk in surprise. I snatch my hand back, feeling my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

“I’ve heard yer Mate’s touch is like catnip to our Beasts. Looks like the tales are true, aye?”

Feeling awkward, I turn away from Kane and Soren, shove open the door, and jump out of the SUV. Once I’m out, I walk to the front of the SUV where Dax and Gavran stand, talking to two Alphas I’ve never seen before. I hang back a few feet, even when Soren and Kane appear like silent assassins, so quiet on their feet that even Daxen’s eyes widen when he glances up and notices them both standing there.

A few minutes later, Gavran takes off, motioning for us to follow. When we get to the warehouse’s entrance, Gavran yanks on the handle and the door swings open on rust-covered hinges that release a piercing, screeching sound that hurts my ears.

Gavran extends his hand, gesturing for me to enter, which makes Soren snarl about sending an Omega in unprotected, and Gav reminds him his men are already there and the place has been cleared for an hour. They bicker back and forth, but I ignore them. I take a step forward. The soles of my shoes tap softly against the concrete floor. It’s the middle of the night, but somehow it’s even darker in here, and it takes my eyes a minute to adjust.

When they do, the argument behind me fades away. Almost immediately after that, the scent slams into me—rust and mildew, the sour tang of old blood that’s been ground into concrete. A bouquet I know intimately. So intimately that I have to stop, take a breath, and remind myself where I am.

And more importantly, where I’m not.

This isn’t Father’s house. This isn’t the basement. I’m not back there. Not chained up. Not dying of thirst. Not lying next to my own vomit as soundless screams rip endlessly from my raw, ravaged throat.

The taste of old iron washes over me, pulling me back and drowning me in memories. It clings to the back of my throat, and I bend over, bracing my hands on my knees as I gag.

The buzz of flickering fluorescent lights somewhere to my right grows louder and louder, burrowing into my brain. I wish someone would turn them off. I don't want to see this place. Don't want to see the rows and rows of cages that are stacked against cold stone walls, now illuminated by the buzzing lights.

The lights stay on. And they should, *shouldn't they?*

Isn't this my fault? Am I not the reason these cages are here in the first place? Because of my blood. Because of what my father's doing with it to the Omegas he's terrorizing.

It's the very last thing I want, but I make myself open my eyes and truly look at my surroundings.

The cages against the wall were clearly placed there haphazardly. Some are stacked, while others are shoved into wooden crates and still others sit alone. Discarded.

The cages are old, iron bars orange with rust. A few doors hang open, while a few hang off their hinges completely.

But others are locked tight, like they're waiting for a new prisoner.

I lie to myself when I see the stains under the bars, doing whatever I can to deny the memory of my own cage—A different cage, in a different concrete room as dark and cold as this one—from creeping in.

I tell myself the red stains are rust.

The same as they were before.

Not blood. Not blood. Not blood.

It's as much a lie now as it was then.

My lungs squeeze. This place… It's no different from my father's house. The only difference is that it's filled with cages instead of cells. All that's missing are a set of stairs leading up to a house filled with chandeliers and priceless art—a mask to hide the evil below.

This is a more honest version of the nightmare I was kept in. There are no lies here. Only stone and the truth of what monsters do to Omegas when no one cares enough to stop them.

"Move."

I jump at the sound of Daxen's voice behind me. It's not easy, but I manage to pick one foot up, then the other, latching onto the middle of Gavran's back as I follow him across the room so I don't have to see the nightmare surrounding me.

“You’re alright,” Soren’s deep voice wraps around me, suffusing me with its warmth. He’s behind me, so close I can feel the heat of his body.

Dax and Gavran walk up to two other males in tactical gear like the two outside, and I hang back a few feet, so I don’t get accused of trying to eavesdrop. Another male walks up to them, and after a few seconds I realize I know who he is—one of the Doctors—Calder.

The group moves, clustering around a lone cage off to the side. Daxen glances over his shoulder, and his eyes find mine with unerring accuracy.

Like his singular goal in life is to humiliate me, he snaps, “Omega, here.”

It’s not the tone—or even the order itself—that causes a red mist to appear, casting a haze over everything and lighting my chest on fire.

It’s the way he snaps his fingers, calling me the way he’d call a dog to heel.

My jaw clenches. Something deep in my chest, where the golden thread of our Bond lies lifeless and alone, pulls and pulls and pulls. It pulls so tight it splinters. Reality shifts. The world sharpens, and a red-hot rush of fury explodes through my veins.

He has *no right*.

“I’m not an animal,” I respond coolly, narrowing my eyes in disgust. Each word out of my mouth is ice cold, a shocking contrast to the fiery heat pulsing under my skin. He opens his mouth to reply, but I’m not finished.

“You will *never* speak to me like that again.”

The shock in his eyes lasts for much, much longer than I anticipate before it morphs, replaced by anger so sharp it would cut me if given half a chance. Neither of us speaks. The longer the silence goes on, the faster I feel my sudden, unexpected confidence leaking away.

My momentary strength has turned back into fear like Cinderella’s carriage turning back into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight. My hands start to shake as the burst of adrenaline evaporates. I’m seconds from falling apart when behind me, Soren steps forward, shifting his body so close to my back he’s practically touching me.

And for the first time, I realize…

I’m not alone.

An approving rumble vibrates through his chest, low and soft but unmistakable.

This Alpha… my Mate…he’s actually… *proud* of me.

“The lassie’s got backbone,” Kane laughs, sounding far too excited. “Took her long enough tae show it."

A scream tears through the air, loud and piercing and terrified. Everyone’s attention turns toward the sound—toward the cage in the corner of the warehouse.

Toward the Omega.

The two Bastards closest to the Omega’s cage are slowly backing away, along with Calder, the Beta Doctor. He’s still close to her, though, murmuring words in a soothing tone that clearly aren’t working—and it’s immediately clear why.

It only worsens when he stops backing away and starts creeping closer instead, one hand raised in front of him to show he’s not a threat, which is pointless when his other hand is curled into a fist around a huge syringe.

Kane darts forward, shouting at Calder. “By Saint Andrew’s cross! What are ye doin’ to the lass?”

He tries to push past the doctor, but when Calder blocks his way, Kane plants one hand in the middle of his chest and shoves him, sending him stumbling into the wall. The Omega’s thrashing and screaming are in what sounds like French, but the screams thankfully fade away when Kane crouches down, making himself as small as possible, and starts speaking to her in a soft Scottish brogue.

Calder creeps up behind him, holding the syringe like he’s going to try injecting her with whatever’s in that needle, but Kane spins on him, his face a mask of fury. “Put that damn thing away, ye daft bastard. Can’t ye see she’s scared out o’ her head?”

Determination fills me, and I know I need to do something. I need to help her. I *know* what it’s like to feel like a cornered animal. Like prey. And if she’s here because of my father, then I have a responsibility to her.

I don’t know when I decided to move, but the next thing I know I’m less than six feet from her cage. No one stops me, and I slow my steps as I come to a stop next to Kane. He twists, glancing up at me before raising a questioning brow. I nod, giving him a soft smile of thanks as he pushes to his feet and steps back, giving us both some space.

Now it's just her and me.

Two Omegas, caught in a nightmare my father created.

Now that I can actually see her, I study her curiously. Like most Omegas, she’s small. Her hair hangs on either side of her face, shielding her

like a long, thick curtain of beautiful dark curls. Even under the flickering lights, the strands shine like black silk and deepest violet.

A few silent minutes pass before she looks up, glancing at me through long lashes with wide, brown eyes almost too big for her face.

It's clear she's been here for a while. Her clothes are torn and ragged, her lips are chapped, and worse, her wrists are covered in angry red marks and bruises left by restraints.

My stomach clenches in remembered pain.

Her features have a sharpness—an awareness and intelligence that shines through the fatigue. She reminds me of a pixie, one of the otherworldly beings from my Mother's stories. Delicate, but strong. Quick-witted and magical. Too alive to be trapped in a box.

I blink back my tears. She's not crying, so I'll be damned if I do. Instead of crouching like the males, I sit fully on the floor, cross my legs, and clasp my hands in my lap. With no other ideas, I say the first thing that pops into my head.

"Hello. I'm Idril."

Not the best introduction, but I've never tried to make a friend before, so I'm cutting myself some slack.

With slow, painful movements, the Omega uncurls from her ball and stretches out her limbs. She studies me the way I was studying her, and I wait patiently, letting her take her time. When she gets to my face, she frowns, blinking slowly like she's trying to bring my features into focus.

Then her eyes widen, and something like recognition sparks in their depths. With a burst of life, she leans forward, whispering, "Yes. I know you."

Her throat sounds dry. *Has anyone even bothered to offer her something to drink?*

"Would you like some water?" I ask, praying someone has some. She bites her lip, then nods. I glance up to ask someone to get her a drink, but Gavran's already there, a brand new, cold bottle of water in hand.

I take it, inclining my head in thanks as he returns to stand with the others. The Omega eyes the bottle warily, and I don't blame her.

I know exactly how it feels, not knowing who to trust.

"It's sealed," I tell her, lifting the bottle so she can see it under the dim lights. "But I'll take a drink first, so you know for sure nothing was done to it."

She shakes her head, takes the bottle, and twists off the cap with shaking hands before lifting it to her lips and taking measured sips—even though it's clear she wants to down the whole thing.

I know how that feels, too.

"Thank you." Her voice is soft and feminine, with a British accent that makes it sound like a gentle melody.

"Where are you from?"

"Wales," she answers, curling her arms around her legs, keeping one hand clutched around her water. She glances over her shoulder, eyeing the males warily. I follow her gaze, frowning at the way they're all watching us like we're exotic animals at a zoo.

When I catch Gavran's eye, I brace for a denial but ask anyway.

"Do you think we could have some room, please?"

His eyes bounce between the two of us before, to my surprise, he inclines his head.

Of course, Dax immediately objects.

"No, no way. She can't be alone with her. We don't know what's been done to the Omega, and we can't trust the—Idril."

"My name is *Branwen*," the Omega snaps, glaring at Dax. The challenge in her tone is unexpected. Both shocking and reassuring at once. Whatever she's gone through, this Omega—*Branwen*—hasn't lost her spirit.

Watching her stand up to Daxen without even hesitating sends a rush of jealousy through my bones. Or maybe it's yearning. And… respect. Awe, too.

Probably all of the above.

I mean… Branwen's in a literal cage, but when someone said something she didn't like, she spoke up. No hesitation. No fear of punishment.

And Fates… I wish I could do the same. I wish I had the strength to say what I'm thinking, instead of shoving it down deep, too scarred by a life of punishments and pain for as little as breathing.

"We'll give them five minutes," Gav responds, and Daxen looks about ready to argue, but Gav gives him a look and his mouth clicks shut.

The males give us a buffer of about twenty feet, and the further away they get, the more my shoulders relax. When I turn back to Branwen, I'm suddenly struck with the realization that… I have no idea what to say. *I*

mean… what am I supposed to do? I don't really even understand why I'm here… so where do I start?

Maybe I should apologize…

'Hey, sorry my dad kidnapped you. He's a total jerk, and I promise I'm not like him. I'm also super sorry if he injected you with something. Turns out, it's my blood—which I just learned is magic, or… something. I don't really know, honestly. But if you start glowing or flying or turning invisible, don't freak out. It's normal. I think.'

Yeah. That'll go over *so* well.

"Uhm… do you want to come out of there?"

She shrugs. "Not yet."

I nod, stretching out my legs and turning to the side. "Yeah… I get it."

And I do. Sometimes it takes a second to adjust when you've been somewhere for so long. The cage—*the prison*—can start to feel safe in its own way. *Familiar.* Not unknown and scary like the outside world and all its potential for pain.

Branwen studies me with pursed lips. Then she nods, like she's come to some conclusion.

"You do understand, don't you?"

I hum in agreement. "So, uhm… They said you were… saying my name. Asking for me? But, listen… I think you have the wrong person. I'm so, so sorry. I'll do what I can to help you find who you're looking for, but—"

"No." She cuts me off firmly. "*You* are who I'm looking for."

"You don't understand. I've *never* met an Omega aside from my mother," I admit sheepishly. But instead of convincing her that I'm not who she thinks, my admission seems to have the opposite effect. She straightens —as well as one can straighten surrounded by metal bars—and her eyes brighten with resolve.

"I came here—to the States—for you, Idril"

My mouth falls open with a disbelieving laugh. "*Me?* Why—I'm nobody!"

She holds my stare, like I'm being purposely obtuse and she doesn't have time for games.

"We both know that isn't true."

I shake my head furiously, denying her words. I laugh, but it's strangled. "Listen. Until recently, I hadn't left my father's estate for nearly a decade.

I'm—I'm *no one*. I don't know *anyone*."

"Well… *that* might be true," she concedes, and I exhale in relief until she keeps going. "However, there are people who know *you*. Women. Many women. And they sent me here to find you. To help you."

Right. The people in the next town over don't know I exist, but a group of women across the ocean does?

I sigh, grinding my palms into my eye sockets. "Help me with what, exactly?"

Branwen shrugs, far more nonchalant about this than I would be if I were her. "I don't know specifically, but I have a general idea. And if you're honest with yourself… so do you."

Wooden beams exploding into a thousand pieces. Fire flaring to life in the sconces, surging flames ten feet tall and white-hot. Handprints—an exact match to mine—burned into the stone. Each moment flashes through my mind like a movie scene.

No… No. Surely that's not… exploding earlier tonight—Fates, was that really tonight?—

"Maybe it will help if I explain *what* brought me here," she suggests, stretching out her legs to mirror my position.

I nod, dumbly. Because apparently that's all I'm capable of right now.

"I come from a long line of human Omegas who have the Sight. Which, put plainly—and ignoring a thousand nuances—means we see flashes of the future."

"Don't sugarcoat it," I murmur, and she throws her head back and laughs. It's so ridiculous, I can't keep my own lips from twitching at the sound.

"In my defense, there's really no good way to break that kind of news to someone. Something I think you can relate to… if I'm not mistaken."

The look she gives me does more to convince me she's telling the truth than anything she could have said. I dart a worried glance over her shoulder toward the Alphas, but I don't know why. It's not like it's a secret.

And Soren's going to know soon enough.

"Alright. But what does this… have to do with me?"

"For two decades, the women in my family have been *shown* visions of you. All of us. Repeatedly. Vision after vision of an Omega with white hair and blue eyes—"

"That could be anybody."

“It could be,” she agrees, taking my interruption in stride. “Until a few years ago, when things started to change. That’s when we began to receive visions of *you*, specifically.”

“What does that mean? Like you were watching me?”

Gods… that’s terrifying. If that’s the case, they didn’t see anything good, that’s for sure.

Branwen shakes her head. “No. It's more… abstract than that.”

“Abstract how?”

Her brown eyes lock on mine, and when she answers, her voice softens. “We saw a white bird in a golden cage. The door was unlocked, but she couldn’t escape. We saw the Five threads of Fate appear and wrap tightly around the bird’s delicate neck, binding to her for eternity. One thread burns. Two weep. One is wrapped in shadows. The last searches.”

Her tone changes as she speaks; no longer a traumatized Omega, she speaks now with confidence. With authority I can only dream of possessing.

“Three months ago, the visions increased. New ones came with frequency, like chapters from a book. A music box made of a burgundy wood none of us have ever seen, gilded in gold and sapphires. But when you lift the lid, there is no song. Instead, it tells a story. In a language we’ve never heard, yet it feels so familiar it aches. Then we saw the infant. Lying in a crib on a mattress made of clouds and silk. Glowing orbs float gently overhead; a haunting lullaby dances through the air. The infant sleeps peacefully… even as shadows snake into cracks unseen and reach for her with grasping, angry hands.”

Branwen’s voice.

It’s… *changing*.

I lean in, almost certain I hear an echo, like something is speaking *through* her.

“We saw a stone archway, half buried in the Earth. Scattered cracks pulse with glowing violet light, and carved upon the highest point… a name. *Idril. Idril. Idril*. Voices whisper and hands claw—reaching from the other side. So many hands. So many eyes.”

I can’t breathe. Can’t *think*. I’m half aware of the Alphas moving behind me, but Branwen’s not. She doesn’t see them. I don’t think she sees anything. At least… nothing here, in front of her.

“A castle on what was once a cliff, surrounded by rolling hills of Pine. Windows lit. Blood dripping down the walls. The voices whisper your name

through the foundation and under the Earth. *Idril. Idril.”*

Her eyes snap open, sharp and knowing. She takes a deep, steadying breath. Then warily, she moves, inching closer toward the front of the cage. At first I think she’s trying to get out, so I start to move, but she reaches out, placing a hand on top of my leg to stop me.

She flips her hand over, palm up like an offering—a question.

She answers my confused look with a silent plea and curiosity—but not fear—so I lift my hand and place it in hers. It’s steady and warm, and for the first time in forever, I feel… *a connection.*

“Close your eyes,” she whispers, and I obey.

At first, there’s nothing.

No… Not nothing.

The absence of everything. Nothing is still *something*, but this isn’t that.

The Void—*my old friend*—is here. Waiting for me. An eternal darkness reaching out and wrapping me in its embrace. Not safety. Not comfort. But also, not fear.

Just… *absence.*

This place is familiar, so it’s easy to relax, floating wherever it wishes to take me. I can feel another life drifting next to me—*Branwen.* Time passes, but not here, and after a thousand years *(or a thousand minutes, or a single breath)* the Void shifts like velvet against my skin. It swirls around me, spinning faster and faster, pulling me down and ejecting me into a liminal space.

I land on my feet and find myself standing on soft, wet Earth, surrounded by fog. It’s silent—nothing but the echo of my own breaths chasing after me.

In my mind, another voice appears—Branwen’s voice. I strain, trying to make out the words, but they slip away. Her voice changes. Her accent thickens, becoming more melodic, with long vowels and a delicate lyricism that shouldn’t exist.

The voice gets closer, then further away. It grows older, then younger. The only thing that never changes is the wisdom infusing every beautiful note, growing sharper and clearer until—

See, Daughter.

A Command, not a question.

The mist clears, and I take a step forward, walking over lush moss and wet Earth until the path narrows and I come upon two birds in separate

cages. The first cage splinters as the second cage begins to sing—a melancholy melody nearly overshadowed by the crisp snap of splintering wood.

Thunder rumbles through the sky. Clouds roll in above and below and all around me, too fast for my eyes to focus. The crash of ocean waves breaks against the shore, loud and curiously comforting, like the taste of Earth and smoke that bursts on my tongue and the fragrance of salt and brine filling my nose.

The whispering voices return. *Older. Younger. Male. Female.* They're crying and screaming and laughing, words turning over and over and over until—

They can't kill the song, Daughter.

The voice is right behind me, and I gasp, whirling around to find—

Two birds—free from their cages. One, purest white, sparkling blue cobalt peeking through shimmering white feathers on its wings.

The second, an endless black that gleams like moonbeams on frozen rain. It cocks its head—*a question*—and its feathers shimmer with deep, iridescent purple.

I know, as surely as I know my name, these are more than birds.

They're the two of us—*Branwen, me*—and as the thunder cracks above us, both birds unfurl their wings and launch gracefully into the sky above.

They soar higher, and we soar with them, flying over oceans, rivers, lakes, and ponds—farms and towns and cabins, hidden deep in the woods.

The moon sinks below the horizon. One by one, the stars disappear, like diamonds plucked by an unseen hand. The sun begins to rise, and the first rays of dawn extend across the land. The birds slow, coasting on currents of wind. We crest over the rise of the hill, and that's when I see it.

A castle.

But not just any castle. I know this castle.

HQ.

From here, it looks like a stone monolith, extending endlessly into the sky. Like a sentry standing guard over the land and its people. We circle the spires, swooping down to glide along the stone walls of the keep.

The sun's light reflects strangely off the stone. I shift, drawing closer to see—

Blood.

I recoil, flapping my wings frantically to escape from the crimson that flows down the walls. Steady, shimmering streams that break off into smaller rivulets, chased by voices on the wind. They disappear, trickling through cracks in the stone.

Branwen snaps her wings, extending them fully as she shifts, soaring *up, up, up* to return to the spires. Her wings cut through the wind as she circles the castle, making loop after loop until the sun sets and light disappears, and her feathers shimmer like diamonds as they drink in the light of the moon.

Still, she flies.

Circling. Watching.

The pale bird—*me, it's me*—follows behind her, white wings burning against the dark of night. Her feathers are too bright, too fragile. Her flight is clumsy, unpolished. But the black bird never leaves her behind, circling back over and over, leading her forward without falter.

She soars through the air, steadying my flight, pulling me higher with each turn of her wings.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Branwen.

Me.

She guides our flight, and I eagerly follow. Slowly gaining confidence with each turn. Until eventually, my wings become steady. *Sure.*

When the voice returns, it is neither old nor young. Neither male nor female. Neither wise nor ignorant.

It simply *is*.

A gift… and an explanation.

This is why she was sent, Daughter. You're not meant to do this alone.

The flame inside my chest flares, burning brighter than ever before. It unfurls, stretches, and turns toward the voice, crackling in acknowledgment. *In welcome.*

This time, it doesn't fold into nothing and disappear. This time, it burns steadily. *Joyfully.* And I know in my soul, I'll never again need to search, fearing it's been extinguished.

Branwen laughs. The sound is bright, alive, and unrestrained. Like she felt the same shift as I did. My laughter joins hers, exploding in a trill of joy

as I soar alongside her, taking in the world beyond, its beauty extending endlessly into the horizon.

Something has changed not only in me, but in the world itself. I smile, feeling closer than ever before to something I suddenly know I've been missing, even if I have no idea what it could be.

I blink.

And find myself back in the warehouse, kneeling on the floor, facing Branwen. My heart pounds in my ears. Tears fall, hot and fast down my cheeks.

Across from me, Branwen raises her head… and smiles.

It's tentative. Shaky. And real.

"Do you see?" she whispers, eyes bright with excitement and hope.

I feel the Alphas. Can feel them watching us, even as I return her smile with one of my own. I know there will be questions later, but I don't care. Not right now.

Because right now, there's no room for Alphas or questions or anything else. In this moment—in this breath—it's only us. No one else exists.

Only Branwen and me.

Two Omegas.

Two birds.

Caged.

But finally… *finally* not alone.

"Do you?" she repeats, leaning closer and squeezing my hand.

My lower lip trembles. I squeeze back, feeling that connection pulse as I whisper my answer.

"Yes."

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Chapter 5

Vaelenor

I’m downstairs sitting with Caelan when Calder arrives with the new Omega in tow.

“We’re a regular Omega sanctuary around here,” I grumble to my silent Packmate, one eye on the procession in the hallway. “I wasn’t aware we were housing another one. Don’t think this one got anyone shot, at least. So... silver linings, I guess.”

No answer.

“Too soon?” I quip, forcing my lips to curve into a smirk.

I sigh, the smile falling off my face faster than I worked to make it appear.

Caelan doesn’t even twitch, but I can imagine him rolling his eyes at my stupid joke.

But he’s not, because he’s still in a Fatesdamned coma. It’s been nearly two weeks, and outside of that one random evening no one can explain, there’s been little progress. Calder says his internal organs are healing “nicely,” but I don’t know what the hell that even means.

Is he, like, baked chicken now, instead of deep-fried?

“Alright,” I mutter, slapping my hands on my thighs. “Time to go see what all the fuss is about.”

I leave, meandering into the hall, not even bothering to look at the nurse on duty anymore. I already know I’ll see the same pitying looks they all give me when I’m visiting Caelan.

I’m here more often than I’m not, honestly. Lately I’ve been hoping Caelan can’t hear what I’m saying, because I’ve spent a lot of time complaining about the Omega.

Like... A LOT.

Which wouldn't be a big deal, if I weren't complaining about how much I want her, and how much I want to hate her. Every day both sides of me fight for dominance, and it's not getting easier.

Well… until tonight. When I watched that fucking Scent-Match Bond snap into place with the wolven and realized Daxen's been right all along. She lied about the Bond with Caelan. Which means she probably lied about everything.

Which means every time I saw pain in her eyes, she was playing me.

Manipulating me. Just like Dax said she would.

It felt like something broke inside of me when she registered his scent.

That damn Fated Bond snapping into place killed a part of me. A part I wasn't even consciously aware of.

I wish the Omega never came into our lives. I wish we'd never even found out about Varenthrall or the kidnapped Omegas or the Severed or any of it.

Scowling, I pick up my pace, jogging to catch up to Daxen. I fall into step beside him but he's staring fixedly at Gav's back and doesn't even acknowledge me.

Cool. Awesome.

Halfway down the hall, we stop outside of an exam room. And of course, my attention's pulled straight toward the Omega, leaning against the wall with a wolven standing guard on either side.

Because I'm weak, I take a second and let myself really look at her.

I don't like what I see.

She looks exhausted. Like she's on her last fucking leg. Her long silver hair is tangled, hanging limp down her back. Her face is streaked with tear tracks, and the wall's doing most of the work to hold her up. Without it, I think she'd be on the damn floor.

No. She has a Mate to catch her now, remember?

I snarl at my Alpha. Gods, he doesn't have to rub it in.

Tearing my eyes away from the female, I turn to my Packmate.

"What'd you guys find?"

He sighs, gesturing for me to follow, passing the Omega and her sentries as we head down the hall, toward another exam room. In answer to my question, Dax yanks open the door and throws out a hand.

Sticking my head in the room, I find a female on an exam table, studying Calder like he just told her he's prescribing elephant shit for her ailments.

She's clearly the new Omega; her perfume of cherries and brown sugar makes that obvious. Except right now, it's burnt and bitter, like a pie left in the oven too long. It gets worse when she turns from Calder and her attention lands on Dax and me.

"No," she says flatly, wrinkling her nose like she smells something foul.

Us, apparently.

She turns back to Calder. "I agreed to an exam, but I won't be put on show. I don't know how you do things around here, but in the UK we have doctor-patient confidentiality."

I don't know which I expected to hear less—the accent, or the undisguised loathing that makes me think she really doesn't fucking like us.

Dax sighs, like they've had this argument already. Multiple times. "We're trying to help you, Omega."

"Here's a little advice. If you're antsy to help someone, start with yourselves." She waves him away with a flick of her wrist. "I'm fine on my own. If you insist I have someone with me during this exam, bring Idril. No one else."

"Fates..." Dax mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. Then louder, "Fine. I'm not going to keep arguing about it."

He grabs me by the front of my shirt, yanking me out of the room, seconds before the door slams shut in my face.

I shrug out of his hold, raising a brow in question. "Why do Omegas hate you so much? Is it the way you talk down to them, or..."

I grimace. "Never mind. Stupid question. It's definitely that."

Dax turns and punches me in the shoulder, making me stumble back a step.

"Fucking ow, asshole," I laugh, rubbing the spot where he hit me.

We both turn at the sound of familiar heavy footsteps to see Gav rounding the corner and heading our way. He nods, absently returning the greeting of two nurses coming the other direction with arms full of linens, but the grim expression on his face doesn't change. When he arrives next to me, his stoic expression drops, and he falls against the wall with a tired sigh.

He looks just slightly less exhausted than Idril. More so when he runs a hand down his face and over the stubble that's normally absent. Even his movements are heavier than normal.

It must be getting close to four in the morning. Vampires might prefer to be awake during the night, but it's getting late as fuck, even for us.

"What's the plan?" I ask, feeling wildly out of the loop.

"As soon as they're done with the Omega's exam and get her clothes to change into, we'll confer for a quick meeting. We can handle the rest in the morning," he answers warily.

"The Omega seems fine," I point out. "At least, fine enough to snap Dax and Calder's heads off."

"Don't let her hear you call her The Omega," Dax mutters. "Her name is Branwen. Also, aren't Omegas supposed to be submissive?"

"The lass has teeth!" Kane shouts from down the hall. "I dinna ken how vampires treat their Omegas, but wolven encourage them tae stand up for themselves."

"No one asked you," I shout back. I don't know what it is about the big Scott, but he gets under my skin. I dislike him almost as much as I dislike his Alpha.

Idril's Mate.

Kane grins, shrugs, then unsheaths a dagger—from I don't even fucking know where—and starts absently twirling it between his fingers, performing an increasingly intricate series of loops and skips with each pass.

Not once does the asshole look at the damn thing.

Where the fuck did he pull that dagger from?

Shaking my head, I wrench my eyes away from him when a nurse stops in front of Gav and hands him a paper. Gav dismisses the her with a wave of his hand, jaw clenching as his gaze flicks over the words. When he's done, he folds it into thirds and slips it into his pocket.

"Good news," he announces. "The Omega is mostly fine. She's tired, dirty, and dehydrated. Has a few scrapes and bruises that need tending but nothing serious I don't think."

The door to the exam room swings open right as he finishes speaking. Branwen steps out—all five-foot-three of fiery personality, ebony curls, and way too much sass for this late at night.

Like she can fucking hear my thoughts, her eyes land on me and she smiles.

I don’t like it.

I like it less when she points a finger at me and says, “You. Pretty boy.”

My brows fly to my hairline. “Uh... yes?”

“What do I have to do to get a shower in this place?” She scans the hall dramatically, like one might jump out and turn it on for her. Before I can respond, she frowns, skidding to a stop mid-stride.

“Where the bloody hell is Idril?”

“I’m here.” Idril’s voice is so soft it barely carries down the hall. She leans forward, peeking around the wolven with a relieved smile.

She pushes off the wall and, like a whipped puppy, Soren follows at her heels as she makes her way unsteadily toward the Omega—er, *Branwen.*

“Are you alright?” Branwen asks, voice full of concern as she rushes toward her. It’s impossible to miss how fluid and easy her movements are compared to Idril’s jerky, exhausted steps.

Like Idril, not Branwen, is the one who spent Fates know how long locked in a cage.

That stabbing ache in my chest returns, and I make myself ignore it.

“Me?” Idril asks, astonished. “I should be asking *you* that.”

Branwen dismisses her concern with a flick of the wrist. “I’m right as rain. Your father only had me a few days. Where are your rooms? Take me to them, I beg of you. I’m dying to get out of these clothes.”

Idril presses her lips into a thin line as a strangled sound gets caught in her throat.

My jaw’s clenched so tight it hurts.

Fates. She doesn’t know how to answer. She doesn’t know how to answer, because she doesn’t have a room, let alone extra clothes to offer her.

I shoot Daxen a panicked look. His eyes widen, but he quickly schools his features and, ignoring Idril’s lack of rooms—and clothing—addresses Branwen.

“You can have a shower after we talk.”

Right now I wish I was more like Dax and could just ignore shit. Instead, all I can think about is how we never even gave Idril a bed to sleep on.

I mean... apparently her own room—that I'm guessing doesn't include a shitty attic—is the bare minimum expected of us. And Branwen has no clue Idril hasn't had either the whole time she's been here.

Shame slams into me out of nowhere. *Gods, even the thought of sending her back to that fucking cell tonight—* I press my fist against my sternum, over the stabbing pain. Like that'll somehow alleviate the ache.

It doesn't.

Idril turns, and I watch her, unable to look away.

Her gaze sweeps to the side, casually scanning her surroundings. It's only because I'm watching her so closely that I notice the exact moment she registers something that has her freezing mid-motion.

Her eyes snap back, landing on whatever she saw that made her stop in her tracks. Her lips part, mouth falling open and eyes widening in shock. The color actually drains from her face, and I swear she stops breathing.

She gasps, like she's coming up for air after nearly drowning, and her hands fly to her throat like she can't breathe. Like she's choking.

What the—?

"Oh..." The word is half whisper, half moan. There's a single beat where the whole world stills, before Idril explodes into motion.

She lunges forward, launching into a sprint and running across the hall...

Straight into an open hospital room.

Dax must realize what happened right as I do, based on the groans we release simultaneously.

"Fucccckkk!" Dax shouts as he springs after her. I follow, mentally berating myself for forgetting to close Caelan's door. I didn't think about it. She doesn't come down here. She doesn't even know where he's been.

Well. She does now.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! This is all my fault!

I burst into the room. Daxen's shouting at Idril, demanding she step back, away from Caelan.

But she's not listening to him.

I don't think she can even hear him.

Fuck… I don't even know what I expected to find when I walked in here.

Idril holding a pillow over Caelan's face, trying to kill him before he wakes up and exposes her?

I mean... *maybe? No? I don't know!*

What I do know is that whatever I thought I'd find... it's not this.

It's not Idril standing next to Caelan, hands fluttering over his chest like two frantic birds with nowhere to land. I never imagined the expression of horror on her face, or how every time she gets too close to touching him, she yanks her hands away like she's afraid.

Like she's desperate to touch him, but terrified of hurting him. Of making things worse.

But... that... that can't be right.

"Oh gods," she whispers over and over as tears stream down her face. "Oh gods, oh Fates."

I stand there like an idiot, dumbfounded, as she whispers his name, shaking so hard I worry she'll break apart.

Does she even know she's crying? She doesn't even seem to feel the tears. Doesn't even bother wiping them away. They spill from her lashes faster and faster, falling in heavy droplets that land on Caelan's chest.

When she whimpers, the sound is so full of distress it sends my Alpha into a rage. I have to fight him back, so I barely process what's happening when she reaches out and places her hand flat against his chest.

"Idril, NO!" I lunge for her, but only make it a single step before I slam into a wall.

Groaning, I shake my head and push up from the floor where I landed on my ass. My blurred vision clears, and as it does I realize—

That wasn't a wall.

As the fucking Alpha Heir scowls down at me like I'm the one at fault here, I realize he must've jumped in front of me, creating a solid barrier to protect his Mate.

What's this guy made of anyway? Rocks?

As I get on my feet, he crosses his arms and glares at me like he's daring me to try something stupid.

"Back up," he warns, eyes flashing bright green. "Or I will back you up."

"Fuck off, mutt."

I lunge to the right, then spin to the left at the last minute to fake him out, counting on his massive size to slow him down.

Like he was expecting my move, he throws an arm out to block me and I slam to a stop before I clothesline myself.

Then Kane appears, sidling up next to him with a grin, and I realize my chances of getting past these two wolven are basically zero.

The entire room has devolved into fucking chaos. Everyone's shouting over each other, demanding someone *move*, or *fuck off*, or *quit being a bloody wanker*.

Then Daxen's voice cracks through the room with the unmistakable tone and weight of Alpha Command, putting an end to the chaos.

"Stop!"

The Command is so heavy even I feel its pull, urging me to submit to Dax's order. Thankfully, because we're a Bonded Pack, I'm able to ignore it.

The wolven aren't so lucky.

With a grin, I take advantage of their distracted state as they fight Dax's Command. I spin back to the right, and with a rush of satisfaction, duck down and around the wolven.

The second I make it past them, I dive for the Omega, prepared to wrench her away from my brother.

But what I see in front of me has me skidding to a stop so fast I almost fall on my face.

Leaning so far over my brother she's practically lying on top of him, the Omega is eerily still. The only part of her moving, are her shaking hands. Hands she's pressed against both of Caelan's cheeks, cupping his face with a tenderness I didn't know could exist.

Tears stream down her face, falling to land on his forehead, cheeks and nose and—-

What?

What the fuck?

I blink. Blink again. Rub my eyes and shake my head, like that'll help make sense of what I'm seeing.

A single tear hangs precariously from Idril's chin. She blinks, and another spills down her cheek and merges with the first. Too heavy to cling on any longer, it falls—landing with a silent splash against the pale skin of Caelan's cheek.

My heart pounds against my ribs as, just like the three before it, Idril's tears start to *glow*.

The glow intensifies, impossible to miss, growing brighter and brighter until it's shimmering like liquid gold. It flares once, outrageously bright,

before it evaporates—No, it *sinks*—into his skin.

Like his body is... like it's...it's…*drinking it in.*

Careful not to spook her, I inch closer, leaning in until I can literally see the shimmering residue left on his skin, mapping the location of where each drop landed.

Physical proof of the tears she's shed for him.

A story written in her pain.

Two more fall, and just like before, they grow brighter until they shimmer and shine in the overhead lights before being absorbed into his skin.

"What in the Fates...?"

The awed whisper comes from somewhere behind me, but I can't look away. Can't tear my eyes from the Omega.

Can no longer deny her heart-wrenching sobs or how each one sounds like it's being ripped from the depths of her soul.

Her hands never stray from Caelan's face, her fingers delicately stroking his skin like she's soothing him.

She looks as pained as she sounds, eyes squeezed shut, face set in an expression so determined I don't dare do anything to break her focus. Some primal part of me is horrified by the idea, begging me to keep quiet. Stay silent, so she can—

So she can…what? What is she even doing?

"Let me in," she pleads, voice cracking with emotion. Something in my chest pulls, and once again, I bring my fist to my sternum, pressing back against the uncomfortable feeling.

A feeling that's forgotten when Idril's hands spasm, making me tense in alarm. With a pained whimper, she sways forward. Part of me wants to reach out, but I curl my hand into a fist as she leans in, swaying closer and closer to my Packmate until finally, with an relieved sigh, she presses her forehead against his.

It's a fucking heartbreaking scene. My stomach swoops and my vision blurs with tears and even though I tell myself to look away… I can't.

"Please," she breathes. "Please, Caelan. Please."

Fates… I wish I knew what she was begging for.

I wish I could give it to her.

I'm so lost in the scene playing out in front of me, I don't notice anything else going on. Not until Idril lets out a startled yelp and her head

jerks up and her neck's wrenched back.

A breath later, the rest of her follows.

Eyes wide, I glance over and find her hanging in the air. Behind her Gav stands, two hands wrapped around her waist.

I expect her to fight his hold, but she doesn't.

She slumps over, body limp, feet dangling two feet off the floor, held suspended by hands so large, they span the entirety of her stomach.

Her lashes flutter, and her neck lolls to the side. With what looks like extreme effort, she lifts her head. Her glassy eyes bounce around, like she's seeking something familiar.

Her gaze latches onto mine.

The pain and anguish staring back at me is so fucking real—so fucking visceral—it physically knocks me back a step.

Which means I run right into the fucking wolven.

Again.

He shoves me away from him, pushing forward—intent on only one thing. Getting to Gav.

Getting to his Omega.

"Hands. Off," he snarls through clenched teeth, and the Alpha authority he's emitting is enough to make me nauseous. Even Gav's affected, if the way he immediately releases the Omega is any indication.

She only falls half a meter, but when her feet hit the floor, her knees buckle. The only thing preventing her from collapsing into a heap is the arm Gav wraps around her waist by instinct to keep her from falling.

Fates, she looks drained. Like she's had the life sucked out of her.

My breath catches and I look closer. Her normally pale skin is grey, devoid of vitality. Her lips are the same, pale and chapped. Dark purple shadows are smudged beneath her eyes. Shadows that I'm fucking *positive* weren't there five minutes ago.

What the fuck just happened?

Shaking, Idril blindly reaches out, searching for something to steady herself. Her hand lands on a chair—the same chair I'd been sitting in earlier.

"I'm fine," she croaks, pushing weakly against Gav's hold.

I turn to Dax, who's been suspiciously quiet since Alpha Commanding the whole fucking room, but he's not looking at her.

He's looking at Caelan.

Soren sweeps in, placing a steadying hand on Idril's elbow. He glares daggers around the room, as Gav turns and ushers them both to the door. Idril lets him, shuffling along while holding onto Soren's arm with both hands, sightless eyes staring at nothing.

My head is fucking spinning. I can hear people talking around me, but I can't process what they're saying. My mind is still stuck on what I just saw and I can't get it out of my head.

I lean over, bracing a hand on Caelan's bed and trying to breathe as everyone exits the room. I don't now how much time passes, but it's probably only a few minutes before Gavran peeks his head back in. "Upstairs study. Ten minutes."

I nod, giving him an awkward thumbs-up while trying to work some fucking moisture into my dry mouth. Eventually, I push off the side of the bed and walk around it, coming to stand next to Dax.

He still hasn't moved, eyes locked on Caelan's face with an almost scary intensity.

Then his arm shoots out, and his hand latches onto me, fingers curling into muscles of my forearm, making me jump.

"What? What is it?"

"His face," he rasps, tearing his gaze from Caelan and turning it on me.

I nod. "Yeah, I saw. Her tears… Fuck, Dax. It's like his skin was—And that fucking glow—And—"

"*No*," Dax barks, interrupting me. Seeing my confusion, he shakes his head. "I mean—yes. That. I saw that. But also..."

He points to Caelan. "Look at his face. It was much paler before. Now look. His cheeks are flushed. His eyes… they're moving behind his eyelids."

I suck in a breath because… *Fuck. He's right.* Caelan looks *drastically* healthier. Almost like he's sleeping off a long night instead of—well, *dead.*

His eyes are moving furiously behind his closed lids. Like he's dreaming. Even as I notice the change, the fingers of his left hand *twitch*.

"I don't understand," I whisper, awed. "What did she do? If she meant to hurt him, why does he look like he's healed? How could she—"

"We don't know she had anything to do with this," Dax interrupts, throwing back his shoulders like he's going to war.

He cannot be fucking serious right now.

“Now hold on. No. Fuck no. You don’t get to gaslight me right now Daxen. It’s been a long godsdamned night.” I glare at him. “You saw what I saw. I *know* you did.”

“I saw it,” he admits with a frown. “But that doesn’t mean much. It may have been completely accidental. We don’t know anything about her, or what she’s capable of. We’re lucky she didn’t kill him.”

Suddenly overcome with exhaustion, I throw my hands up in defeat. There won’t be any reasoning with him tonight. Not unless I want to spend an hour banging my head against a wall.

He’s never going to admit the Omega is anything more than his enemy.

And Fates... for a while tonight I really felt the same. I might still, if I hadn’t had a front-row seat to whatever the fuck just happened. And I’m not saying Dax is totally wrong, but after that...

I’m not saying he’s totally right, either.

I can practically see his defenses working overtime to rebuild the walls that allow him to hate her while passing it off as ‘logic.’

And I let him. Because if I start a fight with him now, I’ll have to face the fact that our so-called enemy just healed our brother, and the implications of that are… *staggering.*

“Let’s go see what Gav wants,” I suggest with a sigh. “I want to go to bed, and the faster we get this over with…”

Dax nods, and with one last look at Caelan, makes his way to the door. I follow, making sure the fucking thing is closed this time.

The walk back to HQ feels like it takes a thousand years, but probably only takes five minutes. When we arrive at the study, everyone’s already seated.

This room is large—originally meant for councils with visiting Bastards, or meetings with delegates from the Council, or any other supposed governing power. It doesn’t get much use anymore, thanks to shit like Zoom.

Not that I’m complaining. Five hundred fucking years and it’s finally acceptable to have meetings without pants on.

Even though it’s not used as often, it’s one of the rooms Gav ensures stays ready at all times. A fire’s already crackling in the hearth, adding to the cozy atmosphere aided by plush rugs and oil paintings set in frames older than I am. Like the War Room, a sturdy oak table is the centerpiece, but this one’s missing the scratches and stains.

At the table, Idril and Branwen sit next to each other, with Soren on Idril's left and Kane next to him. Gav's in his customary seat at the head of the table, so Dax and I slide in opposite the Omegas and wolven.

Kane's gaze catches mine, and he grins, looking like a fucking feral aardvark.

I think.

I don't really know for sure what those look like, but in my head, they look like Kane.

Gav pinches the bridge of his nose and exhales heavily. "It's been a long night," he starts, leaning his forearms on top of the table. "I don't want to drag this out, because I know you're all as ready to get to sleep as I am. So, here's what we're going to do."

He points at Idril. "You're going to answer my questions, and for fucks sake, don't make me Alpha Command you tonight."

Cool. We're doing this now? That's... awesome.

I shove my chair back and stand, heading straight for the whiskey. I'm halfway back to the table with my glass when I think better of it and jog back, grabbing the whole bottle and tucking it under my arm.

I feel like I'm gonna need to be drunk for this conversation.

I pour a few fingers for Gav, passing it over as he turns to Idril and begins his interrogation.

"Explain to me what you can and cannot do. I want specifics."

Soren scoots closer to his Mate, like he can shield her from Gavran's questions. But when Gav's words register, he frowns at his Mate in confusion. "What's he talking about, Idril?"

Dax sits straighter, like a predator scenting blood in the water. He answers before Idril has a chance.

"No one's told you? Your Mate makes shit explode."

Soren's brow furrows.

"Apologies. Allow me to clarify. Your Mate makes shit explode," his smile widens. "With her fucking *mind*."

Soren rearranges his features into something carefully neutral, but not before I catch his flicker of shock. The Omega sinks into her chair, eyes darting around the room, anxiety dialed up to a thousand.

Does she look worse than she did downstairs?

When the silence gets too loud, she reaches for the hem of her shirt with shaking fingers, twisting it back and forth as she whispers, "That's not—I

don’t know how I did that. With the beams in the attic. I was upset and it just... h-happened. I don’t know how I’ve done any of it.”

She turns wide, pleading eyes on Soren. “Things have happened. The last week or so. Things I’m doing. Or causing. Or—or—I don’t know. There was a fire in the hallway. In the sconces. The flames, they—I was upset. And just—woosh! Before that, Vaelenor was in my room. In the attic. And he said—”

She presses her lips together, face twisting like she’s in physical pain.

Like what I said really hurt her.

I throw back my drink and reach for the bottle.

“It hurt,” she admits, looking down at her lap. “And I was sad. Angry. All I wanted was for it all to stop. For the pain to *stop*. Just for a moment. The taunts and being called a liar and everyone using my trauma against me. I wanted it all to stop. I was so tired.”

She swallows thickly. Her next words are barely a whisper.

“I’m so, so tired…”

“What happened?” Soren’s voice is gentle.

“Just what they said,” she answers, still refusing to look at him. “The wood beams across the ceiling exploded. Shattered into thousands of tiny pieces.”

Soren’s shoulders tense. “Fates, were you hurt? Are you alright?”

Idril’s body jerks in shock. Wide blue eyes snap to Soren. Her expression tightens as she searches his gaze.

She’s acting the way someone would act who’s gone their whole life never knowing what it feels like to have someone care whether they live or die.

My fucking chest is *throbbing*. I bring my glass to my lips and toss the amber liquid back without tasting it. Again.

“None of it touched us,” she finally answers, frowning like she still doesn’t know if Soren’s question was genuine.

“It landed around us but—” She shrugs. Like it’s no big deal to make solid wood beams explode with her mind while somehow keeping every piece of wood from touching her.

And me.

“That’s badass,” Branwen grins. “I wish I could make things explode.”

Idril gives her a sheepish look. “I don’t know how I did it, though. I’ve never done anything like that. Not until tonight. Now it's… it’s like all these

weird things keep happening, and I know I'm doing it, but I don't know how. Or why."

She peeks up at Soren, who still hasn't responded. I can see Daxen curling his hands into fists under the table, trying to physically hold himself back from jumping into the conversation.

Soren frowns, turning to Gav. "Back up a second. Start at the beginning. I know about Caelan, and why my Mate is here, but what does this have to do with her father or the missing Omegas?"

"Simple. Her father is injecting the missing Omegas with Idril's blood. We believe he's trying to pass her abilities to other Omegas. And breed them. Can't forget that fun little detail."

Dax drops the bomb like it's nothing.

"Saint Michael, defend us..." Kane crosses himself.

I finish my third drink and pour another.

Idril's so pale she's nearly translucent. Outside, the clouds part and the light of the nearly full moon shines brightly through the windows, bathing her skin in a glow that sends shivers down my spine.

I can't look away from her.

She's beautiful. Even now, with those wide, frightened eyes and delicate features, she looks like a fairy princess.

"He's kidnapped dozens of Omegas," Dax continues, and Idril physically recoils.

"I didn't know he was doing that!" She spins in her chair, turning to Soren with wide, frantic eyes. "I didn't know. I *swear*. I just found out about the blood tonight. Right before you arrived. It's why I was in the cell. I agreed to be there. It's the safest place, until we can find answers and I can get this—this—whatever it is, under control."

She's panicking, eyes wet with unshed tears a breath away from falling.

Fuck, why is she so beautiful when she's about to cry?

"Pretty little stories," I murmur, taking another pull from my drink.

Daxen shoots me a look, then whispers, "Are you drinking your feelings?"

"Don't mock my coping strategy," I toss back. "It's vintage."

All eyes snap to me, and too late I realize I forgot to whisper that last part. Actually... I'm pretty sure I shouted it.

"The whiskey. It's vintage." When no one responds, I shrug, lift my glass in a mock toast and toss it back.

Again.

Kane grunts, looking at me like I'm full of shit. "Aye, vintage. Ye drink like a man twice yer age and sulk like a lad half it."

Branwen coughs to cover her laughter, and Kane shoots her a wink.

Those two are going to get annoying fast.

Which means I'll have to off one of them. No help for it. And it'll have to be the wolven, obviously. Can't off an Omega. Definitely can't get rid of Idril's only friend. That'll make her cry....

And I don't think I like it when she cries.

"Is it possible your father knows why you can do… the things you can do?" Soren leans forward, bracing his forearms on the table.

Idril shakes her head, then shrugs. "I don't know what he knows. He just started taking my blood a few months ago. He said it was for research into Omega-related diseases. Then everything happened with Caelan. Next thing I know, I'm here, answering the same questions every day over and over and over again."

"What questions?" Branwen asks, frowning.

A muscle jumps in Daxen's jaw. He sighs dramatically and opens his mouth to explain. But before he can get a word out, Branwen throws a hand up to stop him.

"Pass," Branwen dismisses whatever Dax was about to say with a lazy flick of her wrist and shoots him a patronizing smile. "I'll get the real story from Idril, thanks."

To really drive home her point, she turns in her chair and reaches out, gathering Idril's hands in her own.

When Idril looks up at her, the gratitude in her eyes damn near knocks the breath from my lungs. Jealousy surges through me like an out-of-control fire I never saw coming.

I want her to look at me like that.

"Alright," Gav interrupts my yearning, which is apparently a thing I fucking do now.

Maybe drinking was a bad idea.

"We clearly aren't going to get anywhere tonight," he concedes in a heavy tone. "Let's get some sleep, and reconvene in the morning."

His eyes flick to the Omega. "Branwen, I'll have a member of staff show you to your room. I'd appreciate it if you'd do me the courtesy of staying at HQ for now. I have a lot of questions, and I'd like to start making

a game plan. One that involves taking down Varenthrall. I might need your assistance, if you're willing."

"I appreciate the hospitality," she replies. "And like I said earlier, I'm not going anywhere. I was sent to help Idril, so as long as I'm welcome, I'll be staying put."

Gav inclines his head before turning to address the rest of us.

"Soren, I'll take you and the Omega back down to the cells. I'll send someone down with blankets and pillows for you. Dax, Vae... get some sleep. We'll meet for breakfast tomorrow at 11 a.m."

He doesn't mention anything about Idril getting blankets, and she doesn't ask, but Sorens frown deepens.

Fuck, why does my chest still ache? Is this heartburn? Have I had heartburn before?

Gav doesn't wait. He stands, crosses the room and walks out the door, leaving a trail of frustration in his wake.

I stand from my seat, but I move too fast. My foot catches on the chair leg and I nearly trip over my own chair.

"You good?" Dax is watching me as if I might explode.

"Never better." And just to prove how true that is, I kick the chair… and only miss a little.

We don't talk on the walk back to our rooms, and Dax disappears into his with barely even a wave. My room is right across the hall from his, and when I turn, my door's blurring and swirling in front of me. I squint, as it splits into two doors. Then three.

I glare at it as hard as I can until it gives in, snapping back and returning to normal.

I grin in triumph. "Ha! Gotchu, you fucker. Can't fool me, door!"

Shoving open the heavy oak, I stumble into my room. I want nothing more than to fall face first into bed and sleep until someone physically drags me out of it.

Instead, I stagger toward the bathroom stripping my clothes off as I go and throwing each piece who knows where.

Making a beeline straight for the shower, I twist the knob, turning the temperature as high as it'll go. I step under the spray before it has a chance to warm up, hoping the ice-cold water will shock me out of this funk I'm in.

I thought the alcohol would work. That it would let me shove all my thoughts about Idril into a box, wrap it up with an entire roll of packing

tape, and shove it so far into the back of my mental closet that even my soul forgets it's there.

That is *not* what happened.

To my horror, the alcohol seems to have had the opposite effect.

No matter what I do, I can't stop thinking about the Omega. Can't stop seeing her in my mind.

I want to forget it. Forget her.

Grind the memories down to dust until there's nothing left to torment me.

Instead, I'm blasted with the image of Idril down in the cells, fingers wrapped around the bars so tight her knuckles are white. She's pleading, begging Dax to let her out.

Begging him not to leave her down there alone.

Of course, that changed when she discovered that she might actually be dangerous. Then she volunteered to stay down there. Even though she was fucking terrified, she offered to stay.

Then we just… Left her there.

All alone.

Curled into a ball, shivering on the cold slab of concrete, with no way to fight the cold or protect herself from the dank, chill air.

Terrified, lost, and alone except for her tears.

I promised I'd bring her a blanket, but I never did. Yet another mark against me. I just have to hope that Soren's able to provide her a modicum of comfort.

At least she's not alone.

I almost laugh. There's got to be something seriously fucking wrong with me. Two hours ago I was spitting mad at the Omega, and now I can't quit worrying about her comfort. Then to top it off, the only thing that helps is knowing her fucking Fated Mate is with her right now.

I don't even bother finishing up in the shower. With quick, angry movements, I reach down and twist off the water, step out and snatch a towel off the rack, wrapping it around my waist.

After aggressively brushing my teeth, I shove off the counter, determined to get some sleep. Tomorrow's a new day, and there's no fucking way it can be worse than this one.

* * *

For hours, I toss and turn in bed. Until the sun is rising over the horizon. In the early hours of the morning, with the birds chirping and rays of light doing their damnedest to win the never-ending fight against my blackout curtains, I finally fall into a restless sleep.

When I do, I dream I'm somewhere covered in fog.

Strangely unconcerned by the mist, I find myself content to explore and end up walking until the fog starts to thin. When it parts, it reveals a field lit by moonlight.

In the middle of the field is a beautiful bird, surrounded by shimmering purple flowers that smell like home.

Despite the enchanting scent, my gaze is drawn to the bird.

It's… *breathtaking.* Ethereal. Nearly pure white, with shimmering blue feathers peeking through the radiant silvery white like a secret.

It turns, and its eyes meet mine.

I'm wholly unprepared for the intelligence staring back at me.

And under that intelligence… *pain.*

So fucking much pain. It's endless. Tears fill my eyes. *How does anything live with that much pain?*

Time stands still as we study one another. I'd swear the bird sees so much more of me than I can of it. I have the distinct impression it could see into my very soul if it so desires.

It ruffles its feathers, startling me as it spreads its wings and prepares to take flight. The feeling of imminent loss is overwhelming, and I open my mouth to beg it to stay before I realize...

It can't spread its wings. Not fully.

A veil lifts, and suddenly I can see what I hadn't before.

The bird is locked away. A prisoner in a golden cage, hopelessly fighting to spread its wings and escape.

Now when our eyes meet, I can see its plea for help.

It's begging me to free it, and despite everything in my soul urging me to do just that…

I don't.

I just stand here, watching it struggle. Ignoring its plea.

Hating myself.

Eventually, it loses interest—and faith—in me, and turns away. My chest aches, a sharp pain stabbing into my sternum over and over like something inside of me is being ripped apart.

But the bird never stops fighting. Over and over, it struggles. And over and over it fails when the tips of its wings hit the bars of its cage. Each time, instead of getting angry, it reassesses its situation.

It's strategic. *Patient.* When it fails, it tries something new.

Fails, and tries again.

Falls… and gets back up.

I don't know how long I watch, but suddenly, something shifts.

It's no longer alone.

A shadow—a second pair of wings—rises up behind it like an omen.

A prophecy.

At this point, the bird's voice is ragged—a broken, rasping chirp. A struggling melody that could have been sung for me, if I had only been worthy of it.

Instead, the bird sings only for the gentle moonlight shining down from above.

Its sound is broken. *Scared.* It longs for freedom. Yearns for love.

As the song morphs into something more desolate, it continues its fight to break free. It never stops. *Never* gives up.

And right before I wake, as I'm floating weightless in that strange space between dreams and reality, I finally understand.

The bird isn't struggling to sing.

It's struggling to speak.

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Chapter 6

Idril

When I woke this morning, my body was more sore than it has been in weeks.

I wince as I stretch out my limbs, taking in my surroundings. Before I get far, my muscles spasm. The pain is intense, and trying to stay upright aches.

I close my eyes and concentrate on breathing. I wish I knew what time it was, but there are no clocks down here. There's nothing here but the smell of mildew and stone and iron.

And Soren.

My heart flips as his scent hits me. My muscles relax, and I breathe in the scent of Christmas until it fills my veins. My body's wracked with pain, but it's almost manageable with his scent in my nose.

"Little Mate."

I push myself up at the sound of Soren's rumbling voice, wincing when something pulls in my back.

Sending my strength to Caelan last night took almost everything out of me. I was already running on empty, but when I saw him, I *had* to try.

I had no idea what I was doing, but I knew it could be done, and I fumbled through until it finally, blessedly, started to work.

It helps that I finally broke down the barrier between us. With my hands on his skin and his heart pulsing under my fingers, it was almost too easy, in fact.

And I managed to push every ounce of strength I could spare through the Bond before Gavran ripped me away.

I still can't believe I've been so close to him all this time.

And worse—I know now that if they'd just taken me to him, I could have healed him myself right away. Sure, it took a second to get a handle on it, but it was mostly instinct. Like my Bond already knew what to do and just needed the freedom to act.

It's a massive weight off my shoulders, knowing he's going to be alright.

Especially now, with another Mate who needs me.

I glance over, finding him sitting sideways, leaning against the bars separating his cell from mine. I frown, realizing he's in the same position he was in last night when I finally fell asleep.

I vaguely remember him refusing to move, telling me he was content to stay where he was and watch over me, but I didn't really expect…

Fates… did he really stay there all night?

"Did you sleep?" I ask, finally forcing myself to move. I stand up, biting down on my lower lip to keep from whimpering in pain as I shuffle across the cell.

"I don't need much sleep," he answers, frowning when I hesitate a few steps away from the bars separating us. "What's wrong?"

"I—"

What is wrong?

I… I don't know.

I can't pinpoint what it is, exactly, but I feel a sudden sense of unease the closer I get to Soren. I know it's not him, but whatever it is grates like sandpaper rubbing against my nerves.

The feeling's familiar, and after a moment I realize why. This is how I felt at first after my father locked me in the basement.

When I see the worry in his eyes at my hesitation, I make myself shake off the sensation, determined not to worry him needlessly.

"Just a bad memory," I tell him, and with what I hope is a reassuring smile, cross the final few feet between us and take a seat. We're less than a foot from each other, but I may as well be as far from him as I am from Caelan.

His long blond hair hangs loose to his shoulders, threaded with tiny, intricate braids. The top and sides are pulled back, secured with a plain strip of leather.

I want to reach out and touch his hair the way he did with mine last night, but I keep my hands to myself. I don't even know how to act, or what

I’m allowed to do or not do.

Everything’s changed so much since the night I met Caelan, and I feel lost. Unsure of every choice I make.

“Is this how it was when you met your vampire Mate?”

My eyes widen in shock. “Can you read my mind?”

He chuckles, and when he laughs, almost invisible lines appear around the corners of his green eyes. He shifts, resting his elbow on top of his knees

“No, Little Mate. If I happened to say what you were thinking, it was just a coincidence. You have a very expressive face.”

I chew on my bottom lip, trying to decide how to answer. W*ill he be angry if I talk about Caelan? What happens when Caelan wakes up? Are they going to get along? What if they hate each other? Should I keep my relationship with Caelan separate from Soren and vice versa?*

There’s no way to know. No one to ask.

I know one thing. No relationship can be built on a foundation of lies. I don’t think I need to tell him *everything*, but I should at least be honest about what I do decide to share.

Soren sits patiently, giving me time to gather my thoughts without making me feel rushed.

That’s something I’ve noticed about him. He’s steady. *Solid.* Like a boulder in a rushing river, unmovable and patient—insisting the world make room for him and not the other way around.

“It was different,” I admit. “Once I was Designated, the only Alphas I was allowed around were my father and the guards he employed. Once I became an Omega, I wasn’t allowed to leave the estate anymore. So it was a bit of a shock waking up to a huge Alpha looming over me in the middle of the night.”

My lips twitch, remembering the confusion on Caelan’s face when I didn’t immediately freak out.

“I think it surprised us both—but mainly because neither of us reacted the way we probably should have.”

Soren hums thoughtfully. He doesn’t *look* angry, which gives me hope. But looks can be deceiving.

“You never scented him, though?”

“No, our Bond is… different.”

I hesitate briefly, choosing to keep my Bonds with Vae and Dax to myself for now. I'll tell Soren eventually, but I don't think being Mates requires me to tell him everything within twenty-four hours of meeting, *does it?*

"Yeah, you mentioned something about that last night. You said it started as a pool of liquid, then turned into a thread?" Soren tilts his head to the side, golden strands falling in waves over his shoulder.

The way he looks at me… It's like he's genuinely interested in what I'm saying. It makes this feel more like a conversation than an interrogation.

"It happened during the ambush," I confirm. "I don't know when, but something changed. And it acts different, too. It reacts to what's happening, like it has feelings—emotions—of its own. It's a part of me, but it's also… something else."

When I check on Soren's reaction, I'm relieved to see he still doesn't seem angry—but he does look confused. Still, he doesn't push, content to sit with my words while he processes.

It's nice. *Calm.* Like the first fresh snow on a dark winter's night when everything is shrouded in white, and the world waits on a precipice of something new. Something hopeful.

Finally, with a deliberate calmness, like he's picking each word carefully, he says, "I've never heard of a Bond acting like that."

The words are almost identical to Dax and Vae's. It's a response I've heard over and over—thrown out as proof that my Bond is a lie.

My fear is too ingrained. Too much a part of me to simply slide off my shoulders.

He doesn't believe me. He thinks I'm lying. Just like Vae. Just like Dax.

My stomach plummets. My Omega whines behind her brick wall, and I echo it on instinct, cringing at the desperation ringing through the sound.

"Idril?"

Soren inches closer, but the panic has already set in.

"You think I'm lying." I pull my legs up, wrap my arms around them, and pull them closer into my body. I want so badly to make myself smaller. To disappear.

If no one can find me, then no one can hurt me.

Soren's eyes widen. He shifts up to his knees and wraps his hands around the bars, frantically shaking his head. My eyes lock onto his tattoos

as his fingers flex and tighten around the iron.

“Idril, no. I believe you, I swear. I’m only trying to understand.”

He looks so earnest. I want to believe him. I *want* my Mate to trust and believe in me—to be on my side.

Fate can’t possibly want to destroy me that badly, right? Surely, there are much easier ways to do so than being rejected over and over and over.

And isn’t that why I fought so hard last night? Didn’t I just decide that being scared isn’t the same as giving up? Don’t I owe it to myself—as well as Soren—to take a chance?

One more chance. I can take one more chance.

With a deep breath, I force my shoulders to relax, and look up, meeting Soren’s moss-green eyes. “I understand… it’s just hard not to—to—”

“It’s hard not to trust that someone isn’t going to hurt you in a situation where that’s all you know,” he murmurs gently, putting my feelings into words almost perfectly.

“Yes.” I exhale with relief. “Yes, that’s exactly what it feels like.”

Soren’s mouth parts, but before he can speak, the sound of the door swinging open from upstairs makes me jump.

Scrambling to my feet takes longer than normal, joints aching with each movement. I’m immediately on edge, the Alpha’s threat to use Alpha Command swirling through my head like a death knell I can’t escape.

Despite the pain, I must stand too fast. Out of nowhere, my vision blurs and wavers. I list to the side. I know it’s happening—that I’m falling—but it’s like my brain won’t speak to my limbs. Or maybe my limbs no longer understand what my brain is saying.

My shoulder slams painfully into the cold bars of the cell, but before I fall further, Soren’s there. He reaches through the iron, wrapping large, strong hands around my waist to keep me upright.

My vision goes black.

I blink. My lips cycle between numb and tingly, and my thoughts feel fuzzy.

“Idril?” Soren’s tone is urgent. I see the way he keeps glancing toward the staircase at the side of the room, but I can’t focus enough to figure out why.

“I-I’m… okay…” I croak, reaching out to grip the bars and using them to steady myself.

So much for starting our relationship on a foundation of truth; I am so far from okay, it's terrifying—and I'm pretty sure Soren knows it. The dubious look he aims my way is practically calling my bluff for him.

I try to reassure him so he doesn't worry, but my smile is shaky and hardly convincing.

"Just need something to eat, probably. You can let go now; I promise I won't fall."

I'm not making the conscious decision to lie, but my instincts are spiraling, and all my Omega cares about is reassuring him.

She's determined to do everything right, convinced that if we mess up, he'll reject us.

The sound of boots scuffing on concrete grows closer. I glance over my shoulder toward the stairs, right as Vaelenor and Silas round the corner.

The Alphas walk straight to my cell, and Vae reaches into his pocket, pulling out a set of keys. He quickly finds the correct one, slides it into the lock, and twists his wrist until the latch clicks. The door opens with a *CLANG* that reverberates off the stone and makes my head pound harder.

When I don't move right away, he lets out an irritated grunt, like I'm doing something to keep them from wherever they're taking me on purpose.

"Breakfast. You have questions to answer, so let's go."

Soren still has a hold on me, and at Vaelenor's Command, his fingers flex in the material of my shirt, like he's fighting to actually let me go.

I don't say anything. I don't want him to see how terrified I am. It will only make it worse.

Alpha Commands are hard on Omegas. I once read an old textbook where someone described it as standing in the middle of an ocean and getting hit by a massive, powerful wave.

If it happens once, it knocks the breath out of you—trips you up.

But if it happens two, three, four times in quick succession?

Then you're drowning. Pulled into a watery grave with no one near to pull you out, and no chance to fight your way to the surface.

It's also the *only* way to guarantee these Alphas know I'm telling the truth.

Which means the faster I answer, the less painful this will be.

I just wish I had faith that when they find out I haven't been lying, it'll be enough to actually change their minds.

Soren’s jaw clenches, but he reluctantly releases me when I take a step forward. Silas and Vae sandwich me between them as we make our way toward the stairs, but before Silas reaches the first step, Soren slams his palms against the bars of his cell, making the iron rattle and groan.

“Where do you think you’re going? Where Idril goes, I go.”

His eyes narrow, flashing a green so bright it looks like sunlight reflecting off a grassy field.

Vae laughs. “No chance. You think we’ll be able to interrogate her with you snarling and growling like a fucking beast?”

He tosses the keys in the air and catches them deftly without even looking. “You can wait here. I’ll even have a Beta bring down a nice big breakfast.”

My stomach churns with nausea. I’m terrified I’m going to throw up, and just as afraid to tell anyone.

“This is bullshit!”

His eyes lock with mine, and I shake my head, pleading silently with him to let this go. I need to do this, and I need for it to be over. He looks so confused, and it’s clear he doesn’t understand why I’d want to face the firing squad alone.

It’s alright, I mouth. His eyes search mine for three long heartbeats. Then he exhales and releases his white-knuckled grip on the bars. His eyes change, bleeding back to his normal moss-green.

“When she gets back, I want her in my cell,” he snaps. “Do you understand?”

“I’ll have to ask Gav,” Vae answers, but it’s not a no, which is what I’d been expecting.

We’re halfway up the stairs when Soren’s voice rings out one last time, each word weighed down with Alpha authority.

“And fucking feed her, you piece of shit!”

The climb finally catches up to me once we reach the landing. I take two steps away from the stairs before I have to stop and bend over, panting as I struggle to catch my breath.

Vae quickly realizes I’m no longer following. He whips around, eyes wide with panic, like he thinks I might’ve run away in the whole three seconds since I stopped walking.

“When’s the last time you ate?”

I glance up at him through the curtain of hair blocking my view. Black dots appear in my vision, and I have to close my eyes as the room starts to spin.

“Yesterday morning.”

Vae frowns, but doesn’t respond. He doesn’t snap at me to keep walking, though, either, so that’s something.

Unfortunately, Silas doesn’t care if I can breathe or not, and he groans dramatically. “Are we going to eat or what?”

Anger rushes through me. Gods forbid I’m allowed two minutes to keep myself from passing out. Silas could *never* handle what I’ve lived through. One day chained to the wall of my father’s basement would leave him begging for his mother.

I straighten, and my glare lands on Silas.

“Lead the way,” I reply scathingly.

Vae and Dax are my Mates.

Silas, Cage, and the rest of them… they’re *nothing* to me.

We have to cross half the castle and up another flight of stairs, but eventually my surroundings start to look familiar, and I realize where we are. I’m not surprised when Silas shoves open the door to a familiar dining room—the same room I was brought to my first morning at HQ.

Branwen, Gav, and Daxen are already seated. Kane’s missing, but that makes sense. Soren told me last night he would be in the woods with a few of his Pack, patrolling the perimeter.

When she hears us walk in, Branwen turns in her seat. Her gaze lands on me, and her mouth curls into a genuine smile.

It vanishes the moment she gets a good look at my appearance.

“Gods, are you in the same clothes as last night?”

She sounds so appalled I almost laugh. Almost tell her I’ve been in these same clothes for close to two weeks. Almost explain how I started with three pairs of leggings and four shirts. I burnt holes in the thighs of one pair of leggings with my hands, so now I only have two.

The contrast between us alone is enough to laugh at. Branwen looks comfortable and stylish in black leggings made of thick, butter-soft fabric that looks a thousand times nicer than mine, a flowing racer-back tank top, and a fluffy, soft oversized cardigan on top. Even her hair’s been washed and styled. It falls in soft, bouncy curls down her back, dark purple and midnight black, shimmering like onyx.

She’s stunning.

And I’m… seconds away from breaking.

Branwen’s face is set in a mask of genuine concern, and when I don’t respond, she stands up with the clear intention of crossing the room to meet me.

“Sit down, Omega,” Gav orders. He’s seated at the head of the table, slathering butter across a perfectly golden piece of toast. His words are a Command, but his tone is… soft. Almost kind.

I’ve never heard him speak like that before.

To be fair, I’ve only ever met the guy twice, though. *So what do I know?*

Branwen spins toward Gav, shooting a ferocious glare over her shoulder. “Eat shit, you pompous twat.”

She ignores him, crossing and gently taking my hands in hers. “What in seven bloody circles happened in the six hours since I saw you last? You look like rubbish.”

Her concern makes me want to cry. I want to crumble into her arms and tell her everything that’s happened, but I can’t. I won’t give the Alphas in this room the satisfaction of watching me break so easily. I swallow thickly, determined not to let the stinging pressure behind my eyes turn into tears.

It’s just… It’s been *so long* since anyone’s worried about me.

“Nothing another good night’s sleep in a concrete cell won’t fix,” I quip, trying to make light of the situation. I try to play it off, because there’s nothing she can do to change things, but I’m positive she doesn’t believe a word that comes out of my mouth.

The sound Branwen releases is half snort of laughter, half pissed-off mama bear, and it makes me smile. Then, she wraps her arms around me, pulling me close and refusing to let me go.

I freeze, muscles tensing at the contact before I gradually relax. I fall willingly—*happily*—into her warmth, soaking up her care like she’s the sun and I haven’t been outside in years.

When’s the last time I was hugged by another woman? I can’t remember.

Before my mother died, probably.

When Branwen finally pulls back, her smile is soft and knowing.

“Come, sit. We’ll get some food and water into you. You’ll feel right as rain in no time.”

She leads me to the table, urging me to take a seat in the chair next to hers. There's an empty plate in front of me, and a glass of water placed next to it.

I reach for the water, suddenly not caring if I have permission to drink it. I take slow sips, knowing I can't gulp it down, even though I want to.

The Alphas always make sure I have time to shower, use the restroom, and brush my teeth, *but little things like being able to drink water when I'm thirsty?*

Safe to say they conveniently forget about those needs. Completely accidental, I'm sure.

After I've slaked my thirst, I set the glass back on the table and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

Everyone's been quiet since Branwen called Gavran a twat, and I'm not sure if that broke all the Alphas in the room or if they're simply afraid of her.

Possibly both.

"Here, you like eggs, right?" She doesn't wait for an answer before picking up the platter and spooning a mound of them onto my plate. "What am I saying? Everyone likes eggs. Except this scrambled shite. In Wales, we at least fry the bloody things properly."

She leans across the table, reaching for the platter of perfectly toasted bread. Branwen frowns at the selection.

"Toast, is it?" She sighs dramatically. "Looks like someone let it sit out in the sun too long and forgot to salt the butter. Still, carbs are carbs."

She reaches for the hash browns next and shoots Gavran a look that makes it abundantly clear who's to blame for that particular dish.

"Now this…well, this is just shredded potato. Looks like it was fried until it waved its own white flag of surrender. Back home, we'd call this a burnt offering, and throw it out back to the pigs. Eat up, darling."

The entire table is watching with horrified, wide eyes, but Branwen ignores them and continues her perusal of the remaining food.

A spoonful of fruit lands on the small space still left on my plate. Before I can thank her, she exhales a disappointed sigh and grumbles, "At least this fruit won't kill you. However, the melon looks like it's been weeping since Sunday. Oh look! There's even one little lone strawberry for color. Must've accidentally snuck in."

“Are you quite finished?” Gavran’s voice cracks like a whip, slicing through her tirade. He glares at her with narrowed eyes over the rim of a steaming cup of coffee, like he’s waiting for her to give him a reason to bend her over his knee.

I would have shrunk under that male’s stare, but Branwen isn’t fazed. She flicks her hair behind her shoulder, straightens her spine, and blinks innocently. “Saints, no. But I’m happy to pause long enough for you to look stern and important if it will help your tiny cock complex.”

My fork falls from my hand, clattering against the plate and bouncing off the china before falling to the floor, somehow managing to hit every hard surface in its path on the way.

Everyone’s eyes snap my way, and I duck my head, feeling the heat of embarrassment creep up my neck.

“S-sorry,” I mutter, bending over to retrieve the fork. When I finally pull myself back into my seat, Branwen’s primly eating her toast with a knife and fork, ignoring the way Gavran can’t peel his eyes off her.

“You have five minutes to eat, Omega,” Dax tells me, attention locked on the screen of the laptop sitting open on the table next to his plate.

“Why?”

I lay my hand on Branwen’s leg under the table, squeezing gently in a silent signal not to push this. If she does, she’s going to end up in trouble.

They’re going to get angry. And I know exactly what happens when Alphas get angry.

But Branwen apparently has a death wish because she looks at me like I’ve grown a tail. I shake my head, silently pleading for her just to let it go.

Finally, she sighs, returning to her breakfast with a scowl on her face.

I do the same, but instead of taking my time like everyone else, I begin shoveling food into my mouth.

I am… *famished*. It’s such an odd combination of senses. On one hand, I feel the same as I have when I’ve been sick with the flu. On the other, I’m so ravenous, I don’t spare a thought for the aftermath, confident that even if I throw all this up, it’ll be worth it.

All the self-restraint I had while drinking my water is gone. I can’t remember the last time I sat at a table, participating in a meal like a proper human. The experience soothes my instincts. That, combined with being far away from that cell, helps me start to feel halfway normal.

Until my five minutes expires, that is.

I’m about to stab my fork into the strawberry I’ve been stupidly saving when Daxen grabs my plate. When he pulls it away, my Omega surges forward with a growl that I echo instinctively.

As he pulls my plate further out of reach, I chase after it, shooting to my feet and leaning over the table with my fork in hand. At the last second, I take a chance and stab at the strawberry, just barely managing to spear the piece of fruit on my fork.

Before Daxen can take it away, I pluck the fruit off my fork and shove it into my mouth with a grin.

It tastes like victory.

I refuse to look at Daxen, relishing my win and the sweet tartness of the berry on my tongue.

Branwen laughs, placing her napkin on top of her still nearly full plate of food and pushing it away.

Huh.

I didn’t even know there *were* napkins.

Just like that, the high of my win vanishes, leaving shame and anger in its place. I feel so incredibly small. So small that I wasn’t even important enough for a cloth napkin. Or any napkin.

Looking at Branwen’s clean clothes and bright complexion only compounds my shame, making it a thousand times worse.

Then I notice her scent.

Cherries. Sugar. Vanilla. Perfectly baked crust.

My Omega—who moments before was so cautiously smug—is despondent, hiding behind her wall where she thinks she’s safe. She’s not safe. We will never be safe.

I want to ask why. *Why am I the only one who has to take suppressants. Why do I have to deny my Omega instincts, like they’re something to be ashamed of? Why is it only my Omega they’ve decided to eradicate, breaking us both down until there’s nothing left of us?*

“You didn’t eat much.” Silas gestures toward Branwen’s plate with his fork, his mumbled words barely clear enough to understand around his mouthful of what might be toast.

Or eggs.

Or… honestly, I’m not sure. And if I keep trying to figure it out, I truly will vomit again.

“Apparently, the five minutes to eat are up,” she replies, long finger tapping a beat on the arm of her chair.

“The time limit is for her—” Daxen gestures toward me dismissively. “You can eat what you want.”

I didn’t think Branwen’s spine could straighten further, but apparently it can. She sits taller, placing her hands in her lap and squaring her shoulders.

“I see.”

Her tone is flat.

“Let me make sure I’ve got this straight.” She sweeps her gaze from Alpha to Alpha, leveling each of them with a glare full of judgment and hostility. “A meal is indulgence for me, but for Idril, it’s deprivation.”

The smile she forces on her face drips with disgust. “How… *charming*.”

“The Omega woke up and chose violence today,” Silas stage-whispers to Vae, who doesn’t reply. In fact, he’s not paying attention to Silas at all. His eyes are trained on his plate, his face a mask of confusion as he pushes his food around aimlessly with his fork.

“You are not a prisoner, Branwen. Idril is. That’s the difference.”

The smile she turns on Gavran is feral.

“I look forward to watching you all eat crow. In fact, I brought you a recipe all the way from the UK. A gift from my grandmother. I’ll gladly pass it on to your chef.”

Gavran leans back, clasping his hands together and resting them on his stomach that’s so muscular I can actually see the outline of his abs from halfway down the table.

He is *not* the kind of male I’d want to argue with.

Branwen doesn’t share my fear.

“Why don’t you tell me, Branwen, what you think we should do with an Omega whose actions nearly caused the death of one of my best Commanders. An Omega who lied, time and again, claiming to have shared an imaginary Mate Bond with the male she almost killed?”

“Allegedly,” She corrects.

“*Not* allegedly,” Daxen snaps. “She—”

“I thought I told you last night, I have no interest in your stories. Stop talking.”

I suck in a sharp breath, eyes widening in horror. I’m so shocked by her words, I almost don’t realize she’s turned her attention toward me until she reaches out and gathers my hands with her own.

“What do you want to do, Idril?”

“M-me?”

“These Alphas—and I use that term *very* bloody loosely— want to interrogate you with Alpha Command. What do *you* want?”

The concept of having a choice in any of this is so novel that I take a moment to consider her question, despite knowing it will never happen.

What do I want?

My answer comes immediately, and just like the concept of having a choice, it’s equally impossible.

I want my Mates to love me.

I want them to not reject me.

I want to rewind time and go back to last night, before I discovered who they are to me. Before the weight of this secret became mine to carry alone. Before I discovered the twin golden threads wilting in my chest, left to spend eternity alone and unloved.

And if I can’t have that, then at the very least…

“I want them to believe me.”

I latch on to that final wish and hold on tight.

“What you want doesn’t matter.” Vae shoves his plate angrily, startling me and making me jump. It slides across the table, stops when it collides with a platter, and sends bacon scattering across the wood.

Why is he so angry?

“He’s right,” Gav agrees, ignoring Vae’s outburst. “It’s been decided. This isn’t open to negotiation.”Branwen’s mouth parts, but Gav shoots her a glare sharp enough to cut. “Three questions. Alpha Command.”

My breakfast sits like a brick in my stomach. I reach for my water with shaking hands, bring it to my lips, and take small sips to keep from getting sick.

Breathe. You knew this was coming. You would have chosen to go along with this regardless. Just answer the questions. That’s all you have to do.

I might not have Branwen’s confidence, but I know how to be brave. My entire life I’ve been on the receiving end of unjust punishments disguised as whatever new lie the Alpha tells himself to justify his cruelty.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn toward Gavran and wait for him to meet my eyes before inclining my head.

“Go on, then.”

My hands shake, and when Gav nods at Vaelenor, permitting him to begin, they shake harder.

Vaelenor scoots his chair away from the table, looking everywhere but at me; he pushes to his feet and stands.

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Chapter 7

Idril

I'm focused on Vaelenor, so I don't notice Silas move until my chair's ripped forcefully away from the table. With a yelp, I scramble to steady myself before glancing over my shoulder, where Silas stands with a smug smirk I want to wipe off his face.

He did it to rattle me, and it worked. Obviously, something about my decision to face this head-on unsettled Silas so much he felt the need to reassert himself—pulling my chair, with me in it, and dragging it more than six feet away, leaving me sitting in the middle of the room by myself.

Isolated.

As though being alone is some kind of new concept for me.

My hands are shaking with adrenaline. But this time, instead of giving in, I rally. Taking a deep breath, I return my attention to Vae as he walks around the edge of the table, coming to a stop a few feet in front of me.

When I meet his eyes, I'm expecting to see cruel mischief reflected at me. What I find is worse.

Nothing.

He looks like a ghost.

Like someone sucked out his soul, and all that remains is a shell, going through the motions.

Irritation swims in my gut, flowing through my blood and filling my limbs. By the time it reaches my chest, the irritation has morphed into rage.

The fire in my chest welcomes the emotion, using it to feed and nourish the flames until they grow into an inferno. It crackles and burns, eager to see the Alphas experience just a glimpse of the pain they've inflicted on me.

I have to actively force my anger down into something more manageable, knowing it won't stay like that for long. The Alphas are quiet, waiting.

If they're waiting for the robot to speak, we might be here a while.

Vae's looking right at me, but his eyes are blank, which just makes me angrier. I want him to look *at* me, not *through* me.

I want him to face the consequences of his actions. *Who does he think he is, wearing a mask while he torments me?* Too afraid to acknowledge his actions, choosing instead to hide like a coward.

He thinks he can turn it all off because he's… *what? Scared? He's the big bad Alpha, not me. So why then, out of the two of us, is he the one cowering like a child?*

Fates, I want to *scream*.

Right here, right now, I want to open my mouth and scream and scream and scream—until my throat is raw and my voice gives out. I can't scream out loud, but I *need* my words to reach him on *some* level, so I scream silently, shoving my pain down the thread of a Bond that will never know what it is to be whole.

You are my Fated Mate! Look at me, damn you! Look at me while you try to break me, you coward!

My anger overflows, moving from my chest into my legs and arms and neck, washing over me until I fear I'll burst into a thousand roaring flames and burn this castle down around us.

I'll burn and burn, and I'll make him burn with me. We'll see how long his mask holds once he's face to face with my fire.

Branwen's hand wraps around mine, and the unexpected touch makes me flinch. When I glance over, I realize she must have moved her chair because now it's next to mine.

"It's alright," she murmurs, and when I can't remember how to respond, she reaches for me with the hand not holding mine and places a palm to my cheek, like she knows I'm struggling to stay grounded in reality.

I take a deep breath, and she smiles, squeezing my hand reassuringly.

"Look at me," she murmurs, and my eyes flick to hers.

"You can do this. You are so much stronger than you know." Her eyes beg me to believe her, and Fates, I want to.

"Gods, you act like we're about to kill her," Silas scoffs, leaning back in his seat so it's balancing on just the back legs. His own legs are spread

obnoxiously wide, and he grins at Branwen lazily around the chewed-up toothpick hanging from the side of his mouth.

I swear I can almost feel the way he's buzzing with excitement from across the room, like he's only here for the show.

And at this moment, I hate him. I hate him because I *know* that's the only reason he's here—for entertainment.

"Have you ever been Alpha Commanded, you sod?" Branwen snaps, and doesn't even pretend to care about his answer. "No. You haven't. Because you're an Alpha, you lot have all the bloody power. Well, I have. Once. And it was like sprinting head-first into a brick wall, only to realize you can't get around it because the bloody thing keeps moving with you. It's barbaric. *You all* are barbaric."

No one so much as flinches at her accusation, but I'm not surprised. They're Alphas. They don't have to worry about things like Alpha Commands when the entire damn system is designed to fall in line around them.

I fix my attention back on Vae. "Will you get on with it?" I snap at him—a last-ditch effort to startle him out of his stupor.

Swallowing thickly, Vae glances over his shoulder at Gav. I can't see his face, but whatever unspoken messages he sends, Gavran denies with a shake of his head.

Dax studies his Packmate with a frown. His computer is gone, and at some point, he switched seats.

I guess all it takes to get him off of his laptop is anticipation of my torment, so…. *that's nice.*

Vae exhales and his shoulders droop, but he turns back around to face me. Finally, he lifts his head and looks into my eyes.

I leave myself open, letting him see everything. All the pain, betrayal, and anguish. All the fear and disappointment and dreams that never come true no matter how hard I wish for them.

I let him see the devastation caused by his rejection—official in all but name. My Omega pushes forward, and I let him see her, too. Let him suffocate on her desolation and grief. The melancholy we can't outrun, no matter how hard we fight.

Then I find our Bond, actively seeking it out for the first time since last night. It's as beat down as I am, curled into a tight ball and pulsing dimly. For one second I wish I could show this to Vaelenor. Make him watch the

way it shrinks down, doomed to an eternity defined by the unwarranted and undeserved hate of the other half of its soul. Forced to carry on every second of every day, knowing it will never, ever be complete. By no fault of its own, there will always be something missing.

Because of him.

I make him look, watching the way his composure starts to crack and his hands curl into fists at his sides as he struggles to keep it together. I don't know if he's feeling the pain from our Bond the way Daxen is, but I hope so.

I can't hide from my Fate, so why should he?

My mouth is dry by the time his feet start to shift. Then, like the coward he is, he looks away before asking his question.

"Do it," I demand as the silence thickens. He licks his lips, but still hesitates. Sick and tired of waiting for him to act, I growl low in my throat. "*Do. It.*"

Still nothing. My anger flares hotter, and I seethe. It takes a lot for me to hit my limit, but somehow he's managed to succeed without even trying. Clenching my jaw so hard the muscles strain in my neck, I shout, "*Coward*!"

That does it.

His head snaps up and his eyes narrow. I don't back down, daring him to own his actions like an Alpha. The silence is deafening, broken only by our collective breaths and the distant ticking of a clock.

A chair leg scrapes along the floor. Downstairs, a pan clatters against something hard. Someone coughs.

"Tell the truth. Why does your father hate you?"

The Alpha Command rips through the room, directed at me. There's no room for confusion. Each word is coated in intent, demanding a satisfactory answer.

More importantly, demanding the truth.

It hits me, slamming into my chest like a five-hundred-pound weight and flattening my lungs. So heavy with authority, it's impossible to breathe, to think, to speak.

Alphas are taught to be specific with Commands. They're taught not to Command without deliberation and intent. Daxen's Commands were half-hearted and lacking deliberate intent. It's easy to comply with a Command to *"stop"* or *"look at me."*

My father’s were sometimes the same. Until the day he Commanded me to tell him how my door got unlocked, and I discovered what it felt like to fight a Command. Not because I didn’t want to answer, but because I needed to answer without exposing Caelan.

I didn’t think anything could hurt as much as that had.

I was wrong.

My teeth bite into my tongue. My mouth fills with the taste of blood. I try to swallow it down, but my lungs fight for air, and somehow I swallow and gasp at the same time. Now I’m choking on my own blood, and my lungs are getting tighter. When I close my eyes, I can feel phantom hands wrapped around my neck, squeezing.

Think, Idril!

“I don’t know” isn’t going to work. He wants an actual answer, and I *want* to tell the truth.

I’m finally able to suck in a lungful of air, and oxygen returns to my brain, bringing memories shrouded in fog back into focus. I flip through them, finding the answer to Vae’s question almost immediately.

“B-because I’m no—not a boy!” I gasp, taking in another huge lungful of air with greed. “Not a boy. Not an Alpha. Not—he wanted—not me.”

The pressure around my lungs disappears. Air rushes into my lungs, and I bend over, gulping down oxygen with each heaving breath. A hand rubs soothing circles on my back, and my pitiful Bonds perk up in my chest, hopeful and naive.

It’s not one of our Mates comforting us. It’s Branwen, chair pressed right up to mine, whispering words I can’t make out thanks to the ringing in my ears.

Slowly, I sit up. My bones feel brittle, like the slightest pressure might shatter me into a thousand pieces. Vae turns to go back to his seat, but not before I see his expression.

He looks gutted.

My eyes drop to his hands, balled into tight fists at his sides. As he pulls out his chair and sits down, his fists uncurl, and his fingers flex, twitching like he’s reaching for something that’s not there.

I don’t know why my mind latches onto the movement, but I become so transfixed watching it that I don’t even notice when blood drips over my lips and down my chin.

“God’s teeth,” Branwen curses and jumps to her feet, swiping a cloth napkin from the table. She crouches in front of me, bringing the white cloth to my nose with instructions to hold it there.

I try, but my hands won’t stop shaking. My arm gives out after just a few seconds and falls to my lap. The once-white cloth, soaked red with my blood.

I throw my head back and, with an arm that feels like it doesn’t belong to me, raise the cloth back to my nose.

“Someone dispose of that before the scent of her blood becomes too strong for the scent neutralizers, and it turns into a feeding frenzy in here,” Gavran orders in a bored voice.

Branwen checks that I’m no longer bleeding before balling up the napkin and stalking out of the room. I can hear her angry footsteps head down the hall. A door slams, and a few seconds later, she returns.

“I flushed it,” she says, retaking her seat.

“You can’t flush a cloth napkin,” Silas informs her.

“Somehow I managed,” she snaps back.

My eyes drift lazily around the room, finally falling on Daxen. He looks utterly relaxed, leaning back in his seat with an ankle propped up and resting on his knee.

His loafers are rich Italian leather—expensive, like my father’s were. He looks dressed for a business meeting, in grey slacks and a sleek light blue button-down, sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms.

Fates, he even took the time to trim his beard.

Eyes the color of moonstone lock on mine, staring back at me unabashedly—trying to see all the way into my soul, discover my secrets, and rip them out of me.

In another life, I would have handed over every one of my secrets. He wouldn’t even have to ask.

The irony is tragic.

I wait, knowing the next question is coming. Unlike Vae, there’s no need to goad Daxen. He’s already prepared.

Next to me, Branwen gasps. “No! You can’t—”

Whatever she was going to say is drowned out by Daxen’s voice—low and strong and smothered with intent.

“Tell the truth. Do you know why your father is taking your blood?”

My brain slams to a stop. The pressure around my chest returns. It tightens. Constricts. And then I'm panicking, *because what the hell kind of question is that?*

He just told me why. *Just last night! Why ask something he already knows the answer to?*

"You know I do," I answer, forcing the words through clenched teeth.

Dax waits patiently, watching as I struggle to breathe. My grip tightens on Branwen's hand. My already labored breaths turn painful. Air gets choked off in my throat, making me cough and wheeze.

All the while my mind races, but making sense of anything is a struggle. *What's his play?* It makes no sense, and until I know his actual question—

The realization slams into me, so obvious I feel stupid for not seeing it right away.

He asked a question he *knows* will make me look like I'm withholding important information when I answer truthfully. He knows everyone will assume that by admitting I know my father's plans for my blood, that I've always known.

Known, and kept it a secret. Strategically.

Daxen doesn't care about the truth. Daxen wants to be right.

And what's better than using my own words against me?

Using them as a reminder to everyone else that he's been right all along.

The room starts spinning. I sway, falling from my chair and landing on the floor. Right before my face smacks against the stone, I throw my arms out in front of me, palms smacking against the floor and tearing open the thin, chapped skin of my hands.

I know what I need to do to stop this, and even though a part of me wants to refuse to play his stupid games, I don't intend on dying for pride.

Or Daxen.

I look up from where I've fallen, kneeling on the floor. Through blurry eyes, I find Daxen's grey eyes and latch onto them. I let him see my rage. My pain. My agony. Then I level him with a glare full of disgust and force out my answer with the little air still left in my lungs.

"Y-yes."

Giving in *hurts*. My Omega whines, and so do I, but without any air in my lungs, all that escapes is a raw, soundless wheeze.

My body gives out, and I collapse on my side. Pulling my legs to my chest, I curl into the tightest ball I can—just like when I was a little girl.

“You *bastard*!” Branwen shouts, and I get the feeling she’s been shouting for a while, possibly since before Dax’s Command left his mouth. I can’t see her, but I can sense her. Can feel the gentle touch of her fingers sweeping sweat-soaked tendrils of hair away from my face.

“You bloody fucking asshole!”

“All she had to do was answer the question. The Command would have lifted. She—I—I didn’t know that would happen. She was fighting—it—it shouldn’t have happened!”

Daxen’s voice is tight, almost frantic.

Which makes no sense. He knew exactly what he was doing.

He set a trap, knowing biology would force me to respond, *and he’s surprised it worked?*

Branwen’s arms wrap around me, and she tries to urge me to sit up, but I moan, shaking my head. I can’t move. Not yet.

“Why isn’t she opening her eyes?”

“Back. The. Fuck. Up. I will stab you in the dick if you take another step.”

“I told you, Omega. I was unaware—”

“Eat shit and die, *Alpha*.”

Gods, it’s so hot. When did I start sweating? I can feel it pooling on my lower back, making my shirt stick to my skin.

“Someone call Calder. Get him up here. Gav—”

“Daxen, calm down. Look. She’s opening her eyes.”

I don’t know if that’s true, or if Gavran can see the future, or if I simply imagined his voice, but the result is the same. My vision begins to clear, the black haze receding as the world comes into focus.

I blink and Branwen’s here, snaking an arm around my back to support me as I move, determined to get off the floor. Panting, I reach out and grasp onto the arms of my chair in front of me, using it and Branwen to heave my shaking limbs into my seat.

The Alpha’s attention is a heavy weight on my back, but at this point, I don’t care about looking weak. I don’t care about much of anything after what just happened.

“That was manipulation.” Branwen hasn’t stopped arguing since I opened my eyes, firing accusation after accusation at the Alphas, but especially Gav.

I try to speak, but my mouth is too dry, and nothing comes out. Not even swallowing helps, and after my third failed attempt to speak, I give up. I lick my lips, tasting salt on my tongue. I lift my fingers to my face. *Wet.*

When did I start crying?

Next to me, Branwen explodes from her chair. It flies backward, skidding across the floor to slam against the wall behind us. She doesn't seem to notice, though. With hands planted on her hips, she leans in until she's less than six inches away from Gavran. "Fuck all the way off, Commander Cockup. She's *done*. Her system can't *handle* another Command."

Gavran swallows thickly. For the first time, I see a crack in his mask, and I hold my breath, praying for him to do the right thing and put an end to this.

I don't think any of us are expecting Silas to take matters into his own hands. He stands, and for whatever reason the movement registers as something worrisome enough to demand Daxen's attention. It's like some kind of pre-disaster warning goes off and his head snaps to the side, grey eyes flying straight to Silas.

Whatever he sees on the other Alpha's face has Daxen's draining of color.

I can only assume his emotions leak through the Pack Bond because in less than a breath, Vae, too, goes on high alert.

What's happening? What can they sense that I can't?

Time slows to a crawl.

Silas opens his mouth. As he begins to speak, Daxen's eyes widen in panic. He lunges across the table—to do what, exactly, I'll probably never know.

It's too late.

Silas's Command cracks through the air like thunder. Heavy. Cruel. A probable death sentence.

Vaelenor stands. The terror on his face scares me more than Silas's Command. He lurches forward, making a beeline for Silas. He moves so fast that his chair twists, shoots across the floor, and right into his path. Gaze narrowed dangerously on Silas, Vae doesn't notice the piece of furniture until he's practically on top of it.

Without breaking stride, he reaches to the side, lifts the chair, and, completely unconcerned about anything but getting it out of his way,

launches it across the room.

It soars through the air before crashing into the opposite wall with so much force that the antique oak splinters into pieces and falls, clattering to the floor.

It all happens in less than six seconds. I know, because that's the average amount of time it takes for an Alpha Command to fully reach the part of an Omega's brain that controls Designation biology and registers Commands.

Six seconds, but only a millisecond for my body to register the words and lock up in horror.

The Command plows into me, wrapping around my bones and slithering between my ribs, prepared to force into my soul and steal the answer for itself.

It burns like acid through my veins, ready to flay me open from the inside. Spill my blood as well as my secrets.

The words of the Command echo through my skull. A death knell I can't escape.

"Tell the truth. What are you?"

Tell the truth. What are you?

Tell the truth.

Tell the truth.

What are you?

What are you?

What?

What?

I *SCREAM*.

My vision turns black. My nerve endings explode in agony—my back arches, body jerking and spasming uncontrollably. My lungs tighten, and my mouth fills with blood. I can't swallow. I can't make my body do anything I tell it.

My mouth falls open as blood rushes up my throat, filling my mouth and splattering onto the floor.

My body gives out, slumping bonelessly. I land on my side and my fingers spasm, reaching and searching but finding only air where my friend's hand should be.

She's gone. I'm alone.

I stop fighting, no longer in control of my own body. My hands curl into fists, clenching so tight I can feel the bones grinding and joints popping.

Someone screams. *Me? Branwen? Both of us?* There are barked orders, shouts for a doctor, but underneath, a high-pitched ringing that grows and grows until it's all I can hear.

I'll hear it forever, because there is no way to stop this Command. There is no answer to offer as a sacrifice in trade for my life. It rips my free will away, and replaces it with pain.

The pain washes over me until it becomes all I know—my whole world. I can't see, can't hear, can't speak. Perhaps I've died, and this is all that remains.

Me and the Void and agony that will never end.

My Omega whines, and the Command tightens in response, choking off the sound and demanding an answer.

What are you?

What are you?

What are you?

If there's an answer, I don't have it. It doesn't matter how much I want to answer; I can't.

What's the answer?

Tell me the truth. What are you?

What am I?

Pain. That's what I am. It's all that's left of me, after all. Pain inside. Pain outside. Pain you can see and pain you can't. Pain is the story of my life, written on my flesh like a story half-told. Each chapter etched across my back, legs, and arms… My heart. My soul.

So many scars on my soul. Those… those hurt the worst of all.

Daughter.

I don't know if the voice is real or if it's merely a hallucination. The soft whisper brushes against my senses, and with all the strength I have left inside of me, I reach out, latching onto it and holding tight.

I want to answer. I try, but when I open my mouth, all I can do is scream. Then I realize I'm already screaming. I've been screaming. *For how long?*

Minutes? Hours? Days?

Forever. I started screaming the day my mother died, and I haven't stopped.

I scream and scream. Begging and pleading and praying to gods long forgotten.

I scream for Caelan.

I scream for my mother.

I scream because my nerves are on fire. I've been doused in kerosene, and someone just lit a match.

My head falls back. Screams taper into moans of pain ripped from my throat. The sound is unnatural. Like an injured animal, caught in a trap. Too broken to escape or keep going.

Agony pulses through me, zipping along my skin like lightning. My Omega whines, and I echo the sound. It's shrill and piercing, the cries of a child who stumbled into a nightmare years ago and never woke up.

An Alpha growls, reminding me I'm still alive. Still stuck in this nightmare.

I'm shaking. Trembling. The ground beneath me rolls and shifts. For the first time in what feels like hours, I try to open my eyes, and there's no resistance. I blink rapidly through the sting of the harsh light. My blurry vision sharpens, and the world around me comes into focus.

It's not only me shaking. It's the whole world, too. The sturdy legs of the table above me skitter wildly over stone. Platters full of food inch across the wood, creeping dangerously close to the edge. A platter of white porcelain slips over the side and falls, shattering into a thousand jagged pieces.

My eyes fall. Less than six feet from my face, a skull lies on the floor. I blink, but it's still there when I open my eyes. Half its face is white bone. The other half is loosely covered by rotting flesh, slowly sliding off the bone like it's melting. Tufts of long white hair—what's left of it—reach like skeletal fingers, twirling along currents of wind that don't exist.

Maggots wriggle and squirm, crawling from the holes of its eyes and nose. A few turn around to crawl back to the dark, but more take their place, wriggling over each other and dropping to the floor. But before they can land, they disappear, swept away on a cloud of smoke.

The skull's mouth parts, opening wider and wider and wider until the jaw dislocates, coming unhinged and clattering to the floor.

My heart slams against my ribs.

The skull screams.

Rotted flesh sloughs off the bone like melted wax. The bone softens and shrinks. It melts, transforming right before my eyes.

I blink, and the skull is gone. In its place rests a glass water pitcher, lying on its side. Pure white and untouched. Exceedingly fragile. Impossibly clean.

It rolls, clattering across the stone, headed straight for me. Two feet from my face, it sways to a stop and a trickle of water spills over the lip.

Right on the heels of the first is another. Then another. One after the next, faster and faster until dozens of trickles of liquid combine into a single stream that spreads across the stone like a river.

I watch the liquid creep closer and closer until it dawns on me that… this isn't water.

It's blood.

Streams of blood. Dozens of them. Each one inching closer to me with patient, insidious intent.

From inside the pitcher, a shadow shifts… *watching. Listening. Remembering.*

My lips part. I try to call out. Try to warn someone—*anyone*— but my throat is too raw, and nothing comes out.

Suddenly, there are hands on my brow. More hands on my arms. The sound of voices punctures the haze I'm trapped in. The sounds become words. Words string together, forming thoughts and ideas and questions and orders, each splinter like shards of glass before falling to land in pieces surrounding my body.

I reach for one, but my arm merely twitches. I glance down and realize my hands are curled into fists.

'Rest now, Daughter. Do not be afraid. This is not how your story ends.'

Like my soul has just been waiting for permission, my eyes roll back, disappearing into the back of my head. Light fades away. An empty, dark nothingness rushes in, filling the space.

Something close to peace falls over me.

I know this place. I've been here before.

I fall, letting the shadow swallow me whole. My senses power down one by one, until all that's left is the pain. It clings to me, unwilling to release its hold. For a moment I'm afraid its claws have sunk too deep.

Then, I feel a sharp jerk, then a popping sensation in what feels like my soul as it, too, disappears.

In a cocoon of nothing, I float and rest, secure in the knowledge that I’ve finally found someplace safe. Nothing can get to me here.

Because nothing exists.

There is only the Void, soundlessly screaming my name and carrying it away on the wind.

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Chapter 8

Soren

I haven't moved in what feels like days, but in reality it has probably only been an hour. The dungeon smells like mildew and cold, wet stone, the chill seeping into my bones like it's got a personal vendetta against me.

Leave it to the leeches to have an actual dungeon in an actual castle.

I'd always heard their compound was large, but after days running the perimeter, I now know it's much larger than we suspected.

The castle, where their Head Commanders and the Last Shield live, is like something straight out of a medieval fantasy. Though smaller than this one, I've seen similar structures on visits to Scotland with Kane. Not only old, but alive in a way few places truly are.

I crack my neck for the eighth time. I feel antsy. Unfocused.

A Beta female brought a tray a while ago. Opened the door to my cell and damn near threw it across the floor before relocking it with nervous, shaky movements.

Like I couldn't get out of here if I wanted to.

I ate half, then pushed the rest under the bench. Just in case those fuckers get the bright idea to try starving my Mate again.

I'm waiting twenty more minutes before I shift and ruin their year. The only reason I've entertained this at all is because Idril made it clear it's something she needs to do.

I've been patient, but this is taking too long. *How hard is it to ask three questions and feed her?*

Something isn't right.

My Mate Bond pulses frantically—mirroring my anxiety.

This wasn’t at all how I foresaw our first meeting going. If someone told me a week ago I’d be voluntarily detained by the Bloodbound and watching over my Mate all night while she tossed and turned on a stone slab—I’d have laughed in their faces.

But that’s exactly how I spent the early morning hours—propped up against the cell bars, memorizing her features until they were imprinted in my soul. The curve of her cheek, the slight wave of her silver hair, the way she instinctively curled into a ball, which told me exactly what kind of life she led.

Her soft noises of distress made me fucking feral. I spent half my time talking down my Beast and Alpha, who were tag-teaming to convince me a war was totally worth ripping out a couple Bastard’s throats.

And fuck, I wanted to. Still want to. But there’s a reason why the man is in charge and not the Beast or Alpha. This situation is precarious at best, which means I have to play it smart.

I’m the Alpha Heir. Tearing the throats out of even one vamp would rock the foundations of both worlds. The repercussions would be swift, bloody, and widespread. Not only would I be throwing thousands of my own pack into a fight they never sanctioned, but we would have to involve the rest of the country’s packs—and probably some allies overseas, too.

With a single action, I’d throw our entire Species into a war with what *should* be tentative allies, costing hundreds of thousands of innocent wolven *and* vampires their lives.

So as much as I’d love to simply raise hell, I can’t.

I’m not even in the position to take my Mate and run without fighting. Even if I somehow made it out alive, my actions are a direct reflection on my father. I can’t bring strife to his door—and, by extension, the Packs—needlessly.

Besides, bigger issues are at play here. The claims of Idril’s abilities can’t simply be brushed aside. *Exploding wood beams and fire that reacts to her emotions?* I don’t know anyone who’s ever heard of gifts like that.

There are stories, known only to our Elders, of a race of beings who died off so long ago that record of them no longer exists—a race of supernaturals who could control the elements.

At least, that’s what the stories say. I worry about putting too much stock in word of mouth, however. Who knows how much has been changed or embellished.

Next time I meet with Kane, I'll send him to speak with my father. He needs to know what we've discovered. The trafficked Omegas, the human working with Severed, my Mate, her gifts…

I keep running through the same endless loop, ending right back where I am now. I can't fight. I can't leave. I can't take Idril, and even if I could, *what about her other Mate?* She won't leave without him, and the male's in a coma.

Not that I'm seriously considering busting out of here—

I freeze mid-step, grunting in pain. My hand flies to my chest. There's a burning pain behind my ribs that appears out of nowhere. A sharp ache I've never felt before.

My Beast is clawing at my insides, shouting at me to shift, fight, *something*, because—

Something is wrong.

I turn my focus to our Mate Bond. At first, everything seems normal. The Bond seems content, coiled in my chest, pulsing and thrumming with contentment now that Idril's been found.

But that ache is still there. It yanks and pulls, urging me to look closer, sure I'm missing something because—

Fuck.

The Bond isn't coiled tight with contentment.

That's distress. *I need to go. I have to get to her right fucking now!*

Spinning on my heel, I take off.

And almost run face first into the iron fucking bars of this cell.

"FUCK!"

I slam my hands against the bars. *How the fuck am I going to get out of here?* Outside of shouting, I—

The floor drops.

Like it's up and decided, after two hundred years, that it's tired of being solid and wants to try something different.

At first I think I hallucinated the whole thing, then it happens again. The ground lurches beneath my feet, and I stumble, then go down hard, knees slamming against stone. My hands shoot out on instinct, and I catch myself on the cell bars before my face does the same.

The Bond is fucking screaming in my chest. The feeling is so wrong it blurs my vision. My Beast howls—aware on a level not accessible to my human side that our Mate needs us.

What the fuck is happening—

Right as I hesitantly push to my feet, the shaking worsens, making me pitch forward and slam into the bars *again*. The world jolts, violent and angry, like a god buried under the castle for thousands of years is waking up for the first time—and he's fucking *pissed*.

The walls groan, and the sound echoes off the iron of the cell and bounces through my skull.

I push toward the edge, where the bars are thinner, but it's like trying to paddle a rowboat through a tsunami.

Chunks of mortar and concrete the size of my fist rain from the ceiling. I duck instinctively, but if I let go of the bars to protect my head, I'll be thrown across the cell like a fucking chew toy. So I stay where I am, holding on until my muscles start to scream as the foundation of this centuries-old castle does its damnedest to pull the whole thing down on top of me.

I have a feeling that something horrible is happening. Not just with the castle—I don't give a fuck about an Earthquake—but with my Mate. The distress and fear filtering through the Bond are so visceral I can feel each emotion like it's my own.

Except it's *not* mine. It's *hers*.

And I should be there! I should be protecting her, should—

The ground lurches violently, and I'm thrown back. I fly through the air and slam into the back wall. The absence of pain in my bones tells me the crack I heard came from the wall and not my shoulder, at least—*thank the Mother.*

Groaning, I slide down the wall and fall on my ass, panting as I press my hand to my chest like I can somehow hold the Bond together with determination alone.

More and more rock falls from above me, coming way too close to my head for comfort.

Then as fast as it started, the shaking simply… *Stops.*

There's nothing gradual about the way it happens, which makes this even more disturbing. Pieces of debris still break from the ceiling and walls, falling like rain pattering against cobblestone. I hear the distant groan of stressed architecture. But outside these walls…

Nothing.

No voices. No footsteps. No shouts or screams for help. Just silence.

And my Bond—that's silent too. Still there, but unnaturally still save for sporadic pulses that jump and stutter, as though her heart is fighting for each and every beat.

I spring to my feet at the sound of the door swinging open. Footsteps thundering down the stairs send my heart galloping in my chest. I lunge for the bars, ignoring the crunch of glass shattering under my boots.

Vaelenor appears first, and when I get a good look at him, my stomach drops.

He looks… *destroyed.* The self-assured, cocky asshole is gone. The male in front of me looks like he's being led to the gallows. His dark auburn hair is a mess, wild and standing on end like he's been tugging at the roots. His shirt's torn at the shoulder, grease dripping down the side and onto his jeans. His normally tan skin is pale and his eyes—

Glassy. Haunted. Like a warrior who's seen something he can never unsee.

When our eyes meet, he looks away. That's when I know that whatever happened to my Omega…

It was bad. Really, *really* fucking bad.

"Where—"

The demand dies in my throat as Gavran steps up behind Vae. The normally composed leader looks like he's aged a decade. His amber eyes lock with mine, and my blood freezes in my veins.

Deep, soul-crushing shame—so horrifying I stumble back a step. But then Vae steps to the side, and I follow Gavran's eyes as they fall to the body hanging limply in his arms.

No…

Oh gods. Oh, Fates. NO.

She looks dead.

The thought rushes through me before I can stop it. But Fates, it's true. She looks like a corpse. Like all the life's been sucked from her body, leaving her hollowed out and almost unrecognizable, with grey skin and dark shadows under her eyes that look like bruises. Her beautiful hair is a mess, tangled and twisted, sweat-damp strands that stick to her temples, forehead, and neck; the sickly grey skin the color of ash stretches tight over her frame, as though she's lost ten pounds in the last hour.

A pained whimper falls from her lips.

Vaelenor flinches like the sound is a physical blow.

I don’t flinch. I can’t. I can’t move.

I’ve stopped breathing.

My stomach plummets to my feet. My heart slams against the cage of my ribs, terror and rage fighting for dominance. Both feed my Beast, who is salivating for revenge.

“What. Happened?” I demand in a voice that doesn’t sound like mine.

Vaelenor pulls out the keys and steps forward to unlock the door. I’m standing so close I can see his hands shake. It takes him two tries to get the key in the lock.

The moment the door swings open, I lurch forward, prepared to tear my Mate from Gavran’s arms.

I don’t need to. He hands her to me, transferring her into my arms like she’s a priceless heirloom he’s afraid to break. The moment her weight settles against me, the Bond pulses, thrumming with relief.

Her head lolls against my chest. Her face twists in agony and a whimper falls past her lips, limp frame tensing in my arms like even in her sleep, she’s bracing for a blow.

“I asked you a question,” I seethe, forcing the words through gritted teeth, “*What the fuck happened to my Mate?*”

“She didn’t respond well to the interrogation,” he responds in a controlled, measured tone that just pisses me off. Like he’s informing me of a fucking tactical mishap instead of why my Mate looks like she’s barely survived a sprint through Hell.

“No shit.”

I run my hands gently along her arms, legs, and chest, checking for injuries like broken bones. I see no blood. No bruises. No obvious wounds at all to explain why she looks so much worse than she did an hour ago.

“Was she hurt during the Earthquake?”

No answer.

A furious growl rips from my throat. Both men refuse to look me in the eyes. Vae’s attention is fixed on the wall behind me, hands stuffed in his pockets and shoulders hunched like he’s bracing for a blow.

“Answer me,” I demand, letting every ounce of Alpha authority bleed into my tone. I don’t hold back. Don’t temper my power. I want them to feel it. To understand.

Because if someone doesn't start talking, I’m going to lose it. If that happens, my Beast will take control, and neither male will leave here alive.

As much as I'd enjoy ripping them both apart limb by limb, I can't afford to let that happen. Even now, I hear my father's voice warning me to get control before I do something to put the pack at risk.

'If you can't be trusted to keep control of your Beast when you're emotional, then you can't be trusted to lead this Pack. And if you can't do that, then you can't protect your Mate. Control, Soren.'

I've heard some variation of that exact lesson a thousand times, so it's easy to imagine his words now. It's not easy, but I force my Beast back and let the silence stretch uncomfortably, waiting for a fucking answer.

Vaelenor's eyes flick to the side toward Gavran before falling to his feet with a grimace.

Coward.

Gavran finally breaks the silence. He clears his throat and throws back his shoulders like he's going to battle. "Vae asked his question, then Daxen asked his. She didn't handle it well, so we were going to stop, worried she couldn't handle a third Command after the first two."

His eyes fall to Idril, then jump back to me, full of a vulnerability I'm not expecting.

"Before I could put an official end to the interrogation, Silas asked his question."

The words seem so impossibly loud in the empty cell. Again, Gav's eyes drop to Idril and his face twists with regret.

But I don't give a fuck about his regret, and my patience is wearing thin.

"I swear to the Fates," I hiss. "If you don't tell me what the hell happened, there's not a male alive who'd blame me for what happens next."

"You're right," he agrees, shame etched in every line of his face. "You're… you're absolutely right. And I'm—Fates. I'm sorry. This *never* should have happened. It was—"

He hesitates, then with obvious reluctance, meets my eyes. "I'm going to level with you. I've been a warrior for longer than most Bastards have been alive, and I've never seen an Omega—" He frowns, shaking his head before correcting himself. "I've never seen *anyone* in that kind of pain. If I had any idea an Omega could ever respond to Command like that, I never would have approved this. I've seen Omegas Commanded hundreds of times. Never—Never—" He scrubs a hand over his face, squeezing his eyes closed tight.

The world is covered in a haze of red. Black spots dance through my vision.

And he just keeps talking.

“She was screaming and screaming and… Fates, those screams… like she was being torn apart, ripped open from the inside. From her soul.”

His lips thin, expression turning wary.

I wait for him to finish. I can’t open my mouth to speak. If I do, I’m afraid I’ll rip out his throat.

“She seized.”

Rage.

Hot, fiery, burning rage like I’ve never known pours through me. My canines elongate, sharpening to needle-fine points along with my vision as my Beast shoves forward with furious intent.

The vampire takes a step back like he can feel the danger pulsing through the air. “Branwen rolled her onto her side while I called for Calder—one of our Doctors. And then, the Earthquake happened. Which I have to assume was connected.”

“Explain,” I demand, pulling my Omega closer.

Fuck. I should have been there. I should have fought until they let me come with her.

“It’s happened twice before, we think. When she experiences intense trauma…” he trails off, gesturing at the very obvious aftermath. “This happens. A magical manifestation of her emotional state. It’s just a theory, but…” He shrugs. “Theories are all we have right now.”

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Maybe I should respond to that, but I can’t get the image of my Mate lying in a heap on the floor, screaming in pain, and fucking *seizing*.

“Where’s the pup?”

Gavran frowns. “Pup?”

“He means Silas,” Vae answers, speaking up for the first time.

“Silas has been detained until his Pack returns. He will be held accountable.”

“Not good enough,” I snap. “He nearly *killed* my Omega. If you don’t make him pay for what he’s done to her, I will.”

“Silas is under my Command,” he replies, tone turning dangerous. “He is mine to punish. Don't mistake my regret for more than it is. If you think to dispense your own justice, I'll have to take that as a declaration of conflict and respond accordingly. *Do not* add a war to this already overflowing pile of shit we’ve found ourselves in.”

My fingers flex instinctively around my Mate, and I have to force my muscles to relax. I hold the male’s stare, searching his gaze.

Then, for just a few breaths, his mask drops completely, granting me a view of the male beneath.

A male who’s struggling and hiding it from everyone. Who, for the first time, finds himself questioning his men and their decisions. Questioning who they are, and who *he* is, for having let so many things go wrong lately—a male who—against all odds—might respond better to an ally than an enemy.

Then the mask is back, and I’m facing The Last Shield once again. *Hard. Unwavering. Fiercely protective.*

I make a strategic decision and offer him the same courtesy—Alpha to Alpha. Male to Male. I let my own mask fall, allowing him a glimpse of who I truly am as well—an olive branch. One I hope—in the long run—will lead to security and peace for my Pack.

And more importantly, for my Mate.

Because the hard truth is, we have much larger enemies than each other. And we both are going to need every ally we can get.

“My respect for you does not yet extend to your Commanders,” I clarify, and Gavran’s lips twitch.

“Understood.”

Idril stirs in my arms. I pull her closer, like I can shield her from this place. From these males who have already inflicted so much damage.

“I need blankets,” I demand. “And water and food for when she wakes up.”

Like a scared mouse, Vaelenor has crept so far away he’s nearly on the stairs. At my words, however, his head whips up, and his eyes widen.

“I don’t think Dax—”

Gavran winces. I growl furiously, pinning the coward who can't even face his own actions with a glare full of disgust.

"*Fuck* Dax. I don't care what Dax thinks. I don't care what Dax wants, or needs, or feels, understand? The *only* one who I care about is the Omega in my arms—and by extension, Caelan. If you don't have enough honor to provide basic fucking comforts to the female *you tortured*, I will take her and disappear."

When he frowns, I flash him a dangerous smile and lay out the rest of my plan.

"Now, keep in mind that if that happens, Idril and I won't leave alone. The forest on your very own property currently contains dozens of my warriors, ready and waiting for my Command." I shrug, feigning nonchalance. "Oh, they won't attack, of course. Gavran's right—a war is something neither Species can handle right now."

"Then what—"

"You see, Vaelenor, wolven are known for possessing two innate talents. Fighting, and fucking shit up. My males won't fight, but they *will* cause so much fucking chaos you won't know your ass from your elbow in your own halls. And while you're busy trying to remember your own mother's name, I'll take my Mate and go straight to the compound, down the stairs, take two lefts, a right, and arrive at room 109. From there, it'll take me less than three minutes to grab Caelan, and another forty-seven seconds for all three of us to disappear."

My smile widens at the horror in Vaelenor's green eyes.

"You'll spend the next century searching, and by the time we let you find us, I imagine your Packmate will have a thing or two to say to you after spending years imagining all the ways you tormented his Fated Mate while he was injured."

It doesn't escape me that I just claimed the fucking vampire as part of my own pack and a male under my protection. Three weeks ago, that idea would have been unthinkable.

But Caelan's hers. Which means he's mine, too. Just… not in the same way.

When neither male responds, I push my advantage to hammer home how serious I am. I stride forward, shifting Idril in my arms, which forces their focus where it should be—*on her.*

“If anything like this happens to Idril again, the consequences will be something none of us will be able to live with. Feel free to take that as a threat, because that’s exactly what it is.”

The air is thick with tension once I finally finish speaking. Gavran is stiff, arms crossed in front of him. He searches my features and must realize I’m not fucking around.

“Message received,” he responds, and if I’m not mistaken, his eyes hold a gleam of respect that wasn’t there before.

He turns on his heel, gesturing at Vae to follow.

Before he goes, Vae pulls out his keys and, with a grimace, shoves the key into the lock of my cell. He looks like he hates what he’s doing, but he still does it.

“Blankets,” I remind him. “I want some Nesting material for my Omega.”

“I’ll bring some stuff down,” he murmurs. His eyes never once stray toward Idril. When I don’t respond, he clears his throat awkwardly before he adds, “There’s a blanket she really likes still up in her attic room.”

“Go get it then,” I snap when he still doesn’t move. He jerks at my tone then nods frantically. As though he’s been waiting for some way to do something for her, he takes off, racing up the stairs two at a time in his haste.

I turn, crossing the cell to retake my seat on the stone bench, which is shockingly large enough to hold even my massive frame. Leaning back, I cradle Idril against my chest, wishing there was something I could do to fix this now.

“No more,” I promise her. “Those assholes are done hurting you. *Everyone* is fucking *done hurting you.*”

Part of me wishes I’d just taken her and run last night. I even considered revisiting the subject this morning, but when I asked her about Caelan and saw the way her eyes lit up, love shining through the shadows of exhaustion and fear for the first time, I just… *couldn’t.*

The last thing I want to do is treat her like every other Alpha she’s met by throwing out demands and dismissing her desires and agency because she’s an Omega.

But now… things have escalated. And it’s my job to protect my Mate above all else, no matter what.

And yet… taking her from Caelan could be just as detrimental as staying here. I have no idea how strong their Bond is. No idea if ripping her away from him could have emotional or physical repercussions for either of them.

I sigh, knowing what I have to do—protecting her means protecting her physically, emotionally, and mentally.

So if that means I act as a constant shield while we stay here, then so be it. If she is determined to wait for Caelan to wake up, then she'll do it by my side. Not in separate cells. Not in the same room. *Right fucking here.*

Next to her. Where I belong.

I won't force my will on her, but I will make sure she's strong enough to advocate for herself. I'll be ther for her to lean on, until she's strong enough to stand on her own. I'll make it my fucking life's mission to help her rebuild everything that's been torn down by the abuse she's suffered her whole life.

I hold my breath as she stirs in my arms, waiting for her to settle. She doesn't. Her lashes flutter, and I swear my entire body turns to granite as her eyes open.

She blinks slowly, glassy eyes flitting around the room in confusion before landing on me.

"Soren?" Her voice is a whisper, and the soft sound breaks my fucking heart.

Tears spring to my eyes, and my throat tightens.

"I'm here, Little Mate."

Remarkably, she seems to relax, shifting in my arms and turning into my chest. "Don't leave," she murmurs, lashes fluttering as her eyes close once again.

"Never," I swear to her fiercely. It's not only a promise—it's a vow. One I know I'll keep till the end of my days.

"You smell like Christmas," she whispers, lips curving into a soft smile.

"You smell like mine," I whisper back, and her smile brightens.

And I know, right here and now, that I'll do everything I can for the rest of my life to keep that smile on her face.

Fates… It's everything.

She's everything.

Her breathing slows, evening out as she falls asleep into soft puffs that fan against my skin.

I lean back, relaxing against the wall in contentment. This is good. She can sleep, and I'll hold her while she does. Watch over her. Make sure nothing bad *ever* happens to her again.

Hours pass in what feel like minutes. I doze lightly with my Mate in my arms, and my Beast stays on alert— ready to wake me at the first sign of danger.

Eventually, a young Beta female with a bob and severe features appears almost silently at the base of the stairs. She's holding a clipboard in one hand, eyes flitting across the pages, not even bothering to watch where she's going as she strides forward and stops unerringly in front of the cell door.

Tucking the clipboard under her opposite arm along with the blankets and pillows already there, she reaches into her pocket for a set of keys and uses them to unlock our door.

Unlike every other Beta I've met so far, this female shows no signs of fear at all. She places three blankets and two pillows on the floor beside us, straightens, and plants her fists on her hips, studying Idril with a critical eye.

Her stethoscope and pale purple scrubs are at odds with the rigid vibe I'm getting, and it takes another solid thirty seconds before she finally speaks.

"I'm Lenora. One of the Doctors employed by the Bloodbound."

Gathering Idril closer, I push off the stone bench and bend over, snatching a blanket and pillow from the pile she set on the floor. With one hand, I lay them both out and, after a bit of adjusting, carefully lay Idril on the thickest one I can find. I cradle the back of her head protectively, lowering it to rest comfortably on top of the pillow.

"Thank you."

I grunt. "Didn't do it for you."

"Fair enough."

Fates, this woman has the personality of a robot pretending to be a real person. As soon as I turn to face her, she doesn't wait for me to ask before launching into an explanation for her appearance.

"I was sent to check on the Omega, as well as to administer her suppressant. It's a tad early—I normally dose her closer to ten—but today has been… chaotic."

“Explain to me why it took you so long to get down here,” I demand as she reaches into the front pocket of her scrubs. When she pulls out a syringe, I shift before she can pop off the cap, placing myself between her and my Mate.

When she doesn’t take the hint and sways to the side like she’s going to move around me, I move with her, raising a hand in warning.

“Sorry, Doc. I don’t think so. Idril’s been through enough trauma today. The only person around to scent her is me. I’m not letting you inject her with something else meant to fuck with her instincts.”

Lenora sighs. “She *has* to be on a suppressant. She’s been on them since she was Designated. We can’t just cut her off. If I were you, I’d be more concerned about when she weans off of them.”

My whole body jerks in shock.

“Explain.”

Lenora’s lips purse, like this is something I should already understand. “Idril’s father kept her on military-grade suppressants since age thirteen. She’s never gone through a heat. Cutting her off without weaning her will result in a long, painful heat. The kind you alone could never satisfy. It would be impossible to accommodate her needs while keeping you both fed, rested, and properly hydrated. It would be, in a word, disastrous.”

She’s been on suppressants since she Designated?

That’s… fuck… nine years. Nine *years* denied access to her own body. *What kind of monster pumps his own child full of unnecessary medication like that for years?*

It’s… It’s *barbaric*. A level of abuse I never imagined could be possible.

My stomach churns, lurching with nausea, and I’m forced to count my breaths to keep from passing out as she goes on, shredding my heart in the process.

“With her recent decline in health—both physically and mentally—I can’t fathom a future where she avoids a lifetime of heat-related trauma and anxiety. The mental implications alone—”

“Alright,” I interrupt. “You said we can wean her off. So… as long as we do that, then her heat will be normal, right?”

No fucking way is this Doctor getting near her until I have all the information. Idril is mine, now. And until she’s able to consent on her own, I’ll be damned if I’m going to make an uninformed decision on her behalf.

Lenora exhales like she’s considering that I’ve been placed on this Earth specifically to annoy the shit out of her.

“Even tapering won’t be enough to guarantee a ‘normal’ heat. It will give her time to prepare, but there are side effects to ending prolonged suppressant use. More heat spikes, for example. And listen… no matter how slowly we taper her, her first heat will still be intense.”

She raises a brow along with the syringe.

I rack my brain for more questions but can’t think of any, and grudgingly take a step to the side. She kneels beside the bench and pulls out an alcohol swab. After rolling up Idril’s sleeve, she cleans a spot on her upper arm that’s littered with fading bruises. My Beast lunges forward with a snarl, and it takes effort to force both of us to calm down so I can pay attention as Lenora speaks.

“Think of it like this.” She uncaps the needle and plunges it into Idril’s arm.

Idril doesn’t so much as flinch.

I do.

“She’s twenty-two. She should have experienced three to five heats by now. Those heats don’t simply fade away. They stack up. Imagine each missed heat as a domino, stacked in a line, just waiting for that one little push to send them falling.”

She stands, recaps the syringe, and unwinds her stethoscope, placing the metal against Idril’s chest. My mouth opens, but she lifts a finger, and I stay silent. Honestly, I’m just happy to see her performing a far overdue checkup.

“Well?” I push when she’s finished, anxious for answers.

The Beta scrawls something on her clipboard before tucking it back under her arm and giving me her full attention.

“She’s malnourished. She came here like that, so the Bastards aren’t at fault. However, I will admit their efforts to keep her fed have been less than desirable, something I fully intend to discuss with them.”

I scoff. That much is fucking obvious. They’ve clearly been neglecting her care—prisoner or not.

“The truth,” I demand, because I have fucking eyes. Idril’s a wreck. Her limbs have been spasming, the circles under her eyes are so dark they’re nearly black, her breathing is shallow, and in the last hour, she’s started to

sweat like she’s burning through a fever, despite her skin remaining cold as ice.

Before she can answer, the door creaks open at the top of the stairs. And a moment later, to my eternal irritation, Daxen fucking Montclair rounds the corner.

I’ve never wanted to punch someone so bad in my life.

Fucking wonderful.

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Chapter 9

Soren

"What the hell are you doing here?"

The door to the cell is standing wide open. I could shift. Tear his throat out right here and now. My Beast is fucking salivating at the thought, and I allow myself three heartbeats to revel in the fantasy before locking my bloodlust down.

"Gavran wants an update on the Omega." The asshole doesn't even look at me when he answers, keeping his eyes pointedly fixed on Lenora.

At the entrance to our cell, he hesitates, like he's not sure if he should take that final step. His grey eyes wander to the stone bench—and my unconscious Omega—flashing with something I don't recognize.

Then his face smooths into a mask of forced confidence he probably thinks I can't see through and he takes a purposeful stride across the threshold and into the cell.

My Alpha bristles along with my Beast, both primal sides of me on edge with him so close to my injured Omega.

My Alpha's pissed—pointing out that this is her spot. Her Nest—*however shitty*—and this Alpha didn't even ask permission to come in.

That pushes me over the edge.

"*Out!"* I point over his shoulder, advancing on him with the full intention of throwing him across the room—just like I did last night.

I hate this male. I *hate* the way he looks at Idril like something to be controlled. Just another piece in his world for him to maneuver.

Daxen's eyes narrow incredulously. "Try it, and I'll have you removed quicker than you can shift."

I bark a disbelieving laugh. "Oh, I'd love to see you try."

Lenora appears between us, and I back up, returning to stand beside Idril as she turns to Daxen and says, “I’m actually glad you’re here.”

Daxen backs up as well until he’s leaning against the bars on the opposite side of the cell. At Lenora’s words, he folds his arms over his chest and lifts a skeptical brow.

“Is that so?”

Lenora’s expression changes, twisting with disgust. I can only see her profile, but I can still see the scathing glare she aims at Daxen.

“I’m going to give you a lesson I want you to pass on to the rest of your little friends,” she tells him, coolly.

“I didn’t come here for a lesson,” Daxen responds. “I came for—”

“Tough shit,” she snaps, cutting him off. I find myself smiling as this little Beta who smells like roses squares up to big, bad Daxen. “Just in case you were all genuinely unaware, Alpha Command works on Omegas because it is, at its core, a neurological override.”

“I know what a—”

“Obviously not,” she snaps with a defiant lift of her chin. “So allow me to enlighten you. Alphas are given the ability to Command for one reason. *To protect their Omegas*. Its primary function is to keep an Omega alive—*safe*.”

Daxen swallows thickly, gaze shifting over Lenora’s shoulder to land on my Omega. The Beta steps forward, demanding his attention as she continues.

“The problem, of course, is that an Omega’s body isn’t built to withstand repeated overrides. When Commands are stacked, the Omega’s nervous system goes into *shock*. Her biology—her very fucking *soul*—interprets the overload as an attack *from inside*.”

The Beta’s so close that if Daxen were two heads shorter, she’d be spitting in his face. Her lips peel back from her teeth, and she sneers.

“Alpha Command is not designed to be used as a fucking weapon.”

She holds his stare until he looks away, shifting awkwardly on his feet.

He’s clearly uncomfortable, but I doubt it’s because he’s feeling remorse. That emotion requires a fucking soul.

“Do you want to know what happens when you force a malnourished, exhausted, overworked, emotionally unstable Omega to answer impossible questions?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer, pointing at Idril behind her emphatically. “That’s what happens.”

My eyes fall to my Mate. My beautiful Mate, who's struggling for each breath and sweating like she’s trying to fight off an internal attack her instincts are convinced exists.

The sight fucking wrecks me.

And it makes me hate this asshole even more. Especially when he begins to fucking *protest*.

“I—I tried to stop it. You weren’t there. It was Silas—”

“It was *all of you!”*

I grunt in agreement, but I doubt they hear me. She’s right, though. What happened today was torture, plain and simple.

She shakes her head, like she can’t believe she has to explain this to someone, let alone an Alpha.

“You Alphas strut around as if the Fates themselves handed you everything on a fucking silver platter. Strength, power, stealth, enhanced physical capabilities. Well, I’ve got news for you. There’s a *reason* for that.”

“I—”

“To protect Omegas. To protect those physically weaker than you.” She points a shaking finger at Idril again and hisses. “Instead, you lot used it to interrogate an Omega until her nervous system CRASHED. I can’t believe I have to explain this to the same males who claim to dedicate their lives to saving Omegas. What you did today was so wildly fucked up, I can’t even look at you all the same anymore. You *disgust* me. *All of you*.

Well.

I wasn’t expecting this Beta to be my new favorite person when she walked in, but I can’t say I’m disappointed in this turn of events.

Lenora takes a measured step away from Daxen and exhales deeply. She swipes her palms down the front of her scrubs, pulling herself back together until that expressionless mask is back in place.

“The Omega’s blood pressure and heart rate are unstable. She has a low-grade fever, her adrenal system is in free fall, and her nervous system is fried. That’s what’s causing her limbs to tremor and spasm. Her body has shut down what it can to repair the neurological crash when her brain short-circuited.”

She turns on her heel, attention falling on me. “Keep her bundled up. I'll have one of the trainees bring more blankets down, because she needs them.”

She studies the cell with clear distaste and turns back to Daxen.

“She needs an actual Nest. Safety. Comfort. This is the opposite of that. If you keep her here, she will take longer to heal. There’s nothing I can do to speed that up. You sent her Omega instincts into a tailspin, and having her Mate will help with that more than anything.”

I exhale a relieved breath. Thank the Mother. At least I can do *something* to help her.

“Skin-to-skin contact would be best.” She eyes me clinically from head to toe. “It’s freezing down here, so if they make you stay, try to create your best proximity to a Nest with the materials I can find. And stay close to the Omega at all times. Either myself or one of my nurses will be here every hour or so until her heart rate and blood pressure stabilize.”

I nod. “Got it.”

She turns to Dax. “Let Gavran know I’ll be up to discuss the implications of this morning’s torture session shortly. Unfortunately, I don’t trust you to pass on my concerns.”

The Beta does another quick check on my Mate, jots down a few notes on her clipboard, and, flipping through the pages, disappears the way she arrived.

Once she’s gone, I grip the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head.

“Save the strip show ’til I’m gone, yeah?” Daxen mutters. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his slacks. He’d be the perfect picture of nonchalance, if I hadn’t seen the way his hands were shaking the split second before hiding them from sight. Or the way his hair is standing on end, like he’s been running his fingers through it anxiously.

I want to punch his fucking teeth out.

“If you have a problem with nudity, look away,” I suggest, pulling down the zipper of my jeans. “I don’t give a fuck about your sensibilities. If the Doc says skin to skin helps, then I’ll glue myself to her body, and you can go fuck yourself while I do it.”

I hesitate, thumbs tucked in the side of my jeans, letting my lips curl into a taunting smirk. “Unless, of course, you’re jealous. In which case, by all means, feel free to stay.”

He scoffs. I finish stripping, throwing my jeans, shirt, and socks into a pile in the corner furthest from the built-in toilet. The muscle ticking in his jaw makes me believe I might have hit the mark.

Not even an absolute shit for brains like Daxen can deny how fucking perfect my Omega is—like a creature born in another world. More importantly, she's kind. *Patient.* She cares about others—even at the expense of her own comfort.

For fucks sake, just last night she stepped into a terrifying situation to help rescue an Omega she'd never met. She refuses to leave her prison, where she's been abused for weeks, because this is where her injured Mate is.

And Fates, she's *strong*. Soft, but with strength forged in fire, just starting to burn.

Idril is pure light. Everything good in the world. She's everything I've hoped and prayed for and more.

If I were Daxen, I'd be jealous of me, too.

"I'm good," he scowls, but his eyes are still fixated on my Omega as I climb onto the stone bench, hesitantly maneuvering my six-foot-nine frame behind her.

Daxen kicks off the bars, moving from his spot for the first time and crossing the cell toward us. As he gets closer, his mask begins to drop—something I doubt he even realizes is happening. His attention is laser focused on my Mate, confusion appearing in his grey eyes.

"Just—Just be careful. We still don't know what she's capable of. The last male she got close to—" He swallows thickly, nodding to himself like he's said what he meant to say.

As he lifts a fist to his chest, grinding it into his sternum like he's in pain, understanding dawns.

This isn't jealousy… this is something *more*.

He looks lost. Unsure of where to go. Like a male who's been wandering for days with no sense of direction. His eyes are fixed on Idril, studying her like she's a puzzle he can't figure out.

Probably because he's missing most of the fucking pieces.

I shift, cutting her off from his line of sight. "Hey, asshole."

Dax jerks, like he's waking up from a dream. His eyes snap to mine.

"Leave." My voice drips with Alpha authority, but I'm done playing nice. This isn't a Fatesdamned zoo.

But because he’s Daxen, he ignores me, pulling his hands from his pockets and crossing his arms over his chest defensively. I get the feeling he’s trying to wrangle back some sense of control.

“I believe you’re under the impression that I enjoyed what happened this morning.”

“Didn’t you?” I ask, raising a brow in challenge

He lifts his chin. “My job is to keep my Pack safe. From all threats—both external and internal. No matter what, or who, they may be. Alphas, vampires, Severed, even an Omega who seems incapable of hurting a fly.”

“If you need to defend your actions, talk to your therapist. I’m not buying it.”

His expression turns furious. “You know what? Fuck this, I don’t owe you an explanation.” He turns on his heel and stalks out, slamming the cell door shut behind him. He snatches the key ring from the hook Lenora left them on, shoves it in the lock, and twists it with enough force to break the damn thing off.

He’s halfway to the stairs when he whirls around, leveling me with a glare. “You don’t have a Pack, but maybe if you did, you’d think differently. Maybe you’d understand if you found your brother—a male you’ve watched take a dagger to the chest without flinching—minutes away from death, and in so much pain he chewed through his bottom lip.”

Alright, he wants to play this angle? Fine. Let’s play.

“You’re a fool,” I say flatly. “And the fact that you truly believe Idril had anything to do with what happened to Caelan makes you a dangerous fool, which is worse.”

He opens his mouth, frowns, then snaps it shut. “You—Fates, you *believe* her,” he murmurs. “You truly believe she’s Caelan’s Fated Mate. Even though you *know* that she’s yours.”

I straighten to my full height. *Why is this so fucking hard for him to understand?* “Of course I believe her. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Why wouldn’t... why *wouldn’t* you?” he sputters, looking at me like I just told him the sky is made of water. “Didn’t you hear me last night? It’s *not possible!*”

“According to who?”

I’m not arguing with this idiot because I care what he says—*nothing he says will ever sway me*—but because I will always fight for my Mate. I’ll always support her. Defend her.

Also… I enjoy bringing this fucker down a few pegs.

One of the first things my father taught me as a pup was how to recognize when your opponent is off-balance—whether on the battlefield or in a boardroom. And like with all my father's lessons, I trained until I had perfected it. And then I trained some more.

Which is how I know, with absolute certainty, that Daxen Montclair is starting to spiral.

I see it in his eyes. The tightening at the corners of his mouth. I see it in the way his fingers curl and uncurl, and his gaze flits around the cell wildly, the intrusive thoughts creeping in and making it impossible to focus.

He's confused. Searching for something he'll never find. A lost little boy, pretending he knows his way home and refusing to admit—*even to himself*—that somewhere along the way, he took one too many wrong turns.

My Beast recognizes it as easily as I do. He salivates, canines dripping as he paces back and forth, poised to strike. I lean into that feeling and slide across the cell, erasing the distance between us.

"I asked you a question."

"What—what question?"

I soften my expression, throwing him a lifeline. "*Who* says Idril can't be Fated to both of us?"

"Who says—" He shakes his head, like he's trying to force his thoughts to rearrange. He takes a deep breath, trying to compose himself. "Tell me something, Soren. Have you ever met a human Fated to a Supernatural?"

The way he slips into lecture mode makes sense. This is probably where he feels most comfortable. *Confident.* The male who explains every scientific, historical, and psychological nuance to everyone else. I play along, allowing him to relax in his illusion of superiority.

"Of course. My Omega cousin is Mated to a human Alpha. They've been Bonded for half a century."

Daxen stands straighter, clasping his hands behind his back like a professor in a lecture hall. I force my lips not to twitch as he continues.

"Have you ever known a whole Pack of Supernaturals—vampires or wolven—who Mated with a human?"

I feign confusion, like I'm unsure what point he's trying to make.

"Well, no," I admit, then hurriedly add, "But that doesn't mean it hasn't happened."

He inclines his head, like he's magnanimously conceding my point.

This fucking idiot is so used to being the smartest male in the room, he's never even considered the possibility that a room exists where he's not.

"Fair enough," he replies in the most insufferable tone imaginable. "But what about a wolven Omega Mated to a human Alpha *and* a vampire Alpha?"

This guy is on my last nerve. *He does realize I was fucking there when he went through this the first time, right?* I really, really hope he never has children, and if he does, someone bans him from helping with homework. Otherwise, the poor kid will drop out by the first grade.

I start to respond, but he cuts me off. Apparently the question was rhetorical.

This male is *insufferable*.

"The answer is no, you haven't. There are no cases in the wolven archives, the vampire annals, or what passes for the humans' historical records. There's never even been a *rumor* of an Omega claiming two Fated Mates of different Species. Not in *thousands* of years of written and oral history. Again—it's impossible."

By the Mother, how does his Pack put up with him? He'd try the patience of a Saint!

"Improbability and impossibility are separate, distinct shades of plausibility."

Daxen hums. His eyes fill with pity. "You Scent-Matched to that Omega, and now you believe her every word without question. Why?"

"Watch it, Daxen," I warn.

"Believe it or not, I'm trying to help you."

I'm sure this has nothing to do with the way he's frantically grasping at the threads of his own logic. I don't know why or when, but something in this male shifted. Whether it was a single event or a thousand little moments doesn't matter to me. I'm not doing this for him; I'm doing it for Idril.

He's had fun playing his little patronizing game.

Now it's my turn.

"What if you're wrong?" I keep my tone calm and curious, not the slightest bit combative. It's clear that Daxen's world is built on empirical, objective, evidence-based thought and reasoning—selective as it may be. And he doesn't even realize how much of a disadvantage that is, going through life with all the confidence of a male who truly believes the rest of

the world adheres to the same rules—just because some asshole published a study in a textbook.

“What do you mean ‘what if I’m wrong?’”

I shrug. “Just humor me for a second.”

He laughs, but the sound is forced. Like he’s doing me a favor, he shrugs. “Alright, sure.”

At some point over the last few minutes, we’ve both crept closer, erasing the distance between us. Now we’re face to face, separated only by the cold iron bars of our prison.

I reach out and wrap my left hand around the metal bars between us, tattooed fingers curling around the iron. My grip tightens, my forearm muscles flexing with the movement.

“What if Caelan wakes up tomorrow? What happens if he wakes up, and you run to his bedside, sure you’re about to discover the truth once and for all, but what you discover… is that Idril’s been telling the truth this whole time?”

He blinks.

“Tell me what happens when you walk into Caelan’s hospital room and, rather than being overjoyed to see you, he’s frantic, demanding to know where Idril is. Demanding to know why she’s not with him.”

His face pales, draining of color.

“Tell me, Daxen. Tell me what you’re going to do when he looks in your eyes and tells you he wants you to find Idril and bring her to him—because she’s his Fated fucking Mate.”

Each point compounds the last, pushing him from wariness to fear to anger.

He clenches his jaw, grinding his teeth so hard a muscle ticks along his jawline like a heartbeat. “Then I guess I’m fucked.”

My Beast chuffs, enjoying this even more than I am. I wait, letting the silence stretch into awkwardness.

Like he just can’t help himself, he adds, “But that’s not going to happen.”

His grimace tells me he knows he just fell for a technique he’s probably deployed himself a thousand times before, which makes this all the more satisfying.

“You seem quite sure of that.”

“I am.”

I lift my right hand, wrapping my fingers around the bars in a mirror of my left, framing Daxen's face between them. I lean in until I'm close enough to see the pores on his face.

"How sure? Sure enough to stake your relationship with Caelan?" I whisper, squeezing the thick metal bars in my fists. "Sure enough to stake your *future* on it?"

His eyes flit back and forth, searching my own for something he's never going to find.

"Of—of course. Of course I am. What kind of question even is that?"

"Why are you so sure?"

I squeeze the iron bars harder, imagining it's Daxen's throat.

Come on… You're right there. Say it, you pretentious shit.

His breathing grows faster. His hands fly up to the bars, and he grips the cold iron with fists mere inches below my own.

"*Why?"*

"Because—I told you already!"

"Tell me again."

"Fates!" His fingers flex, tightening around the metal like he's hanging onto the edge of a cliff. "A human cannot Mate with two different Species," he shouts. "It's—It's fucking impossible. Humans can't Mate with both a vampire and wolven. It's irrefutable. Definitive. Proven time and time again by the Scientific community, the medical community, a dozen Fatesdamned Historians. Even the Pope agrees! Humans cannot be Fated to both!"

There it is. His line in the sand. The foundation he's built everything on—including his opinion of my Mate.

I don't speak. Don't move. Daxen's so worked up he's panting. He curls his fingers into a fist, and he lifts it to his chest, pressing it against his sternum.

One at a time, I release my grip from the bars, unwinding each finger until I let go completely. Daxen watches the movement with trepidation.

I hold his cold grey eyes and take a step back, away from the metal separating us.

His wary expression bleeds into genuine concern.

I take another step back, unhurried. *Controlled.* Drawing my own line in the proverbial sand.

Daxen's brow furrows.

Another step, and my smile widens in direct contrast to the way his frown deepens.

Another step

Another.

By the time I cross the cell and reach the stone bench where my Mate sleeps, Daxen's pupils are blown out, dread etched into every line of his face.

I turn to my Mate, letting my focus linger on the shallow rise and fall of her chest, sending a rush of gratitude to the Mother for each and every lungful of air.

Every breath she takes is proof. Proof that she's still alive. *Still mine.* Still fucking fighting, despite a lifetime spent being abused by males who should have protected her. Should have saved her from her tyrannical, psychotic father.

Should have kept her safe until their Packmate—their *brother*—was strong enough to take over.

Daxen hasn't moved. Hasn't dared to release his grip on the bars. His eyes are glassy. He looks like a wild animal, right before a trap snaps shut around it.

"Daxen."

At the sound of my voice, he rips his gaze away from my Omega and forces his attention on me.

"It's impossible for Idril to be Mated to Caelan because she's already mated to me."

He gives me a hesitant, jerky nod.

"And a human can't be Fated to a vampire *and* a wolven."

Another nod.

"You forgot just… one small thing."

His dread turns to confusion. When his mouth opens, I speak over him, springing the trap.

"*Idril. Isn't. Human.*"

Silence.

A beat passes. *Two.* I watch as his brain struggles to catch up as his reality shifts beneath him. I clock the exact moment he *sees* her as something possible, more than the image he concocted—

Horror—*complete, abject fucking horror*—slams into him.

His fingers go lax, and his hands fall from the bars to hang limply at his sides. His chest heaves. His hand flies to his sternum. Pain twists his features, and he spins, sprinting for the landing and thundering up the stairs.

Seconds later, the door slams so hard that dust falls from the newly damaged ceiling.

My Beast howls. He doesn't even care that we didn't get to shed blood, more than satisfied by Daxen's defeat. Hopefully, it shook him up enough to start making him question shit seriously, widening the newly formed cracks in his self-righteous beliefs.

Exhaustion hits me like a truck, making my shoulders drop. All I want is to curl up with my Mate. Hold her in my arms. But the sound of that fucking door at the top of the stairs swinging open puts an end to that fantasy before I make it even halfway to my Mate.

Vaelenor rounds the corner, arms outstretched, a pile of blankets stacked so high I don't know how he can see around them.

At the entrance to the cell, he juggles the blankets and his ring of keys, fumbling and nearly dropping both in between multiple attempts to fit the right key into the lock—and missing the hole.

Repeatedly.

Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I lean back against the wall and watch in amusement as he struggles. After the fourth miss, he snarls and stomps his foot like an angry toddler.

"Little help over here?"

"Sorry, can't understand you. Your voice is too muffled by the blankets," I lie, grinning.

The Alpha mutters a string of curses. Finally, after another four unsuccessful tries, he manages to get the key in the lock. With a sigh of relief, he twists it, pushes open the door, and then—

Stands there.

I lean around the pile of material and shoot him a frown. He's just standing there, rocking back and forth on his heels like an awkward turtle.

"Are you going to come in or what?"

"It's—I mean—this is kind of Idril's space right now, and she's an Omega and aren't you supposed to ask before—"

"Oh for fucks sake," I murmur, even though part of me appreciates that he at least cared enough to ask. "Get in here."

He enters the cell and leans down, placing the stack beside our *"bed."* When he straightens, his shoulders are hunched, and he still isn't looking me in the eye.

And for some reason, that makes me irrationally furious.

"Don't look at your feet, look at me," I snap. "Better yet—look at her. Fates, I never knew a Bloodbound—a fucking *commander* no less—could be such a coward."

His head snaps up, eyes wide with shock.

"Ex-fucking-*scuse* you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I misunderstand when you brought my Mate back to me this morning? Were you not one of the males who did this to her?" I throw out a hand, gesturing toward my Omega.

"I—I—"

"I—I—" I mock. "By the Mother, both of you can't get through an uncomfortable situation without stumbling over your words. How old are you, twelve? Gavran actually sends you, Dax, and Silas on missions? What the fuck have we been worried about all this time if this is the best your organization's got?"

Silence.

"Fucking look at her!"

To my absolute shock, he does. His gaze snaps to Idril, and unlike Daxen, he doesn't try to hide his reaction. His fingers twitch, and his face pales. He visibly flinches.

"There you go. Take a good long look at what you did to her." I eat up the distance between us in two strides, but he doesn't stumble away as I expect. "You know, at least Daxen has the balls to own his actions. But you… It's like you're under the impression you can hide from what you've done. Which makes you not only a joke of an Alpha, but a coward as well."

Vaelenor is even easier to analyze than Daxen was. He needs reinforcement. *Attention. Validation.* The male's constantly yapping, cracking jokes, convinced that if he keeps those he loves happy, they'll keep him around.

He needs to be needed, because people who are needed won't get tossed aside.

"I came to ask how she is," he says, cheeks turning bright red.

"Your Packmate should've already passed along that information."

He shuffles nervously, shoving his hands in his pockets, then sliding them out and crossing his arms over his chest. “Look, I heard what Dax said. But Daxen… his explanation was so—so—*clinical*. You’re her Mate. You’re who *really* knows how she’s doing. So I’m asking you to please, tell me how she really is.”

His sincerity throws me off-kilter. He looked wrecked earlier, but I thought it might have been fear rather than genuine remorse. But now…

By the longing looks he keeps darting at Idril, I have a feeling that his emotions—while tangled in guilt—may be genuine. And if he cares about her—even the smallest bit—there’s a chance he can be reasoned with.

Something to consider later.

For now, I decide to answer him honestly. I run through the list of her injuries, taking satisfaction in the way he wilts with every word. I don’t sugarcoat anything. If she has to face this reality, then so does he.

I fully expect him to run away like before. He doesn’t. Emerald green eyes meet mine, and he shocks me further by asking, “What can I do for her?”

“Nothing. She needs a Nest and her Mate. So unless you can sneak us both into Caelan’s hospital room…”

I lift my brows, and after a moment he takes my meaning and nods.

“For what it’s worth,” he murmurs, “I’m sorry. I tried to make my question as easy as possible because truthfully… I didn’t want to do it.”

I scoff. “That's all well and good, now that the damage is done. But it doesn’t absolve you of anything.”

“No, I know that—”

“Do you?” I snap, cutting him off. “Because I’ve got to be honest. It doesn’t seem like you know much of anything. You sure as hell don’t seem to know where you left your morals, because instead of pushing back when you knew something was wrong, you participated in the destruction of an innocent Omega. Now Idril’s the one who has to pay for *your* cowardice.”

I hang my head, exhausted by having to explain basic fucking decency to someone five times older than I am.

“Regretting it doesn’t matter. Acknowledging that you didn’t want to participate *doesn’t matter*. Fates, I can *almost* understand Daxen’s thought process—if I squint *really, really* hard—but you? You *knew* it was fucked up, and not only did you stay silent, but you *participated*.”

I finally force myself to look at Vae and almost flinch when I see the way his hand—curled into a fist—is grinding into his sternum.

Just like Daxen.

The similarity in their expressions is enough to give me pause. Either this is some kind of Pack Bond situation, both males have terrible heartburn, or something else is going on…

Then I realize… I don't fucking care. I don't have the mental energy to engage with him anymore. I turn my back on him, dismissing him to finally —*fucking finally*—pull back the blanket and climb onto the stone bench behind Idril.

The second I'm close to her, my body relaxes. My muscles unwind, and my lungs expand for the first time in hours. I can't scent her, and this is the least ideal situation ever, but Fates… she's here.

And she's *mine*.

I'm only passively aware of Vae's presence. I can see him still standing there from the corner of my eye, fist resting against his sternum and devastation in every line of his face. I don't bother telling him to leave; it's clear he's dealing with some internal crisis, and with Idril next to me, I genuinely don't care about anyone or anything else.

Being careful not to jostle her too much, I peel her T-shirt over her head, but leave on her tank top. I exhale and finally—*finally*—wrap my arm around her delicate frame, pulling her close and tucking the blanket around us both.

My chest touches the skin of her back.

And the world tears apart.

My body bows and my back arches.

My Beast *howls*.

The sound is primal. A feral claim that, despite having attended hundreds of mating ceremonies, I've never heard before in my life.

Something in my chest pulls and pulls and pulls, before erupting into twin streams of blazing silver. They start to spin, twisting together into an intricate braid until—with a flare of blinding light—they *SNAP* together, forming a Fated Bond the likes of which I've never seen.

Glittering silver bursts through my vision. It wraps around my soul and into my heart, shooting through my veins. It overtakes me completely, filling my mouth, nose, and ears—until every one of my senses has been replaced by silver so beautiful it can't possibly be real.

I can feel it, surging through my blood, burrowing into the very marrow of my bones, until there is nothing left. Nothing but her and me and this Bond between us.

It's inside and outside, and all around me. Curiously, I reach out, overwhelmed with the desire to feel the silver thread against my skin.

The Bond sparks and shimmers the closer I get to it, and the moment my skin makes contact—

My consciousness shifts, throwing me out of my body and into the awareness of something ancient. Something I get the distinct feeling I'm not actually meant to be.

I am me… but I am also a being of stardust and galaxies and glimmering silver. I soar across space and time, *searching… searching… always searching…*

For her.

She is all there is. All there will *ever* be.

So I search—for decades, centuries, millennia without stopping. I watch empires fall and rise. I watch as, in what feels like the blink of an eye, a massive landmass splits, breaking apart to form what will eventually become the seven continents the world will come to know.

Oceans rise—oceans fall. Trees are cut down; homes and businesses and castles are built. Food is harvested. Weapons are made. A million, billion people fall in love and live and die with each breath I take.

And still, I search.

I am a being of stardust—one of only a lucky handful who have been chosen by Fate. The world has never seen a Bond like ours, nor will they again. There was once a similar Bond, but it—just as those lucky enough to experience it—no longer exists. They've been gone for so, so long—a day, an hour, a minute. Time is meaningless outside of the millennia I spend in a search that feels like it may never end.

And then it does.

I am a being of stardust. My name… my name is Soren. I am stardust, and I am wolven. And for the barest instant, the two parts of me collide, and I brush against the knowledge of why my kind exist. For a single breath, I know all that's been lost to time. Our history, the birth of our Species, and exactly how close we are to the vampires we try to pretend don't exist.

I know everything. I see it all. And I am overwhelmed with gratitude and despair, knowing our very existence nearly came at the expense of all

else. I hear the screams of the world tearing apart until the Mother herself—her very soul and being—lashes out, and—

Nothing. Nothing but overwhelming loss tempered by gratitude and sorrow for what is and nearly was and may once again come to pass.

I am stardust, and I am wolven, and my soul has searched since the beginning of time. Every moment. Every breath. Every sunrise and sunset and every second between has led to this moment.

To her.

MINE.

I'm no longer stardust.

I am wolven, and I am falling, falling, falling through the stars, yanked back to earth. I slam into my body with a gasp, eyes snapping open and my Scent-Match Bond pulsing and thrumming.

It sparks with joy, no longer alone. Alongside it exists something new. Something deeper, *stronger.* Ancient and powerful and so incredibly, impossibly fucking *alive*. It reaches out, wrapping around Idril and me both, tethering our souls together and rearranging my DNA.

Remaking me into something new.

Hers.

My fingers flex, biting into Idril's skin. My claws unsheath. My canines extend—both lengthening and sharpening faster than ever before. My vision sharpens, the world snapping into focus, so clear I can count each strand of hair on Idril's head. I can pick out every shade of silver and white while still retaining enough attention to spare for the conversation between Daxen and Gavran happening in his study three floors above.

What the hell is happening to me?

This Bond… it makes our Scent-Match Bond feel flimsy in comparison. Even now, every part of me feels lit up. Fire races down my spine, flooding through my limbs before circling back again.

Vaelenor moves—taking a single step in our direction—but I move faster. Faster than I ever have before, crouching over my Omega and shielding her with my body. I'm not sure who's physically in control—me, my Beast, or something else entirely—something attached to the Bond that's waking for the first time in millennia.

Vae takes another step. *Closer.*

Big fucking mistake.

“*Mine!*” I roar, but my voice doesn’t sound like my own. It doesn’t sound like my Beast, either. More like I’m speaking through the Bond itself, imbuing my words with power.

This new Bond is alive and screaming, primed to attack. Even when the Alpha backs away, hands raised in front of him, I don’t move from where I’m crouched, hovering protectively over my Omega as a growl vibrates deep in my chest.

When his eyes fall to Idril, my vision turns white.

“GET OUT!” My voice thunders through the air. My hands are clenched around the edges of the bench, and when I tighten my grip, my claws dig into the concrete like hot knives into butter. The stone splinters apart, long sections breaking off and crumbling in my hands.

I don’t linger on the realization that I’m suddenly strong enough to crush concrete into dust. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is getting that male the hell away from my Mate.

The male who’s kept her prisoner. Who’s *hurt her*.

With narrowed eyes, I watch him slide a cell from his pocket. He swipes at the screen and presses the device to his ear. My growl intensifies as he backs away, step by wary step until he’s crossed the threshold of the cell and into the hall.

My instincts bathe in satisfaction at the violent way his hands tremble while locking the door, terrified green eyes bouncing between me and the lock.

Only once I hear the door slamming shut at the top of the stairs do I register the soft touch of fingers against my cheek. My attention narrows, blurring around the edges before snapping into focus. The touch feels like a spark against my skin, and the growl rumbling through my chest changes, morphing into a purr.

When I look down, the most beautiful blue eyes are looking back at me.

“Idril,” I breathe. “My Mate.”

She’s so small beneath me, but Fates, she’s so *large* at the same time. So full of life. I can feel it now, overflowing with something ancient and powerful that I can’t quite wrap my mind around. Even her skin seems to be glowing. Cheeks bright with vitality. Seeing that makes my purr strengthen, and she sighs in contentment.

I lift my hand and gently reach down and smooth a strand of silken white hair back from her face.

I cup her cheek in my palm and lean down until my forehead rests against hers. I can’t find the words to explain what I’m feeling. Can’t find anything even remotely adequate to express the love in my soul and the intensity of my devotion to her. There’s so much to say—so many questions to ask—and part of me wants to beg her to tell me I’m not the only one feeling this throbbing, untamed, uncontrollable new Bond.

But I don’t have to say a word. Like she already knows, she raises a shaking hand and presses it against my bare chest—directly on top of where our Bond pulses the strongest.

Her full lips tilt up at the corners, and she peers up at me through long lashes. Then, like she already knows my soul better than I know it myself, she whispers, “Yes. Yours, Soren. Always yours.”

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Chapter 10

Vaelenor

It's been two days. Two days since the fucked up trial by Alpha Command. Two days since Soren went feral out of godsdamned nowhere and I had to run like a scared little bitch before the wolven tore out my throat.

Two days I've spent suffocating in self-hatred and guilt. Two days spent going on extra patrol just to kill something, some fucked up part of me hoping that doing some good might even out the cosmic scales.

Which is ridiculous. Like some dead Severed could make up for Alpha Commanding an Omega into a seizure.

Lenora laid into Daxen, but that didn't stop her from laying into me as well when I went to visit Caelan last night. Didn't stop her from reminding me that I'm a piece of shit for using my biology to overpower someone I was *made* to protect. Didn't stop her from threatening to cut off my balls if it ever happens again.

Somehow, I doubt Daxen was issued the same threat.

I deserve it, though. I know I do. I can't sleep. Can't eat. It feels like there's something under my skin, burrowing into my muscles and making me itch.

I got bitched at three times during breakfast this morning for *"squirming"* before I finally got sick of hearing it and escaped to spar in the compound training room.

Fuck. I *have* to stop doing that. I didn't escape this morning. I ran away. Exactly like the coward Soren said I am.

I was hoping to fight off some of the twitchiness, but of course that didn't work. A shower didn't work. Patrols, surveillance, and killing Deadwalkers haven't worked.

My Alpha instincts are spiraling—have been since the day I laid eyes on the Omega—but the other day… something cracked. *Splintered apart.*

I was standing there, watching as Idril fell to the floor, curled her hands into fists, opened her mouth, and released the most gut-wrenching, heart-shattering, soul-crushing scream I've *ever* heard.

That's when it happened.

That's when my instincts shattered.

I swear I felt the world tilt on its axis before spinning out of control as Idril screamed in agony and pain, and I just… stood there. Stood there trying not to get sick as her raw, wordless screams turned into screams for Caelan. For her mother.

And I just… stood there. Stood there like a worthless piece of shit while the *Omega* rushed over to Idril, turning her on her side so she didn't choke if she seized.

Which is exactly what happened.

Right there, on the floor of the room where we eat breakfast of bacon and eggs and fucking apple tarts. Her body jerked and shook and—

And I just stood there and *watched*.

Worthless.

The commentary from my Alpha makes me wince. Yet another thing that's changed. He no longer harps on about the pretty Omega he wants to purr for. Now he literally *refuses* to address me outside of spitting insults in as few words as possible whenever I'm at my lowest.

Not sure if he just doesn't want to waste energy on me using full sentences, or if he thinks I'm so fucking stupid he needs to dumb everything down so I don't get confused by words with more than one syllable.

Either way, it's the only time my instincts even acknowledge me anymore.

Ass-taco.

"Okay, that's not even a real thing," I snap, and my Alpha shrugs like he literally could not give a single shit.

Somewhere behind me, something made of heavy metal falls, clattering against the stone walkway between the compound and HQ and making me wince.

Fates! Why does everything remind me of that cursed fucking morning? My nervous system is shot—every loud or unexpected noise has me bracing

for the ground to start heaving and the castle to start shaking again.

That part still feels like a dream. The entire compound down to its foundations just… *lost it.* Like the building and the ground it sits on were waking up in answer to her call.

I've experienced earthquakes before. What happened then wasn't an earthquake—it was fucking chaos. Dishes that were nowhere near the edge of the table flew into the air and shattered against the floor. Dozens of priceless original artworks jumped from their moorings, antique frames splintering against hardwood and stone and ripping through the canvases. The wood around the windows cracked, glass shattering across three floors.

The sound was eerily similar to bones snapping in half.

Anything that wasn't bolted to the ground—*which, let's be fucking honest, was nearly everything*—was affected by the mayhem. Furniture, electronics, booze, curtains, books—it all fell victim as the earth responded to her agony.

And what did I do while my home fell apart, centuries-old badass warrior I am?

Oh, that's right! Nothing.

Cocktopus.

"Fuck. Off," I hiss.

"Uh… what?"

My head snaps up, and I realize at some point I walked right into a group of trainees in the middle of sparring outside the compound. Not *near* the group. Not dangerously *close* to them.

Right through the fucking middle of two dozen males training in hand-to-hand combat. They're all looking at me with expressions varying between confusion and fear, and not a single one bothered to stop me from wandering into their practice. They just stopped what they were doing and waited for my deranged ass to mozy on by without a so much as a *"hey, what the fuck?"*

"Were you asshole's just gonna stand there with your thumbs up your ass?" I shout, sweeping my glare around the group. "You're all too scared to speak up when someone interrupts your training? What… were you just gonna watch as I disappeared into the forest? Maybe grab some popcorn and follow me all the way off the nearest Fatesdamned cliff with nary a damn warning?!"

I’m shouting. I know I am. I think I might actually be losing it for real right now, but I can’t seem to stop.

“Well!?”

A couple of males shuffle awkwardly. A throat clears somewhere behind me. Multiple sets of eyes dart this way and that but refuse to meet my eye.

My Alpha barks out a laugh.

Blind, stupid Assbat.

“You’re *literally* just making up words!”

At my furious roar, the five males closest to me exchange confused looks, like they’ve never argued with *their* instincts before.

I scowl, curl my hands into fists, and order, “Get back to training!”

I turn on my heel and stride purposely back toward HQ, but not before —in an attempt to save face—I shout over my shoulder, “That was a test, by the way! And you all failed! How can anyone trust you to have their backs if you’ll let a Commander walk right into a live combat zone?!”

The chorus of groans and curses that follow behind me do little to ease my irritation. No matter what I do, no matter what lies I tell myself, *nothing* changes how I’ve felt since that stupid interrogation.

Unmoored. Adrift. Like a boat with no fucking anchor in the middle of a stormy sea. The one time—*the only time*— I’ve felt slightly tethered to reality was when I brought blankets to the Omega. Only then did everything inside of me settle. It took less than a second to realize that caring for Idril is the only way to fill these cracks inside of me.

But knowing how to get rid of this itching, restless feeling doesn’t help when I can’t return to those cells. Partly because Daxen *“decided”* to give her time to recover. But, in the interest of keeping my vow to stop lying to myself, the real reason is that Soren… well…

He’s fucking terrifying, alright?

Coward.

“Original,” I mutter, but part of me is just happy my Alpha is talking to me at all after days of the silent treatment.

At the front entrance, I press my thumb to the biometric lock and shove the door open.

And almost trip over the hunched form of a female kneeling in the foyer.

I blink. Blink again.

Why the hell is Idril on the floor, brush in hand, scrubbing the Fatesdamned tile? She didn't even seem to notice that I almost stepped on her!

And because my brain decides now is a great time to misfire, I just stand here, frozen in place like the world's sweatiest statue.

After a solid half minute, Idril finally senses my presence. She stills, and her shoulders hitch up to her ears like she's instinctively bracing for a blow.

My stomach turns and my gut clenches, and I realize, with startling clarity, that I *can't fucking stand* the sight of her fear. I don't know when it happened, but all my prior confusion is gone. At this moment, I would do anything to erase the dread I can feel coming off of her.

She finally lifts her head and those wide blue eyes that make her look like a fairytale princess land on me.

Shockingly, her shoulders fall, and she relaxes once she registers who's looming over her. The grin that blooms on my face is probably unhinged.

So much for not scaring her, my Alpha laments, and I inwardly cringe, forcing my expression into something more neutral.

I can't rip my eyes away from her. She looks healthier, and seeing that has my whole body relaxing for the first time in days.

The circles under her eyes are nearly gone. Her complexion is no longer grey and sickly. In fact, it almost looks like it's… *glowing*. Her hair's pulled back in a loose, intricate braid, dozens of smaller braids peeking through. Soft tendrils frame her face, and her full, pink lips are no longer chapped and red like the last time I saw her.

She's beautiful.

And it's incredibly freeing, no longer denying how I feel.

The silence must be getting awkward because Idril tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and starts to gather her supplies, murmuring, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize how close to the door I was."

She shifts everything to the side, leaving me room to walk around. Except… I don't. I can't. I know I should walk away—*if only so I can find Gav and throw down because why the actual fuck are we still making her do this stupid shit?*—but I just… *can't.*

Like I'm having some kind of out-of-body experience, I watch as my mouth parts and my lips move, forming words that escape without my permission.

“You need socks.”

What. the. fuck.

That’s what I’m leading with? You need SOCKS? What the hell do I think I am, a fucking sock vigilante?

Just… Someone please fucking stake me.

And because this interaction isn’t already shocking enough, Idril actually laughs. It’s soft and gentle and sounds like a song, and I swear to the Fates something is solidifying inside of me and I don’t think I’m strong enough to fight it anymore.

Apparently my brain-to-mouth filter is broken because instead of letting the subject die, I… keep talking.

“I, I thought—I mean—I swear I got you some shoes.”

Yes, Vae, because shoes are a far superior alternative to socks.

My neck heats with embarrassment. I’m just waiting for Idril to start laughing at my repeated fuck-ups, when she gasps, eyes brightening and expression lifting with genuine joy.

“The white Converse… those were a gift? From you?”

I clear my throat, nodding sheepishly as the heat in my neck starts creeping into my cheeks. When her smile widens into a genuine grin, and her eyes fill with gratitude, my lungs squeeze so tight I struggle to breathe.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and there’s so much genuine gratitude in her tone, I honestly want the floor to open up and swallow me whole. I literally helped Alpha Command this female into a Fatesdamned seizure, but here she is, two days later, thanking me for a fucking fifty dollar pair of shoes.

Unironically.

What the hell do I do now?

My Alpha speaks up, because apparently this asshole just has all the answers.

More shoes, shithead. More pretty things. More gifts mean more smiles. Idiot.

Idril’s looking at me expectantly, and I barely get my shit together enough to respond.

“You’re ah—you’re welcome.”

I should leave. *Why aren’t I leaving?*

“So you’re feeling better then? There’s no, ah… lasting effects? Is your heart okay? Can you breathe alright? No more fever?”

She sits back on her heels and looks up at me, head cocked like she's searching for something. Her perusal feels intimate, but I try to be patient as she collects her thoughts.

When she answers, she does so slowly, choosing each word carefully.

"I'm much better. Having Soren helps a lot. So did the blankets. He said you brought them, so again, thank you."

She gives me a small smile, but it's not like the last one. This one is restrained and doesn't even reach her eyes. Something in my chest burns like it's fucking screaming, and right now, I would do anything—*fucking anything*—to have that smile from before back and aimed at me.

I want to rewind time. Go back to when a single delighted expression made me feel like a god. *How in the Fates can one Omega affect me so thoroughly?*

More smiles, my Alpha grumbles, and for once we're on the same page sans insults. I can't even argue because I get it. I want every single one of her smiles. I want to own them. Hoard them like treasure.

I want—

I want—

I want… her.

It's like a door's been thrown open and I'm seeing the sun for the first time in centuries. I'm struck with a realization that hits me so hard I physically stumble back a step.

I don't *want* to hate Idril anymore.

I don't want to hurt her. I don't want to go back to convincing myself over and over that she's lying.

I don't want her broken or afraid. I don't want to see her tears, or hear her screams *ever* fucking again.

I want to see her smile. I want to hear her beautiful, tinkling laugh. And I want her to do it often and freely, with her whole chest. I want to see the kind of woman she'll become when she's not constantly broken down, on edge, and afraid.

I want her to be confident. *Strong. Healthy and happy.*

And I want to be there for all of it.

Fates help me, but I do. The desire is a living, breathing ache expanding and burrowing into my soul and refusing to leave. Or maybe it's always been there, and I'm finally acknowledging it for the first time. And by the gods… It feels *amazing*.

Every other want and need falls away until only Idril remains. Her smile. Her laugh. Her joy. It shoots up to the top of the list at lightning speed, cementing permanently as my top and only priority. I'd sell my damn soul to take her pain away, and the feeling is so unexpected and overwhelming it nearly brings me to my knees.

"Are you alright?" Idril's soft voice might be the only thing that can actually pull me back to reality. I shake my head, trying to get back on solid footing. But my hands—no, my entire *body*—is shaking.

I curl my hands into fists, but I feel like I'm high in this new reality I've stepped into. I've never, in my whole life, been so sure of something. I'm done fighting my instincts. Fighting Daxen, fighting myself.

The only thing left that's worth fighting for is the female in front of me.

When Idril clears her throat, her frown deepens, but before I can ask her what's wrong and find a way to fix it, she asks, "Was there something you needed from me?"

I rock back on my heels, biting my tongue before I blurt out the first thing in my head, which is, *'Yes. I need you. I need you to discover that whatever abilities you have include time travel. Then I can go back to the night we met and do everything differently. I want to get on my knees and beg for your forgiveness, then promise you the world just to see your lips curve into that gentle smile that sends shivers down my spine.'*

Instead, what comes out is, "Nope, just wasn't expecting to see you back at it so soon, that's all. The way Lenora made it sound, you were gonna be out for a while."

Her face falls. I play back the words in my head, and I swear to the Fates I don't understand why the moment I fully commit to owning my feelings, *I somehow say exactly the wrong fucking thing!*

Mumpsimus.

That's not a real word!

Actually, it is. You're just dumb. Look it up.

You are literally me!

Idril's expression pinches in pain. "Uhm yeah… I was out of it for a while," she murmurs, voice reed thin and strained.

Fuck!

"No!" I shout, wincing when the word echoes throughout the foyer. *Fates, Fates, Fates, I have to fix this!*

"That's—that's not what I meant."

But she's already shaking her head.

"It's okay, I get it," she replies, bending over to resume cleaning, but not fast enough to hide the tears in her eyes.

"Idril, I—" My protest comes out half-strangled, and I choke up. I have no idea what to do here. *Apologize? Explain myself?*

Would she even believe me if I did either?

"I'll only be maybe ten more minutes. Then I'll be out of your hair."

I groan, throw back my head, and glare at the ceiling. I need to fix this. Maybe I should tell her I'm happy she's feeling better. Or… maybe I should ask where her Mate is. Find out if I'm about to have my intestines ripped out through my spine, or if there's still enough time for me to run like the coward I am.

Maybe I should ask her if we can talk privately, explain everything I've been feeling for the last two weeks, and apologize for how stupid I've been. Maybe she'll understand if I explain that I know my change of heart seems sudden, but I've actually been fighting my feelings since the moment I laid eyes on her.

Or maybe I should just lay it all out there. Tell her my deepest, darkest secret. The source of all my shame. The fear that haunts me every fucking hour of every day.

That I agonize over losing myself to my Bone Curse, as I did in that warehouse?

Will she understand that I've spent so long deferring to Caelan and Dax because I'm paralyzed by the fear that any choice I make will lead to my Curse taking over?

Causing the deaths of the only family who've ever loved me?

In the end, none of that matters because I don't get the chance to say anything at all. The sound of the clock chiming one in the afternoon echoes through the foyer, and with a sigh, Idril pushes to her feet. Her eyes meet mine, and I can fucking see the disappointment in them.

And I know I've let her down once again.

"Excuse me, I have to go," she mutters. And then she's gone, scurrying through the foyer and disappearing down the dimly lit hall, leaving me standing alone in the wake of our interaction with no idea of how drastically my life just changed.

I wish I could tell her without sounding like an absolute psycho.

The logistics of my decision are fucked to hell, but so is everything else, so that's nothing new. Dax is going to be pissed, but that seems to matter far less than my new desire to fix things with Idril. I can't explain it, but despite my shitty start, I finally feel like I'm back on solid ground for the first time in weeks.

And as for Caelan…

Why demand to stay if it's all just a lie?

I—

Shit.

Why haven't I considered that before now? Why the hell would she insist on staying here until Caelan wakes up?

Because you're a twatwaffle?

"Ha, fucking, ha."

At least you're not a Twunt.

"A what now?"

A Twunt. Twat and Cunt.

I bark out a laugh, bending over to grab the cleaning supplies and moving them out of the way. Then I decide—*fuck this.* I'm getting rid of them. This punishment shit has gone on long enough. If I'm going to commit to my feelings, then I'm going to do everything possible to make up for my mistakes. Starting with that stupid fucking breakfast where I told her she was going to spend her days doing soul-sucking manual labor as punishment for her deception.

Sighing, I make my way toward the grand staircase, determined to go straight to Gav and demand an entire fucking list of shit for the Omega.

"So… if I'm not a Twunt, who is?" I ask my Alpha, genuinely curious.

Cage, obviously.

I stop right in the middle of the stairs. Hearing Cage's name has the tiny hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

The other day, Dax mentioned talking to Cage about the way he was mistreating Idril. I'd planned on talking with him myself because honestly, I fucking straight up hate that kid, but I never got around to it.

Cage is the kind of asshole who thinks that because his daddy's some rich business mogul, it means he gets to skirt his way through life without doing any work. He wants to be a full, initiated Bastard, and hates that we're making him go through the same process as everyone else.

He’s the kind of incompetent, whiny asshole who expects shit to be handed to him because of his lineage. He’s never actually shown any initiative or expressed any excitement about becoming a full Bastard.

So… why is he still here?

A terrible feeling starts to creep into my gut because it’s finally beginning to dawn on me that if Idril’s back to doing chores, and neither Dax nor I told her to start them…

Idril’s shaking hands and fear-filled eyes when the clock chimed, right before she ran out of the foyer, pop into my head.

FUCK.

I toss the cleaning supplies aside and vault over the banister, taking off across the foyer and down the hall where Idril disappeared.

I don’t stop running until I’m halfway down the hall. Then I slow down, being extra careful not to make any sounds and give myself away. If Cage is up to something, I need to catch him in the act.

No one in the world is as stealthy as Caelan, but I’ve been paying attention to his technique for centuries. It’s that technique that allows me to slip through the hall like a ghost, checking every room as I go for signs of Cage and Idril.

I don’t have to search for long. Hushed, tense voices from the game room quickly give away their location.

“I told you to have my lunch ready at one!”

I pick up my pace, hurrying down the hall. My Alpha growls, and the sound rumbles to life in my chest as the memory of that morning has shame tightening my lungs.

I was so fucking awful to her. She was so afraid, and I just *kept* hammering at her.

“You are meant to *serve*, Omega!”

“Let go of me!”

The sound of fear in Idril’s voice snaps something inside of me. I tap into my enhanced speed, hating myself for forgetting to top up on blood the last few days.

NO!

“After everything I’ve done for your father and mine, I think I deserve to decide how your part in this story ends.” Cage’s voice is manic. Fucking psychotic.

“You don’t get a say in any part of my story,” Idril snaps back, voice shaking with fear. And even though I’m fucking fizzy with fear of my own, I’ve never been more fucking proud of someone in my life.

I’m less than ten feet away, now. So, so fucking close. And then I’m there, sliding to a stop at the door to the game room. The room is dim, television on but paused mid-game. The bright light cast harsh shadows across Idril’s terrified face as she stares up at Cage, looming over her.

Cage, who has his hands wrapped around the upper arms of my—*the*—Omega, having walked her all the way across the room, less than two feet away from the fireplace.

A fireplace that’s roaring with flames, snapping and crackling like they’re alive. They sway forward, reaching for the Omega like they’re grounding her.

Supporting her.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Cage’s voice softens. His grip on Idril’s arms tightens.

Time slows… my whole world coming to a stuttering halt. With his back to me, I can’t see his face. But I can hear the smug satisfaction in his voice as he leans in closer and whispers, “No one cares about the opinion of a dead girl.”

Idril’s eyes widen as, with all the strength of his Species and Designation, Cage shoves her.

Directly into the fire.

The flames roar, flaring higher. A door slams open somewhere down the hall a breath before cool spring air hits my senses. Wind screams down the empty hall, shooting past me and into the lounge, shoving me forward.

I don’t stop to think. Eyes locked on the only fucking thing that matters, I use the momentum from the wind to my advantage and lunge forward.

Sprinting straight for Idril.

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Chapter 11

Idril

I know pain. I've lived with it for years. Even now, my joints scream as I fall backward, into the flames. My hands scrape along the brick, tearing at my fragile skin.

I prepare for the acrid smell of burnt flesh and hair. *Will I smell my flesh burning or will I feel it first?*

My limbs tense, coiling tight. My fingers scramble at the brick at my sides. I feel the heat of the flames licking at my clothes, right as something steadies me—like a hand pressed against my lower back. The sensation lasts only a second, but it's enough time for me to wrap my fingers around the edges of the fireplace and shove myself back.

I spin, stumbling and nearly losing my tenuous grip and falling back into the fire. My hand flies out, reaching instinctively for the nearest solid surface.

The back wall of the fireplace.

My mouth parts, but no sound passes my lips.

Inside… I'm *screaming*.

I flinch, but I'm not sure if it's a reaction to my hand passing directly through the fire, or in reaction to the meaty *thuds* of flesh meeting flesh behind me.

The hearth is small, even for me. I can easily reach the back brick without falling into the flames, and I do. My left hand smacks against hot stone while the fingers of my right hand grip the hearth's edge for dear life. The hem of my shirt is so long it hangs into the flames, and even though my entire arm is engulfed in fire, my brain latches onto how quickly the cotton catches. I will never understand the absurd thoughts going through my mind

at this moment, but it’s not the heat or pain that makes me finally yank back my arm and cradle the limb to my chest.

It’s the reminder that I only have two shirts. And if I ruin this one, I probably won’t get another.

Maybe it’s shock. Maybe it’s a delayed reaction to trauma. Maybe it’s a thousand and one other things or none of them at all, but for whatever reason, that’s what finally jolts me into action.

I know I should be feeling pain but… I don’t. The moment my arm is out of the fire and cradled protectively against my chest, I start to shake. I don’t want to look. Don’t want to see the burnt flesh or the blisters or the skin that could very well be sloughing off bone, like the skull on the floor of the dining room.

All I can manage is to squeeze my eyes shut and tell myself that if I refuse to acknowledge it, it’s not real. Any second now the white-hot agony is going to hit, and I whimper, crouching in front of the warmth of the fire, cradling my injured arm and refusing to acknowledge the world.

Fates… I can’t do this. I can’t—

“Idril! Gods, move back!”

An arm wraps around my middle, yanking me away from the fireplace and dragging me halfway across the room. My back is pressed against a hard, muscular chest, but my eyes are still shut, and I think something inside of me glitches because…

Vaelenor?

“You stay right fucking there and don’t move,” he snarls from right above my head and, yes… I’m not imagining it.

Vaelenor is holding me. *My Fated Mate is—*

My feet touch the ground. Strong hands land on my shoulders and spin me around. His fingers spasm, gripping me right where Cage had and making me wince.

“Fuck. Fuck, sorry.”

His touch disappears for all of two seconds before returning to my arms with a nearly imperceptible tremor. I can smell the smoke of singed cotton. Hear the way Vae’s fighting to get his breathing under control. Feel the slight vibration passing from his body to mine.

I want to look at him. Want to see his face. But I still can’t open my eyes. But there’s still no pain, and some part of me is convinced I won’t feel it so long as I don’t open my eyes.

The flame in my chest flares with indignation, making me frown.

“Are you alright? Fates, please tell me you’re alright. I couldn’t get to you in time. I saw you catch yourself, but then he was about to push you again, and I couldn’t let him do that. I couldn’t—I should have gone straight for you, but I tackled him and then—gods, Idril, let me see your arm. Please, I need to see how bad it is.”

There’s something oddly soothing about his tone, but not enough to convince me to expose my injury to him. I shake my head in fierce denial and shift away protectively for good measure.

“Omega, I need to see it. Your arm was— it was—” He swallows thickly, but he doesn’t need to say it. I know where it was.

Right in the middle of the roaring flames.

Something scuffs against the ground to my side. Just like that, Vae’s hands are gone. I feel him move right before I hear someone kicking a body.

Cage releases a painful groan, and Vaelenor scoffs. “Don’t be a fucking baby now. Not when you were a big badass just two minutes ago, going after a helpless Omega who couldn’t fight back.”

“Fuck you,” Cage spits.

“Only one asshole in this room is fucked, and it’s not me.”

I feel Vae’s body shift before once more addressing me. His voice is gentle. *Soft.* So different from anything I’ve heard directed my way before.

It’s the way he should have *always* spoken to me. The overwhelming sense of loss has tears springing to my eyes.

“I really need to take a look at your arm,” he murmurs gently. “I won’t touch you. I promise. Not unless you tell me it’s okay. But I need to see how bad it is.”

Silence.

“Can you at least tell me on a scale of one to ten, how bad it is?”

His words make sense, but they’re not registering. I frown, running over them again, trying to force them into my current reality. But I can’t. I can’t because…

I *still* don’t feel any pain.

That can’t be right. I can feel everything else—the scratches on my palms and knuckles, the pain in my bones and muscles that hasn’t gone away in days. But my arm…

With cautious movements—because I still don't trust that my nerve endings have simply shut down in an attempt to keep me from cracking completely—I extend my arm out in front of me and slowly, warily, open my eyes.

When my blurry eyes focus, I gasp, lurching back a step and blinking furiously, unable to accept what I'm seeing.

Pale, porcelain white skin. Hair thin, blue veins visible along my wrist and elbow. No blisters. No angry red and oozing burns. No charred skin or visible bone.

I thrust my arm out in front of me, twisting it back and forth, searching for some kind of evidence of what just happened. My wide eyes snap up, locking onto emerald green irises nearly as wide as my own.

Oh… *oh no….*

"I— I don't know what, how—" Words fall from my lips as I search frantically for an explanation. "I swear I don't know— I fell, and it was just instinct to catch myself and my arm—I thought—maybe adrenaline, or—or—"

Each new word trips and tumbles over the last. My teeth begin to chatter, and I inch backward—away from Vaelenor. From Cage. From the danger in this room.

Valenor's hands fly out in front of him, palms up. He takes a step back and nearly steps right on top of Cage, who's on the floor, hands and ankles tied with—

Are those… Electronic cords?

Vae has *somehow* managed to hog-tie Cage with what look like random cords from various headsets, game controllers, and chargers. Cage bucks, straining against his bindings. I fully expect them to snap apart against his vampire strength, but they don't.

How did Vaelenor get that many cords around him so fast?

My hands fall to my sides, the movement pulling Vae's focus back to my right arm. He frowns, but he seems more confused than angry. His calm curiosity doesn't erase my fears, but it does temper them a little.

I glance up, peering at him through my lashes. I'm on edge. Anxiety swarms like bees under my skin. Vaelenor doesn't normally jump straight to accusations—not like Daxen—but he's made his feelings for me crystal clear.

I hate that I feel the need to overanalyze every one of our interactions, but I can't help it. He's my Scent-Match. There's a part of my soul even now reaching out to him, even knowing it's pointless.

No part of me trusts Vae to step up and do the right thing.

And I won't follow at his heels like a puppy, begging for scraps of affection. I refuse. After twenty years spent wishing that my father would love me, I learned not to give away pieces of myself for free, especially to males who are unwilling to do the same.

I deserve better. Better than him. Better than a male who sees the way I struggle with my hair, and thinks casually tossing hair ties at my feet is worthy of praise.

"Gods, it's hot in here," he mutters, wiping the sweat off his brow with his forearm. My eyes flick to the hearth, where the fire still burns. The flames are steady—but not intense—and my shoulders sag with relief.

Vaelenor clocks my reaction and frowns, expression twisting into something that looks like pain. "Are you sure you're alright?"

That's the last thing I expected him to say. It puts me immediately on edge.

Why isn't he yelling? Or calling for Daxen? Or throwing out accusations or—or—

"You're a fucking idiot," Cage barks from the floor. "How much more proof do you need—"

"Shut your fucking mouth," Vae snarls, and in the blink of an eye, his concern morphs into rage. His hands curl into fists, and he rounds on Cage in two quick strides. He bends over, grabs the Alpha by the front of his shirt with one hand, and yanks him up onto his knees.

"What the fuck, man? What's your—"

"What part of shut your fucking mouth do you not understand? I don't want to hear your voice."

"Are you gonna tell Daxen about her arm? Gonna tell him that she fell into the fire and doesn't have a scratch on her? What am I saying… of course you are. You're his little bitch. You let him order you around in the bedroom, too? Or only—"

"ENOUGH!"

But it's already too late. With a furious roar, Cage surges to his feet. His restraints snap, wires and cords flailing and whipping dangerously through the air as he throws back his head with a maniacal laugh.

Oh, no. No no no no no.

My heart slams against my ribs with fear, and I stumble back. I keep my eyes trained on Cage—sure he's coming straight for me.

He doesn't. His eyes narrow on Vaelenor and he grins, bending over and rushing at him like a charging bull.

I've always been under the impression that all vampires have similar levels of strength. There's no doubt in my mind that based on what I've seen, Caelan could have snapped through those restraints in seconds.

Cage is nowhere near as strong. Caelan would have sent Vae crashing through the stone wall. Cage slams into him with just enough force to make him grunt and stumble back a step.

It takes less than ten seconds for Vae to get Cage into a headlock and subdue him. He doesn't even break a sweat.

"Stupid move," Vae mutters, rolling his eyes.

"Fuck. Y—"

"Yeah, yeah. Fuck me. Gods, you're stupid. I can't believe you really thought you were good enough to join the Bloodbound. Straight up, without your Daddy and his complaints to the Council, you never would have made it this far on your own merit. You're pathetic."

As Vae continues to dress him down, Cage's eyes dart down and to the side, almost like he's looking for something. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and my stomach churns as a suddenly ominous feeling washes over me.

What in the world is he doing?

I don't want to get closer, but I do. Shifting to the side, I take small steps, inching closer toward both Alphas, trying to see if I can tell what Cage keeps glancing at.

On the side of the couch, leans an iron fire poker. I notice it at the exact moment Cage—still partially in Vaelenor's grip—reaches out his arm and lurches to the side. He's not far, and he easily wraps his hands around the cold iron. His mouth curls into an unhinged smile.

I scream.

"Vae! Watch out!"

Cage's eyes shoot to me, but Vaelenor's are already on the threat, and he snarls when he clocks the fire poker in Cage's hands. He's expecting an attack, I'm sure.

What neither of us is expecting is for Cage to lift the poker, pull it back over his shoulder, and whip it across the room like he's aiming a spear.

A spear meant for me.

Time seems to slow. Fear immobilizes me, adrenaline doing nothing to shock me into movement. My eyes are locked on that sharp, pointed tip as it soars through the air, headed straight for my chest.

The metal is less than four feet away. Less than a second before it hits me, punching a hole straight through my heart.

Ending my life.

I know—I know—I need to move, but I'm frozen. Paralyzed with shock and fear and a complete system overload because this—this is too much. It's too much.

Vaelenor's screaming my name. Shouting at me with so much fear in his voice it breaks my heart.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die yet. I know my life has been awful and I know sometimes I wish I could sleep and sleep for eternity, but—

Something slams into me from the side with all the force of a freight train and sends me flying through the air before I've processed what's happened.

Unlike when my father backhanded me and sent me flying across the foyer, this time I'm aware of what's happening, and I'm able to shield my head a breath before I fall, smacking hard against the cold stone of the floor.

I don't get up right away. Instead, I lay where I land, curl into a tight ball, and focus on trying to pull air into my lungs. I'm distantly aware of voices shouting and the sounds of fighting, but everything throbs and aches. I can't breathe. I can't breathe, but I know the poker didn't hit me…

So why?

Confusion makes me peel one eye open, then the other. I blink blearily, shocked when I realize I was thrown all the way across the room. At my back, so close I can feel the heat of the flames, is the fireplace. How—*how?*

"—aimed at her chest!"

Vae's voice.

"Yeah, well, pushing her into the fire failed, so I had to work with what I had," Cage snaps back. The casual way he talks about killing me shouldn't hurt. It shouldn't, but Fates… I'm so *tired*. My body hurts. I can't stop shaking. All I want is to disappear and pretend this entire morning didn't happen.

Or at the very least, take back my insistence that Soren visit his Second—something he's been putting off for two days, refusing to leave my side since the moment I woke and our Bond—the same silver thread as Caelan's—snapped into place. I had to beg him to go, and even though I knew he needed to, he still dragged his feet and swore he wouldn't be gone longer than two hours.

Not ten minutes later, Cage arrived. Said it was time to *'resume my duties.'* And I couldn't even argue because nothing had changed. I'm still an Omega. Still weak. And with Soren gone, still unprotected.

Moaning as my muscles protest the movement, I make myself uncurl from my ball and push up so I can see what's happening. The fire poker comes into focus first. It's all the way across the room, lying on the floor by the wall. About five feet up, a huge chunk is missing from the stone.

It's not hard to imagine what happened, and seeing just how close I came to being impaled by something thrown hard enough to crack stone causes my stomach to flip with nausea.

With arms that won't stop shaking, I push up further, frowning when my gaze lands on expensive Italian leather loafers attached to toned, muscular legs covered by perfectly pressed, buttery soft grey dress slacks.

My brain feels like it's glitching. I want to deny what I'm seeing, because it makes no sense. I know that confident, controlled stride crossing the floor, headed straight for the fire poker. I know that hand, reaching, and those long, dexterous fingers wrapping around the almost-murder weapon and snatching it off the ground.

Daxen.

Has he been here the whole time?

Exhausted, I crawl toward one of the leather chairs nearby and use it to pull myself up so I can see what's happening. My vision's been mostly blocked by furniture until now, so I'm shocked to realize Vaelenor and Cage are only about eight feet away, to my left.

Vaelenor has Cage restrained in front of him, arms wrenched painfully behind his back; Cage's mouth is busted, and so is his cheek. Both injuries seem to be healing at a snail's pace compared to the near instantaneous healing I've seen before.

He grins with a mouth full of teeth covered in blood, and when Daxen stops directly in front of him, his grin grows impossibly wider.

Daxen smiles back.

What's happening?

In perfectly choreographed movements, like steps in a dance they've performed a thousand times before, Vaelenor releases Cage, dropping his arms and taking a swift step back and to the side. At the same moment, Daxen hefts the poker, readjusts his grip, and drops his hand to his side, lining it up with his hip.

He draws it back and, in a single, fluid movement, thrusts it forward—stabbing it straight into Cage's gut with so much force that the sharpened tip explodes from his back.

Cage *screams*.

It takes every ounce of my self-control not to do the same.

Dax reaches out with his free hand and grips him by the shoulder, calmly dragging him across the room—toward me.

Vae follows them, stalking to the hearth where he grabs something next to it and turns, handing it to Daxen.

A branding iron.

Cage is struggling in Daxen's hold—as much as one can struggle with an iron rod through their torso—but when he sees what Daxen's holding, his struggle increases. He starts to thrash and flail, screaming and begging for mercy. He pleads for his mother, for mercy, swearing he'll do anything and everything, and *please, please don't do this!!*

I want to look away, but I can't.

The flames flare, bathing Daxen's face in oranges and golds. He looks beautiful. I've always thought Vaelenor looked like a storybook prince. Like royalty.

Daxen looks like a god.

A vengeful deity, sculpted from marble. A statue given life, created from the coldest, hardest, most unrelenting stone. Impenetrable.

Just like his heart.

Daxen drags the Alpha across the floor, never once breaking stride, ignoring Cage's protests and pleas. As soon as he realizes begging has no effect, he switches tactics and starts threatening instead. Some of his threats sound legitimate, and I worry that what Daxen has decided may have consequences.

Then I remind myself that he's never once worried about me, and I shove that fear far, far down. If I have to face the consequences of *his* actions, it's only fair he do so as well.

I feel strangely numb, like I'm watching this all happen from outside of my body. That remains true right up until Cage screams, "Do you have no mercy?!?"

Daxen stops so fast that Cage pitches into the fire, nearly falling in himself. He fights even harder now that he's no longer being dragged behind another Alpha, struggling to break free from Dax's hold while blood seeps from the wound in his stomach. Every time he moves too fast, his face twists in pain.

I know exactly how scary it is to be facing a male like Daxen when he's angry. His fire burns so cold it could freeze your soul. I've marveled at the way he moves—calm, controlled, precise—a lot like Shade actually—a patient predator that is somehow more lethal—more terrifying—for its lack of emotion.

Up until now, I thought I was probably one of a very few who have seen Daxen at his most dangerous and walked away scarred, but alive.

But the look in his eyes now is a million times more terrifying than anything he's ever aimed my way. Cage stills as Daxen's grey eyes land on his. Even from here, I can see the barely restrained violence in their depths.

I thought I'd seen Daxen at his most monstrous.

I was wrong.

His tone is clipped when he speaks, as cold and unforgiving as the rest of him.

"Say that again."

"W—what? Say what again?"

"The last line of drivel that fell from your lips. Repeat it."

Cage's eyes light up with hope. His lips tremble, and tears stream from his eyes. "Mercy! I'm begging you to have mercy! This is a mistake! A huge mistake! My father—my bloodline alone—"

"Enough," Dax snaps, cutting him off with a wave of his hand. "I didn't ask for a dissertation. I simply thought it prudent to point out the irony of begging for mercy when you yourself have none."

"I do!"

"Do you?"

"Yes! Let me prove it!"

Dax hums thoughtfully, then says, "Tell me why you tried to kill the Omega."

The question has me taking a silent step back on instinct, like I can escape the pain even though I know better by now. The golden thread of Dax and my Mate Bond snaps back, coiling into a tight ball of pulsing pain.

Cage shuffles on his feet, groaning when he jostles the still-open wound in his stomach. Behind him, Vaelenor leans back against the wall and crosses his arms like he's looking forward to an answer.

"I don't understand," Cage pants, expression tight with agony. "Who cares about a stupid fucking Omega? You all hate her anyway. I just… I just wanted her gone."

"Why?" Daxen pushes.

"For personal reasons!" Cage snaps.

"So you decided to push her into the fire."

"Yes!"

"And when that didn't work…"

"I figured iron through the heart would finish the job."

Cage struggles in his hold, growing more and more anxious as the seconds pass and the fire crackles and spits less than two feet away.

"Perhaps this makes me a hypocrite," Daxen says thoughtfully, and the words make my stomach drop. The hope on Cage's face turns into confidence.

"Oh, thank fuck. I knew you'd see reason," he forces a smile through gritted teeth. His gaze falls to the metal bar in his stomach. "Now get me down to Calder and get this thing out of me. It fucking hurts!"

The flame in my chest burns hotter and hotter, but I can't feel it over the overwhelming sense of betrayal. *Which is ridiculous because what exactly did I think was happening? That Daxen was going to disfigure one of his trainees for trying to kill me?*

"I think you misunderstand," Daxen murmurs, so low I almost miss the response completely.

"Can we talk about this later?" Cage whines.

"There won't be a later," he responds, and the menace in his voice sends ice skating down my spine.

Something is *very, very* wrong. I can't possibly be the only one to feel it.

Cage frowns, and the tension in the room grows. The air itself feels like it's pulsing with anticipation and a rage so thick I can taste it on my tongue —cold stone and cedarwood and fury so hot it's about to catch fire.

Daxen leans in until they’re almost nose to nose, and whatever Cage sees in Daxen’s eyes has all his confidence disappearing like it never existed, replaced by a terror so acute his voice actually shakes.

“What’s going on?”

“I don't enjoy explaining myself,” Daxen tsks. “And I’ve never been one to honor the requests of dying men.”

Cage still looks genuinely confused. “Who—who’s dying?”

Daxen’s lips curl into a genuine smile. “You are.”

Cage’s eyes widen. Understanding dawns. His mouth parts and he releases a scream of unadulterated terror as Daxen grips him with one hand on his shoulder and one on the iron rod in his chest, spins him around, and shoves him face first into the blazing fire.

Vaelenor comes to stand by Daxen’s side. He reaches for a decorative wooden box on the mantle and pulls it down, cradling it in one arm and popping open the lid.

Cage is screaming—terrible, agonized screams that both Alphas ignore. He’s fighting to escape, but Daxen has a solid grip on the iron still shoved through his stomach and uses it to shove him back down.

Vaelenor reaches into the wooden box and pulls out two items before returning it to its place on the mantle. One, he passes to Daxen—a long, black fitted glove that he pulls on before reaching down and wrapping his now-protected hand around the iron pole.

The second item is a little velvet drawstring bag. With eyes bright with excitement, Vae opens the bag and shakes what looks to be shimmering black and blue powder into his palm before tossing it into the flames.

It’s like an explosion goes off in the fireplace. From six feet away, I can feel a blast of heat so intense I jerk away from it even though I’m nowhere close. Vaelenor steps back, but not before sending Daxen a worried look. Dax gives him a stoic nod, readjusting his grip on the now red-hot iron as Cage screams and thrashes and fights to get out of the flames.

It’s… *horrifying.*

I don’t know what that powder is, but it clearly raised the fire's temperature. I watch in horror as Cage’s body burns, trying to heal itself over and over, new pink skin regrowing before the flames turn it red with burns and then black as it chars before flaking off to expose the muscle beneath.

My heart is slamming in my chest, beating out of rhythm with terror. Cage is partly through a regeneration when he stops fighting and stills, swiveling his charred, hairless head to the side; milky eyes—lidless and bubbling like liquid—fall on me.

A terrified Omega whine rips up my throat. Vaelenor spins, emerald eyes widening when they land on me and he realizes I've seen everything. Daxen tenses and grunts, leaning his weight against the poker and shoving Cage further into the flames, even as beads of sweat pour down his face and neck and his shirt turns dark with patches of wetness.

I can feel tears streaming down my face, but for some reason, I can't look away. Dax's grip around the poker never wavers, even when it turns so hot it begins to glow.

Time slows and speeds up; Cage's screams eventually die off. His skin stops regrowing, muscle burns, and bones crack until finally—*finally*—they're all that remain of what was, only twenty minutes ago, an Alpha.

I almost scream at the sound of the warped iron clattering to the floor. Daxen tears off his black glove and tosses it into the still-burning fire. He steps back from the heat, extends his hand, and flexes his fingers. His skin is an angry, painful red, and I suddenly realize that the whole time he was keeping Cage down, the iron was burning and blistering his skin.

How many times did his hand and arm—like Cage—burn and heal only to burn again, over and over and over?

I don't—I don't—why? Why would he do that?

Why would he do any of that?

Oh, gods…

My eyes fall on the burnt—but still very obvious—pile of Cage's remains.

Daxen just *killed* someone. *No.* Not just someone—a trainee who apparently has some kind of influential and powerful father.

He killed Cage.

Decisively. Ruthlessly. Horrifically.

Oh Fates… oh Fates, I think I'm going to be sick.

I don't remember deciding to move, but I'm halfway across the room when my shaking legs give out, and I fall mid-step, landing in a heap on the floor with a strangled sob.

Daxen spins, whipping around on his heel and frowning when his eyes land on me. He reaches out, extending his hand for me like he can't help

himself. I jerk back, and he glances at his hand—red and shiny with new skin—grimaces, and lets it drop to his side.

He thinks I flinched because of his skin? His skin?! I just sat here for ten minutes watching him hold down an Alpha as he burned alive, and he thinks I'm reacting to his skin?

It's *absurd* how little he knows me.

"Idril…?" Vae's voice is hesitant as he inches his way across the room, and it's only now that I realize I've backed all the way across the open area without realizing I was even moving.

Daxen takes a step forward, and even his voice is gentler than I've ever heard it before when he says, "I'm so sorry you had to see that. And I'm sorry if I hurt you when I knocked you out of the way. It wasn't my intention."

It wasn't his intention?

What about all the other times he's hurt me? Were those accidents, too?

Why? Why did he do that? Why did he save me? Why did he kill Cage? I just… I don't understand. This doesn't make any sense!

Everything that's happened in the last hour finally catches up with me, and the room starts to spin. A strangled sob inches up my throat as my lungs tighten. I try to suck in a deep breath, but it gets caught in my throat.

My chest thrums with the pain of two partial Mate Bonds that know nothing outside of rejection and hope that's only reinforced by the actions of the two Alphas standing in front of me. It's suddenly too much—too painful—standing in the same room as my Fated Mates and pretending to ignore the way my soul feels like it's ripping more with every second I'm forced to shoulder the weight of this secret.

I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for *them*.

"*Omega...*" Vaelenor cracks with pain, and my Omega surges forward, intent on soothing him. I have to shove down my whine. I refuse to beg for comfort from Alphas who have nothing to give.

The door swings open, cracking against the door and bouncing back. It's prevented from hitting the person on the other side by a large tattooed hand—a hand with tattoos I've spent the last two days memorizing, following every swirl and line with my gaze so often I could draw them from memory.

"Soren…"

My lips have barely finished forming the shape of his name before he's here, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close. I breathe in his

scent, burying my nose in his chest and melting against him as the growl vibrating against my cheek turns into a purr.

“What the fuck is going on here? It’s been an hour and a half! *Ninety godsdamned minutes!*”

He doesn’t get an answer. In a repeat of Soren’s entrance, the door behind him once more swings open and slams into the wall. Soren snarls, sets me on my feet, ushering me behind him before turning to face the perceived threat.

The faint scent of rose water is as familiar to me as my own name after two weeks. What’s not familiar is how frazzled Lenora looks when I peek around Soren to see her standing in the doorway.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” she snaps, panting like she ran all the way from the compound.

Vae strides forward, panic etched in every line of his face. “What’s wrong? Is it—”

Lenora nods, talking over him and cutting him off with the two words I’ve been waiting to hear since this nightmare began.

“Caelan’s awake.”

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Chapter 12

Caelan

I wake to heat.

Not the searing, fiery pain of silver, but a warmth deep in my chest, pulsing reassuringly through my limbs in a way that feels like home.

I don't realize I'm awake at first; everything is languid and fuzzy, like being submerged in a warm bath.

The pulsing intensifies, morphing into a frantic drumbeat until I understand…

It's the Bond.

It shimmers and thrums, linking my soul to the soul of my Mate. I can *feel* her, a barrage of emotions cycling one after the other until I can't discern which are hers and which are mine.

I peel my eyes open, but instead of the bright sky over the grasslands, my blurry vision sharpens on a white ceiling and buzzing fluorescent lights so bright they make me wince.

The sterile scent of the med bay hits my senses, saline coating my throat with each breath. The feel of hands appears on my chest. *Soft. Clinical.*

Wrong.

I glance down, and Lenora's face and familiar severe expression appear, making me flinch.

What the fuck is happening?

I use my elbows to try to push myself up, but Lenora stops me.

"Stop that," the Beta admonishes. "Lie back down before you put yourself back into another coma."

I sag, falling back with a groan. "How… long?"

My voice cracks, and I can barely force out the words. But I have to know. Have to know how long I've been out. Have to know how long my Mate's been alone with the males I once called brothers—the males I trusted to protect and care for her when I couldn't.

The males who betrayed me by betraying her.

"Two weeks," she answers. "Take a deep breath." Her stethoscope slides across my chest, and I do as she says.

Fates, but my head fucking hurts.

I close my eyes, forcing myself to let Lenora do her thing while I focus on Idril. It takes less than a breath to locate our Bond, and even less time than that to tell that something's wrong.

She's terrified, exhausted, and in pain. But even more concerning is the heavy blanket of nothingness that seems to be smothering her feelings. Like she's protecting herself… trying to cut herself off from her emotions.

My internal alarms are screaming. There will be no polite easing into this. Not after I've spent the last two weeks imagining all the ways she's suffered while I was unable to protect her.

"M-m-ma—"

"Shhh," Lenora waves me off dismissively and repositions her stethoscope with a glare.

Scowling, I reach out and wrap my fist around the damn thing, yanking it out of her ears and tossing it across the room.

Lenora glares at me.

"Was that necessary?" She sighs, but before she can stand to retrieve it, my hand shoots out and wraps around her arm. I might be weak as fuck right now, but I'm still her boss.

"My—" A dry cough makes me groan in pain, and I glare at her harder.

She rolls her eyes. "You want me to get someone?"

I nod frantically.

"Get… m-my…" I release her, and my hands curl into frustrated fists at my sides.

"Yes, yes," she grouses. "Your Pack. I'll go get them right now, alright?"

No, damnit. Fuck my Pack! Get my Mate!

I watch helplessly, a growl rumbling through my chest, as she rushes from the room. Presumably to find my fucking Pack—who are the last assholes I want to lay eyes on right now.

“Fuuuuck,” I groan, slamming my head back against the pillow.

There’s not shit I can do now, and that pisses me the fuck off. I don’t want to wait; it’s all I’ve done for weeks. I want my Mate, and I want some Fatesdamned answers.

Gods, the way she looked when she admitted how terrified she was that I might wake up and deny our Bond—the memory still guts me. I’ve replayed those moments a million times, trying to recall every second. I can still feel her in my arms—thin, exhausted, sobbing with fear.

Fear for herself, yes, but mostly… fear for me.

Because of course no one would tell her anything about my condition.

I don’t realize how pissed I am until I hear my grip tear holes in the fabric of the sheets. I force myself to calm down. Unclench my fists.

The only good thing about waiting for her is that it gives me a chance to talk to my Pack and get the whole story.

Not because I think Idril’s lying.

Because I strongly suspect that she kept the worst things she’s gone through a secret.

Fuck, I’m going to kill my Pack.

Once I discover how much damage they’ve truly done, I’m going to rip apart our Bonds until nothing remains of them. I don’t know *how* I’m going to do it, but there’s got to be a way. Just because it’s not something people talk about doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.

In my mind, a plan begins to unfold, laying itself out piece by piece until I can see it spread out in front of me.

It’s practical, efficient, and, most importantly, brutal.

Recon. Then control. Then extraction. Nothing flashy. Flashy isn’t the goal.

The goal is vengeance.

Step one: *information extraction.*

I know the only way to make this work is to play up my disorientation. Nothing extreme—they’ll see right through that—simple things I can easily blame on side effects from coming out of a coma.

Confusion. Maybe a memory slip or two.

I need to ask questions, but keep them simple. *How long? Who knew? Who ordered the abuse? Who watched and did nothing?*

Once I know each part my Pack—and the rest of my supposed family—played while my Mate was systematically abused and cut down…

I'll decide what to do with them.

But until then, I have to pretend to be clueless. The second I show my hand, Dax will turn defensive. It's just how his mind works—always playing chess while everyone else is playing checkers.

Not this time.

This time, he won't even know we're on opposing sides of the board.

I can feel the arrival of my Pack, even before the door swings open so forcefully that the glass rattles. Our Bonds light up like the fucking Las Vegas Strip, and only now do I realize something was done to mute them.

Whatever it is, it's gone now. And I'm not going to get a chance to ask what it is regardless, because Vae explodes into the room with a grin so large it splits his face in half. He runs his shaking hands through his hair, eyes bright with excitement and joy.

Two weeks ago, seeing him this happy to see me would have brought me so much relief.

Now, I feel nothing but disgust.

Dax is right on his heels, walking in my room the way he arrives everywhere—with all the confidence of a male who's never met a door he co*uldn't unlock. Confident. Controlled. Self-righteous as fuck.*

For centuries, I've admired that part of him. The way he's always been so sure of who he is and what he believes in. Confident in his ability to back up those beliefs with evidence.

Now, I've never wanted anything more than to see the look on his face when he discovers how bad he's fucked—how *wrong* he's been about Idril—since the beginning. I want to burn the memory into my brain for eternity.

Daxen's cold, grey eyes land on me and soften. He exhales a breath of relief, almost like he wouldn't let himself truly believe Lenora was telling the truth until he saw for himself.

I make sure my side of the Bond is locked down. I don't want them feeling anything until I've had time to evaluate the situation.

Relief floods into me from Vae's side of the Bond. His joy at seeing me awake is so pure and overwhelming it's impossible to keep my soul from reacting.

Daxen's relief is more subtle but no less real. He can't hide the ebbing tension from his side of the Bond, even though I can tell he's trying to. There's something else I'm getting a read on, too… a mix of feelings.

Protectiveness. Pride. A heavy dose of confusion?

Interesting.

“Thank the Fates,” Vae laughs. “Fuck, Brother, I thought you were a goner.”

Tears spring to his eyes, and I won’t lie, it’s hard to keep my heart from softening. Harder still when Dax unexpectedly erases the distance between us and bends over, wrapping his arms around me and holding me in a tight embrace. I can feel the love pulsing between us. It’s so real and visceral that my eyes start to burn with tears of my own.

I return his embrace, centuries of brotherhood allowing me to fall easily into the comfortable lie of what I used to believe was unwavering loyalty and love.

Has it always been a fucking lie?

“I’m so fucking glad you’re alright,” he whispers, squeezing my shoulder and releasing me. His hands slide into the front pockets of his grey slacks, and my gaze catches on the pinkish hue of new skin on his right hand.

My instinct is to ask him what the fuck happened. But then I remember… I don’t fucking care. Instead, I ask something else. Something easy, something I already know, to get the conversation started.

“How long?”

“Almost two weeks, you asshole,” Vae pulls back his fist like he’s going to shoulder-punch me, but catches himself and lets his arm drop with a wince. “So, uh… how do you feel?”

“Like something died in my mouth,” I answer honestly. They both laugh, which eases the tension. Dax crosses the room, pours me some water, and hands it over. After draining half the contents, I decide it’s time to get to the point.

“What the *hell* happened?”

Vae groans, collapsing next to my legs at the end of the bed. Daxen drags a chair over and falls into it. He exhales, visibly deflating like this is the first time in weeks he’s been able to finally set down the invisible weight on his shoulders.

I hope it’s guilt. And I hope it weighs a thousand pounds.

He looks like shit. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his frown looks permanently etched on his face. It matches the deep crease between his brows, and the faint lines at the corners of his eyes are pinched in worry.

I should care more. This is my Packmate. My *brother*.

But when I look at him, all I can see are all the times he tried to convince me Idril was lying, manipulating me. In the War Room, the SUV, Redmark, a dozen other places.

“What’s going on?” When there's no answer, I turn to Vae—who doesn’t look much better than Dax. We give Vae a hard time about his looks, but in reality, they’re the source of a lot of his anxiety. The guy truly believes that when we meet our Mate, and she discovers his Curse, his looks will be all he has going for him.

Stupid fucker’s going to wish his Curse was his only hurdle. After he spent weeks traumatizing her and accusing her of being the cause of my injuries, neither that nor his charming good looks are going to matter.

“What do *you* remember?” Daxen asks, leaning in and bracing his arms on his thighs.

“Not a lot.”

It’s not even a lie. What happened in the basement is still fuzzy. I remember Varenthrall monologuing me to death. I remember the Doctor begging me to get Idril away. I remember my Mate lying on a metal table next to me, pale, injured, and beautiful in a macabre way I *never* want to see again.

I remember her blood flowing from her veins to fill the bags at her feet. Blood her father stole from her, nearly killing her in the process.

“Varenthrall had you hooked to a slow-drip of silver,” Vae answers gently. “Do you remember that?”

He sounds so earnest. So worried about me. Our Bond squirms, urging me to soothe my Packmate’s obvious distress. But my Bond to Idril thinks he needs to sit in his discomfort.

That’s the side that wins.

“I remember,” I say flatly. “Kinda hard to forget.”

Vae nods. “When your comms cut out, we raced to Varenthrall’s. We heard—well, *Dax* heard—everything that happened before that.”

“Heard a few interesting things,” Dax murmurs. This, too, is strategic. He’s planting seeds, already making his case for how he’s treated her, just in case.

Vae shoots Dax a worried look. He licks his lips nervously. I can feel his fear and anxiety pulsing off of him in waves. He’s not nearly as confident as Dax seems to be that Idril’s guilty.

I file away the observation.

“When we got there, everyone was gone. The place was a wreck. It was *covered* in blood. And the smell… *fuck*. Gav and Silas searched the upper level, and Dax and I went to the basement. Thank the Fates… that’s where we found you, hooked up to a fucking IV. It was—”

He chokes off with a strangled sound. His face drains of color. A hand lands on top of my leg, and his eyes fill with tears.

“I thought you were dead,” he whispers, voice shaking. “I thought… I thought...”

A tear escapes, and he angrily swipes it away. My stomach drops.

Act normal.

The desire to comfort my Packmate is instinctive. This is Vaelenor. My brother. One of only two males who have been by my side—who I’ve trusted implicitly—for centuries.

Until I trusted them with the most precious thing in our lives. Until I trusted them with our Fated fucking Mate.

“Anyways,” he clears his throat awkwardly. “We brought you back here, and we’ve just been waiting for you to wake up.”

He turns to Daxen.

And something about the movement—the way he does it so naturally—rearranges and reforms in my mind, sharpening into focus and emerging into a picture that’s suddenly so fucking clear.

How have I never noticed how often Vae turns to Daxen—and me—for answers?

With sudden clarity, I know exactly how the last two weeks have played out. Vae, afraid of making the wrong decision, turns to Daxen for answers. Blindly following his lead. Hour after hour, day after day. Of course, Daxen’s answers—fueled by anger, misplaced loyalty, and if I had to guess, a metric fuck-ton of bullshit masquerading as justification—turned into an endless loop. Cruelty and abuse, powered by Vae’s crippling need for Daxen’s obsession with control.

And the only one who suffered was my Mate—for having the audacity to exist inside of their fucked up, codependent world.

Dax clears his throat. Picks an invisible piece of lint from his slacks. When his eyes lift to meet mine, I see it—the anxiety he’s failing to hide.

He’s afraid.

He fucking should be.

“Well?” I push, lifting an expectant brow.

“Well… what?”

The way Daxen feigns confusion almost sends me over the edge.

“Did you find the Omega or not?”

I refer to her by her Designation on purpose, even though the implied disrespect makes my fucking soul recoil. But I can’t use her name. If I do, he’ll know how I really feel in an instant.

Vae stays silent, more than happy for Dax to take the lead.

That tracks.

“The Omega,” he draws out the word, studying me like if he just looks hard enough, he can see into my brain.

I roll my eyes good-naturedly, pretending I’m simply annoyed with his lead-up.

He relaxes.

The thought that I’d fool him to get the truth isn’t even on his radar.

It’s like he doesn’t know me at all.

“We took her with us.” His answer is short. *Clipped.* A very family friendly way of saying he fucking kidnapped her, but alright. I let the silence linger, and no surprise, it’s Vae who cracks.

“She admitted to Gav and Silas that she was in on the ambush. We’ve been keeping her in the attic.” Vae cringes, like he’s aware of how fucked up that sounds out loud.

“And her father?”

Dax scrubs a hand down his face. “Still looking. We’ve got Bastards out every fucking night, searching everywhere within a two-hundred mile radius. We’re discussing expanding our search for a third time. He’s out there, but he’s gone to ground.”

“The trafficked Omegas?” I ask

“No new leads. Riven has Daniella in a safe house. Says she's had longer periods of lucidity. Ford and Evander are still with Calla in Chicago. They check in once a day, but there’s no change with her, either.”

“And what does Idril have to say? Surely she hasn’t been sitting in the attic for the last two weeks?”

I force my hands not to curl into fists and my jaw to relax.

“She’s been working,” Vae says. “Cleaning, laundry, scrubbing floors, cataloging the Lost Room…”

He trails off, leaning forward and resting his forearms on top of his thighs. He sighs, hanging his head like he’s struggling to decide what to say.

When he finally looks up at me, his eyes hold an entire ocean of regret.

“Listen, Caelan. A lot of shit’s happened these last few weeks.”

Dax snorts, but Vae doesn’t react—yet another deviation I note and file away.

“Vae’s right,” Dax adds. “A lot *has* happened. But you just woke up. You need rest, not drama. Once you feel better, we’ll debrief. Catch you up. Until then, I think you should focus on getting your strength back up.”

Using my concern for my health to hide the bullshit going on in this house is so fucking… *him*.

“No thanks,” I reply. Daxen’s eyes widen. I can see him gearing up for a lecture, but he’s not my father.

And if I have my way, he won’t even be my Bonded Packmate for much longer. I have no intention of staying Bonded to the males who traumatized my Omega.

The door to my room swings open and Gavran enters, checking to make sure the door clicks shut behind him. When he turns around, his eyes find mine with unerring accuracy. His relief is palpable, as is the exhaustion lining his face.

He crosses the room, coming to stand beside my bed in four long strides. He’s silent. *Solemn.* He lifts his fist, bringing it to his chest and resting it over his heart and beating it—*Once. Twice. Three times*—before lowering his eyes in deference and inclining his head in somber respect.

“Shalna’ohr tyvalk. Morir da vylnax.”

The Lost Language rolls off his tongue as though he was born to it. The words are lyrical. A single phrase—one of only four we have access to and know the meaning of—spoken by the first Bloodbound. Words passed down from generation to generation, used primarily during official ceremonies.

Except one. The Commander’s Vow, delivered to a warrior who nearly dies on the Commander’s watch. An apology. An acknowledgment. An oath.

I let myself appreciate the enormity of the moment. Not just for the vow, but because this is the last moment I will ever look at my Last Shield as a male of honor and integrity.

Because no matter what my Pack’s done to Idril, none of this would have happened without Gavan’s approval. He’s our leader, which means he, too, is responsible.

I dip my chin enough to be respectful and keep up the ruse. Inside, I'm *seething*.

"How are you feeling?" Gav asks, wariness in his tone that puts me on edge.

"I actually feel great," I lie. I feel like I'm about to crawl out of my fucking skin if I don't get to Idril. "In fact, I was just telling my Pack that I need to be briefed on what's happened while I've been out."

"Caelan—"

"Despite what Daxen may think, I'm more than capable of sitting in a chair while other people talk." I shoot him a self-deprecating smile, forcing a chuckle as I add, "Once I've had a shower, that is."

To my right, I can *feel* Dax seething. But his feelings mean nothing compared to my own need for Idril.

When the time comes, I'm going to claim her right in front of every fucking Alpha in this state. Just so there won't be any more fucking confusion moving forward.

"Don't you think you should rest a little longer?" Vae asks, frowning in concern. "You just woke up, Caelan."

"I'm done resting." I snap. "If something happens, I don't want to be scrambling to play catch-up just because my Pack wants to baby me."

Dax turns to Gav with imploring eyes, but Gav shrugs. "If he's up for it, I see no reason to wait."

I grunt, biting back a smile as Daxen pinches the bridge of his nose like I'm being unreasonable.

He has no fucking idea just how unreasonable I'm about to get.

"I'll grab Lenora," Gav adds. "Assuming she and Calder give the all clear, we'll convene in the War Room in an hour. Give you some time to shower and get dressed."

"Thanks."

He turns to leave but pauses with his hand on the nob and looks back at me over his shoulder. "Might want to brush your teeth."

When I give him a flat look, he grins and disappears into the hall. Less than thirty seconds later Lenora reappears, opening the door and slipping in on silent feet.

Both of my Packmates wait in tense silence while Lenora checks my vitals. *Are they worried for me, or worried about what's coming?*

“I sent for these as soon as you woke up,” Lenora explains, taking a pile of clothes from a nurse and handing them to me. “I figured you’d insist on leaving.”

Grinning, I set the clothes in my lap and reach behind me for the tie to my hospital gown, fumbling with the laces.

“Do not overdo it, O’Ruaric. I know you’re a big, bad Alpha, but you need to give your body a chance to finish healing. Don’t be an idiot.”

I shrug off my hospital gown and toss it to the floor. “Got it.”

“You *aren’t* an idiot, are you, Caelan?”

Something in the Beta’s tone makes my skin prickle, and I freeze in the middle of pulling my shirt over my head. Warily, I lift my eyes to meet hers, and I swear…

She knows something. Or she thinks she does.

“I’m not,” I answer, holding her gaze until she steps back with a satisfied nod.

“Hey! I’m not an idiot either!” Vae proclaims, shooting Lenora a charming grin that shows off his dimples.

“Yes, you are,” she responds flatly before turning to Daxen. “So are you.”

I have to bite down on my lip to keep from laughing as Daxen’s mouth parts in shock, and Vae makes a strangled sound of indignation. Lenora sweeps past them and exits the room without giving either male a chance to respond.

“What’s her deal?” Vae grumbles.

I shrug. “What’d you two do to piss her off?”

“I—”

“We’ll let you get dressed,” Dax says, speaking over Vae and cutting him off. I duck my head and pretend I’m engrossed in looking for a pair of socks so he doesn’t see the laughter in my eyes.

When I nod, they both stand, taking their time crossing to the door. Vae hesitates before he leaves, stopping at the threshold with the door half open.

“Do you want us to hang out in the hall? In case you need help getting upstairs?”

“Hmmm?” I glance up, pretending to be distracted before shaking my head in answer. “Nah, I’m good. I’m sure Lenora’s gonna make a nurse wheel me up. Just because I’m leaving without a stab wound doesn’t mean her rules are gonna change.”

Vae rocks back on his heels. “Yeah. Yeah, okay. Forgot about that rule.”

“Yup.”

“I’ll just… see you in a bit, then.”

Vae’s fingers flex around the edge of the door, squeezing like he doesn’t want to let go. Dax huffs, rolling his eyes and grabbing his arm, yanking him away from the door.

“Let the guy change. We’ll see him upstairs. He’s not gonna disappear on us.”

I might. Might take my Mate and fuck off somewhere you’ll never find either of us ever again.

My Packmate forces out a laugh. “Duh. Of—of course he’s not gonna disappear. Obviously.” He rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t turn around and leave until the door clicks shut between us.

I wait ten minutes before peeking into the hall to find a nurse—and wheelchair— waiting for me.

The trip to my room is a blur. When we get outside, the sun is high in the sky. I almost ask my nurse—a new girl I haven’t met before—what time it is, but she doesn’t look like speaking much.

Which is fine. It gives me time to concentrate on my Mate Bond. Once I begin examining it closely, I can’t pull my attention away. I’m vaguely aware of reaching my room and thanking the nurse. I’m aware of the door to Vae’s room opening, his head peeking around the oak with a grin when he sees I’m on my feet. I return his grin with a tight smile, but my attention’s focused solely on one thing. One person.

My Mate.

All through my shower, I study the Bond. It’s overwhelming. Bright and alive, four times larger than my Pack Bond Threads, and so full of power it’s *intoxicating*. Even my side of the Scent-Match Bond—which, from what I’ve heard, should be reaching for Idril—is wrapped tight around the silver thread, pulsing with contentment.

Almost like the silver Bond is strengthening it. Reassuring and soothing it.

Remarkable.

Idril is much calmer than before, but still anxious. The fear is gone, soothed by something I’m struggling to understand, but she’s practically vibrating with impatience.

That’s what finally kicks my ass into gear, and in less than five minutes I’ve dressed, thrown on my shoes, and am shoving my phone in my pocket as I shut the door to my room.

Vae and Dax meet me at the entrance to our Pack’s wing, and I grind my teeth to keep from frowning when I see them.

I never thought I’d feel this way about my brothers. I’ve walked through fire for these assholes. I’ve taken bullets—lost limbs. Damn near lost my life—*twice*—just to keep them safe.

I remember the blinding sense of relief I felt when I opened my eyes in Varenthall’s basement to see Dax standing over me, knowing that as soon as they went to our Mate, she’d be safe. I’d only just discovered that she was our Scent-Match, and I was so fucking confident that all of Daxen’s suspicions would melt away the moment he got her scent.

I don’t know what the fuck happened to prevent Dax and Vae from scenting Idril, but it really doesn’t fucking matter, does it?

I believed in that Bond. I believed in the innate goodness of my brothers. I trusted them with the most important, most precious person in the fucking universe.

And they failed.

Failed me. Failed her.

Failed themselves.

I don’t know if I can ever trust them again. Worse… I don’t know if Idril will *ever* trust them, and that breaks my fucking heart. No one in the world deserves to be loved, worshipped, and cared for the way she does. The last two weeks should have been filled with tenderness, joy, and *freedom*.

My hands clench into fists. I pretend not to see how their worry increases with each weighted look. Pretend I’m not fucking vibrating with betrayal, imagining all the shit they’ve put our Omega through.

At the doors to the War Room, my Packmates hesitate. It’s clear they want to say something, but I don’t give them a chance. I reach for the doorknob right as Dax reaches for my arm and I slip away from him and step into the room. He sighs, but follows behind me.

The last time I was here was the night before the ambush. It feels like a thousand years ago now.

Gav, already in his seat at the head of the table, looks up from his phone when he hears the doors swinging open. When his eyes sweep past me, they

soften.

For some reason, that just pisses me off.

Dax sits and leans to the side to pull a laptop from his bag. Every few seconds, he flexes the fingers of his right hand. *It's obviously finished healing, so why the hell is he flexing it so often?*

I don't even think he realizes he's doing it.

The door opens, and Silas walks in. He looks haggard, with his hair pulled messily back and at least three days' worth of growth he hasn't bothered to shave. His eyes are glassy and red, with deep purple bruises.

When he sees me, he stops dead in his tracks and whispers, "Caelan."

I nod in greeting, and frown when his shoulders slump. When he gets to the table, he pulls out the chair across from me and falls into it, looking for all the world like a male on death row.

I turn toward Gav and ask, "Who are we waiting for?"

"Me. And probably this bloke as well," A feminine voice that is definitely *not* my Mate answers, and I spin in my chair as the door swings shut behind a human Omega.

What the hell is an Omega doing here?

There's no denying how beautiful she is, with tan skin, thick, black hair, a mischievous smile, and dark eyes that twinkle like she's in on a joke the universe chose to share only with her.

What's most unique, though, is her accent.

She crosses the room like she's been here a thousand times and takes a seat across from my Pack, leaving a few chairs between her and Silas.

Right behind the Omega is Riven, who takes a seat next to her and shoots me a grin.

They must have come together. Maybe they're friends… or…

Does Riven have human friends?

"You look much better than the last time I saw you," Riven observes, placing a bundle of leather-bound books on the table in front of him and unbuttoning his suit jacket.

"I feel much better," I answer before gesturing toward the Omega with a nod. "Who's this?"

"What?" Riven frowns, then follows my gaze and shrugs. "I have no idea. We just met in the hall—"

"We'll get to introductions later." Gav interrupts.

The Omega rolls her eyes, then turns, studying me openly. I'm about to tell her to stop when she grins and nods decisively, like she's come to some kind of conclusion. She pulls out her phone and bends over the device, typing furiously.

Not once does she stop smiling.

Where the fuck is Idril?

Totally oblivious to my growing need, Gav clears his throat and announces, "We have a lot to discuss. A lot has happened in the past two weeks, and I know I speak for everyone when I say," his eyes land on me, "we are so fucking happy to have you back with us, brother."

I grunt in thanks, ignoring Vae when he lets out an excited whoop while trying not to shrug off Daxen's hand when it claps down on my shoulder.

I hate them. I really, truly, hate them right now.

"Ford and Evander are returning from Chicago in a few days, and with everyone finally back under the same roof, we need a game plan moving forward," Gav continues.

"We need to lay out all the pieces and see how they fit, and we need to start acting instead of reacting. If we don't, I'm not sure how long we can stay ahead of this shit. We have to make finding those missing Omegas—and Varenthrall—our top priority."

He leans in, resting his forearms on the table. "The first order of business is the Omega prisoner."

Adrenaline surges through my veins, and I sit up straighter, squaring my shoulders.

"Get her," I demand, and somehow I manage to keep my voice steady even though my stomach is churning and my nerve endings feel like they're firing off lightning beneath my skin.

I need her. I fucking need her near me. I've waited long enough.

Vae turns to me and murmurs, "Caelan, I think we need to tell you—"

He trails off as his gaze falls to land on my chest. He cocks his head, brows furrowing in confusion, and it only takes a second for me to realize why.

I'm growling.

Well… *Fuck it.* I was trying to play it cool. Gather all the information and discover the truth without being potentially manipulated, but that's not me. Not in this situation, at least.

It feels good to drop all pretense and give in to my raging anger. I turn to Gav and snarl, “Bring her here. Now.”

Part of me expects to be reprimanded, but Gav simply nods and reaches for his phone, shooting off a text before calmly placing it back down.

If these assholes had any clue who I’m really pissed at, they’d be pissing themselves right now, not patiently waiting for their victim to arrive.

The rumbling in my chest increases in volume, and so does my rage. I can’t even look at my Packmates without getting nauseous. Can’t fucking wrap my mind around the reality that the men I’ve lived with for centuries could really believe Idril would do something to hurt me.

To hurt *anyone*.

The minutes tick by in silence, and the air thickens with anticipation. Everyone’s clearly on edge.

Well… everyone except for Riven and the Omega.

The female scrolls through her phone aimlessly, nodding her head to a beat only she can hear. Like she knows I’m watching her, she glances up and looks right at me, a small, knowing smirk tilting up the corners of her lips.

She holds my gaze steadily. *Confidently.* It almost feels like she can see all the way into my soul.

As soon as I think the words, the Omega’s smirk grows, widening into a grin—

And she fucking *winks at me.*

I jerk, eyes darting around the table to see if anyone else just saw that because… *what the fuck?*

Who is this Omega?

The only one who seems to notice is Gavran, who’s watching the Omega with a frown. She must have some kind of fucking sixth sense because she turns from me, deliberately focusing her attention on Gav.

I don’t know whether to be confused or intimidated.

The two watch each other. The more his frown deepens, the wider she grins. I see the moment something clocks for Gav. His eyes widen, and his face drains of color. Horror etches itself into every line of his expression, and fear—*legitimate fear*—darkens his amber eyes.

Whatever realization he just had, it scared the shit out of him. His eyes dart to me, to the Omega, back to me, and then back to the Omega. With an

audible groan, he props his elbows on top of the table and his head drops into his hands.

"Fuck."

At the sound of his curse, the Omega releases what I can only describe as a fucking *cackle* of delight.

What the fuck is going on?

I'm about to ask what the hell I'm missing when the door creaks open and I no longer care.

I lurch from my seat so fast I send it toppling to the floor. My fucking heart is racing a thousand miles a minute. A tingling like pins and needles begins in my lips, spreads to my face, down my neck, and into my arms and legs. I swallow, and my vision blacks out.

I have to blink twice before it comes back, and the first thing I see—

Idril.

My Mate.

My Omega.

Fucking mine.

Centuries of experience at keeping my emotions locked down around frightened and abused Omegas is all that's preventing me from losing my shit when I take in her appearance. Her hair hangs in a thick, loose braid down her back; messy tendrils escape, framing a too-thin face. Her bright blue eyes are trained on the floor, hands clasped in front of her, trembling fingers twisting nervously.

She's too thin, just like in the meadow. Just remembering how her bones felt beneath that scratchy cotton shirt, under my fingertips, makes my fangs lengthen.

She takes two wary steps into the room and stops, tensing like she's waiting for someone to yell at her or… or…

"Idril."

Her name escapes a breath, falling from my lips into the eight feet of space between us.

Time seems suspended, like the world itself has ceased spinning to watch what happens next. I mentally will her to look up, sending as much love and longing through the Bond as I can, but she still doesn't look at me. She's so tense her fucking shoulders are shaking.

I take a chance and inch closer.

"Idril…"

I know the exact moment the pleading in my voice registers. She flinches, and an Omega whine tears out of her, drowning in pain and hope and despair and fucking *exhaustion*.

I recognize the sound of heavy wood scraping against stone as my brothers lunge from their seats, Idril's whine catapulting their instincts into action. I know it the way a predator stays constantly aware of *any* threat to its Mate. The fact that I know it's Vae and Dax instinctively reacting to the sound of their Scent-Match's pain doesn't soothe my rage. If anything, it pushes me closer to the edge.

I spin, whipping around to face my Packmates. My growl bursts from my chest, exploding through the room in a booming, thunderous roar of warning to stay back.

Dax's eyes widen when my gaze snaps to his. My eyes narrow, and I know, with a certainty I feel in my soul, I could rip out his throat in less time than it takes him to blink. He'd die on this fucking floor, in a puddle of his own blood, before his brilliant mind could even process what happened.

Both males take a few steps back, but nowhere near far enough. My lips curl back from my teeth, and I bare my fangs with a threatening hiss. Right now, I don't even care that I'm more animal than man. I'll be whatever I need to be to protect my Omega and make her happy.

Vae's face twists in pain. He lifts a hand and sways forward. "Caelan—"

My hand moves to my lower back, fingers curling around the hilt of my dagger before he even finishes speaking. I blink, and my arm's extended, hand hovering mid-air. My wrist is bent at a perfect ninety-degree angle, middle and index fingers pointed straight at my target.

My so-called brothers.

The polished steel reflects off the lights from above, flashing with each rotation as it spins through the air with deadly precision. I don't know which male I was aiming for—*Dax? Vae? Both?*—but it doesn't matter. Dax, who was standing in front of Vae, was smart enough to duck the moment the dagger left my hand.

It takes Vae a second longer to comprehend what's happening before he, too, falls to the floor—escaping a blade to the throat by mere seconds.

My dagger hits the stone wall behind them, scoring a deep groove in the stone before landing to clatter against the floor.

Silence.

Then the black-haired Omega throws back her head and laughs.

And laughs…

And keeps laughing.

Riven's lips curve into a smile, and like they're both in on some kind of private joke, the two devolve into wheezing laughter until all eyes are on them—except for those belonging to the two males who've just been taught the first of many valuable lessons.

Stay the fuck away from my Mate—or die.

Our Pack Bonds are screaming, but I can't be fucked enough to care. Vae looks up at me from the floor where he fell, eyes wide and full of betrayal.

I respond with a disgusted sneer, because fuck their pain.

The confrontation lasts no more than a minute, but it's a minute too fucking long when my focus should be on my Mate. Turning back to face Idril and dismissing my Pack is easy.

What's hard is seeing my Omega's eyes *still* locked on the floor, like the potential consequences of daring to look up are too terrifying to risk. The way her fingers frantically twist and pull and smooth the fabric of her shirt fucking shatters me into a thousand pieces.

I wish they hadn't ducked.

I inch closer to my Omega, stopping when I'm about four feet away. Her shoulders hitch in silent sobs, tears carving shimmering tracks in the pale skin of her face.

"Sweet girl."

I don't know what makes me choose that endearment, but the moment Idril hears it, her breaths stutter, her movements still, and her head snaps up in recognition. Those bright blue eyes latch onto mine. The Bond *thrums* like a plucked cord, and then I'm back in that blood-splattered foyer with Idril in my lap, and her head is cradled in my hands, and I'm promising, *'It's okay, sweet girl. It's going to be okay. Breathe. I've got you. I'm here. Everything is fine.'*

And we both know it's a lie, but a lie is all we have, so we latch onto the lie, holding it tight with both hands and refusing to let go.

For weeks we've held on to that lie, pretending it was the truth. Telling ourselves there was still hope over and over until it started to shift and reform, becoming a permanent part of us—a part of our story.

We held onto that lie until eventually, we turned it into the truth.

"It's time," I whisper, taking another step closer.

She shakes her head. Her voice cracks when she whimpers, “I can’t.”

“You can,” I insist fiercely. “You are so, so strong. And you’re not alone anymore.”

I take another step.

Another.

One more, and I’m right in front of her. So close I can see the fear in her eyes.

But under the fear… *hope*.

She watches as I lift my right hand and curl it into a fist. Her eyes grow wide with recognition as I lift it to my sternum and press it against my chest—right over my heart.

With a relieved whimper, Idril deflates and lurches, taking a stumbling step forward. She’s shaking so hard she buckles as her legs give out, and I lunge, reaching out and catching her as she collapses into my arms with a strangled sob.

I wrap my body around my Omega and bury my face into her hair. “Idril. Idril. My Mate. My Omega.”

Wrapping my body protectively around my Omega, we both collapse to the floor. I pull her closer—*tighter*—thanking all the gods and Fate and anything listening for the solid weight of her in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, and because once will never be enough, I repeat the words over and over and over again, rocking back and forth with her in my lap, uncaring that I’m breaking apart in front of witnesses.

“Fates, I’m so sorry. I failed you. I fucking failed you. I thought you’d be safe. I thought they’d protect you. I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry.”

I don’t know how long we spend wrapped up in each other on the floor of the War Room, but I know it’s not long enough. I’d happily stay right where I am all night if not for Daxen’s inability to read a fucking room.

The panic in his voice tells me all I need to know about his state of mind as his shout slices through the heavy silence.

“Someone explain to me what the actual *fuck* is going on!”

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Chapter 13

Daxen

The sound the Omega makes when she falls into my brother's arms is something I'll hear for the rest of my life. It's branded onto my soul, burned into my brain.

Despite being alive for over five centuries, I've never heard anything like it. I've held mates as they've lost the Fated half of their soul. I've seen mothers grieve the death of their children. I've witnessed families' homes, with everything inside, destroyed in war.

I've heard grief, *lived* it.

This… this isn't grief.

This is a female who's been forced to be strong far past her breaking point. A female who just used the very last of her strength to fall into my brother's arms and nearly died getting there.

Maybe I should have known when his dagger was spinning straight at my head, but even then I was more confused than anything. Even then, something inside of me refused to believe the truth. Refused to acknowledge what I've been fighting to deny for days now.

It wasn't until Caelan reached for the Omega, pulling her close, and burying his face in her hair that the world stopped—and I finally understood.

And when my brother fell to the floor, curling his frame over hers like he was prepared to protect her with his life… Something inside of me crumbled to dust. Around me, the world lurched, then started to spin again—like everything was put to rights. Like everything was finally the way it was always meant to be.

Like my whole universe hadn't just been rocked on its foundations.

Like my fucking life didn't just implode.

Caelan's been blocking us from his side of the Bond since the moment he woke up. Now, he finally lets us in. His emotions flow freely, flooding the Bond.

And nearly destroying me in the process.

Light shoots down the Bond and washes over me, drowning me in a brilliant explosion of silver. I gasp for air, lungs tightening to the point of pain. My chest constricts, and my hands fly to my sternum, curling into fists that I use to pound against my flesh.

My heart pounds frantically against my ribs as my brain struggles to comprehend what I'm seeing.

But I don't need logic or science to tell me what I know I'm experiencing only a glimpse of. I don't need my brain to put a name to what I know as surely as I know my own name.

Their Bond.

I can see it as easily as I can see the green threads of our Pack Bond. Except this—this Bond is a *thousand* times more intense. A thousand times more incredible. The silver thread of their Bond is unlike anything I've ever imagined could be possible.

It's Caelan. It's Idril. It's both of them, together.

Two souls twisted into a spiraling chord so incandescent—so fucking ancient and bright and *alive*—that it knocks me back a step. My hands fly out in front of my face, like doing so will somehow shield me from facing the truth.

I bend over, bracing myself by gripping the flesh of my thighs with numb fingers.

It feels like forever before I finally get my breathing under control, and once I can finally take a breath, I shout, "Someone tell me what the *fuck* is going on!"

Calean's head snaps up. He turns, leveling me with a glare that feels like it should light me on fire. My newly healed hand throbs, twitching at the recent memory of white-hot, fiery pain. Of burning flesh that heals, burns, heals, and burns again.

With the Omega cradled in his arms, Caelan pushes to his feet and straightens to his full height.

"It's very simple, Daxen. Idril is *mine*. My Fated Mate. Do you understand?"

Even now, part of me still wants to deny his words. Deny what's happening. This isn't my brother. This isn't Caelan. This is a stranger. A stranger who deliberately threw a dagger at my head. A stranger wearing my brother's face and speaking with my brother's voice. It's not right. It's not real. It *can't* be.

Everything hits me at once, slamming into me with the force of a freight train. My mouth is so dry my throat clicks audibly as I try to swallow. I'm shaking. Shaking and sweating, swaying on my feet, seconds from imploding.

I reach out, blindly searching for something to hold onto as the room spins and the floor heaves beneath my feet—someone moans, long and low. A heavy weight lands on my shoulder and I flinch, scrambling away from the touch as my stomach heaves and bile surges into my throat.

Fates… that sound—that moaning—I need it to stop. I need it to go away. It's *awful*. It's… It's…

It's coming from me.

"Daxen?"

My head snaps up, finding Vaelenor kneeling in front of me, eyes wide and wild and agonized.

"She was telling the truth," I whisper, like maybe if I speak low enough, no one else will hear me. No one else will come to the same realization I have.

This whole fucking time… this whole time…

Fates… oh gods…

No, no, no, no!

What have I done?

My eyes latch onto Vae's. For once, I'm looking to him for help. For a fucking lifeline to hold onto so I don't drown in this fucking ocean of guilt that's pulling me under.

But all I see in his eyes are my own emotions reflected at me.

Horror. Self-loathing. Desperation.

His grip on my upper arms is painful, but right now, it's the only thing keeping me from losing it completely.

Until his emerald eyes turn pleading and he asks, "What—what do we do? How do we fix this?"

It takes everything in me not to laugh. *Fix this? FIX. THIS?*

Doesn't he fucking get it? There is no fixing this!

Like the world's shittiest movie, moments from the last two weeks replay in my mind, each worse than the last: every cruel word, every mocking phrase, every sneer and glare and accusation.

I reach for grief and self-righteousness, but that lens is gone, crushed by the weight of truth and my own ignorance.

Each moment unfolds in stark clarity, forcing me to acknowledge everything I've previously been content to ignore. Like a play I've seen a thousand times performed in a language I didn't know but was pretending to understand.

The night we brought her back to HQ. Silas carrying her to the holding cell. Water dripping from still-wet linen, leaving a pink-hued trail of droplets on the tile floor of the med bay in his wake.

A pale arm, covered in bruises, swaying limply with each of Silas's steps. She was thin, like she hadn't eaten in months.

She didn't fight back, not even when Silas wrenched the door open and tossed her in.

The sound of her body landing on the concrete. Her pained whimper cut off by the slam of the cell door.

When she asked about Caelan's gunshot wound… Fates, there had been genuine distress in her voice. I can see it now. So fucking clear it's painful.

I lunged at her, like a monster. I *terrified* her.

The light fading from her bright blue eyes. Until nothing remained but acceptance. *Resignation.* A scared, injured Omega, moments from death, who always knew this moment would come for her eventually.

Who always expected to die at the hands of an Alpha. A male who should have protected her. Who didn't understand her.

Who didn't care to try.

Fuck! I saw it. In the seconds before her eyes closed, I fucking saw it. A spark of—*something*. A last desperate wish *for…for… what?*

My hands curl into fists. I fight to hold onto the image—dissecting each micro-expression in that moment as I search for the answer.

What did she pray for in what she was sure were her final breaths? And why am I only now recalling my own memory of that moment?

Right as the answer begins to sharpen, the memory is yanked away, and I'm thrown into another.

Then another.

And another.

Another.

One after the next after the next until my stomach heaves and my Alpha snarls in rage and contempt.

That's when I realize these memories are coming from *him*. They're mine… and they're not mine. The memories are the same, but the attention to detail… *That's* different. Like the same shot taken from two different angles. My supposed logic vs my Alpha's priorities. Two sides of the same coin.

The same, but different.

I know it's only been a few seconds, but time feels strange, like the seconds are crawling by, each moment passing ten times slower than it is in my head.

I'm trapped—*locked in my mind*—a prison of memories I'm being forced to relive.

The first time I Alpha Commanded Idril in the library.

Hours later, viciously tearing apart her memories with her mother. Using the few happy moments she had left to punish her for existing.

The way her hands shook as she ran them up and down her clothing. The way she smoothed, bunched, and twisted the fabric. Trying to Nest. Trying to Nest with the rough, itchy clothing I provided her, trying to Nest because she was scared. Because she was desperate for comfort. *Because I hurt her.*

The forced rations. The cold attic with no blankets. The glass shattering against the wall behind her head. The cell.

The Alpha Commands.

I'm shoved out of my head and back into reality. Vae's still in front of me, waiting for me to tell him what to do—how to fix this—but I ignore him, my gaze snapping across the room to Silas.

"The Alpha Commands," I murmur. Silas's eyes meet mine and his face drains of color, his eyes widening as the horror of what we've done solidifies.

Vae's body jerks. When I refocus on him, he's looking at me like he just realized I've cost him everything.

Fuck… maybe I have.

No.

NO.

Denial surges through me, and I hold onto it with everything I am. This is not happening. *It's not. I—I can fix this.*

I have to fix this.

There's no other fucking option.

I'll… I'll explain. I'll explain everything. And Caelan—stoic, calm, understanding Caelan—will listen. He'll listen to my reasoning, and once I've explained, he'll get it. He'll understand. He has to.

He'll still be pissed, of course. He'll be super fucking pissed, probably for a while, but he'll forgive me eventually. He's angry, but anger is good. Anger means he cares.

As long as no more daggers come flying at my head, we'll be alright.

I take a deep breath. *Another.* When Vae says my name, I hold up a hand, aware the entire fucking room is staring at the two of us. Watching me freak out. Watching Daxen fucking Montclair break apart on the fucking floor in the most epic meltdown in history.

Alright, Montclair. Stop spiraling. Get off the floor and fix this.

Right.

I push myself up—*when did I get back down on the floor to begin with?*—swipe my hand across my brow and take in the room, fighting not to grimace visibly.

Everyone's staring.

All except for two people, who aren't paying attention to anything at all—especially me or Vae.

Caelan and Idril sit on the rarely used couch across the room. They're facing each other, heads bent so close they're nearly touching. Caelan's hands cradle Idril's, thumbs sweeping across the pale skin of her knuckles.

Every few seconds, he shifts—reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, or cup her cheek in his palm. They're in their own world, oblivious to everything around them.

Which is fine, but… I need to explain. Not only to Caelan, but Idril as well.

Yes… especially to Idril. Of course. Gods… why can't I think clearly?

Plan in place, I lurch forward, but my shaking legs don't want to cooperate, and I stumble, almost falling to my knees.

Vae catches me before I can fall.

"Come sit down," he murmurs, urging me to turn and head back to the table, where everyone else waits—watching me.

Judging me.

“I’m fine,” I snap, shoving him back.

“Dax—”

“I said I’m fine!”

My shout echoes through the room; Idril jumps, flinching away from Caelan and darting panicked eyes around the room. They land on me, and she shrinks down, shoulders inching up to her ears like she’s trying to disappear.

Caelan turns, pinning me with a glare. His eyes meet mine, and I’m swallowed whole by the need to talk to him. To fucking fix this *now* so we can move forward and put the last two weeks behind us.

I *need* to explain. Make him—*them*—understand.

“We didn’t know!” The words escape, but before I can explain what I mean, Caelan scoffs. This time, when his eyes meet mine, they’re full of absolute hatred.

The naked disgust renders me mute. At my side, Vaelenor chokes on a strangled sound of anguish and steps forward, raising his hand in supplication.

“Gods, I—”

I follow his gaze, assuming he’s addressing Caelan, but his eyes aren’t on our brother.

They’re on Idril. And they’re brimming with pain.

He turns his gaze to me with haunted eyes full of accusation. His expression twists into anger, and I suddenly know exactly how this is going to play out.

“You *swore* she was lying,” he shouts, shoving a shaking finger into my chest. “You said— I *told* you. I fucking begged you—how many times, Daxen?”

His words are a jumbled, stuttering mess, but he keeps going.

“I fucking *told* you, over and over. I said we needed to be sure. I said—How many times did I say that? And you—you fucking *swore*.”

I swallow thickly, trying to choke down the ball of emotion in my throat. I can’t deal with both of them right now. I need to put out one fire at a time, and Caelan’s the priority. Ignoring Vae, I turn back to my brother and try again to plead my case.

“You don’t understand the position we were in. We had nothing to go on but the facts as we understood them, and the word of an Omega we didn’t

know and couldn't trust. We made the best decisions we could with the information we had."

There. Concise. Logical. To the point. It makes sense, and it's the truth.

Caelan stares at me, unblinking. Then he bends over, scoops up his Omega, and stands. At first, she protests, but he leans down and murmurs something that has her relaxing into his arms as he stalks across the room and retakes his seat from earlier.

He stalks right past Vae and I like we're not even here, and despite taking the same seat as before, he makes a point to move both it and the seat beside it as far away from where Vae and I were sitting as possible.

With no other choice, Vae and I reluctantly return to our own seats. The room is so silent I can hear my own heart pounding.

Caelan places Idril on the chair to his left, positioning himself as a barrier between us and leveling me with dark, onyx eyes full of judgment.

"Why would Idril lie? Explain it to me, Daxen. Tell me why you think she'd lie, knowing the truth would come out eventually. Tell me, *brother*, why you treated my Mate like a prisoner. *Make me understand*."

Every word lands like a blow, demanding an answer while serving as a condemnation.

Idril shifts, and like he's attuned to her every desire, Caelan moves so she can peer around his frame. Her bright blue eyes are wet and glistening with tears. The way Caelan looked at me hurt. The way Idril's looking at me is *so* much worse. Never before—*not once in my whole fucking life*—have I wanted to shrink beneath someone's gaze until I disappear. Until I no longer fucking exist.

There's no disgust in her bright blue eyes. Only pain. Pain and betrayal and heartbreak. And no matter how much I want to… I can't look away.

Caelan pushes back from the table and stands, positioning himself right behind her. He places one hand on her shoulder and the other on the back of her chair, like a knight guarding a queen.

An image appears in my mind's eye, like a memory from another life. Idril on a throne, long silver hair streaming down her back in gentle waves, set off by a delicate white-gold crown with five brilliant gemstones adorning it. Figures stand, guarding her back—but their features are blurry, and the image is gone before I can decipher who they were.

Where the hell did that come from?

I’m left with an odd feeling—almost like that moment’s been overlaid in reality on top of this one. That feeling only intensifies as her lips part, and she speaks, for the first time since arriving in the War Room.

And everyone listens.

“I’ve made myself small for you for weeks, Daxen.” Her gaze sweeps the table. “For *all* of you.”

Her eyes return to me, drilling deep like she can see inside my soul. “But *especially* for you.”

She swallows thickly, takes a deep breath, and straightens her spine.

“I obeyed. Never complained. Never talked back. Never asked for more than I was given.” She lifts a hand, reaching for Caelan over her shoulder. She’s shaking. Clearly terrified. But… she’s speaking anyway.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to *beg* someone to believe you? To tell the truth—to tell *strangers* the very real, very terrible story of your life and what you’ve gone through—and for them to laugh in your face while they call you a liar and hold your life in their hands?”

Her lower lip trembles and she bites down on it hard. Her lashes flutter, tears falling from her eyes and slipping down her cheeks. Inside of me, something else cracks apart and turns to ash.

Caelan’s fingers spasm, tightening on her shoulder, like a part of him can’t bear to hear anymore.

“You call yourselves his brothers,” she whispers, and for the first time, real anger slips into her tone—but not for herself. For *Caelan*.

“I told you. I told you so many times that we had a Bond. That he was my Mate. But you were all so sure I was lying that no one considered what might happen if I was telling the truth. Not one of you spared a thought for how that might affect him.”

She shakes her head in disappointment. More tears fall, carving paths down her cheek and making her blue eyes impossibly brighter.

“He *trusted you*. He had so much faith in you. You didn’t protect me, and that’s fine.”

The way she waves her hand like she’s waving away the notion of being cared for as something ridiculous punches me in the gut.

“I didn’t expect protection,” she says. “At first I hoped for kindness, but quickly realized how delusional it was to wish for even that much. How I was treated was unacceptable, but I knew when Silas dragged me out of my

father’s house—before we even drove off the property—that something was very wrong and somehow, all of this was going to fall on my shoulders.”

Her breath hitches.

“I didn’t expect you to treat me with kindness. I didn’t expect you to treat me fairly.” Her features harden. “*But he did*.”

Her words knock the air from my lungs. She straightens her shoulders, curling her hands into fists in her lap as her gaze bounces from me to Vae, to Gavran, then Silas as she speaks.

“When Caelan and I were surrounded, and I was sure we were going to die, he promised me that his Pack was coming to save us. To take us both away from there. Away from my father. He promised a future where I never again had to be afraid to exist. To live in constant fear of being punished and starved and beaten. And for a little while, I believed in that future. I believed, because *his* faith in you was *so* strong—so *absolute*—it felt impossible not to.”

Her voice is so soft by the time she admits that last part that I wonder if she even realizes she spoke it out loud. There’s a throbbing ache in my sternum. My throat tightens, and it’s clear I’m not the only one affected by her words. Branwen’s eyes are bright with tears. Next to her, Riven’s expression is hard, jaw clenched in rage. Silas hasn’t looked up since she started to speak, and even Gav’s face has drained of color.

Idril doesn’t notice any of it. She hasn’t looked up from her lap since her last surge of strength, but she seems determined to continue. Despite everything I thought I knew, I find myself respecting her bravery. Wanting to protect it—to protect *her*.

Fates… I am so fucked up.

“None of you owe me anything outside of what your honor demands.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Gavran visibly flinch.

“As far as I’m concerned, none of you betrayed me. You can’t betray someone if you never promise them anything to begin with. And that’s exactly what you delivered. Nothing.”

Fuck.

“But—” She inhales sharply and looks up, eyes bright with anger. “You *did* betray Caelan.”

She deflates, like her words have drained her of every ounce of strength she had left in her small frame. Caelan moves, stepping around her chair

and lifting her into his arms, retaking his seat now that she's finished speaking.

The silence is deafening. The vents kick on, pumping AC and de-scenter, drowning out the sound of our breathing and—

I strain my ears, unsure if I'm hearing what I think I am. But when Vae's spine goes rigid and his head swings to the side, eyes wide with shock, I know he hears it too.

Purring. Caelan's purring.

Something about the sound of my brother purring for his Fated Mate sends me into a panic. Later, I'll go over this moment a thousand fucking times. I'll replay it until I scream, but I don't know if I'll ever find an answer that's not wrapped up in jealousy and the lightning-strike realization that—despite my distrust—I'll never, *ever* have an Omega of my own to love and protect and purr for.

All I know is that my whole life has just changed on a dime. I've betrayed my brother. I've betrayed my Pack. I've betrayed an Omega and almost broke her in the process. This is—for a male who's spent his entire life protecting Omegas—the kind of failure that makes you start questioning everything. *Because how the fuck do you get something so wrong?*

But instead of keeping my mouth shut and letting my brother have this after everything the two of them have been through—most of it thanks to me—I lash out. A surge of jealousy washes over me. My mouth parts, and words I don't remember deciding to say tumble out.

"Isn't your wolven Mate wondering where you are by now?"

A choked groan bursts from Vae, and I instantly wish I could magically rewind the last ten seconds and stitch my fucking mouth shut.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Idril twists in Caelan's arms, turning to face me with wide, startled eyes brimming with confusion and pain. They're bloodshot. Rimmed with exhaustion. She stares at me and blinks—a long, slow blink that broadcasts her thoughts so clearly she may as well be screaming them.

Why?

Her lower lip trembles and I watch, hating myself, as something twists in her expression.

Why, Daxen?

Her voice in my head grows louder. Her eyes beg me for an answer.

Why do you hate me?

I shake my head, and even knowing she can't hear me and this is all in my fucking guilt-ridden imagination, I answer in my mind.

I don't know. I'm so, so fucking sorry. I don't know.

Her expression falls, and she closes her eyes like she's too tired to look at me anymore. Her features twist in pain.

That's when I realize….

I hate myself. I hate myself more than I could *ever* hate her.

Caelen's hand lifts to gently cup the back of her head. His body is tense, curled around her like someone's going to kick down the door and rip her from his arms.

I've never seen him like this. Never, in all our years together, have I seen him so much as embrace another female.

"What is he talking about, Idril?" Caelan's voice is soft. *Gentle.* I can't hold back my relieved breath at the lack of accusation in his tone.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Branwen reach for her phone. The Omega looks downright giddy.

I don't like it.

"I just texted him," she informs the room, voice sweet as pie. "He wanted to give you two a few minutes alone. Said it was important Idril be able to reunite with her Mate without him hovering like a bloody shadow."

"How kind of him to agree to Idril's request," I respond.

"Oh, no. He offered," Branwen clarifies, smile widening into a grin that makes me grind my teeth. "He wanted it to be a special moment for them. I don't think he realized they were going to already have an audience when she finally got to see him, though."

The message is clear—we're all assholes for not considering that Idril and Caelan might want a private moment together. I glare at the Omega, but I swear to the Fates nothing phases this female.

Probably because she can *See* everything coming, the idea of that level of control is so enticing it makes me sick.

The Omega turns her bright smile on Caelan, and when she looks at him, all the menace is gone. "You don't know me, but I'm Branwen. I'm here for her," she nods toward Idril. "There's a lot these idiots haven't bothered to update you on, but there's one big thing you should know."

Without asking, the Omega takes it upon herself to explain how Soren discovered Idril and their Bond, his arrival, and everything that came after.

Caelan sits the whole time stoically, letting her speak.

"He's a nice bloke," Branwen says when she's finished. "And despite your Pack doing their damnedest to convince him Idril was a lying, manipulative bitch, he never fell for it. She told him the truth, and that was enough for him."

Caelan glances down at Idril, who blinks up at him with tired eyes, like his proximity alone is enough for her to relax for the first time.

"He took care of you?" Caelan asks. Idril nods.

Caelan shoots me a glare. "You tried to convince him she was lying?"

What is wrong with this Omega? For fucks sake, if she's that hell-bent on sabotaging our relationship further, she doesn't need to be here to do it.

"You know, there's a Hotel 8 about fifteen miles down the road. I'm sure they have vacancies. I can call now and reserve a room for you. My treat." I flash her a biting smile.

"Oh no, thank you," she replies, being purposely obtuse. "I actually quite enjoy the bed in my room. Oh!" Her eyes widen like she's just thought of something, and she spins in her chair to face Gavran. "Do you think Idril can sleep in an *actual* bed now? I mean… surely you won't make her return to that cell in the dungeon again, right? With no bed and no Nest and no bathroom?"

She cocks her head, blinking innocently.

I'm going to explode.

"Honestly, I was kind of shocked you sent her back there after you Alpha Commanded her so many times she seized, and her body shut down from the pain. Then again… I don't run an organization full of warriors who haven't got the sense the gods gave them, so what do I know?"

Her smile is feral.

So is the growl that explodes out of Caelan.

"Oh fuck," Vae tenses, like he's seconds from running out of here as fast as he can. Gavran's eyes narrow on the Omega, nostrils flaring when her only response is an exaggerated blink.

Before Caelan can launch across and tear out our throats, the doors to the War Room swing open.

Soren and Kane enter, and Soren's eyes go straight to Idril. His shoulders relax, and he exhales in palpable relief.

Branwen's eyes gleam with mischief, making my stomach roll. "Oh, good! Soren, be a doll and take your Mate from Caelan for a moment."

“Branwen.” Gav barks her name, speaking up for the first time since we all arrived. “Stop.”

She taps her finger on her chin and pretends to consider before replying primly, “Thank you for the suggestion, but I don’t think I will.”

Soren crosses the room, coming to a stop next to Caelan and Idril. There’s a tense moment as both Alphas stare each other down. Then, to my shock, Caelan pushes back from the table and stands. He turns, muscles strung so tight I can see them through the fabric of his henley, and carefully passes Idril into Soren’s arms.

The wolven cradles her to his chest, inclining his head in thanks.

What the actual fuck?

My Packmate pivots and turns to me. He takes four determined strides in my direction. I stand, bracing myself for what I know is coming. He doesn’t slow down, using his momentum as he cocks back his fist and swings, landing a punch on my face that would have sent a human to the emergency room.

He doesn’t hold back. I stumble, trip on the leg of my chair, and fall, sliding across the floor.

I lay there, blinking bleary eyes at the wooden beams of the ceiling and probing my tongue along my split lip until I feel the flesh start to tingle and heal.

It takes much longer than normal thanks to the number of times I re-healed my burns while killing Cage.

Worth it. It’s not like I had any regrets before, but now I’m even more sure in my decision to end his life for what he did, and what he tried to do.

At least I did one thing right. At least I saved her from that fucker.

A few seconds later, Vae falls next to me with a groan. He rolls to his side, gasping for breath and holding his hands against his stomach.

I roll my head to the side, and my eyes widen as Caelan stalks toward Gav. No fucking way is he—

Gav stands.

Holy. Shit.

Hands clasped behind his back, Gav inclines his head stoically, giving Caelan permission I’m not sure he would have asked for regardless.

Caelan clocks him right in the face, splitting the skin along his cheekbone. Silas is next, and he follows Gav’s lead, standing and clasping his hands behind his back.

“You should punch me more than once,” Silas tells him morosely.

“Explain.”

“We decided to Alpha—”

“*I* decided,” Gav interrupts, talking over Silas. “It was ultimately my decision.”

Silas swallows thickly. “Three questions. It was obvious after the second question she couldn’t handle a third. Gav was about to issue the order to stop. But I—” His voice breaks, and he lifts his head, looking at Idril.

She’s standing in front of Soren, eyes wide as saucers, hands covering her mouth in disbelief.

“Don’t look at her,” Caelan snaps. “Look at me.” He waits for Silas to meet his eyes before demanding, “Tell me what you did.”

“I believed Daxen. Believed she set you up. Believed she was lying about being your Mate. Believed she was working with her father. I didn’t ask questions. I didn’t think for myself.”

Silas blinks, and tears fall from his lashes—something I never thought I’d see from the normally indolent Alpha.

“I deserve whatever punishment is coming to me.” he raises his head, his face a mask of misery. “I’m sorry.”

Caelan’s left hand lands on his shoulder to hold him in place, and his right hand curls into a fist. He punches him.

Then he does it again.

And a third time.

The third time, Caelan releases him, and he, too, falls to the ground. Caelan bends over, fists the front of his shirt, and yanks him to his feet.

He shoves Silas forward and points a shaking finger at his Mate. “You don’t apologize to me. You apologize to *her*.”

Silas swallows thickly, a bruise forming on the side of his face as he looks up and meets Idril’s eyes.

“I’m sorry.” For the first time I can remember, he sounds truly sincere. “I fucked up. I hurt you. I let others hurt you and egged them on. I watched you suffer, watched you starve, kept food from you, made your life hell, and was a complete asshole. I don’t expect forgiveness, but I need you to know… I’ve never hated myself more than I have these last few weeks. And I am so, so sorry.”

Idril doesn’t speak. Soren’s fingers curl, wrapping around her neck from behind. His hand is so large it swallows the entire delicate length.

“Uhm, I—” Her voice is small. Unsure. Like she’s fighting some kind of instinct and doesn't know which way to bend. Caelan crosses the room and crouches in front of her. He takes her face in his hands, swiping his fingers under her eyes to stop her tears before they can fall.

It’s an oddly familiar movement, like he’s done it a hundred times before.

“You don’t have to accept his apology unless you want to. You don’t owe *anyone* your forgiveness when they hurt you. Not Silas. Not your father. Not my Pack, or anyone else.”

He reaches out, tucking a loose strand of hair away from her face. The way he touches her makes me want to look away. Like I’m watching something intimate. Something I don’t deserve to see.

“Sometimes, apologies aren’t enough. Sometimes, no matter the intention, they’re just words. And you don’t have to carry their weight. You don’t owe anyone absolution because you think it’s expected of you. Their guilt is their own. If you choose to forgive them—now, in the future, or never—that’s your gift to give or to withhold.”

She nods, exhaling a deep breath. Caelan stands, coming face to face with the wolven heir. He reaches out, extending a hand which Soren accepts without hesitation. Their palms meet above Idril’s head like they’ve struck some kind of solemn agreement.

“Thank you for being there. For protecting Idril when I couldn’t. Knowing she had you—even for a little while—means more than I could ever explain.”

Soren inclines his head. “Nothing in this world could have pulled me from her side.”

Caelan shakes his head. “It’s not just that. It’s the fact that you trusted her. She hasn’t had anyone to stand by her side since her mother died. For me… It was the first kind of hell knowing she was defenseless and alone even if I had no say in the matter.”

Caelan’s words are heartfelt and honest.

I hate them.

They may as well be a fucking bullet through my chest. I can hear every Fatesdamned word he *isn’t* saying.

‘My Pack didn’t trust her. They didn’t believe her. They didn’t stand by her when she needed them the most. I trusted them, and they betrayed us both. They hurt her when they should have protected her.’

Vae leans over and hangs his head in his hands, shame radiating off of him in waves. I reach out and place a comforting hand on his shoulder, but he shakes off my touch.

“Vae, I—”

“Stop, Daxen. Just… fuck off, yeah? I don’t want to hear any more of your fucking facts or logic.”

I flinch.

“I trusted your bullshit ‘evidence,’ when I should have trusted my instincts. Now look.”

A fist appears around my lungs and squeezes. *Is this how it’s going to be from now on? Are they both just going to take every opportunity they can to remind me of how bad I fucked up? Can’t they see I’m already fucking struggling?*

I was so fucking sure. So fucking confident.

And the one time it mattered the most, I got it wrong.

Astronomically, horribly, life-alteringly wrong.

I can tell myself this is the first time something like this has ever happened… but is it? Have I fucked up before? Gotten things wrong despite believing with everything in me that I was right? What other decisions have I made without considering my own biases and how they were affecting my thinking? How many times have I fucked up like this, and how many others have suffered for it?

The Omega—oblivious to my internal meltdown-turned-crisis—whispers my name, yanking me back down to earth.

“Daxen.”

Once again, she’s on Caelan’s lap. I’m the only one still standing, fingers gripping the wood of the chair back like that’ll save me from this hell I’ve wandered into.

I turn, giving her my attention but refusing to speak in case something comes out I don’t mean.

She clears her throat and her hands reach for the hem of her shirt, fingers winding and twisting in the fabric.

A coping mechanism.

An attempt to self-soothe when she’s scared. *Hurt.*

The fist around my lungs tightens. My throat feels like it’s fucking closing. I glare at those delicate fingers, pale and chapped from the chemicals we’ve made her use to clean.

Stop. Fuck, please stop. I can’t watch this anymore.

“Will you please sit, so we can tell Caelan what happened?”

Her voice shakes when she asks. Her fingers twirl, twist, and pull at the fabric. Tighter and tighter, her anxiety increasing with every silent second that passes while waiting for my answer.

Caelan bends down. Presses a gentle kiss to her temple.

“It’s my father,” she says. “The Omegas and what he’s doing to them. The fire, and…” She turns, glancing at Caelan over her shoulder.

Fates… she’s afraid.

Maybe he doesn't see it. Maybe no one else sees it but me. But I know what she looks like when she’s scared, when she’s bracing for harsh words. For pain. I’ve always assumed the little tells were an act—

But if I was wrong about Caelan…

That means the way she curls her shoulders and the way her fingers still right before they start to tremble and the way her eyes snap to the floor like she’s been trained to keep them there…

All those tells are real.

And right now, they’re all present.

And the way she looks at Caelan? It’s so obvious. He still doesn’t know what she can do. No idea about her blood and what her father is doing with it. No idea what she is or what her abilities are.

Fates, when did I learn to read her so perfectly? When did I memorize every one of her micro expressions and tuck them deep inside my soul the way I have with my Pack and my team?

And why the fuck is she asking me for help, of all people?

“What she’s trying to say is that your mind works differently than all of ours,” Branwen adds, choosing for once to use her powers for good instead of evil. “So sit your arse down so we can fill Caelan in on what the bloody hell has been happening around here. Also, this one,” she tosses a thumb over her shoulder at Riven, “is chomping at the bit to speak. So please, for the love of all that’s holy, have your emotional crisis later.”

“Aye, I agree with the lass,” Kane adds with all the gravity of an asshole casting his first vote in parliament.

I forgot the Scottish bastard was even here. Fuck, my head aches.

I exhale a frustrated breath and retake my seat with obvious reluctance. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to discuss any of this. I don’t want to sit between my Packmates—both of whom are pissed at me for the same, yet very different reasons—and feel their anger thrumming down the Bond.

There’s one thing I do want, though, and that’s answers.

So against my better judgment, I open my laptop and boot it up.

Like my body doesn’t care what my brain wants, my gaze slides to the left, toward Idril.

She’s curled into Caelan, Soren’s hand resting on her thigh. My Packmate is apparently fine with that because he’s not yet threatened to remove the mutt’s appendage.

Like she can feel my gaze on her, Idril glances up, peering at me through her lashes. When she notices I’m already looking at her, she stills.

Then she graces me with the softest, most gentle smile I’ve ever received. It's tentative. *Wary.*

Genuine.

I take the olive branch for what it is—aware that out of the two of us, I should be the one offering, not receiving—and incline my head the smallest amount.

Her rigid muscles relax on a soft exhale.

I turn from her to focus on my laptop. No matter how bad I want to look back, I don’t.

Because after everything that’s happened in the last hour, all the realizations and truths and upheavals, nothing has scared me—genuinely *terrified* me—more than the suddenly overwhelming desire to see more of those soft, gentle smiles.

Or just how selfishly I want to steal them for myself.

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Chapter 14

Idril

I study my hands, lying flat on the table in front of me. They're pale. *Small*. The worn oak under my palms was once smooth, but now it's littered with dents and scratches that speak to its history.

I feel like an interloper—a spectator in my own life.

A mug appears in front of me. When I glance up, Caelan gives me a soft smile, which I return as he takes his seat and scoots it closer. Another hand—just as large as Caelan's, but tan and covered in tattoos—nudges the mug, a silent encouragement to drink.

Both of my Mates have been doing whatever they can to take care of me all evening—plying me with tea and snacks, bringing me soft blankets, and checking on me almost obsessively.

"Are you hungry? You didn't eat the almonds; are they too salty? You need to eat something light so you don't get sick."

"Are you thirsty? Do you want more tea? Water? Was it hot enough?"

"If you're too cold, we can move to the kitchen. Are the blankets soft enough? What fabrics do you like most? What about textures?"

Maybe another Omega would have been annoyed by the first dozen questions, but I can't imagine ever getting tired of feeling this way. It's like a dream—an impossibility.

The topics we've been discussing have been tough, but their care bolsters me. Makes me feel like it's okay to exist, even if we still don't know who I am or what's happening to me and why. Even my Omega has crept out from her fortress. Warily, of course, but she's interested. Cautiously optimistic.

Soren, Caelan, Kane, and even Gavran have been encouraging me to speak up. To actively participate in conversations. It's… *strange.*

I just wish I had more to say. Mostly, I listen as each male—and Branwen— chimes in, adding pieces to the conversation with their own knowledge. I finally discovered how Caelan found vials of blood in my father's study and how that blood led them to Doctor Albertson's.

Then I listened, horrified, as Daxen described what they found in his home.

The evidence board.

The notes.

The photos.

The plans to inject my DNA into kidnapped Omegas and breed them.

Since the other night, I've known he's been using my blood to hurt other Omegas. I knew it had something to do with what—or who—I am, but I didn't know any specifics.

Now that I do, it's tearing me apart.

Everyone keeps telling me it's not my fault—even Vae and Daxen, shockingly— but it's hard to believe them. A few days ago, almost everyone in this room hated me. *Now that they know I was telling the truth, they suddenly think I'm blameless? And I'm supposed to simply take them at their word?*

I can't help thinking that if I'd asked more questions, found the courage to stand up for myself, or tried to run away sooner or *anything*…

Maybe I could have saved those Omegas.

Is this ultimately my fault because I was too much of a coward to act sooner? If my blood is being used for something so horrific, what does that make me? Am I dangerous, just like Dax said I was? Does it even matter if I try to do good in this world if my very existence causes harm?

A cool hand brushes the back of my neck. I glance to my right and give Caelan a reassuring smile, but my lower lip starts to tremble, and I bite down on it so I don't burst into tears.

His hand gathers my hair and pulls it off my shoulders, running a soothing hand down my back. "Are you alright? We can stop for the night."

I shake my head. Physically, I'm fine.

No. That's a lie.

I'm exhausted. My body aches. My head is pounding. And quite honestly, there's not much I'd do for a hot bath now that I can finally have

one.

But I've learned to live with discomfort. I've mastered ignoring physical aches to function, and that is important.

"I'm fine," I reassure him. "I promise."

This would be much easier if I could figure out how to ignore the ache in my soul every time Dax or Vae speak. Truthfully, the hardest part about being here is the way my Bonds perk up every time they so much as look my way. I *have* to figure something out because Bonding those Alphas is never going to happen.

It's only a matter of time before one of them scents my Omega perfume. So far I've been lucky. They haven't even thought to question it. Probably because they assume my Bond with Caelan functions the same way as a Bloodmate or Moonmate Bond. While Scent-Match Bonds will always apply to the whole Pack—assuming the Pack is Fated as well—the Species-specific Bonds don't.

There's a very good chance both Alphas will outright reject me when the time comes, but even if they don't, the result will be the same.

I will never tie myself to Alphas who would never love or want me without a Fated Bond. I won't spend the rest of my life attached to a male out of obligation.

I can't imagine a Fate worse than waking up every day and wondering if, secretly, my Mate would rather burn the Bond out of his chest than spend another moment pretending that Fate got it right.

This is ridiculous. I need to focus. I have Caelan. I have Soren. I've survived two decades' worth of terror and pain and fear and lived through it.

I'll survive this, too.

Soren leans closer, like he can sense my distress, and I exhale in relief when his warm palm settles on top of my thigh, squeezing gently. He leaves it there, and I'm grateful for it. His touch is grounding.

The door swings open, and Branwen saunters in, last to return from the short break Gavran insisted we take.

"How are things back home?" Gavran asks as Branwen retakes her seat. She shrugs, placing her phone face-down on the table.

"As well as can be. Mum and my aunts were having a snit knowing Varenthrall'd taken me, so they're a bit overprotective at the moment."

"Wait. Your family *knew* you'd be taken?" Silas's mouth drops open so wide I can see the back of his throat. "And they still let you get on a plane?"

Branwen picks up a piece of toast and takes a delicate bite. She lifts a finger, then proceeds to take a full minute to chew and swallow before she answers.

"Yes."

Silas throws himself back in his chair dramatically. My lips curve in an amused smile as, on either side of me, Soren and Caelan both break out in laughter.

Even Gavran's eyes tighten—which I'm starting to realize is his version of a full-blown smile.

"How did you escape?" Riven asks. "Forgive me, but I'm fascinated. I had no idea Seers still existed. There's very little written about the Talent. I was under the impression it died out centuries ago."

Vae lifts a brow. "Wow, there are things you don't know? Here I was, thinking you had a direct line to the gods."

"They've been screening my calls," Riven replies glibly.

Branwen smiles and sips her tea. I find myself leaning in, admittedly captivated by the Omega's ability. I don't quite understand how it works, but it seems both amazing and a little bit terrifying.

We've barely had a chance to speak since she arrived, and I have *so* many questions. This is another girl who can do something that no one else can. I want to know *everything*.

"My family comes from a long line of Omega Seers who originated from Scotland and Wales. We're human, and only the females are blessed with the gift," she explains. "It manifests at birth and strengthens as we age. Each girl's Talent is a bit different. Our abilities and strengths vary wildly. For example, my aunt Pauline is much weaker in the Sight than the rest of her sisters. However, her visions, while infrequent, are much clearer than the rest of ours."

She tilts her head to the side like she's considering how much she wants to say. "She was the first to *See* Idril's face. The visions started twenty years ago. The first was a white bird, locked in a cage. We knew the bird was an Omega. We knew this Omega was important. But for years, that's *all* we knew, despite the vision's abnormal frequency. It wasn't until Pauline received a vision of Idril's face that we finally discovered the bird's identity."

Silas leans in, eyes bright with excitement. "So it's like… what? A movie in your mind?"

“Depends on the individual,” Branwen replies.

“What do you mean?”

She takes a moment to consider before trying to explain, “One of my cousins can’t *See* visions the way the rest of us can. She can hear things, though. Her visions manifest as whispered warnings and important information.”

“Holy shit,” Silas breathes.

“What’s nice is that, as blood relations, we’re able to pass our Visions—what we See or hear—mentally. It requires physical touch, but it keeps our network well-informed and cohesive. One of us probably wouldn’t be of much use in the grand scheme of things, but all of us together working as a hive mind…”

She lets the implication speak for itself.

“That’s amazing,” I whisper. Her life, her world, her *family*—it’s like something out of a storybook.

What would it be like, growing up surrounded by a network of women who support you, guide you, and nurture your gifts? What would it be like to live with a whole group of women who understand you and love you for who you are? Who encourage you to embrace your gifts and build your confidence with love and patience?

Branwen smiles at me and winks. “Not nearly as amazing as making an entire ceiling explode with your mind, but we do what we can with what we have.”

When she smiles at me, it’s like she’s giving me the smallest peek into the life she’s lived. A wave of melancholy sweeps over me and my eyes begin to burn.

Acceptance. Fates, that’s what this is. It’s exactly how my Mother used to make me feel—like I was brave and magical simply because I existed.

“Anyway,” Branwen continues, “we always knew I’d end up in the States; we just didn’t know when. The visions made it very clear that they meant for Idril and I to find each other.”

“Why?” Caelan’s hand tightens around mine. I don’t even remember when he grabbed it.

Branwen shakes her head apologetically. “That, I don’t know.”

“You are here to help, though, correct?” Daxen asks, frowning.

Branwen smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Let me make something very clear. I’m here to help *Idril*. You lot are on your own.”

Her eyes land on me and soften. “Idril is strong. You don’t know just how strong she truly is. Unfortunately, partially thanks to you, neither does she.”

My cheeks heat in embarrassment. I want to shrink in my seat, but Soren’s palm lands on the back of my neck and I melt into the touch. There’s something about the proprietary way he holds me, fingers wrapped gently but securely around my throat, that makes me feel safe.

It’s the same way I feel when Caelan’s arms are wrapped around me, his body curled over mine, shielding me from the world and surrounding me in his scent.

I’m grateful when Branwen moves on, using her toast to gesture toward the small pile of leather-bound books stacked neatly in front of Riven.

“What’s that? A bit of light reading in case we all bore you out of your skull?”

Riven snorts, his lips curving in a half-smirk. “Sadly, no. Less light reading and more ancient prophecy interspersed with ironic and completely off-topic references to Catholic Saints I’ve never heard of, but were apparently *very* popular in the 17th and 18th centuries.”

Vae nods solemnly. “That tracks. Had to get real creative with curses back then. If you threw in a few obscure saints, the priests just thought you were praying.”

Riven hums, but it’s clear Vae was expecting the joke to land differently. His eyes dart to Caelan, but when he sees his blank expression, his face falls.

The exchange hurts my heart.

I’m not the only one who almost lost Caelan. Vaelenor and Daxen did, too. In a way, I can even understand how they treated me that first night. Heck, even the first day.

What I can’t excuse is how often they turned on me even after I told them the truth. Not once, not twice, but *over and over and over again.*

But I don’t want to be the reason their pack falls apart. For Caelan, forgiving Vae and Dax on his own terms is up to him, but I need to know he doesn’t harbor some kind of misplaced belief that I’ll hate him if or when he does forgive them.

I don’t want that on my conscience. I’m carrying enough as it is.

“Oh gods… wait!” Vae shoots to his feet, backing up with his hand raised like he’s warding off something evil. “Please tell me those aren’t

more of Benedict the Damned's journals!"

Who's Benedict the Damned?

Riven laughs. "Don't worry, these belonged to members of a group of humans who called themselves The Watchers."

"Oh! You're kidding," Branwen breathes, reaching over to grab one. "How perfectly delightful."

Riven's brows shoot to his hairline. "Wait, you've heard of them?"

She flips open the cover, waving a hand dismissively. "Of course. Ley lines are incredibly curious things. The Watchers used to, well… *watch* the lines. They believed that when Ley lines began acting up, it was a sign of something slipping through from the other side."

"What'd they watch for?" Silas asks.

"Some say demons or Angels. Some believe when the Ley lines became active, it was the first sign of Armageddon."

"Seriously?" Dax scoffs. "The end of the world?"

"Obviously," Branwen responds dryly. "Famines, earthquakes, tsunamis. The Bible's really into the whole trumpets-before-the-end thing. But regardless, that's just one theory. If you ask me, they were actually watching for non-secular entities. More fairy tale and less fire and brimstone—to put a not-at-all-accurate, new age spin on it."

Kane hums. "Aye, I've heard tales of the Fae Folk."

Wait. What?

Daxen groans. "The Fae aren't real. They're fairytales. Stories told around campfires with absolutely no basis in reality, let alone proof they existed." He leans forward. "And while we're at it, demons and angels don't exist, either, and religion is something I've refused to discuss since 1648."

Soren leans over me and mutters to Caelan, "What happened in 1648?"

"Thirty Years' War. Don't get him started or we'll be here for the next thirty years, and not even the fucking apocalypse will save us."

Branwen pins Daxen with a narrow-eyed glare. "I *thought* you had learned your lesson regarding what you *think* you know, but apparently the adage about old dogs and new tricks applies to both canines as well as vampires."

Before Daxen can respond, I cut in, trying to prevent this from devolving further. I can't take any more arguing tonight. I just can't.

“What do you mean, Fae? Like little fairies? With wings like butterflies?”

“Not quite,” Branwen replies. “Not in the way you’re imagining them. The Fae were—”

“Not real,” Dax grumbles under his breath.

His continued denial is steeped in the hit he took to his pride today, and that’s clear enough that even I can see it. But after spending two weeks having him deny every word out of my mouth, something about his childish insistence rubs me the wrong way. I have no idea if the Fae—*something I’ve only read about in books*—were real or not, but his sullen attitude irritates me. My chest warms as the flame flickers to life. I’m already speaking before I’ve made the conscious decision to do so.

“I’d still like to know what the difference is between what I’ve read about in stories and the creatures they’re referring to. If this has something to do with those journals, it could help explain things.”

Caelan’s palm falls on my shoulder, a warm weight, silently reminding me that he’s here.

“I’d be interested to hear what Branwen knows as well,” Riven adds. “I’ll admit, the most I know of the Fae are stories connecting them to a species of beings who were born possessing innate magic. Like vampires who can perform blood magic, but on a much grander scale.”

Riven catches my eye. His mouth curls in a small, warm smile.

My chest fills with a different kind of warmth. Slowly, it occurs to me that for the first time since I designated and my home turned into my prison...

I have… *friends*.

My own smile is wobbly, but he doesn’t seem to care. His eyes soften in understanding as I blink back tears, determined not to let them fall.

“Aye, some wolven can do something similar,” Kane says, responding to Riven. “I did ‘nae think tae mention it, but Soren kens the stories just as well as I. The Elders pass them tae every Alpha and his kin.”

Gavran frowns. “But you’re not a Pack Alpha. Or a member of his family.”

“Nae, but I grew up in Scotland. We have our own tales o’ the Fae.”

I look to Soren, who nods. Squeezing my neck once before leaning forward, he braces his forearms on the old oak.

“Kane’s right. It’s part of why I left to meet with him this morning.” His eyes dart to me, shining with guilt. I know he feels awful about leaving this morning, but I wish he wouldn’t. I told him to go, after all. I knew he couldn’t just cut off all contact with his Pack and the outside.

It’s not his fault that Cage had clearly been waiting to get me alone.

I give him an encouraging smile, wishing for the dozenth time that I knew how to send my emotions through the Bond the way he and Caelan do.

“Our Elders keep records of our history. We don’t share them outside of the Pack,” he continues. “However, as I explained, these are… extenuating circumstances.”

I can see the way he hesitates, and I know his decision to continue is no small thing.

“While Idril was recovering, I kept revisiting the stories I was told as a pup. It was decades ago, and I was struggling to remember most of them. So this morning, once Idril was well enough for me to leave for an hour or so, I met with Kane. Asked him to reach out to my dad.”

He huffs out a laugh.

“Turns out, Kane didn’t just already know them, he’d also already reached out to my father, who confirmed the stories he was told are the same—or very similar—to those passed down in our family.”

Gavran stands from his chair, stretching to work out the kinks in his back before making for the alcohol cart. He picks up a bottle of whiskey and a stack of glasses, and returns to the table.

After pouring himself a drink, he passes the bottle and a glass to Soren. “And these stories, they’re about the Fae?”

“Our Elders never referred to them by name. The legends speak of a human-like species that were born with magic. Real, true, innate magic. Supposedly, they could wield their powers with alacrity. Some possessed specialized abilities related to the elements. Others could only do basic magic—like an enhanced version of what your Blood Mages do, but without all the chanting and shit.”

“What’s that have to do with me?” I ask, frowning in confusion. Soren smoothes his palm down the back of my head with a soft smile—a gesture of affection that makes butterflies burst to life in my stomach.

“Because, Little Mate, in some of these stories, these beings could heal others with only their touch, and wield fire like a weapon. They could speak

to the wind and call rain from the sky. Make flowers bloom with nothing more than a whisper.”

No. He can’t be serious.

Those are *stories*. Stories like my mother told me as a child. Stories I repeated to myself at night, memorizing each word until they became a part of me because they were the only happy memories I had.

But they’re *just stories.*

“The Fae are said tae have the same powers,” Kane says gently. “There are tales of Folk who rode horses made of water, and shot balls of fire through the sky in battle. They forged arrows from wind that could kill a man with unerring accuracy.” He shrugs before adding, “I dinna ken if any of it’s true, but it’s certainly interesting.”

“I’m not Fae.” My tone is harsh and accusatory, and I wince the moment the words leave my mouth.

“I dinnae say ye were, Lass.” Kane smiles kindly. “I dinnae think the Fae really existed, truth be told. But stories come from somewhere, aye?”

“You may be on to something,” Riven says, nodding absently.

Traitor.

He shuffles through his journals and, when he finds the one he’s searching for, flips it open to one of a few dozen tabbed pages. “A lot of the entries in these journals are mundane bullshit—chores, gossip, complaints about crops. But they do contain bits and pieces of relevant information. One thing I came across more than once is an odd sketch of a circle divided into four equal quadrants. Each quadrant contains a symbol, but I don’t know what they are. They’re similar in style to runes, but don’t belong to any runic language I’ve found.”

The more he speaks, the more animated he becomes.

“One thing they may be connected to, however, is the four elements. In fact, the elements are mentioned frequently throughout each journal. Sometimes in context, but *sometimes* they appear randomly, like a fucking tick.”

I smile at the absurd comparison. “How do you mean?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Riven grins, grabs up a thick, brown volume from the middle of his stack, locates one of the tabbed pages, and lays it open in front of him. He clears his throat and begins to read.

“‘Ma says the peddler may come back in spring, which gives me just a few months to decide—” He makes a point of pausing before he continues,

“wind through the trees, wind through the leaves, wind through the grass, wind to breathe, wind or air or air or wind, an endless spiral that never ends and never begins; the snake is eating its head, eating its head, eating its head. Threads fray and blow in the wind, and the snake is—” another pause, then in a more normal tone, “what I’m willing to trade for a new copper pot.”

Silence.

“See what I mean? That whole passage was right in the middle of a completely innocuous statement. What’s stranger is how she simply picks back up where she left off, like she wrote all of that down and didn’t even realize she’d done it.”

“So… you lied. Those *are* haunted journals!” Vae accuses, looking at Riven like he’s personally betrayed him.

Riven ignores him. “It’s purely an educational guess, but I believe those four symbols represent each of the elements.”

Vae raises a skeptical brow. “Is there any way you can make it make sense for the rest of the class? Because I’m fucking lost.”

My lips tilt up at the corners in an involuntary smile at his admission, and at the same moment, Vae’s roaming gaze lands on me, and he grins, like we’re sharing some kind of secret.

“Don’t look at her,” Caelan snaps, making me jump.

Vae’s smile falls, and his eyes fill with pain when he looks at his Packmate. His lips part, but before he can say anything, Caelan leans over the table and snarls. “You think you can just smile at my Mate after spending weeks making her cry?” He turns to Daxen and adds, “I don’t want to see either of you so much as look at her without asking her fucking permission.”

Dax’s eyes are so wide I’m afraid they’re about to pop out of his head. I can feel Caelan’s indignation through our Bond, and I reach out, placing a hand on his arm to try and calm him.

I’m grateful when Riven shoves back his chair and stands. “I’ll do my best to explain, but—”

“But it’s Vae, so you don’t have much to work with,” Caelan mutters.

“Alright, enough,” Gavran sighs, throwing back the rest of his drink before using it to gesture toward Riven. “Go ahead, Riv.”

Riven snatches a marker from the table. As he crosses the room toward a whiteboard on the opposite wall, he uses his teeth to uncap the marker,

turns his head to the side, and spits it onto the floor.

He hums as he writes, and I get the feeling he's purposely pressing the marker's tip against the whiteboard as hard as he can, but no one complains about the excessive squeaking sounds, so maybe I'm wrong.

Once he's finished, he steps aside to reveal a paragraph written in precise, tidy script and various words circled and underlined for emphasis.

His eyes find mine, and he smiles. "Idril, I believe you've seen this before. Or heard it, at the very least."

I nod. It's the same passage Riven was translating in the library a few days ago. The one I know by heart because my mother recited it as part of a story she told over and over when I was a child.

"We found this passage in an old book a few days ago. It was written in old Irish Gaelic. It took me a while to translate, but I had some help."

"Once I got a few words translated, Idril was able to finish it immediately. This line of text—this exact passage, word for word—is part of a story she heard often as a child. A story told by her mother. From memory."

"At the time, no one had any information about what the two missing Omegas were put through. Calla remembers very little of her experience, and Daniella rarely wakes long enough to ask. The only thing tying the two women together is their designation, the appearance of unexplained but largely harmless abilities with light and fire, and the things they—for lack of a better word—prophesied in an unconscious state."

"There are two specific things both females mentioned while unconscious—a Light, and a Gate. After exhausting every modern form of research and finding nothing of relevance, we had to go old-school. And what's more old-school than stories?"

Dax groans dramatically. "Gods, Riven, can you get to the point just once without the dramatic lead-up?"

"No," Riven answers.

Soren coughs in a poor attempt to cover the laugh that slips free, and then the tension in the room seems to lighten just the smallest amount, making it easier for me to breathe.

"The interesting thing about this passage," Riven continues, "is that it's a completely different version of a well-known Irish folktale called *The Song of Light*. You can go online and pull up dozens of copies of *The Song of Light*, but I believe we found the *original* version. Idril's mother not only

passed the version on to her daughter, but could recite it so perfectly that, as a child, Idril memorized it. Until last week, Idril and her mother were the only two people in the world with access to the translated version."

A shiver runs down my spine.

How is that even possible?

Riven turns to me with soft eyes and asks, "Do you remember the whole story your mother told you?"

Warily, I nod, forcing myself not to look at Dax as memories of the last time I answered Riven's questions about this story slam into me.

Of course I remember. I heard it so many times that I would silently recite each line as my mother told it.

It used to make her laugh.

She had the most *beautiful* laugh.

"Would you repeat it now for us?"

I hesitate, but his request is so earnest it's impossible to deny him. I close my eyes because it's easier than watching everyone else watch me while I speak. When I finish reciting the entire story exactly the way my mother told it to me, I finally open my eyes, knowing I have to brave the room's reactions. To my surprise, no one is looking at me with derision. Even Daxen looks more thoughtful than cruel for a change.

After a few tense moments of silence, Kane whistles, long and low.

"Aye, that's right odd. That the Lass's Ma would tell her that story when she was a wee bairne? What are the odds?"

Gavran scrubs a hand down his face. "Every time I think we know everything there is to know, something new pops up."

Daxen clears his throat. "This might be a good time to mention…"

Gavran groans. "For fucks sake, what now?"

Dax schools his features, straightens his spine, and takes a deep breath. "Cage is dead."

"What?!" Gav jumps out of his chair and slams both hands on top of the table, making me jump.

Oh… oh, no. This isn't good. This is absolutely going to get blamed on me.

"I killed him."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?!"

I'm really starting to think he might be, because he doesn't stop there.

“I held him down until he burned to death in the fireplace in the game lounge,” he says calmly.

“I’ll be sure to put it in the report,” Gav spits. The normally calm Alpha sounds like he’s two seconds away from snapping, jaw and fists both clenched in anger.

“He was a mole,” Vae adds before Daxen can answer. The two share a look I can’t decipher.

“It’s true,” Daxen confirms. “But you’ll need to ask Vae for specifics. I wasn’t there for that part. I came in right as he threw the fire poker across the room in an attempt to kill the Omega.”

“What?!” Caelan shoots to his feet. I reach for his hand as he turns to Soren and growls. “And where the hell were you? Explain to me why you left our Omega alone for so long; someone nearly succeeded in killing her.”

“I told him to go!” I shout, twisting to my right and craning my neck back to see Caelan’s face.

“I didn’t want to,” Soren explains, and when I twist my head to the left, I have to crane my neck back even further.

Why are they both so tall?

“I’ve been gone for nearly four straight days with no outside contact. And there’s something about the wards you all have up that interferes with our mind-link, and just a heads up—*there’s no fucking cell service in your dungeon*.”

“There aren’t any wards,” Daxen cuts in.

“Bullshit,” Soren snaps. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not! There are no fucking wards! HQ is way too big to maintain them long-term. Besides, my surveillance is more than sufficient.”

“You shouldn’t have left her,” Caelan spits, and my head snaps to the right.

“I *told* him to,” I repeat, but no one’s paying any attention to me down here.

“Again, I didn’t have a choice!”

“You did. And you chose to leave our Mate alone. And she almost *died*.”

“That’s not fair!”

I feel like I’m in the middle of an Alpha tennis match and both my neck and chest are starting to hurt. My Omega whines, covering her ears as both Alphas’ voices get louder and angrier with each rebuttal.

I shoot a helpless look toward Branwen, who's across the table, watching with an amused expression. I catch her eye and mouth, *help me*.

Her smirk grows into a mischievous grin, and she stands, leaning over the table to rummage through the bowl of fruit that Silas apparently commandeered at some point. He doesn't even notice, too lost in the back-and-forth happening between Gavran, Vae, and Dax.

Based on the vein throbbing at Gavran's temple and the finger Vaelenor keeps pointing at me, I assume they're arguing about what happened with Cage.

I'm seconds away from crawling beneath the table in search of somewhere dark and quiet to hide when Branwen cups her hands around her mouth and shouts, "*Oy!*"

Nothing.

In fact, I'm pretty sure the Alphas are shouting even louder.

When I hear a string of Scottish curses, I realize Kane's joined the argument with his Alpha. The only male not trying to make himself heard is Riven, who's too busy squinting at the pages in one of his journals, mouthing words to himself like he's not in the middle of a verbal war zone.

Out of nowhere, Soren cuts off mid-sentence and turns toward Branwen with a snarl. "Ow! What the actual fuck?"

What—

On my right, I hear the sound of a meaty *thud*, followed by Caelan's voice snapping. "*Seriously?*"

I spin to the right as an apple flies through the air, hitting Vaelenor in the side of the head.

In the next breath, Daxen takes an apple to the throat. His hands fly to his neck, and he coughs, frowning at the piece of fruit as it lands on the table, bounces once, and drops to the floor.

"Do not—" Gavran's warning is cut off by a very prepared Omega. Three apples fly across the four feet between them, like projectile missiles locked on their target with military precision. Gavran's ready for the first one and the second, but as usual he underestimates the Omega, and a third apple hits its mark and explodes on impact.

Right in the middle of his forehead.

Gavran opens his mouth, snapping it shut when Branwen raises her hand and warns, "Not *one word*. From *any* of you."

Planting both fists on her hips, she turns to my Mates.

“You both are entirely too tall to be standing over your Omega and shouting like that. Look at her! She’s going to strain her bloody neck.”

Both Soren and Caelan sit down so fast it’s almost comical.

“Shit,” Caelan swears. “I’m so sorry. We shouldn’t have been shouting like that. Especially right above you.”

Soren reaches for my hand. “I’m so sorry—Branwen’s right. If we’re going to argue about something, we shouldn’t be putting you in the middle of it. Literally.”

“Aye, sorry lass,” Kane adds, leaning around Soren’s bulk with an apologetic smile.

“And you three—” The glare Branwen levels at Gavran is honestly kind of scary. I expect Gav to reprimand her, but instead his lips tilt into a smile that just sets Branwen off more.

From the corner of my eye, the apple that hit Daxen in the throat rolls out from under the table.

Where in the world did that come from?

It rolls past my chair and continues across the floor before—*impossibly*—it starts to pick up speed, rolling faster and faster, as if shoved by an unseen force. Halfway across the room, it turns sharply to the left—*another impossibility*—and rolls another ten feet with unnatural speed. I tense, bracing myself right as it crashes into the stone wall so hard it explodes, sending pieces of pulverized fruit flying through the air.

My heart is racing, slamming against my ribs. There’s no way that just happened. *Someone else had to have seen it, right? I can’t be the only one—*

“What’s wrong?” Soren murmurs, but I don’t answer. I have a horrible, sinking feeling. I unfold from my seat, gaze bouncing around the room from one window to the next, searching for… *something.* I don’t know what it is exactly, but I can feel it like something’s watching me.

There.

Before I realize I’ve made the decision to move, I’m shoving back my chair and stepping around it, eyes locked on the seemingly empty space between the floor and the window—right above where the apple exploded.

“Idril?” Caelan stands, but I don’t check to see if he’s following as I creep across the floor. I’m afraid if I so much as blink, what I’m seeing will disappear.

“Wait… what is that?” Daxen murmurs. “It looks like…”

“Is that one of the apples?” Vae asks, incredulously. “What the fuck happened to it?”

“What’s going on?” Silas shouts, the sound unnecessarily loud in the now-silent room.

“Shadows,” I murmur.

At first, I didn’t see it, but now… I’m sure of it. Right there—under the window— a black mist hovers about two feet off the ground.

It’s thick, like impenetrable fog. Almost solid. Unnaturally still.

I’m almost halfway across the room when Soren stalks past me, straight toward the mist.

Up until now it hasn’t so much as stirred, but the moment Soren gets close, it begins writhing and churning in an unnatural pattern. Almost like it’s…

Like it’s agitated.

With each movement, it seems to solidify further, until it no longer resembles mist or fog or even shadow.

I don’t know when it happens, but when I glance away from the shadow, Soren’s less than two feet away from it. He reaches out, extending his hand like he’s going to—

“Don’t touch it!” I lunge for him, sprinting across the room and wrapping my hand around his seconds before his fingers make contact. He jerks, then, like he’s coming out of a trance, his eyes clear and a frown appears on his face.

“What the—*shit!”*

Soren’s arms snake around my middle and he pulls me back right as the shadow shoots into the air and jerks to a stop six feet above us. My mouth drops open as it splits apart, then reforms into the shape of a spiral.

The spiral starts to spin, slow at first, then faster and faster. Soren shoves me behind him and walks us back as the shadow spins and surges, almost like clay that’s being molded by invisible hands.

The shadow thickens and hardens, sharpening into something new. It lengthens and stretches as it transforms, and what I thought was just a shadow resolves into a freaking *spear*.

The fully formed weapon hovers above our heads—tendrils of black shadow sway and pulse down its length.

Electricity crackles through the air, the scent of ozone suddenly so overwhelming I can taste it. Someone curses. Wood creaks, followed by the

sharp rasp of someone unsheathing a weapon. I can feel the tension in the room, thick enough to make my skin itch.

Until, in a parody of Caelan's earlier throw, the spear takes off, arcing across the room headed straight for Daxen and Vae. Unlike the dagger, the spear stays near the ceiling—well above both Alphas' heads.

It feels almost like… like it wants us to *know* it saw what happened. Like it's *taunting* us.

It hits the opposite wall, crashing into the concrete with a thunderous *CRACK*. It shatters, splintering into a swirling storm of sharp black fragments that detonate like a silent bomb.

I scream as they launch through the air, scattering in a thousand different directions—the Alphas duck and dodge. With a curse, Gavran throws himself over Branwen as Soren and Caelan form a barrier around me.

The fragments swirl around us, like leaves caught on a current of wind. They make a final rushing pass around the room, then shoot toward the door and disappear through the crack between it and the floor.

My heart's racing, pounding violently in my chest. I stare at the floor, blinking in disbelief.

What just happened?

"I really miss when the only things we worried about dodging were arrows and cannon fodder," Vae grumbles, eyeing the tiny crack leading to the hallway.

"Ha," Silas responds flatly.

"Seriously though," Vae adds, voice low like he's worried he might draw whatever the heck that was back. "What—and I cannot stress this enough—the *fuck* was that?"

Gavran pushes past Riven and Dax, not stopping until he's right in front of the still-closed double doors leading to the hallway. He raises a hand for silence and, after listening intently for a moment, says, "It's gone. I can't feel it anymore."

"Hold on. You could *feel* it?" Riven asks.

Gav frowns back at him. "Yes? Couldn't you? It was almost like sonar. I could feel and hear it."

The rest of the Alphas exchange uneasy glances, which makes Gavran's frown deepen. "You're telling me none of you felt the pulsing coming off that thing?"

More uneasy glances.

“I did,” Branwen says, stepping forward and shooting me a meaningful glance over her shoulder. One that makes me want to groan out loud.

Oh Fates.

“I did too,” I admit, and have to force myself not to step behind Soren’s larger frame when everyone’s attention swings toward me.

Caelan spins on Daxen. “How the hell did whatever the fuck that was circumvent your security, infiltrate a locked meeting where we were discussing classified information, and not a single one of us noticed its presence except for my Mate?”

“I—”

“You *what*?”

Daxen swallows thickly, but doesn’t back down. He looks lost. *Confused*. I almost feel sorry for him.

“I’ll find out what it was,” he finally responds.

“I really wish I could say I trust you’ll do exactly that, but as it turns out, I can’t trust you to do shit anymore. Especially if it involves anything remotely related to the safety of my Omega.”

“Caelan,” Vae pleads, stepping up next to Dax.

I reach out and wrap my hand around Caelan’s. I can feel him shaking, buzzing with adrenaline.

Vaelenor’s eyes fall, and he watches as my fingers curl around Caelan’s. His eyes fill with longing before he forcefully shifts his gaze.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” Caelan squeezes my hand once before letting it drop, taking a step forward to stand in front of me. Soren straightens, pulling me close to his side before I have a chance to feel his absence.

“You’re all going to figure out what the fuck that was, how it got into HQ, and how the hell you’re going to keep it out.” He turns toward Gav and takes another step forward.

“You’re my Commander. I’ve spent the last six centuries respecting you. Believing you were the pinnacle of what it means to be an honorable male.”

Gavran’s jaw clenches. “Caelan, I—”

“I’m not fucking finished,” Caelan snaps, and Gavran visibly flinches.

“Just so we’re clear, while I respect your position, I no longer respect you. In fact,” his eyes sweep across the room, “I no longer respect any of

you. Not only that, I have to wonder whether or not any of you are fit to keep yourselves alive, let alone the two Omegas currently residing in this stone fortress where honor goes to die."

Grunts and sounds of agreement come from Soren, Kane, and Riven, but Caelan's not done.

"I'm fucking exhausted, and frankly, I'm sick of having to breathe the same air as the males I can't even trust to not only keep my Fated Mate alive, but *not actively kill her* for two fucking weeks while I'm in a godsdamned coma."

Caelan turns to me and gently asks, "Where are your things? I'll send someone to bring them to my rooms."

"She doesn't have *things*," Soren spits. "No Nesting material, no clothing, no phone or books. Not even a Fatesdamned pair of panties that belong to her."

By the time he's finished his list, my face is burning, and Caelan's has drained of color.

"Vaelenor bought me shoes," I whisper.

Vae winces. "I, ah, appreciate the backup, but I don't think he's taking that as the reassurance you mean it to be."

One glance at Caelan's murderous expression and I know he's right. That did *not* make things better.

"Why don't we worry about this tomorrow?" Soren suggests calmly, placing a reassuring hand on Caelan's shoulder. When Caelan looks back, Soren's eyes dart to my hands and Caelan and I both follow his gaze, realizing at the same time I'm—*once again*—twisting my fingers in the cotton like I always do when the urge to Nest gets overwhelming.

"The shadows—" I start, in an attempt to pull the attention away from me and back on the immediate threat.

Why does it feel like I almost forgot about that?

"Caelan's right, Omega," Dax speaks up, shocking me into silence. "That never should have happened. It's on me. You all should get some sleep. I'll start digging for answers."

He turns and walks back to the table, where he starts packing up his electronics. His movements are jerky. *Flustered.* The part of me that will always reach for him wants to comfort him.

He just killed someone only a few hours ago, for Fate's sake.

For me.

Gavran pulls out his phone, calling and issuing orders to what sound like dozens of teams. He asks Branwen and Riven to stay, but must have taken Caelan's at his word because he doesn't extend the same request to him.

"What now?" I ask, once Daxen and Vaelenor have sulked out of the room, both males casting longing looks at their Packmate until the doors shut behind them.

"Now we get some sleep," Caelan answers, running a gentle palm down the back of my head. "You and Soren will stay in my rooms for now, until we can figure something else out. They're in the same wing as Dax and Vae, but I'll get us moved somewhere better tomorrow."

I shrug. "I don't mind."

It's not like I'll be able to ignore them for the rest of my life—even if Caelan somehow follows through on his threat, that doesn't change the fact that they're my Fated Mates—with or without a completed Bond.

"Well, I do," Caelan grumbles.

"As do I," Soren agrees. "You shouldn't have to sleep so close to the two men who terrorized you."

I open my mouth, but shut it again, too tired to have this conversation tonight. Instead, I smile as Caelan lifts my hand and places a gentle kiss against my palm.

"What do you think, sweet girl? We can do whatever you'd like if you're not ready to go to sleep yet."

The feeling of his lips against my skin makes me shiver.

The thought of sleeping on an actual mattress is enough to make me dizzy. For tonight, at least, I'll be safe. Warm. Comfortable. With Caelan and Soren surrounding me.

It's more than I ever dared hope for, and the smile that blooms across my face is the first one I haven't had to force in what feels like years.

"Sleep sounds… perfect."

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Chapter 15

Caelan

I’m not someone who wakes up slowly. The moment my brain clicks back online, I’m up. This morning is no different.

My eyes are still shut, but I can hear rustling noises from the bed next to me, where Idril slept last night.

Soren and I chose to sleep on the floor, on extra mattresses I had brought in for us. It went against every one of my instincts, but after everything Idril’s been through, the last thing either of us wanted to do was overwhelm her the first night she spent in a bed.

The rustling grows louder, so I shove down the blankets and sit up. It takes a few seconds, but once my bleary eyes adjust, Idril comes into focus.

My Omega is on my bed, wide awake, crawling around the California king, shoving and yanking at piles of blankets and sheets with increasing agitation.

She’s erected a small wall out of sheets and a comforter around the edge of the mattress. Her hand shoots out behind her, and she waves it around blindly, searching until it lands on a pillow, which she grabs before shoving it into the barrier with a huff.

I whip my hand to the side, smacking Soren in the chest. Or maybe it’s his head. I’m not sure, because I can’t tear my eyes away from Idril long enough to bother looking.

I have to smack him twice before the wolven startles awake. It’s almost eerie how fucking silent he is as he jerks awake and—almost in the same movement—catapults out of his prone position and into a defensive crouch.

This time I do pull my attention away long enough to raise a finger to my lips, smirk, and point toward the bed.

At first he frowns in confusion, but then his eyes land on Idril and soften with clear adoration. She growls and mutters under her breath, swapping pillows for at least the third time.

“Stupid soft pillow,” she grumbles. “If you’re so comfortable to sleep on, then you should be perfect for everything…”

She jams it against the makeshift wall with force, but before her hand leaves the fabric, she’s ripping the pillow away again.

“Nope, that’s not right either.”

Changing tactics, she reaches for another pillow—one I recognize from the window seat next to the balcony. She squishes it one way and then another, muttering, “Why is this one so lumpy? Who even approved this?”

When another pillow comes loose, she lunges for it and tucks it back where it belongs with gentle precision. When it holds, she grins, gives her work a single approving nod, and spins on her knees to continue tackling what I’m starting to realize… might be her very first Nest.

I lock my side of our Bond down tight. I don’t want her to feel the way my heart fucking breaks at the realization that my Mate is twenty-two and has never—*not once in her entire life*—felt safe enough to make a Nest.

Most Omegas do this for the first time within weeks of officially Designating. By twenty-two, she should have *closets* full of approved Nesting material.

When Soren’s eyes slide to mine, he frowns. It’s clear he, too, is getting a clearer understanding of just how horrible our Mate’s mostly unknown past has been. He swallows thickly, eyes brimming with pain.

Idril releases an aggrieved Omega groan, and my eyes snap back to the bed where she’s crawling toward the edge. She bends over and starts rifling through a pile of blankets and pillows on the floor—outside of the Nest. When she finds what she’s looking for, she pulls it out with a triumphant smile.

I narrow my eyes at her prize.

Where the hell did that thing come from?

Soren looks at me questioningly. Keeping my voice low so she isn’t disturbed, I whisper, “It’s a blanket I picked up decades ago overseas on a mission. I haven’t seen it in… fuck…” I shake my head, thinking back. “Maybe twenty years?”

“Do you think she got it from your closet?”

“She must have,” I whisper, trying not to chuckle. “I know I told her to take what she wanted, but I wasn’t expecting her to dig out blankets I forgot I even had.”

I can’t remember exactly where I found it. Still, as she wraps the faded navy blanket around her shoulders, rearranging it until it’s cocooning her like a makeshift cloak, I decide I’ll find who I purchased it from, fly there, and bring back every blanket they’ve ever made.

As she smoothss her fingers along the fabric in soft, gentle movements, a soft smile on her lips, I decide…

Fuck it. I’ll just fly back with the whole ass person. *Why shouldn’t we employ an official blanket-maker-person?* That’s totally a real thing.

Idril hums as she works, and for long moments we simply sit there and watch as our Omega learns what she likes and dislikes. It’s comforting, knowing that between the two of us she’s finally somewhere she feels safe.

A few minutes pass in contented silence. Then, Idril slams to a stop. The way she freezes so abruptly causes both Soren and me to go instantly on alert.

It becomes clear pretty fast that there’s no unseen physical threat—outside of that damn pillow from earlier. Her eyes land on it, and her face twists into an expression of absolute disgust.

Then she *hisses* at it.

“You,” she growls, sneering like she’s come face to face with her father instead of an uncooperative piece of bedding.

“Fates, I think that pillow is her nemesis,” Soren whispers with a grin. “We may have to intervene.”

I grin back. “Nah, she’s got this.”

“You know,” Idril scolds, picking it up and squeezing it like she can force it into what she needs it to be, “I had such high hopes for you. That’s what upsets me the most. You’re literally the *perfect* pillow for sleeping. The way I see it, when you find the perfect pillow for your head, it should also be *unquestionably* perfect for everything else in life.”

Her voice is thick with conviction, and I find myself nodding along in agreement with her analytical reasoning. The fact that she’s the most beautiful, adorable, *perfect* Omega in the entire fucking world has nothing to do with it.

The pillow gets shoved between two others at an angle, taken out, moved, rotated—something I don’t think I have the instincts to understand

—and flipped over before Idril gives up.

She sits back on her heels and sighs. Three silent seconds pass before she speaks again, and this time her tone is absolutely *dripping* with disgust.

“Who made you, anyway? An Alpha?”

I slap my hands over my mouth to muffle my laughter.

Soren’s face is bright red from holding in his laughter. I jab him in the side with my elbow in warning, but I’m pretty sure I’m the one about to give us away and ruin this entire fucking moment.

Idril grabs the pillow that has officially become Enemy Number One in our lives, and with a sound of disgust, she throws it over her shoulder.

She doesn’t just toss it away gently. Oh, no. Not our Omega. She chucks it blindly as hard as she can. It sails through the air, soaring across the room in a spiraling arc and landing on the couch in the lounge and seating area.

Idril pulls out another pillow and presses it to her face, inhaling deeply. When she pulls back, her mouth is set in a frown and, with another adorable fucking snarl, she whips it angrily over her shoulder.

This pillow doesn’t make it anywhere near as far as the last. It takes the same path, but lower, and is airborne for less than three seconds before—

“Oommph.”

Soren’s so busy watching her he didn’t even see the pillow coming. That’s it. That’s my limit. Throwing my head back, I let out a booming laugh, unable to hold it in any longer.

Idril whips around, eyes wide and mouth open in shock. When she notices us both sitting on our makeshift bed, watching her like creeps and smiling like idiots, she groans. A pretty blush creeps up her pale neck and into her cheeks.

She’s already flushed with exertion, tendrils of silver-white hair sticking to her sweaty temples, eyes bright and alive in a way I haven’t seen since I met her.

When she notices the recently thrown pillow next to Soren, she gasps and scurries across the mattress, damn near falling off the edge in an effort to reach him. “Oh, Fates! I’m so sorry!”

He laughs, snatching the pillow and holding it to his chest. Like, because she hit him with it, it's his now.

A token of her love… *or some shit.*

And I can’t even make fun of him, because I’m as big a simp for the little Omega as he is.

Idril falls to her knees between the two of us and lifts her hand, pressing her palm gently to Soren's cheek like she's worried he may have actually been injured.

Assaulted by flying cotton stuffed with feathers.

Soren promises her he's fine, laughing as she fusses over him like he's not a seven-foot, 350-lb warrior who can shift into a half-ton wolf with claws and teeth as long as my fucking hand.

I'm worried she doesn't even really know that part of herself. That she's not as informed as she should be. Designation biology is tricky. It's not simply about sex as much as it is mental health and emotional well-being. If something is wrong, it can and will start affecting her physically. Her health, her happiness, her sense of self—it's all intertwined with her designation.

"What's wrong, sweet girl?"

When she frowns at my question, I reach out and wrap my hands around her hips, drawing her down to the mattress between us.

"What do you mean?" she asks, snatching one of the blankets I slept with during the night. She immediately runs the fabric through her fingers, testing its texture and softness.

I nod, gesturing toward her hands. "Do you need more Nesting materials? Different fabrics? Colors? Whatever you need, all you have to do is ask, and I'll get it for you."

Her fingers freeze, and she grips the fabric tightly, fingers spasming around the edges. Her pulse flutters rapidly in her neck, and her pupils dilate.

It's a fear response. She thinks I'm going to take that blanket away from her.

Fates, my poor Omega.

She physically forces herself to release her hold on the blanket and set it down, cheeks heating in shame. If she weren't on suppressants, her scent would be burnt with fear and bitter with shame.

"No, thank you," she answers. "I was just… moving things around."

She purses her lips and winces, like she doesn't like the taste of her own lie.

Soren makes a strangled sound of displeasure and reaches out, taking her hands and cradling them in his own.

“Nesting is a good thing, Little Mate. Caelan and I both want you to feel safe enough to Nest.”

The look Idril gives him is dubious, and I don’t blame her, really. Her Omega may have taken over this morning, but her response now makes it clear she still doesn’t feel safe enough to make the conscious decision to Nest—let alone *ask* for what she needs.

She doesn’t even want to admit to it, like if she does, she thinks we’ll get angry.

Or take it away from her once we discover it makes her happy.

“And you can tell us if something’s wrong,” I tell her. “I promise we won’t get mad. Nothing you say will make us angry.”

Her lips part, and she looks at me with an expression of open disbelief.

Fates, I don’t think I ever considered that a Fated Mate Bond didn’t automatically translate into absolute trust.

Or maybe she just doesn’t trust any Alpha after the way her father and my shit-head brothers treated her, Bond or not.

We wait patiently, giving her time to work through her thoughts, wordlessly ensuring she knows we aren’t going anywhere. This is how we gain her trust. Through a thousand moments and a thousand little actions that reinforce our promises and *show* her what she means to us.

Idril pulls her hands into her lap and whispers, “It doesn’t smell right. The room smells right, but the blankets and pillows… I’m worried it won’t ever smell right.”

“Why do you think that?” Soren asks gently.

Idril covers her eyes with her hands as if she can hide from the world. She whimpers as her Omega pushes forward, and I tense, muscles straining with need. It’s taking every ounce of my self-control to stay still and let her lead this conversation, but *fuck* if my Alpha isn’t losing his shit.

“You’re both going to be so mad,” she whimpers, and when she lifts her head, her eyes are swimming with tears.

I can’t fucking take it anymore. I reach out and gently pull her hands away from her face. She resists at first before giving in. But she still won’t look at me, and *I hate it.*

Soren reaches over and runs a hand down her back in soothing strokes. “Idril, please tell us, Little Mate. Whatever it is, it will be alright. We aren’t going anywhere. Neither of us. We may even be able to help, if you let us.”

She chokes out an incredulous laugh that turns into a heart-breaking sob of despair.

“Not with this. No one can help with this.” She pulls her hands from mine and even though I hate it, I don’t fight her. She wraps her arms around her legs and pulls them close to her body, curling over them and making herself small. She’s pulling away from me. *From us.*

Whatever it is that she’s struggling with, it’s obviously *not* fucking Nesting. She has no idea how to mute her side of the Bond, so the despondency thrumming from her to me is enough to bring me to tears.

Does this have something to do with what happened to her while I was injured? Is it something my Pack did? I know we have a thousand things to discuss, but I thought giving her time to breathe before tackling the specifics was best for her. I’m terrified of overwhelming her. I don’t want to force her to talk about everything that’s been done to her, *but what if she thinks I don’t care about it because I haven’t brought it up yet?*

My lungs seize when she looks me directly in the eyes and whispers, “Daxen and Vae.”

My brothers’ names may as well be two bullets right through my heart. Despite their physical absence, their presence swells, filling the room and stealing our oxygen.

I reach for her hands, swallowing a whimper of my own when she hesitates before placing them in mine.

“What about them?” I’m trying to project calm, but it’s fucking impossible. My voice breaks on the words, and I realize I’m shaking. A thousand different possibilities of what she’s about to tell me flit through my mind, each one worse than the last.

“They’re my Scent-Matches, too.”

The words fall from her lips, and my stomach drops.

Fuck… this is my fault. I should have discussed this with her last night. I never should have let her fall asleep without telling her what I already know. *What the fuck was I thinking?*

Say something, asshole!

Idril’s hands are shaking, and each breath she takes is sharp and shallow. My Alpha’s right—I need to fucking fix this. *Now.*

“Idril, sweet girl…” I swallow thickly, fingers spasming around hers. “I know.”

My Omega gasps right as Soren barks, *“You know?!”*

I search frantically for a way to explain this to them both without fucking it up even more.

“I caught your scent in the basement of your house,” I tell her. The words tumble out, one after the other. I’m not even thinking about what I’m saying; I just know I have to *explain*.

Idril sits silently as I recall that moment. Her eyes are glassy, unfocused, delicate hands lying limp in mine. She’s looking at me but… she’s not *seeing* me.

Fates, I should have told her as soon as I saw her. *I’m such an idiot!*

“I meant to tell you in the meadow,” I tell her. “I’m so sorry. It should have been the first thing I told you. I just never expected… and then you were ripped away from me, and I was so… *angry*.”

“What meadow?” Soren asks, moving to Idril’s side and wrapping an arm around her.

“Later,” I promise, pleading with him to let it go for now.

He narrows his eyes but nods.

“I wasn’t going to keep it from you. I swear. I just…”

“You feel trapped.” Her eyes lift and finally meet mine, brimming with pain.

“*No!*” I shout, and tighten my grip on her hands, as if speaking the words alone might be enough for Fate to take her from me. “I don’t feel trapped at all. Not at *all*, love. There’s nothing I wouldn’t give if it meant keeping you. *Nothing*.”

I lean closer and wait for her to meet my gaze before adding, “*Including* my brothers.”

Idril flinches. “You can’t. You’re stuck. Stuck with me and stuck with them. And Caelan, I don’t want you to choose. I don’t want you to feel like you *have* to choose.”

“I don’t,” I reply fiercely. “You’re mine, Idril. You’re my Mate. *Mine*. Fate blessed us with two Fated Bonds—including one that’s so fucking powerful it makes the Scent-Match Bond look like a piece of thread next to an oak tree.”

She swallows thickly but doesn’t answer.

“You say you don’t want me to feel like I have to choose, right?”

She answers with a hesitant nod.

“*There is no choic*e, *Idril*. Choosing implies the existence of one or more alternatives equally as enticing as my Bond with you.”

I let go of her hands and lift mine to cradle her face in my hands, swiping my thumbs across her cheekbones the way I did that first night in her bedroom, and a dozen times since.

“Listen to me closely because this next part is important.”

She nods. “Alright.”

“There is no version of me in this world or any other that lives a life without you. You’re mine, Idril, without a Bond or with a dozen of them. You’re written in my bones. My blood. My fucking soul. With every breath I breathe, in every lifetime I live, my choice will *always* be you.”

Her eyes search mine. I hold my breath, waiting.

With a strangled sob, Idril throws herself into my arms. I pull her close, wrapping myself around her and breathing in her scent—still beautiful, despite the suppressants doing their job—as she cries silent tears that soak through my shirt and into my heart.

I don’t know how long we stay there, wrapped up in each other, but eventually Idril’s tears taper off, and she pulls back. Soren passes her a tissue, which she takes with a watery smile of thanks.

“How did you find out?” Soren asks once Idril’s calmed down enough to speak. I wish I could save her from having to relive all her fucking trauma.

“They came to my room,” she answers shakily. “Just a few hours before you arrived. I guess they’d already showered, but they never reapplied their descenter. As soon as they walked in… I knew.”

Soren curses and Idril reaches out, taking his hand in hers. “There’s something else.”

“Go on, love.”

“They don’t know we’re Scent-Matched.”

“By the Mother, I seriously fucking hope not,” Soren exclaims.

“I’m so sorry you had to find out like that,” I murmur. “I should have handled it differently. I’ve made this so much worse.”

“We have to tell them,” Soren says, but he doesn’t sound like he actually wants to. “They don’t deserve you, and Bonds or not, I don’t trust either of them anywhere near you, but—”

“No!” Idril lunges for Soren and clutches his wrists like she thinks he’s about to tell them right this moment. “Fates. I can’t. Please don’t make me. They’ll reject me, or—or—”

Her voice breaks on a sob, and her tears return with a vengeance, streaming down her pale cheeks and breaking my heart all over again.

Soren pulls her to him and wraps his arms around her. His wide eyes meet mine, full of turmoil.

“Please,” she whispers brokenly. “Please, please… I can’t live like that. I can’t—*I won’t*—spend the rest of my life wondering if they’re only with me because of Fate. And I can’t handle an outright rejection right now. I can’t. My Omega can’t.”

He deflates, giving in without a fight. “Alright, Little Mate. Alright. I promise I won’t say anything. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, alright?”

Idril turns to me, and I nod in agreement. We can’t *make* her tell them. This is Idril’s choice. I won’t fight her on it, even if I wanted to. I refuse to be yet another Alpha who forces her to bend to my will.

And quite honestly… fuck them.

“We won’t say anything,” I reaffirm. “You’re both right. They don’t need to know right now.”

She pulls back from Soren’s chest, turning to me with confused eyes.

“They’re your pack,” she points out needlessly.

I snort in contempt. “Love, compared to you, they don’t even signify. And I’m not exactly feeling charitable toward them, yeah?” I bite my lip, considering. “We’re just going to have to get on one page about our Bonds. I haven’t mentioned our Scent-Match Bond yet, and so far no one’s bothered to ask specifics about the silver Bond, but make no mistake—those questions are coming.”

I lean in, brushing a loose strand of hair out of Idril’s face. She’s so beautiful. *So perfect.* I could stare at her forever, awed by her very existence. My heart swells with love, and I funnel it down the Bond, eager for her to feel the way I feel.

She gasps, hands flying to her chest—a soft, small smile blooms, full of wonder and hope.

It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

Soren grabs the pillow Idril tossed at his face and leans back, shoving it behind his head. “To be completely fair, I have plenty of questions about the Bond, too.”

“What questions? You’re Scent-Matches,” I point out, frowning in confusion.

Soren shakes his head, hesitates, and starts nodding instead. His frown deepens, brow furrowing in confusion, and he shrugs.

“Wow,” I respond flatly, once I’m sure he’s not going to change his answer a fourth time. “That was incredibly fucking insightful and not at all confusing. Thank you.”

Idril laughs, and the sound of her happiness fills me with light. Her joy makes me smile and clearly affects Soren the same way, because his frown is gone and his face splits into a huge grin.

“We’re Scent-Matches,” he clarifies. “But another Bond snapped into place down in the cells. It’s stronger. More real, if that makes sense. It’s so…” he scrubs a hand down his face in frustration. “I don’t even know how to explain it. It’s just… *more*.”

There’s no need for an explanation, though. And in his defense, I don’t think even the most talented wordsmith to ever exist could find a way to describe the way the silver Bond feels.

“So then… there are two for both of you. One gold—the Scent-Match Bond—and one silver. Except,” she turns to me, “why haven’t I felt the Scent-Match Bond with you yet, Caelan?”

“You will,” I promise her. “As soon as my suppressants wear off. It’s common practice to keep a patient on suppressants, but they’re not long-lasting, so it’s only a matter of time.”

Her eyes light up, and I swear I see her Omega peeking out for the briefest second before disappearing again.

“I know the gold thread is a Scent-Match, but the silver… I have no idea what that is,” she admits.

“I don’t either,” I admit.

“No clue,” Soren sighs. “But there has to be some information somewhere.”

“If there were, Daxen would have found it,” I tell him. “Or I would have in the days leading up to the Ambush.”

“Well, I say we lean on our ignorance of the new Bond if anyone asks,” Soren suggests. “As long as we keep what we do know to ourselves and continue letting everyone think your Scent-Match Bond is with Soren while my Bond with you is a never-before-seen Bond that we simply don’t have answers for…”

“That sounds easiest, and technically none of it is a lie,” Soren agrees.

“I do want information on the silver Bond,” I grumble, standing up and stretching the kinks out of my neck. “Maybe I’ll find something while I’m searching for a way to break my Pack Bonds.”

Silence.

Idril stands. She studies me, searching for something she must find because the next thing I know she’s in my arms, limbs wrapped around me tight like she never wants to let go.

“Thank you,” she whispers, then shocks the shit out of me when she leans in and gently rubs the side of her neck and face against mine. Scent-marking me.

“Why are you thanking me?”

Instead of answering, she lets go of me, and reluctantly, I release my hold on her as well so she can get down. For a long moment she just stands in front of me, eyes wide and brimming with unshed tears and so much fucking gratitude it makes my chest ache.

“You can’t break your Bond with them,” she tells me fiercely.

“I can and I will,” I respond with conviction.

“No, she’s right,” Soren cuts in, standing and taking a step closer. “You can’t. Not yet, at least.”

“What—”

“We have no idea how that will affect Idril,” Soren says, cutting me off. “Believe me, I understand your impulse to tell those fuckwits to get bent, but until we know more about her Bonds—and what she’s capable of in general—severing a Fated Bond that happens to run parallel with her Scent-Match Bonds is fucking stupid.”

Fuck.

I never… I hadn’t even considered the possibility. *What if Soren’s right? What if part of our Scent-Match Bond is dependent on our Fated Pack Bond?* It’s no coincidence that Scent-Matches are always Fated to Packs with a Fated Bond—the Bond threads may be different colors, but they’re connecting the same individuals with a Bond from the same source.

And yet the thought of spending the rest of my life Bonded to the two men who betrayed me—and more importantly, our Fated Mate—makes me want to fucking rage.

“There’s no proof that Fated Pack Bonds can be severed, Caelan,” Idril points out. “I know I was sheltered for most of my life, but I did online courses in college, and one was an AP History of Supernatural Species and

Fate. It was in the text. My professor discussed it at length—there was even a story about twin brothers who were separated at birth and grew up in opposing kingdoms back in the 16th century."

"The Graves twins," Soren nods. "Wolven. Fought on opposing sides of a multi-generational war. One twin found his Fated Omega, but she was taken captive by the opposing army. An army led—unknown to them both—by his twin brother. The Omega fell for both Alphas, but when they discovered each other *and* the Fated Pack Bond…"

"I know all about the Graves twins," I sigh.

"Then you know they spent an entire decade searching for a way to sever their Fated Pack Bond," Soren responds pointedly. "And you know that in the end, the search was fruitless."

"What happened to them?" Idrik asks. "The book never said, and my professor didn't know."

"No one knows for sure," Soren answers. "Of course, there are plenty of stories. Rumors. I imagine all three are probably dead. That, or they fucked off somewhere they could live in peace. Somewhere no one would ever find them."

"That sounds amazing," I grumble, crossing the room toward my closet and flicking on the light. "I vote for that option."

I grab shorts and a t-shirt and contemplate grabbing something for Soren, but even as the closest in stature, I don't think my clothes would fit the Viking bastard.

I do grab a sweatshirt of mine for Idril, though, and my Alpha preens at the mental image of her wearing my clothes.

"So, what do you think, Idril?" I peek my head out of the closet as I pull on my jeans.

"About the Graves twins?"

"About the plan," I correct, and grin when I see the teasing glint in my Omega's eyes.

"I think that's as good an idea as any," Idril replies, breaking me out of my thoughts. "I don't want to lie to them. They're still my Mates, and it doesn't feel right to lie. The thought of it makes my insides itch." She gives an exaggerated shiver for emphasis. Soren smirks.

"But also… maybe it makes me a bad person, but I mean what I said earlier. I won't spend my life wondering if the Alphas I'm Bonded to are only around because of a Scent-Match."

She bites her bottom lip, and I have to force myself to look literally anywhere but her mouth. Fates, I don’t know how long I'm going to last without having her in my arms. All I want to do is hold her, kiss her, bring her pleasure.

I want to be mindful of her emotional state, but I also don’t want her to feel like she can’t come to me for physical comfort.

“It’s not a lie if you’re withholding information to protect yourself,” Soren argues.

“It just feels hypocritical after weeks spent insisting I’m not a liar,” Idril sighs. “Just to turn around and lie about something so serious.”

I straighten. “With all due respect, fuck them. They don’t get to say shit about how you respond to their cruelty. Would you have kept this from them if the last two weeks never happened?”

“No!” Idril shakes her head so emphatically her messy braid starts to unravel. “Of course not!”

I nod emphatically. “You’re not lying to them, Idril. You’re respecting yourself enough not to hand your heart over to males who have proven exactly how easy it is for them to hurt you.”

I lean in, placing my hands on her shoulders. “They made their choices. They fucked up. Now you get to decide what happens. They had no problem proving they could hurt you. Now they’ll have to work harder to prove they can be worthy of you. Make them, Idril. Make them fucking prove it. And until they can, there is nothing wrong with protecting yourself.”

“What if they never do enough to prove it?”

“Then they spend the rest of their lives hating themselves for *their* actions.”

She holds my gaze, bright pale blue as clear as a cloudless sky and full of trust, and *Fates*… my brothers are the biggest idiots in the world. *How could they have ever fucked things up with her so badly?*

I have no empathy for them. No sympathy, either. Both are reserved for Idril.

A knock at the door makes me growl. I glare at it until another knock comes—louder, and accompanied by a female’s voice—a member of our staff.

“I have clothing for the Omega!”

Soren lifts a brow, and after my nod, crosses the room and opens the door. A Beta staff member greets us with a wide smile. Behind her, two more Betas wait, arms laden with dozens of shopping bags.

“What’s all this?” I ask.

“I was told these bags are for the Omega,” the Beta answers. She raises a thick eyebrow in question when both Soren and I just stand here stupidly because… *what the fuck?*

“Where should we put it?”

“Uh—in the closet, I guess,” I answer, and we both step back, giving the group room to slip in and scurry over to the walk-in. Idril watches the procession with utter bafflement.

“Those aren’t mine,” she whispers, like she’s worried I’ll think she went on a middle-of-the-night shopping spree while I was asleep. The staff make quick work of offloading their bags and are almost at the door when I stop the Beta female with a raised hand.

“Where did all this come from?”

Her brow furrows in confusion. “Vaelenor.”

All three Betas leave, and I shut the door behind them, twisting the lock for good measure. Planting my fists on my hips, I throw my head back and groan out loud.

Wonderful.

“Did she say *Vaelenor* got all this?” Idril asks in a tone full of disbelief. She inches toward the closest—and bags—but stops before she gets too close. Like she can’t quite believe any of it might actually be for her.

“Why, exactly, would Vaelenor buy our Mate clothing?” Soren sounds indignant, and after the way Vae and Dax have treated Idril, I can’t blame him.

“He feels bad,” I explain with a sigh. The thought of dealing with Vae’s antics sounds exhausting. I might be much better physically, but I’m still not a hundred percent; regardless, I’d rather go on back-to-back missions than navigate Vaelenor’s social ineptitude.

“He… feels bad?”

I gesture toward what must be thousands of dollars of who the hell knows what.

“Yup. This is what he does when he fucks up—hyper-focuses and overcompensates. Though in his defense, there’s not really a way for him to over-apologize. I should have seen this coming, honestly. This is on me.”

“He feels bad?” Idril walks up to stand next to me, frowning at all the bags.

“Yup. And instead of apologizing and trying to earn your forgiveness, he’s apparently decided that the best way to prove how sorry he is is by—”

“Buying our Omega racy lingerie?” Soren snarls, lifting a lace thong and a matching bra from an expensive-looking black bag.

“Oh my gosh,” Idril gasps, face turning bright red. She reaches out and snatches the lingerie. She releases a strangled noise and whips the designer set behind her back in an attempt to hide it.

“You know we’re both still imagining you in those, right, Little Mate?” Soren smirks.

“You are not,” she replies hotly, daring him to contradict her.

I stalk closer, coming up behind her and snatching the underwear out of her hands. I hold them up, eyeing them appraisingly.

“Oh, we absolutely are,” I tease. Despite my tone, I’m not actually joking. Picturing my little Omega dressed in lingerie is enough to make me hard instantly. Especially knowing no one else would know she’s wearing it except Soren and me.

Well… and Vaelenor, apparently.

Fuck. That.

I scowl at the thought, stalking into the bathroom, where I promptly toss the lingerie into the trash before returning. Soren and Idril stare at my now-empty hands in confusion.

The idea of Vae giving my Mate panties is rubbing me the wrong way. Waking something up inside of me, I don’t know how to shove it back down. It might be unreasonable, but I don’t care. He had his chance to provide for her. He fucked it up. She’s not his to provide for.

I cross the room, stopping once I’m standing in front of my Omega and cupping her face in my hands. “Soren and I will provide you with underwear—no one else. I don’t want any other males to know what you’re wearing against your skin. Understand?”

Idril is mine. *My Omega. My Fated Mate.*

“You’re mine,” I growl, feeling my Alpha right at the surface. Idril lifts her hands and wraps them around my wrists.

“I’m yours, Alpha,” she replies, voice sweet as honey, and just as thick. It winds through the air and washes over my senses, smothering all my jagged, jealous edges.

It’s exactly what I needed to hear. The acknowledgment that she’s mine calms my instincts. Idril’s pupils are blown, breaths coming in shallow pants. Her tongue peeks out, and she licks her lower lip, drawing my gaze to her mouth.

Fates, I want her. I want her with an intensity that almost scares me.

“Alpha.” Her skin’s flushed, and I don’t think it’s from embarrassment. Her pulse flutters at the side of her neck like a trapped butterfly. I reach out and gently trail my hand from her face, down to her neck, where my fingers wrap around the slender column of her throat.

She swallows, and I can feel the movement against my palm. My breathing turns heavy, my cock hard and aching in my shorts. I can’t look away from my Mate.

I’m distantly aware of the bathroom door shutting and the shower turning on, and silently thank Soren for giving us some privacy.

Idril glances over my shoulder curiously, and the second her attention is no longer on me, my Alpha snarls, and I mirror the sound.

Idril’s lashes flutter shut, and her gaze becomes hooded with desire.

“Look at me, Mate.” My voice is rough and dripping with my own desire. An Omega whine falls from her lips, and my hand spasms, fingers flexing around her throat. She does as I command, lifting those beautiful blue eyes to mine. I reward her with an approving smile, and smooth my thumb across the soft skin of her jaw.

“Good girl,” I murmur lazily. I’m officially lost in the moment. *Lost in her.* Her breathing hitches, her pupils dilating even more.

Fuck. I didn’t even think about what I was saying before I said it. As a general rule, Omegas love praise. And my sweet girl has spent her whole life being cut down, so I imagine validation from her Alpha affects her extra hard.

“Do you like that?”

“L-Like what?” She whispers, biting down on her plush bottom lip. I crouch down until I’m eye level with her, then I lean forward until my lips press against the soft shell of her ear.

“Being my good girl,” I breathe, and my Alpha fucking roars inside of me when she whimpers.

“Words, Sweetheart. I want your words. I’ve been waiting what feels like forever to hear your sweet voice.”

She gives me a soft, shy look that makes my cock throb harder. Her pupils are so dilated they've nearly overtaken the blue of her irises.

"Yes."

The blush on her cheeks deepens. I'm dying to know how far down her body the color bleeds. I angle my head until my lips are a breath away from hers. I'm not going to push her, but I won't treat her like she's breakable, either.

This certainly wasn't what I was aiming for when I started teasing her, but my instincts are telling me not to pull away unless it becomes too much, too fast, for her.

I worry if I stop things right now, she'll take it as another rejection. I need to take whatever this is slow, but my Mate also needs to know with complete certainty that she's desired. Wanted.

Loved.

"I dreamed about these lips," I murmur, trailing my hand back up her throat and sliding the pad of my fingers across the soft flesh. "When I was in that dreamscape, and all I could do was think, I spent hours replaying the night we met."

It's an admission, but not one I'll ever regret giving her. I'm obsessed with this girl, and have been since the moment I first laid eyes on her. I'll never underplay my feelings or leave her wondering how I feel. She's my Fated Mate. Perfect for me in every way. I know she'll be able to handle every piece of me.

Even the feral side that I've kept hidden away for so many centuries.

"I thought about it, too," she admits. "Every night, I thought of you."

Her voice is quiet. Soft. The words float between us like silk, wrapping around my heart and tying us together even tighter than before. They make my head spin, like I'm drunk on her. My pulse beats harder, and before I realize what I'm doing, I'm wrapping my arm around her back and hauling her body into mine with a possessive growl of desire.

"Tell me to stop," I murmur, turning us so my back faces the bed and she stands in front of me.

She shakes her head.

"Idril," I warn, "I want this to be on your terms. I want everything to be your decision, and I don't—"

She lifts two fingers and presses them against my lips, cutting me off.

“I’ve never done anything,” she admits, teeth sinking into that soft lower lip and making my vision waver. “You were my first kiss, and I don’t —I don’t know what I’m doing.”

I glance behind me at Idril’s Nest. The last thing I want is to fuck with it. I need her to understand that I respect her space. I don’t care if it’s technically my bed. Now, it’s hers. Everything I have, and everything I am, is hers.

And I’m going to show her exactly what that means.

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Chapter 16

Caelan

I take Idril's hand in mine, and lead her toward the couch in the sitting area. Each room in this wing is more like a small apartment than a bedroom. The sitting area in mine is sunken, and when we arrive at the two steps leading down to soft rugs thrown over the cold stone floor, I wrap my hands around my Omega's waist and pick her up, urging her to wrap her legs around me.

She squeaks in surprise, but does as I urge. I walk us over to the couch and fall into the comfortable leather with Idril straddling me. She pushes up like she's about to move off of me, but I stop her with a firm hand on her hip.

"Stay."

She does, settling back down hesitantly. Her hands are braced on my shoulders, and for a heartbeat she hovers over my lap, so I wrap both hands around her hips and pull her down until she's sitting comfortably. I was planning to ignore the hard length of my cock between us, but as soon as Idril feels it, her eyes widen.

"Whatever happens between us is your decision," I tell her. "I will never push you for anything. If you want to be held, I'll hold you. If you want to be kissed, I'll kiss you. If you want other things…" I trail off, enjoying the way her fingers spasm against my shoulders.

"What do you want, Omega?" The question might not be fair, but I won't make any assumptions. This is her choice. *Always.*

Idril squirms and the hard length of my cock rubs against her core. She whimpers, squeezing her eyes shut tight. I guide my hands to her hips and rock her body against mine, repeating the movement.

Idril’s breath catches. Her heavy-lidded eyes are glassy and full of desire.

“I don't understand what’s happening,” she murmurs. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

“You’re my Mate,” I reply firmly. “The way you feel is normal. I’m yours, Omega.” I rock her hips again, while lifting mine to give her the friction she needs. She grips my shoulders tighter, her nails digging into my skin and sending a small bite of delicious pain through my nerve endings.

She falls forward, melting into me like it’s the only place she wants to be. I can smell her arousal, the scent barely discernible thanks to the suppressants.

But there are no suppressants in the world strong enough to completely block an Omega’s perfume when they are as turned on as my Mate is right now.

It’s faint, but the smoky vanilla and honey make me fucking wild. Unable to wait another second, I cup the back of her head and pull her lips to mine.

Touching her like this is enough to send me feral. Her soft mouth moves against mine, hesitant and unsure. I lick the seam of her lips, and with a breathy moan, she opens for me. I groan, touching her tongue with mine, exploring her. My hips punch forward without my permission. I want to get closer. I want to bury myself inside of her and never leave.

“Caelan.” Her moan against my lips makes me snarl. I move my mouth down her neck, nipping at the thin skin of her throat, licking a path down to her shoulder—to the exact spot I plan on biting her.

Her body melts into mine. Her hips shift forward, giving another experimental roll. She’s curious and turned on, but unsure what to do. I smile into her shoulder, returning my hands to her hips and helping her move by grinding her against me.

Fates, I can feel her slick, even through the layers of clothing. I want it—I want to lick every inch of her and taste her on my tongue.

Her breathing increases as I move her hips over my cock faster and faster. She lets out a tiny, frustrated growl that makes me want to tear the whole world apart with my bare hands.

I lean back against the cushions, heat suffusing my veins as I watch her hips roll back and forth over my length. *Fuck, it’s so hot.* Especially when I

notice the darker spots of fabric and realize her panties and my shorts are both soaked with her slick.

I groan long and low at the sight, throwing my head back in ecstasy. This is, single-handedly, the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen.

But when Idril glances down, her movements stutter to a stop. "What—what?"

She brings her fingers between us, running them against the fabric of my shorts that are soaked with her slick. The curious way she tests the wet patch makes me hotter. My muscles tense, desire thrumming through my blood.

When she looks at me with bright eyes drowning in shock, I can't bite back my smug smile. "Your slick, baby. It's your body's way of preparing you for my cock."

She narrows her eyes. "I know what slick is; I just…" She lifts her fingers between us, wet with her arousal. "I've never…"

Reaching out, I wrap my hand around her wrist and bring her fingers to my mouth. The taste of her on my tongue has my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

Fucking honey and vanilla and something sweetly floral… *Fates, it's perfect.*

She's perfect.

I lick and suck off every last drop, smiling wickedly at the way she watches me without blinking. Her cheeks are flushed, eyes bright with need.

She's never looked more beautiful.

"You've never been turned on for your Alpha Mate," I tell her. "I want you to come for me. Can you do that, Sweetheart?"

Her breath hitches, but she nods, and the blush painting her cheeks deepens. I lean back, once more encouraging her to move as she begins her slow, torturous roll on top of me. I watch every movement and twitch with hooded eyes, determined to remember every fucking second.

She's beautiful, even in her innocence. This may be new to her, but her body knows what it wants. She moves on top of me, taking her pleasure as the hesitancy in her eyes starts to disappear.

I can't stay still, and before long I'm moving with her, rolling my hips with hers and groaning as more slick soaks through my shorts.

“You’re fucking perfect like this,” I rasp, and when her eyes light up at my words, my blood heats. “That’s it, sweetheart. Ride your Alpha. Take what you want.”

The friction is brutal, hot, slick, and perfect. I can feel my knot swell, hot and hard and pulsing.

Even though I want to close my eyes and bask in the feel of her using me, I don’t want to miss a moment of this. Don’t want to miss a single flicker of lust or gasp of desire as she experiments, discovering what feels best.

“Good girl,” I praise as her speed increases. She's panting, nails digging into the skin of my shoulders through my shirt. “You feel so good on top of me. You were made for me, Omega.”

Her hands bunch in the fabric, thighs tightening against my hips. My hold on her waist is so tight I worry she’ll bruise, but she doesn’t seem to care. Her eyes are bright; straight, white teeth digging into her lower lip, little sounds of pleasure escaping from her throat as she gets closer and closer to release.

“Perfect girl,” I praise. “Look at you, moving so sweetly for me. You’re mine, Idril. Always mine.”

I can feel her building, the tension so close to snapping I can nearly fucking taste it. I urge her on, forearms tense, muscles coiled tight, my voice dripping with raw devotion and obsession. “Don’t hold back, Omega. I want to feel you fall apart. Let go for me.”

“Caelan,” she gasps, and her head falls back, limbs shaking. The sound of my name on her lips urges me on, and my hips surge harder.

“Look at you… grinding yourself on my cock like you were made for it. You *were* made for it. Come for me, Idril.” My voice is rough and raw, vibrating with a rumbling growl of lust.

With a shocked cry, she breaks. Her body shudders, and her limbs shake. A searching, keening whine of need falls from her lips as she trembles violently in my lap. I don’t stop my own movements, determined to work her through every last moment of pleasure.

She’s fucking beautiful. *Perfect*. The sight, the sound, the *feel* of her convulsing in my arms rips me open.

Heat races down my spine. My vision flashes a bright, blinding white. Idril collapses into me, and I snarl, pulling her down and rocking my hips up into her wet warmth, only separated by a few pieces of fabric.

I explode. Violent shivers rush through my body as my cock kicks and pulses between us. Ropes of cum erupt into the fabric of my shorts. The scent of my release rises between us, twisting and mingling with hers.

"Fuck—*Idril*," I gasp, moaning her name. I'm somehow still pulsing, *still* spilling. My Omega's scent, her voice, her body pinned against mine, it tears me apart and stitches me together at once.

When I finally catch my breath, she's trembling in my arms, clinging to me. I cup the back of her head, pulling her into my chest and pressing my mouth into her hair as she catches her breath. I swear I can still feel her throbbing against me.

I hold her tighter, running a hand down her back over her shirt, smoothing my palm up and down her spine.

"You did so good," I murmur, pressing soft, gentle kisses to her damn temple. "So, so good. My perfect Mate."

She buries her face into my throat, lips warm and soft where they press against my skin.

Scent-marking me.

I Scent-mark her back, unwilling to do anything that might pull us out of this moment. I don't care about the mess we've made, the problems waiting for us, my Pack, her father, or anything else. All that matters is now.

I'm eternally grateful that Soren was kind enough to give us this moment alone. I don't know if I could have done the same if our roles were reversed.

Eventually, Idril pushes up from my chest. She blinks sleepily, and her lips curve into a shy smile. But something's… *off.* She's not looking at me. Her eyes are on my shirt, where her fingers are busy knotting and unknotting the fabric, twisting the cotton anxiously.

"Hey," I whisper, placing two fingers under her chin and urging her to look at me. I reach out and lay my other hand on top of hers, stilling her movements. She jerks, like she isn't even aware of what she was doing.

Fuck, what's happening?

"Are you alright? That wasn't too much, was it? Because we can slow down. I don't want you to feel like—"

"No!" She shouts, cutting me off. Then repeats in a softer voice, "No. It wasn't too much. I just… didn't expect it, is all. I wanted to do it, though. I do… want it. I want *you*."

A single tear falls from her lashes and trails down her cheek. She sniffs, swiping it away angrily. “Sorry, I don’t know why I’m crying. I’m not sad.”

“No, you’re not sad,” I agree. “You’re overwhelmed, which is normal. All of this—all these emotions—are totally normal. As long as you don’t regret it.”

“I don’t regret it,” she promises, and I believe her. I can feel it through our Bond. She’s overwhelmed, yes, but not regretful.

I stand, and this time she wraps her legs around my hips automatically. I don’t plan on carrying her around like this forever, but right now my Omega needs to feel close to her Alpha—and I care more about what she needs than how it looks.

“What are we doing?”

“Just wait,” I tell her with an indulgent smile. “You’ll probably enjoy this part as much as you did the orgasm.”

“I don’t think *anything* could feel as good as the orgasm did,” she replies dubiously.

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“Oh yeah?”

“I didn’t know it would be so… everything.”

Grinning, I push open the door to the bathroom and flick on the lights so she can see when I raise my eyebrows and reply teasingly, “Everything, huh?”

To my absolute delight, she throws back her head, releasing a startled laugh. The sound is like feeling the sun on your skin after years of nothing but clouds and rain. Light and beautiful and free.

And in my opinion, a thousand times better than the orgasm.

I set her on the cool marble counter, then walk over to the tub and twist the faucet until the water is the perfect temperature for her. Ensuring it’s nice and warm for her. Then, I pour in some scented salts that’ve been on a shelf in the closet for ages.

Pretty sure they're the ones Silas bought a few Christmases ago. The year he fell for some ad claiming their bath products cured the common cold.

No one had the heart to remind him vampires don't get the common cold.

I escape into the closet to grab another pair of shorts and change. Once I'm done, I snatch the dirty shorts from the floor and return to the bathroom where Idril watches in confusion as I toss them into the trash.

Right on top of the lingerie Vae bought for her.

I'm going to punch him—*again*—for being so fucking presumptuous. *I mean, what the hell was he thinking, buying my Mate lingerie?*

"Why'd you throw those away?" Idril asks with an expression of horror on her face that's straight up fucking adorable. I cross the room until I'm standing in front of her, planting my hands on either side of her thighs and caging her in.

Fates, it feels amazing being this close to her. Just knowing I can reach out and touch her feels like a gift.

Which is why I don't stop myself from leaning in and pressing a soft kiss between her furrowed brows before answering, "There's no way I'm sending shorts full of cum to the poor Betas on laundry duty. Mainly because, if they see that mess, I don't think I'll be able to look any of them in the face."

Idril scrunches her nose.

"But also, because they're covered in your slick as well. And I know myself well enough to know I'll kill anyone else who scents your arousal."

I expect her to laugh, but the opposite happens. Her smile drops, and she murmurs, "It's not like anyone can smell it now. It's gone. I thought I could scent my perfume for a few minutes, but… not anymore."

She looks so sad. My heart fucking breaks for her. I hate the way she's been forced to suppress her Omega. They don't simply suppress her scent—military-grade shit like what's been forced on her does so much more. It dulls her instincts and locks her Omega away, making it impossible for her to understand and know her instincts.

Her father—*and now my own fucking pack*—have been keeping a part of who she is away from her for her entire adult life. They've stolen that part of her soul from her—prevented her from discovering who she is as an Omega. Sure, she can still sense her Omega. Hear her sometimes.

But not the way she should. Twenty-two years, and she probably only slightly understands her designation and her needs.

For all she'd been a prisoner in the physical sense of the word, she'd also had her designation imprisoned as well. I wondered if she even knew that she didn't lean into her instincts the way most Omegas did. I wonder if her father realized that, or even my brothers.

Even though it pisses me off, I can't help but be grateful for them at the same time. In some ways, they've helped her. Without them, the desire to Nest, for comfort and safety, for soft things, for an Alpha's validation and love—all of it would have been a million times worse. Her Designation's needs would have overwhelmed her until the denial broke something inside of her.

I sigh—another thing to ask Calder or Lenora about.

"I was thinking," I back up a few steps, opening a drawer under the sink and reaching for a brush that's still in the packaging. I gesture for her to spin with the brush and order, "Turn around."

She gives me a confused look, but does what I ask.

"Good girl," I purr, smiling when goosebumps rise on her arms.

"What were you thinking?" she asks, folding her legs under her and placing her hands in her lap. She watches me through the mirror as I pull the hairband out of her hair and start unraveling the braid.

"Why don't we go see Lenora soon? Talk about getting you off suppressants, if that's what you want. You can always use a descenter to hide your Scent from Dax and Vae. It works well enough."

I'm so fixated on running my hands through the silken strands of her long, white hair, admiring the way the silver strands gleam beneath the overhead lights, that I almost don't notice Idril's silence. Not until she stills, her limbs stiffening.

"We don't have to," I rush to add. Fuck, I don't want her to think I'm trying to make decisions about her body without her consent. "Just know it's an option if—or when—you want it. You just seemed so sad about your Scent."

Our eyes meet in the mirror. After a few moments, she shrugs, glancing away. Her shoulders inch toward her ears, like she's preparing for a blow.

"Do you think we can talk to someone besides Lenora?" Her voice is so small. Small and afraid.

Afraid of what? Of asking? Of Lenora? Does she think I'm going to get angry?

I force myself to stay calm, brushing through her hair with long, soothing strokes and berating myself for not fucking thinking once I realize what the issue is.

Lenora. Of course she won't want to go to her. She's the one who's been stabbing her with a needle every fucking night and forcing the suppresents on her to begin with. I have to swallow down my anger, imagining the Beta looming over my sweet Mate, forcing medication into her body without her consent.

Fuck. I need to calm down. My scent's turning bitter; it's going to send Idril's instincts into a tailspin if I don't get my shit under control.

I focus on brushing her hair, pulling the bristles through sections in slow, methodical strokes. Once I've sufficiently pulled myself away from the edge, I answer her.

"We can see anyone you want. We can do anything you want, Idril. It's your body."

She hesitates for just a moment before nodding. Eventually, her shoulders fall, and her body relaxes as the tension bleeds out of her. I continue my ministrations long after the tangles are gone, content to keep going as long as she remains soft and languid in front of me.

The bath is borderline too full, so I make myself move to turn off the faucet. Turning back to Idril, I reach around her front and offer her the hair tie.

"Why don't you pull your hair up and spend some time in the bath? When you're done, we can talk more if you want."

She glances at the full tub over my shoulder, a smile full of joy blooming across her face. I find myself returning her smile, reaching out to help her down from the counter and placing my lips to her temple once she's on her feet.

"Will you find Soren?" she asks, making me pause on my way out the door. She looks worried again, and I hate that she seems to have a never-ending string of anxiety.

"I'll find him, sweetheart," I reply, frowning when the worry doesn't disappear from the lines of her face.

"What if—will he—is he still here, do you think?"

Oh, my poor girl. She has no idea. None at all.

This is exactly what I was worried about. If her Omega were closer to the surface, if she knew how to lean into her designation and trust that part of her—she wouldn't be anywhere near as worried.

She'd understand that there can never be jealousy or anger between Soren and me when it comes to her. Not her. The only thing either of us cares about is her happiness. *Period*

"Sweetheart," I crouch down, taking her hands in mine. "I promise you—Soren's fine. He's not angry about what we did. There will be plenty of moments when you want to be with just one of us. There will also be plenty of times you'll want both of us at once," I wink, and she blushes. "There will also be times when you want to be alone for a while. That's okay too. This is new for all of us, but the one thing you need to remember is that no matter what, both Soren and I want to see you happy more than anything else in the whole fucking world. That's all that matters to both of us. Everything else, we'll figure out."

I don't wait for a reply, standing and exiting the bathroom, making sure the door clicks shut behind me as I do. I don't walk from the door, though. Instead, I stand next to it silently until I hear the sound of water sloshing in the bath.

I turn from the door, jumping when I come face to face with Soren standing right behind me, hands in the pockets of his jeans and a smirk on his face.

"Sorry." His grin widens before he grimaces, explaining, "I had to leave, or I was going to—ah…" He trails off awkwardly.

I wave him off. "I get it. And thanks. For giving us that time together."

He inclines his head, then gestures to the bedroom door behind him. "Your asshole Packmate says he found something he wants to speak to you about."

"Which one?" I ask without sarcasm.

"The one who didn't buy our Omega panties," he responds flatly, making me groan.

Dax is the last person I want to speak to right now.

"Alright," I sigh. "Let Idril know I'm checking in with the Pack if she asks. She's taking a bath and relaxing."

"Good," Soren nods, crossing the room toward the couch in the sitting area. He snatches the remote off the coffee table and clicks on the TV, then

—before I can stop him—throws himself down on the couch, right where Idril and I had just been.

Soren's shoulders tighten. He angles his head to the side, nostrils flaring like—well, a fucking wolf. Wolven have way better senses than vampires, so when he lets out a low moan and reaches down to adjust himself, I cringe, raising my fist to my mouth and smothering my laugh.

Soren turns a narrow-eyed glare on me. "If I wind up knotting this couch, it's on you."

I bark a laugh and decide now would be a good time to hightail it out of here. Once I'm nearly at the door, I ask, "Need me to grab you a towel or should I add a cleaning bill to your tab?"

His growl is more wolf than man, and I barely dodge the pillow he whips at me, slamming the door shut right as it hits the wood with a muffled *thud*.

Even though I know I'm headed toward an inevitable showdown with Daxen, I smile.

Yeah… pretty sure I like the wolven.

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Chapter 17

Vaelenor

Something's watching me.

My entire life, I've relied heavily on my instincts. Almost every decision I've made over hundreds of years was made following my gut. Now I'm standing on my balcony overlooking the back training yard and the forest beyond, wondering why the fuck I ignored them the one fucking time it mattered the most.

I squint into the forest, using my enhanced eyesight to pick apart the shadows. Last night, I decided I won't ever ignore my instincts again, and that starts now.

It's mid-afternoon. The sun's casting long shadows across the yard, but I fucking swear I saw yellow eyes blinking at me through the low brush a minute ago. But now they're… *gone.*

It doesn't really matter, though. I know what it was—that fucking cat from the Varenthrall Estate. I haven't seen or thought about it since the night Idril arrived, but I know down to my very bones that it's out there.

"Here kitty, kitty," I murmur like a fucking psycho, leaning over the ledge like the extra ten inches might help.

I scent Daxen from the hallway before the door to my bedroom swings open, and I turn, leaning back against the stone ledge of the balcony.

I wonder if Idril's room has a balcony. I bet she'd love one. I always catch her looking out the windows like she's dying to feel the sun on her face.

"Where's Idril?" I ask. "I mean, what room did Gav put her in?"

Dax gingerly picks his way across my room, stepping over dirty laundry with narrow-eyed irritation. I roll my eyes. No one made his prissy ass

come here. It's my room, and I'll cover it in sweaty clothes if I damn well please.

What's he gonna do? Peer-review me to death?

"She's with Caelan," Dax finally answers, stepping up next to me and leaning over, bracing his arms on the railing.

"Really? What about the wolven?"

Dax looks at me like I'm a fucking idiot. "They're both staying in Caelan's room." He turns back to the forest and mutters, "One big happy fucking family."

Well damn, I wasn't expecting Dax to sound so bitter. Maybe he feels just as shitty as I do. Maybe we can work together… figure out how to apologize.

Even knowing she'll probably never forgive me doesn't stop me from wanting to get on my hands and knees and beg her for forgiveness. It's the least I owe her.

I probably should have done that last night… I just wasn't fucking thinking straight after what happened. The guilt was eating me alive, and I spent all night replaying all the fucked up, terrible things we did to her. Then I stayed up until three in the morning, shopping for her online, and sent staff to pick up my purchases as soon as the sun rose.

She has no clothes. No shirts or pants or pajamas. *Nothing*.

I know I should've let her Mates buy what she needs, but I just couldn't stop myself. It was like… a freaking *compulsion*. Every time I thought, '*okay, I've bought enough*,' I'd remember her face when she thanked me for those damn shoes, and I'd add more shit to my order.

I don't even care if she even wears any of it. I just want her to have it. My Alpha—*I*—want to give it to her. *She deserves—*

Fuck, she deserves *so* much more than a bunch of stupid clothes she probably doesn't even care about. *What in the Fates possessed me to think buying all that crap was a good idea?* It's nothing compared to the way I treated her.

The way *we* treated her.

Might as well have sent a note with it that says, "*Sorry we Commanded you into a seizure, denied your Omega basic biological necessities like blankets, bartered food for answers, and spent two weeks systematically breaking you apart when all you ever asked for was someone to listen to you. Here's some fucking Lululemon.*"

Fates, I'm an absolute idiot.

"What are you doing out here?" Daxen asks, and I debate whether or not to tell him. I'm not exactly thrilled with my brother right now. Not after the way he pushed me over and over to ignore my instincts because he supposedly knew best.

Except, as it turns out, I was right the whole time. I was right, and he was wrong, and now Caelan won't even fucking look at us. And I don't blame him. If I found my Fated Mate right before getting so injured I had to be placed in a fucking coma, and found out she was treated as anything less than a fucking queen when I finally woke up, I'd lose my shit, too.

I'm a thousand percent sure the only reason he didn't rip out our throats with his bare hands is because it would've scared Idril.

When the silence gets too heavy, I respond to Dax's question with a shrug before admitting, "Just feels like there's something out there. Watching me."

"That's your guilt," he sighs. "There's nothing out there."

I grind my fucking teeth together so hard I'm pretty sure I'm about to break a molar.

"For fucking once, do you think you could maybe take what I say seriously?" I snap.

I'm so *angry*. At Dax, at myself, at the *world*.

I feel like I've lost something. Something that was never even mine to begin with. There's a gaping hole inside of me now, one that wouldn't be there if I'd just listened to my instincts; I'm sure of it.

But I didn't. I listened to Daxen. And now everything is singularly fucked up because of it.

Instead of responding, he stands to his full height and swipes a hand down the front of his shirt like he's checking for wrinkles. "I told the wolf to have Caelan meet me in the control room in ten. I found some shit you'll both want to see."

With that, he turns on his heel and walks away, crossing my room with a purposeful stride—stepping all over my clothes on his way out.

Because he's a fucking dick.

I should have known he was just gonna pretend like nothing happened. It's so fucking on brand for him. And all these centuries later, I still don't know how to handle him when he gets like this. I want to fight; he wants to pretend like nothing's wrong.

Well, fine. I guess neither of us is going to get what we fucking want.

If he thinks I'm going to give up or stop caring eventually, he's delusional. I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to remind him every day just how bad he fucked up. In two hundred years, when Caelan and the wolven are living their perfect domestic lives with their pregnant Omega and six kids running around, baking cookies and making finger-paint ornaments for their perfect Christmas tree, I'll still be here, making sure he never forgets.

Maybe crouched inside the tree itself, covered in tinsel, whispering "*you were wrong*" as Daxen tries to put the angel on top.

I'll ruin Christmas, Thanksgiving, Arbor Day—hell, I'll ruin every holiday until the end of time. It will be my legacy.

I'll be Sad Uncle Vae who shows up drunk every holiday just to remind Uncle Dax the Bitter about that one really important time he was *wrong*.

I let out a pathetic groan and throw myself face-first onto my bed.

My future sucks.

* * *

I push through the door to Dax's Command room, holding it open for the Beta wheeling in a cart full of food and drinks behind me. Daxen's busy typing furiously, attention bouncing between three monitors, so I don't bother asking before grabbing the largest thermos and popping it open. Steam wafts into the air as I take a deep inhale of perfectly brewed coffee.

Dax waits until the thermos is halfway to my mouth before, without even looking up from his monitor, he warns, "That's decaf."

I sigh and place it back on the cart. "Why do you hate me?"

"I haven't slept yet. The last thing I need is more caffeine."

"I'm failing to see how that's my problem," I grumble, loading a plate with frosted cookies instead. I don't even care if I'm eating all Dax's snacks. *Fuck Dax.* And his snacks. And his stupid decaf coffee.

Taking a seat away from my Packmate, I relax, eyeing all the monitors hung across the wall, taking up the majority of the room. It would be a decent size without all the equipment, but as it stands, there's not much room for anything extra outside of five or six chairs pushed against the walls for visitors—which Daxen hates.

It's quiet aside from the constant buzz of running machinery and the fans set at full blast to prevent the tech from overheating.

Screens flicker from one room to the next every few seconds, each angle giving Dax the perfect view of every inch of HQ, the grounds, the

training yard, the perimeter, and the compound.

A few seconds later, Silas walks in looking like shit, and some part of me is happy to see it. He screwed up big time the other day, and I'm certainly not planning on forgetting his little stunt any time soon.

His gaze homes in on the coffee, and he reaches out and snatches it immediately.

"It's full of caffeine," I lie, taking an aggressive bite of my cookie.

He sniffs it, then looks at me and frowns. "You're a liar."

I shoot him a menacing smile, but he ignores me and pulls out a chair, falling into it and yanking his ball cap down like he's trying to hide from the world.

I didn't really expect Caelan to show up, so when the door opens and he slips in with a smug as fuck expression on his face, it throws me off balance.

Bracing for his shitty mood—not that I blame him—I'm even more shocked when I really look at him and realize he looks the *opposite* of angry. He looks… *satisfied.*

My stomach spins. *Why does Caelan look satisfied?*

My Alpha snarls, spitting taunts dripping with venom.

Oh, I don't know, could it be because he just spent the entire night and most of the day with his hot as fuck Omega Mate? You've got to admit that if your roles were reversed, you would have spent all morning with your head between the Omega's thighs, discovering how many little noises you can coax from her with your tongue. Or discovering how long it takes before she goes from panting and whimpering to full-on screaming your name while her warm, wet heat pulses around—

"I've got news about Cage," Dax's voice slices through the room, killing my spiral with much-needed efficiency. And thank fuck, because the last thing I need to do right now is get hard because I can't stop thinking about my Packmate's Fated Mate.

Gods, what is wrong with me?

I glance down, noticing my plate is empty. Maybe… maybe I just need some more sugar.

Yeah. That's got to be it—low blood sugar.

"Well, spit it out," Caelan snaps from where he's leaning against the wall next to me. Daxen's lips thin as he spins back around and presses a few

keys. All at once, all but a few of the monitors blink on, mirroring his laptop—which in turn is mirroring the screen of a phone.

“This is Cage’s phone. I had it brought to me as soon as I knew he would no longer be continuing his training.”

“So… before or after you held him down in the fireplace until the fire consumed him and he died?” I ask, stretching for the tin of butter cookies on the tray and stealing a sleeve. When I glance up, all three males are staring at me.

“What?”

“Before,” Dax clips. “As soon as I felt your rage through the Bond and heard the two of you grappling, I made the call.”

“Wait, so you knew you were gonna kill him before you even walked in the room?”

Daxen’s jaw ticks. “It’s irrelevant.”

“I don’t think it is,” Caelan drawls. “Why *did* you kill Cage?”

“We are getting wildly off topic—”

“Answer the question,” Caelan demands, talking over him.

The room is totally silent except for the sound of parchment paper from my snack. I swear I can actually see Daxen’s mind working, trying to find a way out of this conversation.

Finally, Dax turns to me and says, “I did not know I was going to kill Cage when I walked in.” Then he turns to Caelan. “I killed him because he tried to kill the Omega.”

Apparently that’s not a good enough answer for Caelan. “Why?”

“I don’t know why he wanted to kill her; you’d have to ask Vae. He was there for the lead-up.”

Caelan’s onyx eyes darken with simmering rage.

“Don’t be obtuse; it makes us both look fucking stupid. Tell me why you reacted to Cage’s attempt to kill my Mate the way you did.”

Fuck are we really doing this right now? Daxen’s going to pop a blood vessel, and Caelan’s barely been out of medical for a day.

“Because she’s an Omega. She’s defenseless.”

“She’s always been an Omega. That didn’t stop you from tormenting her for two weeks. And I’d argue she’s not nearly as defenseless as you’re implying. Try again.”

“I never once tried to *kill* her, Caelan. Cage was going to take her life in cold blood, and while I won’t argue that she has abilities we don’t yet

understand—abilities she could use to protect herself—she wasn't using them fast enough. If she were, I wouldn't have had to shove her out of the way half a second before that fucking sharpened piece of steel pierced her heart."

"Still not answering my question."

"Maybe I don't have an answer!" Dax shouts. "Maybe I just fucking reacted. Did you ever consider that?"

Caelan tilts his head to the side and frowns. "You don't ever just *react*. Why are you lying to me?"

Oh gods, this isn't going to end well.

"I'm not lying," Dax seethes.

"Then why—"

"Because she wasn't his to kill!" He surges out of his chair, grey eyes flashing silver, hands fisted at his sides. *"She's not his!"*

Compared to Dax, Caelan is the definition of calm and controlled. It's unsettling the way the two have switched places. Normally Caelan's the one shouting, and Daxen's the one refusing to give in to his emotions.

What the hell is happening to us?

Caelan's mouth curves into a small, knowing smirk that causes Dax's eyes to narrow to slits. They stare each other down, and it's like the more irritated Daxen gets, the wider Caelan's smile grows.

As if this moment couldn't possibly get any more tense, the door swings open and Branwen saunters in, fingers flying over the screen of her phone.

"I hope you boys didn't start without me."

Daxen turns his narrow-eyed glare on the Omega. "No. Get out."

She finally looks up from her phone and cocks her head to the side, frowning before she turns to Caelan and asks, "You're cool if I'm here, right?"

Caelan shrugs. "Fine with me."

"Absolutely not," Dax barks.

Branwen snorts, stopping in front of the snack cart and popping open the tin of butter cookies with a hum of appreciation. "These are the best. My gran used to make ones just like this, but better."

"Homemade's always better," I agree, tossing another cookie into my mouth.

Dax's eyes widen. "Vae!"

Maybe I’m petty, or maybe it's because I actually kind of like the little Omega, but either way, I swallow my bite before saying, “Don’t look at me. I vote she stays.”

“I’m fine with her staying,” Silas mutters from his seat in the corner, tucked back in the shadows like a fucking gremlin. At the sound of his voice, Branwen shrieks and spins around, eyes wide as she searches the dimly lit room until she finds where the voice came from.

“You bloody arsehole! You scared me half to death!”

Silas must really be in a shitty mood because all he does is wince and shrink further in his chair, mumbling, “Sorry.”

Branwen turns back to Dax with a beaming smile. “Four to one. Looks like you’re outvoted.”

“I’m not outvoted,” Dax growls, crossing his arms over his chest. “There is no vote. This is my office. I say who stays. I say who goes.”

“Come on, Dax, don’t be such a dick,” I mutter, which earns me a grin from Branwen and a glare from my Packmate. I shoot a surreptitious glance at Caelan, but he doesn’t respond, and my gut sours.

Instead of going back and forth with him like she always does, Branwen sighs, plucks two more cookies from the tin before replacing the lid, and heads back to the door like she’s leaving.

She only makes it two steps before Silas shouts, “Wait, where are you going?”

“I’m not going to stay where I’m not wanted. I told your Leader I’d be here to help with the whole missing Omegas’ situation, but if Daxen doesn’t want my help, that’s on him.”

Well now I’m curious. “What help?”

With one hand planted on the door, she looks over her shoulder at Daxen and shrugs. “Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing you lot can’t handle. I mean, Cage’s texts with his father only talk about switching their base of operations a few times over the last two years. I’m sure the evidence Daxen found on Cage’s phones will lead you straight to any number of abandoned buildings in the area. Cage went out on leave twice a week for six and eight hours at a time, right? So you only need to narrow it down to abandoned buildings within a sixty-mile radius depending on mode of transport. That’s only like… 1,500 locations if we’re counting houses, warehouses, schools, churches, etc.”

“You’ve made your point, Omega,” Dax sighs.

“Of course… Cage’s father works for some high-profit agricultural company, so you’ll also need to check any buildings they’ve bought or sold. And probably add abandoned mills, farms—”

“Enough, Omega,” Dax groans, interrupting her. “You can stay.”

“Then there’s the possible prisoner I *Saw* being held at their current base. I’m sure she has plenty of time for you to—”

“Branwen!” Dax shouts, and Branwen turns to him with a smile.

“I’m so sorry, have you been speaking to me this whole time?” She lifts a hand to her chest and widens her eyes in feigned shock. “You kept saying ‘Omega’ and, well, we Omegas are just so silly and scatterbrained. You really *must* try harder to use our actual names so we know when you’re speaking to us,” she admonishes, and the smile on her face does nothing to diminish her obvious sarcasm.

I find myself grinning like an idiot.

“I… apologize.” Dax basically has to force the words out between clenched teeth.

Branwen’s smile drops, and her expression turns serious. “You can shove your apology up your arse. Presuming there’s still room with the massive stick lodged up there.”

Damn... I find myself liking this female more and more every day.

Dax pinches the bridge of his nose and retakes his seat. “I’ll take that under advisement.”

He wakes up his computer, spinning his chair around to face the rest of us. “As I was saying, before we got wildly off-topic, I scrubbed Cage’s phone. There wasn’t much—mostly text messages between him and his father—but enough to make it clear they were both focused on the same thing.”

“They’ve been working with Varenthrall,” I surmise.

“So it would seem,” Dax agrees.

“So… what? Cage was sent here to spy on her? That doesn’t make sense. They could have no idea we’d even cross paths with Idril,” Caelan frowns, shaking his head.

“No, I think Idril’s appearance was just a happy coincidence for them. But what is clear is that Varenthrall’s work with the Severed may be recent, but whatever Cage and his father are working with him on started a long, long time ago. Look at this.”

He clicks through a few apps on the mirrored phone screen, and a hidden messaging app fills the screen with a slew of texts between Cage and his father. I read along as Dax points out the ones he's highlighted.

I'm not going back to Turkey. That place is crawling with bugs. Tell V to find someone else to dig shit up this time. It's not 1983, and I'm a Bastard now.

"A Bastard?" Silas snorts from his secluded cave of shadows. "If he's a Bastard, my local parish priest is the Pope."

"The delusion of self-grandeur is… concerning," Dax mutters in agreement before scrolling and bringing up another text. "This one's from his dad. Dated a year and a half ago."

Things are going to start happening a lot faster now that the girl is getting older. Work harder to ingratiate yourself with that team. It's important they listen to you. I don't need to remind you what happens if the knights in shining armor start sniffing around V's plans.

Then Cage's response.

I know.

If you knew, I wouldn't have to keep calling that caveman leader of theirs and begging him to give you more responsibility.

I said I'm on it. His guard dogs make it much harder than we thought to get near him.

"Well, a year and a half makes sense. The timeline lines up with what we found at Albertson's house," I point out, gesturing for Branwen to pass me the tin of cookies.

The texts between father and son get increasingly erratic from there. And when Idril shows up, they only get worse.

"As you can see, Cage took his assignment as a chance to prove to his father and Varenthrall that he could handle things on his own. Multiple texts are complaining about not needing a babysitter of his own anymore," Dax flicks through a few pages of texts where a very immature-sounding Cage tries over and over to make a case for himself to his father before adding, "I think that when Caelan woke up he decided to act. To do something big and

prove to his father and whoever else he's answering to that he was ready for more responsibility."

"So this is a much bigger operation than anyone initially believed," Branwen says thoughtfully. "This isn't simply a wealthy psychotic human working with Severed to traffic Omegas."

"But we've known that," I reply. "We know it has something to do with Idril's blood. Something to do with her abilities and Varenthrall trying to pass those abilities on to other Omegas."

"And breed them," Silas points out. "Can't forget that bit."

"Fates forbid," I grimace.

Branwen frowns. "Right, but how long has their little party of nutters been working together? And for what? Why breed Omegas? What's the long-term goal here? And if Idril's blood is so important… why leave her when they ran?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Dax answers. "And to find answers to those questions, we need intel. Which is where, I believe, you come in."

Branwen nods. "Right then."

"I can't believe you fuckers thought it was a good idea to put Cage in charge of watching her," Caelan snarls, cutting Branwen off before she even gets started. "What the *fuck* were you thinking?"

"Fates, do we have to do this right now?" Dax sighs.

"Oh, I'm fucking sorry. Are my questions inconveniencing you?"

"Alright, stop," Branwen shouts, stepping between the Alphas and raising her hands. "As much as I love how pissed you are because Idril totally deserves a Mate who will beat the shit out of the assholes who hurt her, now is not the time."

Caelan frowns.

"She's right." Daxen stands as well, turning to Caelan with somber eyes. "I know we have a lot to talk about. I know I owe you answers. We all do."

Caelan's hands curl into fists at his sides, and I know he's doing everything he can to hold himself back, and I fucking hate it. "You don't just owe me answers. You owe her answers, too."

Daxen's eyes fall and land on Caelan's clenched fists before he forces his gaze back up to his face. Swallowing thickly, he murmurs, "You want revenge. For what's been done to her."

Caelan’s lip curls into a sneer.

“I want *vengeance*.”

My chest fucking aches, and when Caelan replies, that ache gets a thousand times worse. Like whatever muscle’s next to my heart is being ripped apart.

“I get it.” Dax’s voice is gentle as he steps toward our brother. “But right now, the male who hurt your Mate the most is out there, using her blood to hurt other Omegas. Don’t let your anger with Vae and me supersede the real villain here.”

Dax is less than three feet away from Caelan—the closest either of us have been allowed near him since he first woke up—and seems to be weighing his words.

Until Caelan’s expression twists with disgust and he takes a giant step back. “Let’s get one thing straight. You two—you’re both as much villains in Idril’s story as her father. I’d love nothing more than to beat both your asses into the ground, but Branwen’s right—now isn’t the time. Not because your actions are less of a priority for me, but because Idril cares more about the missing Omegas than she does her own pain. Prioritizing my vengeance over hers would be selfish.”

I give in and press my palm against my sternum as the ache there worsens. Caelan’s words make me want to crawl into a hole and die. I don’t think I’ve ever hated myself more than I do right now.

Caelan turns to the Omega and inclines his head. “Go on, Branwen. I promise not to interrupt again.”

“I took a nap earlier,” she begins. “And I had another vision. This one was far more detailed than any I’ve had before. I *Saw* an abandoned building. One of Varenthrall’s. That’s where you need to go.”

Dax sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I’m not trying to be an asshole, but that doesn’t do shit to help us.”

“How about a location?” she asks.

Dax’s eyes widen. “What, like coordinates?”

“Nothing so sophisticated,” she snorts. “Can you bring up aerial footage of any abandoned buildings within three miles of the coast?”

“Of course,” he answers, like that’s a totally fucking normal thing for someone to have on hand.

Ten minutes later, with a ton of questionable photo and video footage I don’t even want to know how he got his hands on—we strike gold.

“That’s it!” Branwen exclaims, leaning over the console and pointing at what looks to be an abandoned military base surrounded by nothing within a ten-mile radius.

“You’re sure?” Caelan asks, squinting at the grainy footage. “There were a couple others that looked similar.”

The glare she shoots him is only a quarter as terrifying as the ones she aims at Dax and me.

“I’m sure.”

“So what’s next, then? What’s the plan?” I’m so sick of sitting around asking questions and listening to people talk. I want to move. I need to fucking do something.

“Well, it seems obvious.” Dax’s voice is so calm it pisses me off. “We find out who—if anyone—is there. We can’t charge in blind. We treat this like any other recon.”

He spins around in his chair to face me and adds, “I’d like you and Silas to scout from the coast, Vae.”

I feel something settle inside of me at his order. I need this. I need to get out of this place and away from my fuck ups and do something— *anything* that might help us find answers for Idril.

Because Dax can go on about finding the missing Omegas all he wants. Still, in the spirit of being honest with myself, the second Caelan said this was what Idril would want us to focus on, I was jumping at the chance to do something to start atoning in a meaningful way.

”Let’s keep this low-key,” Dax continues. “Look for movement, signs of Severed. The area is warded off in the aerial footage. Most military sites are, and the wards don’t just drop when the site is abandoned, unfortunately.”

“How’d you get that footage then?” Branwen asks.

“Hacked into a kid’s drone a few months ago. Got lucky.”

“What, like… for fun?”

Daxen shifts to the side and pins her with an unblinking stare. “Yes. For fun.”

Before she can reply, he turns to Caelan and asks, “Not going to insist on going?”

Caelan shrugs. “I’m good here. With my Omega.”

We can all hear what he’s not saying. *My Omega who’s still healing. My Omega who’s traumatized because of you. My Omega Fated Mate who you*

betrayed.

Dax nods and zips up his laptop bag before hitching it onto his shoulder. “Alright then. I’ll go let Gavran know what the plan is.”

He barely makes it two steps when Caelan’s hand shoots out and his palm slams into the middle of his chest. Dax freezes, every line of his body going rigid. Caelan waits until he has Dax’s full attention.

“This bullshit game you're playing is going to bite you in the ass,” Caelan whispers. “So you better be fucking *sure* you want to keep playing it.” His fingers flex until he’s squeezing Dax’s shoulder so hard I’m worried something’s about to pop out. Then, like it's a foul curse, and not an endearment we’ve used for five hundred years, he spits, “*Brother.*”

All the blood drains from Dax’s face and… *Fates, are his hands shaking?* Wordlessly, he wrenches out of Caelan’s grip and stalks across the room, wrenches open the door, and disappears into the hall as it slams shut behind him.

I just stand there like an idiot, not having a single fucking clue what to say or do. I glance to the side where my brother still stands, and for the first time I really wonder if there’s any way for us to fix this.

Branwen clears her throat awkwardly. “Ah… I’m going to check on Idril. See how she’s feeling.” She reaches out and grabs Silas by the arm. “Let’s go, puppy. Maybe we can find you a bone to play with.”

Silas frowns down at the female—who’s easily half his size—but lets her drag him behind her toward the exit. Right before he gets to the door, he glances at me.

“I’ll meet you in the foyer at two?”

I nod in agreement before he, too, disappears.

Caelan’s still standing where he was when he stopped Dax, staring aimlessly at the empty air in front of him. A glance around the room confirms everyone else really is gone, which means it’s only me left to figure out what to do now.

Guess that’s one way to force myself into action. Just gotta be the only dumbass not to escape when they had the chance.

Oh yeah. Totally nailing this not-being-a-coward thing.

Fucknugget.

“No one fucking asked you. Go back to napping, or whatever it is you’ve been doing the last four hours.”

Making up new names to call you when you're acting like a Twat-taco.

I snort a silent laugh. *That one was actually kinda clever.*

Clever?

Yeah, you know… Twattaco? Twat. Taco.

Are you ill?

Fates, forget it.

Ass-tini.

I consider simply not answering my Alpha, assuming a lack of response will shut him up. Unfortunately, my Alpha doesn't even consider I might be ignoring him. Apparently, he immediately assumes I'm just too stupid to understand his joke. The silence lasts five seconds before—

… Like a martini made of ass.

I sigh. Out loud. Which Caelan doesn't even register.

Fuck it. Might as well do what I do best. Talk about random shit and hope I'm charming enough for the other person to forget how fucking inept I actually am.

"Did uh—"

Wincing, I take a few steps closer so I'm not shouting across the room.

No need to freak out. It's just Caelan. Your Bonded Packmate. Your brother. He wouldn't kill you.

The sound my Alpha makes when he laughs could easily be described as a cackle.

You should run.

Fuck my instincts. My jaw clenches, and I cross the space between us with newfound determination. When I'm as close as I'd normally be if I weren't overthinking every Fatesdamned thing, I ask, "Did the staff drop off the stuff I got for Idril?"

"What?" Caelan's eyes snap to mine, dark, black, and sharp as the dagger he's probably dreaming about gutting me with. It takes everything in me not to take a step back.

His gaze sharpens, and when it starts to soften into something that's more broody and less stabby, I relax.

"Oh… the clothes." He scrubs a hand over his short hair and nods absently. "Yeah. They brought them earlier."

There's no holding back the grin that takes over my face. For just a moment, I selfishly let myself imagine Idril's face lighting up brighter and

brighter with each bag of new clothes and all the other girly things I ordered for her.

But I must spend too much time imagining it because when I focus on Caelan, he's totally not smiling back like I thought he'd be. His eyes are hard. Even darker than they were just a moment ago. My grin falls as his hard stare turns into a pissed-off glare that's so heated I kind of wonder if my skin has started peeling from my bones.

When he takes a menacing step forward, I know I've somehow fucked up.

"Do not ever buy my Mate lingerie again," he snarls in a tone so threatening I'm actually a little bit scared.

My mouth opens, but no words come out, which is honestly fine because he's not done talking.

"If you do," he warns, voice lethal. "I'll make you eat every fucking piece."

My laugh sounds strained even to my own ears. I throw my hands up between us, but he ignores them, walking me back step by step until I bounce into the wall.

"Each bra. Each pair of panties. Until you gag on the lace and choke on the straps."

My voice is like three octaves higher than normal as I stutter, "I totally hear you, but just for the sake of argument, are we *really sure* the punishment fits the crime in this—"

He growls. His fangs lengthen to points.

I shut up.

Caelan stares me down long enough to really get his point across, which, frankly, is wasted time on his part, then turns on his heel and stalks out. I don't breathe until the door snicks shut and I'm sure he's gone. Then I bend over, brace my hands on my knees, and exhale like I just ran a freaking 10k.

Just great. Totally fucking awesome. Not only do I have to prepare for recon tonight, but I also need to find enough time to research '*how to prevent death-by-thong*.'

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Chapter 18

Vaelenor

It’s been two hours since we arrived at the decommissioned military base, and Silas and I are both bored out of our skulls. There’s nothing here. We checked the perimeters twice, but outside of a few tire tracks leading in and out of the place, it’s a ghost town.

The whole place feels empty, and I hate that feeling. Empty means wrong. Empty means bad. Empty means the Fates are contemplating how best to ruin my entire fucking evening in the most dramatic and traumatizing way possible.

After another fifteen minutes of jack shit, Silas shoots to his feet.

“Let’s go in,” he says and, without waiting for a reply, starts climbing out of the bushes we’ve been hiding behind for hours.

Mary, mother of—

I latch onto his arm before he can take another step.

“That’s not the plan, numbnuts. I know Ford doesn’t let you outside without floaties and a babysitter, but in case you need a refresher, recon means eyes and ears *only*.”

He shakes me off with a grin that I just know keeps Ford and Evander up at night. “Yeah, but recon’s so boring. And something’s in there; I can smell it.”

“If you really think that, then we comm Dax for backup. We don’t go traipsing in like rookies. For Fate's sake, Silas, you know better. Going off script is exactly how you get hit with a flamethrower. Then—*whoosh!*” I throw my arms out, miming an explosion, then place my hands on Silas’s shoulder and, moderating my tone like I’m negotiating with a toddler who

just mainlined red dye 40, ask, “Do you *want* to get hit with a flamethrower, Silas?”

He frowns in consideration—which is concerning in and of itself—for a full three seconds. Then, proving once and for all he has zero self-preservation, he shrugs and takes off.

Asshole’s halfway across the parking lot before I’m able to wrap my mind around what just happened. Cursing, I part the bushes and hiss his name.

“Silas!” He ignores me.

“Motherfucker,” I swear, double-tapping my comms to radio Dax.

It’d be nice if we could keep the comms on consistently without the wards frying the tech, but right now I’m grateful we can at least use it sporadically. Chasing a two-hundred-year-old child through an abandoned military compound while my pack has no idea what’s happening is totally not on my bingo card.

“The little shithead went off script,” I snap once we’re connected. “I’m going after him. I don't think there’s anyone here, but I’m letting you know, just in case.”

“Went off script how?”

“Well, he decided recon is boring and is now trying to break in.”

A loud *BANG* has me glancing up to find Silas trying to wrench the door open by its handle. Of course it’s locked, so all he’s doing is rattling the *metal* door against the *metal* frame, like a godsdamned dinner bell for every Severed in a thirty-mile radius.

Fuck. Me.

“Correction. He’s trying to break in *poorly.* I’ve got to go.”

I hang up and sprint across the concrete lot, skidding to a stop behind Silas and yanking him away from the door with enough force to send him flying.

“What the actual fuck do you think you’re doing?” I whisper-shout. “You’re loud as shit! Do you *want* to die?”

Silas pushes himself up on his elbows from where he’s sprawled on the ground and frowns. “No? I don’t want to die.”

“Do you want *me* to die?”

Standing, he swipes his hand through his hair to push it out of his eyes, and his frown deepens.

“You? Why would I want you to die?”

My only response is a heavy, confused blink.

”I need to get in there, Vae,” he reiterates, and reaches for the handle as he tries to shoulder past me. When I put out a hand to stop him, he has the audacity to look genuinely confused.

“What are you doing?” I ask, gathering up every ounce of patience I possess.

His gaze flicks between me and the door, full of an urgency I don’t understand. “I told you. I need to get—”

“Inside, yes. I understand that part.”

Apparently Silas has hit the bottom of his well of patience because he throws out his arms in exasperation and says, “Man, I don’t know what the problem is! Can you just tell me whatever point you’re trying to make?”

Gods above, it’s like we’re having two totally different conversations!

“That door is locked,” I point out. “It’s locked tight and looks brand new. No matter how many times you pull on the handle, it’s not going to magically fucking open.”

The Alpha glares at the handle like it personally insulted him before his whole body seems to deflate. Shoulders drooping, he turns bright, confused eyes on me.

The hopelessness staring back at me is like looking in a damn mirror.

Fates, I don’t know what this kid wants so badly, but at some point he decided getting into this warehouse was seriously important and… *fuck.* It’s not like we can just go back to watching quietly.

Sighing, I reach out and place a hand on his shoulder. “If you really need to get in there—”

“I do!” He cuts me off, but it’s like my words had all the hope he thought was lost rushing right back in, so I don’t even admonish him for it.

“Then we’ll find another way to get in.” I lift a hand before he can start talking over me again. “I’m not totally against checking shit out, but if you want my help, you have to stop being so fucking reckless.”

That makes him pause. He considers me with a dubious expression before asking, “You’re really gonna go off-script and help me?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “I really am. You’ve already sent this mission spiraling; we may as well see if we can find something useful. Come on.”

We’ve taken a grand total of three and a half steps before he opens his mouth again.

“I… ah… I’m sorry,” he mutters, falling into stride next to me and shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket. I wait, unsure whether this apology covers the last twenty minutes in general or something more specific.

“I just really need to get in there. I need to do something. Find *something*.”

His tone makes my senses prickle. This time, when I glance over at him, I make myself really look. It’s not like I haven’t noticed how shitty he’s looked since that fucking breakfast from hell, but damn…

He really, *really* looks like shit.

The circles under his eyes are dark purple, his facial hair is scraggly and untrimmed, even his mohawk’s unstyled, with wisps of hair escaping from the black beanie he haphazardly pulled on to cover it.

The momentary excitement from earlier is gone, too, and he’s back to shuffling along with his head down, shoulders hiked up to his ears. And just like that, the pieces all start to align.

“Discovering something won’t automatically get you back in Gav’s good graces, you know,” I say as gently as I can. “And if I know Ford, it won't do shit to save you from his wrath, either.”

Silas kicks a rock the size of a baseball mid-step and watches it skitter and tumble across the concrete lot until it eventually bounces to a stop about twenty feet away. He finally looks up and turns, meeting my gaze and shrugs ruefully.

“It’s not Gav I’m worried about,” he admits. “Not Ford, either, truthfully.”

I hum in acknowledgment and slow to a stop in front of another entrance on the south end of the building. This door is metal as well, but unlike the last one, its top layers are rusted, and the hinges are barely hanging on.

Perfect.

I crouch down and pull my tools out of the inside pocket of my jacket, laying them out in front of me.

“Thought you said this was just recon?” Silas asks dubiously.

I smirk. “I have not, nor will I ever, find myself locked in a coffin I can’t get out of,” I answer, and it takes every ounce of my control to keep a straight face when he lets out a surprised laugh.

I work on the bolts, prying one out easily before moving to the next.

“Hold onto the door so it doesn’t go toppling over,” I tell him, grunting as I struggle with a particularly stubborn bolt. “So. If you’re not worried about Gav or Ford, then who?”

Silas flattens his palms against the metal, and when his answer finally comes, it’s not at all what I was expecting.

“Idril.”

The entire door almost falls over when I let go in shock, and I just manage to catch it before Silas gets crushed.

“I really fucked up, Vae,” he murmurs, expression twisted with guilt. “I mean… *really* fucked up. I… I hurt her. *Seriously* hurt her. Like a fucking monster.”

“Why did you do it?” I ask, trying to keep my tone even—which isn’t easy.

I don’t think I’ll ever forget the way Idril looked that morning, sprawled across the floor like a broken doll, back arched, screaming in pain.

Screaming for her mother.

It fucking haunts me. I still hear it in my dreams, every single night. I close my eyes, and when I wake up, all I can remember are the white bird and the cage and Idril’s screams.

“I don’t know,” Silas answers, exhaling in frustration. “I mean, shit… I *do* know. I know exactly why I did it. I wanted to be the one who finally got answers out of her.”

When I shoot him a confused look over my shoulder, he huffs and rolls his eyes.

“Come on, man. I always have to find a way to prove myself. I know I do shit that annoys you guys, but with Ford and Evander gone, I’ve just felt… I dunno. Alone, I guess.”

His cheeks redden, and he looks away. To be fair, I can understand what he’s saying, in a way. Ford and Evander are his Pack. Even when he acts like an idiot, they love him anyway. They always want him around—he’s their brother. But to the rest of us, he’s more of an annoying gnat who’s sometimes useful.

“It’s dumb,” he mutters when I don’t say anything. “I just thought that if I could get her to talk, everyone would be thankful. Even if it were a shitty thing to do, it wouldn’t matter because we’d have answers and you guys would finally see me as a part of the team.”

“Silas, we do see you as a part of the team.”

“No,” he shakes his head, eyes hard. “You see me as a part of my Pack. But if Evander and Ford weren’t my Packmates, Gav would have never looked at me twice. I *definitely* wouldn’t be a part of his inner circle. I’m only here because without me, you guys don’t get Ford and Evander, either.”

I work the final bolt free and slide the door from its frame, leaning it against the brick wall. After repacking my tools, I climbed to my feet, struggling to find something to say to put Silas at ease.

Before Silas can step through the doorframe, I grab his shoulder to stop him. He stills, but doesn’t turn to look at me. His whole body is tense, muscles tight with anxiety.

“You’re useful, Silas,” I tell him, then wince. I’m not good at this kind of shit. I don’t know how to make someone feel better with words. “You don’t need to put yourself in danger to prove it.”

Silas warily turns around to face me. He meets my gaze, and whatever he’s searching for, he must find because his lips curve into a genuine smile.

I have a feeling I’m seeing the real Silas for the first time in decades, not the mask of chaos he hides behind.

The smile only lasts a few breaths before he steps back, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

Apparently neither of us is very good at this emotional shit.

I extend an arm, gesturing for him to go ahead of me. “You first. This was your hair-brained scheme, so you get the privilege of stepping into the creepy as fuck decommissioned military building potentially swarming with the ghosts of low-level Severed.”

He snorts a laugh, pulling his flashlight from a back pocket and flicking it on. I follow suit, stepping behind him into the dark, heavy atmosphere of the building.

Unsurprisingly, the interior’s stripped bare. Long hallways extend from the main entrance, shooting off in multiple directions. Once-vivid paint has noticeably dulled over time, peeling from the walls in long jagged streaks.

Most doors hang from their hinges—when they aren’t, they're missing completely. The smell of rust, iron, and dust is thick in the air, only partially overshadowed by the stale, lingering scent of Deadwalkers.

This place has been out of commission for decades, *and yet—*

“It doesn’t feel empty,” Silas mutters, giving voice to my thoughts.

There’s something here. Something that’s changed the air itself, making it press in on me with suffocating intensity. I try to ignore it as I take a random turn down a long hallway. The farther we go, the stronger the heavy, ominous feeling becomes.

The scent of ozone appears from seemingly nowhere, hitting me straight in the chest. I inhale a shocked gasp and curse my stupidity. The scent snakes through my sinuses like a fucking parasite that’s just been waiting for its chance to strike.

Disoriented, I stumble back a step. Silas turns, raising a brow in question, and I shake my head, gesturing for him to keep going.

“You good?” he asks, and I nod, not trusting myself to speak. The scent grows along with my anxiety. My thoughts tumble over each other, taunting me with all the possible outcomes of my Curse going off. The intrusive thoughts pop up out of nowhere, just like they always fucking do. They’re always there, in the back of my mind, waiting in gleeful anticipation for the second I let my guard down and allow fear to trickle in, creating a breach in my fortifications wide enough to launch a full-on attack.

My mastery over this part of me only extends so far, and once it passes that invisible line, it’s no longer something I can control. It takes over everything. When that happens, I’m no longer me. Vae disappears, and nothing remains but the Curse—untold destruction, moments from being unleashed.

Losing it right now would be a nightmare. I can’t let it happen. *I won’t.*

We continue down the hall, peeking through open doorways, passing room after room covered in layers of dust. Most are bare, but a few contain rusted filing cabinets and broken metal bunks.

I want to ask Silas if he can smell the ozone too, but I don’t want to draw attention to it if he hasn’t.

Where the fuck is it coming from?

At the end of the hall, Silas stops walking abruptly. I curse, skidding to a stop as well so I don’t run into him. I’m about to ask him what the fuck he’s doing when I see why he stopped.

At the end of the hall, a brand-new door with equally new hardware glints off the bright beams of our flashlights. I count the padlocks. Then recount them just to be sure, mouth parting in shock at the sheer number of locks keeping us from accessing whatever’s on the other side.

Or keeping whatever’s on the other side from getting out.

A shiver skitters down my spine.

Silas reaches out, running gloved fingers down the front of the door. He turns to me, eyes wide and gleaming with excitement.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I’m thinking you should stop touching shit,” I snap.

Don’t know why I even bothered wasting my breath. Silas is already twisting the industrial locks like he’s racing an invisible clock.

Is the scent of ozone getting stronger?

I’ve been on hundreds of missions. Descending creepy stairs in an old, abandoned building isn’t new. And yet something about this whole place has me on edge like never before. Like every move I make is tipping the balance of the universe one way or the other.

Which is ridiculous. *Right?*

At the top of the stairs, Silas finds a light switch and flips it. Nothing happens. Of course, Silas is nothing if not persistent, so he tries again. *And again.*

And again.

It’s not until the sixth attempt that I realize he may actually stand here flipping this switch for the next decade unless I stop him. Sighing, I reach around him and place my hand firmly on top of his.

“It’s not working,” I point out needlessly. Silas frowns.

“I hate the dark,” he mutters. “Should have known the creepy building that’s totally abandoned except for a single basement door equipped with eighty-seven locks wouldn’t have fucking electricity.”

“Well, there’s some kind of illumination,” I tell him, gesturing toward the faint luminescent glow coming from the bottom of the stairs. I can’t see where it’s coming from, but whatever it is, it’s in the basement itself and doesn’t extend up the stairway. “Plus… you can see in the dark.”

Silas grunts, still peering into the dark stairwell like something is waiting for him. “You all say that like it’s the same as seeing in the light, and it’s *not*.”

When his eyes meet mine over his shoulder, I realize I’m going to have to go down first.

Lovely.

The stairs creak beneath our boots as we descend. The scent of ozone intensifies the closer we get to the bottom. Like lightning in a bottle; familiar in the worst way.

If it hadn’t set off my Curse the last and only time I scented it, I think I’d be having a wildly different reaction. As I think back on that exact moment, I’m realizing that my first reaction—my *initial* reaction—wasn’t fear.

My steps slow as I make myself confront my recollection of that night. At first, my memories bounce back and forth, like a needle skipping along a record. Almost like my brain is protesting, refusing to let me relive the trauma of losing control to this thing inside of me.

I try not to fight, letting the moment play out naturally.

I take another step down the stairs. Inhale. Exhale.

The crackle of Daxen’s voice in my ear. Air brushing gently against my skin as Gav aims his gun, guarding my back in case something’s there that Daxen’s drones didn’t pick up. The sound of my boots against the concrete. The steady drip, drip of water to my right.

The metal door sliding shut.

Another step. Inhale. Exhale.

The crackle of Daxen’s voice in my ear. The sound of his chair rolling across the floor in the security room. Gav’s breaths behind me—solid and sure. Air brushing gently against my skin as Gav moves, aiming his gun, guarding my back in case we missed something. The sound of my boots against the concrete. My breaths, steady and sure. Dust floating through the dim light of the warehouse. The steady drip, drip of water to my right.

The metal door sliding shut, cutting off the air filtering in, the cool, crisp scent of early spring.

Another step. Inhale.

My boots on concrete. My breaths, steady and sure.

Exhale.

Dust floating through the dim light of the warehouse. My boots on concrete. The drip, drip of water—

Another step.

My boots on concrete. Dust in the air. The crackle of Daxen’s voice over comms.

Inhale.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Exhale.

The metal door sliding shut.

Another step.

My boots. Breaths. Dust. Gav.

Inhale.

The metal door sliding shut.

Exhale.

Cutting off the air from outside. Cutting off the crisp, cool scent of early spring—

Inhale.

Ozone and lavender and amber and ozone and lavender and amber and ozone—

Protect. Protect. PROTECT.

I gasp, stumbling down the final step and catching myself against the concrete wall. I hear Silas speaking, but it's like he's underwater, the words all garbled and senseless as everything from that moment crystallizes with blinding clarity.

I was right. Fates, I was right! Fear was never my immediate reaction to the scent of Idril's blood. Not even close. *It was—*

It was a blinding, primal, protective instinct. The overwhelming need to defend whatever—or *whoever*—that blood belonged to. An urge so intuitive, so fucking compelling, that my Curse went from 0 to 1000 just to ensure any potential threat could be swiftly eradicated.

And because I've spent half a millennium terrified of losing control just like I did that night, my brain decided to focus on the horror while ignoring the initial emotion—*the catalyst.*

Gods… I failed Idril before I ever even saw her face.

"Vae!" Silas's voice slices through my internal spiral, and my eyes snap open. *When the hell did I close my eyes?*

Silas is shaking me, hands on my shoulders, voice frantic. I turn and glare at him over my shoulder, and he releases me, stumbling back with his hand on his chest.

"What the fuck, Vae?"

"S—Sorry," I clear my throat. "I just… remembered something. About the night I first smelled Idril's blood."

"Sorry? *You're sorry?!* Dude, you walked down the stairs with your fucking eyes closed, fell into the wall, and then stood there mumbling to yourself. So what—and I cannot stress this enough—*the fuck, Vae?!*"

"I honestly don't have a better answer than the one I gave you," I tell him.

Silas's eyes look like they're about to fall out of his head.

"Okay, cool. Let's try this one, then. Why the hell are you still up close and personal with that wall? Is there a reason you can't fully face me? Did you knot it on accident? Are you getting high on that paint?"

"Paint? What paint?"

"Fuck—is this what it feels like to be gaslit?" His arm shoots out, and he points emphatically at the wall like I'm an idiot. *"The glowing paint!"*

In his defense, you are being an idiot, my Alpha pipes up needlessly. ***Slow-roasted-moron with a side of stupid.***

Again, you ARE me.

Says you—and Daxen—but I don't need to remind you just how well it ended the last time you trusted him over me.

I roll my eyes, then frown because… *why didn't I turn around to talk to Silas? Why are my hands still on this wall? Why haven't I moved?*

I'm so close to the wall I have to take a step back to see what's right in front of me.

I don't know what this stuff is, but I don't think it's paint. It's the same color as the luminous light coming from the rest of the basement to our right, but I could swear it wasn't coming from this wall when we were upstairs. I take another step back, and as I do, the odd silvery-blue glow of the substance seems to fade.

By the time I've backed up so far, I'm standing on the third step from the bottom, and the glow is almost completely gone.

"What the fuck," Silas breathes. "Now get closer. See if it gets brighter."

I shoot him a dubious look, but do as he says. This time, the substance doesn't simply get brighter; it sharpens into actual shapes.

"Holy shit," I murmur, creeping closer to study the drawings—because that's what they are. I have no idea what kind of symbols or drawings they are, but they're too precise—too purposeful and uniform—to be random.

Silas follows behind me as I walk along the natural curve of the wall and into the basement itself. The images etched along the perimeter are fascinating, ranging from simple, rudimentary symbols to more advanced designs and even a few incredibly intricate variations. Each one is made up of lines, waves, swirls, shapes, and patterns. Each symbol twists, crosses, or mirrors another, and when I step back, I realize they seem to stack and grow one on top of another, creating even more intricate designs on a larger scale.

I've never seen anything like it, and yet… I can't shake the sense that it feels strangely familiar, like something I've seen in a dream.

I'm inches away from the wall, trying to discern what the hell this substance is, when it hits me.

Holy… Fates.

This is where the summer lightning scent is coming from. Which means—

Oh. Fuck.

I scramble back so fast I almost trip over my own feet. I swallow, trying to work some moisture into my suddenly dry mouth. To my right, Silas is busy studying the substance—so captivated by the appearance of something neither of us has ever seen—a fucking rarity when you've been alive as long as we have—that he, too, has failed to connect the dots.

Every inch of these walls is covered in this glowing silver-blue substance. A glowing silver-blue substance that smells like ozone, lavender, and amber.

And I have no fucking idea why, how, or when the color changed, but that doesn't make the truth any less real.

This basement is covered in symbols drawn in *blood*.

Idril's blood.

Panic skitters through my veins. Sweat coats my palms, and then my brow. My heart is fucking racing, and that pain in my chest—that fucking ache that won't go away—is *throbbing*.

How much of Idril's blood did that asshole take? How much of her blood did he steal to do… whatever the fuck this is?

This much blood should make the place look like a crime scene. Instead, it's been used for art, and somehow that's a thousand times more sinister.

A choked sound comes from Silas, and I spin to face him, realizing he must have just put it all together.

Except, Silas is no longer next to me. He's in the fucking middle of the basement—I can barely make out his form in the shadows. The glow from the blood is fucking with my vision, causing everything toward the middle of the room to look even darker than normal.

"Vae. Get the fuck over here."

I zone in, forcing all the shit from the last hour behind me to focus on the here and now. I creep silently across the room, following the sound of

Silas's voice. My hand falls to my dagger at my side, and while I know nothing's down here lying in wait, I keep my senses on high alert for noises from above.

When Silas's features come into focus a few feet in front of me, I hurry over to him, eating up the remaining distance between us.

"What is it?"

"I—I—" Silas stutters, like the words are stuck in his throat, then raises his arm, pointing toward a large stone slab in the shape of a fucking altar in front of us.

Apprehension washes over me, but I keep moving. Inching closer to what my mind refuses to accept is a fucking person—no, a female—lying on top of what looks like an altar because *it is a Fatesdamned altar.*

As I get closer, her features become easier to make out. The stone is covered in the same symbols as the rest of the room, and, as before, the glowing increases the closer I get.

Her skin is deathly pale, but not lifeless. There's no grey pallor or waxy appearance. It glows—just faintly—with life, in the light from the symbols—her hair's pale blonde, with golden undertones.

Most promising of all is the way her chest moves with each shallow breath. I watch for long moments, waiting for that next breath, noticing the way the skin around her eyes tightens and her lips blanch, like she's fighting for each lungful of air.

"I'll call Gav," Silas murmurs, but I wave him off, unable to look away from the female. There's something here… I can feel it. Something I'm missing. Something I should have already put together but haven't.

It's just a strange feeling, like someone pulling on a strand of my hair over and over. I find myself drawn to the subtle wave of the female's hair, my eyes tracing the delicate way one of the loose strands flutters against the apple of her cheek.

A memory flashes behind my eyes. *Delicate, thin, pale fingers, gently flicking back a strand of white hair just for it to fall forward and rest against her cheek. Her hand lifts, and she tucks it behind one ear, the whole time completely unaware of the monster sitting three feet away, unable to force his eyes from her.*

Brushing away the memory doesn't work. Not when the likeness is so uncanny. Sure, this woman is much older than Idril, and her hair is more of a golden blonde, but the pale skin and thin, malnourished figure….

The female frowns, a furrow appearing between her brows that makes my hands twitch as once again another memory resurfaces. One of Idril in her chair, scribing tirelessly while Dax and Riven argue over folklore and I pretend like I'm reading and not obsessing over the little Omega.

Fates, it's uncanny the way their expressions mirror each other.

I basically spiral from here, picking apart each and every one of this unknown woman's features until I'm halfway to a panic attack or a fucking breakdown or something. I keep searching for something—*anything*—that will make this make sense, but I can't. It's all the same. The delicate line of their jaws, the way their noses turn up just the smallest bit, the shape of their brows. Even their fucking cheekbones are almost identical.

Bile surges up my throat at the near certainty staring me in the face. The resemblance is almost perfect. They could be sisters if not—

"Holy fuck," Silas exclaims, stepping up beside me. His eyes are wide. *Wild.* He turns to me, and I mentally beg him not to fucking say it, even as he asks, "Is that—"

I shake my head, denying the possibility before he can speak it into existence. She's dead. Idril said she was dead. We found a death certificate and articles in the fucking paper.

But all my prayers go up in a blaze of fiery death when the female's lashes flutter open and—like she already knew we were here—her eyes fall on us.

My breath stops in my chest. My lungs won't work. They simply stop fucking working. I want to close my eyes, but I can't. I can't because those fucking eyes are looking into my soul, and I know—I know before she says a single word—I know because those eyes—bright, blue, just a shade darker than the color of sapphires in sunlight—are the only proof I need.

Then the Omega's lip curves into a gentle smile I don't fucking deserve. I reach for Silas, fingers twisting in the fabric of his jacket because I'm afraid if I don't hold onto something, I'm going to collapse. I want to run and keep running before this woman discovers—

"I'd like to see my daughter," Annalise Varenthrall requests with a dignity and grace that no one could ever take away. Her voice is barely more than a broken whisper as she adds, "Please… please bring Idril to me."

It takes me three tries before I can finally speak. My order carries its own weight. Of a truth, spoken out loud. An impossibility—one I have no

Fatesdamned idea how to navigate.

There are a thousand reasons why I should wait. Talk it through with Dax, Caelan, or even Silas. Run through all the possible potential shit shows. Someone else should decide this. Someone with more experience should handle it.

Yet even as all the same old arguments cycle loudly through my head, it's never been easier to ignore them. There are a thousand and one reasons why telling anyone about this—especially Idril—is a terrible idea. There are a million reasons why I should at least let Gav decide what to do next.

But there's one brave, strong, beautiful Omega back at HQ that matters more than all my fears combined. That, combined with the absolute certainty in my soul that what I'm about to do is what's best for *her,* is what has me turning to Silas and issuing my first official command in centuries.

"Call Gav. Tell him we need to speak to Idril. *Now*."

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Chapter 19

Idril

Everyone’s shouting, talking over each other. The more upset the Alphas become, the more nauseous their pheromones make me.

I curl into my chair, wrapping my arms around my legs and forcing myself not to cover my ears with my hands like a child.

“She’s not going!”

That’s Caelan, once again sitting next to me, tone dripping with protective fury. He’s not yelling. He doesn’t need to. Caelan’s the kind of Alpha who has no problem getting his point across without raising his voice.

“We need her there,” Daxen argues for the thousandth time. “We don’t know what the hell is going on with the magic in that place, but it's *her blood*. The one person it won’t attack is *her*.”

“You don’t fucking know that,” Soren snarls from his seat at my left. His hand’s a heavy weight around the back of my neck, tethering me to the present when I’d almost rather be left in peace to float away.

Normally I love the safety of his touch. Not right now. Right now, the safety feels too tight. *Chafing.* It feels too much like a show of ownership, and I’ve recently realized that ownership and possession are not the same thing. One feels like pride and love, and the other feels like being locked away without bothering to even ask if I *want* to be in a cage.

I know that’s not how he sees me, but it doesn’t change the way I feel.

Caelan leans forward, surveying the room with a hard stare. “Just to be clear, you’re asking me to take my Mate, who’s spent the last decade living in literal hell, to an abandoned military base to verify if the dead woman you found in a rotting basement is her mother. With no protection.”

I flinch.

I know his words aren't meant to be cruel, but just like Soren's touch, they hurt regardless of intention.

"She's not dead," Vae argues. "I've told you this a hundred fucking times. She's alive."

"And she can't leave," Silas adds. "The wards around that place—the second we tried to move her, they did something to her. She started screaming. Back arching, bones popping and cracking. Whatever wards he's got on her aren't anything we've seen before."

Branwen's voice cuts through the ongoing argument, loud enough to shut up every Alpha in the room.

"Has anyone asked Idril what *she* wants?"

The silence is a welcome change, and I exhale in relief. My head is pounding, thumping behind my eyes in time with my heartbeat. I'm not sure how much more bickering I can take.

Before this evening, this had been the most wonderful day I've had in, well… *ever.* The morning spent with Caelan changed something inside of me. Maybe it's just the endorphins, but I don't believe that. For the first time ever I felt wholly and completely loved, safe and happy. Not only that—the entire moment felt like it strengthened me.

For an hour I luxuriated in the first bath I've had in weeks, then spent the entire afternoon and part of the evening with my Mates. It was so relaxing, just Caelan, Soren, and me, watching movies and eating dinner on the couch.

It was… *normal*. So freaking normal. So normal it felt like my heart would overflow with joy and contentment.

It was the perfect day.

Until Vaelenor and Silas returned from their mission, and the news of their shocking discovery swept through HQ like a whirlwind, taking all sense of normalcy with it.

I've barely had a moment to process their news, but that hasn't slowed their plans in the least. Discussions quickly devolved into debate, then collapsed into a multitude of arguments, mostly centering on whether I should travel to this abandoned building.

To her. My Mother.

I just want it all to stop for a second. Just pause so I can adjust to the newest shifts that are, once again, turning my world upside down. I can feel

the cracks forming in my psyche, each new change causing another fissure in the surface of my reality.

This new truth—this new reality—forces its way through my childish attempt to convince myself that what Vae and Silas saw was wrong. It's a silly lie. A stupid attempt to hide rather than acknowledge a world where my mother's alive.

And I've spent the last decade failing her.

How could I be so ignorant? To simply take my father at his word and never once question the validity of her death? Fates, there wasn't even a body!

Soren's hand covers mine, stilling the jerky, frantic movements of my fingers picking and twisting the fabric of my new leggings. His fingers wrap around mine and squeeze gently.

"I'm so sorry, Little Mate," he murmurs. A furrow appears between his brows, and I curl my free hand into a fist so I don't reach up and smooth it away. "This has been incredibly insensitive of all of us. We should have asked you for your opinion from the start."

"This is your choice, sweetheart," Caelan adds, his voice solemn but gentle.

Didn't they just spend the last twenty minutes arguing about what I should or shouldn't do? Now they're saying this is suddenly my choice?

"You don't want me to go. Either of you," I point out.

Are they truthfully willing to let me decide just because Branwen asked if anyone had bothered to ask my opinion? Did they genuinely just forget to ask what I wanted, or do they not really mean it?

Is this one of those situations where I'm supposed to pretend like I want to do what my Alphas want to do to keep the peace?

Caelan sighs, repositioning his chair to mirror Soren's position.

"I won't lie to you; I want you to stay right here, with me, where I know you're safe. The thought of you facing what's possibly waiting, let alone walking into a basement with floor-to-ceiling runes made from your own blood—it makes me sick with fear. As much as I wish I could, I can't make this decision for you, Idril. My instincts—both as an Alpha and as your Mate—are screaming at me to lock you in my rooms where I know you'll stay safe."

"Why don't you?" I ask, bracing myself for his answer. I need to know, though.

His lips tip up at the corners in a gentle smile as, without even having to be asked, he opens his side of the Bond completely. I gasp. It's almost overwhelming, like being inside his very soul. I can feel *everything*, from the lingering exhaustion he hasn't yet shaken off after his injuries to the undeniable intensity of his love for me.

My eyes fill with tears. I concentrate on my side of the Bond until it opens fully as well. It's clumsy and untrained, but after practicing with Soren this afternoon, I think I'm starting to get the hang of it.

Caelan reaches out and cups my cheek with his palm, and in this moment, it's like no one else exists in the world except the two of us.

I look to Soren, who nods in agreement. "Caelan's right. I don't want you to go, either, but I know how important this is for you. You need to make this decision for yourself, and if you decide to go… I'll accept that. And I'll support you however I can. Always."

They really mean it. They're telling me the truth. They really, truly, are willing to go against their instincts and follow my lead.

It hits me like a punch to the gut. For the first time in my entire life, I'm the one who decides what's best for me. This is really, truly, my decision.

"I…"

I glance up and scan the room, heart hammering against my ribs.

"Are you alright?" Soren reaches out and rests his fingers against the thin skin of my wrist, counting the beats of my pulse. As gently as I can manage, I pull at the mental curtain separating our Bonds until just a crack remains like before. Caelan frowns, but doesn't say anything.

"I'm alright," I tell Soren, glancing up and scanning the room like the answer to what I should do will jump out at me or something.

It doesn't, but Branwen catches my eye and gives me an encouraging smile, which is the next best thing.

I scoot my chair closer to the desk so I feel like I'm actually a part of the discussion instead of the subject being discussed. Taking a deep breath, I muster every bit of courage I can and ask, "Am I going to be in trouble if I want to go?"

"There's no punishment, Idril," Caelan swears. "No matter *what* you decide. That isn't how we—"

His words die off mid-sentence. The air in the room thickens as everyone realizes that yes, that's exactly how the Bastards do things around here.

I shouldn’t have asked. This will only make things worse. But before I can take the question back, Caelan shoots from his chair and turns a furious glare on Gavran at the head of the table.

“You—” he snarls, pointing at him. “You’re the reason why she even has to ask that. Everything that happened since the moment she set foot in this nightmare only reinforced all the abuse she endured from her father. You fucking realize that, don’t you?”

Gav nods solemnly.

“Tell her she’s not going to be punished. Tell her right the fuck now, or I’ll take her and leave, and you can all go fuck yourselves.”

Branwen clears her throat, and when Caelan swings his rage-filled glare on her, she murmurs, “Remember what we discussed…”

“No,” Caelan barks. “Not this time. I’m not asking for a fucking explanation; I’m asking for some reassurance for my Mate so she can live without fear that someone’s going to punish her for breaking some non-existent fucking rule.”

My friend must agree because she turns to Gavran and raises a single imperious brow. “Well then, you heard him.”

Gavran’s amber eyes meet mine solemnly from across the table. He stands and places his right fist over his heart.

“What happened to you on my watch was an egregious error. One I will never be able to atone for. I promise, from this moment forward, that no group or individual associated with the Bloodbound will harm you under my orders or approval. While I cannot swear that no one will ever harm you again, I vow to do everything in my power to protect you and provide you with a safe home for as long as you choose to remain.”

His words, spoken so formally, should give me some sense of peace or reassurance. They don’t. There’s an air of expectation, like everyone’s just waiting for me to accept his apology and promise and move on, but…

I can’t.

For the first time in days, the fire inside of me flares to life, filling me with indignation. A lifetime of propriety presses in on me, urging me to do my part and say my lines, but the flame is snarling and spitting, urging me to stay strong, reminding me of Caelan’s words about not owing anyone my forgiveness.

“I appreciate your words,” I finally say, holding Gavran’s gaze so he can see my sincerity. “But I’m not yet ready to accept your apology.”

Pride explodes down our Bond from both sides, as Soren leans over and scoops me into his arms, pulling me onto his lap without a care in the world for propriety. I go willingly, feeling my muscles relax as he rubs his cheek against mine, Scent-marking me. He's wearing a descenter, but I can still catch the faintest hint of his scent, pine and snow rich with pride and joy.

I clear my throat and straighten, addressing the rest of the room, all of whom are still waiting to hear my decision.

Dax and Vae both have been oddly quiet tonight, neither one saying so much as a word outside of individual discussions. Even now, they wait patiently for me to speak.

"I want to go," I say with as much confidence as I can. "I want to see my mother. I want to help her. I—"

I bite the inside of my cheek, fighting not to break down in front of everyone when a choked sob gets stuck in my throat. Caelan's fingers flex around mine, lending me support, and once I swallow back my emotion, I lift my chin and turn to Gavran.

He's the leader. Ultimately, this is his mission and his decision.

He owes me this.

"I want to go. I need to see my Mother."

* * *

An hour later, I'm ready to go, dressed head to toe in black thanks to Vaelenor. When I finally emerge from Caelan's closet, I've found a pair of black jeans that fit more like leggings, a black racerback I'm fairly certain is for working out, and a black sweatshirt that took me far too long to realize is purposely cropped, not defective.

Not at all what I'd choose for myself, but Caelan said to pick anything black so long as it was easy to move in. I'm just tying the laces of the ankle boots I found at the bottom of one of the bags when Soren walks out of the bathroom. His gaze slowly rakes over me from head to toe before he lets out a growl so full of hunger it makes me dizzy.

"Gods, you're perfect," he murmurs, taking me by the hips and pressing his lips to mine. He pulls back, and an Omega whine falls from my lips as I chase after him.

My cheeks heat when I register the sound I just made, but Soren's grinning like he just won some kind of prize.

"You get through tonight, and I'll kiss you as much as you want," he swears, making me blush even harder.

Like me, he's dressed all in black. Unlike me, his clothes are clearly tactical—made for missions like these—and the way his clothing hugs every dip and curve of his broad, muscled form makes me increasingly anxious to get home and cash in on that promise.

Caelan stalks around the corner, slipping a shirt on over his bare chest. My eyes zero in on his abs, and a whine escapes my throat before I even realize it's happening.

Gods, I might actually die around these males.

Caelan pauses mid-step, cocking his head to the side. "What's wrong?"

Too embarrassed to answer truthfully, I bite my lip and do the next best thing—shrug. I'm suddenly burning up, like the temperature in the room's been cranked up ten degrees. *Fates, when did it get so hot in here?*

The fire in the hearth crackles and pops, the sound abnormally loud in the silence. Caelan's eyes dart toward the flames before returning to me, narrowing with suspicion.

He barks out a laugh and shakes his head ruefully.

"Should probably put that out, yeah? I have a feeling that keeping a live fire when you're dealing with a lot of feelings is probably a bad idea."

Chuckling, Soren crosses toward the hearth to put out the flames, but Caelan's words have something hard coiling in my chest.

"Are you… afraid?" I ask, glancing between both men. "Of what I am? Of… what I can do?"

I don't realize how afraid I am of their answer until the words are actually out of my mouth. I mean, I wouldn't blame them if they are afraid of me. Heck, I'm scared, too. Mainly because I don't understand any of what's happening to me. I don't know what I can do. I don't know what will trigger it. I have no control, and that's… *terrifying.*

What happens if I have a nightmare one night while the fire's burning across the room? What if one morning, I wake up and realize I've done something in my sleep and hurt my Mates accidentally?

I shiver, imagining this room engulfed in roaring flames, both males unable to escape the fire as it eats through everything around them, turning it to ash. My stomach rolls, nausea replacing the fear, making me physically ill.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the image, but now that I've considered it, I can't stop.

Both Alphas appear in front of me, sporting identical expressions of concern.

Soren reaches for me, his voice full of conviction as he swears, “I’m not afraid of you, Idril. Am I concerned about what you can do? Absolutely. But not for myself. I don't believe you’d ever do anything that could hurt me, or Caelan. I’m more worried for you—but only because I want you to understand what’s inside of you. I don’t want you to wonder. I don’t want you to worry. I want you to embrace whatever it is you can do and love that part of yourself.”

My smile is watery. I know he means what he’s saying, but I can’t get that image out of my head now. All of this is so overwhelming. I feel like my entire life is spiraling out of control, speeding toward a massive accident that I’m helpless to prevent.

Caelan gently tucks a piece of hair behind my ear with one hand, the other twisting behind his back to pull something from his back pocket and holding it between us with a blinding smile on his face.

How can he smile so easily? He’s already been hurt once because of me—because of my father—isn’t he at all concerned about these abilities none of us understand?

“A beanie,” he explains, mistaking my frown as simple confusion over his gift. “For your hair. Soren has to wear one too.” He winks at the other Alpha, startling a watery laugh out of me. He stands, and with gentle hands, starts pulling back my hair and combing through it with his fingers.

Caelan crouches down in front of me with an easy smile and absolutely no hint of the same anxiety I’m feeling. “I don’t think you could hurt one of us even if you tried, Idril. I think that whatever these abilities of yours are, they protect you, and they protect your Mates.” He begins separating my hair into sections before braiding it, and the gentle pressure on my scalp feels like absolute heaven. “I also think that once you learn more about them, you’ll be able to control who they protect.”

Could he be right? Does this—this—power have some kind of built-in failsafe for my Mates? Does it only apply to the five of us, or can I protect others from its destruction as well? Branwen? Riven? Kane?

Fates, there’s so much I don’t know. So many questions I have *no* answers to.

And Fates… I *want* to believe him. I want to believe that, for once in my Fates-damned life, I’ve been given something good. Gods, I want it so

bad it *hurts*.

Except, there is a little voice inside of me that's terrified he's got this all wrong.

My instinct is to immediately dismiss that fear because this part of me doesn't feel wrong. It feels… It feels like a part of my soul that's been hidden from me my entire life.

It feels like sunshine and light and hope and *mine*.

If only I had more answers. If only I knew what it was or where it came from or how to use it, for Fate's sake. Maybe then I wouldn't be second-guessing everything.

Maybe then I wouldn't be second-guessing *myself.*

"Have some faith in yourself, Omega," Caelan whispers fiercely. "Soren and I believe in you. You just need to believe in yourself as well."

There's a knock at the door, and we all turn to face it. It swings open, and Vaelenor peeks his head around the frame. When his eyes land on Caelan, he smiles sheepishly and says, "Uh… We're ready when you all are."

"We'll be right down," Caelan replies without even bothering to look up. Vae doesn't say anything, but for a long second he just stands in the doorway, looking at the three of us with something that looks an awful lot like longing before turning away and pulling the door shut behind him.

"Are you ready for this?" Soren asks once he's gone. "You haven't really said anything since they came back with the news, Idril."

"I don't know," I sigh, and the words are barely a whisper, because the truth is that I *don't* know how to feel, or what to think at all. Part of me is terrified we'll show up, and the woman they found won't even be there. Or maybe she's not actually my mother at all, and Vae and Silas aren't as sure of our resemblance as they think they are.

I don't know which option would be worse, honestly. And the last thing I want to do is give in to the hope swirling in my gut because if it's not her, or she's gone, or we can't rescue her… *then what?*

Pressure builds behind my eyes, but I refuse to give in to the tears. I don't have time to be sad right now. I don't have time to break down. *I can't.*

"I don't know what to think, or how to feel. It's too much," I whisper, and the admission falls from my lips before I've thought to set it free. But I don't take it back because, gods, it feels good to acknowledge it. "There's

so much happening. So many life-altering things and it's all just—I don't know how to—I can't—"

Soren's arms wrap around me, and I fall into him, more than willing to let him hold me up because I can't do it myself right now. My mind spins, and my limbs shake, and, *Fates, what am I supposed to do?*

"I left her there," I sob, and just like my tears, there's no way to hold back my words. Not when they're weighed down with so much guilt I can't breathe around the way it's suffocating me from the inside.

"I didn't even question him. I was so selfish. I worried more about myself and she— what if she doesn't even want to see me? What if she hates me—"

Soren doesn't try to talk me down, and neither does Caelan, who's bracketing my other side, both of my Mates surrounding me in their warmth and strength. I'm thankful for that. Thankful, too, that they don't dismiss my concerns out of hand. Instead, they simply let me cry, wrapping me in their scents and comforting me as best they can until my tears finally taper off, leaving me wrung out and exhausted.

It's only been a few minutes, but I feel like I just came out of a blender. I pull out of Soren's embrace, using my sleeve to wipe the tears from my face and suddenly feeling embarrassed for breaking down. I'm angry at myself for getting so upset. It makes me feel weak, like the only thing I ever do around these males is cry.

I don't want to be weak. I want to be strong. I want to be more than the Omega human they have to protect and coddle all the time.

Soren's hands—rough, calloused, and warm—slide up my arms and across my shoulders and neck before cresting on either side of my face, cupping both cheeks in his palms.

"Listen to me," he rasps, eyes so bright they look nearly fevered. "You were a *child*. You didn't leave her, Idril. Your father took her from you. Somehow, for years and years in that hell, you *survived*. That's all that matters, and I promise you, it's all that will matter to her, too."

"He's right," Caelan agrees from behind me. His hand smoothes down my back— slow and deliberate, anchoring me to both him and reality. "The only thing she'll care about is that her daughter is alive and safe. She's your mother. She loved you more than anything, and no matter what, I can promise you she'd go through whatever your father has put her through a million times if it meant keeping you safe."

Soren leans forward until our foreheads are touching. “We’re going to be with you every step of the way. No matter what. I promise.”

Their words are somehow soft and hard at the same time. Soren’s certainty. Caelan’s fierce devotion. The way they let me fall apart in their arms before helping build me back up again. Their love somehow fights back the numbness while reminding me that I have something to fight for no matter what happens tonight.

I exhale a shaky breath and nod. My chest aches, and my eyes are still stinging from my tears, but I can’t deny that I feel steadier somehow, like I’ve been placed back on solid ground.

“I’m scared, but I’m ready to go,” I tell them, trying to muster as much bravery and determination as I can to back up my words. The way they look back at me with eyes full of pride helps to bolster me further, giving me the courage I need to face what’s coming.

Caelan uncurls from his crouch, reaching for my hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Then we go,” he agrees, like it’s the easiest decision in the world simply because I’m the one who’s made it.

That, more than anything, begins fixing something inside of me that’s been broken for a very, *very* long time.

* * *

Daxen, Silas, Vae, and Gav are waiting for us in the foyer, standing in a loose circle and talking in low, hushed tones. The front door stands wide open, and cool night air filters in on a light breeze. The scent of nature grounds me, and I feel a sudden, overwhelming desire to be outside.

The hushed voices cut off as we step into the foyer, and Caelan and Gav exchange a silent, weighted look. He’s the only Alpha Caelan acknowledges. I catch Vae’s hopeful smile fall from his face as Caelan passes him without so much as a glance. I can’t stand the rift between my Mate and his Pack. It’s so obvious, like an open wound that no one knows how to heal.

Caelan’s in front of me and Soren’s at my side, so I’m not expecting Vae to fall in behind me with a nod to Soren. The rest of the group follow, and once we step outside, Caelan lets go of my hand and jogs for the SUV.

“What is he doing?” I ask, as Soren pulls me back when I try to follow him.

“Scouting.”

I laugh, assuming it's a joke. But when Gavran, Dax, and Vae jog in ahead of us and reform in a line, I realize it's *not* a joke.

"It's like thirty feet between here and the car!" I exclaim, as Vae positions himself directly in front of me. I turn, expecting to find Soren laughing at their intensity, and let out a surprised scream when I slam into his chest.

"Whoooaa there," Soren grins, and I have to crane my neck back to look at him.

"Is Idril alright?" Caelan shouts as I spin back around. I take a step to the side so I can see around Vaelenor, but he shifts in the same direction right as I do.

Blocking my view.

"She's fine," Soren shouts back. "Think I startled her."

With a growl, I step to the left.

And Vae lunges and drops to one knee, fumbling with the laces of his boots.

"You're not subtle, you know," I snap, planting my hands on my hips. "Like… you're actually really, really bad at subterfuge."

Vae lifts his head, and his lips curve into a mischievous grin. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm just tying my shoe."

"They were already tied."

Behind me, I can feel Soren's silent laughter. Vae frowns, looks down at his shoes, then back at me. "Are you sure?"

I'm debating just how bad I want to win this argument when Caelan's voice slices through the crisp night air, dripping in Alpha authority.

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"Everyone stay right where you are. Do not fucking move. And for the love of the Fates, *protect my Mate!"*

My heart skips a beat at the command in Caelan's voice. I freeze where I am, eyes scanning the evening sky for signs of attack. *What the heck is*

happening?

"Soren…" My voice shakes as I whisper my Alpha's name, a thousand unspoken questions I can't find the words to ask.

"It's alright," Soren murmurs behind me, and I'm suddenly grateful that he and Vae both are so close.

"What's happening? What is Caelan doing? Is someone attacking?"

"Caelan is just checking the cars for explosives—"

"Explosives?!"

"He isn't taking any chances with your safety," Vae cuts in. "He asked us to make sure we had two bodies on you at all times once we stepped out of the house. I didn't mean to scare you. I was trying to make you smile."

That's… Oddly sweet. In a totally oblivious, tone-deaf kind of way.

"What about right now? What's happening now?" I murmur, as Soren shuffles closer to my back, snaking an arm around my waist and pulling into his chest.

"I don't know what's happening now," Vae admits with a grimace. I can hear Caelan moving around the line of SUVs, his boots almost silent on the pavement. Dax, Gav, and Silas murmur in voices too low for me to understand, so I flick my attention back to Vae just as he stiffens and his eyes widen in shock.

"You're fucking kidding me," he hisses, and slowly reaches for the dagger at his hip, eyes fixed straight ahead toward the forest stretching behind the compound.

"What are you—" Daxen's question is cut off by the sound of a low, raspy yowl that vibrates down my spine and sends my heart leaping into my throat.

The darkness splits, opening like a curtain to reveal a sleek, hulking form with glowing yellow eyes. Its muscles ripple beneath a coat of velvety fur that's so black it almost seems to swallow the shadows.

The massive creature stalks forward, paws thudding against grass, then gravel. Every step it takes is soundless—at complete odds with its hulking form.

A gust of wind parts the clouds, exposing the previously hidden moon. Its glow bathes the world in silver light, brightening it just enough to bring the beast's form into focus.

I grin. Tears fill my eyes and pool along my lashes.

It's Shade. *My* Shade.

I’d know that mark on his forehead in the shape of a crown anywhere. Impossibly, he’s even bigger than he was when I saw him from the attic window a few days ago. And even though that makes no sense, I *know* it’s him.

The Alphas, however, do not.

Like they’re a single unit, they tense, fists wrapping around the hilts of daggers and other weapons, stances shifting, and muscles coiling as they prepare to spring into action at the smallest sign of provocation.

To my right, Caelan appears, fangs half as long as my finger and razor-sharp, glinting in the moonlight. His eyes dart to me, clocking the way Soren and Vae are boxing me in protectively, and snap back to Shade.

“Idril, I want you to back away very slowly. Move with Soren. Get inside and lock the door.”

“What? No!” Horrified, I whip my head toward Caelan. A thousand protests sit at the tip of my tongue, but I forget each one as he pulls a gun from his shoulder holster.

“Caelan, stop!”

The only reason I escape Soren's hold is because he’s not expecting it. I lunge for him but slam to a stop when Vae flings out his arm, barring my way.

Alright. Enough.

“Let me through,” I demand, growling when he refuses to move. My chest heats with anger, and I give in to it, wrapping my hands around his forearm and shoving as hard as I can.

His arm may as well be a slab of concrete. I can literally feel the muscles straining beneath the fabric of his shirt, and I have to accept pretty fast that I’m not strong enough to move him.

With each failed attempt to reach Shade, my chest burns hotter, the flame inside me feeding my anger. Vae isn’t even watching me. His eyes are locked on Shade, who’s still more than thirty feet away, bright yellow eyes flicking lazily from Alpha to Alpha while his chest vibrates with a threatening growl I can hear from here.

“Everyone stop moving,” Gavran shouts.

“Can’t really do that,” Vae tosses back, blocking me for what must be the dozenth time.

“If you’d just freaking move and let me through, you could stand as still as you please!”

The glint of sharp steel in the moonlight as Gavran pulls a dagger from the sheath strapped to his thigh is my breaking point. My pulse spikes, my vision narrows and sharpens, and something in me snaps.

Like hell is that asshole going to stab my cat!

Acting on instincts I don't stop to analyze, I shove harder against the steel bar of Vae's right arm, hard enough to make him grunt. He shifts, expecting me to duck beneath that same arm. Instead, I spin to the left before he even realizes I'm not where he expected me to be. I'm cutting it close, but I manage to duck beneath his left arm seconds before he fully extends it and dive across the lawn.

My movements are awkward and clumsy. I land on my stomach, push to my feet, and, with a victorious whoop, I take off in a full sprint for my cat.

A chorus of male voices chases after me, demands and admonishments I easily ignore. I don't hear Caelan's voice, and for a long moment I don't hear Soren's, either. Then, a booming laugh thunders through the air, and I grin at the sound of my wolven Mate.

I'm less than five feet from Shade when Caelan shouts my name. The fear in his voice is so visceral it stops me in my tracks.

I spin around and see Caelan shoving between Dax and Vae, face twisted in panic. The adrenaline coursing through me makes me want to keep moving, but the terror on my Mate's face won't let me take another step.

"I'm fine," I promise. "It's just Shade. You've met him, Caelan, remember?"

"That's not your house cat, Idril. That's a fucking *panther*!"

I glance over my shoulder at the giant panther that used to be my fat cat, wracking my brain for some way to explain. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the glint of moonlight on steel and realize Gavran's still aiming that damn dagger at my cat—*my only friend.*

The flames in my chest roar in fury.

Caelan notices my glare and follows it to Gav's dagger. He shouts at him to re-sheath his weapon, but Gavran refuses. Caelan snaps back, and soon the two are arguing loudly. Behind me, Shade's thunderous growl grows louder, agitated by the loud back and forth.

"Everyone shut up!"

Daxen's demand has the desired effect, ending the arguing. It also draws the attention of Shade, who swings his massive head toward Daxen. His lips

peel back from his teeth, and he bares fangs as long as my hand and as sharp as Gav's dagger.

With a curse, Caelan's face twists in a mask of determination, and he takes off in a sprint—straight for me.

And Shade.

Shade's attention shifts toward my Mate, but I'm still watching Gavran. His calculating gaze bounces between my Alpha and my cat, hard amber eyes assessing the situation without all the facts.

He widens his stance and readjusts his grip on the hilt of his dagger, and my stomach sinks. If I don't stop him, Shade's going to get hurt.

Determination floods through me, and I whip back around, shifting until I'm positioned directly between Shade and the Alphas. I'm running purely on instinct and an unwavering resolve and intention to do whatever I have to do to prevent the clash I can see coming.

Shade is the only friend I've ever had. He may not have been in my life for long, but he's protected me more than my own Mates have. He brought Soren to me. He watched over me.

Now it's my turn to watch over him.

Caelan's less than ten feet away, but that's close enough. I straighten my spine and throw up my hands between us. Lifting my chin, I summon every ounce of strength inside of me, willing my voice to carry the urgency of my command.

"Stop!"

For the briefest second, I actually believe the urgency in my voice is what causes my Mates—because at some point, Soren started to run after Caelan—to skid to a stop.

Then, the air shifts. I can physically *see* the currents swirling in front of me, like hundreds of threads of air twisting and spooling together. It starts as a breeze and quickly morphs into a full-blown gale.

Before I know it, those spinning currents of air explode. They burst apart before reforming into a wall that swells and expands, then shoots across the yard straight for my Mates.

The trees closest to us ripple and sway. Leaves rip from foliage before flying through the open sky and skittering across the ground. Soren and Caelan's shirts look plastered to their chests and Soren's hair tears loose from its band, billowing away from his face.

Soren’s furious snarl reaches me before being whisked away on another gust of wind. He’s upset. Agitated. His incredible Alpha strength is useless against the cyclone keeping him in place. Caelan is no better off, straining to move, teeth bared in frustration.

I glance back at Shade, who’s resting casually on his haunches, head tilted to the side, watching with eyes gleaming with what I could swear is amusement. His eyes flick to my still-outstretched hands, and I follow his gaze, putting two and two together.

Nausea churns in my gut. Sweat breaks out along my forehead and neck, and my hands start to tremble. I swallow repeatedly, trying not to sick up as I realize… This isn’t some random blast of wind. It’s coming from me.

I have no idea how to make this stop, so I do the only logical thing I can think of. I curl my fingers into my palm, squeezing my hands into tight fists and begging whatever part of me that’s causing this to stop.

And… *it does.*

The wind cuts off so fast I nearly stumble. The world around us settles into silence. The only sound I can hear is my own ragged breathing as I pant for air and my mind spins with shock.

I can feel everyone’s eyes boring into me, but I don’t look up. I don’t want to see their faces. I don’t want to see the fear, the condemnation, or the disgust. I can’t. I can’t do it.

“Idril.” Soren’s voice is closer than I expect it to be, gentle and kind. “Omega, look at me.”

A whine gets stuck in my throat. I shake my head, staring at the grass beneath my shoes. The air feels charged. The scent of ozone is so sharp it almost burns the inside of my nose.

Gods, what did I just do?

A heavy weight presses insistently into my lower back. I glance to the side to find Shade shifting next to me.

He’s even larger up close. His shoulders must be at least half a foot higher than my hips. I’ve never seen a panther in real life before, *but surely they aren’t supposed to be this big?*

He leans down and bumps his nose into my hip, rubbing the side of his face against my thigh just like he used to do when he was smaller. A purr rumbles to life in his chest, and it soothes me, grounding me in the present, reminding me of a time when things were simpler, if no less dangerous.

I’m so tired. My limbs feel heavy. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost believe twenty-pound weights are hanging from my wrists.

Why am I so tired? What’s happening to me?

Shade huffs, warm breath heating my skin through the denim, and shoves his nose against my fingers, which are still curled tightly into my palm. I blink bleary eyes, trying to focus on the top of his head. Even that feels like it takes more effort than it should.

When his prodding doesn’t elicit a response, he growls gently and butts at my hand with more insistence. Muscle memory kicks in, and I uncurl my fingers, opening my palm.

Shade’s purring kicks up a notch, and he runs his huge, rasping tongue across my palm. The sensation is so unexpected, laughter bubbles out of my chest, jolting me out of my numb shock.

I run my fingers through his soft, silky fur, and his purring grows so loud it sounds like the rumble of an engine. When he cranes his neck back and those familiar golden eyes meet mine, pure joy surges through me. My laugh turns into a sob of relief. I fall to my knees, wrapping my arms around his hulking form and burying my face in his pelt.

Shade lifts one mammoth paw and flings it over my shoulder, returning my embrace.

“Well, I’ll be fucked,” Vae whispers in awe. “Guys, I think it really *is* her pet.”

“That is not a pet, that’s a fucking predator,” Dax argues, but he can’t hide the astonishment in his tone, either, and I find myself smiling into Shade’s fur.

Taking a deep breath, I pull back and finally look up, bracing myself for the Alphas’ judgment. Right away, my eyes lock with Caelan, who looks less than two seconds away from snapping. His pupils are dilated, hands fisted around the handles of both daggers.

When my eyes meet his, he retracts his fangs. His eyes soften, and he takes a hesitant step in our direction. Shade’s head snaps up and his bright golden eyes narrow on my Mate.

Caelan stops, raising his hands in surrender. “Sweet girl… can you please call off your demon?”

“That’s the panther I scented at your father’s estate,” Soren exclaims. “I recognize the scent—it’s what led me here.”

I run my fingers in the silky fur between Shade's ears before bracing myself to stand on still-shaky legs. He must sense that I need help because he shifts, pressing against me and keeping me steady as I push to my feet.

"Thank you," I whisper, scratching behind his ears the way I know he loves.

The varying expressions of disbelief and horror on the Alphas' faces aren't a surprise, but Fates… I'm so exhausted from feeling like I have to defend every single strange thing that happens.

"He won't hurt you," I explain. "He's my cat. From my father's."

"If that's a cat, I'm fucking Dracula," Silas mutters.

Vae throws his head back and barks out a laugh. "Dracula slept in a coffin, sooo…"

Silas turns to the Alpha with eyes bright with betrayal. "You're bringing that up now? *Now?* When there's a jungle monster in our front yard? One that apparently belongs to an Omega who just blasted us with a wall made of wind that she *conjured with her hands?*"

I tense, eyes bouncing between both Alphas, bracing myself mentally for what normally comes next. *The cruelty. The blame. The baseless accusations.*

My bottom lip wobbles and I bite down on it hard enough to bleed, willing myself not to cry.

"Everyone *calm down*." Soren steps forward, coming to stand in front of me and turning to address the rest of the group. "This is an… unexpected development. However, it's relatively low on the list right now, yeah? Idril has a pet panther."

He shrugs, and my lips twitch in a smile.

"I, personally, owe the beast a debt. He brought me to my Omega, so as far as I'm concerned, if anyone has a problem with Shade, you've got a fucking problem with me. Y'all might have fangs, but so do we." He grins a feral grin. "And ours are bigger."

Tears spring to my eyes, and I blink furiously, willing them not to fall. My heart swells, and when he turns that grin on me, I swear it feels like I might float away.

It's so refreshing to have someone on my side for once. When Caelan comes to stand with him in solidarity, my Omega actually squeals in happiness.

Yes, Shade is… *different.* A few weeks ago he was a very fat cat who lived in the woods and snuck into my room to keep me company when my father wasn't home.

And now… *he's a panther.*

But fat cat or massive panther, he's still Shade. He's still my friend. And he's warm and solid and *here*.

My smile grows, and I dig my fingers into the rough fur at his neck, letting the steady vibrations of his purr strengthen me, just like I have so many nights before.

Caelan walks over and wraps his hand gently around my arm. Wincing, I turn to face him fully. "I'm so sorry. I don't know how I did that—with the wind. I didn't mean to. I was afraid someone was going to attack, and I just wanted everyone to stop, and I—I don't even know how I did it—"

He presses the tips of his fingers to my lips, effectively cutting off my rambling apology. He pulls me close, wrapping me in his arms, and I exhale, melting into the warmth of his body.

"You have nothing to apologize for. I'm sorry if I scared you. I saw a panther damn near as tall as you are, and I worried it was some kind of trick or something. I should have trusted you when you told me it was Shade."

My throat tightens, and my eyes fall to the ground in shame. "I know I've caused a lot of—"

"No," his denial is swift and sure. He reaches out, pulling me back into his arms. "That's not what I meant. You haven't *caused* anything, so get that idea out of your head right now."

"But… you just said so yourself. All these random things happen around me. I just don't want to be a burden."

Caelan sighs, pulling back to hold me firmly by the shoulders, crouching down until we're eye to eye.

"Idril, we have a Bond that no one's ever experienced outside of the three of us," he gestures to include Soren. "Our souls connected in some kind of alternate dream-world reality I still don't understand while I was in a coma. When I woke up, I found out you had amazing, wonderful, powerful abilities no one else has ever seen. You seem to have formed a bond with a freaking Panther, for Fate's sake, and… don't you *see*? You aren't a burden, Idril. You're a *miracle*."

I swear my heart skips a thousand beats. When Caelan leans in and presses his lips to mine in a kiss so gentle and so full of love, it feels like

almost all the exhaustion that's been weighing me down the last ten minutes just disappears.

"I hate to break up the moment, but we're burning daylight." Gavran's voice startles me, and I pull back, cheeks heating in embarrassment.

"The sun's been down for hours," Silas points out.

Gavran pinches the bridge of his nose. "It's an expression, for the love of the gods, Silas."

Caelan rolls his eyes, and Soren walks over and runs a soothing hand down my spine. "What do you say, Omega? Are you ready to go?"

Glancing at him over my shoulder, I smile and give him a decisive nod. "I'm ready."

Silas scrapes a hand through his hair and grimaces before asking, "So—uh—just out of curiosity, but is—" He hesitates, turns to Vae, and whispers, "What do I call it?"

Vae shrugs. "Your Highness?"

Daxen throws back his head and laughs. "It's a Panther; it can't understand you."

Shade's growl is low and menacing, and his golden eyes narrow on Dax.

"You know what?" Silas's voice is higher than normal. "I'm gonna call him 'Master' just to play it safe."

"His name is Shade," I correct him.

Silas nods quickly. "Right, right. Shade, Master, Your Eminence. I'll call him Daddy if he wants," his laugh is strangled. "What I'm trying to ask is, is he coming with us, or…"

I rest my hand on top of Shade's head. "No, he's staying here."

I crouch down to his eye level and run my fingers through his fur. "I've got to go somewhere. It's important. But I'll be back soon," I tell him, confident he understands everything I'm saying. Caelan's right; for reasons we don't yet understand, *'normal'* no longer applies.

"Why don't you hunt in the forest for a while? Catch something good to eat while I'm gone."

Shade blinks once, long and slow, then leans in and runs his prickly tongue up the side of my face, making me laugh. He butts his head against mine affectionately, then turns and takes off, loping gracefully toward the forest.

Once he’s about twenty yards away, he slows down long enough to glance back at me over his shoulder before breaking into a sprint and disappearing into the trees so quickly it’s almost like the shadows themselves swallow him whole.

I stand, swiping my palms across my thighs before taking Caelan’s extended hand and letting him pull me along behind him.

“I can’t believe we haven’t even left HQ yet and this is already the most eventful mission I’ve ever been on,” Vae mutters to Dax as they follow behind us toward one of the SUVs.

“Yeah,” Dax replies, but he doesn’t sound suspicious or mean. He almost sounds thoughtful.

Soren appears, falling into step beside me, and his hand lands on the back of my neck. Like I’ve been programmed to respond to the pressure of his fingers curling around my throat, I melt into the comfort of his touch.

One by one we all climb into the SUV, all except Daxen, who waits for the rest of us to pack in, filling every seat but the passenger seat in the front.

Once we’re all buckled in, Daxen rounds the front of the vehicle, opens the passenger door, and climbs in. When he reaches back for his seat belt, his eyes meet mine. It only lasts a few seconds, but for the whole ride to our destination, I can’t stop analyzing the genuine confusion and surprise I saw looking back at me. Almost like he was trying to shuffle around puzzle pieces, each one representing all the things about me he thinks he knows.

If Daxen’s starting to realize that the picture he’s painted of me in his head no longer aligns with reality, then I wish him luck in his search for answers. I may be trying to discover what and who I am as well, but I certainly won’t be going out of my way to provide him with the answers when I find them.

He’ll just have to be surprised like the rest of us.

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Chapter 20

Idril

The stars are beautiful out here, away from everything. I can hear the ocean some distance away and smell the brine and salt of the sea. It's been years since I've visited the ocean, despite living only an hour away.

"Alright?" Soren's hand engulfs mine, and he gives it a gentle squeeze.

"Yeah, I'm good," I reply, hoping he'll do me the favor of ignoring the slight tremble in my voice.

"I want everyone to keep their eyes and ears open." Gavran's voice cuts through the dark night, and everyone stops what they're doing to give him their attention. Another SUV pulls in behind ours, and I watch curiously as five males I've never met climb out.

I always forget that the compound houses more Bastards than just the seven who live at HQ.

"We'll have three Bastards watching the perimeter. Two more stationed at the entrance to prevent anything from sneaking up on us. The rest will keep watch while the rest of us head toward the basement. Do not deviate from the plan we set at HQ. It's straightforward, so no one should have any trouble sticking to the plan. Any questions?"

Silence.

"Alright, let's head out."

The words have barely left his mouth when everyone jumps into action. It's fascinating, really. Like a well-oiled machine. Males who have their orders slink off, disappearing into the night like shadows given flesh. Soon, Vae leads our group around the side of the building, where he slides a metal door aside to reveal an open doorway.

I move to step in behind Vae, but Caelan holds me back with a hand around my arm, guiding me into the very center of the group so I'm surrounded.

That's where they keep me, the Alphas forming a blockade around me as we make our way through the empty military base. I crane my neck to get a look at my surroundings, but I'm too short.

The small glimpses I do catch send shivers down my spine. It's like something out of a nightmare. The stale air is suffocating, and I try to breathe through my mouth, but it doesn't help. I swear I can taste rust and mold, coating my throat and tongue.

We turn as one down a hallway and the Alpha's flashlights skitter across the walls and floor, offering the only light to fight back the oppressive darkness deep inside the compound. Every few feet I catch a glimpse into rooms with their doors propped open or hanging on rusty hinges.

There's not much to see. Bed frames so rusted they've started to collapse, filing cabinets with shelves hanging open.

Every step further into this hell is worse than the last, tightening my lungs with guilt and shame until all I want to do is open my mouth and scream and rage at the realization that this is where my mother's been kept all this time.

My kind, sweet mother who wore sundresses and baked banana bread because she knew I loved the smell of it. My beautiful mother who told me stories because every day of our lives was a nightmare.

A tear trickles down my cheek, and I angrily swipe it away, hoping no one else noticed. I don't want to be the girl who cries all the time.

"Are you alright?" The sound of Vaelenor's voice is far closer than I'm expecting. I flick my eyes to his, irritated all over again that he obviously saw me crying.

"I'm fine," I insist through clenched teeth. "I'm not even sad. I'm just angry."

It's not an excuse. I am mad. *Furious.* At my father and the hell he put me through, and worse—the hell he's spent the last decade subjecting my mother to.

Vae doesn't respond, but I can feel his eyes on me as we continue down the hall, our footprints kicking up dust with each step.

"This is it," Silas announces. He raises a hand, gesturing for everyone to stop. Like they've choreographed it, the Alphas part, leaving a path for me

to creep toward the head of the group.

Hope and fear war inside of me, swirling through my chest in a chaotic dance and making it hard to breathe.

What if she's really down there?

What if she's not?

I don't know which possibility is worse.

Soren's voice breaks through the buzzing static in my ears. "It'll be alright, Little Mate. We'll be with you every step of the way."

I glance at him over my shoulder. He smiles, his eyes bright with a primal devotion I could drown in.

Caelan places a comforting hand on my shoulder. "If anything feels wrong or off, pay attention to those instincts, alright?"

Finding it impossible to force sound from my dry throat, I lift my hand and place it on top of his. Something about the way he treats me as a part of the team—a part of the mission—gives me the strength I need to take that first step.

"Team Two just completed a second perimeter check," Gavran announces. "It's clear, but keep ready. We don't know what those runes will do, or how they'll react. They could be keyed to alert Varenthrall, so we act on the assumption that he knows we're here. Get in, get Idril's mother if you can, and get out. Just like we talked about."

I nod in understanding, even though I know he's probably talking more to the Alphas than me. Taking a deep breath, I square my shoulders and take a hesitant step through the doorway and down the stairs.

It's pitch black, and I have to hold onto the railing to keep my balance so I don't go tumbling into the gaping maw of darkness surrounding me. I can feel my Mates right behind me, their presence solid and grounding.

The moment my foot hits the bottom step, bright light erupts around us, casting a glowing light blue haze over everything. It's beautiful, and I don't think before reaching out and tracing the pads of my fingers over one of the symbols—three squares overlaying a circle bisected by a line from top to bottom.

I lift my hand away from the wall, and the moment I'm no longer making contact with the symbol, it starts to hum. I gasp as the runes around me begin to flicker and pulse to an unknown rhythm.

The glow brightens until it's so bright it's bleeding up the stairs and into the hallway above. I turn, the light allowing me to see the Alphas peering

down at us clearly.

Vae's expression is awed. "Gav's right, it's like the blood recognizes her."

"It didn't do this earlier?" Daxen asks, and Vae shakes his head.

I wrench my eyes away from the two of them, but I can't help the way my heart beats faster at the way they're looking at me—with wonder and disbelief instead of the cruelty I'm accustomed to.

As though it's mimicking my own heartbeat, the light from the symbols pulse quicker.

My gaze wanders the length of the basement, taking in what must be thousands of symbols painstakingly painted along the walls and ceiling.

But that's not what has my knees buckling and a whine wrenching free from the depths of my soul.

It's the stone altar, and the woman lying on top of it.

She's absolutely still, with hair that would be identical to my own if not for the golden honey tone mine lacks. I don't even need to see her face to know it's my mother. I spent hours playing with that hair when I was a child, twisting it into knots when I was too young to understand what a braid was. It would always end up a tangled mess, but Mother would simply smile and tell me she'd never seen a more beautiful braid.

I don't even think. I run.

"Idril, wait!" Caelan reaches for me a beat too late and misses.

I don't answer or look back, not when I'm so close to my mother. I half fall, half trip the final few feet, barely catching myself on the edge of the stone plinth and nearly falling on top of her motionless form.

The sight of her guts me. It tears something apart inside me, letting an emotion I don't normally let myself feel break free.

Fury.

She's so much smaller than I remember; her skin is pale and wan, lips chapped and dry, the skin under her eyes sunken and bruised. I watch, holding my breath until I see the rise and fall of her chest. Her breaths are shallow and uneven, but I don't even care. She's breathing. Somehow, someway, she's *alive*.

Alive. My mother is alive.

I want her to look at me. I want her to open her arms, and I want to crawl into her embrace just like I did when I was a child. I want to surround myself with my mother's scent, warmth, and love, and stay there forever.

Just me and her, just like it's always been.

"Mama?" I whisper, afraid to speak too loud. Afraid to make the slightest noise in case this is actually all a dream, and if I speak too loudly, I'll wake up, and she'll be gone, and I'll be back in my room at my father's estate, starving and freezing and alone.

"Hey guys?" Vae's voice floats down from the stairs, and I feel Soren and Caelan's attention turn toward the sound. I don't acknowledge him. I don't care what he has to say. Not when my mother's lashes are fluttering, and her breathing is deepening, and I'm leaning in closer *because—*

Because—

For the first time in almost a decade, my mother—the mother I thought was dead—is looking right at me with eyes just a shade or two darker than my own. I inhale sharply, refusing to glance away from her unfocused gaze.

She blinks rapidly. Then, her gaze sharpens. *Focuses. Brightens.*

I'm suddenly aware of a distressed whine coming from the back of my throat. I bite down hard on my lower lip in an attempt to bite back the sound, but it's useless. My shaking hands reach for hers, where they rest on her stomach.

The moment our fingers touch, she gasps.

"Severed spotted at the perimeter, coming in from the South and West. A fuck ton of them," Vaelenor shouts.

"Mama," I lean closer, wishing I could just climb up on this stupid stone dais so we can be together. *She's too far away!*

No, Idril. Pay attention. You need to get her out of here.

Wait… did Vae say something about Severed?

"Caelan!" I try to get my Mate's attention, but my mother's hand squeezes mine—*hard.*

Before I can respond to the shocking strength of her grip, she lifts a shaking hand and reaches for my face, cradling my cheek with surprisingly warm, soft fingers. It's a familiar gesture—one she's done a thousand times before.

"My darling." Her voice is raspy, and so beautiful I can barely believe it's real. My lashes flutter at the sound. I feel like I'm hearing music for the first time after being told I'll never hear it again.

"My little ember." Her voice breaks, and I meet her tear-filled gaze with my own.

I don't know what to say. *What do I say?*

“You’ve grown into such a beautiful young woman,” she murmurs, and my chest warms at the pride in her voice. Her fingers spasm against the curve of my cheek and her lips curve into a gentle, loving smile that’s so full of pain it’s blinding.

Leaning into her touch, I cover her hand with one of my own as more tears escape to slide down my cheeks. The sound she makes is one I’ve heard a thousand times. The tender empathy of a mother who would do anything to take her child’s pain away, but knows that she can’t.

“We’re going to get you out of here, alright? That’s why I’m here. So we can get you away.”

Soren inches closer, hovering while keeping his distance to give us some privacy… *but where is Caelan?* I turn my attention to our Bond and realize he’s upstairs again, but coming closer. I can feel him rushing back down, his side of the Bond pulsing with anxiety.

What’s happening?

“Idril,” she cuts me off, and her tone is still all wrong. There’s something not right about the way she’s saying my name, and every piece of me wants to ignore whatever she’s about to say because I know I’m not going to like it.

My hands tighten around hers. I stubbornly refuse to answer her, like if I just ignore what’s coming, I won’t have to face it.

“Darling, I can’t leave—”

My eyes snap to hers, finally meeting her eyes when her grip strengthens, refusing to let me look away from her. “What are you talking about? Of course you can. That’s why we’re here.”

Her eyes shine bright with tears she refuses to let fall, and I know. I know, deep down, that she’s telling me the truth. “The runes, my love. I don’t know how your father learned how to do runic magic, but they won’t let me leave.”

I straighten, my resolve hardening, because… *no. No*. That is not how this ends. Not when I just found her. Not when I just discovered she’s been alive all these years.

“He’s using *my* blood,” I snarl, feeling my heart beat faster. The fury I felt earlier surges, blanketing all other emotions.

I expect her to look surprised, but she doesn’t. Instead, she just looks exhausted. Like the last seven years have taken their toll in a thousand different ways and she’s barely hanging on. She smiles, another resigned

smile that I've been the recipient of more times than I can count. This time, I flinch, a hundred memories of a hundred different moments when father succeeded in ruining what little happiness we'd found. Trips we spent weeks anticipating, just to be told we don't deserve to go, right as he stepped through the front door. Afternoons spent baking together followed by father's rage when he got home and discovered we had *"wasted"* our entire day.

Almost every single happy memory ultimately ended with my tears and mother's stoic reassurance and silent strength.

And the exact same smile she wears now.

I *hate* that smile. I hate that it's all she had to offer each time father broke us. I hate how it always came with her weary acceptance of her place beneath him, like a punctuation mark of our captivity.

Fuck. That.

The flame in my chest explodes in rage, and I fall into it, letting it strengthen my resolve. There's no way I'm letting him win again. No way I'm going to let him use me—*my own blood*—to keep me from my mother.

A hand wraps around my arm, and Soren steps up next to me. "We have to go, Little Mate. I'll get your mom, alright? Step back for me."

I don't want to. I don't want to move away from her, but I force myself to do exactly that. If the Severed are coming, we can't stand around and waste time.

I turn back to face her, willing her to see the resolve in my eyes.

"This is Soren," I explain, forcing the words out in a hurry when the sound of shouting echoes from the hallway above us. "He's going to help you. We're going to leave, alright?"

"Your father—"

"He doesn't get to decide this for us," I snarl. "Not this time."

But she's still shaking her head, eyes pleading with me to understand.

"Idril, listen to me."

I try to pull away, but her grip on my hand tightens.

"Listen! This is important. Do you remember our place? Our secret place?"

I nod. Of course I do. The willow tree, at the edge of the forest. Some of my earliest memories are afternoons filled with picnics and games, hidden by the fronds of that ancient tree. We would lay out blankets and spend hours sequestered away from the real world—just the two of us.

The fronds hid everything—including Father’s guards, who refused to crawl on the ground to follow us into our hidden kingdom. We quickly realized it was the only place on the entire estate that offered a modicum of privacy.

It became our sanctuary, and after Mother was gone, it became the only place I ever felt slightly safe. It didn’t matter that the safety was an illusion. Not for a little girl who didn’t know what it felt like to live without fear.

“I left something for you there.” Her tone grows in urgency. “I worried something like this would happen, so I hid it. I would have given it to you myself when you became an adult. But I worried—” she shakes her head, like it’s irrelevant now.

“You have to find it, Idril. Promise me. Promise me you’ll find it.”

More shouts echo down the stairwell, the voices of the Alpha’s growing louder and more frantic. I glance over my shoulder and meet Soren’s worried gaze. This is killing him, I can tell. He doesn’t want to rush me, *but…*

“I’ll find it, mama. Okay? I will. But not alone. We’ll go together. You can give it to me just like you planned.”

Her eyes drift over my shoulder toward the empty staircase as the sounds of shouting turn into the familiar noise of fighting. She hangs her head, shoulders deflating as tears finally escape from her lower lashes and stream down her face.

When she lifts her head and her eyes meet mine, I see the truth I’ve been denying staring back at me.

We aren’t going to visit the willow tree together.

We aren’t going to go anywhere together, ever again.

This isn’t a rescue mission anymore.

It's goodbye.

We hold to each other’s hands, a million unspoken words between us. The life we should have had together. The joy my father has—*once again*—stolen from us both. All the questions and worries and moments in the future when I’ll need my mother—each one ripped out at the root, leaving behind empty holes where nothing will grow.

The runes on the walls flare unexpectedly, growing brighter and making me wince.

“Idril, we have to go!” I turn at the sound of Caelan’s voice and reach for Soren’s hand. The sounds from upstairs have morphed into a terrifying

cacophony of snarls, curses, and threats, accompanied by the scrape of steel on steel and flesh on flesh.

Shrieks of pain and grunts of exertion are so loud I'd swear the fight was taking place right in front of us if I didn't know better.

Fates, when did it escalate?

"There's no more time." Her energy is obviously fading, and she's starting to pant for air between words. "Your father kept me imprisoned for years. Different places. Always tinkering with ways to keep me docile. Until he discovered a way to manipulate the runes and create his own version of wards."

Her eyes flit around the room, grimacing at the glowing silver-blue light.

"The runes kept me in a kind of stasis. They fed off my energy. Every few months he had to move me. Originally he was using my own blood," she smiles ruefully. "My genes may be dormant, but he—"

Above us, someone releases a rage-filled, painful roar that's so angry the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Soren meets my eyes. He's doing his best to stay strong and give me this time, but we're running out. *Fast*.

Caelan bounds down the stairs, searching the basement until his eyes land on me. He exhales in relief, takes a deep breath, and turns back toward the stairwell. He moves with purpose, muscles tense and coiled tight, daggers at the ready, prepared to attack at the first sign of danger.

Another crash from above makes me jump. At the same moment, my mother's voice cracks on a whine. Worried, I spin back around. "Are you—"

"None of that." She lifts trembling fingers to my lips. "This next part is important, alright?"

I nod, not daring to speak.

"I chose to stay here. I chose not to fight him. To wait."

"Wait for what?"

She graces me with another sad, soft smile. This one is different, though. There's no resignation in this smile. There's only love. And a wistful melancholy I feel in my bones.

"For you, my dear girl. I knew this was the only way I'd have the chance to see you again, so I chose not to fight. I *chose* this. Do you understand? I waited, dreamt, and hoped for this exact moment. For one last

chance to see you. To look you in the eyes and tell you how *proud* I am of you, my little ember."

Her words break me. I crumple into my mother's arms, and despite how frail she is, despite how badly she shakes, she wraps her arms around me and holds me close.

One last time.

"I don't want to leave you," I cry between choked sobs.

"You won't. Not forever. I have so many things I wish I could explain to you. So many answers to questions I know you must have." She pulls back until she can look me in the eyes.

"Forgive me for not taking these last moments to answer your questions, Idril. You may not understand now, but one day, when you hold your own child in your arms, you will. You'll understand why I choose to spend my last moments loving you, confident enough to know you'll figure out the rest without my aid."

I can barely see through my tears. Can barely breathe through the gasping sobs. I fall back into my mother's arms and hold her tight.

Until the world explodes into chaos around us.

The wet, angry snarls of something monstrous reach me first. They're guttural and sharp, more beast than man. Pulling back from my mother's embrace, I turn right as the sounds of the snarling beast get too close to ignore. And not a moment too soon.

The first Severed hurls down the stairs with the speed of a missile. At first it's just a blur of limbs that crashes into a heap on the floor. For a moment it doesn't move, staying completely still for long enough that I start to think the fall may have killed it.

Caelan stands still as stone, poised to attack. He keeps his eyes trained on the Severed. He tenses, the corded strength in his forearms coiling tight as he readjusts his grip on his daggers.

Oh.

Oh.

I realize what's happening right as the Severed gives up playing dead. Like the world's most terrible Jack in the Box, it springs to its feet, ready to attack.

Oh… *gods.*

I gasp audibly and take a step back from the reanimated corpse less than twenty feet away. It looks nothing like Alexander, and I finally understand

what the Bastards mean when they say certain Severed beings are no more than fodder for their army.

I want to look away, but at the same time, I can't. It's what nightmares are made of—something I never thought existed in the real world. The corpse is half decayed. Nothing but teeth and rage and grey skin peeling from bone and sinew, exposing muscle and veins beneath.

It shrieks in rage, attention focused on one person—*my Mate*.

The creature lunges at the same time as Caelan moves, blade flashing in an arc that meets the Severed mid-leap, almost like he anticipated what the creature's next move would be.

The dagger slices into the Severed's decaying flesh and muscle, sending an arc of blood the color of midnight spraying across the floor.

Soren's throws out an arm. "Shit. Idril, stay behind me—"

He cuts himself off with a growl that thunders through the basement. He widens his stance and crouches before pulling another dagger from the waistband of his jeans and holding both in a confident, steady grip.

A moment later, I discover the reason for his reaction as an entire wave of Severed pour down the stairs in much the same way as the first.

Their shrill screams fill the air as they flood down the stairs and fill the basement. There are far too many for Caelan to stop them all, despite how hard he fights. They move like insects, climbing and crawling on top of each other, with no regard for anything or anyone around them.

I watch in horror as their ranks continue to grow until I'm fully convinced we're all going to die. There are too many of them. Way too many for the Bastards to fight fairly.

I never thought I'd be grateful to see Silas. He vaults down the last couple stairs, following close behind the Severed. A heartbeat later, a shotgun cracks. The blast echoes off the stone walls and sends the Severed Caelan's grappling with—the fourth or fifth he's brought down—pitching forward.

Black blood explodes from the back of its head. It falls, landing right on top of its dead companion.

Vae turns the corner behind Gav, spouting colorful curses as he wades into the chaos without hesitation. He backs up Caelan immediately, almost like he knew his Packmate needed him before he even made it down the stairs.

I exhale, relieved my Mate is no longer the only one fighting to hold them all back.

It’s clear the Severed are no match for the Bastards, and for a minute I start to believe their greater numbers don’t mean much compared to the Alphas’ skills after all.

Until another dozen or so—faster, less decayed—appear from nowhere, leaping down the stairs with far more agility than the first wave.

Soren’s backed up so far I have to lean around him to see what’s happening. I can feel the anxiety coming off of him in waves; the only thing overshadowing his fear is his determination to keep both of us safe.

That doesn’t keep my fear at bay, though, and I find myself struggling to breathe through the panic, more and more sure we’re all going to die here in this dirty, abandoned military base.

I’m trying to convince myself not to scream in fear when I look up, drawn to the sound of flesh pounding flesh coming from the stairwell. I do a quick headcount—Caelan fighting, Vae backing him up, Gav fighting hand-to-hand and taking headshots between kills, Silas smiling like a really terrifying hyena, face covered in black blood as he yanks a dagger out of a Severed’s eye socket.

Then, like death given form, Daxen steps into the basement. He surveys the scene with a calculating gaze before stepping into the fray with a look of cold, hard determination on his face.

His movements are cold. *Precise. Controlled.* His blades carve a path with arcs of silver as he cuts down Deadwalkers with an unwavering focus.

Not once does he falter. He doesn’t curse. Doesn’t shout. Doesn’t grunt. Simply takes his place with the other Alphas, closing the final hole in the wall of muscles situated between the Severed and me.

“Idril!” My mother’s voice is frantic. I whip around to face her, and she wraps her thin fingers around my arms and squeezes, demanding I pay attention.

“Listen to me, Idril. This is it. I don’t have much time.”

“I am giving you all that’s left of me.” Her eyes are bright and fierce as she explains, “My life. My fire. It will burn in you, *always*. But, my love, listen to me—*you have to let it in*. Accept who you are. Who you were always meant to be.”

“I don't understand!”

Her smile is full of love. “Remember what I told you? About the flame?”

I nod, wishing fervently that I could tell her all about the flame and ask her how she knew it was truly there. I have so many questions. So many things I want to talk to her about.

“Do you remember how I taught you to keep it alive? How we used to practice together?”

“I remember,” I whisper, ignoring the tears streaming down my cheeks and the throbbing ache in my heart. I think back on all those days spent together and all the strange things she taught me and stories she told.

“Good,” she responds fervently. “Let it in. Accept who you are and don’t fear it, my little ember.”

It feels like she’s speaking in a thousand riddles, and I want to push for more, but with an exhausted sigh, she releases my hands and falls back against the top of the dais.

It’s like someone pulled a plug. All her energy drains away right in front of me. Exhaustion is evident in every line of her flesh and every labored breath she takes.

The sounds of fighting echo around us, but I don’t care about anything right now except for my mother.

“I don’t know what I am,” I admit on a sob. “I don’t know anything, mama!”

Her eyes harden. She holds my gaze steadily, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen my mother look so fierce.

“You know exactly who you are,” she says, leaving no room for doubt in her tone. “You are *my daughter*.”

The light from the runes pulses as though they’re validating her declaration. The illumination from the glow is so bright it’s almost blinding.

Once the glow dims, I glance over my shoulder to check on my Mates—

Right as a Severed shoots up from where he must have been hiding underneath a pile of his dead friends. My mother’s hand snaps out, latching onto my arm as the Severed—black maw stretched wide, showcasing razor-sharp teeth and a black tongue—lunges at Daxen’s unguarded back.

Panic tries to take hold, but my Mother’s grip tightens. I close my eyes as the flame in my chest ignites, expanding to become a raging inferno. The single flame begins to separate, splitting into a thousand smaller tendrils.

One by one, they slip into my veins, flowing through me and filling me with a warmth so intoxicating I nearly forget how to breathe.

My mother's voice pierces the air—a melody I know as well as I know my own name. Her words float through the air like glowing embers, landing on my arms and chest, sinking into my skin, and imprinting on my soul.

Three words. Words I'll remember until the end of my days. The last three words I'll ever hear my Mother speak.

"Let it burn."

My eyes snap open. The Severed hangs suspended in the air, mid-leap, mouth wide open, jaw unhinged, teeth longer than Shade's, shining in the glowing light of the runes. Just like before, my mind clears and I simply… *react.*

I throw my hand out in front of me. A defiant scream tears from my chest, and the fire inside of me explodes from my palms in a fountain of flame. It soars, spinning through the air toward the Severed lunging for my Mate.

The fire punches into the side of the creature with the force of a freight train, forcing it away from Daxen right before it can sink its teeth into his flesh.

The basement's bathed in the orange and red of flickering flames—wild, scorching, and alive. It cycles through me, erupting from my chest, through my blood, before exploding from my palms.

I stagger back against the edge of the altar and lift my shaking hands in disbelief. Fire still barrels through me; tiny flames lick at my skin, rolling and jumping between my hands and between my fingers. I close my eyes, willing the flames away before I lose control.

I take a deep breath. The scent of rot and decayed flowers coats my tongue and the back of my throat, making me gag.

My breathing turns labored. Sweat drips down my back. I bend over and brace my hands on my thighs, trying to breathe through the nausea.

Why am I so hot?

There's a high-pitched ringing in my ears. My body feels like it weighs a thousand pounds, just like earlier, but impossibly worse.

A hand lands on the back of my neck. *Soren.* His thumb brushes softly against my neck, right over my pulse point. Caelan stands next to him, both hovering over me protectively.

The ringing in my ears finally dissipates, replaced by male voices. The sounds of fighting are over, so they must have taken down the rest of the Severed.

Fingers press against my chin, urging me to look up. I blink my eyes and make out Caelan's blurry features and the deep frown on his face.

"Idril?" Soren sounds so concerned. I want to put him at ease, but I don't know how.

I'm so tired. I just want to sleep for a thousand years—my whole body aches, just like the days after father locked me in the basement. My muscles are stiff and brittle; every breath is a chore. Even keeping my head up feels impossible.

When something warm and thick drips from my nose and over my lips, I don't even attempt to wipe it away. I can't.

"Is she bleeding?" Vae's voice sounds so far away.

Caelan swears, then someone reaches out and places a piece of cloth under my nose to soak up the blood. Strong arms wrap around me and sweep me off my feet. I blink open my eyes—which are much clearer now—and find myself in Caelan's arms.

My head lists against his chest. I press close, seeking his scent. At first, I can't smell anything over the decenter, but then I catch it—the barest hint of his Alpha scent. I take a breath. Then another.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Each lungful of my Mate's scent seems to recharge me a little more. And when Soren presses in on my other side, I swear I can feel my energy returning ten-fold.

I don't know how much time passes, but when I finally feel strong enough to fully open my eyes, I expect everyone to be gone except for the three of us.

They're not. In fact, when my lashes flutter open, the first thing I see… *is Daxen.*

The way he's looking at me sends my pulse skittering. His grey eyes are boring into my soul. There's no cruelty. No disgust. No irritation. His eyes hold mine, and there are so many questions there. So many things he doesn't understand.

I wonder if he can see the secret I'm hiding in mine?

“There you are,” Soren murmurs, his face appearing in my line of sight, blocking Daxen. “Are you feeling better?”

I hesitate, then shake my head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what happened to me.”

Caelan and Soren exchange a long, heavy look. Then Caelan asks, “Do you remember the fire?”

“Of course,” I nod. “It was just like the wind from earlier, though. I don’t know where it came from. I saw that Severed jumping for Daxen and then…”

“Wait, A Severed was coming for me?” Daxen shoulders past his team, coming to stand in front of me.

But I’m not worried about Daxen. There’s only one person I need to check on.

“Where’s my mother?”

Soren’s eyes soften, and he hesitates before exchanging a heavy look with Caelan. And I know. I *know* the words he’s going to say before they even come out of his mouth.

Reality fractures, and I’m suddenly two versions of myself. The twenty-two-year-old woman in a derelict basement and the young girl sitting at the dinner table with her father, surrounded by the trappings of wealth. My father’s words overlap with Caelan’s. Cruelty and kindness. Empathy and contempt

“Idril,”

“Little Omega.”

“Your mother’s dead.”

“She’s gone, sweetheart.”

A whine tears up my throat, and I struggle to shift out of Caelan’s arms. He places me on my feet, and I scramble for the stone raised just a few feet away.

I turn, exhaling a breath of relief when I see both Alphas right behind me. I don’t know why, but I don’t want to be away from either of them right now.

I step up, and what I see nearly brings me to my knees.

She’s right there—my mother. Eyes shut and a soft smile on her face—one I’ve never seen in all the years we were together. *Peace, maybe?*

Her chest is still. Unmoving. She looks like she’s sleeping, but she’s not, *is she?*

She’s dead.

The moment I say the words in my head, something inside of me breaks. I fall to my knees as every ounce of my strength drains away.

I have the most visceral sense that I’ve lost something vital. There’s a gaping hole in my heart—in the *universe*—where she should be. But there’s nothing left of her. Nothing but me… and whatever answer she left buried beneath the willow tree.

Everything becomes a blur. I don’t remember how I got here, but I’m sobbing into Soren’s chest, Caelan pressed against my back, whispering soothing words against the crown of my head.

I don’t care about what the other Alphas are doing. I don’t care if they want to leave, or ask questions, or discuss the fire, or anything else.

All I can do is cry. So that’s what I do.

Sandwiched between my Mates, I cry and cry until I can’t cry any longer. Time disappears amid my grief. Seconds, minutes, hours… none of it computes. Nothing feels real. Nothing tethers me to this world but the strong arms wrapped around me and the steady heart beating against my back.

For however long it takes to cry myself to sleep, not a single one of the Bastards so much as move an inch or make a sound while I’m lost to my grief. I don’t know if it’s simply because they don’t know how to react or if they’re actually offering my mother a modicum of respect, but they stand silent vigil guarding her body as I fall apart.

Illuminated by the glow of the mysterious gift inside of me that my mother left behind.

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Chapter 21

Daxen

There's a flock of birds in my room.

It's the only logical assumption I can make without opening my eyes to verify. I specifically chose a room set up so that my bed was as far away from the windows as possible, knowing that otherwise, the birdsong would wake me up in the mornings.

So why, in the name of all the Fates, can I hear the sound of what must be dozens of the little fuckers chirp-chirp-chirping and trilling their heads off? And why does it sound like they're doing their we're just happy to be alive routine right next to my head?

With a groan, I force my gritty eyes open and lift my head—

Or try to.

I make it about two centimeters when I realize the side of my face is stuck to something. When I reach up to rub the sleep from my eyes, I slam my left hand into something hard, which sends pain shooting up my forearm.

"Fuck!"

I sit up and peel the entire left side of my face off whatever it's been stuck to—which at this point I'm seriously starting to think is duct tape.

This is awesome—exactly the way I wanted to start my day.

I blink, my blurry surroundings coming into focus, and I realize… I fell asleep at my desk.

Why?

One scan of the empty coffee mugs and the blood bags scattered around the trash can at my feet is enough to jog my memory. It was already late

when we arrived back home, and I must have spent hours scrolling through forums and hacking into private servers in my frantic search for answers.

And once again, there are none to be found.

Sighing, I close my eyes, and the first thing I see is the image of the Omega collapsed on the floor in front of her dead mother.

The image haunted me the whole ride home.

Right along with the questions I had about what Soren told me happened right before we finished the fight. The ride home was melancholy, and it felt shitty to ask for details. So I waited until we got back to HQ to ask Gav.

It's a good damn thing I did, because when he told me… *Fates.*

I'm pretty sure I owe him an apology for the way I responded to his retelling of events. Especially considering I stared at him blankly for a solid minute in absolute silence before abruptly spinning on my heel and escaping to my room.

Not my best moment, but right then, the only thing I could think was '*I have to get answers*.'

It felt imperative that I find some kind of explanation for what Idril did in that basement.

Thanks to her deranged father and his obsession with DNA, we can say with a fair amount of confidence that her abilities are probably genetic. Specifically, passed down through the maternal side.

But what makes Idril—and presumably her mother—so different? Where did her abilities originate? What else can she do? How is she doing it?

To my right is the notebook I started last night. I pick it up and flip through the pages full of scrawled notes—speculation, hypotheses, and a thousand unanswered questions.

I spent hours scouring online journals, studies, forums, and records. I made a dozen calls to some of the brightest minds and trusted contacts in various historical and scientific fields.

I even texted Riven to drop off the journals I found in the library last week, but all I got in reply was a middle finger emoji.

After that, I sat at my desk and stared sightlessly at my blinking cursor. Wondering why I just couldn't let this go.

Somewhere around five in the morning, understanding finally dawned. Or… maybe it just took me that long to be honest with myself.

Idril saved my life. At least, she saved me from a hell of an injury. The likelihood of a Severed taking me down is small, but I still could have been injured.

Fates, the fucker could have gotten a lucky shot. It's happened before.

Gav's voice has been cycling through my mind all night. His clipped, no-nonsense tone recounting how the world lit up in a blaze of orange and gold, and when he looked up, a column of fire was soaring through the air, barreling straight for the Deadwalker at my back.

The way he tells it, the fucker was less than a breath away from sinking its fangs into my neck when the flames hit it, sending it soaring halfway across the basement.

By the time the fire burnt out, there was nothing left but a smoking pile of ash.

Which means the fire was hot enough to burn through flesh, muscle, and bone in minutes. Something I've never seen happen without chemical assistance.

Like what I used on Cage.

With a frustrated groan, I press my palms into my eyes as hard as I can.

What the hell is happening to me? I'm floundering. Lost at sea while a storm rages. I've never felt so unmoored in my life.

I lift my hand, admiring the newly healed skin. I haven't told anyone this, but when I was holding Cage down with that poker, waiting for him to hurry up and die, I didn't feel any pain while my hand was burning.

From the moment I saw that poker headed for Idril, my brain just… switched off.

Then something else took over. Something quick. *Decisive.*

And fucking furious.

Watching Cage burn, heal, and burn again was one of the most satisfying deaths I've ever delivered. I don't regret it.

The buzz of my phone startles me, and I have to push aside stacks of texts and search under papers before I finally find it shoved all the way back behind my monitor.

Of course, the second I find it, it stops buzzing. I curse, hoping I didn't just miss a call from one of my contacts. Some of the academic types can be real petty when they want to be.

Thankfully, it's just a text from Vae. I relax and thumb it open, expecting to find his usual ramblings interspersed with tangents that always

leave me trying to decode what his actual point was to begin with.

Instead, his message consists of three words.

Breakfast. Ten minutes.

Well, safe to say he's still upset with me.

With a sigh, I push back from my desk and stand, wincing at the way my joints crack when I move. The muscles in my back and shoulders are painfully tight from sleeping hunched over a hard surface, and right now all I want to do is get in the shower and let the hot water soothe away the ache.

Of course, once I get in the shower, my brain refuses to allow me a few minutes of blissful silence. Instead, I'm plagued with the memory of Idril in the courtyard last night, protecting that behemoth of what's supposedly a cat.

Or, used to be a cat? Maybe?

I have no idea.

The hot water's nearly gone when I finally climb out of the shower, and I have to hurry through toweling off and getting dressed. Exactly ten minutes later, I'm walking into our Pack dining room.

I almost turn around and walk right back out when I see that Caelan, Soren, and the Omega are sitting together at the end of the dining table.

Schooling my expression into something more neutral, I make my way toward the head of the table and take my seat. I drape my napkin across my lap and try to stop my eyes from darting toward the door every five seconds until Vae appears.

In typical Vae fashion, he doesn't explain why he's late. He just grins and shrugs before taking the seat to my right.

For the next seven and a half minutes, no one speaks. Only the faint hum of the AC cycling through the vents and the clink of dining utensils scraping against china fill the silence.

The only thing preventing me from grinding my molars to nubs is the calming scent of my Pack swirling through the room.

What's strange is how Soren's spicy chestnut and pine blends almost perfectly with ours. That's almost unheard of for an outside Alpha—especially when there's already an established Fated Pack Bond.

I'm halfway through a mental checklist of items to research with Riven when Caelan's low, rumbling voice breaks the silence.

"You really should eat a little more than that, Omega."

An unexpected sense of longing washes over me. Caelan's tone when he speaks to his Mate is so gentle. So full of concern. I glance down the table at the Omega.

"I'm just full, that's all," she responds, pushing little pieces of scrambled egg around her plate with her fork.

"Maybe we need to discuss your appetite with Calder," Caelan murmurs thoughtfully, tucking a strand of silky white hair behind her ear.

I glance down when I feel a sharp pain in the hand holding my knife. Small drops of blood appear from the shallow cut in my palm before my healing kicks in.

What in the hell led me to pick my knife up by the blade? I reach for another napkin and blot away the blood.

"Why do you need to speak to Calder?"

I don't remember deciding to speak, so I'm almost surprised when the words leave my mouth. I'm even more surprised when Caelan answers.

"Because she's barely eating. I'm worried that after an extended period of forced starvation, there's something wrong we might not be able to see."

Idril's face turns red. "I'm fine. I promise. If I eat a lot, I'll get sick. It'll pass eventually."

"How much is she eating?" I direct my question toward Caelan, but not because I'm trying to be an asshole. Because when I look at Idril, I'm suddenly noticing things. Things I ignored before… and can't ignore now.

Like how her cheekbones are too sharp. Or how I can visibly trace her collarbones beneath the fabric of her shirt.

Fuck! When did I start looking at her again? Have her fingers always been so fucking delicate?

How did I miss it before? I don't… I don't understand.

You're lying to yourself, my Alpha snaps, finally speaking for the first time in days. ***You didn't miss it. You <u>chose</u> not to look.***

My heart races. That can't be fucking true. *It can't.*

There's no way she's been so severely malnourished the entire time she's been here, *right?* It's not possible. This has to be a side effect from whatever she did last night. The same thing that made her pass out.

Yes. That's it. It has to be.

Because if it isn't, that means I've spent the last fourteen days ignoring the physical deterioration of an Omega. Something I would have clocked instantly in the field.

And that’s just not possible.

Is it?

My Alpha laughs, low and mocking. The sound makes my head spin. I think I’m going to throw up. The sound is damning. More damning than any words could be because I know… deep down… my instincts are right.

I’m lying to myself.

“Dax?”

My vision is blurry when I turn toward the sound of Vae’s voice. He frowns, leans over, and whispers, “What’s going on? You’re sweating. Your lips are pale.”

I wish I could explain, but I can’t find the words. I need to talk to Caelan. Ask him if Idril’s worse now than she was when they met.

I want to ask the Omega a thousand things. My mind is spinning, working faster than I can keep up. Each new question leads to a dozen more until I realize—

I don’t truly know anything about this female.

The door swings open, and Calder saunters in, wearing fitted jeans and an old band tee. He somehow manages to emit an air of professionalism even though he crosses the room without looking up once from his phone.

He sets down his medical bag and a thermos of coffee. The smile on his face falls when he finally turns, acknowledging our existence.

“Oh. You’re all here. That’s… something.”

His gaze lands on me, and his eyes brighten.

“Daxen.” His lips twitch. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I respond dryly, ignoring Vae’s snort of amusement.

He folds his arms across his chest and leans against the table. “Does anyone want to tell me why I’ve been summoned at this ungodsly hour?”

Idril scrunches her nose and leans closer to Caelan and whispers, “It’s like 10 a.m.”

“Calder works night shift. So this is more like 4 a.m. for him.”

“Correct,” Calder says. “Which puts all of you on my shit list.”

He pauses, then clarifies, “Except for the Omega. Pretty sure she gets a free pass for life after her two-week stay at Hotel Horrorshow.”

He turns toward Vae and me with a glare. “Also, because I have a feeling the reason I’m here has something to do with you two assholes.”

Vae’s mouth drops open. “Me? What did I do?”

Soren’s eyes narrow. “Think. Very fucking hard.”

Vae's shoulders fall, and he slumps in his chair. "Oh."

"Yeah," Soren echoes. "*Oh*."

Calder turns and gestures for Idril to stand. "Alright, Omega. Let me see if you're falling apart physically as badly as these idiots seem to be mentally."

"Wait," Soren snaps, settling a hand on Idril's shoulder. "Shouldn't you examine her somewhere more private? Or at the very least, away from the assholes who hurt her to begin with?"

Idril turns and places a hand on top of Soren's.

"It's fine," she tells him. "Besides, I wouldn't want anyone to feel like they need to question if I'm 'playing the victim.'"

That last part is aimed at Vae and me, and it hit its mark. The ache in my chest spreads, turning into a throbbing pain that radiates throughout my body.

Vae makes a choked sound, like he's been punched in the gut.

Idril stands. There's no hesitance in her movements or fear in her eyes. She holds Calder's gaze with a stubbornness I've never seen in her before and says, "You have a very odd bedside manner. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Calder grins like the psychopath he is. "Your spine seems to be intact, at least."

The ache in my chest intensifies as a hesitant smile blooms across Idril's face.

I watch intently as Calder starts by checking her vitals. The exam is pretty standard, right up until he reaches out and grips a fistful of her hair at the scalp.

"Hey!" Idril yelps, trying to duck away as he combs his fingers through her hair from root to tip.

Calder has to side-step Caelan, who stands and lunges for him. Soren pulls him back, but Caelan's not having it. Not until Idril places a hand against his chest, whispering soft reassurances until he calms down.

Calder ignores him, holding out his closed fist over the table. "Do any of you boys want to take a guess at her diagnosis?" He lifts a brow. "Nobody? Really? Maybe a clue will help."

He uncurls his fist.

My stomach churns. My throat and mouth dry out as a terrifying amount of silver hair floats from his palm. It lands on top of the table, right between

platters of fresh-cut fruit and unbuttered toast.

“What the fuck? Did you just rip out her hair?” Caelan shoots to his feet. This time, Soren doesn’t bother holding him back.

Calder’s reply doesn’t register over the sound of my heart beating frantically in my chest. Because despite what Caelan might think, I already know Calder didn’t pull out Idril’s hair.

I probably know the symptoms of CSDD better than Calder. I spent hours studying case files until I was certain I’d know if we ever pushed the Omega too far.

Fatigue, extreme hair loss, brittle bones and excessive bruising, tremors, feelings of isolation and helplessness, restlessness, lethargy, extended episodes of severe dissociation.

If you were watching for symptoms, why did you dismiss her responses that night in the library? My Alpha pushes back.

Everything is all twisted up in my head. *Was I truly ignoring the signs just because I didn’t want to see them? How much of that was subconscious, and how much of it did I knowingly lie to myself about?*

Was I really so fucking desperate to be right about this female?

Gods… what the hell have I done? Who the fuck am I?

I don’t know how long Vae’s been trying to get my attention, but apparently he’s had enough because the fucker kicks me underneath the table hard enough to send a sharp pain shooting through my shin.

“What the *fuck*,” I hiss.

“I’ve said your name four times,” he hisses back. “What the hell is wrong with you this morning?”

I check to make sure my side of the Bond is shut down tight. The last thing I need is to broadcast my spiral.

“Nothing,” I lie, ignoring his dubious frown.

“Then explain why you’re staring at that pile of hair like it just insulted your mother.”

Thankfully, I don’t have to come up with a reply. While I’ve been having a crisis of conscience, it seems Idril’s been single-handedly talking both of her Mates off the ledge.

Five days ago, I would have rolled my eyes at how quickly an Omega could manipulate the emotions of two massive Alphas. But now… now I’m starting to wonder if maybe it’s just because she’s… *her*.

“How long have you been experiencing hair loss?” Calder asks.

Idril shrugs. “A few months. But it got a lot worse the last few weeks.” Soren’s eyes flash bright green, and a growl rumbles in his chest.

Idril glances back at him over her shoulder and gives him a gentle smile. “I promise, it’s not that big of a deal. It’s not even very noticeable.”

“Have you noticed any fatigue? Bruising?” Calder asks, and when she shakes her head, he lifts a brow and pointedly drops his gaze to her arms.

There’s no hiding the purple, green, and yellow marks littering her pale flesh. There aren’t a lot, but even one is too many.

“Those are just from cleaning,” she murmurs, crossing her arms like that will hide them, like it’ll erase them from existence. “I’ve always bruised easily.”

From cleaning. She bruised from *cleaning*.

“Did someone put their hands on you here?” Caelan’s tone is deadlier than I’ve ever heard. He’s asking Idril, but he’s looking across the table—at me. At Vae.

For a second, I wonder what Idril will tell him. W*ill she tell him the truth, or will she lie?* Maybe she’ll decide this is the perfect way to get revenge for the way she’s been treated.

Would I even blame her if she did?

Something in my gut tells me that the thought of lying never even crosses Idril’s mind. And when she follows Caelan’s glare and realizes who it’s aimed at, her lips part in shock.

“No! Fates! No… no one hurt me.”

When Caelan and Soren both scoff, she winces. “Not like that.”

Not like that.

Because we *did* hurt her.

I hurt her.

I hurt her, and I kept hurting her, and holy fuck… I don’t even fucking know who I am anymore.

Fates, why? Why did I do those things? How the fuck did I get it so godsdamned wrong?

A pained sound comes from Vae. He’s bitten his nails down to nothing. Normally, I’d reach over and smack his hand out of his mouth, but I can’t move.

I can’t fucking *breathe*.

I know things are really bad when Calder’s voice gentles. “Have you ever lost significant chunks of time and have no recollection of the time

you've lost?"

Sitting up straighter, I lean in, waiting for her answer. I know for a fact it's happened a few times, but I also dismissed those moments as learned behavior.

No, that's wrong.

I think back to that moment in the library. The memory is crystal clear—my accusations, the way her gaze fell to the lit fire in the hearth. By the time I noticed something was wrong, her eyes were blank—aside from the reflection of a single flickering flame.

I remember how pissed I was when I realized she was dissociating. And now… now I can see it for what it truly was—an overwhelmed, terrified Omega escaping the only way she could. It's so fucking obvious to me now. So clear that I have to remind myself that instead of treating her response as a reaction to trauma, I told myself she was doing it on purpose. So she didn't have to face her own guilt over what she had done to Caelan.

My grip on the dining table is so tight I can feel the wood begin to crack against my palms. There's a scream trapped in my throat. *Gods… I can't fucking breathe.*

For patients with CSDD, dissociation is the primary symptom medical providers are taught to watch for. It comes on fast, but more importantly, it's one of the most advanced symptoms—and one of the most dangerous.

If those moments in the library weren't trauma responses, then that means I spent every fucking day assuming she was nowhere near the danger zone, when in reality she's been there from the moment she arrived.

Which means... she's been sick for a very, very long time. A dangerously long time.

"How did you know that?" The Omega's fingers pinch at the fabric of her shirt. My own twitch in response as my Alpha surges forward, snarling at her obvious distress. Adrenaline is coursing through me, overloading my system with the need to move. *Stand up. Go to her. Do… something.*

What the fuck would I even say? Sorry I almost killed you? Sorry I refused to see what was right in front of my face, and now you're suffering for my fucking pride?

It's like I was in a fever dream—so hellbent on being right and so pissed that Caelan ignored my warnings and almost died that nothing else mattered except making her pay.

Caelan reaches for Idril's hand and tugs on it, tenderly pulling her onto his lap.

Calder crouches down until he's eye level with her. "Idril. How long have you been losing time?"

Tears fill her eyes, and she visibly deflates, falling back against Caelan's chest. His expression twists with grief, like his very soul is reacting to her pain. He squeezes his eyes shut tight and buries his face in her hair. Like he can't bear to face the reality of what she's been through.

"It started maybe two days after I got here," she answers. "At least, that's the first time I noticed it. I was worried about Caelan and couldn't fall asleep. I remember staring out the window at the moon and the next thing I knew, the moon was halfway across the sky."

"How often has that happened since the first time?"

"Maybe… once a day. Sometimes twice. I blink and time's just… gone. And it's just blank. Like someone cut the whole memory away."

Calder pulls out a chair and takes a seat, leaning back and studying her. "Well, the good news is, the missing time should stop as your instincts realign—if it hasn't already."

"But *why* is it happening?" she asks, and suddenly I want to stand up and run away from this conversation with shocking urgency.

"It's a coping mechanism," Calder explains. "It's your instinct and brain's way of saying, 'We're done here. Everything hurts. Wake us up when this is over.'"

Caelan's eyes snap toward Vae and me. Furious. Sharp as blades.

As sharp as the blades in my chest. The ones that are *twisting*, *twisting*, *twisting*.

Calder's expression twists in disgust. "It happens to Omegas when their instincts are deprived to the point of starvation. They become an empty shell, right in front of your eyes."

My stomach rolls, and my mouth fills with saliva. I swallow thickly, willing myself not to puke. I lift a shaking hand to my neck, convinced the truth is about to strangle me.

I'm fucking choking on it.

Idril shifts on Caelan's lap, shrugging in answer to the whispered question Calder asks her. My gaze is drawn to her lap, where her fingers subtly twist in the fabric of her shirt, curling and uncurling as the pads of her fingers rub the soft cotton.

I can’t look away. It’s something I’ve watched her do over and over for weeks.

At first, I thought it was a nervous tick. Just an anxious girl’s subconscious attempt at self-soothing.

Then I took it further, using it as yet another piece of *‘evidence’* against her. I refused to listen to Riven. Refused to even acknowledge his accusation in the library. *Why? Why did I dismiss him?*

Because watching her now… It’s so fucking clear. She was never simply self-soothing.

She’s been *Nesting.*

Even surrounded by two Alphas who clearly love her, she still doesn’t feel safe.

A mentally and emotionally healthy Omega in Idril’s position wouldn’t be using her clothing to Nest. She’d turn to her Mate. Press her nose into his neck and seek out his scent to soothe herself. She’d have a soft, thick blanket—one she could curl up with in case her instincts start to spiral.

But not Idril.

She’s Nesting with her clothes because she’s never had anything else. Caelan told me as much when he first found her.

“There was nothing there, Daxen. No Nest. No television or books or clothing. No photos, phone, iPad, or blankets. Just her. Her and a fucking cat on a mattress so thin she might as well have been on the floor.”

Caelan came home smelling like lust and need, desire surging through the Bond. I’d taken one look at his face, and I’d known, *hadn’t I?*

That it was already too fucking late.

That he was already too far gone.

I’d known, and I panicked. I could see the inevitable fallout. Could feel the pain and self-hatred of four hundred years ago like it was yesterday. So I dismissed everything he told me. I lied to him and lied to myself and *kept* fucking lying.

“How the fuck would she have known I was coming tonight, Daxen?” His eyes were so bright. Pleading, begging me to understand.

Fuck! I thought I was protecting myself, protecting my Pack. I let that bitch crawl back into my head like she has a thousand times before. She won four hundred years ago, and she’s *still fucking winning*.

I curl my hand into a fist and press it against my sternum. My heart is beating so fast I can feel it in my temples. Can hear my own ragged

breathing. The longer I stare at the Omega's hands, the harder it is to get air into my lungs. Each tiny movement is like a hot blade punching through my ribs and digging into my lungs.

She's been so alone for so long.

No Nest. No safety. No love.

Locked away in a barren room, stripped of every comfort. Fingers twisting in the fabric of her clothes as her instincts fight the only way they know how. Just to trick her brain into believing she's safe.

A rumbling growl bursts to life in my chest. The sound is low and rough, and it won't stop no matter what I do. I cough, trying to cover the noise, and Idril twists in Caelan's lap with a look of concern on her face.

The knives lodged in my chest twist harder.

"I'm assuming you know why all this is happening to her. There must be a reason," Soren asks, blessedly pulling Idril's attention off of me.

"She's suffering from something called Chronic Sensory Deprivation Disorder. It's rare— because most Alphas are biologically predisposed to protect Omegas—but it *does* happen."

He turns to Idril. "If I had to guess, living with your father did a number on you. That, combined with years of forced suppressant use, would be enough on its own. Add in the absolute hell you've lived in over the last two weeks? That's more than enough to throw you into the late stages of the disorder rather quickly."

The sound of pain that tears out of Caelan makes me want to scream. Vae hangs his head, holding it in shaking hands. The self-loathing thrumming down his side of the Bond is sharp and acidic.

I don't ask him to lock it down. A part of me feels like I deserve to feel his pain, as well as my own.

Calder snaps on a pair of gloves. "May I?"

He waits for her nod—and because he's not a total idiot, waits until Caelan and Soren both give their permission as well. He starts at her temples, pressing gently before examining her pupils, then moving down to prod at her scent glands.

"The good news is, now that you're with your Mates, your system will start to realign. Once your instincts understand you're finally safe, the faster your symptoms will decrease."

"The only thing I don't know," Calder continues, "is how your Species will affect you, or if it will at all. We really have no idea *what* you are.

You’re not a vampire. You’re not wolven. And you most certainly—” he presses down on her wrist, and the blood rushes back in, pooling under her skin. His eyes dart up to hers. “-are *not* human.”

Idril nods, like this is something she’s already come to terms with. Hell, maybe she has. I can’t help but think any other Omega would be spiraling right now. I’d expect it, even.

I can’t help but be impressed by her bravery.

“With your permission, I’d like to run a few tests.” Calder raises a hand at the sound of a growl, stalling Caelan’s impending refusal.

“You are under no obligation to say yes. This is completely voluntary. I’m aware Daxen has run his own tests and has someone researching your genetics. That’s fine. I trust his work, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t get a second opinion.”

“I don’t mind,” Idril replies. “Would you like to take my blood right now?”

She extends her arm, wrist up, and every male in the room tenses. Calder raises a brow, reaching for her arm like he’s expecting her to change her mind.

“You’re sure?”

Idril nods decisively. “Yes. I want to know what I am. I want answers.”

Calder looks to Caelan, then Soren, clearly expecting pushback. Fates, I’m struggling not to stop this myself. *Does she have any idea what she’s offering?*

“She makes her own decisions about her body,” Soren says, leaving no room for confusion.

Idril turns to him, a blinding smile on her face. I only catch a glimpse of her joy, but it’s enough to punch the air from my lungs.

I reach for my water, trying to work some fucking moisture back in my mouth, and I’m a little relieved to see Vae doing the same. At least I’m not alone in my spiral.

Calder hums tunelessly as he preps the Omega’s arm. She sits stoically as he ties a blue tourniquet around her upper arm, cleans her skin, and slides the needle into her vein with practiced ease.

Idril doesn’t even flinch.

Dark, shimmering red flows from her vein into the vial.

“Remarkable,” Calder murmurs, leaning closer. “Your blood looks like it has *glitter* in it.”

Idril perks up. “Really?”

Calder hums, swapping the vial. “Last one. Don’t want to take too much. Not until you’re a bit healthier, yeah?”

When he’s finished, he places a square pad of gauze against her inner arm and instructs her to keep pressure on it. She does, but after a few seconds she gets curious. She peels back the corner of the gauze, watching with interest as a ruby-red drop of shimmering blood wells up from her vein.

“Wow,” she breathes. “It really *is* shimmering.”

Vae’s in the middle of taking a drink when he releases a strangled sound and chokes on his water. I turn to him, about to ask why he forgot how to swallow.

The scent of Idril’s blood hits me, and I get my answer.

Ozone, lavender, and amber fill my lungs, coating my sinuses and the back of my throat until it’s the only thing I can taste or smell. I open my mouth, and my fangs drop, slicing into my lip. I don’t even care.

I moan, pushing my chair back away from the table and dropping my head between my knees. I try to breathe through my mouth, but it makes no difference—and frankly, I don’t want to. I want to breathe in the scent of her blood until it becomes a permanent part of me. Until it fuses with my soul and—

Fates, is this what Vae smelled in that warehouse that sent his Curse off the rails? If so, I owe him an apology. I don’t even have a curse, and I feel like my bones are about to explode through my skin.

I don’t understand—*why didn’t the runes smell like this?* The scent of ozone was amazing, but this….

Fuck.

My hands curl into fists. I’m not surprised to see them shaking. It’s taking everything in me not to jump across this table and sink my fangs into Idril’s delicate throat. My instincts are screaming at me, *begging* me to do whatever it takes to get a taste of her blood. And, gods, *I want it.* I want it with a hunger I’ve never experienced before in my life.

It feels like my system has been reprogrammed. My DNA rewritten to obey an imperative set of commands.

Bite. Drink. Take. Mine.

“Oh *fuck*.” Vae’s practically salivating. His pupils are tiny pinpricks, fixated on her blood slowly soaking through the white gauze.

He tips back his head, throat working furiously.

This is not normal. Not by any stretch of the imagination. I've consumed blood millions of times in my life. Not once—not a *single* Fatesdamned time—have I had a reaction like this.

This isn't mere thirst. I *need* Idril's blood. Ache for it with a desperation that scares the shit out of me.

"What the hell is wrong with you assholes?" Calder barks, staring at us like we've lost our minds.

"Bl—blood," Vae chokes out. He reaches up and wipes the corner of his mouth where he is quite literally salivating.

Calder bends over and sniffs the vial he's in the middle of labeling. Then he shrugs. Fucking *shrugs*.

"It smells good, but not lose-control-of-my-fangs-good. When's the last time you two fed?"

"It must be because of the magic in her veins." I push out of my seat and yank Vae out of his. We need to get back. Get away from the Omega before our baser instincts take over.

Caelan's fangs have dropped as well, but unlike Vae and me, he seems to have some kind of control over himself. Enough to hand his Mate over to the only predator in the room who won't sink his fangs into her perfect, porcelain skin.

Soren wraps his arms around his Omega as Caelan furiously ushers them out of the room, away from the three of us.

Soren doesn't waste any time getting her away. The last thing I see before the door slams shut behind them is Idril's bright blue eyes filled with bewilderment.

I'll have to avoid this room for the next few days. Even without her blood physically present, I'm still struggling. For the first time in decades, I… *want*.

I want to fight. I want to fuck. I want to do both at once.

But not with just anyone.

With her. Idril. The innocent little Omega with the big blue eyes and the stubborn set to her jaw that I thought I hated, but am starting to realize I actually admire. The female we all thought was human, but has blood that shimmers and smells so fucking perfect it brings immortal vampire Alphas to their knees.

After a few deep breaths, I feel like I've gained enough control to open my eyes.

I wish I hadn't.

Caelan's leaning against the door, arms folded and a look of fury on his face.

Godsdamnit.

"Caelan—"

"Save it," he snaps. "I'm not interested in your excuses or explanations. I'm not here to have a fucking pow-wow like the good old days. The only reason I haven't left is because I wanted to be sure you both were back under control first."

"You think we'd go after Idril?" Vae's voice is barely more than a whisper, each word dripping in pain.

Caelan's eyes darken further. "Do I think you'd purposely do or say something to abuse an innocent, traumatized Omega? Yes. Yes, I fucking do."

His words are like a punch to the gut. My soul physically aches. And for the first time, I truly wonder how the fuck we're going to fix this. Because the way Caelan's looking at us now…

He hates us.

"I know we fucked up," Vae murmurs, eyes filling with tears. "I'm not going to make excuses."

I reach out and place a hand on his arm, squeezing gently. The helpless look he sends me makes me feel more out of control than I have in a long time.

My entire fucking *life* is spiraling out of control, and I'm fucking powerless to stop it.

And I have no one to blame but myself.

Out of nowhere, Calder reappears, medical bag slung over his shoulder.

"Where—"

"Balcony," Calder answers, cutting Vaelenor off. "Wanted to give you assholes time to compose yourselves. It was embarrassing. For you."

Caelan raises a brow. "But not for me?"

"You're her Mate. You're supposed to act like a starved jackalope when you get a whiff of your Omega's blood."

That earns Calder a smirk, which is more than anyone else has managed to pull from my broody Packmate in the last couple of days.

“By the way,” Calder drawls, and Caelan’s smirk immediately disappears. “I’d like to point out that I didn’t get to finish my damn job. And in case you’ve forgotten, *you’re* the one who called, begging me to come all the way up here to check on your Omega.”

A muscle in Caelan’s jaw jumps, but he stays silent, waiting for Calder to get to the point.

“This is normally the part where you apologize.”

Silence.

Calder shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

Caelan narrows his eyes.

“Cool, cool,” Calder nods, rocking back on his heels. “We’ll just pretend you apologized.”

“No, we will not.”

“Oooookay,” he agrees, raising his hands in surrender. “Let the record show one Caelan O’Ruaric offered no apologies.”

“Do you have a fucking point you’re coming to, or are we just wasting each other’s time?”

“I’m going to wean Idril off her suppressants,” Calder says. Before Caelan can react, he asks, “You’re administering her shot every night, correct?”

Caelan’s shoulders tense. “I am.”

Calder rummages through his bag before pulling out a bag of syringes and another bottle of suppressant.

“You know, I kind of love this for you two,” Calder remarks, passing the bag to Caelan. “It’s kind of romantic. Except you’re stabbing her with a needle instead of your co—”

“Have some respect,” Vae snaps, cutting Calder off before he crosses a line that ends with Caelan’s fist carving a path through his face.

Caelan’s lip curls in disgust. “I’ve got this, thanks.”

He turns his glare on Calder. “If you ever fucking mention Idril and the word cock in the same sentence again, you’ll find yourself without one.”

The Doctor swallows thickly. “Got it. Not sure if anyone told you this or not, but there’s no scientific evidence that finding your Fated Mate turns you into a raging psychopath.”

“It’s been a rough few weeks,” Caelan responds in a clipped tone, and Calder’s eyes soften in understanding.

“What do you want me to do with these?”

“I want her on a slow taper. No shortcuts, or you’ll fry her system, understand? I’ve emailed you the dosage instructions and tapering schedule. A variety of medical-grade descenters are on their way, too. Should arrive either today or tomorrow.”

He hesitates before adding, “I give it a week—*tops*—before her Scent starts breaking through. It’s up to you, of course, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea to start using them now. Just to establish a routine and protect her preemptively.”

“So she still has to hide her scent.” Caelan’s face twists with disgust, and I can’t help empathizing. Everything inside of him shifted when he discovered her. She’s the center of his world now.

Gods, this is on me, too. The whole reason she’s been on suppressants is because I forced the issue. Because I couldn’t handle the thought of catching her scent. I made her suppress her Omega, terrified she’d weaponize her Designation if she had the chance.

So many fucking years I’ve spent terrified of being manipulated again. And this is what it’s led to.

For the first time in my long life, I have no idea where to even begin making amends. *How do you start to repair something you’re responsible for breaking?*

Calder adjusts his bag on his shoulder and sighs. “No one is saying Idril needs to hide her scent. She’s your Mate, Caelan. If you want my opinion, I think letting her scent break through naturally is the better—”

“Fuck no,” Caelan slices his hand through the air. “No one else is going to scent her.”

There’s nothing left of the male I’ve lived with for the last five centuries. The male who’s fought by my side through countless battles. Who’s been the steady foundation of our Pack from the start.

An overwhelming feeling of desolation washes over me. I force myself to meet his eyes, searching for any sign that it won’t be like this forever.

It can’t. We’re a Pack. Bonded by Fate.

“I see no reason to spare either of your feelings, so I’m just going to give it to you straight. She doesn't want you two, specifically, to scent her.”

“What?” Vae jumps to his feet in shock. “She specifically said Dax and me? Why?”

He sounds so bewildered it breaks my heart. And it doesn’t help that Caelan’s not pulling his punches.

“Why do you think?” he snaps. “She’s been forced to suppress her Omega her entire life. She didn’t even know what her Omega perfume *smelled like* until the night of the ambush.”

All the blood drains from my face. My stomach churns with that increasingly familiar swooping sensation I’m starting to realize is a potent mix of shame and guilt and self-loathing.

“For ten years she’s lived in fear of punishment if she acknowledged that part of her. She’s been conditioned to believe it’s wrong to smell like an Omega. To perfume, or whine, or reach for something soft when she’s afraid.”

Vae falls back into his chair. *Do I look as devastated as he does?*

Caelan dismisses us and turns to Calder. “If we’re done here, I need to go find my Mate.”

Caelan barely gives Calder a chance to nod before he spins on his heel and stalks across the room. He rips open the door and disappears into the hall.

The sound of the door slamming shut makes me flinch. I sit here for I don’t even know how long, staring blankly at the door. I know Calder left soon after Caelan, but everything else is a blur. Time seems to slow and speed up at once. My mind spins, and my thoughts tumble over each other.

When I finally wrench my gaze away from the door, I don’t even know what time it is. Vaelenor’s still sitting at the table, eyes trained on the floor in front of him. I almost can’t reconcile what I’m seeing.

My normally good-natured, always smiling brother… *is crying.*

His face is pale. Tears carve wet tracks down his cheeks. His shoulders are hunched, fists clenched between his knees, body shaking with silent sobs.

For once I have nothing to say. No plan, no dossier, no research. And no fucking clue how to wrap my head around everything I’m feeling.

Eventually the door swings open and Gav walks in, halting in his tracks when he sees us.

“What the fuck happened to you two?”

I don’t answer. I can’t.

What the fuck gives me the right to pretend like I have the answers, anyway?

“Guilt,” Vae murmurs, almost too low to hear. “Shame. Disgust. Longing. The realization that I’m standing at the edge of a chasm, seconds

from falling.”

Gav’s eyes widen.

“Cheers.” I lift my glass in a mock salute and bring it to my lips just to find it empty. With a self-deprecating laugh, I set the glass back on the table. “Fucking brilliant.

“You’ve *got* to be fucking kidding me.” Gav sighs, walking in and shutting the door behind him. “I’m going to give you two a piece of advice.”

We both perk up, like eager puppies.

“What is it?” Vae asks, green eyes bright with undisguised hope.

“I thought I’d made myself clear, but apparently not. So I’m going to tell you this one more time.”

Vae nods frantically. Pretty sure he’d agree to hand over his firstborn for a legitimate answer on how to move forward.

“Get your heads out of your asses and deal with your fuck up like Alphas. You’re two of my most decorated warriors, and you’re sulking like children. It’s fucking pathetic.”

What the fuck?

“You fucked up big time.” He points a damning finger at me. “Especially you.”

“Wait, I thought—”

“Shut the fuck up, Daxen.”

I shut the fuck up.

He sighs, pushing off the table and planting his hands on his hips. “The way we handled things with the Omega was, hands down, the biggest fuck up we’ve made as an organization since I took over. I am not blameless. I failed on multiple levels. I failed as your leader, and I failed as an Alpha. I will make amends for both failures.”

His face hardens into granite, and I know this next part is gonna be rough.

“I don’t know how you’re going to fix this, but I can tell you this much —you both need to do some serious self-reflection. Both of you have issues you need to address. Issues I should have pushed you to confront a long, long time ago. And I think if you’re being honest with yourselves, you already know what those issues are.”

I open my mouth to speak, but the look on Gav’s face has me biting back my response.

“You want my advice? Here it is. Grow up. Stop being a coward. When I look back at your actions the last two weeks, you know what I see? Little boys hiding with their heads under the covers. I see children, too stubborn and prideful to admit when they’re wrong.

“That Omega might never forgive you. Caelan might never forgive you. But if you’re half the men I know you are, that won’t stop you from your duty.”

I try not to shrink beneath the heavy stare of his amber eyes. I feel about two inches tall. I feel even shorter when he turns his back on us and leaves without another word.

Neither of us makes a move to follow.

For hours, I sit in silence, contemplating… *everything*. And despite Vae sitting less than a foot away from me…

I’ve never felt so fucking alone.

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Chapter 22

Soren

I'm fairly certain my Omega just almost became a feed bag for her Fated Mates.

I race down the hall of the castle, with Idril in my arms. I'm not sure where I'm going, but I follow my instincts. Eventually, I find my way to the kitchen—and to the door I entered days ago when I first arrived.

The door I know leads outside, where all that separates Idril and me from the forest is the empty training yard.

Once we get to the door, I set Idril next to me in the kitchen and reach for the handle. Before I can turn it, Idril places a hand on my arm, stopping me without saying a word.

"Soren, why are we running?" I steel myself for the fear I know I'm going to see in her eyes. When I look down at her, I have to do a double take.

Because she's not afraid at all.

"Hold on," I squint, just to be sure I'm not seeing things. "You're not… scared?

"No, should I be?" She frowns, tilting her head to the side in confusion. Her long white hair cascades over her shoulder in waves.

Unable to help myself, I reach out and wrap a section of her hair around my fist. *Fates, it's so soft, like silver silk.*

My mind jumps to images of Idril's hair wrapped around my fist just like now, but instead of the kitchen, we're tangled up in dark satin sheets. With a lot less clothing.

I open my fist, dropping the strands of hair before I do something stupid.

Gods, my hormones have been spiraling since the moment I scented Idril's arousal yesterday. All I can think about is bringing her the same pleasure she experienced with Caelan.

Completely oblivious to my fantasies, she waits patiently for me to explain what just happened.

"We were running because they were having a hard time with their… uhm… urges, I guess. They scented your blood, and…"

The mere idea of their fangs slicing into my Omega's flesh sends a surge of fury through me. When I imagine them feeding from her, my hands curl into fists, and I suddenly want to punch something like the wall.

Or their fucking faces.

Idril steps in front of me. Her hand tightens, squeezing my forearm gently. And just like that, my anger dissipates.

"They're vampires, Soren." Laughter dances in her eyes. In that moment, I realize the only ones afraid were Caelan and I.

By the Mother.

Idril turns and places her palm on the door. She glances uncertainly over her shoulder. "Do you think… I mean, can we go outside? Just in the back?"

She bites down on her bottom lip, studying me like she's dissecting my reaction to her question.

It feels like my chest is caving in. The whole time she's been here, she hasn't been allowed outside. She's been stuck inside—a prisoner.

I don't hesitate with my answer. "Fuck yes we can."

The smile she gives me is so wide and so beautiful that for a second it feels like I got the wind knocked out of me. And I know… I'll *never* be able to deny her anything.

Idril opens the door, practically vibrating with anticipation. I follow behind her, only realizing she's not wearing shoes once we're away from the house. When I point it out to her, she throws her head back and laughs, like concern that she'll injure her feet is the funniest thing she's ever heard.

Her laugh sounds like wind chimes and magic. Like the wind itself is laughing with her, swirling around each note and enhancing the tone, perfecting it with her joy until it sounds like the peaceful essence of nature itself.

With the sun shining down on her, it's not hard to believe she may actually be made of magic. There's something inside of her—something

pure that radiates from her core. I don't know what it is.

For that matter, I don't know *what* she is.

Maybe that should bother me, but it doesn't. She's a blessing from the Mother. My Omega—*my Mate*—promised to me by Fate itself. There's no wolven—past, present, or future— who will ever be as lucky as I am.

And I get centuries by her side. So much longer than wolven normally get with their Mates.

Idril makes her way toward the back of the castle, picking her way across the soft grass. She turns, angling her face toward the sun, and her lips curl into a soft smile.

"You know you're going to live for a long time, right?"

"What do you mean?" she asks, reaching out and lacing our fingers together. Looking up at me with a soft, shy smile on her face, she asks, "Is this okay?"

Everything inside of me melts at that smile. "Of course. You never have to ask. You can touch me anytime, anywhere."

The wind kicks up, lifting Idril's hair so it streams behind her in a gentle breeze.

"What did you mean? When you said I'll live a long time?"

I wish I hadn't blurted it out, but it's so easy to forget how little she knows about the world. She's so strong, smart, and pragmatic that I forget she's spent the last two decades locked away, her access to everyday knowledge heavily limited by her father.

"The chances of a human being Fated to a Supernatural might be rare, but they do happen."

The excitement in her eyes when she realizes I'm not going to withhold information makes me want to tell her every single thing I know about this world.

"When a human and Supernatural seal their Bond with a mating bite, the human's lifespan changes to line up with their Mate. Vampires, obviously, can live for more than a thousand years. Some have survived almost two thousand."

Idril nods. "I knew they lived a long time, but I had no idea it was that long."

"I'm not sure, but I imagine that my lifespan will be extended along with yours," I add. "Wolven are long-lived, but not like vampires. Even our oldest Elders don't survive much past a thousand years. That's partly why

there’s more of us than there are of them. Biology has its own way of evening the playing field.”

“That makes sense,” she murmurs. “Wolven don’t live as long, but it’s not nearly as difficult for you to reproduce.”

I squeeze her hand. “Exactly.”

We stop around the back of the castle. I inhale deeply, taking in the seemingly perfect afternoon. The sky is bright, not a single cloud in the perfect blue sky above us.

“Do you think my Mother’s happy?” Idril asks, breaking the silence as I tug her toward a bench placed at the edge of a small garden. When she curls into my side, I bury my smile against the crown of her head.

“I think she’s not only happy, but also very, very proud of you,” I answer after giving the question the consideration it deserves. Her hands clench in the fabric of her shirt, but before she can start twisting it between her fingers, I place my hands on her hips and pull her into my lap.

“What—” She cuts off as I position her so she’s straddling me. Instinct kicks in, and she nuzzles into my neck, inhaling deeply before melting into me.

“Oh…”

She trails her nose down my neck until she reaches my scent gland right under my jaw. “I love the way you smell,” she whispers.

We both relax, sitting on the bench and doing absolutely nothing but enjoying the quiet peace together. I can feel my Beast’s desire to run, and I don’t blame him. It’s the perfect day to shed my clothes and shift.

I wonder what Idril will think of my Beast. *Will she be afraid of him? Or will she be excited?*

It’s a perfect moment of bliss. When she lifts her head and places a soft palm against my cheek, the affection in her eyes sends my heart racing.

For a long moment, she looks at me, stroking her thumb lightly against the scruff of my beard.

“What are you thinking?” I murmur. The tips of her cheeks redden, and I reach out and trace the color. Her eyes fall to my lips.

“Whatever it is,” I whisper, “the answer is yes.”

That earns me a shy smile, and she bites down on her lower lip. Hesitantly, she leans in and brushes her lips against mine.

At first, her movements are timid. Feather-soft. Despite giving her permission, I wasn’t truly expecting her to make the first move, and it

catches me off guard. My brain finally kicks in when she starts to pull back. With a growl that's straight from my Beast, I surge forward, pressing my lips against hers. Cradling the back of her head with my hand, I kiss her back—*hard.*

We've kissed before, but… *Fates.*.. it feels brand new every time she touches me. My body hums with lust and pulses with energy. Everywhere her hands touch, they leave tingling sparks in their wake.

Idril moans, and the sound vibrates against my lips. I take advantage and deepen the kiss, slanting my mouth over hers and guiding her head where I want her. My tongue sweeps across her bottom lip. To my surprise, she doesn't just part her lips to allow me entrance—her tongue snakes out, meeting mine with hungry strokes.

That snaps whatever control I have left.

She tastes perfect, like salt and amber and *home*. And fuck, I want to drown in it.

Her fingers twist in my shirt, and she pulls me closer. My body answers, moving wherever she wants. Soft hands sweep down my chest and fumble to get beneath the fabric of my shirt. When her skin meets mine, palms flat against my abs, every muscle in my body contracts. A moan rumbles from my mouth into hers.

Her kiss turns frantic, soft whimpers of need and urgency slipping through, and I love every fucking noise. I want to learn them all. And I want to discover what other sounds I can get her to make.

I want to listen to those breathy moans for the rest of my damn life.

Her hips move, grinding down on my cock. I nip her bottom lip, and she shivers, hands running up my chest and around my ribcage, gripping my back and pulling me closer.

"Soren." My name is part whine and part whimper, and it yanks me out of my haze of lust.

My eyes snap open.

Fuck. We're still sitting outside on a garden bench, in perfect view of any asshole with eyes.

With a reluctant groan, I tear my lips from hers despite every nerve in my body screaming in protest. I don't want to stop. I want *her*. I want her with an intensity I never knew possible.

I want to Mate her—*physically* Mate her. Give her my bite and knot her over and over until her belly swells with my pups.

The thought makes me moan. I drop my head, pressing my forehead to hers, trying to banish the image of her pregnant with my pup before I embarrass myself. My breaths are ragged. My chest heaves, fingers flexing against her hips, holding her body close against mine.

“What’s wrong?” she whispers, voice a soft breath between us. “Did I—”

I cut her off with a snarl. “No, Little Mate. You’re fucking perfect. Too perfect.” I let out a self-deprecating chuckle. “If we keep this up, I’m not going to stop. I won't be able to.”

I lean in, pressing a soft kiss to her temple and breathing her in. I can’t scent her perfume, but there’s still something I can’t get enough of that’s undeniably *her*. I lift my hand and cradle her cheek, holding her gaze so she understands how serious I am.

“You deserve more than me rutting you outside like a godsdamned animal,” I rasp. “Not for your first time.”

She flushes, the tips of her ears turning pink with embarrassment. “You don’t know that it’s my first time,” she mutters petulantly.

I laugh, and the sound vibrates from my body to hers, making her smile.

“Am I wrong then, Little Mate? Have you had sex before?” I trail a hand down her neck, between her breasts. *Lower.* Her breath stutters, and we both watch as my fingers trail lightly down her belly, stopping less than an inch from where I know she wants to be touched the most.

I twist my wrist and cover her pussy with my hand. She gasps, her eyes flaring wide with lust.

“Have you let another man inside this pretty pussy, Idril?” I growl, smirking when she doesn’t answer.

I readjust my hand so the heel of my palm is pressing right against her clit. Her pupils dilate as a whine tears from her throat.

“You like that?” I grind my palm harder. *Fuck,* I love the shudder of need that runs through her. She bites down on her lower lip, her hips rocking, wordlessly begging for more friction.

“Answer me, Little Mate.” I lean in and run the tip of my tongue across the top of her breast, humming when I feel her nipple peak through the thin fabric of her bralette.

“I-I-” Her response is a breathless stutter, one I reward with more friction. I clamp my left hand down on her hip and use it to help her rock harder and faster.

I lave my tongue over her nipple again, then nip at it softly. She gasps, then releases a moan that I'll be hearing in my dreams every night for eternity.

"Fuck," I hiss, "make that sound for me again." I work her harder, encouraging her hips to move against my hand, and when I feel her slick soak through her panties and leggings, I groan in pleasure.

"There you go, sweetheart. You're so fucking wet for me, aren't you?" I nip at her breast again, cursing when her entire body shudders at the slight pinch of pain.

Gods, she's fucking perfect. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned before now. Wolven are tactile by nature, and while I've never been the type to sleep around, I have enough experience to know what I like. Wolven give in to their primal side in the bedroom.

And I'm probably rougher than most.

Even now, I want my Mate with an intensity that would scare most inexperienced females. I want to own her, force every ounce of pleasure from her body I possibly can until she's begging for mercy. I want to watch tears of pleasure in her eyes. Hear her tell me she can't possibly come one more time— right before I force *another* orgasm out of her.

"You're so fucking perfect for me. Look at you, riding my hand." I grin when more slick fills my palm. My nostrils flare, and I'm rewarded with the faintest hit of her Omega perfume.

"Please…"

I move my hand, chuckling when she makes a sound of distress. I curl around her, Scent-marking her and shielding her body with my own.

"It's alright. I've got you."

I shift, pressing my fingers right on top of her clit and rubbing in small, firm circles.

Idril's hands fall to my shoulders and her fingers spasm as she moans. They tunnel into my hair, and the way she grabs onto the strands and pulls makes me moan in ecstasy. It's fucking heaven with my Omega Mate on my lap, limbs wrapped around me, trembling and panting as she chases her release with a single-minded determination to take what's hers.

"You're so close, aren't you? I can feel it. Let go, Little Mate. Let me feel all that slick dripping down my hand, baby."

She shudders, tugging even harder on my hair. She whines, and the sound sends a surge of adrenaline through my veins.

“Fuck, if we weren’t outside, I’d have you spread out like a feast. Legs over my shoulders, devouring you with my tongue over and over until you beg me to stop.”

“Soren, oh…” She keens, her body tensing, movements uncontrolled and wild.

“Fuck yes, come for me. Come all over my lap. Fates, you’re perfect. So beautiful. So fucking *mine*.”

Her head falls back, spine arched, hair spilling down her back like silk. Her lips part, and her mouth slackens as her limbs start to shake. I growl, leaning in and letting my canines drag across the skin at the side of her neck.

Gods, I could bite her right now. One small slip, and she’d be tied to me irrevocably. No one could ever take her away from me.

“You’re fucking mine, Idril. *Mine*.” My voice sounds rough even to my own ears, but I can’t help it. The fantasy of biting her is making me wild. Idril’s not unaffected. With a surprised gasp and a breathy moan that goes straight to my cock, her thighs squeeze around my hand, and she falls apart.

It’s the most fucking beautiful thing I’ve seen in my life.

I don’t try to keep her quiet. *Why should I?* Let all these assholes hear her. Let them hear how perfect my Mate sounds when she comes apart for me.

Her hips are starting to slow, but I don’t let up. The angle is starting to make my fingers cramp, but I’m determined to wring every last ounce of pleasure I possibly can.

When she shudders, I press harder, keeping a firm pressure against her clit, just barely moving my fingers. After a few seconds, a strangled sound gets stuck in her throat, and her eyes snap to mine.

I smirk, realizing at the same time as she does what’s happening.

Fuck. Yes.

“Give me another one, Omega,” I demand.

“Oh, *gods*—” Her hands land on my biceps. Her fingers dig into my muscle and squeeze, making me grunt. “What’s happening? How—?”

More slick drips through the fabric of her leggings and onto my jeans. It’s so fucking hot it makes my head spin.

“Come on, Little Mate. Give me one more,” I whisper against the shell of her ear. “I need to feel you fall apart one more time, Idril.”

That’s all it takes. She explodes a second time, shuddering in my arms as I work her through another orgasm. She gasps, collapsing against me, breaths coming in ragged pants into my chest. I pull my hand back, but not before twisting so I can gather as much slick as possible.

Idril follows my movements with lazy curiosity as I bring my soaked fingers to my mouth.

The moment her taste hits my tongue, my eyes roll back in my head. Fates, she tastes like actual honey and vanilla. Sugary sweet with just the right hint of musk.

I’ve always been told that Omega slick tastes like their perfume, but this isn’t simply similar. This is *spot-fucking-on*, and it takes everything in me not to throw her back and shove my face between her thighs.

Idril groans, falling forward and burrowing into my chest, huffing in embarrassment. The sound makes me smile. PDA is normal for my Species, but the vamps are far more reserved. And humans—they’re even worse. Caelan and I need to make sure we’re giving her the proper reassurance and aftercare.

I hold her, relishing the way I can feel her heartbeat slowing against my chest.

“Thank you,” I whisper against her temple.

“For what?”

“For being mine.”

“Yours,” she agrees, then tilts her head and adds, “Well, yours and Caelan’s.”

I laugh. “Yes, mine and Caelan’s.”

I hesitate, debating whether or not this is the right time to bring it up. It seems stupid to dance around the subject, though. It’s not like the situation will change if we refuse to talk about it.

Schooling my features, I clear my throat before saying, “Not just ours, though. Vae and Daxen’s, too.”

Idril tenses, stiffening in my arms. I almost apologize for bringing it up, but force myself to stay silent, knowing it won’t help her if I shield her from the truth. Vae and Dax aren’t going anywhere. Sure, we’re keeping it from them right now, but that can’t last forever.

Finally, she deflates, melting back into me. “Vae and Dax are mine… but I’m not theirs. Not yet. Maybe not ever.”

In this moment, I feel like I'm seeing part of the real Idril for the first time. My Little Mate, who's spent her whole life surrounded by Alphas who have tried to cut her down to nothing. Who's never felt safe enough to stand up for herself. To demand to be treated the way she deserves.

And Fates help me, I'll do anything I can to stoke that fire inside of her. I know—down to the depths of my soul—that there is so much more to her, behind the walls she's been forced to hide behind.

And I'm the lucky bastard who gets to stand by her side as she blooms into the woman she truly is.

The wind picks up, blowing soft strands of Idril's silver hair around me. It's the perfect moment. One that shatters when I notice a thick shadow of mist curling around my feet.

What the fuck is that?

I've got Idril in my arms, and the last thing I want is to scare her, but whatever the fuck this is, it's not natural. Which means I need to get us the hell away from it.

I stand slowly, readjusting my hold on Idril while paying close attention to the mist. Idril shifts, blinking up at me lazily.

"What are we doing?"

Before I can answer, her limbs go rigid. I know the moment she sees it because her legs and arms tighten around me.

"Soren…" she whispers, "Where did that shadow come from?"

Her voice shakes with fear, and I don't blame her. I have no idea what the fuck this thing is, let alone where it came from.

"It's alright," I reply, running a soothing hand down her spine. "It's going to be fine."

"What *is* it?"

The shadow continues to curl around my legs lazily, climbing higher inch by inch until it's almost to my knees.

I don't know what to do, but I know I can't stand here. I need to move. Get Idril somewhere safe.

Where the fuck can you hide from a shadow?

I pick up my pace as I head back toward the castle, all while trying to project some semblance of calm through the Bond. The shadow keeps up, refusing to fall behind.

I'm still yards away from the side entrance when it makes its move, surging up and circling Idril's ankles and legs, wrapping around them like a

snake.

Idril screams in fear and kicks out, but the shadow is relentless. It squeezes tighter the harder she fights back. I curse, heart slamming against my ribs as adrenaline courses through my veins with nowhere to go.

My first instinct is to fight—*but how?*

"It's moving, Soren! It's *moving*!" A distressed whine falls from her lips, making my Alpha feral. I can feel my Beast fighting to break free beneath my skin, struggling to escape. If I thought I'd have a chance in hell at fighting this thing off in that form, I'd give in and shift.

But shifting would mean letting go of Idril, and that's not going to happen. Besides, I don't think claws and teeth are going to do shit against a Fatesdamned *shadow*.

My steps start to slow until it feels like I'm wading through mud. The shift is gradual enough to adjust my momentum so I don't fall on my face, but quick enough to feel jarring. One second I'm sprinting, the next I'm running, then jogging, then before I know it, I'm plodding along like I'm slogging through cement, each step more difficult than the last.

I push forward until I can no longer pick up my feet. Everything from my thighs down is frozen in shadow that's—against all odds—shifted into a solid black block of impenetrable nothingness.

I'm helpless. *Trapped*. Completely unable to move, let alone fight. Idril's absolutely terrified, and I've never felt more powerless in my life.

Reaching out to my Pack isn't working. There's some kind of interference or block preventing me from connecting mind-to-mind. I'd bet my fucking title it's got something to do with this damn mist. I shout for Kane, praying he's close enough to hear me. If he can just get here and take her away. Somewhere safe, away from—

Idril freezes in my arms, the change from trembling, terrified mess to complete stillness slices through my panic.

"*NO!*"

The rage-filled command sounds like it's been ripped from her very soul. I swear to the Fates I can physically sense it hovering in the air, suspended for what feels like eternity.

Then, it *detonates*.

Her demand repeats over and over, folding in on itself before echoing into eternity. She slices her hand through the air, and a beam of pure, white

light appears. It shoots out in a blinding arc, slicing straight through the shadow holding me in place.

The shadow releases an unnatural, high-pitched shriek of pain as it recoils. The sound is like a blade scraping over glass, but amplified. I can hear it in my bones. Feel it in my nerve endings. Like it's coming from inside of me, or surrounding me, or above me, or fuck, everywhere at once.

What's even more unsettling is that underneath the shrill tone, I swear I can hear a distinctly masculine echo that sounds human enough to make my stomach churn.

The shadow erupts into vapor and shoots off toward the training yard. In its new form, it's hard to tell if it's truly gone, or simply too small to see.

Idril collapses against my chest, shaking with exhaustion. She buries her nose in my neck, taking deep breaths as I wrap my arms around her tighter.

Bewildered, I fall to my ass and curl around my Omega. My mind races, struggling to make sense of what the fuck just happened.

Up until now, I stupidly believed I was prepared for any eventuality. I've spent my whole life training, studying, theorizing—determined never to be taken unaware by a foe.

But… a shadow?

A fucking shadow?

I should have been prepared for this, too. After the same shadow appeared in the War Room, I should have been researching and coming up with a plan in case it returned.

Why wasn't I?

The thought has my internal alarms going off, screaming at me.

I'm missing something.

This is the first time I've even *thought* about that night in the War Room. Somehow, the entire experience was pushed to the back of my mind. Like it never happened.

Thinking back, I try to remember any conversations I've had about that night. I remember Caelan insisting Daxen figure out what it is and how it got in, but after that….

Nothing.

Not a single one of the Bastards has so much as hinted at what happened. Neither has Kane.

By the Mother…

This isn’t good. *What are the chances all of us would just forget an incident like that?*

There’s something else happening. Something affecting us, affecting our memory.

I pull back, cupping Idril’s face in my hands, but when I see those blue eyes swimming with tears, I forget about everything except for her.

“What was that thing?” She breathes, and I wrap my arms around her as tight as I can.

“I don’t know,” I answer, shaking my head. I open my mouth to ask her—

What?

There’s something… something important I was about to ask her.

Wasn’t there?

Whatever it was, I can’t remember. I’m sure it’ll come back to me eventually.

“We should probably find Caelan.”

I nod, and I have the suddenly overwhelming sense that whatever I was about to ask Idril is also something I need to talk to Caelan about. Something that happened… *something important.*

The feeling disappears as quickly as it came.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the sense of unease that lingers in its wake, and my gaze lands on the compound. The sprawling single story building that looms across the training yard.

The strange sense of urgency slides away.

My Beast whines. Urging me to keep my eyes open. To pay attention, in case—

“Soren?”

Idril’s frowning, looking up at me in concern. “Why are you staring at the compound?”

That’s right. The compound. The single-level monstrosity that covers the majority of the back of the estate, running all the way up to the tree line. It’s where the trainees live, train, and eat. It’s probably where that asshole Cage lived, too.

Actually….

An idea sparks to life, and I grin down at my Omega. “I was just thinking. Just because the guys are doing their own research doesn’t mean we can’t investigate, too.”

Idril’s eyes brighten. “Really?”

My grin widens. “What do you say? Want to go on a little mission of our own, Omega?”

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Chapter 23

Idril

Soren and I walk silently through the halls of the trainee compound. It didn't take much to convince me once he laid out his plans, and after a quick detour so I could change, we came straight here. Ready for our own two-person, totally unsanctioned mission.

The silence is unnerving, but Soren points out that it's early afternoon—which apparently means most of the trainees are either at the gym, out on patrols, or in classes.

Whatever those entail.

"How many trainees are there, do you think?" I ask, and he shrugs, muscles rippling under his shirt.

I can't stop looking at him. He's like a Viking come to life—so different from my other Mates, but no less perfect. There's something so wild and primal about him, from the tiny braids woven through the blond strands of his hair, to his full beard, to his abnormally tall height.

I swear he towers over literally everyone—except maybe Gavran.

"I'm not sure, but my best guess is close to two hundred," he replies, pausing to check the names scrawled on a placard next to a door.

It's obvious the males are the ones who wrote their own names—some of the handwriting is so sloppy it's nearly illegible.

"That many? Fates, I thought there were maybe fifty or so," I murmur, making sure to keep my voice low, even though I probably don't need to.

There's literally no one else here.

"Yeah, and that's just this compound," Soren adds, moving on to the next dorm and squinting at the names. "There's like twenty compounds across the US, Canada, and Mexico. Another dozen in Europe, about the

same in Asia and South America, four or five in Africa, and three in Australia."

My eyes nearly bug out of my head.

"This one is the largest, though. The others aren't nearly this big."

"You've visited others?"

Soren snorts. "Not a chance. Wolven and vampires try to leave each other alone, if you haven't noticed. But we have informants, just like I'm sure Gavran has informants amongst the wolven. Besides, it's all public information."

"Why is this one the largest, though?"

The look Soren shoots me over his shoulder is full of shock. "Because it's been the Last Shield's home base since Gavran brought his main team to the colonies in the early 18th century."

His confusion deepens as I wait for him to explain, which he thankfully does.

"Gavran isn't just the head of this compound, Idril. He runs the entire organization. He's the leader of all Bloodbound across the world—all ten thousand answer to him."

I stutter to a stop, mid-step.

The leader of the entire organization? How didn't I know that?

I can feel my cheeks heating in shame, but on its heels is anger—sharp, bitter, and hot. My flame flares for the first time in days, indignant on my behalf.

I *hate* how often I'm forced to face my own ignorance.

Before leaving my father's estate, I thought I was fairly well informed. But every day, it becomes more obvious how *little* I really know about the real world. I hate it. It makes me feel stupid. *Small.*

When he realizes I'm no longer right behind him, Soren's steps slow to a stop. He turns, lifting a questioning brow.

"Idril? What's wrong?"

The way he's looking at me—with concern rather than pity—has my anger receding. I sigh, determined not to have a pity party in the middle of the compound.

The trainee compound located at the headquarters of the entire freaking organization!

I paste a smile on my face and shrug, waving him away. "Nothing, just didn't realize there were so many locations."

Soren hums, eyes narrowing like he doesn't fully buy what I'm selling, but thankfully, he doesn't push. I pick up my pace, falling into step beside him and resuming our search. We work in silence, Soren checking the rooms on the right, while I check the rooms on the left. Eventually, the tension eases from my shoulders.

"Here!" Soren exclaims, pointing at a door the same as the rest—aside from one thing. This room only has one placard. The handwriting is just as sloppy as the rest, but the name is easy to read.

Cage.

"Do you think they're going to get mad that we're doing this?" I ask, placing a hand on Soren's back to prevent him from opening the door. He snorts in amusement.

"If they do, then fuck 'em. They can get mad at me if they want. But the fact that no one's been sent to look into Cage's shit outside of his phone—is a huge oversight. One I plan on rectifying."

He wraps his hand around the doorknob, eyes bright with mischief. "Besides, what are they gonna do? Lock us in a cell?"

He winks, and a startled laugh bubbles out of my chest. I slap my hands over my mouth to contain the sound, but it's impossible.

Soren doesn't scold me or tell me to be quiet. His smile grows, turning into a grin as bright as the sun. The way he's looking at me… It's like my laughter is the cause of his own joy.

I fall for him just a little more.

He bends over and presses a gentle kiss to my forehead. "Too soon?"

I shake my head, grinning back at him.

"Oddly enough, that actually made me feel better," I admit. My grin grows even wider. Soren makes me feel brave. Brave, and a little giddy—like my chest is filled with bubbles. "Let's break some rules."

"Adda girl."

Soren crouches down, pulling what looks like a Swiss Army knife from the back pocket of his jeans. Once he's found whatever part of it he's looking for, he gets started.

I'll admit, I had no idea how we were going to get into Cage's room once we found it. I didn't even bother to ask. For some reason, though, I didn't anticipate regular old lock-picking.

I keep an eye out for anyone passing by while Soren works. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, making me light-headed in the best way. I

feel like I’m finally doing something to find answers, instead of just sitting around and waiting for something to happen.

For the first time in my life, I’m taking back a little bit of control. It’s not a big win by any means, but it’s still a win. One I didn’t know I needed.

I still need to talk to Caelan about what my Mother told me. Last night we all fell into bed almost as soon as we got home, and I definitely didn’t get a chance to bring it up during breakfast as I planned.

Of course, it’s only been half a day. There’s still plenty of time.

I hope.

“Got it,” Soren murmurs as the lock clicks over.

He pushes open the door, and the overpowering smell of ranch dressing immediately assaults us.

“Fates! That’s a fucking *terrible* Scent for an Alpha. I’d rather wear permanent descenter than walk around smelling like that.”

Soren steps into the room first, and I follow, bracing myself for what we’ll find as he flicks on the light.

It’s… exactly how I would have pictured Cage’s room if I bothered to care. The bed is unmade and messy, with dirty laundry tossed everywhere. I count no less than six pairs of designer shoes tossed around the room haphazardly.

There’s a massive, two-handed sword hung on the wall right above a nightstand next to his bed.

A sword.

On the wall.

“It’s like he never matured past fourteen.” Soren curls up his lip in disgust, eyeing a desk covered in half-empty Ramen cups and chip bags. He gingerly lifts a cup between his thumb and forefinger and gags.

“Mold,” he explains. I wrinkle my nose in disgust.

“Breathe through your mouth,” I suggest.

“We should have brought gloves. Or a hazmat suit.”

Eager to find something, I start to search—rummaging through drawers and rifling through papers, keeping an eye out for anything that seems out of place. Which, considering I don’t know what I’m looking for, could be anything.

Twenty minutes pass in relative silence. Caelan filled us in on everything Daxen discovered, so I know the bones of what they think—that Cage was sent here as some kind of plant. Apparently, he rose in the ranks

slowly. And mostly just because his father complained so much that Gav capitulated in some areas just to shut him up.

The whole thing seems like Gavran gave in for political reasons, *but what do I know?* I'm not the biggest fan of Gavran's leadership skills as it is. I'm sure so many others respect and admire him for legitimate reasons, but I don't see it.

I don't know if I ever will.

"There's nothing here except trash." Soren sighs, surveying the room with his hands on his hips.

He's not wrong. Between the two of us, we've gone through pretty much everything—his dresser, nightstand, desk, closet, bed…

Wait a second…

"Can you help me lift that mattress?" I cross the room, kneeling in front of it and wriggling my hands into the space between the mattress and the bed frame. I don't make it far before Soren's hands land on my hips, and he gently tugs me back.

"Let me do this. I don't want you getting any closer to that bed than you already are."

There's a primal growl under his teasing tone. Something predatory that sends a delicious shiver down my spine.

"I'm going to have to cover you in my scent when we're done here."

I swallow thickly and my skin prickles with goosebumps. If I weren't on suppressants, my Omega perfume would be blooming in the air between us.

Soren misses nothing.

"You're so perfect," he murmurs, leaning down and running his lips along the delicate skin of my neck and up to the shell of my ear. "Now move aside so we can finish this. When we're done, maybe I'll consider doing whatever it is you're thinking about."

With a shaky exhale, I force myself to take a step back.

"Good girl."

I try to shake off my lust, but I swear… being around my two Mates must be doing something to my hormones. It's getting harder and harder to shove down my desire.

"Idril?" Soren's playful prodding pulls me out of my thoughts, and I blush, shaking my head like I can somehow just shake off my Omega instincts.

Mate?

My Omega perks up for the first time in days, and there's something about her that seems stronger. *Healthier.*

I need to find Branwen. It's either sit down and talk to her about all this Omega business, or stew in my ignorance about my own Designation.

Well… what else is new?

Soren bends over and lifts the queen mattress without so much as a grunt. I kneel back down and squint, trying to see all the way to the back where the bed hits the wall. The smell is somehow worse back here.

There's no way around it; I'm going to have to reach back between the mattress and the frame and feel around for anything my eyes have missed.

Freaking vampires and their enhanced eyesight. It's like a cave in here with how low they keep the lighting.

I groan, reaching forward and cringing in disgust, fully prepared to touch something disgusting. Thankfully, my hands pass through nothing but air, and right as I'm about to pull back and tell Soren he can let go, the tips of my fingers touch something.

Paper.

I strain for it, shimmying on top of the bedframe to get a better grip.

"Did you find something?"

"I think so."

It's caught under the edge of the mattress, and when I finally get a good grip on it and tug, something shoots across the frame and right past my face.

I scream, scrambling out of the claustrophobic ranch dressing cave from hell, falling unceremoniously on the floor.

"What happened? What is it?" Soren drops the mattress and bends over, pulling me up with a solid arm around my waist.

"I think—oh gods, I think it was a mouse! Or—or—a rat!"

The thought of a rodent living under Cage's bed combined with the scent makes me gag. I swallow thickly, trying not to throw up.

Soren's searching gaze sweeps around the room. He must notice something because he drops to his knees before crawling under the desk to get closer like an absolute psychopath.

If he comes out holding a mouse, I'm going to scream. *Again.*

He's smiling triumphantly when he crawls back out. When he opens his palm, I recoil, fully expecting a squeaking, furry grey rodent.

When I recognize what it is, I exhale in relief.

“Just a phone.” He laughs, shaking his head ruefully. “Gods, I’ve never seen someone move so fast with so little coordination.”

I roll my eyes and hold out my hand. He hands it over before standing up and swiping the dirt and dust off his jeans.

I’ve never owned a phone of my own, but everyone around me always has. This phone isn’t like the ones I’m used to—sleek, thin, and expensive-looking. It’s clearly a more basic version, compact and bulky at once—a flip phone.

I roll the device between my palms, surprised to find something like this among Cage’s otherwise expensive things.

“It must have been stuck under the mattress,” I murmur. “And when I pulled on the paper, it shot out.”

I hand the phone back to Soren. He slides it into his back pocket and reaches for the paper we haven’t even looked at yet. He folds it in neat squares and slips it in his other pocket.

“We should take these to the main house,” he sighs. “I don’t think there’s anyone here, but if there is, that scream is definitely going to have them investigating.”

I nod in agreement. I really don’t want to go all the way back before examining what we found, but he’s right. The last thing I want is to explain to some Bastard why a human Omega and a wolven Alpha are sneaking through Cage’s things.

I’ve wasted more than enough breath explaining my innocence over the last few weeks. I’d rather avoid doing it again, if possible.

I follow Soren into the hall, and as if the universe is laughing at us, we instantly hear footsteps coming our way.

“Shit,” Soren curses, shuffling me behind him. I can hear the male getting closer, his voice dripping with irritation as he mutters to himself.

“I swear to all the gods, if one of these assholes has a female in his room, I’m taking his ass straight to Daxen.” The voice is so close, there’s no time to escape. The way back is a straight shot down a long hallway, so even if we make a run for it, we won’t escape notice. If we head toward the voice, the hall ends in a dead end, branching out in a T shape—one hall to the left and one to the right.

The trainee appears from the hall on the right, stiff-backed and narrow-eyed, like he’s already caught someone breaking the rules. I swear I forget

how to breathe, just waiting for the male's eyes to shift in our direction.

"What's happening?"

A soft voice with a distinct accent floats down the corridor on the left.

Branwen appears, carrying a stack of folded towels in her arms. She fumbles the towels—on purpose—and the trainee lunges to grab them before they can topple onto the floor. In the process, she manages to swap their positions—forcing the male to turn so his back is facing us.

"Oh, Fates," she exclaims. "How clumsy of me!"

It takes everything in me not to laugh at her over the top performance. I swear I can feel her sly amusement like it's my own. I'm suddenly positive that her appearance isn't random.

"No, that's, ah—that's alright," the trainee mumbles, clearing his throat awkwardly. "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met."

He's so nervous he can't stand still, shifting back and forth on his feet. I can see the tips of his ears turning red from thirty feet away.

Branwen waits for him to glance away down at the floor, then gestures for us to get moving. She adjusts her grip on the towels and extends her hand to the Alpha.

"I'm Branwen, a guest of Gavran's. However, you wouldn't know it by the state of things. Apparently, the heathens over at HQ are under the assumption that towels replenish themselves, so I've been forced to make the trek all the way over here to fetch my own."

She holds up her stack to punctuate her claim, and the trainee—who I'm starting to think has never actually spoken to a girl face to face before—nods in understanding.

Soren smiles, shaking his head in disbelief. I kind of want to hang around to see how she handles the young Alpha. Soren reaches for my hand and tugs me behind him to make our escape.

Once we're far enough away, he exhales. "Fates, if that's all it takes to sidetrack a guard, it's a wonder this place hasn't been infiltrated before."

That same giddiness from earlier returns, and I laugh, feeling so light I worry I might float away. This moment feels so unlike anything I've experienced before. Like my nervous system doesn't know how to process it.

It's the middle of the afternoon; I just spent the last few hours enjoying time with my Mate, and to top it off, we completed a heist in a—*probably*—restricted part of the Bloodbound compound.

Even better… what we discovered could lead us to answers.

The only thing keeping this from being the best day of my short life is the lingering blanket of sadness and loss of my mother. I haven't allowed myself to linger on the memories from last night. Haven't let myself process it. Between the fire I used to kill that Severed and my mother dying —*again*—it all just feels like too much.

It's overwhelming.

Soren must notice the smile fall from my face, because he stops walking halfway across the training yard. He spins to face me and places his hands on my shoulders.

"Where did you just go, Omega?"

His moss-green eyes search mine, full of so much care and concern that I have to look away.

Fates, what is wrong with me? I was just so happy not even sixty seconds ago. *Why did I let myself go there? Why do I let myself feel things that hurt?*

I ruined it, and now I'm about to ruin his whole day, too. Unless I can shove all of this down deep somewhere I don't have to acknowledge it.

I just need to get through everything happening. I just need to get through the more important things, and then I can let myself spiral.

My Omega whines, a sound full of despair. I don't need her words to know what she's thinking.

How long?

How long can I go on ignoring all the bad things and clinging white-knuckled to the good?

Before Soren can push for an answer, Branwen's voice floats to us on the breeze. We both turn as she pushes through the side exit of the trainee compound.

Still carrying an armful of towels.

Seeing her brings a grin to my face. She jogs to catch up with us, wordlessly handing her stack of towels off to Soren, who takes them without complaint.

"What are these even for? We have plenty of towels, trust me."

She side-eyes him and huffs indignantly. "First of all, you're an Alpha. You're supposed to fall all over yourself to help me," she scolds. "Secondly, I don't *actually* need towels, you muppet. I *Saw* you both breaking into that tosser's room and thought I'd best intercept that trainee before he hauled

you both to Gavran. So those towels?" She twirls a finger, gesturing toward the bundle. "They are now your problem."

I smile and throw my arms around her in a hug, which she returns with equal intensity.

"Where have you been?" I ask, pulling back to look at her. "I haven't seen you in days."

"Yes, well… I knew you needed some time alone with your Mates, and I've been dealing with some shite back home as well," she links her arm in mine as we continue through the yard toward the castle.

We're less than ten feet away from the side door when Vaelenor comes running around the side of the castle.

No… he's not running, he's *sprinting*. Tossing frantic looks over his shoulder like the Grim Reaper is chasing him. He nearly runs right into Soren, who narrowly avoids the collision when he slams to a stop mid-step.

"What the fuck…"

I shake my head dumbly and spin, keeping my eyes on Vae as he snarls and turns sharply, and sprints straight for me.

For a moment, I think he's trying to lead whatever he's running from toward me. Then he skids to a stop right in front of me, and his eyes fill with relief.

"Idril. Thank fuck." He bends over, planting his hands on his knees and taking deep, ragged breaths.

"What—"

"Listen," he pants, craning his neck as he searches for… *something.* "Your—"

A rolling yowl cuts off his words I'd know anywhere. My mouth curves into a grin, and I spin, turning my back on Vae right as a massive shadow shoots around the edge of the castle.

Shade is sleek and graceful, with a solid form honed for stalking prey. Despite his size, he's silent as the night, muscles rippling with each soundless stride he takes, closing the distance between us.

His eyes are two gold coins, gleaming with smug superiority and focused on one person.

Vae.

He's herding the Alpha, stalking his prey like a predator stalks a crippled gazelle. It's blatantly clear he's playing with his food.

It's oddly… *cute.*

With no warning, Shade lunges, sprinting for Vae and skidding to a stop inches away from where he stands. A look of pure, unadulterated mischief replaces the predatory glean in his eyes.

“Shit,” Vae curses, face draining of color. “Shit, shit, shit, shit!”

There must be some kind of glitch or feedback delay between Vae’s brain and his body. One second he’s standing there, and the next his legs are moving in opposite directions. He scrambles blindly to get his feet under him and twists himself up even worse. His ass hits the ground, and he starts crab-walking backward.

He makes it an impressive six feet before tripping over nothing but air and sprawling on his back in the grass.

Deciding to take pity on him, I walk over and step between the two of them.

“Shade,” I murmur, trying to pull his attention away from Vae. Shade’s eyes dart to me, and right back to Vae.

Stubborn cat.

I have to acknowledge that part of me is enjoying this—seeing Vaelenor on the ground, with my huge cat looming menacingly over him. The part of me that aches every time I remember the way he and Dax treated me.

Then there’s the other—much, much smaller—part of me that kind of feels bad, knowing how terrified he is. There’s no way he could know that Shade isn’t actually going to hurt him.

“Idril,” Vae turns to me with pleading eyes. “Will you please call off your cat before—”

Shade springs forward.

And drops a yellow, slobbery softball in Vae’s lap.

My mouth drops open in shock. Soren throws back his head and lets out a booming laugh. “He just… Oh, Fates! He wasn’t chasing you. He was trying to get you to *play fetch*.”

I can’t contain the laughter that bubbles up from my chest, and apparently, neither can Branwen. Before long, all three of us are gasping for breath between laughter.

Shade sits back on his haunches, glaring at us all, tail sweeping in agitation through the grass.

Vae blinks down at the ball in his lap, incredulity etched in every line of his expression.

“What the actual fuck…” he mutters, scraping a hand down his face.

As though he's personally embarrassed by Vae's inability to grasp what his role is in this game, Shade leans in and uses his nose to nudge the ball into his stomach. He creeps back a few feet, crouches close to the ground like he's going to pounce, and waits. His eyes flick pointedly from Vae to the ball, then back to Vae.

"Absolutely not," he scoffs, pushing to his knees. "I am *not* throwing that ball for you. You chased me around the grounds like a psychopath from Hell, and now you really want to play fetch?"

The sight of a grown male arguing with a cat sends another wave of giggles pouring out of me.

I crouch down and call for him, "Come here, boy… I'll play fetch with you."

Shade glances at me, huffs, then turns back to the Alpha in front of him and narrows his golden eyes.

"What the hell kind of panther plays fetch?" Soren asks, still chuckling.

"It's not a panther," Vae spits, glaring at us. "It's Satan's housecat."

Shade's ears flatten close to his head, a low rumble vibrating in his chest. Vae throws his arms up in exasperation and finally gives in.

"FINE!"

He picks up the ball like it's a bomb that might detonate any second and hurls it across the yard.

Shade shoots after it like an arrow loosed from a bow. Clumps of grass tear up beneath his claws and explode across the lawn.

The side door opens, and Daxen appears with Caelan following behind him. There's a distinct gap between the two males, which worsens when Daxen turns to Caelan, who blatantly ignores him.

With a sigh, Daxen turns back around. The pain in his grey eyes makes my chest ache.

Then my mind totally blanks because… both Alphas are shirtless. And they're both dripping with sweat. My throat goes dry. Yanking my gaze from the dips and lines of their muscular forms is impossible.

Daxen isn't as bulky as Caelan, but he's more defined. And both males have a V of muscle in their abdomen that disappears under the waistband of low-slung shorts.

Branwen links her arm in mine and tugs me away from the two Alphas. The moment they're out of my line of sight, I take a deep, shuddering breath.

My face heats in embarrassment, but Branwen simply pats my hand like she totally gets it. “There you are, love. Much better now.”

“Do I even want to know what’s going on here?” Daxen drawls, grabbing a towel from the stack Soren set in the grass and using it to wipe the sweat from his face and chest. Caelan grabs one as well, thanking Soren, whose eyes flick toward Branwen with a knowing smile.

She shrugs, then gestures toward Vae, who’s watching Shade return with a look of resignation. “The third is for the pretty one with no brain. He’s gonna need it for all the slobber.”

“Wow, I’m impressed,” I grin as Shade returns full of triumph and drops the ball at Vae’s feet expectantly.

“Are you playing catch with that thing?” Daxen asks, bewildered.

“Not on purpose,” Vae grouses, staring at the ball in disgust. I honestly don’t blame him. It’s covered in saliva. Because he has zero patience, Shade picks up the ball, holding it gently between his huge teeth and nudging Vae in the stomach.

Vaelenor groans, accepting the ball and hurling it across the yard. “This is so fucking beneath me.”

“I dunno,” Soren hums. “It looks about right from here.”

Caelan barks out a laugh. Catching my eye, he gives me a playful wink before walking over to me.

“I’m going to go shower; I just wanted to see what all the yelling was about.” He presses a soft kiss to my temple, and butterflies explode in my chest.

“Oh, wait!” I grab his arm.

He cocks his head. “What is it, love?”

“There’s something I need to tell you about—about the—” The thought slips away, and I blink. *What was I about to say?* It was important, I’m sure of it.

“Quick!” Vae whispers-shouts as he runs past us. “Let’s get inside before he comes back!” He races for the door, yanks it open, and disappears before I’ve even processed what he said.

“Idril? You had something you needed to tell me?”

Was there something I meant to tell him? What the heck was it?

I shake my head and grimace sheepishly. “I’m sorry, I don’t—I can’t remember what I was saying. It must not have been very important.”

His expression smoothes and his eyes soften. He reaches out, cradling my face in his palms. “It’s alright. It’ll come back to you. You’ve had a lot going on; your brain is probably working overtime trying to keep up with all of it.”

“You’re probably right,” I sigh.

“Don’t stress, alright? I’m going to go take a shower, then we’ll get something to eat.”

He leans in and presses a kiss to my forehead and waits for my answering nod before jogging off. Branwen and Dax follow, but I stay, unwilling to leave until I’ve seen Shade one more time.

“Are you coming, Omega?” Daxen asks, holding the door open for me. His eyes flick to Soren, who’s lingering off to the side, waiting for me.

“Uhm… in just a second,” I reply, wrapping my arms around my stomach, feeling awkward.

I’m pretty sure this is the first time Daxen’s ever spoken to me normally, and he apparently finds my answer lacking because he lifts a single brow in response.

“I don’t want Shade to think we just abandoned him.”

I brace myself for a cruel remark, the way I used to brace myself for my father’s fists.

But the cruelty doesn’t come. Instead, Daxen’s eyes soften just the smallest amount. After what feels like an eternity, he inclines his head in acknowledgment.

Soren’s eyes catch mine, and he gives me a questioning look, tapping the back pocket of his jeans.

I know what he’s asking—*do we tell him what we’ve found now?*

I nod. I’d rather do this as soon as possible. I’m getting antsy for answers.

Soren turns to Dax. “Can you grab Caelan and Vaelenor and meet us in the lounge of your wing in twenty minutes?”

Daxen’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

“Idril and I went on a little mission this afternoon—searching through Cage’s things,” Soren answers nonchalantly. “We found some things that might be of interest.”

A muscle feathers along Dax’s jaw. He scrapes his hand through his hair and forces his muscles to relax.

“I’ll let them know,” he replies before disappearing into HQ.

Shade appears, loping out of the forest and across the training yard. I grin when I notice the ball he was playing with is suspiciously absent.

He comes straight to me, rubbing his large body against my legs and purring up a storm. I laugh, kneeling and wrapping my arms around him.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

He swipes his prickly tongue up the side of my face, then butts his head against mine.

“I wonder if he knows Kane’s out there,” Soren muses. He reaches out, extending his fist toward Shade. Shade takes a few sniffs of Soren’s scent, then swings his head toward the forest, then back toward Soren.

Not for the first time, I truly wonder how much Shade understands. I have a feeling it’s more than any of us realize.

“That panther is not normal,” Soren mutters, throwing his hands up when Shade narrows his eyes. “Not in a bad way. You’re just far more intelligent than… well… literally any other animal in the world.”

I run my hand across the fur on Shade’s head, fingers dancing over the marking in the middle of his forehead that’s in the shape of a crown.

“I’ve got to go inside for the night,” I tell him. “But I’ll come back tomorrow, alright?”

Soren inhales sharply when Shade nods his head before bounding across the yard back toward the forest.

I push to my feet and dust my hands off on the front of my pants. Soren shakes his head with a look of shock on his face.

“It’s just wild. I’ve never seen anything like it. I wonder where he even came from.”

I shrug. “He was just there one day. I assumed he was just a feral tomcat, but he’s always been incredibly intelligent. When the Alphas took me, I thought I’d never see him again.”

“But he followed.”

A grin blooms across my face. “Yeah… he followed.”

Soren reaches out, offering me his hand. “Ready to go see if we found anything interesting?”

I place my hand in his and let out a deep breath. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

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Chapter 24

Vaelenor

I'm ten minutes early to the meeting Soren requested, and when I walk into our sitting room, I'm glad I made it a point to come early. No one else is here yet, which works perfectly for me because I'm not trying to do this with a running live track of smart-ass commentary.

Grinning to myself, I pull all the bags into the room and place them on the couch. I eye them critically, then change my mind and set them back down on the floor.

Then I pick them back up again.

The clock in the corner of the room keeps ticking, and I could swear it's seriously mocking me.

It's plain as day once I realize what I'm hearing. Instead of the usual *tick-tock*, it's the same word over and over again: *mor-on.*

I send it my most impressive scowl, and reach into one of the bags to pull out a heavy cashmere blanket, laying it next to me on the couch. I do the same with the other two, adjusting the position of each blanket until there's a neatly folded pile taking over the entire left side of the couch.

Mor-on. Mor-on. Dumb-ass. Dumb-ass.

Fates, has that fucking clock always been so Fatesdamned loud? Maybe I need to take out the batteries.

Yeah, that'll work.

I hesitate, trying to remember if it even takes batteries. I mean, the damn thing's been here for the better part of a century, so… *no?*

How do I turn it off, then?

"Why are you looking at that clock like you're about to challenge it to a duel?" Daxen asks, sauntering into the room. He stops in front of the couch,

taking in the five extra-large, extra-soft, extra-comfy blankets. He raises a single, imperious brow, and before he's even opened his mouth, I know I'm already sick of his shit.

"And what, preytell, is all this?"

He doesn't even wait for an answer before bending over and scooping the blankets into his arms, searching the room for an empty space on the floor to toss them out of the way.

With a snarl, I rip them out of his arms and replace them, shifting and tucking and adjusting until they're exactly where I had them before. When I'm done, I lay a protective hand on top of the makeshift fucking Nest I'm just now realizing I've made for Idril and decide… *fuck it.*

In for a penny, and all that shit.

"Don't. Touch. Them," I enunciate each word, ready to straight up fight my Packmate if he pushes me.

He doesn't. Instead, he switches sides and teams up with the clock against me.

"Moron," he mutters, rolling his eyes and throwing himself down on the opposite couch.

This fucker. I know things changed at breakfast. I could see it in his eyes. In the way he kept his fists clenched so no one would see his hands trembling. I know my brother. I know when he's spiraling. He can lock down his side of the Bond all he wants, but he can't fool me completely.

He knows he fucked up. He was practically on his knees in front of Gav right alongside me. Of course, he's not going to come right out and admit he's been a giant bag of dicks, but you don't stare sightlessly at a wall for two hours in silence if you're *not* seriously regretting your recent life choices.

Then again, he wouldn't be Dax if he didn't fight back just a little—just to prove to himself and everyone else that he's still in control. I should have expected this little regression, but he'll have to push through it. I don't have time to rub his nose in his accidents. Not when there's groveling to do.

Lots and lots and lots of groveling.

Caelan, Soren, and Idril walk in together, Idril sandwiched protectively between the Alphas. And just like every other time the Omega walks into a room, all my attention is drawn toward her. Even though I just laid eyes on her a bit ago—after being chased around the yard by her demon cat—she looks… *different.* There's a weightlessness to her now that wasn't there

before. Her skin's still pale, but it's glowing. Her hair is no longer pulled back into a single, thick braid, but falls down her back in soft, sleek waves. Tiny braids are interwoven throughout the strands, including two at the sides holding sections away from her face. Wispy silver strands absently frame high cheekbones flushed a soft pink, making her look like she's actually fucking glowing.

But best of all?

She's smiling.

My heart slams against the front of my ribcage as Soren murmurs something and her smile grows, widening into a grin. Caelan smirks and leans down, whispering something to the two of them that causes Idril to throw back her head and let out a bright, musical laugh.

I make a mental note to ask him what he said to her later. I need to keep track of everything that makes her smile. Then do them every single day. I'll be the best Packmate-in-law in the whole Fatesdamned world. I'll fucking crush it. If they ever hand out awards, I'll be at the top of the list. Everywhere I'll go, people will point and whisper, "Hey, is that Vaelenor? I heard he's like… The best Packmate-in-law in the universe. His Packmate's Fated Mate thinks he's so amazing she even made a blog. He's way better than that loser, Daxen."

Yeah… that's totally happening.

There's just one little problem. One I'm reminded of when Caelan murmurs something else to the Omega, and she laughs even harder—it's that same beautiful, tinkling laugh I first heard in the library.

The sound goes straight to my cock.

I search for something to hide my growing erection and grab the nearest pillow, placing it on top of my lap, praying to all the gods and Fates and even the moon for good measure that Caelan doesn't notice. I'm like, ninety percent sure he'd tear my throat out if he does.

No matter how hard I try to convince myself that lusting over my Packmate's Fated Mate isn't weird, I haven't quite reached that level of self-delusion, unfortunately. It's not exactly something I can turn off, though, and if I'm being totally honest with myself, these feelings aren't new.

I decided last night that I'm officially done ignoring my instincts. All morning after what we found out at breakfast, I couldn't stop thinking that

if I'd simply listened to my instincts from the start, everything would be so different right now.

So even though it scares the shit out of me, for the first time in my life, I'm trusting them completely—no second-guessing. No excuses. No letting fear get in the way—Curse or no Curse.

The way I see it, my relationship with Idril cannot *possibly* get worse.

I'm so lost in my head hyping myself up for *'Operation Don't Be A Coward'* that I nearly miss Idril walking toward the couch, bright blue eyes trained on the blankets.

My spine straightens as she shuffles to a stop in front of me, scrutinizing the bedding warily. Her hands curl into fists at her sides like she's fighting her instinct to reach out and touch them.

Her eyes dart to mine before flitting away again.

Logically, I know that this is the part where I'm supposed to speak, but it's like all the words have been sucked out of my head, and I sit here, just staring at her stupidly.

Fates… What should I say? Something tells me that, *"Here, I bought you these to make up for denying you blankets for so long, even though all I've wanted to do since the second I saw you is to wrap you up in the softest fabric known to man because you deserve to live inside of a cloud,"* isn't going to go over well.

I have an entire list of new names to call you. My Alpha gleefully informs me. ***I've been preparing for this moment my entire life.***

Snarling, I send him a mental middle finger and ignore his commentary. He can save his list for another day. This is the first step in my list of ways to grovel, and I'm *not* going to fuck it up.

Idril's growing increasingly fidgety, rubbing the fabric of her cotton sundress between thumb and index finger and chewing on her lower lip. My own anxiety has skyrocketed into the stratosphere, and for the rest of my life I'll blame my overwhelming panic for the way I finally put an end to what's become the world's most awkward silent standoff.

Taking a deep breath, I open my mouth, gesture toward the blankets, and scream—*yes, scream*—in a pitch five times higher than my normal register, *"These are for you!"*

There's a solid ten seconds of straight silence followed by peals of laughter from the other side of the room. Cursing under my breath, I squeeze my eyes shut and concentrate on trying to salvage this interaction.

I can do this. I just need to try again. It's cool. I'm cool. Everything's cool.

Clearing my throat, I open my eyes and force myself to meet Idril's startled gaze with my own.

"What I mean to say is, I'm sure you have tons of blankets and stuff in Caelan's room, but I thought maybe you'd like some of your own, for other places in the castle. Like… in case you get cold. Or want something like… a blanket."

I can physically feel my cheeks growing redder by the second. Worse—Idril's just standing there. I suddenly notice how quiet it is, the entire room focused on our exchange.

Caelan and Soren have moved, both of them now standing behind their Omega. My Packmate's aiming a straight-up terrifying glare my way, which is almost as unnerving as the creepy as fuck smirk the wolven can't seem to wipe off his face.

Why do I get the feeling he knows something I don't? The way he's looking at me gives killer clown vibes, and I am *not* here for it.

Idril shifts and the movement reclaims my attention. I swear to the Fates I stop breathing as slowly, hesitantly, she extends a hand toward the blanket on top of the pile. When her hand makes contact with the faux-fur, delicate fingers burrowing into the fabric, I exhale in relief.

Gods, this is a thousand times worse than the most high-stakes mission I've ever been on.

I'm sure I look creepy as fuck watching her face as she smoothes her hand back and forth in the bedding, but I can't help it. I need to know what she's feeling—what she thinks.

Does she like it? I mean, she has to like it, right? It's like… the softest blanket in the world. And she's an Omega.

My brain falls prey to an endless cycle of intrusive thoughts until I'm second-guessing the blanket completely. Objectively, it's perfect. The inside is lined with cashmere, the outside made from the softest, most lavish materials, created specifically for an Omega's heightened senses.

The faux fur is a shimmering white, almost the same shade as her hair.

"I've never seen these before," she murmurs, and I perk up.

"Ah… no. You wouldn't have. I mean, they're new. Like, new to the castle. Recently purchased. By me. Like… I bought them. All by myself. With my credit card. And had them delivered."

I exhale and wipe the back of my hand across my forehead. Then, for reasons I will never, ever, fucking understand, I add, “They came FedEx. Weekend delivery.”

They.

Came.

Fedex.

Weekend fucking delivery??

Silence. Then my Alpha mutters, ***Holy. Shit.***

Dax, like the traitor he is, barks out a laugh and doesn’t even attempt to control himself. I glance back, craning my neck to look over my shoulder and pin him with a glare.

The clock keeps on ticking.

Mor-on. Mor-on. Mor-on. Mor-on.

I shoot to my feet and spin, facing the offensive piece of furniture and glaring at it with every ounce of pissed-off Alpha I can summon.

It ticks *louder*.

“For the Fate’s sake!” I throw up my arms, officially convinced this is actually a nightmare. “Will someone, for the love of the gods, please throw that fucking clock away?”

Startled by my outburst, Idril’s mouth parts as she flicks her eyes toward the clock and frowns. “What’s wrong with the clock?”

“It’s… Uhm…”

To absolutely no one’s shock, I flounder, frantically searching for literally any answer to her question.

You will not tell the Omega that the clock is mocking you, Vaelenor. You will not. This is still salvageable, but not if you accidentally convince her inanimate objects are bullying you.

“You know what? It’s actually nothing,” I give her my most charming smile, which I’m pretty sure doesn’t work when her frown deepens.

“It’s just really loud,” I add. “That’s all. Never noticed how freaking loud it is.”

Caelan has clearly reached his limit. He mutters something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like “I can’t watch this anymore,” and takes a seat on the couch. Soren follows, taking a seat next to Caelan, still sporting that damn smirk.

What the hell does this asshole think he knows?

What Soren does or does not know ceases to matter when Idril reaches out and plucks the blanket from the top of the pile. Her movements are hesitant, like she's already anticipating the moment it's ripped from her arms.

For a long moment she simply holds the blanket in front of her, a barely-there smile on her lips. Then, in a move I did *not* see coming, she turns and takes a seat between Caelan and…

Me.

She unfolds the blanket and wraps it around her shoulders like a cape, sighing in contentment. Then she turns toward me, and her mouth curls up into a bright, blinding smile, and all the oxygen gets sucked out of the room.

Fuck… I am seriously screwed.

I'm obsessed with my brother's Fated Mate. Like… *really, seriously, obsessed with her.*

The light, airy feeling under my skin intensifies as she leans to the side and whispers, "Thank you, Vaelenor. It's lovely."

"It's no big deal," I insist. I force myself to look away, but I can still see the smile on her face from the corner of my eye, and suddenly, it doesn't matter how much I blundered through the whole situation. It's irrelevant compared to the look of unbridled joy on her face.

That joy is exactly why I spent thousands of dollars on the best blankets for Omegas that money can buy—something I didn't even know existed a week ago.

Worth every damn penny.

Daxen's voice cuts through the room, putting an end to murmured side conversations and reminding me why we're actually here.

"So, Soren—what's this about? You said you went through Cage's things?"

The disapproving look he's aiming at the wolven doesn't go unnoticed. Soren straightens in his seat, returning Dax's glare with one of his own.

"We did. It should have happened days ago. I don't know what kind of half-cocked operation you're running here, but searching Cage's room should have been one of the first orders of business—especially after what you found on his cell."

He stands, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a basic-style cell phone and a folded piece of crumpled paper. He tosses both

unceremoniously onto the coffee table.

“We were a little busy trying to find the asshole,” Daxen replies, and I don’t miss the concerned look he flicks toward Caelan, who’s grinding his molars so hard I can hear it from ten feet away.

Idril shifts, snaking one pale, delicate hand out from under her blanket and placing it on top of Caelan’s jean-clad thigh. Without looking, he covers her hand with his and visibly relaxes at the contact.

It’s not a flashy moment. In fact, I’m not sure if anyone but me saw it. And yet, I’m hit with a wave of jealousy so thick it hurts to breathe.

Any chance that Idril might be my Mate has flown out the window because of whatever new Bond she shares with Caelan. As far as I know, she’s Soren’s Scent-Match, but no one’s said fuck all about her and Caelan being Scent-Matched, so it’s safe to assume they’re not.

I mean, I can’t imagine Caelan would keep that to himself. And even though he hasn’t scented her Omega perfume himself, she’s scented him. They’d know if that Bond existed.

Whatever this silver-threaded Bond is, there’s one thing we know for sure. It apparently snapped into place so fast and seamlessly that not even Caelan was completely sure what actually happened until he saw her for the second time, days later.

That’s *fast*. Whatever triggered it, it didn’t take much, so the chances I might share the same kind of Bond with Idril are practically non-existent at this point.

I mean, Caelan knew before he even heard her voice. If the Bond hasn’t appeared for me by now, then it’s not going to.

Right?

I mean, Fates, there’s no reason even to think I might share a Bond with her. After the way Dax and I treated her… Fate wouldn’t dare bless me with such a gift.

If anything, this is my punishment. To spend the rest of my immortal life watching my Packmate build a perfect life with his Fated Mate—the very female I was too fucking cowardly to fight for, let alone own my feelings for.

I basically showed Fate exactly how little I deserve her.

It makes sense that this would be my punishment. Cruel, but fair. An eternal reminder that when it mattered most, I failed her. Stood by silently

while she broke right in front of me, falling apart a little more every day while I did *nothing*.

“Thanks so much for waiting for us.”

I’m yanked back to reality by the haughty feminine voice of our newest Omega housemate and twist in my seat to see Branwen and Kane stepping through the door, a look of irritation on the Omega’s face that I’m pretty sure is just her default setting.

Well, for everyone but Caelan, Soren, and Idril. Basically, she hates anyone who’s ever hurt Idril, and I don’t blame her.

“You’re here!” Idril’s face lights up when she sees her friend, and despite how bitchy the Omega is to me, I can’t help but feel genuine gratitude toward her.

“Aye, nice to see ye as well, Lass,” Kane replies as he and Branwen take seats at the opposite end of the sectional.

Branwen rolls her eyes. “She was talking to me, you wanker.”

“Ye dinna ken she dinna mean me, too,” Kane argues, surveying the room like he’s searching for something before adding, “Either way it’s nice to get out of my Beast form and back on two legs. Are there snacks? Yer wee cat hunts all the good bits o’ prey in the forest.”

“No! No snacks.” Dax snaps, his patience fraying as the room devolves into chaos around him. Predictably, he tries to force everyone back on track. “Soren was just about to tell us what he and Idril found in Cage’s room.”

Soren gestures toward the table where he deposited the phone and paper. “Not much to tell. This is everything—this phone and paper were hidden under his mattress. We haven’t looked at it yet. Figured we’d wait until everyone was together.”

“Well, let’s see it then.” I reach out for them, but Soren gets there first, which is wildly unfair considering he literally *just* tossed them on the table. Soren leans over Idril and Caelan to hand me the paper, then holds my gaze steadily and slips the phone back into his pocket.

Dramatic, but okay.

I unfold it, smooth the creases, and spread it out on the table. It only takes a cursory glance to make sense of what I’m seeing.

“Floor plans for HQ,” I curse, and it only gets worse from there. “Fates, there are notes about each of us. Where we sleep, where we eat, when we train. Even when we’re most likely to be off rotation.”

“Do you think he sent those to someone?” Caelan asks, leaning over Idril to get a better look. He blinks. Blinks again. “I mean, assuming anyone else can read this shit. This has to be the worst handwriting I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Gods teeth, if this is that lad’s idea of intel, ye could leave the doors open, and they’d still get lost,” Kane mutters.

“Terrible handwriting aside, Caelan’s instincts are spot on,” Daxen adds grimly. “Cage wasn’t writing this shit down to remember fondly when he’s on his deathbed. We already know he’s involved with Varenthrall and the Severed. Chances are high he’s been passing it on.”

“So they’re planning a strike. An attack on HQ,” Branwen muses.

Daxen nods. “This is exactly the kind of information we’d acquire before an infiltration,” Dax sighs, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Fates, we taught the asshole what to look for.”

Idril shrinks into her blanket, pulling it tighter around her and tilting her head to the side. Her eyes dart toward Caelan, then Dax. She frowns, brow furrowed in concentration.

“Idril,” I ask softly, “do you have something you want to add?”

She startles, blushing when everyone’s attention falls on her. Caelan squeezes her hand, and while her touch soothed Caelan, his touch seems to imbue her with courage.

The knot of jealousy in my chest tightens and presses in like it’s making a permanent home.

“It’s just… you’re saying whoever wants this information wants it to break in and strike at the Bloodbound, right?”

She chews on her bottom lip, and despite addressing her question to Daxen, refuses to look up at him. I wonder if he notices.

I wonder if he cares.

“That makes the most logical sense,” he agrees. “I’d like to study it more thoroughly, and it also depends on what we find on that burner, but it seems obvious. The Severed have a singular goal—to displace vampires as a whole in the Species hierarchy. They think they’re better, stronger, smarter. The Bloodbound are their biggest roadblock. They’d have to eliminate us completely before that could ever become a reality.”

Idril’s frown deepens, and I almost expect her to shrink down after Daxen’s reply, but that’s not what happens.

Rather than leaning into Caelan or disappearing into her blanket, she sits straighter. Her eyes flit over the words on the page, bright and focused.

Gods, she looks just like Daxen does when he's close to figuring something out. It's remarkable, watching her demeanor change right before my eyes. Her eyes narrow and she leans in. A single, delicate finger glides over the notes. She reads through them twice and then sits back, lifts her chin, and meets Daxen's gaze with her own for the first time since she walked in the room.

"I don't think that's all this is," she declares, pointing at the notes. "If Cage wrote this all down to pass on to someone in an attempt to infiltrate HQ, it's missing a lot of information. You're all listed—the seven of you in charge. But there are far more people who live in this castle." She glances at Caelan, her Omega seeking validation from her Alpha in a moment so instinctual I almost feel like I should look away.

Fates, I want that. I want her to look at me like that.

Caelan inclines his head, mouth ticking up into a satisfied smirk.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

Bolstered, she continues her explanation. As she speaks, her confidence grows until she's addressing the room like she's the one in charge.

"A lot of the staff have apartments off the trainee compound, but there are quite a few who live in the older wings of HQ. Families who have, from what I've gathered, served the Bloodbound generationally. As well as a select few who work odd shifts."

"That's right," I murmur, giving in to the instinct to back her up. "Our steward and his family have an entire wing to themselves. Our head of security as well—though he's technically a Bastard—he has his own rooms but also retains staff rooms off-site. Says he likes being with his men sometimes, but needs his own space as well."

"What about full Bastards?" Soren asks.

“Aye, there’s no way ye run this entire place with just the seven of you and dozens of trainees,” Kane adds, and I take a second to appreciate the irony of sitting here with wolven and spilling our secrets without a second thought. All because the Alpha Heir and my Packmate share an Omega.

“Of course not,” Dax replies indignantly. “There are plenty of full Bastards, but they live off-site in the compound. The only ones who live in HQ full time are us and some staff.”

“Alright, so he’s missing a lot of people here who would be here at any point if they were trying to sneak in,” Idril summarizes. “And adding to that, there’s no other vital information written down. No guard rotations, no mentions of entry or exit points. No security codes, or camera placement or outside patrols and routines.”

She shrugs, tucking her hair behind her ear, voice full of certainty. “I mean… if someone wanted to break in—seriously break in—those aren’t things they’d simply ignore. That’s pertinent information.”

Caelan’s grin has practically taken over his entire face. I can damn near feel the pride rolling off of him in waves as he leans over and presses his lips to her temple.

“Smart girl,” he murmurs.

I expected that kind of reaction from Idril’s Mates, but what really grabbed my attention and won’t let go is the way *Daxen’s* looking at her, something calculated swimming in his eyes. Everything she said is something Daxen would have put together in the next few minutes, most likely, but for Idril—someone with no experience doing what we do—*to notice it right away?*

Yeah… that’s a little unexpected.

“So you don’t think they’re trying to break in?” I ask, trying to dig deeper and figure out what she thinks is going on. Idril shakes her head, then shrugs.

“I think that if someone were trying to simply break in, their focus is too targeted. Their goal is to get to specific targets. The seven of you.”

“Damn.” I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Just to be fair,” Idril adds, “Cage is quite possibly one of the most ignorant beings to ever walk the Earth, so there’s a huge chance I’m totally off base here. He could just be really, really bad at spying.”

Gods, she’s not wrong. It could easily be either of those things. Or both. *Or, Fates… neither.*

“Obviously the next step is to check out the phone,” Branwen suggests from across the sectional. I do a double take when I realize she’s sitting cross-legged, her mass of hair pulled over one shoulder, fingers dancing as she plaits it into a seriously confusing-looking braid.

Soren hands the phone to Caelan, who flips it open and holds down the power button, waiting for the equipment to light up.

Dax lunges across the five feet between them and snatches the phone from Caelan’s hand. Caelan’s mouth falls open in shock as Dax pops the back off and pulls the battery out in a single, swift movement.

Caelan curses, reaching for the phone. “What the fuck, Dax!”

Dax holds the phone behind him, refusing to hand it back.

“Do you want whoever this belongs to to know we discovered it?” he snaps before aiming his glare at Soren. “From now on, anything tech related goes through me first. Don’t hand over anything before I’ve had the chance to look it over and take the appropriate precautions. Not your new BFF, not Caelan, and definitely, positively, under no circumstances, Vaelenor.”

“Excuse the fuck out of you,” I snap back. “Contrary to current mishaps, I’m not actually an idiot, asshole.”

Dax ignores me, too focused on sliding out the SIM, which he tosses into the fire. He bends down, slides a thin blade from the side of his boot, and begins tinkering with the internal components until, a few moments later, he’s holding a sliced copper wire that does who the fuck knows what in the phone.

“There,” he says smugly, sliding the battery back in before powering it on. “Now the phone can’t possibly call home.”

The device only takes a few moments to power up. It’s not old by any means, just basic, which works in our favor.

We wait in silence as Dax scrolls through the phone, reading whatever he happens to come across. When he’s finally done, he frowns.

“What?” Idril asks, leaning forward intently.

“There’s nothing on there that’s helpful,” Branwen explains, which only serves to piss Dax off more.

“Oh, did your powers of Sight tell you that?”

The Omega flashes him a smile that’s all teeth. “If I’d Seen what was or was not on that phone, I’d have mentioned something sooner. For your information, it’s your shitty attitude that gave it away. Though, to be fair, you always have a shitty attitude, so who can truly say.”

Idril chokes on a laugh, slapping her hands over her mouth belatedly. Daxen's head snaps in her direction, and just like that, her laughter cuts off, and the smile falls from her face.

My Alpha growls, and my hands clench into fists. I want to fucking kill him for that. I hate the way she wilts around Daxen and me so easily. I wish she knew just how badly I want her to be happy. To see her confident and strong and free—things I've only caught little glimpses of over the last few days.

I can't blame her for her reaction, though. Frankly, I'm not sure how she can even stand to be in the same room as us. Earning her forgiveness feels more and more like a pipe dream the more I'm forced to face just how deeply we hurt her.

I hate myself for all of it. For hurting her, for letting Daxen hurt her, and for the way my Packmate and brother looks at me even now—like he still can't believe how I could have let him down so spectacularly.

Like he doesn't even know who the hell I am anymore.

"The texts are meaningless," Dax grunts, waving Branwen off. "I mean, I'm sure they mean something, but there's no context, so they don't really make any sense. And there are only three, which doesn't help much."

"Read them," Caelan demands. Dax scrolls back up and, with a tone that conveys exactly how little he thinks this will help, reads the first text.

"'The lock is weakening. We must get it under control. Destruction of the key is looking more and more viable as an option.'" He scrolls down. "Then, 'Report back to me on any talk. I'm sure one of them has noticed by now; the entire world is on edge.'"

Something about that one resonates. I can tell by the way he swipes his thumb across his lower lip, his brow furrowed in thought. Whatever it is, he shakes it off and refocuses, moving on to the final text.

"This final one is the strangest of them all. It says, 'This will all be for nothing if you don't destroy the key. I don't care how you do it, but get it done.'"

Soren raises a hand. "Wait a second, who's writing those texts? Are they from Cage or to him?"

Dax shakes his head, passing back the burner when Soren reaches for it. "There are no outbound texts. Those are all inbound, and they're all from a spoofed number. It's the same person—the style is uniform—but different

numbers. I can take a stab at tracing them, but the chances are high that tracing will lead to jack shit."

Sighing, he leans back and stretches. His black henley snakes up at the movement, exposing a few inches of flat abs. It's not something I've ever bothered to notice before, but thanks to the fact that I'm apparently obsessively tuned in to Idril's every movement and reaction, I feel the exact moment her awareness shifts. Her breathing hitches, and from the corner of my eye, I watch as her eyes zero in on those few inches of tanned skin like a predator homing in on prey.

Her pupils visibly dilate, and her breathing deepens until she shifts, squirming in her seat. It's not until Branwen loudly and pointedly clears her throat across the room that Idril's eyes snap down, heavy pooling beneath the pale skin of her cheeks.

That's not exactly strange, though. I mean, fuck, I get it. Dax is a good-looking guy.

Obviously not as good-looking as me, but he's never had any trouble picking a female up when he cares enough to try.

What shocks me isn't her reaction to him. It's Caelan's reaction to Idril.

It's immediately obvious to me that Caelan was aware of her reaction the whole time, just like I was. And instead of getting pissed, like I'd naturally assume, he simply squeezes her hand with his and swipes his thumb back and forth across her knuckles.

Idril glances up at him from beneath her lashes, and instead of tension, the soft, reassuring smile he gives her has my mind fucking exploding.

I don't… I don't understand.

Does he simply not care that Idril was just checking out Daxen? Don't Alphas lose their fucking minds if their Omegas so much as acknowledge another male's looks?

Is it just because we're Pack? Is there just no jealousy there because of our Fated Pack Bond?

"I can work on deciphering the texts," Branwen offers. "There's a good chance that if I concentrate, I'll See something. I'm going to require the phone, though."

"Absolutely not," Dax scoffs. "I'm not handing over the only piece of evidence we have."

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you want my bloody help or not?" She stands, her graceful movements at odds with her scathing tone. Crossing the space

separating her from Dax, hands planted on her hips, she lets loose.

“Do you even want to know what those texts are referring to, or are you planning on simply stumbling blindly through evidence you didn’t even bother to procure yourself until you make so many incorrect assumptions that you end up hurting someone innocent thanks to your fucking hubris? I mean, from what I can tell, that’s simply standard operating procedure around here. I guess that’s my fault for assuming I’d be working alongside grown males who aren’t going out of their way to make things more difficult, but it seems I’m mistaken.”

The glare she aims at Daxen is terrifying. It’s the same way my Mother used to glare at me when I misbehaved as a child.

Dax, of course, refuses to back down.

“I don’t know you,” he bites out, but his voice doesn’t carry the conviction he’s trying to convey. “You’ve been clear you’re here for Idril, not us.”

I can feel Idril physically shrinking into her blanket, like she wants to disappear. She pulls it tighter around her shoulders, and I’m so fucking glad I thought to purchase extra Nesting material for her, and at the same time, I’m so fucking pissed that she requires something soft and warm and safe right now to begin with.

Branwen, to her credit, doesn’t cower an inch. She stares Daxen down, holding his gaze as well as any Alpha. The girl has a spine of steel, that's for sure.

A tense moment passes, then the Omega lets out a laugh that’s so eerily similar to a cackling witch that the hairs on my arms stand on end.

“Oh, I get it now,” she laughs. “I thought it was only Idril, but it’s not. Not by a long shot.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Daxen demands, nostrils flaring.

I raise my hand because I know the answer. Fates, I think we all know the answer, outside of the newcomers in the room.

“It’s Omegas in general, is that it?” She steps closer, her tone mocking. “Yes, that’s exactly right. Here. I’ll make you a deal, you absolute skirt-shirker.”

She spins, pointing at me. It takes everything in me not to shrink away from that finger.

Fates know what she might do pointing that thing all willy-nilly like that.

“You give me the phone, and Vaelenor can stay with me the entire time. That way I won’t be able to do anything to *manipulate* anyone. Not with a big, bad Alpha to remind me of my place.”

She smiles, but it’s not a nice smile. It’s the smile you’d see on a shark. The Omega isn’t even angry. She’s more delighted knowing she’s got Daxen’s number. The deliberate emphasis she put on the word *‘manipulate’* isn’t lost on either of us.

“Ouch, I might marry that one. She can terrify me ‘til death do us part,” Kane announces to the room, and Branwen tosses him a smirk and a wink over her shoulder.

Gods help me, if those two ever actually hook up, it would be like watching a natural disaster unfolding in real time. All the Bastards in the US wouldn’t stand a chance against their combined shit-talking.

Dax actually seems to be considering her proposal, which I wasn’t expecting. He raises a brow at me in question, and I shrug, not really minding if I have to babysit the Omega while she does whatever voodoo shit she does to See things.

It might be nice to get some damn answers without adding a couple thousand more questions.

“Fine,” Dax agrees. “Vaelenor will stay with you the entire time while you do…” he waves his hand between them dismissively. “Whatever the hell it is you claim to do that has been helpful exactly once since you showed up out of nowhere.”

Branwen throws back her head and guffaws. “Gods, you have a reckoning coming, Daxen Montclair, and the more you talk, the more excited I am to see it.”

She retakes her seat, muttering a string of curses under her breath. The only things I catch are *“bloody pussy-petrified tosser,”* but I’m pretty sure that’s on purpose because the moment the words are out, Dax shoots from his seat, eyes flashing with rage.

“Fear has nothing to do with my decisions. I just don’t trust whatever brand of chaos you're involved in.”

Before he can take one more step toward the Omega, Idril’s voice cuts through the tension unexpectedly.

“I think that’s quite enough.” Her tone is soft, but purposeful. And apparently so unexpected that Dax’s jaw drops open in shock. He turns slowly until he’s facing her, then stares at her for what feels like forever.

Not once does she look away.

Next to her, Caelan sits still as a statue while Soren eyes Dax like he's contemplating twenty-eight different ways of pulling his spine from his body. And yet, neither male steps in.

"Excuse me?" Daxen finally asks, tone low and sharp.

Idril sits taller, allowing the blanket to fall to her lap.

"I said," she repeats, enunciating each word with purpose, "That is quite enough."

Because I'm so close, I'm nearly touching her; I can feel her body trembling. It takes everything I am not to reach out and place my hand along her lower back to steady her, but despite being so close to each other, we've never so much as accidentally grazed one another.

And gods, I want to. I want to fucking touch her. When she speaks again, her voice shakes nearly as badly as her limbs, but she still doesn't back down.

"Branwen is my friend, and she's here as Gavran's guest. You—you can't talk to her like that."

Her voice cracks on the last word, but she goes on, fingers curling tighter around her blanket.

"I might not have much experience in social situations, but I do have experience with sadistic Alphas. I did spend twenty-two years surviving one, after all." Her jaw ticks, eyes flaring with something hot and angry.

"My father is a monster. He is one of the cruelest, most vile beings alive. And yet, compared to you, his manners were impeccable. You might consider that."

Fuck. Me.

Soren and Caelan both snap to attention, ready to protect their Mate. Idril's tongue darts out, and she licks her lips. Her dry throat clicks as she swallows.

Fates, she's terrified.

Terrified… but not backing down.

Dax doesn't move. Not for a long few moments. Then his mouth opens, lips parting and eyes hardening, and I know—*I fucking know*—he's about to make this a thousand times worse.

I brace myself for his attack, confident he's about to cut her down and destroy every small bit of courage she's somehow managed to scrape together to stand up for her friend.

But right as I think he’s about to bite back, his hands—curled into fists at his sides—loosen. He inhales a sharp breath, nostrils flaring like he’s trying to catch a scent, and something in him changes.

The shift is so slight I doubt anyone but Caelan and I notice. To me, it’s fucking obvious.

His pupils expand until they’re so wide they nearly eclipse all of the grey. His head tilts to the side—his brow furrows.

And my normally controlled, impenetrable Packmate… *submits.*

Eyes that have been locked steadily with Idril’s drop, falling to the floor deliberately.

There’s no acknowledgment of what happened on his end, but his eyes close and he takes a deep, long breath like he’s praying for patience. To anyone else, he’s exactly what he’s portraying himself to be in this moment. An Alpha fighting against his irritation and wrangling his control back into submission. I fucking know better.

He’s not upset. He’s not mad. Fates, he’s not even irritated.

He’s turned on.

Gods, what the hell is happening right now? This asshole has spent the last three days making me feel like the world's shittiest Packmate because of how I feel about the Omega. I’ve spent every single waking second keeping my side of the Bond locked down—something he *knows* makes my fucking skin itch—just so he and Caelan can’t feel the lust and obsession and need raging through my veins.

I’ve been waging war with my Pack on two fronts. Can’t let Dax know how bad I want her or how much guilt I’m drowning in; otherwise he’ll call me a traitor. Can’t let Caelan know how bad I want his Mate.

Also, because he’ll probably actually kill me.

And now… *now… Daxen is the one hiding shit!*

He turns and retakes his seat, propping his ankle on his knee, looking anywhere but at Idril. The Omega’s still strung tight and shaking. Her lower lip wobbles and she bites down on it—hard—and stays steady.

There’s a barely audible vibrating growl climbing up Caelan’s chest. I wonder if he’s pissed because of the way Dax spoke to his Mate, or because he clearly wants Idril just as bad as we do.

When Dax hears the sound, he straightens and shrugs his shoulders like his skin is too tight. “So moving forward, what's the plan of action? Anyone have any ideas?”

Soren leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees and furrows his brow in feigned confusion. “Wait, you actually want suggestions from the rest of us?” Widening his eyes, he places a hand on his chest, adding, “I’m sorry. Here I was thinking you had all the answers.”

“It’s the fucking title of his autobiography,” Caelan mutters under his breath, still glaring at Dax across the room. “I Have All The Answers. Just Ask Me.”

Daxen’s face goes blank. Then he lowers his head and, so quickly I nearly miss it, the side of his lip tips up in a self-deprecating smirk.

I feel like I’m living in an alternate universe. *Is he actually playing nice?* First the public submission to Idril and now this. Maybe I was wrong earlier, and he isn’t regressing. Maybe he was just being his normal asshole self, and I misread it.

“I want to get to work on these text messages,” Branwen says, standing from her seat. “If it’s cool with Vaelanor, we can hang back and get started on that.”

“Fine with me,” I agree.

“I need tae steal Soren for just an hour or two,” Kane says, catching Soren’s eye. “Just to check in with the lads.”

Soren frowns. “Is everything alright?”

“Oh aye. They just want to see for themselves that you haven’t been drained dry,” he grins. Soren rolls his eyes, glancing down at Idril. “Is that alright with you, Little Mate?”

Idril’s eyes widen in surprise. She glances between Soren and Kane, like she’s not sure Soren meant to ask her opinion. When it becomes clear to her that it wasn’t a mistake, she smiles.

“Of course. I can help Caelan with—”

She’s cut off as Caelan reaches out and wraps an arm around Idril, pulling her into his lap.

Dax stands, throat working as he swallows thickly. His eyes darken on Idril, and the way she’s perched on Caelan’s lap makes his pupils dilate.

Jealousy. That’s jealousy… holy shit.

“Great. You all can let me know what you find,” he mumbles as he packs up his equipment. “I’ll be in the Security room analyzing tapes from Cage’s last few weeks.”

He doesn’t wait for a response. He swings his bag across his shoulder and heads toward the door, not bothering to bid farewell to any of us on his

way out.

The door swings shut, slamming behind him, effectively signaling an end to Soren's little meeting.

I don't move from my spot on the couch as the rest of the group stands and begins filing out. Thank the gods Branwen mentions she needs to speak to Idril before we get started, because I need a minute alone. To get my shit together at the very least.

I've barely nodded my assent when she asks me to hang on for a second before she scurries into the hall, shouting Idril's name dramatically. When Idril responds with a peal of laughter, I'm eternally fucking grateful that I'm the only one left in the room and I can let free the groan of frustration and need I've been swallowing back all afternoon.

I am so totally, completely, fucking fucked.

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Chapter 25

Idril

"I want to go back to my father's Estate."

It's the morning after we met to discuss what Soren and I found in Cage's room, and the sun is just peeking over the edge of the forest outside the window.

The sound of my own voice makes me wince. It's a jarring contrast to the soothing sound of Caelan's heartbeat where my head rests on his chest, and the even cadence of Soren's soft breaths where he sleeps on my other side, an arm flung across my middle.

"I wondered when you were going to bring that up," Caelan murmurs, idly running fingers through my hair. "We can go today, if you'd like."

I nod in agreement, too afraid I'll start crying if I speak out loud. Every time I so much as think of my mother, I find myself fighting back tears. And I don't want him to see me crying.

It's so stupid to work so hard to hide it when I know for a fact Soren and Caelan both can feel my pain through our Bond. I'm getting better at blocking them, but it takes practice—something we've found ourselves short on these last few days. Still, I don't think they realize how grateful I am that they make such an effort to keep their emotions to themselves. It's already difficult enough to navigate my own chaotic feelings. I don't know how I'd handle it if I had to sift through theirs, too.

Of course, there are moments when I love feeling them down the Bond. Like right now, as an overwhelming sense of support flows into me, pulsing down the silver thread connecting Caelan's soul and mine.

I let it wash over me, luxuriating in the warm perfection of his care. It's so perfect. So overwhelmingly *real*.

Days ago we realized that Soren has the strange ability to sleep through anything—including a possible nuclear attack. So it startles me when Soren snaps to attention, shooting awake with a gasp.

He's tense, blinking bleary eyes until they finally adjust and his shoulders relax.

"Morning," he murmurs, leaning over and placing a gentle kiss on the nape of my neck. "This is where I'm going to bite you."

That shocks a laugh out of me. "Where did that come from?"

He grins. "Just thinking. For the sake of being honest, you should know that I think about giving you my bite often."

"Not as often as I think about your blood," Caelan admits from my other side. His eyes are focused on the side of my neck.

I stiffen, which Caelan notices because he misses nothing.

"What's wrong? What just happened?"

"Aren't you worried? About what might happen if you drink my blood?" I glance at Soren over my shoulder. "You, too. What happens if, when you bite me, you swallow some of my blood? What if you guys start glowing and sparking like Calla and Daniella?"

Caelan and Soren share a heavy look above me. I sit up, tucking the blankets around me and reaching for the blanket Vaelenor gave me yesterday, wrapping it around my shoulders.

"Omega—"

"I hate my father," I say, cutting Caelan off. "I hate him so much. For what he did to my mother. For what he's done to the missing Omegas. And I really, *really* hate the way he's made me some kind of unwilling participant in what I really hope is a psychotic break and not something he's been involved in all this time that I could have prevented."

Soren frowns. "That's bullshit, Omega."

"Listen to me." Caelan pushes up so he's seated as well. "None of this is your fault. Your father's actions are not your own. I've been saying *that* since before I knew you were mine. Don't you dare let the shit my brother says convince you otherwise. You're a victim, too, just like the other Omegas."

"I think it might help if we understand *why* he's doing it," Soren suggests, arching his back as Caelan nods in agreement.

"Agreed. We know why he stole your blood, but we don't understand why he's trying to pass your abilities to other Omegas. I can make a pretty

good guess, but that's all it'll be. We also don't really know how or why the Severed are involved."

I can't help feeling defeated. We have so many questions and no answers. It's maddening.

I know there are so many more important things we need answers to, but I can't help fixating on the one question that runs on a loop in my mind. The question that keeps me up at night.

The question I'm not sure I even want the answer to.

What does all of this have to do with me?

"There's this, too." Soren snatches the remote from the nightstand and points it at the TV. He flips through what must be a thousand different channels—*why are there so many?*—until he lands on a national news outlet.

Caelan groans. "No way. Turn it off, Soren. She doesn't need to see this shit."

He reaches over me for the remote, but I lift a hand to stop him, eyes glued to the television screen. *Fates… when's the last time I actually watched television?* I must have been a pre-teen when Father took them from every room I had access to.

"It's alright," I give Caelan a soft smile. "I need to know."

Caelan doesn't look convinced. He sighs and pulls me close until I'm resting against his chest.

Soren turns up the volume. He and Caelan both shift until they're leaning against the headboard, sporting identical grim expressions.

The commercial break ends and a Newscaster appears on screen. She's a pretty, middle-aged woman who has incredibly kind eyes, despite her frown and the furrow between her brows.

"Good morning, it's 6:52 a.m. here in New York. If you're just joining us, we're in the middle of our continuous coverage of the global disturbances that have been baffling scientists and officials alike over the last few weeks. Overnight, another seismic event shook the Alaskan Coast, despite the area containing no fault lines to account for the magnitude of the tremors."

The screen cuts to an overhead shot of a small fishing village in absolute disarray. Nearly every boat is capsized. The buildings have been reduced to nothing but rubble, and trees and power lines are strewn in a tangled, dangerous mess across the land.

And right through the middle of the town, impossible to miss, the very Earth is marred by a massive, jagged fissure.

"The search for survivors is still ongoing. So far, two are confirmed dead, with an unknown number missing. Because of the remote location, it's difficult for First Responders to mobilize effectively, putting the burden of search and rescue on the residents of the community."

I gasp, my heart breaking for the people picking through the rubble. The cameraman's too far away for any close-ups, but I can see them, crawling around their broken town like tiny ants.

"In other news, here in the lower forty-eight, residents in Kansas are waking up to reports of more unexplained lights in the sky."

The footage changes. Right away, it's obvious this video was originally filmed on someone's cell phone. The camera's pointed at the night sky, thousands of sparking stars just barely visible behind the clouds. For a long moment, nothing happens.

Then, the person recording lets out a curse as dozens of balls of light shoot across the sky, one after the other. It's an endless shower of falling stars the size of basketballs.

The camera follows the lights until they begin to slow. Eventually, they fizzle out, disappearing over the horizon as fast as they appeared.

"The unexplained phenomena were accompanied by massive power outages in half the state. Leaving hundreds of thousands without electricity, and the power companies at a loss with no identifiable cause as to why or how their power grid was affected."

A man in coveralls with a company logo patched on the breast and a utility belt appears on screen. His mouth is pursed, lips pressed in a thin, angry line, exhaustion clear in each line of his face.

He leans into the microphone and glares at the person interviewing him. *"Ma'am, there ain't no timeline for when the power'll be back up because there ain't nothin' wrong with the lines. We've checked every transformer, every line, every substation from here to God's green cornfield, and there ain't a damn thing wrong with any of it."*

"So you're saying you don't know what caused this," the reporter asks, before shoving the mic back in the guy's face. He gives her an exasperated look.

"Did I say I don't know what caused it? 'Course I do. It was those damn balls of light. But whatever they were, they didn't leave us a note explainin'

how to turn the juice back on. Folks are just gonna have to sit tight, cause this ain't in the manual."

The man stalks off, and the footage cuts back to the reporter.

"Other areas across the world experienced disturbances overnight as well. In Italy, a six-hundred-year-old church collapsed after witnesses heard what they're describing as a 'sound like a thousand voices screaming.' Just hours ago in Tokyo, hundreds of flights were grounded when the compasses of several planes began spinning wildly before take-off."

The newscaster rattles off reports from Greece, Scotland and Nigeria. I listen intently, until her voice starts to sound like static and the footage on screen—disaster after disaster after disaster—blurs into a single, never-ending nightmare.

I'm drowning in shame. I've been so focused on myself and my pain. And all this time, these people have lost homes, jobs, and even their lives to unexplainable events I had no idea were even happening.

I spent years trapped in my father's house, selfishly believing that my little world was the only one on fire.

Now, seeing entire towns leveled, acres of crops dead and destroyed, beautiful, priceless art ruined, historical architecture in literal pieces… I'm finally realizing just how small my world truly is.

Caelan leans over Soren and snags the remote. Next thing I know, I'm staring at a black screen.

I blink, letting my eyes focus in the dimly lit room. I swallow, trying to work moisture into my mouth.

"What—what does all of that have to do with me?"

Caelan lets out a resigned sigh and covers my hand with his. "We don't really know. It might not actually have anything to do with you, Idril. That's part of the problem—it's something else we can't find answers to."

"Alright… well, what *do* you know?"

"Not much. Daxen's been tracking these anomalies for a while. To be transparent, he's been tracking them since they brought you to HQ. Apparently, they really ramped up the night of the ambush."

"And?" I push, knowing there's something he's not telling me.

"Daxen thinks it's… strange," he admits, grimacing.

"Daxen thinks you're the reason this shit is happening," Soren corrects. "Because Daxen has his head stuck so far up his ass he's basically blind."

My mind spins. I don’t even know what to say. Suddenly, so many things start to make sense, and that only makes me feel worse.

This is why Daxen hates me? He really believes I’ve had something to do with all these terrible things happening around the world? What, does he think I’m so powerful I can cause a Church to collapse without even knowing I’m doing it—from four thousand miles away?

It’s ludicrous!

Isn’t it?

“What am I?” I whisper. I don’t remember grabbing Soren’s hand, but I squeeze, terrified of his answer.

Of *any* answer.

Soren reaches for me with his free hand, pressing it against my lower back—a solid, warm weight tethering me to reality. His voice, when he answers, is soft, but strong and sure.

“You are our Mate.” He leans in, pressing a soft kiss right below my ear. His words vibrate pleasantly against my skin, making me shiver.

“You are your mother’s daughter.”

Tears rush to fill my eyes, his words a purposeful echo of my mother’s declaration the night she died. I hadn’t realized he was close enough to hear her.

Caelan’s forehead meets mine, and his answer is no less tender. “You are everything, Idril. The beginning, and the end.”

My Mates sit with me, letting their words carry the weight of all they haven’t said out loud. And in this moment, surrounded by their scents and warmth, I believe them.

Soren’s breath catches, and I feel him go supernaturally still beside me. He tilts his head to the side, brow furrowed like he’s listening to something only he can hear. Then his head whips toward the door, and he shoots from the bed in a full-blown panic.

“My Pack.”

That’s the only explanation he offers before he’s gone, taking off so fast he’s nearly a blur. He doesn’t even stop to throw on a shirt with his joggers.

I don’t hesitate to follow. I fling off the blankets and jump out of bed, racing after him. There’s no need to glance back and check for Caelan. Even if I couldn’t feel him in the Bond, I can hear his footsteps echoing steadily right behind me.

Soren’s already all the way down the hall, so even though I want to call out to him, it’s pointless. By the time I think to ask him where the heck he’s going, he’s rounding the corner and disappearing from view.

“Idril, get behind me, please!” Caelan sounds legitimately afraid, so I don’t argue. I slow down just enough for him to pass me, then pick up my pace.

Halfway down the corridor, a door to the right swings open and a barely awake Vae peeks out.

“What in the Fates is going on?” he asks, rubbing his eyes.

Caelan scarcely pauses long enough to glance back before he answers. “Don’t know. Something with Soren’s Pack.”

That’s apparently enough of an explanation for Vae. The door to his room slams shut behind him. He shoots across the hall, banging his fist against the door opposite his own.

I’m getting antsy, shifting from foot to foot, shooting worried glances after Soren. Caelan looks as eager to get going as I am. The second Dax opens the door, we take off, leaving Vae to explain what’s happening.

Thankfully, I can tell exactly where Soren is through our Bond. By the time we arrive at the side door off the kitchen, we’re right in time to see Soren’s back as he disappears into the forest without us.

I nearly run into Caelan when he stops at the door, throwing an arm out to prevent me from racing after Soren.

My instincts don’t care that my head knows Caelan’s not keeping me from Soren to be mean. So I feel ultra-bad when an Omega whine slips from my lips as a persistent, unbearable need to get to my Mate pulses through me.

Worse, I can feel his fear through the Bond. The fact that he’s not shielding me from his emotions sends my anxiety spiraling.

Suddenly, Daxen’s here, shouldering past us and pushing through the open door. He stills. The muscles in his back tense, standing out in sharp relief, and his spine is suddenly ramrod straight. I’m close enough that I easily hear when he curses.

“What the fuck….”

Caelan elbows around him. Whatever he sees is enough to warrant an even louder curse of his own.

I fight to choke down another whine, but it’s a struggle. My heart’s racing, and my hands are clammy with sweat. I wipe them off on the fabric

of my sleep shorts, pulling my cardigan tighter around me.

A flash brightens the sky, turning the Alphas in front of me into dark silhouettes. It's so bright I have to squeeze my eyes shut, fearing it might blind me.

Soren's fear is getting worse. I can feel it through the Bond and hear it in his tone as he shouts orders somewhere off in the distance. Each command he issues is followed by a chorus of male voices—ones I don't recognize, but pray to the Fates belong to Soren's pack.

There's a loud *SNAP* from the tree line, and the ground heaves beneath my feet, with a sound like rumbling thunder.

And just like that, I'm done.

I don't bother with niceties. I shove through the two Alphas in front of me, doing my best not to touch Daxen. I simply can't handle it right now if brushing up against him sets him off. Thankfully, he steps to the side as I push past Caelan and stumble into the cool morning air.

Caelan's hand wraps around my upper arm, and he tugs, pulling me back into his chest. I glance up, worried I've made him mad, but he's not even looking at me.

I follow his gaze and realize he's looking at the forest—at the wolven appearing between the trees. One after another, the massive Beasts spring from the forest like the hounds of hell are after them.

"What's going on?" Vae barks, which seems to shock the other two. They shift, making room for him to slide in next to us. As a group, we creep forward cautiously.

Turns out, we're right to be cautious.

Initially, I wasn't sure what caused the loud snapping sound, but now I can tell exactly what it was.

Right at the forest's edge is an obviously empty spot in the foliage where a tree is missing—well, not missing. It's still there, but it's on the ground, sprawled on its side. Crushing the smaller, younger trees. The top of the tree is facing us, branches extending to either side like swaying, grasping arms.

The middle of the trunk is cracked clean in half, exposing thousands of jagged pieces of wood, sharp enough to skewer someone with little resistance.

The ground begins to move again, subtly pitching to and fro like a ship on a tumultuous sea. It lasts no more than a couple of seconds before—

SNAP!—another tree fractures, falling to the forest floor in a spray of debris, just a few feet away from the first.

I barely have time to register what I've just seen when another one falls a couple yards to the west. Then another, and another, and *another*, until rows are fragmenting under the strain of gravity. Each tree lost is punctuated by the deafening *CRACK* of its trunk splintering apart into hundreds of pieces.

The sound becomes so loud I have to cover my ears, unable to take another second. Each death makes me flinch, not because of the sound, but because the loss of each tree physically hurts my heart.

Caelan tightens his hold around me, but I'm not going anywhere. The wolven—which are closer in size to horses than wolves—are nearly on top of us. Either no one's paying attention, or they're simply not worried because, rather than moving out of the way, all three Alphas stand their ground.

"Where's Soren?" I have to shout over the noise.

Is this what it feels like to be in the very center of thunder? Every tree that falls adds to the rumble beneath my feet. Flocks of birds explode from the branches. Hundreds of squawking specks with wings flee into the sky in search of presumed safety.

"I don't know. I don't have any idea what he looks like in Beast form," Caelan shouts back.

I bite down on my lower lip, searching the shadows of the trees for my Mate. Two more wolven appear, lunging from the forest, followed closely by Shade, who is not only chasing them; he's quite literally nipping at their heels.

He shrieks, a raspy, yowling scream that I think is supposed to be his version of a growl, just to ensure he's made his displeasure known.

I'm practically vibrating with fear at this point. When a tree nearly lands on Shade—who dodges at the last second—I rush forward with a terrified shriek.

I don't get far. Caelan's grip on me is unyielding. Thankfully, my cat has the reflexes of a predator made of shadow. He flies across the yard—a thousand times faster than any of the wolven—and less than thirty seconds later he's skidding to a stop at my side.

With a choked sob, I fall to the ground and wrap my arms around his massive neck, thanking the Fates he's safe.

Only a few moments later, the cacophony begins to slow before coming to an abrupt stop. Almost as if the forest had been self-imploding specifically in an attempt to injure the wolven residing in its domain.

One final tree groans before snapping in half and crashing into the ground, sending a showering plume of pine needles and branches billowing into the air.

What follows is a silence so thick and eerie it feels as unnatural as the chaos that took place moments before.

I stand, keeping one hand on Shade's head for comfort as he sits calmly by my feet.

The first wave of wolven have started to shift. Each and every male is tall, gruff, and muscled—almost the way I imagine lumberjacks. They all sport some form of facial hair, and a few even have long, shaggy strands that clearly haven't seen a pair of scissors in years.

Vae snorts in amusement. "They look like a regiment of highlanders who got told that kilts are out and denim is in and, in a twist absolutely everyone saw coming, they're all ready to go to war over it," he mutters, voice purposely low enough that only we can hear him.

Which is probably smart, considering the group of males look like the kind who punch first and ask questions later.

The two wolven Shade chased from the woods are easy to spot, standing with the rest of their shifted Pack and nudging them with their noses. They make a show of sniffing each person thoroughly—presumably searching for unseen injuries.

One of the wolven is a mottled grey and brown with amber eyes. I smile when one of the males reaches down and playfully bats him away.

Then the second wolven steps forward and my breath catches in my throat. White as snow and so massive he nearly reaches the other males' chests.

He turns from his Pack and heads in our direction. His large body is surprisingly graceful despite his abnormal size. As he gets closer, I realize his eyes are a startling bright green. And the moment they land on me, I feel a spark of recognition.

It's not simply the size, or the fact that he has the same—albeit lighter—eyes as my Mate. It's the sheer dominance radiating from him with every graceful step he takes. That, and the focused intensity in his eyes… like he's imagining all the ways he wants to consume me once he has the chance.

My body moves before my mind can catch up. I take a step toward the massive Beast, and Caelan doesn't hold me back. Shade, however, follows next to me, ears perked and tail shifting side to side—almost like a dog wagging its tail in excitement.

"Gods, that cat is fucking fearless," Vae mutters.

"You *have* come to the realization that that's not a normal panther, right?" Daxen drawls from behind me. "It's not like she went to the zoo and brought it home."

A long beat of silence passes, then Vae whispers, "Wait…you can do that?"

Shade chuffs, and I get the distinct impression that he's laughing. Daxen's right about one thing… Shade's not a normal panther. He's something else. Something… *something like me*.

I spare a glance at the wolven standing behind Soren's Beast. His Packmates are huddled together in a solemn group, eyes trained on Soren. They're tense, almost like they're prepared to intervene if he attacks.

There's a gravity to this moment. Something I'm too ignorant to understand. For once, I don't think I'd be able to grasp the magnitude, even if I *had* lived a normal life.

I'm not afraid, but my instincts don't subscribe to rationality. My Omega is trying to be brave, but it's not easy. Not when I'm so close to something so rarely seen by humans that some circles still consider them myth.

Soren's paws are the size of dinner plates, and with every step he takes, his claws tear up the Earth. His body is almost solid muscle, sides billowing with each controlled breath.

I don't realize I've stopped to stare until Shade turns his head and chirps at me in a scolding tone before bounding across the final few feet separating us from Soren.

The tension from Soren's pack thrums until it's so thick in the air I can practically feel it. Unconcerned, Shade lopes right up to Soren and butts his head against the Beast's flank. His purr is so loud it sounds like a car engine revving, and the startled expressions on the group of wolven make me laugh, despite the tension.

Soren returns Shade's greeting. Then, he turns to me and dips his head and hunches his shoulders. Like making himself six inches shorter might make him seem less threatening.

For some reason, that makes me grin. It’s so ridiculous but at the same time, just so… *Soren.*

The last thing I want is for him to worry his own Mate is afraid of him. I lift my hands and run my fingers through the soft, silky fur between his ears. He’s much warmer than I thought he would be. He exhales in relief, and a surge of appreciation rushes through me. Pushing onto my tiptoes, I wrap my arms around his broad neck.

I remember watching the old Thanksgiving Day parade on television one year with Mama—before my father took all the TV’s away—and seeing the Clydesdales. They were one of my favorites, with their towering forms and feathery hooves, prancing with their heads held high like they knew they were something to be admired.

The memory of those Clydesdales is what my brain latches onto, like an attempt to contextualize Soren’s majesty and size. His Beast is just as large, but instead of polished leather and reins, he’s all hard muscle and bulky, thick fur.

And he’s *mine*.

He gently rests his head on my shoulder. He’s quite obviously keeping all his weight on his back paws; otherwise, I’d be on the ground right now. I hug him tighter, loving the way his Christmas scent is even more intense in this form.

There’s an extra layer of wildness to it. Something primal and feral, an ancient power born of the Earth.

A heartbeat later, I’m no longer pressed against the solid, furry form of my Mate. Soren shifts—his fur receding, replaced by skin. The weight of him against my shoulder is replaced by his arms wrapped around my back.

He pulls back, sporting a huge grin.

“I probably shouldn’t admit this, but Fates, I was worried. I thought you might be afraid of me.”

“I might have been,” I admit honestly, “if I didn’t already know you were mine.”

Returning his widening grin with my own, I’m about to beg him to tell me how in the world he can shift without ruining his clothes, when Kane appears like a wraith to stand at Soren’s side. His normally jovial expression is absent.

“I dinna mean tae interrupt but….” He hesitates, tossing a look over his shoulder toward their pack. As I’m studying them, one male with shaggy

blond hair catches my gaze. His brow furrows and his lips thin into a disapproving line.

He doesn't look away, and I get the feeling he's daring me to do so first, like it's some kind of silent challenge.

What in the world is that about?

"What happened out there?" Caelan asks, placing a steady hand against my lower back and pulling me to his side. We cross the yard, coming to stand in front of his pack.

And, Fates… Every single one of these males—including Soren—is shirtless. I guess I should be grateful they're all wearing pants.

I blink at all the shifting muscles—*I mean seriously, why are there so many abs?*—and have to physically pull my attention away before I start actually drooling.

Hormones, I'm finding as I wean off my suppressants, are incredibly inconvenient. Suddenly I can't stop replaying that moment yesterday afternoon, when Daxen stretched on the couch, and his shirt rode up, and….

Oh my gosh, stop it, Idril!

"I had the lads doin' a perimeter check, and thirty minutes in they came runnin' back, shoutin' at us tae get out o' the woods. That we were under attack," the Scot explains, raking a hand through his dark hair.

"I let Soren know what was happenin' through the PackBond, then rounded everyone up tae leave. One o' the lads was far out, so when Soren got tae me, we went back for him. Then outta nowhere, yon wee Beastie came tearin' through the foliage with Alaric's wolf boltin' in front o' him. I could smell the fear comin' off o' him in waves."

"Because that damn cat took a bite out of my flank!" A male—who must be Alaric—shouts, shooting Shade a scathing glare. Shade's eyes flick toward the wolven dismissively, teeth bared in a snarl and a threatening sound vibrating in his throat.

When Alaric bares his teeth in return, he takes a step forward, and I place my hand on top of his head in warning. At my touch, his growl cuts off, and he takes a reluctant step back.

"No need to lower yourself to his level," I murmur under my breath. "Just ignore him."

Behind me, someone snorts. I glance over my shoulder and nearly pass out in shock to find Daxen watching Shade with a hand over his mouth, shoulders shaking in silent laughter.

I blink, then turn back around, focusing on the wolven in case he tries something stupid—like coming after my cat.

Kane steps in front of Alaric, cutting off his line of sight with a glare. “Aye, well—the kitty cat saved yer arse,” he tosses back. “Saved ours too, truth be told. Soon as he caught sight o’ us, he chased our arses all the way out o’ the woods. Trees fallin’ round us like the bloody end of the world. Christ above, I thought we were done for.”

Shade, clearly interpreting Kane’s words as praise for his heroic efforts, steps up and butts his head against his thigh.

With a roguish grin that nearly splits his face in two, Kane crouches down on one knee and scratches behind his ears.

“Yer a fierce wee bastard, aren’t ye? Good lad. Brave as any wolven, I’d say.”

Clearly having decided he’s made yet another friend, Shade turns and licks a long stripe up Kane’s face. The Alpha laughs and bats him away good-naturedly.

“Och, dinnae let it go tae yer head, aye?”

By now, the tension around Shade has eased, mostly thanks to Kane’s easy acceptance. The male who stared at me—*Alaric*— eyes flick toward me, and when he realizes I’m already watching him, his frown deepens. His confusion melts away, replaced with anger. He turns accusing eyes on his Alpha and stalks forward with purposeful strides until he’s so close to my Mate he’s nearly on top of him.

Soren tenses, lost in his own conversation with Caelan and Kane, but otherwise ignores him, which only pisses Alaric off even more. Seething, he growls, stepping even closer to Soren and shouting, “You Mated a *human*?”

The entire yard goes silent. The hum of males excitedly detailing their version of events halts abruptly, and suddenly, all eyes are trained on Soren and me. It takes everything inside of me to keep myself from cowering under the weight of their gaze.

Soren’s hand lands on my neck. His fingers flex, his touch easing my nerves and soothing my Omega’s desperation to burrow somewhere soft and safe.

Behind me, Soren straightens, looming over every male without even trying. He doesn’t get angry, even though I can feel his frustration through the Bond. He sweeps his gaze over the group of wolven, and I get the feeling he’s daring them to meet his eyes.

With a satisfied nod, he turns his focus to Alaric. “I did. This is my Scent-Match. My Fated Mate, Idril.”

His voice is full of pride, and it puts me even further at ease. Soren’s the picture of control and authority, but when he looks down at me, his eyes soften.

“Idril, these are a few of my Packmates. They’ve been keeping watch out here. An extra layer of security.”

There’s no reason to pretend I’m not openly studying the group. These aren’t the kind of males you can overtly shrink away from, no matter how much my Omega wants to.

There’s something about them that’s hard and primal in a way the vampires aren’t. I get the sense that even outnumbered, not one of them would shy away from a threat. There’s a solidity clinging to them, a sense of immobility. Fighting these wolven would be like trying to fight a stone wall. One that’s stood for so long, it’s permanently sunk into the Earth, becoming one with the very thing it was built to protect.

Instinctively, I know any sign of submissiveness on my part will solidify what they’re all already thinking.

I’m an Omega. *Worse—I’m a human.* A thousand times weaker in their eyes than a wolven Omega.

Not fit to stand by their Alpha’s side.

My mind races. If I were them, I’d be waiting for a cordial, shy greeting from the human. Kind, gentle, but unimpressive. Even now, the males looking at me are mostly impatient. There are maybe one or two regarding me with open curiosity, but most, like Alaric, aren’t trying to hide their obvious disdain.

Based on their reaction to Alaric’s question, they aren’t happy that I’m human.

Well, fortunately for them, I’m *not* human. And even if I were, they’d simply need to come to terms with it. I’m fighting enough battles on what feel like dozens of fronts. This is one battle I don’t have to fight. Their opinion doesn’t matter, because Fate has already spoken.

More importantly, I made my choice days ago. And I choose Soren.

Bolstered by the strength of my decision, I decide the best way to respond to these males is to go with my gut.

They’re expecting a polite greeting, but that feels disingenuous. Cool indifference does as well—that’s simply not who I am. It might give off an

air of bravery, but sooner than later it'll become clear that it was nothing more than a front. They'll see me as wildly inauthentic.

What is authentic, however, is the gratitude I feel for these males.

This isn't my home, but I *am* living here for now. More importantly, so are my Mates. And these males have spent the last week guarding the perimeter of our home. They've given up their comforts to live, work, and sleep in the forest.

The least I can do is thank them. Nothing grandiose. The last thing I want is to come off as self-important.

Fates, I hope I'm not making the wrong choice.

My hands curl into fists at my sides, and I lift my chin, scanning the group of males standing before me.

"I want you to know that I'm grateful for the extra security you've provided," I tell them solemnly. "No one could have foreseen what happened this morning. Soren's told me how incredibly proud he is of his pack, and I can see why. I have no doubt you've all done your jobs well."

To my shock, two of the males stand a bit taller. Soren's grip tightens around my neck, and he sends a surge of fierce pride down the Bond.

At some point, Daxen must have wandered into the forest. The sound of his footfalls as he jogs back pulls everyone's attention and, thankfully, puts an end to my introduction.

I send a quick prayer to the Fates, thanking them for the interruption.

Daxen comes to a stop in front of us, shooting troubled glances over his shoulder back toward the trees. His mouth is pressed into a grim line.

"Another disturbance."

No one seems shocked. After all, the whole world seems to be under some kind of supernatural attack.

Even still…

"Why here?" I murmur, recalling the hours I've spent watching report after report on the news. How convenient for this to happen just moments after I finally discover what's going on in the rest of the world.

Maybe I'm looking too far into it, but something doesn't sit right with me.

Dax frowns. "Do you know just how many disturbances have taken place within thirty miles of HQ over the last two weeks? Starting the night Caelan was taken—"

I cut him off with a growl. It’s a pitiful Omega growl. One that escapes before I even realize just how angry his words have made me.

But Fates, I *am* angry.

No. I’m furious.

I am so sick and tired of Daxen ignoring that I was a victim that night as well. It was one thing when Caelan was still in a coma and everyone *“thought”* I was lying.

But Caelan’s been awake for days. They know better. Daxen, specifically, knows better. And after spending weeks being accused of lying, I’ve officially had it with his willingness to ignore my pain.

“The night *I* was taken,” I snap, correcting him before he can say anything. “Or, if you’d like, the night Caelan *and I* were taken. Either way, you don’t get to keep ignoring what happened to me that night. Especially when we *both* know the next thing out of your mouth is going to be an implication that I’m the reason for all these disturbances. And don’t say it wasn’t.”

He opens his mouth, eyes wide, but I raise my hand, forestalling him.

“I said, *don’t say it*. Don’t think you can accuse me of being the mastermind behind the destruction of villages in Alaska and churches in Italy and the electrical grid of the entire state of freaking Idaho! Not if you’re going to turn around and imply that I’m too blind to know that’s what’s about to happen. Like I’m too stupid to pick up on repeated patterns!”

I’m shaking. I can’t tell if it's quiet, or if I just can’t hear anything over the high-pitched ringing in my ears. I can physically feel the blood drain from my face even as I hold Daxen’s gaze, too paralyzed with terror to look away.

Oh, gods! Stupid. Stupid, stupid! Why did I do that?

My Omega is losing her mind, shaking with horror. I almost let the fear take over. Fall into it and let it drown me. It’s what I know. It’s what’s familiar.

Alarms are screaming in my head, warning me to submit if I want to survive. Some kind of fight-or-flight instinct kicks in, and I get a dump of adrenaline.

The world blurs. My chest tightens painfully while I struggle to breathe. And I know… *I know, I know, I know*… I’m about to pass out. I’m about to

pass out, and doing so will undermine everything I just said. I'll lose whatever headway I made with the wolven, and—

Stop.

Breathe.

The voice echoes through my mind. I swear it's like I mentally gasp and latch on, sucking down lungfuls of air.

My eyes flutter shut.

The world quiets.

Breathe.

The voice hums a soothing tune—one I know, but don't. There's a shift in the air, followed by a gentle caress as a tendril of wind brushes along my cheek. It twirls and twists, dancing through the strands of my hair in playful acknowledgment. The whole ordeal lasts only a moment, but it's enough. Enough to calm down.

Enough to retake control.

It's pure instinct that urges me to focus on the flame in my chest. The flame that has recently been calm and quiet.

Waiting.

At my call, the flame flares to life, sparking with anticipation.

I hesitate. I have genuinely no clue what to do now.

Okay. Think, Idril. What do you need?

I need to stand my ground. Not only do I need to be brave, but I need to *not* back down from Daxen. I need to have enough courage to advocate for myself.

It's what I've wished for since I was a little girl, helpless against my Alpha father.

But I'm no longer a helpless little girl. I no longer lack power of my own. I might not have a clue as to what's happening to me, but whatever this is—it's power.

Even without it, I'm no longer fighting by myself. I'm no longer alone.

I'm no longer a powerless human Omega.

Not anymore.

I open my eyes, bracing for Daxen to snap. To demand I take back my accusations.

I won't.

I'm prepared for his anger. I'm prepared for his rage. I'm prepared for him to snap back and say hurtful things, because that's what Alphas do

when they feel like they're losing control.

I'm not prepared for his gaze to fall. To slide pointedly to the side.

I'm certainly not prepared when, with deliberate movements—like he wants to be sure everyone in attendance doesn't misunderstand—he tilts his head to the side.

And Daxen Montclair bares his neck in submission. *To me.*

"What… what's happening?" Vae's whisper is more frantic than I've ever heard him. And Fates, I can relate. My heart is racing so fast I think my chest is vibrating.

"Holy shit…" Soren curses.

At the same time, Caelan mutters, "He is so fucking lucky. I really thought today was gonna be the day I killed him."

I stand here, mouth parted, while I struggle to find words. Any words. Literally any words at all would be better than the stupid way I'm blinking at my erstwhile Fated Mate as he stares stoically at the ground at my feet, neck bared in submission.

The wolven shift nervously. Almost like being around such a dominant male as he publicly submits to an Omega who just told him off is making them seriously uncomfortable.

Well… *same*.

What do I even do? I mean… *Am I supposed to say something? Should I tell him to stop? Give him permission to look up, like a queen granting permission to rise?*

Oh gods, I really, really don't want to do that.

I don't have to worry because Daxen decides for me.

He lifts his head, takes a deep breath, and looks me right in the eye.

"You're right."

His voice is strained. *Raspy.* He clears his throat and winces.

"That was a shitty thing for me to imply. Despite the data, there is no empirical proof that any of what's happening is directly related to you."

He takes a step forward, grey eyes holding mine, refusing to let me look away. "I made a mistake before. I saw things in data that weren't true. Then, I made it worse by refusing to acknowledge *anything* that might contradict my data. I accused you of things you had no part in. I took it to a dangerous, cruel extreme."

Another step. His side of the Bond uncurls in my chest, like it can feel him drawing closer. It hurts even worse, somehow, the way it's reaching out

for him now.

So close, but so far.

“And you’re right,” he goes on, clasping his hands together in front of him. “A week ago, I would have ended my statement exactly as you said. I can’t expect you to know I wasn’t going to accuse you of anything today. Not when up until now, I’ve shown you nothing but the worst parts of me.”

I can’t speak. I don’t even think I’m breathing.

“I fucked up. With you. With Caelan.” His eyes flick to the side, where Caelan stands, body tense and still as a statue beside me.

“With Vae.” His gaze shifts to my other side, where Vae watches, mouth hanging open comically wide.

“I hurt all three of you. Simply because I refused to accept a reality that didn’t align with what I believed to be true. If you had any idea what—”

He cuts himself off with a grimace. Part of me badly wants to know what he was about to say, but he waves the thought away with a flick of his wrist.

“Regardless, I have no defense against your accusations. I do, however, have information about the disturbances. Specifically, those that have occurred within a thirty-mile radius of HQ. If you’d like to see them, I’d be happy to show you.”

With a respectful incline of his head, he slides his hands into the pockets of his slacks and strides back to HQ with his head held high.

No one speaks. Caelan and Soren flank me on both sides. At some point, Vaelenor came to stand at my back. He’s so close I can practically feel him vibrating from shock.

“Guys,” Vae whispers, pulling his phone from his back pocket. “I think —Well, maybe— Should we call Calder?”

Silence.

“Just to see if he needs to be checked out,” he quickly adds. “Nothing intensive. I’m thinking like… a baseline neurological assessment. To test for signs of possession.”

Caelan lifts a brow in question and echoes, “Possession.”

“Or… and listen, I’m just spit-balling here… but what if he had a stroke? Or, what if he was abducted in his sleep? Like body snatchers, ya know? I mean, in thirty years we might all look back on this moment and realize that if that hadn’t happened, we could’ve gone centuries without

knowing that's not actually Dax. That’s Alien Dax. And Real Dax is somewhere on a spaceship getting probed. Like, probed in the—”

“We know where aliens probe,” Soren cuts in, speaking over him.

“So then we’re all in agreement.” Vae perks up, and I’m starting to wonder if he’s being serious.

“We are not,” Caelan responds flatly.

Vae nods to himself. “Dax was body-snatched.”

Soren shoots Caelan a frown. “Is he even listening to you?”

“No. He gets like this sometimes. His brain just… processes differently. Sometimes you just have to let him tire himself out.”

After Soren confers with Kane and his Pack, we start making our way back to HQ. After only a few steps, I realize Vae isn’t with us.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I see him turning in a slow circle, one hand shielding his face from the sun as he squints into the sky as if a spaceship might appear at any second.

With a groan, Caelan jogs back, grabs him by the shoulders, and physically steers him back toward HQ. Vae argues the whole time, digging in his heels both literally and figuratively.

Soren and I follow, both of us trying—*and failing*—not to laugh. At the door, Vae nearly twists out of Caelan’s hold, but Caelan growls and grips the back of his neck like a puppy.

Right before the door shuts behind him, I hear Vae mutter, “They should’ve taken me instead. At least Dax isn’t such a coward; I can’t even work up the courage to apologize. If anyone deserves to be probed, it should be me.”

Soren’s laughter cuts off. I don’t move. I’m stuck there—staring at the now-empty door to the kitchen.

“Did he just—”

I nod. “Pretty sure, yeah.”

I dunno whether to feel bad for the guy, or… *Fates.*

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Chapter 26

Idril

I can't seem to turn off the television, and for the first time all day there's no one here to tell me to stop *"doomscrolling,"* as Caelan calls it.

To be fair, I still don't have a phone, so I'm not *scrolling* anything. I'm flicking through channels.

So… doomflicking?

It started as a way to get my mind off yesterday and Daxen's bizarre… *everything.* But new reports keep coming in, piquing my curiosity. I've kept an eye on the screen all day, trying to focus on other things so I don't get *"sucked in,"* but it's hard when it seems like something new happens every hour.

With Caelan showering and Soren on patrol with his Pack in the forest, for the first time all day, I'm alone.

I prod at Soren's Bond, and he sends back a wave of reassurance immediately. I'm trying not to bug him, but after yesterday I can't stop worrying, knowing he's out there.

When I explained my fears to Branwen earlier, Daxen pointed out that there's not a single documented case of a disturbance occurring in the same place twice. So by that logic, Soren and his Pack are probably as safe as any of us can be.

I don't know who was more shocked at his attempt to ease my fears—him or me.

And that's the thing. It *did* ease my anxiety.

Until my brain started reminding me that the laws of nature, man, and every other law don't seem to apply to me.

“We’re just now getting reports from South America that villagers along the Amazon woke to find the River flowing backward. Scientists are calling it ‘another in a long list of impossibilities.’ No injuries have been reported, but the event did disrupt multiple fishing routes.”

The new story grabs my attention, and I sit up straighter, leaning in so I don’t miss anything. This is a new channel and news anchor, one I haven’t seen before. After days of flipping between all the major news outlets, my Alphas finally gave in and let me take control of the remote.

I asked Branwen if she could *See* why the disturbances are happening, but she said all she gets are flashes of what'll happen in the future.

When I mentioned we could try and do something to warn those about to be affected, she gave me a look of exasperated fondness and said, “Darling, what would you have me do? Start a Facebook group? They’d call me a nutter and lock me away even *if* they believed me.”

I couldn’t even argue. Especially when I just spent weeks with males who refused to believe the truth no matter how often I tried telling it to them.

The bathroom door opens, and a billow of steam appears, followed by my Mate. Caelan pads into the room, naked except for a towel slung low on his waist. Droplets of water run in rivulets down his chest before disappearing into the cotton.

My mouth goes dry. It’s impossible not to be affected by him, especially now, when all I can see are miles of toned muscles and smooth, tan, tattooed skin.

My fingers tighten around the remote, and I have to bite down on my lower lip to keep a moan from escaping.

Caelan sees my reaction and grins, shooting me a cocky wink that has heat rushing to my cheeks.

Despite that, I’m not nearly as embarrassed by my responses as I was a few days ago. Everything with Caelan is just so… *easy*. He was my first kiss. The first male to ever touch me. The first Alpha to make me feel alive. *Wanted.*

My Bonds with each male are different, but no less intense. I’m sure they’ll grow and change, just as our relationships will grow and change, but my Bond with Caelan will always be unique.

He was the first male to give me the love and safety I’ve spent my whole life yearning for, and to do so without reservation. Without even

having to ask.

A sharp knock at the door has Caelan frowning as he runs a hand over his shorn hair. I stay where I am, readjusting my blanket nervously. My Omega is *not* happy about someone randomly showing up in the room that belongs to her, and I can't help but also feel a little on edge.

This is where we sleep, where we relax, where we've been safe for the first time in two decades.

Caelan clocks my movements and his frown deepens. At the sound of another knock, he mouths, '*Stay here*,' and marches to the door.

How have I never noticed the way he moves before? The way his muscles tense and roll beneath his skin, and how his chest and thighs flex as he reaches for the doorknob, lower body coiling tight. His every sense is on high alert, prepared to spring into motion to protect me from any potential threat.

Fates, even his scent is extra strong. The aroma of a hearth fire wafts through the air. Each note of smoked cedar, ash, and honeyed whiskey intensifies, filling the room and infusing my lungs until I swear I can *taste* him on my tongue.

I shake myself out of my scent-induced haze as Caelan squares his shoulders and yanks open the door.

Daxen.

Of course.

His scent hits me—Cedar, smoke, and cold stone—and my Omega relaxes. It blends with Caelan's, creating a mouth-watering cocktail that makes my Omega purr.

Their scents are similar, but Daxen's is sharper; his cold stone overpowers the cedar and smoke. Caelan's is much warmer—it's what I've always imagined home is meant to smell like. Like whiskey on my lips and fire in my soul, wrapping me in a downy cocoon of safety.

My hands shake as I reach for my blanket, pulling it closer to my chest.

It's not like this is the first time I've scented them together. Now that I'm staying in Caelan's room—in the same wing as Vae and Dax—I smell them everywhere. They're always here, blending perfectly along with Soren's Pine and Chestnut.

I've just never felt it so intensely.

Daxen pushes into the room, eyes fixated on the television as he makes a beeline for the lounge where I've been holed up all evening.

“Good, you’re already watching.” He plops down on the opposite end of the couch from me and points to the screen. “They’re bringing a guest on in a second. It’s someone I want you both to see.”

Both of us?

Caelan sighs and shuts the door with a bit more force than necessary. “You couldn’t have, oh, I dunno… fucking *not*?”

Dax tosses a frown over his shoulder. “Uh, no? I need you to see this. And I can’t find Vae, so I’ll have to fill him in later.”

Caelan’s jaw flexes as he disappears into his closet, reappearing a few minutes later in a pair of grey joggers. Daxen hasn’t said a word to me. I’m not sure if he’s ignoring me, or if he’s just so excited that he’s simply oblivious to everything else.

Caelan sits next to me and leans forward. “What’s this about?”

Dax waits until the news cuts to a commercial, then twists to face us. “Alright, so, Riven and I have been tracking all of the disturbances since the night we brought you back to HQ. Recently, we sat down and spent an entire afternoon mapping the location of each event.”

“Why would you do that?” Caelan asks.

“Riven hypothesized something that, up until recently, we haven’t had enough worldwide data to determine a correlation. In the US, yes. But the rest of the world? No.”

I shake my head. “Wait. Last I read—which, to be fair, was years ago—there wasn’t any scientific proof that Ley lines actually exist. There’s speculation, of course. And hundreds of stories dating back, gosh, over a thousand years at least. But nothing definitive.”

Daxen stills. His gaze lands on mine with an intensity I’ve never felt from him before.

“That’s correct.” His voice sounds strained and raspy. He shifts closer, closing some of the distance between us on the couch. “But as Riven pointed out, Ley lines have seen the rise and fall of countless empires over the years. Hundreds of civilizations have built religious temples, monasteries, churches, apothecaries, libraries—even the first recorded observatory—all along Ley lines. Why?”

“Coincidence?”

Dax visibly winces. I shoot Caelan a confused look over my shoulder, but Caelan just grins. “He hates that word.”

That actually tracks.

I chew on my lower lip, trying to think. “Alright… let’s say all these civilizations that came before us knew something we don’t. What does that have to do with what’s happening now?”

Daxen’s eyes find mine, gleaming with that same intensity as before. “Because each disturbance has taken place on a Ley line. Every single one. There’s not a *single* outlier.”

“What the fuck,” Caelan mutters, scrubbing a hand down his face.

I shake my head, leaning forward as my eyes widen at the implications. “That’s—That has to be statistically impossible. You’re sure?”

“Ran it four times.”

Caelan wraps his arm around my waist and tucks me into his side. His scent wraps around me like a warm blanket, soothing my anxiety.

“What does this have to do with the news?”

Dax straightens, his scent growing thicker and lighter with excitement.

“This male they’re bringing on—he’s corroborating everything Riven and I have concluded ourselves. This is validation on a *national* scale. Which means other people are putting it all together. Paying attention.”

Caelan glances down at me, lips pressed into a thin line. It’s clear he thinks Dax is getting a little over-excited about the whole thing, but to be fair, I kind of understand.

The commercials end, and Dax reaches for the remote. He turns up the volume—even though no one’s talking and it’s already loud enough—as the news anchor reappears on screen.

“—joined now by Doctor Hugh Wilder, a cultural archeologist widely known in academic circles as a ‘Ley hunter.’ For those unfamiliar, Ley lines are believed to be invisible lines that span the planet, connecting significant ancient sites and landmarks. People have long dismissed them as superstition or pseudoscience. But Doctor Wilder believes they may hold the key to understanding these mass disturbances. Doctor Wilder, welcome.”

The screen splits, showing the Doctor behind a desk in a cluttered office or study. There are piles of books stacked in random towers, and the walls are covered with so many maps there’s no empty space left. Some are framed, and some are tacked to the wall, but they’re all marked by sweeping curved lines that cross continents and oceans alike.

The Doctor himself is bald and looks to be in his early fifties, with laugh lines around his mouth and eyes. Eyes that probably twinkle when

he’s amused, but are currently dull with exhaustion as he returns the news anchor’s greeting.

“Doctor Wilder, you’ve been warning the world about Ley line disturbances for some time now. What have you observed?”

The Doctor. leans in a bit, like he’s gearing up for a fight instead of a lecture. This is clearly a man used to defending himself.

“I suppose I can’t exactly blame the masses for ignoring me,” he answers with a bitter laugh. “Who listens to the guy who yaps about Ley lines in 2026, right? Everyone thinks they’re just part of the stories their great-great-grandparents whispered over the hearth. However, the data’s undeniable. These anomalies—geographical, elemental, and otherwise—all occur along the same paths mapped centuries ago. Paths that some believe—with significant evidence to back them up—have existed for thousands of years. What I’ve done, and what anyone can do from your own home, in fact, is map the location of each of the recent disturbances. Then, you simply overlay it with a map showing the locations of the Ley lines.”

“And what did you find?”

“They’re a perfect match. The data doesn’t lie.”

My stomach flips as the screen flashes, showing a map of glowing lines and little black dots marking each disturbance. The perfect symmetry sends dread skating down my spine.

“Furthermore, as you can see here, the Eastern United States is overrun with disturbances. In the last few days alone, there’s been a massive uptick of small-scale happenings.”

“Such as?”

The Dr sighs, pressing his lips into a grim line. *“Such as entire neighborhoods reporting that their lights flickered off and on for hours in a distinct, identical pattern. Or a small town of around three hundred who claim they all had the same dream on the same night. Animals behaving erratically, tidal surges, the list goes on. More than three-quarters of these smaller disturbances are occurring East of the Mississippi. More specifically, on the coast near the southern parts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts… all the way down into Northern Delaware.”*

I don’t realize my hands are shaking until Caelan wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me onto his lap.

Fates, it’s so hot in here.

My forehead is damp with sweat. My skin feels tight, like I soaked in chlorine for hours and didn't rinse it off.

"So you're suggesting these incidents aren't random," the news anchor presses, and the Doctor barks a laugh that sounds half-crazed.

"Of course they're not random," he scoffs. *"Have you been listening to a word I've said? They're taking place on the Ley lines. Furthermore, the Eastern United States—especially New England—is absolutely inundated with small-scale events."*

"So what exactly are you trying to say, Doctor?"

"Oh my gosh, this lady is the worst," I growl, irritation and discomfort getting the best of me.

"It's like she's trying to piss him off," Dax agrees.

"She's baiting him. She wants him to get angry," I nod, swiping the back of my hand across my forehead and absentmindedly wiping my hand on my shirt.

Daxen snaps his fingers. "Damn, I didn't even see it, but you're right. She's trying to discredit him." His eyes narrow on the screen, where the Doctor is rubbing his temples and taking deep, even breaths.

"Oh for the love of Pete!" The Doctor turns, pointing a shaking finger at one of his maps. *"Look, here. See? This is the epicenter. The question we should be asking ourselves is no longer whether or not something larger is coming. The question is when it's coming."*

He turns back around to face the camera. *"Listen very carefully. My grandmother used to say, there's no forcing the toothpaste back in the tube once it's been squeezed out. Well, mark my words, Kelly. The world? We're the tube of toothpaste. And someone—or something—has our planet in its grip and is squeezing for all they're worth."*

The news anchor, who must be Kelly, looks stunned. She stares straight into the camera with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Thank you, Doctor Wilder, for your time as well as that… er… graphic warning."

The split screen disappears, taking the doctor with it.

"Alright," Caelan declares, leaning over and snatching the remote. He points it at the screen and presses the power button aggressively until the television finally clicks off.

It doesn't really matter, though. I can still hear the doctor's words in my head—

Eastern United States.

The epicenter.

Not if. When.

My chest constricts. There's not enough air in the room.

Daxen's right.

And if he was right about the Ley lines, there's a high probability that he's right about this, too. Which means… all of this is my fault.

All of it.

I can touch fire without burning. I can make the Earth move. The beams in the attic shattered because I couldn't control my emotions. The fire, the wind—I can make them do things with my mind.

I left my father's house, and now storms are ripping cities apart, and animals are dropping dead for no reason and—and—

Is this why father kept me locked away? Because I'm dangerous? Because something about me is wrong?

The television is off, but I can still see the ticker at the bottom of the black screen. An up-to-the-minute scrolling tally of my sins.

My fault, my fault, my fault.

"Idril!"

I turn my head, searching for Caelan through tear-filled eyes. I can hear him speaking, but I can't *see* him.

"Omega, take a deep breath in with me, alright?"

Who is that?

"That's right. You're going to be just fine."

"Back up, Daxen. You're too close."

Daxen. Caelan.

Two Mates.

Two Mates. One who betrayed me.

Is that why? Did Daxen betray me because he knows, deep down, that there's something wrong with me?

I'm panting. Sweating.

Oh Fates… oh Fates… I can't freaking breathe!

I rip my shirt off, uncaring of who's here or what they might see. I just need out of these clothes. They're too tight. Abrasive. Like sandpaper against my skin.

I strip off each layer until only my bralette and sleep shorts remain. Only then do I feel like I can inhale properly.

“I can’t—I can’t—”

I don’t even know what I’m trying to say. I can’t get the words out. Can’t make them make sense. I’m too lost in my anxiety. It’s strangling me, making me fight for every lungful of air.

I press my hands to my stomach. My skin is burning up. Like I have a fever.

A sharp ache spasms through my abdomen, right under my palms. I groan, but it quickly devolves into a whine. The pain is both sharp and dull at once, like a thousand blunted knives ripping through my insides. I’ve never felt anything like it. Like someone’s ripping me apart and shoving boiling stones inside my gut.

Boiling stones with razor-sharp edges that scrape and stab against my insides with every freaking breath.

Oh gods, what’s happening to me? What is this?!

My vision starts to blur, and I really start to panic. Then, like an answer to my prayers, Caelan appears right in front of me. He reaches out and cups my face in strong, blessedly cool palms.

I can’t think. Can’t make decisions. But my Omega knows what to do. So when she pushes forward, I don’t fight her. I shove my face into Caelan’s neck and take gulping, greedy lungfuls of his scent. Maybe later I’ll look back on this moment and be embarrassed, but right now I don’t care about anything other than getting closer to my Alpha.

“She’s having a heat spike.” Daxen’s normally calm voice is wavering, like he’s struggling to get words out. His own scent spikes, bleeding into the room and making me moan.

“She needs—”

“Don’t,” Caelan snaps, pulling me to his chest and wrapping his arms around me, shielding me from his Packmate’s view.

There’s a lethal, dangerous edge to Caelan’s voice. I don’t dare look up, terrified that if I do, I’ll see rage on Daxen’s face. He hates everything related to Omegas. I’m sure he’s wondering even now if I did something to send myself into my first-ever heat spike just to manipulate him.

The memory of the look of disgust on his face makes my skin hurt. Suddenly, I don’t want him anywhere near me. I don’t want him near me, or my Mate, or my Nest, or anything at all.

“Get out,” I grind out the word between clenched teeth, face still buried against Caelan’s neck.

“What, sweetheart?” His voice is gentle, and the last thing I want Caelan to think is that I'm talking to him.

A cramp rips through my stomach. This one’s so sharp I can’t hold back the desperate whine that rips up my throat. I press my hands harder against my midsection, half-convinced that if I glance down I’ll see my organs spilling into my hands.

Daxen curses, and I realize he’s still just a few feet away. With shaky movements, I extend my arm and point in the vague vicinity of the door.

“Omega?” Caelan sounds so confused and Fates; I wish I could explain.

With all the energy I can muster, I shout, “Dax. *Leave!*”

“Get out, Daxen!” Caelan tucks my head into his neck and snarls so loud I can feel his threat vibrating throughout my whole body.

For a long, weighted moment, nothing happens. Then Caelan tightens his hold on me and snarls, “*Get out before I rip out your fucking throat*!”

Caelan’s bark leaves no room for misinterpretation. I can hear Daxen’s footfalls as he races to the door. It slams shut, leaving Caelan and me blessedly alone.

What’s confusing is that even though I ordered Daxen to leave, his retreat still hurts. Not because I want him, but because my Omega takes it as yet another rejection.

Enough. I snap. *He’s not rejecting us.* ***We*** *are rejecting him.*

That seems to finally get through to her. She cuts off mid-whimper and tilts her head, considering.

Something must resonate because instead of deflating, her shoulders actually straighten. Then she exhales, like she’s letting something go.

The moment is small, but meaningful.

Until another cramp slams into me, and all my brain and instincts care about is getting as close as possible to Caelan, even though I’m already practically crawling inside of him.

To make matters worse, slick is pouring out of me. It’s soaking my shorts and panties and running down my thighs. I’ve been wet before, but never like this. This is *not* normal.

“Why’s there so much?” I whimper. “Why does it hurt so much?”

“It’s alright, sweetheart. It’s a heat spike. This is normal.”

Caelan picks me up, and I wrap my legs around him instinctively. The moment my core comes into contact with his stomach, I throw my head back and moan.

Fates… it feels so good.

I don’t realize I’m moving my hips, but even when I do, I can’t stop.

“I need—Caelan, I need…”

He places me on the bed, and I’m forced to pull away from his neck so he can move, crawling on top of me. I inhale deeply, and the only thing I can smell is Caelan’s scent. Which means my perfume still isn’t strong enough to break through the suppressants, thank goodness.

Another cramp seizes me, the stone in my stomach scraping against my insides until I’m sure the edges have turned into knives, tearing me apart. The sound that rips from my throat is half plea and half demand.

Caelan growls low in his throat, swooping in and taking my mouth in a searing kiss. I let myself be swept away, luxuriating in the feel of his lips and tongue against mine.

It only lasts a couple of seconds before he pulls back, chuckling at the demanding growl I aim at him.

“It’s alright, love. I’ve got you.”

He kisses the corner of my lips before moving down my body, pressing soft, gentle kisses along my neck, my clavicle, down between my breasts. One hand slides up my ribcage, while the other tugs at the top of my bralette, pulling it down until one of my breasts pops free.

His pupils dilate, and he groans, scent spiking with need.

“Fuck, you’re perfect.” He leans in, taking my nipple in his mouth. I don’t know why I expect him to move slow—that’s not Caelan. He’s gentle and kind and would never hurt me, but when I look into his eyes, I can see just how close he is to losing control.

He ravishes me, sucking and licking and nipping at my breast until I’m a writhing, pleading mess. When I can’t take it anymore, I beg.

“Caelan. Please. I need you… It hurts. Please make it stop.”

“Shit, I’m so sorry. You’re right. Right now isn’t the best time for extended foreplay.”

I nod frantically, fingers clenching at the sheets and blankets so I don’t grab my Alpha and move him right where I want him.

I’m confused when, instead of leaning in for another kiss, he starts to move in the opposite direction. Holding my gaze, he slides his fingers beneath my shorts and tugs, pulling them down my legs with a sound of pure lust. He pushes between my legs, forcing me to spread them further to make room.

“Fuck, love. You’re so wet. You’ve completely ruined these.” He lifts my shorts between us and, to my absolute mortification, presses them to his face and takes a deep inhale.

“Gods, the Scent of you is enough to make me feral…”

I don’t have the brainpower to formulate a reply. Gripping my thighs in his hands, he lets out a primal moan and pulls my legs open. Exposing me to him for the first time.

I don’t even have the energy to be embarrassed anymore. My hips jerk as my body struggles to get closer to my Alpha. His fingers flex, making me moan and whine because *why—Fates, why isn’t he touching me?*

All I want in the world right now is for him to touch me. I need his hands on my flesh. His skin on my skin. The heat and breath and touch of my Alpha.

My Mate.

“Look at this pretty pink pussy,” he groans, eyes little more than onyx stones reflecting pure lust and need. His fangs have lengthened—something that would terrify me if he were anyone else. Instead, I bite my lip, unable to look away.

I want him to bite me.

I can’t stop thinking of what it might feel like. The image of Caelan’s fangs piercing my skin as he drinks my blood makes me shudder as more slick pours from me, pooling in the blankets beneath us.

“Fuck. What were you just thinking?”

His eyes are locked between my legs. I’m not sure he even realizes what he’s doing as he reaches out and slides one thick finger between my folds.

That single touch nearly breaks me. I arch off the bed, my back bowing and a moan escaping me that’s so loud I’m sure the entire castle can hear it. My scent blooms in the air—wild honey and smoked vanilla mixing with his hearth fire to create something that’s purely, uniquely us.

Caelan’s eyes snap to mine, burning with need. His lips twitch into a half-smirk as he lifts his finger to his mouth and sucks my slick from his skin.

He stills. And then he snaps.

His hands flex on my thighs, and he strikes, mouth latching onto my core as he devours me.

The sight of my powerful Alpha Mate between my legs is enough to send me spiraling. The way he feasts like he needs my slick to stay alive is

borderline feral. The possessive way he grips my flesh and the noises falling from his lips—the way it makes me feel is new and bright and perfect in all the right ways.

I can feel him pulling himself back, trying to get a rein on his control. His movements slow just enough to be purposeful, and it's somehow even better.

He licks me from my opening to my clit, a growl vibrating in his throat. He's merciless, determined to consume me and refusing to allow the smallest bit of my slick to go to waste. Each time his tongue passes my clit, I moan, my hips shifting desperately.

He throws his arm across my hips to hold me in place while I continue to rock against his mouth helplessly.

"That's it," he pants into my folds. "Ride my face."

His eyes latch onto mine. I can see the excitement in them right before he wraps his lips around my clit, and *sucks*.

I scream, arching off the bed while trying to chase my release as best as I can with his arm pinning me to the mattress. It feels so good. *So perfect.* His tongue plunges inside of me, and he moans like he's the one feeling pleasure right now.

"More, more, Caelan, please."

"Greedy Little Mate," he chuckles into my flesh. "Soaked and begging for me. You taste like Heaven. I could live between your thighs."

Another cramp hits, but this time the pain feels tangled with pleasure. It's sharper than before, brighter. But not enough.

"I need—I—I need—"

I don't *know* what I need.

Caelan swirls his tongue around my clit in teasing circles before flicking it back and forth until my eyes fill with tears from the pleasure.

"Say it," he orders. "Tell me. Tell me what you need."

"More," I moan, wishing I knew the right answer and praying that somehow he does.

"Good girl."

Releasing my thigh, he wastes no time slipping one thick finger inside of me. The pressure is *perfect*, and I sigh in relief. My hips move restlessly until he curls his finger just right while his tongue continues his exquisite torment on my clit.

The pleasure grows and grows until I feel like I might burst. The fullness of him inside of me is exactly what I needed.

"You're so fucking tight," he murmurs right before he flattens his tongue against my clit. I whine in ecstasy. My head falls back, and my hands fly to my hair and tug.

Fates, I'm so close. And it's so strong. So much stronger than before.

I try to pull away instinctively, suddenly terrified the pleasure might actually kill me once it snaps, but Caelan refuses. His arm bands tighter against my hips and somehow—*someway*—he doubles his efforts.

"Don't you dare fight it," he demands. "Give it to me, Omega. Drown me in your slick."

I do.

The pleasure that's built and built and built finally snaps, bursting through my limbs and sending electric sparks through my nerve endings. My thighs tighten around Caelan's head, and I don't even realize I'm screaming, but gods, I am.

I can feel myself tightening rhythmically around his fingers, clenching and pulsing over and over.

When will it stop? Will it ever stop?

Caelan moans, long and low, but never stops his steady movements. Like he's determined to pull every last ounce of pleasure he can out of me. His finger pushes harder against that part inside of me that makes me want to black out, and the movement of his tongue softens into something more languid.

I'm shaking, relishing in the feel of having something inside of me as I fall apart. Once the pleasure turns sharp, I pull away, every nerve in my body overstimulated.

With a chuckle, Caelan places both hands on my knees and gently pushes my legs apart.

I flush when I realize I'm probably suffocating him, but the smug grin on his face makes me think he wouldn't actually care even if he had stopped breathing.

He uses his tongue to clean between my legs before sliding up my body, brushing his lips delicately against my own.

I can taste myself on him, our scents mixing into something heady and alive.

And infinitely possessive.

“How do you feel?” he asks, pressing his forehead to mine. I wrap my arms and legs around him in response, and he laughs, flipping us smoothly so that he’s on his back and I’m curled on top of him.

“So much better,” I murmur, then yawn. “Tired.”

Truthfully, I’m exhausted. *Boneless.* I feel like I completely unraveled and was put back together again.

He presses his lips to my temple and takes a deep inhale of my scent while he still can.

“Let’s give you your shot, then you can get some sleep. Sound okay?”

He waits for my nod, then reaches over and fumbles for the waiting syringe on the nightstand. He checks once again to make sure I’m ready before administering the shot, but even now I barely feel the sting of the needle as he injects half my normal dose into my arm.

“Good girl,” he whispers. “Get some sleep, sweet girl.”

I don’t argue. I don’t think I could move right now if my life depended on it. I sink into my Mate’s arms, feeling euphoric and floaty and empty of every emotion except love and an overwhelming sense of safety.

With the ache in my body and mind blissfully silenced, I fall into sleep almost instantly.

* * *

I don’t know how long I’m asleep, but when I startle awake, Caelen’s next to me, breathing deep with one arm banded around my lower back and the other tucked behind his head.

My eyes are blurry from sleep, and it takes me a second to focus on my surroundings. But the moment I do, I realize what pulled me out of a dreamless slumber.

A thin line of flame flickers along the edge of the room, like soft candlelight.

Squinting, I follow its winding path with my gaze, trying to make sense of what I’m seeing.

“What…”

Is this one of those strange dreams again? It doesn’t feel like it, but—

No. Both times I escaped in my dreams, I felt a clear sense of unreality, even if it took me a second to recognize it. Like I was there, but not there at the same time.

Caelan shifts, and I glance at his still-sleeping form, wondering why neither of us has discussed the dreamscape, and if I should have brought it

up before. I hadn't meant to ignore it, but there's just been so much happening and—

The light flares, brightening the room significantly. I get the uncanny sense that it's irritated at being ignored.

And suddenly, Branwen's words from yesterday when she chased me down after the meeting come back to me.

"When the fire calls, you must answer it."

Well… Hell.

Sliding out from under Caelan's arm, I move as carefully as I can so I don't wake him. He's got a predator's instincts, and if he wakes up now, there's no chance he'll simply let me leave on my own to discover where this flame goes.

I don't like leaving without telling him, but I promised Branwen that I wouldn't ignore the flame *and* that I'd go wherever it took me alone.

She swore this was the way I'd find answers to my questions, so that's what I hold onto now, praying for the strength not to chicken out.

Besides, Branwen wouldn't knowingly put me in danger.

When my feet hit the plush rug, the flame flickers, wriggling across the floor toward the door.

It reminds me of a snake, slithering toward the unknown. A flame that leaves nothing but unblemished carpet and stone in its wake.

On my way out, I snatch a clean pair of cotton shorts from the bags of random stuff Vae purchased for me. One of Caelan's sweatshirts is still where he threw it across the back of the couch, so I snag that, too.

At the door, I hesitate. *Am I really going to do this? Follow a moving line of flame even though I have no idea where it might be taking me?*

I think of all the reports I've seen—all the people hurt and dead. All the homes and cities destroyed—and make a deal with myself. If, for any reason, I feel like this might be a trap, I'll turn back around.

But right now, I don't feel that way. As the fire spins around my ankles, dancing almost playfully against my skin, I get the feeling that I'm exactly where I need to be.

With one last look at my sleeping Mate, I push the door open.

And follow the flame.

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Chapter 27

Daxen

I wake with a start in the middle of the night to the sound of someone slamming their fist against my bedroom door.

BANG BANG!

"Daxen! Get up!" Caelan's muffled voice filters through the thick wood, and I groan in irritation.

It feels like I just fell asleep after spending hours tossing and turning to the thoughts—and moans—of Caelan pleasuring the little Omega across the hall.

It was enough to drive me mad. I don't think I've ever wanted someone as much as I had listening to the sounds falling from her lips. Even after they were finished, the silence was so fucking loud it was deafening.

So why the hell is he at my door now?

BANG BANG BANG

"Daxen!" There's a frantic edge to his voice I must have missed before, and his next words have me flying out of bed.

"Wake the fuck up, Idril's missing!"

I don't even remember getting to the door, much less yanking it open.

"What the fuck are you going on about?"

I lock down my side of the Bond, so he doesn't feel the fear thrumming through my veins.

How in the Fates is she missing? Why would she run off? How does he lose his Omega, for fucks sake?

Gods, I only just apologized. I haven't even had a chance to explain… *anything*.

Caelan fists a hand in the front of my shirt and tugs me into the hall. “I woke up, and she was gone. I can barely feel her through the Bond. It’s like she’s blocking me somehow.”

He releases my shirt, and I get a good look at him. His eyes are wild, and his hands are shaking. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my Packmate genuinely afraid before.

“Maybe she went downstairs to get a drink,” I suggest. “Or… maybe she went to check on her panther?”

Caelan stills, then shoots me a glare that would make a weaker male cry.

“She didn’t leave to check on Shade, asshole. She’s just… *gone*.”

He shakes out his hands like he’s trying to get rid of the excess adrenaline.

“I thought maybe… fuck it.” He hangs his head, fists planted on his hips. When he looks up at me, there’s real pain in his eyes.

“I don’t even know why I came to you. Habit, I guess. From the centuries I spent believing you had a fucking soul.”

Ouch.

He turns on his heel, but before he can walk away, I reach out and grab his arm. He tries to pull away from me, but I tighten my hold, refusing to let go.

I won’t let go. I can’t. Something tells me that if I let him walk away right now, I’ll be watching him walk away from far more than this one interaction.

“Let go of me,” he snaps. “I need to find her.”

“I’m not letting you go. And I’m not letting you search alone.”

He tugs harder, but I dig my heels in. It doesn’t matter how hard he tries to get away from me; I’m a stubborn asshole, and I will absolutely keep this shit up in the middle of the hall until he gives in.

Across the hall, Vae’s bedroom door swings open. Our Packmate is shirtless and sleep-mussed, wearing a pissed-off scowl.

“What. The fuck. Is going on? It's four in the morning, you *psychos*.”

“Idril’s missing,” Caelan snaps. “I need—”

Vae slams the door in Caelan’s face, cutting him off mid-sentence. The pain in my brother’s eyes is so fucking visceral it makes me hate myself.

Fuck. We are the worst Packmates.

“Caelan…” I lift my hand and place it on his shoulder, but he shrugs me off.

“Fuck you both,” he hisses, and his voice cracks from all the betrayal he can’t shove down. “You deserve what’s—”

Vae’s door swings back open so hard it slams into the wall. Caelan’s venom-laced words die in his throat as we both take in a fully dressed Valeanor, looking wide-awake and borderline *chipper*.

He reaches over and shoves a pair of my own shoes—*Where did he get these?*—into my hands.

“What the fuck are we waiting for?” he asks, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Let’s go, losers. We’ve got an Omega to find!”

He takes off, shouldering past us both. I shove my feet into my shoes and follow, catching up when Caelan slams to a stop halfway down the hall. Frowning, he lifts his fist and presses his palm against his sternum.

The movement is oddly familiar.

He scans the hall, like he’s looking for something no one else can see. Then, as if someone’s yanked a string attached to his spine, he straightens, every muscle in his body coiling tight.

With a curse, he taps into his enhanced speed and shoots off. We follow as he races through our wing, down the stairs, and through the first-floor halls until we reach the back exit to the training yard.

“What the fuck was that?” Vae asks, but Caelan ignores him. He yanks the door open and disappears into the cool night beyond.

I bolt after him. “Where the fuck are we going?”

Our Pack Bond is thrumming with anxiety so thick I can damn near taste it. It’s disorienting to have Caelan’s side of the Bond open like this. Out of all three of us, he’s the one who keeps his end locked down the most, *especially* during high-stress situations.

But there’s also something else there. A thin, wispy feeling of curiosity, muffled.

“I can feel her,” Caelan murmurs.

The sky is pitch black save for a scattering of stars that glint like diamonds. A half moon provides most of the illumination, hanging so low in the sky I’d swear it’s leaning in to pay attention. I take a deep breath, letting the cool, crisp air fill my lungs and clear away the last vestiges of sleep from my system.

I try not to think of worst-case scenarios, but my instincts won’t let me relax, tossing out image after image of all the ways Idril might be trapped or taken or hurt or—

We’re halfway across the yard when I see it.

A line of fire snakes through the grass and into the forest beyond. The entire area is still a mess of broken trees and crushed branches, and the line of fire winds through it, lighting the way like a path to Hell.

I slow down, following the flames with my eyes and trying to see where it leads. I swear it’s getting shorter, like a fuse that's burning itself out.

At the opposite end, illuminated just enough to be visible in the blanket of darkness, I can just barely make out a figure.

Barefoot, with pale legs that disappear into the bottom of an oversized sweatshirt that falls nearly to her knees. I don’t need to see the waterfall of white hair flowing down her back, or the way the strands gleam silver in the moonlight to know who it is.

Idril.

“Omega!” Caelan’s shout pierces the eerie silence and echoes through the night. A flight of birds roosting in the still-standing pines startles at the sound. They explode into the sky, wings beating as they disappear into the dark of the night.

Idril doesn’t react. Doesn’t give any sign that she heard anything at all. The way her head is angled makes it easy to see she’s focused on the ground.

Or, more specifically, the glimmering line of fire that’s leading her into the trees.

What the fuck is she doing? Is she sleepwalking, maybe?

“Where did that fire come from?”

“Branwen,” Caelan answers, and by some unspoken agreement, we pick up the pace. There’s probably less than one hundred and fifty feet separating us from Idril, but for some reason the distance feels endless. My own anxiety soars higher, and the closer she gets to the forest, the more sure I am that I *cannot* let her reach the trees.

Vae shoots Caelan a look like he’s crazy. “What are you talking about? Branwen set that fire?”

Caelan doesn’t answer Vae’s question. Instead, he growls and pushes himself to run faster. I don’t ask questions. I simply match his pace.

I can practically feel my Pack reaching the same conclusion I have. Their anxiety merges with mine, thrumming through the air around us.

We have to keep her from crossing into the forest.

“Idril!”

Caelan tries again to get her attention, but out of nowhere a gust of wind sweeps the sound away, carrying it in the opposite direction.

What the fuck just happened?

My skin prickles with unease. My steps pound against the grass, harsher with each stride as I push myself further, harder, faster. It feels like the training yard has tripled in size. An endless chasm fights against us, just as determined to keep us from the Omega as we are to reach her.

We're sprinting, Caelan leading the charge, but just barely. Vae curses next to me, panting like he can't get a full breath. I'm about to ask him what's wrong, but on my next inhale, I feel it.

The air's thicker than before—more difficult to breathe.

Anger rages, and I funnel it into pushing my body harder, when all I really want to do is scream.

I keep my eyes on Idril. *Seventy feet away.*

Sixty.

Her small frame shrinks the faster we run. *We may as well be miles away, for fucks sake!*

Thirty feet.

She's mere steps away from the tree line. The branches sway, casting menacing shadows that strain and reach for her with insidious fingers.

Her name falls from my lips, a pleading shout that's ripped from my throat and explodes into the night. Against all odds, it reaches her seconds before she takes her final step into the forest.

I recognize the sweatshirt she's wearing as one of Caelan's. It's a stupid thought, but it grounds me. Pushes back the eerie sense that the world is spinning out from under me.

The hem brushes against her thighs as she stumbles to a stop. She spins around, and for one long moment I wonder if she can even see us. Then her eyes land on me, and she flinches, like she's been pulled from a deep slumber.

"Sweetheart, what in the Fates are you doing?" Caelan's voice is soft. *Kind.* The kind of tone you use when you're trying to coax a frightened animal away from something dangerous.

Idril's gaze snaps to Caelan's, and her expression smoothes out. The light of the moon shines down on her, making her skin and hair glow like it's lit from within. Her eyes are such a bright, light blue, softening on Caelan with tenderness and love that makes my chest hurt.

She’s so beautiful. So fucking impossibly otherworldly and genuine that I almost don’t feel worthy enough to look at her.

I’m suddenly overcome with the most profound feeling of loss. Like I’ve just had my entire future stolen from me. Ripped from my hands, despite having no clue I was holding it to begin with.

The pain of loss is so fucking real I have to stop and bend over. Focus on sucking down lungfuls of air while blinking back tears.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Why are you all running?” Idril’s gentle voice sounds like it’s miles away.

“Come out of the forest, sweet girl,” Caelan pleads, extending a hand.

Vae steps up beside him with a gentle smile. “It’s cold. Why don’t we go back in?”

Idril frowns. It’s so fucking obvious that she can tell they’re babying her. Placating her. She’s smart… far smarter than I think any of us ever gave her credit for.

She knows there’s something they’re not telling her.

“It’s not safe in there.” I step forward, ignoring the curses my brothers hiss at my back. “I don’t know what’s going on, or why I feel the way I do, but we all feel it. I know it sounds ridiculous, and I have nothing concrete to explain how I know this, but—”

She raises a hand, effectively cutting me off. I brace myself for the questions. The arguments. The push-back.

I’m not expecting her to incline her head in acquiescence.

Gods. None of us give this female enough credit.

I exhale a relieved breath as Idril steps forward—

And a veil of fire explodes from the ground with a deafening *WOOSH*.

Blazing columns orange and red expand and lengthen, merging to form a living wall of flames at least fifteen feet high. It shoots into the sky with the strength and speed of a detonating bomb.

The heat is so blistering I’m forced to tap into my enhanced speed—the little I’ve replenished after our dash through the castle—to sprint away from it.

There’s no vampire alive who can stand against fire without a sense of crippling fear. It’s ingrained in our DNA, an innate terror that forces even the bravest of us to retreat, even when our minds are screaming to do the opposite.

Unless, apparently, it's what's keeping a vampire from his Fated Mate.

With a roar, Caelan charges straight for the wall of flame. He's feral, full of rage that's blasting through our Pack Bond with a ferocity that almost brings me to my knees.

By some miracle, Vaelenor has more speed saved up than the rest of us for the first time in fucking ever. His form is a blur as he races after Caelan and tackles him to the ground, preventing him from running straight to his death.

I scramble after them and dive on top of my brother. Caelan roars and screams, shouting the Omega's name with heartbreaking anguish.

It takes every ounce of my own strength, but we manage to keep him down, knowing he'll do whatever he can to get to her if he manages to get free, even if it kills him.

"Let me go, you fucking assholes! Let me go!" His Alpha authority is out in full force, but I throw up every mental shield I have and double down. He bucks and twists, but he's sloppy, reacting with nothing but fear and instinct.

There's no fucking chance either of us is letting him go.

"Godsdamnit, Caelan. Fucking stop! You'll get yourself killed."

My words have no effect on him. His muscles strain, veins pulsing on his face, neck, and arms as he snarls and snaps his teeth at us like an animal. His feet scramble against the Earth, digging in and kicking up clumps of grass and dirt as he crawls—or tries to—toward the flame.

Solid black eyes bright with determination latch onto mine. For one terrifying second, I think he might actually get to her—and drag Vae and me right into the flames with him.

"She's gone! Idril—"

The flames flare, soaring higher.

Caelan goes limp. Tears stream down his face and into the grass as his whole body shakes, spasming with heaving sobs that won't stop.

Vae's face is a mask of fear and vulnerability. He looks as helpless as I feel, and when his green eyes meet mine across our sobbing brother, it's easy to read the question in his terrified eyes.

It's the same one I'm asking myself.

What the fuck do we do?

I don't know. *gods, I can barely wrap my mind around what's happening. Where did this fire come from? Where is Idril? Is she okay?*

Fates, if the fire hurt her—or worse, killed her—and took his Bond—

His Bond!

Digging my fingers into the muscle of Caelan's shoulder, I shake him as hard as I can. I'm straddling his back to keep him down, but I use every ounce of my strength to get my hands underneath him and flip him onto his back so I'm straddling his lower stomach instead.

"Caelan! Your Bond, asshole! Listen to me!"

"Oh fuck!" Vae's eyes widen, but Caelan's not paying attention to either of us. He's too busy caning his neck, searching the fire for a glimpse of his Mate.

Snarling, I grab his fist and *slam* it against his chest—right where our Bonds live in our souls. Gods, I hope his Bond with Idril is in the same spot….

If it's still there at all.

"Can you feel her? Feel her, damnit! In your Bond!"

Nothing.

Alright, fuck this.

Wrapping both of my hands around his fist, I pound our combined hands against his chest, hammering over and over until his glassy, unfocused gaze meets mine.

Slowly, so fucking slowly, his onyx eyes start to clear.

"W—what?"

"Your. Bond!" I shout, hitting him again. "Get your shit together and *pay attention*."

Finally, he seems to comprehend what I'm saying. I release him, then curl my hand into a fist and punch him one last time for good measure.

It feels like I can't fucking breathe as I wait, panting, as he lifts his shaking hand to his chest and rests it against his sternum.

Vae falls to his knees next to us and runs a trembling hand through his disheveled hair. "Do you feel her?"

Fates, please, please let her be alright.

"She— She—" Caelan stammers before he stills and takes a deep, shuddering breath. His eyes flutter closed as his hand curls on top of his chest.

"She's what?" I wrap my hands around his fist again, this time to support him. Or maybe I'm the one who needs support.

I don't even know anymore.

“She’s alive,” he chokes out as more tears stream down his cheeks, glittering like diamonds in the light of the flames. “Oh, gods, she’s alive.”

I exhale, more relieved than I have any right to be. When I glance at an equally relieved Vae, he averts his eyes, and shame burns bright through our Bond.

Why? Does he think I don’t know—that we both don’t know—how he feels about the Omega? Does he genuinely not realize how badly I’m struggling with my own feelings?

In this moment, I finally realize just how drastically I’ve fucked up. Not only with Idril. With my own Pack. I thought I was protecting them. I wasn’t. All I did was ruin *everything*.

How am I ever going to fix this?

Caelan grunts, bucking to get me off of him. “Let me up. I appreciate your help, but I’m fine now.”

With reluctance, I push to my feet, keeping a close eye on Caelan as he does the same. His red-rimmed eyes are brimming with unshed tears, and his palm is pressed flat to his chest like he can physically hold his Mate Bond in place.

The sight of him like this is too much. I turn away, giving him a moment of privacy so he can fall apart without being stared at. Vae catches my gaze, and I jerk my head, gesturing for him to follow.

By unspoken agreement, we head toward the forest—or, as close as we can get before it becomes uncomfortable—so we can intercept Caelan if he tries to take off again. We stand here silently, staring at the towering wall of fire in shared bafflement.

It must be at least twenty feet high, and it looks like it spans the forest's perimeter. Keeping us out, keeping us away from the Omega.

Vae scrubs a hand down his face. “Did she do this?”

I shake my head without giving my answer the same level of consideration I would have even a week ago. I don’t need to. As much as I’ve tried to convince everyone around me that Idril might be dangerous, deep down, I know better.

She’s not to blame for whatever insanity this is. At least, not directly.

“I saw her face,” I tell him. “Right before. She saw Caelan, and her eyes softened, and she looked so… thankful, maybe? I got the feeling she was relieved someone cared enough to come after her.”

Vae grunts, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s not burning anything.”

“What?”

“Look at the grass—the trees. Nothing’s burning. Nothing that touches the fire.”

Holy shit… he’s right.

The grass beneath the flames is just as green and healthy as it was an hour ago. The branches of the trees are the same as well. None of it is affected by the fire.

I turn at the sound of footsteps to find Caelan striding toward us. He comes to a stop beside me. He tenses, squinting at the foliage.

I can fucking see the moment the idea forms in his head.

“Do not,” I snarl, clamping my hands on his shoulders. “Just because the grass and trees aren’t burning doesn’t mean you won't. Can’t you feel how fucking hot it is?”

For a second I think he’s about to say fuck the consequences, but before I’m forced to wrestle him to the ground for the second time tonight, a shout echoes from the far side of HQ.

We all turn, right as a wolven appears from the shadows.

“I thought they were visiting Soren’s father for the night,” Vae frowns.

“I did, too…” My voice trails off as six more wolven in Beast form appear, following the first. I can easily pick out Soren’s white wolf, flanked by two others.

The Pack slows down, coming to a stop in front of us. All except Soren, who shifts mid-step, changing from Beast to man so seamlessly it’s impossible not to feel awed.

The Alpha stalks toward us, wearing a scowl so deep it would scare the shit out of a lesser male. I expect him to stop, but he strides past us, not stopping until he comes to the very edge of the fire.

Maybe we should have stopped him before letting him get that close. *Is he going to step through the flames? Try to get to Idril like Caelan?*

As if to dissuade him from doing exactly that, the flames flare, soaring higher as if reinforcing their purpose.

Soren stands silently, fists clenched so tight the muscles in his forearms stand out in stark relief. His entire body vibrates, a constant tremor running through his frame.

The silence is eerie. *Absolute.* Marred only by the crackling of the flames.

Until Soren inhales a deep lungful of air, opens his mouth, and screams Idril's name.

It's like the sound's been wrenched from the depths of his soul. It shreds up his throat and into the night sky, reverberating off the buildings and echoing back to us. The flames soar higher, as if in answer to his summons.

I get the feeling the fire is taunting him.

Taunting all of us.

Soren turns, jaw tight, and anger etched in every line of his expression. His gaze sweeps across the faces gathered in the clearing, not stopping until it lands on Caelan, Vae, and me.

He points one trembling finger toward the fire. A growl vibrates through his chest with all the fury of an Alpha who just lost his Mate to something he's only now realized he can't even fight.

His words may seem aimed at our whole Pack, but we all know who they're meant for.

"What the *fuck* did you two do?"

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Chapter 28

Idril

I can't hear anything over the roar of the fire behind me. The moment it sprang up, it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to run back through it and into Caelan's arms.

Even now, I want to turn around. I can feel Caelan's anxiety and fear through the Bond, but Branwen's words echo through my mind until every step I take feels weighted with purpose.

The forest is quiet and cool. There's no wind, no birds chirping in the branches. No animals sneaking through the foliage. It's as though a blanket has been thrown over the trees. The only sounds that reach my ears are my bare feet in the dirt and my own breath puffing past my lips.

So when a large, black shape slips between the trees and onto the path beside me, I nearly scream. Until I realize it's only Shade, and a relieved breath rushes out of me.

"What are you doing here?" I murmur, running my fingers through his fur. He chuffs, eyeing me like it's ridiculous I even have to ask. It's such a human expression I can't help but laugh.

"Well, either way. I'm glad to see you."

Shade butts his head against my thigh and we continue on our way, following the line of flame through the silent woods.

I've been paying attention to the forest floor, making sure I don't step on anything or lose sight of where I'm going. For the tenth time, I curse myself for forgetting to throw on shoes before leaving the castle.

When the line trickles down to little more than ten feet, I finally look up and realize we've come to the mouth of a large cave that looks to be a natural part of a rocky outcropping.

Wait… I've been here before, haven't I?

It only takes a few seconds before I remember—this is the cavern I visited in my dream. I can't believe I haven't thought about it since that night, but with everything that happened right after…

I inch closer to the entrance. It's still dark, but as the last of the flame gutters out, my eyes adjust, and it becomes easier to see.

For the second time tonight, I have to bite back a scream when I notice that someone is leaning against the trunk of the old oak tree a few feet away.

Their features sharpen, and I have to rub my eyes to be sure I'm not imagining things.

"Branwen?"

Branwen jerks awake. Her eyes snap open, and she takes in her surroundings, seemingly not surprised to be waking up on the forest floor. When her gaze lands on me, she grins.

"About time, Darling."

Standing, she yawns and stretches her arms up over her head. "Sorry about that, needed a bit of a lie-in while I was waiting. Wasn't exactly sure when you'd show up."

"You knew I'd be here?"

"Not until about three hours ago," she replies, swiping the dirt off the back and sides of her leggings. I don't miss the fact that *she* was smart enough to put shoes on before traipsing outside.

She takes off for the cave entrance, and I jog a few steps to catch up to her.

"Why the fire?" I ask as we enter the cave. The temperature drops almost immediately, and it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"I didn't know for sure until tonight," she explains. "But I don't think you would have made it here alone otherwise. The flames kept your Mates from following. I could be wrong, but…" She shrugs, managing to convey just how unlikely that is with a single gesture.

I snort a laugh and return to paying attention to my surroundings so I don't accidentally trip or run into something. It's dark as sin in here, and the chill increases the further we walk. Exactly how I remember from my dream.

I reach for Shade but find empty space where his solid form had been moments before. I wheel around, but he's not behind me either.

"Shade?"

"He went back," Branwen explains. "He's going to watch over your Mates while we're doing… whatever it is we're doing."

I squint through the dark, and I can just make out bright yellow eyes peering back at me, glinting in the reflection of the moonlight. My shoulders slump, but part of me is relieved to know he'll be there to watch over my Alphas.

A few minutes later, I'm not surprised when I step in warm water instead of moist rock and dirt. We stop so Branwen can roll her leggings up to her knees, cursing under her breath about *"should have worn bloody shorts,"* and *"would have been nice to know."*

The way she's actually cursing out the Fates for failing to provide her with adequate wardrobe information is so surreal I can't help but laugh.

It's so strange, being somewhere I've never physically been before, yet knowing it all the same. The water's as warm as it was in my dream, and the walls are covered in the same ash.

"I've been here."

When Branwen glances at me over her shoulder with a raised brow, I explain, "This is going to sound ridiculous, but I dreamt I was here just a week ago. I've never been here while awake, but when I was sleeping… It's all the same: the water, the walls covered in ash. The path narrows eventually, and we'll need to turn sideways to keep going. Eventually, this opens up, leading to a huge underground cavern with an onyx platform surrounded by water, like a small lake."

I don't know why, but I don't mention the part about the pillar or the creature inside.

"When I woke up, my hands were covered in ash… as if I'd physically been here."

"Dream walking," Branwen hums. "How strange. I've never actually met anyone who can do it outside of my family."

"Can you do it?"

It's so dark now that I feel rather than see Branwen's shrug.

"Not the way you're describing. My great-aunt Elaine could, but she couldn't control it. She only managed it a few times in her life. I've been

told that my grandmother's great-grandmother could do it at will. And apparently, she did. All the time."

I don't get to ask any of my dozen follow-up questions, because the ground begins to shake beneath me. It starts as a vibration, barely discernible over the sound of our footfalls splashing through the water. I stop, cocking my head and straining to listen.

Branwen stops as well, extending a hand as though she can feel what's wrong in the air around us.

The tremors increase, growing steadily more intense. Pieces of dirt and rock that have been clinging to the ceiling and walls fall around us, splashing into the water. Over the sound of detritus skittering against the rock, comes another sound, louder and deeper. It sounds like a far-off drumbeat, but as it grows closer, I finally realize what's happening.

Another Earthquake.

Branwen looks over her shoulder, and her eyes widen as pebbles fall like raindrops around us. Grabbing my arm, she spins and charges forward, tugging me behind her.

"Run!"

I don't ask questions. I run.

The far end of the cavern groans. Rocks fall, pelting us hard enough to leave bruises before landing in the water at our feet. I lift an arm over my head to try and protect myself, but all it does is make it harder to see as I struggle to keep up with Branwen. We're both panting as we push ourselves to run faster, something that's already difficult with water up over our knees.

Oh gods, I'm so out of shape; this feels impossible!

Behind us comes what sounds like an ancient Beast waking from a nightmare. I crane my neck to look behind me just as the ceiling of the cavern cracks and splits as it begins to give way.

The crash of the rocks shearing apart is deafening. I can't even hear myself scream as a rock the size of a bike falls, splashing just three feet behind us.

I don't know who reached for whose hand, but we hold on tight, fingers twined together, and keep running. It's a struggle, both of us panting for breath and splashing through the resistance as the water steadily climbs higher. The further we push, the deeper it becomes, until it's a living,

churning, violent entity threatening to sweep our feet from under us and drag us to our deaths.

With a final, deafening roar, the entrance to the cavern collapses. Jagged rocks and razor-sharp stone fall in a single, chaotic rush.

Sealing the exit behind us.

I look over my shoulder and gasp at the impossibility of what I find. Where just minutes before there'd been empty space and high ceilings, now only piles of rubble and rock remain.

"Keep going," Branwen urges, tugging my hand insistently. But it's almost impossible to regain momentum. The water is a roaring tempest of freezing rapids, surging up to my waist. But I push on, fighting against the current with my jaw clenched to keep my teeth from chattering.

Ten more feet and it's up to my chest, and only getting deeper.

Right when I think we might have to start swimming, Branwen tightens her grip on my hand and pulls, eyes trained straight ahead and full of determination. A wide grin stretches across her face, and a moment later, I realize the ground is starting to incline. We climb until we are finally, blessedly, out of the water.

We don't slow down. Feet slipping on wet rock, hands slapping and grasping at slick walls in an effort to keep our balance, we race on. Branwen's hold on me is unyielding, a steady anchor in the chaos.

The water reappears, surges around my ankles, and makes me groan in dismay. Our path starts to decline, and as the water rises back up to my waist, it takes everything in me not to break down and cry.

Just when I'm starting to wonder if this tunnel will ever end, the cave narrows, just like it did in my dream. Turning sideways, we inch along until the passage widens.

And the ground beneath us disappears, sending us free-falling through open air.

I know I'm screaming, but I can't hear anything over the deafening roar. The world becomes a tumble of water and air, black and white, light and dark. I have a fleeting thought that I should close my eyes, but I don't. Or maybe I can't.

We fall through freezing spray, and all I can see are stalactites and stalagmites as I struggle to decipher which way is up and which is down, exactly like what happened in my dream.

With a splash, we plunge into a body of water so cold my limbs seize up. For an endless heartbeat, I struggle to move, convinced I've broken something during the fall.

Then, blessedly, my senses rush back, and I can move again. My limbs once again start responding to my brain even as my skin prickles with icy fear and cold.

I squeeze my friend's hand as soon as I can once again command my fingers to move. Two terrifying heartbeats pass before she squeezes me back, and I thank the Fates we're both still alive.

I'm still underwater when I open my eyes and see Branwen already staring back at me. She looks like a mythical creature with her hair floating around her head and her expression tight with determination.

She points down, and I follow her gaze, realizing we're about to touch the bottom of the lake. She taps my arm, points up at the surface, then starts counting down with her fingers.

Our feet hit the floor at the same moment she folds her final finger. Using what little momentum we have from the fall, we push off the bottom of the lake as hard as we can. The motion stirs up silt and debris, creating a billowing cloud of detritus that chases us like a shadow as we shoot toward the surface.

My lungs are screaming, aching for a single breath of air. My chest gets tighter and tighter until I'm sure I'm not going to make it. I force myself to ignore my body's plea for oxygen, kicking toward the light above with a singular focus.

My head finally breaks the surface, and I gasp, greedily sucking down lungfuls of air. For the first time in what feels like hours, I let go of Branwen's hand as we tread water and catch our breath.

We're in the larger cavern, but this isn't the lake from my dream like I thought it was. It's more like an underground tunnel system. One I can only assume was carved out naturally by this river. It reminds me of a subway system, with smaller caves splitting off randomly from the main tunnel we've been spat out in.

With no idea where to go or what to do, I try to relax and let the now gentle current pull me along.

"Where are we?"

I wince as my voice echoes off the walls. Stalactites hang far above us, water dripping off their pointed tips.

Branwen doesn’t answer, too busy taking everything in with wide eyes. It’s dim in here, but not totally dark. A strange light seems to come from nowhere and everywhere at once, as though someone installed hidden recessed lighting.

Which is ridiculous, right?

I hear a splash and turn to see Branwen gasping, pointing at something behind me. My heart lurches, but I make myself look, spinning around and praying to the gods I’m not about to come face-to-face with some kind of giant rodent with teeth as long as my arm.

But there’s nothing there—just the curved wall extending nearly forty feet in the air.

“I don’t see anything. What is it?”

She paddles against the current until she’s next to me. “Right there. About ten feet up. See where the waterline ends?”

“Yes?”

“About two feet above that. All the way across. It’s faint, but those are—”

“Paintings!” I can’t believe I didn’t notice them before. Then again, I was looking for a mutant creature that probably—*please*, *gods*—doesn’t even exist outside of my own nightmares.

The longer I look, the more details appear. These aren’t crude runes or symbols. They’re intricate, beautiful scenes painted in sparkling color and crisp, perfect lines. They’re so old they almost blend in with the natural discolorations along the wall, having faded to near non-existence after what must have been centuries of exposure to a damp environment.

We paddle toward the wall to get closer. The tunnel we’re in is about fifteen feet wide, and it's clear now that when the main tunnel collapsed, the water had nowhere else to go; it deposited us into an intricate cave system that must have originally been underground tunnels.

“Are those people?” I’m sure I can make out distinctive facial features and body shapes; I just wish the water would slow down a bit so I could get a better look.

“I think so,” she replies, biting her lower lip. “That one looks like a man on a throne? Three thrones? I can’t really tell from here.”

“Definitely people,” I murmur, studying the form of a tall man dressed in a flowing robe holding an open book aloft in one hand.

The farther along the river takes us, the clearer the paintings become. The light catches the stone just right, and right before my eyes, shapes begin to take form.

And, Fates… the scenes are otherworldly.

In one scene, figures with impossibly long hair and graceful limbs bend over fields full of food. More figures follow the first group; these crouch in the fields, hands plunged into the dirt. What's most interesting is the expression of absolute serenity on their faces.

Next to them, another group stands off to the side. They are dressed in normal—if old-fashioned—roughspun clothes, holding sickles and baskets. As though preparing to gather massive amounts of food.

Further along, the scene changes into something more whimsical.

A little girl in a dress similar to the robed figures holds a butterfly in her tiny hands. A dozen more flutter above her. She chases after a little boy with a reed flute held to his lips. His breath is painted in lines that morph into the shape of animals born from the air, escaping into the bright blue sky above.

Children run through the meadow behind them, chasing animals formed from air, leaping to catch the lifelike birds, frogs, and puppies that burst to life with each note of his song.

"Idril, look!" Branwen points across the tunnel and at first, I have to search for what she's pointing at, sweeping my gaze higher and higher until finally—

There.

High on the wall, nearly lost to the shadows above, painted wings stretch wide, covering half the cavern. My heart starts to race as I follow the perfect dips and curves of the blue appendage with my gaze, leading to a massive, sinuous body. The wings and body are both covered in shimmering blue and gold scales, with taloned feet and a reptile-like head. Its mouth is open wide, exposing teeth sharp enough to rip me in two.

Dragons.

I count five of the majestic Beasts, each painted in sweeping lines of royal blue and shimmering gold, grey the color of a thundercloud, fire-engine red, and purple so dark it's nearly black. Each creature is easily twelve feet across, with wings that span nearly double its length.

They aren't breathing fire, nor are they attacking. They simply soar in the air, keeping watch above detailed depictions of villages and farms in the distance.

There are little people painted in the streets and in their yards, but none of them are paying any attention to the mythical monsters in the sky.

“These paintings,” Branwen murmurs. “They’re old. Ancient. I mean, I grew up in Wales for Fates’ sake, and these look older than anything I’ve ever seen.”

We keep floating, passing more and more drawings. A large fire with figures dancing around it, heads thrown back in joyous laughter and revelry, bodies tilted in graceful movements.

A man with an arm full of flowers, walking out of a forest and into an open meadow where a girl sits, eyes closed, face tilted toward the sun, completely unaware of the reverent way he watches her.

Then something changes. The edges of the paintings begin to darken. Shadows creep in, overtaking the moments of serenity. Depictions of everyday life and love morph into something darker. *More sinister.*

Men in well-made breeches and leather boots sit astride massive horses, cloaks billowing behind them. One hand holds tight to the reins while the other is thrust out in front of them. Light explodes from their palms, shooting toward a darkness my eyes can’t focus on, no matter how hard I try.

Something about the scene is oddly familiar, but the memory I’m searching for slides away every time I get close to grasping ahold of it.

At the front of an army, a woman holds a sword in one hand. The other is held aloft, a cyclone of air spinning in her palm. There’s a look of fury on her face as she aims the cyclone toward a group that looks to be an enemy contingent.

But something about them seems off.

A shadow creeps insidiously among their ranks, as though trying to attach itself to each soldier in the army.

There’s something irrationally terrifying about these scenes. While the figures are drawn in bright colors, depicted as brave and battle-ready, the ones they're fighting seem almost dazed.

Like they’re not fully present.

It reminds me of the Severed.

Too worn out to continue treading water, we eventually let the water carry us along. The paintings never end, and we take them in with a reverent silence, watching them slide by like memories from another world.

Now that my mind has cleared a bit, I'm starting to really worry about my Mates. I can feel them through the Bond—can even tell which direction they're in—but that doesn't help me down here.

On top of it, I'm cold and tired and *so* sick of being wet. My head aches, and my legs and stomach ache too. A few days of decent meals and sleep isn't nearly enough to prepare me for the kind of physical exertion I've been through tonight.

The water begins to slow after what feels like ages. I've been floating on my back, but something makes me jerk to attention. My movement startles Branwen, and I reach out for her so she doesn't sink under the water as she starts to flail.

Unfortunately, my swimming ability only extends to treading water and floating. So when I grab Branwen, I sink under the water instead. I'm seconds away from panicking when my toes touch something solid. I push forward, and my head pops above the surface. In front of me, Branwen's treading water, eyes wide with worry.

"Oh gods, are you alright?"

I take another step. The water recedes further, and I start to laugh.

Until my foot slams into something solid.

"There are freaking steps," I curse. "How in the world are there steps down here?"

"For the love of the Fates, be careful. If one of us gets hurt down here, we're totally screwed."

"I need you to be way more optimistic, Branwen. This hidden underground cave system isn't big enough for two Omegas riddled with anxiety."

"Apologies," she laughs as we slowly climb each step until we're back on solid ground. "I'll try harder."

I expect the ground to be covered in packed dirt like the cave above, but it's the exact opposite. There's no dirt, just smooth, polished stone that's unnaturally soft against the soles of my aching feet.

The damp path leads to a sort of crossroads. I turn to the right, but hesitate. Ahead is nothing but darkness. Even the strange light that comes from nowhere doesn't extend in that direction.

"Over here." Branwen grabs my arm and pulls me away from the dark nothingness. I gladly let her take the lead and follow her down the tunnel to the left. After about thirty feet, it takes a sharp left turn and opens up,

spitting us out into a massive entrance marked by a wide stone archway so tall my father's estate could sit beneath it comfortably.

This is NOT natural. Someone carved this out of the rock.

But when? How?

Who?

"Ready?" Branwen extends her hand once more, and without hesitation, I take it. Somehow, I know, deep in my soul, that whatever's beyond this archway will change everything.

We step through, and my stomach plummets.

I knew, deep down, that this is where we'd end up eventually. From the moment I stepped into the cave from the forest, I knew.

And yet I'm *still* shocked by the view in front of me.

The cavern is even larger than I remember, easily the size and shape of a domed arena with a ceiling that extends so high above us it seems endless. I can't even begin to comprehend how far underground we are to not see the top.

Eventually the stone gives way to yet another body of water—a still lake that extends at least thirty feet in diameter before hitting a raised platform of onyx in the middle.

I know what's on that platform, too. Knew before I even let my eyes land on it. I've seen it. *Felt it.* Wiped the ash from the ice, then woke with the remnants staining the tips of my fingers.

I clench my jaw as my teeth begin to chatter. I tell myself it's because I'm cold, but that doesn't explain the tears blurring my vision or the fear thrumming through my veins.

Part of me wants to run away. Turn around and jump right back into the river and see where the current takes me.

But a larger part of me—a newer part—wants to dart straight for that platform and wipe away the soot. That part yearns to look into the sapphire iris that once saw straight into my soul in a way no one ever has.

"Hey… what is it?" Branwen takes both my hands in hers and squeezes gently, eyes bright with concern. I'm sure we're quite a sight, hair and clothes sopping wet, water dripping to form huge puddles at our feet.

But her hands are warm, and I focus on that warmth, letting it seep into my skin and give me strength.

I make myself look away from the pillar and meet her eyes. They're gentle, full of care and understanding, and so much kindness it makes me

want to cry.

I never knew how much I truly needed her in my life. How much I've been missing the love and acceptance of another female. Another Omega.

Which is why I know I have to tell her. She followed me here—well, I followed her, but semantics—and that means something. She knew I had to come, but *she* didn't. She could have ignored her dream, and she'd be warm and safe in a comfy bed right now.

"There's something in that pillar," I whisper, as if whatever it is might hear me.

Maybe it can.

"I don't know what it is, but I know it's alive."

"Alive?" She looks over her shoulder toward the pillar, then shakes her head and turns back to me, confused. "Are you sure?"

I'm already nodding before she's done asking the question. I don't know how to explain it, but I try as best I can.

"I saw it in my dream. I wiped the ash off the pillar and…"

"And?"

I swallow thickly. "It opened its eye."

She inhales sharply, and her eyes widen in shock.

"It looked right at me. Just for a second. And it… It *knew* me."

"Fates…"

"I think—" I hesitate, then shake my head before admitting, "No, *I know*—I have to wake it up."

Branwen doesn't let go of my hands, although I honestly expect her to. Heck, I wouldn't blame her if she did. My existence hasn't exactly made her life a walk in the park since she found out about me.

Instead, she tightens her grip and straightens her shoulders, shooting me a smile full of reckless determination.

"Alright, then. Let's wake it up."

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Chapter 29

Vaelenor

My jaw cracks as I yawn for the five-hundredth time.

No one's slept since Idril walked into the forest. We stood in front of that damn wall of fire until the sun rose, and Evander and Ford pulled up shortly after dawn, back early from Chicago.

We probably looked like zombies at that point. Caelan and Soren weren't speaking, Dax's jaw was ticking so often I was afraid he was about to dislocate it, and I couldn't even blink without seeing those damn flames behind my eyelids.

I barely even glanced up from the fire when I saw the two males jogging around the castle and into the yard, demanding to know what the hell they walked into and where the fuck Gavran was.

Gav was inside, having given up on ordering us in hours earlier after it became clear no one was listening. I think he'd washed his hands of us at that point. He knew there was no pulling Soren and Caelan away.

And as for Dax and me?

Well, no one was talking about why we weren't leaving. We could lie, I guess, and say we didn't want to leave our Packmate, but Fates… *how much longer were both of us going to ignore what we're feeling? How much longer can we continue pretending like we aren't both obsessed with the little Omega?*

After sending Ford and Evander inside to get the full story from Gavran, Ford returned three hours later to give Dax and me a dressing down I can still hear.

We're basically persona non grata from what I understand, and both he and Evander aren't even speaking to Silas right now.

The fire's still blazing, and no matter how far we drive in either direction, it refuses to die down. There's absolutely no getting out of that forest.

Or into it.

The government's no help. We've called in every contact we can think of, but the whole state's overrun with disturbances. Apparently not being able to get into a forest *"isn't a priority."*

Dax even tried to rent a helicopter. Pretty sure I saw him emailing someone about actually buying one, but when he saw me watching him, he snapped his laptop shut so fast I'm surprised he didn't break it.

"At least she has Shade," I mutter, turning from the window with a sigh.

Caelan levels me with a disapproving glare.

"Right. She's stuck in the woods with a giant panther who, three weeks ago, was the size of a house cat. Thank you for pointing that out. I feel so much fucking better."

I don't even snap back. *What's the point?*

"I could be wrong, but that fire goes against about twelve city ordinances."

I turn at the sound of Riven's voice and find him leaning against the door frame. He's as put together as always, in a three-piece black suit with a burgundy dress shirt and a fucking pocket watch looped across his vest.

I glance down at my stained joggers and worn graphic tee that says '*Salem, MA, 1692. They Missed One,*' and scowl.

"We aren't the ones who set it," Daxen points out needlessly.

Riven snorts. "Fucking obviously. And yes, I already spoke to Gavran when I arrived, so no need to rehash the whole adventure. So what's the plan?"

He pushes off the frame and crosses the room, coming to a stop in front of us. The expectant look on his face makes me feel about a thousand times more worthless than I already do.

He lifts a single, imperious brow. "You *do* have a plan, don't you?"

Well… this is awkward.

Riven sighs like we've disappointed him, pulls off his suit jacket, and places it across the back of the couch.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thanking the Fates that an actual adult finally showed up. *Because the four of us?* Fucking useless.

Soren and Caelan are both too emotional to make any plans beyond driving around, searching for a break in the magic firewall. Soren looks about four seconds away from shifting, and Caelan's been tossing back blood vials like someone announced a nationwide AB Positive shortage. Pretty sure his fangs haven't retracted once since before the sun came up.

Riven takes a seat next to Dax and surveys the room. "Where's the little Seer? Have you asked her what's going on?"

Daxen's eyes widen. "*Motherfucker*."

"I'll go!" I'm halfway across the room before anyone can voice an objection.

I jog through the castle toward the guest wing, stopping only long enough to ask a staff member to point me to her room. Three minutes later, I'm knocking at her door.

No one answers.

I knock again, wait patiently for twelve seconds, then curl my hand into a fist and knock approximately seventeen times harder. When that doesn't work, I call out her name.

Nothing.

Well… I've got two choices. Option one: I turn around and return to the den of doom empty-handed, forced to face yet another failure and the judgmental stares of my friends and Pack.

Option two…

Fuck it.

This is my house. Technically, I can go where I want. Besides, option one sounds about as fun as voluntarily throwing myself into the wall of flame I have concluded is for real hiding the entrance to Mordor.

Committing fully to my breach of privacy, I push the door open, peek my head in, and squeeze my eyes shut just in case she sleeps without clothes or something. And just to be safe, I call out her name twice more before warily opening my eyes, relaxing when nothing weird jumps out at me.

Satisfied no one's here, and I'm not going to accidentally replace Daxen on the *"Shittiest Alpha Alive List,"* I step inside and shut the door softly behind me.

I've come this far, after all—no harm in looking around.

The first thing I notice is the faint scent of cherries and brown sugar. The Omega's perfume is faint enough to tell me she hasn't been here for at

least hours. The bed is made, so she obviously didn't sleep in it last night, and her clothes are hung up and folded neatly. Even her toiletries are in a nice little row, lined up smallest to largest along the bathroom counter.

I sweep my gaze over the room, searching for literally anything that might give me a clue as to where she might be. *She couldn't have gone far, right?* I mean… she basically only talks to Idril—and sometimes Gav—so it's not like she met up with friends and stayed out all night at a rave.

Think, Vae. When was the last time you saw her?

Yesterday morning? No… it was last night.

I passed her in the hallway downstairs. If I'm not mistaken, when I saw her, she was already dressed for bed. I'm sure of it. I remember checking the time on my phone when she walked by me, that butt-ugly silk robe decorated with floating cat faces billowing behind her.

I do a cursory search of the room. Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately—my search is fruitless; Branwen's cursed cat robe is nowhere to be found.

Where the fuck is she?

I'm so busy trying not to jump-scare myself by accident as I search for the garment in question that I almost miss the piece of paper lying face up and open on top of her nightstand.

In all honesty, I *do* miss it the first two times. Thankfully, on the third sweep of the room, the bright red and purple glittery gel ink that spells out 'BASTARDS' in meticulously penned three-inch block letters grabs my attention.

"Damn… normally I'd say the blinking neon sign to get my attention is unnecessary, but in all fairness…"

I pick up the thick sheath of paper—the rest of which is written in normal, black ink—and read through it. My heart stalls, then kicks back into gear and starts racing as I read through it one more time.

All the blood drains from my face.

Shit.

To whoever went nosing around my stuff first (my coin is on Vae. You really are a nosey sod)—

Idril and I have been called away. No, I don't know how long we will be gone. We'll be back when we're back. Don't bother charging after us. You already tried that, and the fire told you 'no.' It won't go away until you accept the fact that you can't follow. Please be a dear and accept it quickly. I'm sure Shade would like to leave the forest at some point.

I wouldn't give you more information even if I had any. This isn't that kind of letter. Some doors only open to those they choose. Try not to take it personally.

I'm sure Idril sends her love to her Mates.

Do <u>try</u> to be productive while we're gone. If she returns only to discover you all burnt down the castle or worse—wasted everyone's time sitting around stewing in your own misery and bemoaning all the ways life is unfair, well...

I shouldn't have to tell you how bad that would look, but for the sake of full disclosure (and because you're all, well, <u>you</u>), here's some advice.

Go. Do things. Take initiative. I can't begin to tell you how disappointing <u>and totally not-hot</u> it would be if Idril came back from doing Very Important Things to find a sulking group of incompetent, whinging twats.

-Branwen

By the fourth re-read, reality finally sinks in. Prize in hand, I leave and hurry back to my Pack. I'm not sure how they're going to take the news—especially the fact that Branwen apparently knew something was going to happen and kept it to herself—but at least we know Idril's alright.

When I open the door to the sitting room, four pairs of eyes snap to me, full of worry and hope. Wordlessly, I cross the room and extend my hand with the note to Caelan.

He snatches it, eyes skimming over the words so fast I'm concerned he's not actually taking anything in. When he finishes, his shoulders slump, and he presses the paper into Soren's waiting hands with a snarl.

"That's it?" Soren snaps once he's finished. "They were 'called away?' Called away to *what*? And by whom?"

"What does it say?" Riven asks, calmly sipping his drink. He's the only one of us not on edge, and right now I envy his uncomplicated love-less existence.

Knowing he won't get an answer from Broody McBrooderson and his asshole sidekick, I do my best to explain.

"Essentially, it says she and Idril have something they have to do. They don't know how long it will take, and they'll be back when they're back."

I pause, then add, "Oh, and apparently I'm a nosey sod, and she suggests that while they're gone we don't, and I quote, 'sit around on our lazy asses sulking like a bunch of…'"

I frown, struggling to remember the exact wording.

"Pathetic, whinging twats," Caelan finishes for me, tone flat and unamused.

Riven, having just taken another sip of whiskey, swallows before choking out a bark of surprised laughter.

"That Omega," he smirks, shaking his head ruefully. "She's definitely something else."

Daxen tosses the note on top of the coffee table and stands, running a hand down his tired face. "She's a fucking menace is what she is." Then, almost absently, he murmurs, "Thank the Fates Idril didn't have the same attitude when she first arrived."

I suck in a sharp breath and freeze. Less than a second later, Dax registers his own words and goes completely still.

My eyes flick toward Caelan, and any hope I may have had that he didn't hear that is crushed when I note the look of pure, unadulterated fury

on his face.

No one speaks. No one has to. It feels like the world itself has stopped and is waiting to see how this plays out.

Dax is an idiot, but surely he didn't mean that the way it sounded, *right?* I mean… we're all worried. Sleep-deprived.

Caelan leaps across the room, reaching Dax in three purposeful strides. He clamps a hand on his shoulder, spins him around, and clocks him in the face so hard his head snaps back with an audible *crack*.

Daxen stumbles, thrusting out a hand to steady himself on the back of the couch. He turns to Caelan with raw, unblinking bewilderment.

"What the fuck—"

Caelan slams into him like a feral dog finally unleashed. Fisting the fabric of Daxen's shirt, he throws him to the ground where his head smacks against the stone floor with a painful thud.

Caelan straddles him and, with a savage snarl, wraps both hands around his neck.

"You think my Mate being broken when you took her was some kind of fucking *blessing*, you piece of shit?"

Caelan's fingers flex as he squeezes, but Dax doesn't even try to fight back. Even when his grip tightens and his forearms bulge, Dax doesn't make a move against him.

Right as I'm starting to worry he might actually crush his windpipe, Caelan releases him. He's fighting for breath, panting and sweating and shaking from his position on top of our Packmate.

Dax lifts a hand to his neck and prods at the tender flesh. His bruises are already starting to fade, but his voice is raspy when he smirks and says, "You've been in a coma too long. You're losing strength in your forearms."

Caelan pulls back his fist and drives it forward with all the momentum of a stampeding bull, clocking Daxen right in the face.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Not once does Daxen make a move to stop him. Not even when Caelan starts wailing at him, fists flying as wildly as his words. Accusations and curses and threats fall from his lips, landing harder than the physical blows.

"You let her starve!"

Punch.

“You let her get so fucking sick *her hair fell out!*”

Punch.

“You failed her! She was hurt and traumatized, and all she ever wanted was to feel safe, and you stole that from her!”

Another punch.

“I promised her! When we were surrounded, and her father had a gun to her head, I told her that when my Pack got to us, we would be SAFE! I believed with my whole heart that I could trust you—”

Another.

“—And when I needed you most, *you failed me*!”

Another.

By now, Caelan's knuckles have split and healed four or five times, leaving smears of blood across Daxen’s cheeks and lips.

My chest feels somehow hollow and tight at once. And as my Pack implodes right before my eyes, I finally understand just how drastically our actions have affected what used to be an unbreakable Bond.

That thought shakes me out of my shock and makes me move to stop this. I lurch forward, but Riven throws his arm out and holds me back with a hand to my chest.

“Don’t interfere,” he warns. “This needs to happen. Dax has been drowning to death in his own guilt for days. Like suffering silently instead of facing what he’s done is somehow better.”

I wrinkle my nose, and his eyes flick to me and narrow. “Don’t give me that look. Your time’s coming. Don’t think you’re going to walk away from this disaster without some scars of your own, kid.”

“I’m over five centuries old, asshole. Not exactly a kid anymore.”

Riven snorts in disbelief. “Could have fooled me.”

Caelan stands and starts pacing. Daxen stays where he is, like he’s afraid to draw Caelan’s attention again.

“I trusted you,” Caelan seethes. “I trusted you to protect the one thing that meant more to me than my own life. I trusted you to protect my Mate for me when I couldn’t.”

Tears stream down both their faces, and Caelan lifts a shaking hand and wipes them away. He turns to Dax, onyx eyes filled with betrayal.

“Instead of protecting her, what did you do?”

Dax doesn’t answer. His lips thin into a line, and he shakes his head. At first I think he’s refusing to acknowledge what happened, but when I see the

pleading in his eyes, it hits me.

"Say it," Caelan hisses, leaning down until their noses are nearly touching. "Fucking say it!"

"I—"

"WHAT DID YOU DO?"

Dax blinks, another rush of tears spilling over the sides of his cheeks and along his temples, soaking into the stone floor under his head.

"I hurt her," Daxen finally admits, choking on the words like they physically pain him. Caelan's lips peel back from his fangs, and he sneers down at our brother in disgust.

"You didn't simply hurt her," he corrects him. "You tortured her. An innocent Omega. Instead of protecting her, you *led the charge against her*."

He turns around, as if he can't bear to look at him another second.

"Pathetic," he spits, and we all wince when the word lands like a physical blow.

I know it's only a matter of time before Caelan turns his pain and rage on me, and suddenly I understand why Dax lay there and took it.

It's the same reason I'll do the same.

Because we deserve everything he wants to throw at us and more.

Sure enough, Caelan's attention swings to me, face red and veins bulging.

"You—" he hisses, and his onyx eyes darken even further.

Fuck. Me.

"You knew what you were doing was wrong. You knew, and you did nothing. *Nothing!* You two put my Mate in an attic, with no bed. No Nest. You withheld food even though it was clear she was already starving. You made her work, scrubbing floors on her hands and knees, doing your laundry, and gods only knows what other soul-sucking bullshit you could come up with to make her feel small."

Burning tears fill my eyes. I want to look away, but I know I can't. I don't deserve to.

"Caelan," I take a step toward him, not really sure what I'm going to say but knowing I need to say *something*, for Fate's sake.

At the sound of his name, he spins on his heel.

And his fist lands right in my gut.

The air whooshes out of me. My knees buckle. Some weird mashup of a croak, a gasp, and a whistle falls from my lips as I fall to the ground,

fighting to breathe.

Dax sits up, wiping the blood from his chin with the back of his hand. He won't look at either of us, eyes downcast and face as pale as I'm sure mine is.

His eyes fall, landing on the two dark patches that stand out starkly against the light grey stone. Something flashes in his gaze, there and gone so fast I almost wonder if I imagined it.

But the longer he stares at the place where his tears have soaked into the floor, the more certain I am of what I saw.

He's… *grateful.*

Why? Because he knows he deserves to have the shit beat out of him?

Soren leans against the side of the couch and crosses his arms over his chest. There's unmistakable approval and pride in his eyes as he watches Caelan. I fucking hate the way he looks at him. Like at long last, he's finally found the brother he's always wanted.

Hell. No.

I like the wolven, but he doesn't get to swoop in, become brother-husbands with my Packmate, and kick Dax and me out of the harem before we've even had a chance to atone for our sins. Besides, it's not his choice—*it's Idril's!*

Assuming she ever forgives us.

Caelan's eyes land on mine and just like that, my jealousy disappears like it never existed. It doesn't stand a chance compared to the betrayal and heartbreak looking back at me.

He turns his back on us, and I swear to the Fates, I whine. The first step he takes is so loud it's deafening. The second is somehow even worse. I feel our Bond crack in real time with every step, and by the time he stops in the middle of the room, my hands are shaking with fear.

His chest expands as he takes a deep breath. He exhales slowly and closes his eyes like he's steeling himself for what comes next.

"You Alpha Commanded my Mate so often you almost killed her," he enunciates each word, sending them soaring through the air to rip through us like bullets. Shame has crept all the way up my neck and burns below my skin. I feel so low I might seriously need to take up residence in the dirt.

"The worst part is, I still don't even know everything that happened to her." His voice cracks, and more tears fill his eyes. "I have no fucking clue how awful it was for her because she won't tell me. She won't tell Soren.

She won’t tell *anyone*. Not because we haven’t asked. Not even because we’re afraid of pushing too hard and pouring salt in her open wounds by making her relive it—though Fates know that’s true, too.”

Caelan’s eyes brighten until they’re burning, searing into my soul. Without warning, he rips open his side of the Pack Bond.

And I’m drowning, floundering, disoriented, and confused as I struggle just to fucking exist in his pain. The pain *we* caused him.

Us. His fucking Pack.

His next words, though… they’re the kill shot, blowing a hole through my chest and blasting my insides into a thousand, million pieces.

“It took us a few days, but we finally got the real answer out of her. Normally, I wouldn’t share anything with you two that she’s shared with us in confidence, but I’ll make an exception just this once. If only because I think you really, truly need to fucking understand the girl you nearly broke. I want you to really, truly know *her*. Idril. The Omega who broke down in tears because she said she would rather relive each painful moment alone than share what happened and be the reason I never speak to my Pack again.”

He takes a single step forward, and his voice is deadly when he asks, “Do you understand? Can you even begin to conceptualize just how fucking Fatesdamned *selfless* that is? For an Omega you spent the last two weeks breaking, to choose to willingly suffer in silence rather than share the burden with her Fated Mates? And to make that choice not for herself, but to protect *the two of you?*”

Dax falls onto the couch and bends over until his head hangs between his knees. His hands tunnel into his hair, fingers yanking at the strands.

“She said she refused to let your relationship fracture because of her,” Soren adds, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from making whatever sound is trying to rip from my throat.

Gods… I’m going to be fucking sick. What have we done?

What in all the hells possessed us to hurt that Omega? I don’t even try to block my side of the Bond like Dax does. I let all the shame and guilt and self-loathing I feel flow through it freely. I let Caelan feel it, because I don’t know what else to do. I don’t have the words to apologize. I don’t think anything I say would be adequate even if I did.

I want to, though. I want to get on my hands and knees in front of both of them and beg for forgiveness. I want to rewind time and do what I

should've done from the start. What my instincts were begging me to do from the moment I first saw Silas carrying her limp, bruised body through the halls of Medical.

I should have protected her then. Should have stood up for her, even if that meant standing against Daxen. Even if it meant possibly betraying Caelan if Daxen wasn't wrong.

Because… isn't that exactly what happened anyway?

Dax *was* wrong. The whole time, he was dead wrong, and I was too much of a little bitch to make my own decisions. Too reliant on my Packmates making the hard choices for me. Always afraid I'll do something to set off my Curse and wind up killing everyone I love.

"Caelan, I—"

"I really don't care what you have to say, Vae." His tone is strong, but I can see the exhaustion weighing him down. He's looking at us like he's infinitely tired of being the glue that holds our Pack together, and I fucking hate that.

Soren steps up to stand shoulder to shoulder with him. The look on his face makes me squirm, like I'm ten years old about to get strapped by my sire.

"You know what I just can't wrap my mind around?" He doesn't let us answer, which is fair. Considering I can think of about twelve things off the top of my head that I hate myself for, and he doesn't know about eleven of them.

"Neither of you even bothered to come to her and apologize face to face. I know you threw some formal apology at her yesterday, Daxen, but it took you how long to make even that small effort? Everything you put her through—and not just you two, I'm talking about the entire fucking compound—and only the most socially inept child who's only managed to survive this long by pure fucking luck did the one thing we teach our pups to do before they're old enough to shift."

I run my hands down my face, feeling like a child and hating myself for acting like one. I check on Dax and find him sitting stoically, hands clenched in his lap, eyes trained on the window and the fire burning steadily beyond. A muscle in his jaw jumps, but otherwise, he doesn't respond.

In all fairness, neither of us has anything to say. And Caelan's right—nothing we say is going to matter because at the end of the day, it doesn't change what we did—what *I* did.

And more importantly, what I *didn't* do.

Just to add insult to injury. I have to sit here and watch as Soren walks over to my Packmate, places a massive paw on his shoulder, and levels him with a look that says a thousand words—all of them in a language I'm not privileged enough to understand.

Caelan nods in response to whatever message passes between them, turning and letting the wolven lead him across the room.

And out the door.

As it swings shut behind them, I'm hit with a sudden and profound loss that's so intense I genuinely don't know how to go on from here.

Somehow, in the last three weeks, I've lost my Packmates, my sense of self-worth, my identity, and worse of all… my chance—however slim—at the most amazing, kind, beautiful Omega I've met in hundreds and hundreds of years.

Not to mention, I also have to somehow come to terms with the fact that I can't just up and leave my Pack and my life here. Which means I'll have a front-row seat to an exclusive 24/7 viewing of everything I want but don't deserve.

It'll be like It's A Wonderful Life, but instead of discovering that everyone's actually worse off without him, George is forced to live in an alternate reality where every single asshole in Bedford Falls is living their best life now that his pessimistic, abnormally tall ass is gone.

Riven lifts his glass, takes a sip of his whiskey, a self-satisfied smirk tipping the corners of his lips.

"Fucking say whatever it is you want to say, Riven," I groan, gesturing for him to get on with it.

"I told you assholes," he sings, in a tone that makes his face like a thousand times more punchable.

"I told you that if you kept up your shit, it would come back and bite you in the ass. I warned you repeatedly. And you refused to listen. Refused to even pretend to entertain the possibility that I might know what the fuck I was talking about. And would you look at that—" He tugs back his sleeve and checks his watch—"The prophecy train has arrived right on schedule!"

He leans back, stretching both arms across the back of the couch.

"So what's the plan, boys? Are we lying down on the train tracks now, or were you planning to wait and throw yourselves beneath its wheels as it passes?"

“Ha, fucking ha,” Dax replies flatly. “I’m sure you’re just eating this shit up.”

It’s the first time he’s opened his mouth to speak since Caelan beat the shit out of him.

Riven’s grin disappears.

“Quite the opposite. Contrary to what you may believe, I don’t enjoy watching my friend destroy his closest relationships and drown himself in whiskey and self-loathing.”

He leans in, leveling us with a serious expression.

“I have allowed myself three minutes to gloat. Now that those three minutes are up, what I want to know is what you intend to do next.”

Dax stands and limps gingerly to the whiskey cart. He picks up the bottle and uncorks it with his teeth. “About what, exactly?”

“Don’t play stupid,” Riven snaps, sneering. “About the Omega who’s missing and your Packmate who’s too fucking worried to come up with a plan.” He points a finger between Dax and me. “So that leaves you two.”

I glance between them, scratching my head. “Uhm…”

Riven pinches the bridge of his nose and groans.

“Stop looking at this like a relationship problem and start looking at it as a *mission*. You assholes are, to my eternal fucking horror, elite special ops. You have centuries of experience. You’ve spent thousands of hours training, have completed countless successful rescue and retrieval missions, and survived more wars and national conflicts than I can count.”

He leans forward, bracing his forearms on his knees.

“But the second we introduce romantic feelings into the equation, suddenly both of you possess the tactical reasoning of a child whose only weapon is a particularly impressive stick!”

Dax throws his whiskey back, draining the contents in two long swallows, then flings an arm toward the window.

“In case you missed it, there’s a wall of fire out there that’s miles long. We have no way past that thing. Which means we have no way to get the Omega back. Unless you’re suggesting one of us try sprinting straight through the flames, in which case I’d like to point out that killing myself won’t help anyone.”

“Might help, Idril, though,” Riven mutters.

“She doesn’t hate us,” I toss back, falling on the couch with a groan. “I don’t think she hates anyone—except her father. Somehow, she isn’t cynical

or mistrustful… even after growing up the way she did. Somehow, despite an entire life trapped in that prison of a house—”

I jump to my feet. The answer to Riven’s question hits me so suddenly it sends adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“Her house. That’s the answer. When we found her mother, do you remember what she said?”

Dax frowns. “I didn’t hear any of their conversation, and I didn’t ask. Too busy trying not to get my neck ripped out by a Severed.”

“Her mother told her she left something for her—buried it under the willow tree. It’s where they used to hide from Idril’s father.”

“Wait.” Riven stands, raising his hands, and steps in front of me to stop my pacing. “What the hell is buried there?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say.”

“Another mystery.” Riven shakes his head. “You know, this is not *nearly* as fun as the movies make it out to be.”

Dax frowns. “Why hasn’t anyone taken her there to get it? This sounds like something we should have made a priority.”

“I don’t know, man. It’s been busy. And I don’t think anyone wanted to push her about her mother after she watched her literally die right in front of her.” I wave him off, my excitement growing the more I consider it. “What matters is that there’s something there. Something important. Something Idril was sure would provide her with answers.”

Riven lifts his glass toward me in a mock toast. “See? That’s what I’m talking about. A plan.”

At this point, I’m damn near bouncing on the balls of my feet. I feel invigorated. Ready to go. Riven was right; this is exactly what we need.

This is my chance to do something. *Something helpful.*

And maybe, when Idril returns, I’ll have some answers for her. Which, if I’m being honest, is the real reason for my excitement.

I’m starting to understand that there’s nothing I won’t do to apologize to Idril. Nothing I won’t do to see her smile, especially after I’ve been the reason for so many of her tears.

It’s almost a compulsion, this need to show her the real me. Not the asshole I’ve let fear turn me into.

“Should we get Caelan?” Dax asks, scratching at the scruff on his chin he hasn’t bothered to shave.

I shake my head, grabbing a sweatshirt as I make my way toward the door. “No. There’s no chance he’ll leave right now. Not if it means leaving Idril. He’ll want to be here in case she comes back.”

“You’ll have me, anyway.” Riven pushes between us and claps Dax on the back, leaning around him to open the door—and shoving him through it. “You know what they say… four’s a crowd.”

“Three’s a crowd,” I correct, following him down the hall.

“Not when I count for two,” he tosses back.

“That makes no fucking sense,” I mutter.

“Now you’re getting it!” He smirks, as if I’ve just stumbled upon some big secret.

Well, no going back now. At the very least, this’ll be interesting.

Either that, or someone’s going to get staked.

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Chapter 30

Vaelenor

By the time we pull into the drive at the Varenthrall Estate, the excitement has turned into a lead weight the size of a stone in my gut. The last time we were here was to pull Caelan out of literal hell.

I remember the way we were teeming with fear and anxiety, terrified of what we might find when we made it inside.

This time, my focus is solely on whatever will make Idril the happiest. That's it. My new goal in life. *To see her happy.*

My instincts are 1000% on board. My Alpha hasn't quit offering suggestions of ways to protect and care for her. When he's not sending me wildly inappropriate images of all the ways to make her smile with my knot. Those I ignore as best I can, because even if she one day wanted me like that, I'm not sure I'll ever be deserving of her.

I glance at Dax in the passenger seat. He's been quiet the whole way here, his side of the Bond locked tight. I still can't stop thinking about that flash of gratitude I saw in his eyes earlier.

Maybe I'm not the only one cracking today. *Dax is, too.*

He just needs one more little push.

For his own good, of course.

"This is where she lived?" Riven leans forward from the backseat to get a better look.

"Feels like a graveyard," I mutter, pulling into the circular drive and parking the SUV right in front of the doors. A shiver runs down my spine as I open the car door and step into an eerie silence. There's no breeze, no tree branches rustling in the wind. *Hell…* even the birds seem to be chirping less, and only in the far distance.

It’s like the world’s simply forgotten this place exists.

Dax leads the way up the front steps, but I reach around him and wrap my hand around the brass doorknob before he can push the door open. It’s still cracked in places, like someone tried to fix it. *Poorly.*

The hinges creak as we step inside. I’m immediately hit with the scent of old, dried-out blood. It’s not a shock, considering the foyer is painted in it. Marble floors and white plaster walls are streaked and splattered with dark red.

I knew Caelan fought and killed quite a few of Varenthrall’s men in this foyer, but that’s not what has me shivering.

It’s knowing that while most of this blood belonged to the enemy, some of it is undoubtedly his.

And Idril’s.

Riven points at the floor where a deep, jagged crack cuts the entryway in two. I remember noticing it briefly as I ran past, but now I can’t help feeling awed by the power it must have taken to split solid marble—not to mention the three feet of concrete atop the house’s foundation.

Riven’s circling the edge of the foyer when suddenly he stops. He crouches down, squinting at another set of bloody streaks with a frown.

“I think… I think these are footprints.”

That pulls me up short. Coming to stand next to him, it only takes a moment for the random streaks and shapes to snap into focus.

Fates, he’s right.

There are clearly small, bloody footprints that start near the stairs and continue to the middle of the foyer. They’re far too small to be a man’s, which means…

Idril.

“She ran for him,” Daxen whispers, glassy eyes bouncing back and forth between each footprint. “She said… I mean, she told me. In the library.”

His head falls back, and he blinks away the tears in his eyes. I hope he’s remembering that moment in the library. I hope he’s remembering how he threw that glass at the wall behind her head.

“She told me she couldn’t remember how she got away from her father. That he was holding her in front of him, then Caelan got shot and she just… ran.”

As he talks, it’s like I can see the scene playing out in front of me, clear as day. Idril, small and scared, shaking and crying as her own father uses her body to protect his own.

There’s a pressure behind my eyes, and I swallow thickly around the ball of emotion in my throat.

“Brave girl,” Riven murmurs, tone full of admiration. “I don’t know many Omegas who’d have the constitution to run through puddles of blood while facing unknown, dangerous Alphas. All to protect her injured Mate.”

Dax coughs, then turns around so he doesn’t have to face us. He makes a show of surveying the room, taking in the chandelier on the ceiling, barely attached to its mooring, the cracks that start at the foundation and run in spider web patterns all the way up the walls.

He examines it all, but every few seconds, like clockwork, his eyes slide back to those footprints and linger, like he just can’t help himself.

Normally this is when I’d push and needle him, but I know him well enough to know that’s only going to make him more defensive. I can’t force him to see the same thing I’ve come to understand. He has to see and accept the truth on his own.

He’s accepted his level of assholery. He’s accepted how bad he’s fucked up when it comes to Caelan. He’s even accepted the way he betrayed a helpless Omega.

But there’s still something holding him back. I can sense the way it lingers, festering like a wound. Whether it's self-preservation or plain old fear, he hasn’t quite cracked all the way. *Not yet.*

He still sees her as *“the Omega,”* first and foremost. Which means he’s still keeping her sequestered. Building a wall between them so she won’t get the chance to hurt him.

I need him to stop seeing her as The Omega, and start seeing her as just… *Idril.*

Riven catches my eye and flicks his pointedly toward the second level with a mischievous look.

I grin, because clearly, Riven’s on board with my plan. No fucking clue how he figured out what I’m doing, but I’m just gonna chalk it up as weird ‘*Riven woo-woo’* shit and call it a win.

I don’t bother suggesting we go, just in case Dax tries to shut it down. Instead, I cross the foyer and bound up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

“Where the hell are you going?” Dax snaps, following right behind me just like I knew he would. Riven ascends behind him, at a more leisurely pace. All the while, wearing a huge, shit-eating grin.

At the landing, Riven turns left, and I follow. Dax catches up to us easily, boots thudding against the hard marble and echoing off the empty walls.

I finally realize why the place feels so off. The walls are completely bare. Not because someone ransacked the place; there’s just *nothing* here.

No photos of friends or family. No furniture to break up the monotony of the endless corridor. No rugs. No fancy vases or fixtures. No overpriced paintings.

Nothing.

Dax grabs my forearm and spins me around to face him.

“I’m assuming this willow tree wasn’t planted up here, so what the hell are we doing?”

I answer with one of my most charming smiles and shrug, deciding to fall back on the charismatic idiot bit.

“Figured while we’re here, we may as well see if there’s anything we can find that might help us. Not like Caelan really got a chance to search for the other half of that list.”

His eyes narrow like he doesn’t believe me, which is smart. I wouldn’t believe me, either. Unfortunately for him, he has no way to prove I’m full of shit.

Halfway down the hall, I come to a stop in front of an open door leading to an empty bedroom. Frowning, I walk into the room and head straight for the closet against the furthest wall.

The closet that’s locked with a heavy-duty padlock. One you’d find on shipping containers down by the docks. *Industrial.*

Like the door to the basement where Varenthrall was keeping Idril’s mother.

“Well, what do we have here?” Riven muses. He reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket and slides out a blade.

Then he jams it into the lock.

It’s not the most sophisticated lock picking I’ve seen, but it gets the job done. The extensive padlock probably would have deterred a normal human, but not an Alpha vampire with supernatural strength and the need to punch someone.

Or in this case, *something*.

Riven breaks it open in no time and drops it, letting it clatter to the floor. I brace myself, twist the knob, and open the door.

Nothing.

Unless you count dust and the smell of musty mothballs and old paper.

Dax pulls out his phone and clicks on the flashlight, aiming it into the back of the closet. There, shoved against the wall, are two boxes sealed with packing tape.

"Damn. Good instincts," Dax grins, pulling the boxes out of the closet and shoving them into the middle of the room. Once more, Riven pulls out his knife and slices through the tape.

Dax and I crowd in on either side as he unfolds the cardboard, unveiling what's inside.

"Photos," Dax huffs, clearly disappointed.

I'm not disappointed. I'm *stoked*. Few things depict someone's history as accurately as candid photos. I reach in, pull out a manila envelope, and open it. A batch of neatly stacked photos, tied with twine, falls into my hand.

"Doesn't hurt to have a look," I say when Dax frowns at me.

The first one I pull out has me doing a double-take. At first glance, I think it's Idril.

It isn't.

This woman looks similar—small and delicate like Idril, with the similar bright blue eyes—but her hair is a honey blonde, her chin is sharper, and her cheekbones are less defined.

She's outside in someone's backyard, wearing a light blue sundress. Her smile is so bright and happy you can almost feel the joy across the decades.

"It's Annalise," I murmur. "Idril's mom."

I pass the photo to Dax, who glances at it before passing it to Riven. The next photo is also of Annalise, but in this one she's older. And heavily pregnant.

That same bubbly joy is in this photo too, and I have a feeling it has something to do with the hand resting gently on her baby bump, eyes shining with love and excitement.

I pass it over and pull out the next.

A single glance has the corners of my mouth lifting into a smile.

"It's Idril," I grin, holding it out for Dax and Riven to see.

It’s strange to see the Omega as a toddler, held in her mother’s arms. They look so happy, with their cheeks pressed close together, faces sporting identical radiant smiles.

Idril’s hair is the same white blonde as it is now, and it’s even easier to see where the otherworldly blue of her eyes came from. She’s in a jumper, with her hair in pigtails and her grin showing off a mouth full of baby teeth.

Gods, was she always adorable?

I can just see what her future children will look like. They’ll probably have the same beautiful blue eyes and white hair. They’ll look just like their mother, and Caelan and Soren are the lucky assholes who will get to love them and watch them grow.

I shake my head, get lost in my own jealousy, and move on to the next photo. In this one, Idril’s about six and missing her two front teeth. She’s outside at a park. Behind her, children run and play, smiling and laughing.

Idril’s smiling too, but there’s something off. It’s noticeably dimmer than the last photo, almost… *forced.*

From there, the photos continue to capture Idril as she grows older. Seven, eight, nine. Each time, she has the same bright blue eyes, but her smile dims more with each year that passes.

This is what I wanted Daxen to see. Not that I knew exactly what we’d find, but it was a pretty good guess that after two decades of trauma we’d stumble across some kind of evidence that would serve as undeniable proof of the life she’s lived.

It’s impossible to look at the little girl in these pictures and see *just* an Omega. This proves she’s more than her Designation.

And what kind of Packmate would I be if I didn’t force him to confront the things that make him an insufferable dick?

The final photo is a candid shot. Idril’s sitting at a table with a cake in front of her. The flickering candles mark the event as her thirteenth birthday.

Right before she Designated.

She’s gazing listlessly off to the side with a dazed expression. Like she’s only going through the motions.

If there’s any question as to why a child would look so unhappy on her birthday, all you have to do is look in the reflection of the window to see why.

Varenthrall's standing behind whoever's holding the camera, which explains why he's not even bothering to fake it. *Why smile at your daughter's birthday when you can stand there sneering with your arms crossed and your eyes narrowed?*

What a fucking tool.

A slight discoloration runs along the top of Idril's arm. At first, I think it's a smudge. I try rubbing it with my finger, but when it doesn't go anywhere, I tilt the photo for a better view.

My stomach drops.

It's not a smudge. It's a bruise in the shape of a hand.

Fates, she was thirteen years old! What kind of dick does that to his own child? She was so young. So small compared to him. How could he possibly—

Dax snaps his fingers impatiently and reaches for the photo. I frown, suddenly unwilling to part with it. I wanted him to see what she's been through, but this… it feels too personal.

Right when I've decided to make up an excuse as to why he can't see it, he leans over and plucks it out of my hands.

He takes a cursory glance before handing it to Riven, and I exhale in relief.

But then he frowns and pulls it back, leaning in and squinting at the scene.

"It's a shadow," I lie.

"No, it's not," Dax argues, angling it in front of the sun like I had. "That's—"

His words cut off. His jaw ticks, and for a long minute he just sits there and stares at the hand-shaped bruise marring the pale skin of Idril's arm.

Riven shoots me a questioning frown, but before I can explain, Daxen bends over, gathers the pictures off the floor, and shoves all of them—including the one in his hand—back into the manila envelope they came in.

"What are you—"

"We can take them back with us," Dax says, talking over me. "Look through them later. Or… something."

He reaches across the floor, hooking the second box with his fingers and dragging it closer. It's about the size of a large shoebox, and he lifts the lid, exposing an assortment of trinkets.

A scarf, a pendant, a tiny baby hat. Underneath it all is a journal. Bound in leather and tied with a silk burgundy ribbon.

Dax's eyes light up, and he reaches for it, brushing non-existent dust from the cover.

"Dude, you can't read that." Riven makes a grab for it, but he's not fast enough for Dax, who obviously anticipated one of us having morals.

"I can," he argues. "There could be information in here we need. Information that might lead to rescuing all those missing Omegas. Frankly, if there's anything that can save innocent lives, then propriety can get fucked. I'll ask for forgiveness later."

Riven doesn't argue further, despite the clear disapproval on his face. I last a solid fifteen seconds after Dax turns to the first page, starts reading, and then stops.

Silently.

As in… to himself. In his head. *Not out loud.*

"Well…?! Whose is it? What's it say?"

"It's, ah—" he clears his throat, frowning down at the pages. "It's Annalise's. There aren't many entries. It looks like she went months—even years, sometimes—without writing."

"Start at the beginning," Riven orders. "Out loud this time."

"*You can't read that,*" Dax mocks in a high-pitched voice.

"Just read, dipshit."

Dax grins and flips the pages back to the start.

April Second,

Idril and I baked cookies today. She loves to bake. She says it's like magic when all the ingredients mix and turn into treats. She was so happy, with flour all over her dress and face and her laughter in the air.

Then he came home early.

The moment she saw him, she stopped laughing. I thought I'd done a better job of hiding his anger from her, but now I know… she's seen far more than I realized.

I don't know what set him off this time. Maybe it was her reaction to him? Or maybe that she was smiling to begin with.

Whatever it was, it threw him into a rage. He grabbed her by the arm, dragged her across the kitchen and all the way up the stairs, shouting at her for making a mess.

The worst part is… she didn't say a single word. She didn't even cry.

Gods… she sees so much more than I ever realized. The way she reacted—she learned that from me.

'Be quiet. Be small. Don't speak. Don't argue.'

She's seven years old. This is no life for a child. But there's no way out. I'm trapped. And I can't change.

Because if I do—if I fight back—he'll kill me.

And if I'm not here… he'll kill her next.

Dax's face drains of color. He opens his mouth, then hesitates, like he isn't sure he wants to come across another entry like that one.

I'm not sure I want to hear another, either, but this… we owe Idril this. We—*both* of us—called her a liar repeatedly. We mocked her and accused her of playing the victim.

Clenching his jaw, Dax turns to the next entry.

"February twenty-third."

He stops, flips back to the first entry, frowning.

"There are two years missing between the first and second entry," he murmurs, so low I wonder if he's talking to himself, before picking up where he left off.

Idril woke from a nightmare last night. She came running into our room, crying and shaking. She was inconsolable. When I finally managed to calm her down, she told me there were shadows in her room.

Shadows that could hear what she was thinking.

Of course, Jonathan heard our whispers in the hallway and woke up, and before I could explain she'd had a bad dream, he was shouting at her for waking him up.

Of course Idril was still upset about her dream. Still scared. Still crying. That only made him angrier.

And gods… he hit her.

He hit her so hard.

She went flying down the hall and into the wall.

She didn't move. For so long, she didn't move. I was frozen in fear, and–

I thought he broke her neck.

For a long moment, no one says anything.

Then Daxen stands, lifts the book behind his head, and chucks it across the room. It soars through the air, and—*just like Idril*—slams into the wall.

The sound it makes when it hits the drywall makes me flinch.

Dax jerks like he's been electrocuted, turns on his heel, and stalks out of the room.

I follow, my heart in my throat and a stinging, painful pressure building behind my eyes. There's so much of that journal left to read. *How bad did things get? How much more did Idril have to endure?*

Riven's hand wraps around my arm, and he pulls me to a stop before I get to the hallway. His eyes are wary as he asks, "Are we sure this is still a good idea?"

I’m not, but we have to push on. I won’t let Dax continue to wall off his emotions until his relationship with Caelan and Idril—and possibly me—is so broken there’s no way to fix it.

Riven knows as well as I do that this has to be done. So I just nod, pull out of his hold, and jog to catch up with Dax.

We continue down the hall in silence until we come to closed double doors at the end. I can tell where we are by the lock on the outside of the door.

Idril’s room.

Her prison.

It’s a punch to the gut, looking at that piece of hardware and knowing it was installed to keep an Omega locked away.

Except, Fates… we were no better. We locked her away as well. Locked her far away where we didn’t have to see her. Didn’t have to be reminded of our sins.

Out of sight, out of mind, and the only one who had to suffer for our cruelty was the Omega forced to sleep on the floor of an attic.

Riven steps between us and notices the lock right away. His eyes darken, and his expression twists with disgust.

“What a piece of shit,” he snarls. “You lock up your dog, not your fucking daughter.”

“I don’t think Varenthrall can be considered a real father,” I reply, but it’s hard to find a leg to stand on knowing we did the same thing.

Dax pushes the doors open and freezes.

In my wildest dreams, I never expected Idril’s room would look like *this*.

It’s barren. As in, there’s fucking *nothing in here*. No furniture outside of a battered desk shoved into a corner. No Nest. No television or photos or bookcases.

Only a thin mattress, covered with a worn sheet, shoved against the wall. At the end of the mattress are two neatly folded shirts and two pairs of cotton shorts.

That’s it.

“Fates…” Riven spins in a slow circle, taking in the room. “This is really her room?”

“It… No. It can’t be,” Dax scoffs, but the sound he makes is unconvincing. “There’s… there’s nothing here.”

He stands in the middle of the room, wearing a shell-shocked expression. His eyes dart this way and that, searching for something that isn't going to appear no matter how hard he searches.

Then he moves, crossing the bare hardwood toward the closed door in the far corner of the room. He rips it open.

An empty closet, with a single broken hanger.

He pivots sharply, eyes falling on the door of the attached bathroom. Like a man possessed, he makes a beeline for it, hell-bent on… whatever the fuck he's doing.

The bathroom light flicks on, and Dax shoves aside the shower curtain, exposing a half-full bottle of body wash. He wheels around, hands on his head, clocking the toothbrush and tube of toothpaste placed neatly on top of the sink.

Picking up the stick of deodorant, he rolls it back and forth in his palms, lips pursing as he surveys the small space.

When his eyes lock on the cabinet doors under the sink, he slams the deodorant down and bends over, wrenching the doors open with so much force I'm surprised he doesn't tear them off their hinges.

He releases a laugh that sounds eerily similar to what I imagine feral hyenas high on meth sound like. It has me peeking around the side of the doorframe, where Daxen's in the middle of falling to his knees in front of the vanity, grinning like… well… a feral hyena high on meth.

He reaches in with both hands and pulls out—

Handfuls of syringes.

Fates, there must be dozens. Dax's grin disappears. He stares at them dubiously, like he can't decide if he's been betrayed by the syringes or his own fists.

He opens his hands and lets them fall, slipping through his fingers. One by one they clatter to the floor, bouncing against the tile.

With a curse, he reaches back under the sink and this time pulls out twice as many. Those, too, join the first batch. With an agitated snarl, he plucks one up between his fingers, turning it until he can get a better view of the label.

Whatever he sees doesn't help his anger at all. He frowns so hard I'm pretty sure the furrow between his brows will be permanent after this.

He grabs another syringe, reads the label, and tosses it into the pile on the floor.

He does the same with the next one. And the next. *Annnddd the one after that.*

Then he gathers a fistful of them, spins toward the shower, and slings them against the tile. They fall and scatter into the bottom of the bathtub, rolling this way and that. The sound they make reminds me of rain on a tin roof.

Riven takes a step forward, but stops himself at the last second, folding his arms over his chest with a pained expression.

I imagine my own face probably looks the same.

Dax pushes himself up and stalks out of the bathroom. His boots crunch as he steps on the syringes still scattered across the floor. Curious, I creep forward and pick one up, inspecting the label.

Suppressants.

Of course.

"Where the hell does he think he's going?" Riven murmurs, plucking the suppressant from my hand and frowning as he reads the label. I glance up as Daxen barrels across the room, headed for the only place left—

The balcony.

He barely pauses as he wrenches open the doors and steps outside.

There's nothing here except for a single towel lying on the ground. It's stiff and bleached from the sun after weeks left exposed to the elements. With a snarl, Dax kicks it out of his way.

It takes all of five seconds to reach the railing and turn right back around again. When he does, his eyes land on the mattress and narrow.

He locks in like a predator scenting prey.

He practically fucking runs for the mattress, boots thumping against the floor with each pounding step.

Riven cocks his head to the side as Dax bends over and shoves his arms under the mattress, lifting it off the floor. Like he actually thinks there might be some kind of fucking hidden compartment or trap door under it.

I grimace as the mattress falls to the floor and Daxen stares at it before he immediately lifts it back up again. Like maybe the floor changed its mind and decided to lead him to Idril's real room.

Riven runs both hands down his face. Grimacing, I nod.

Daxen's paranoia is steadily increasing. It feeds his anxiety, which in turn feeds his rage.

I could stop this. Pull him back from the edge. Talk him down.

Normally, that's exactly what I'd do.

Not this time.

His scent spikes, biology and emotions overriding everything and cutting straight through his descenter. His scent is bitter and burnt—saturated with anger and disbelief, and sharpest of all—*shame.*

So much fucking shame that I feel like I'm choking on it.

Riven backs up against the wall to stay out of Dax's way, and seeing the wisdom in that, I follow. Together, we watch Dax scramble to the corner where her desk sits. He tears open the drawers one by one, pulling some so aggressively they fall out completely. He barely pauses long enough to check inside one before he's already moving on to the next.

There's a pencil in one, and in another, he discovers a dog-eared, well-worn copy of The Two Towers that's been read so often it's falling apart. I honestly think Riven's about to have a fucking stroke when Dax almost slaps the book down on top of the desk.

But at the last minute, he stops himself.

Hands shaking, Daxen starts flipping through the pages. After a few minutes searching through it—pausing twice to read a handwritten annotation—he gingerly wraps both hands around it and brings it to his chest.

He stands there, muscles coiled tight, and Tolkien pressed to his chest in a death grip so tight his knuckles are white. He looks like a scared little boy, holding tight to his favorite fairy tale in hopes it'll keep the monsters away.

He turns in a slow circle, surveying the empty room helplessly. Part of me—the part that loves my brother and wants to shield him from pain—fucking *hates* this.

But I shove that part of me as far down as I can. Ignoring it the same way I ignored my own instincts about Idril. The same way Daxen ignored all my doubts and concerns. The same way we *both* ignored every fucking moment of every fucking day that Idril spent suffering right in front of us

It's really no wonder why Idril never complained when we put her in the attic. She had a pillow and blanket—more, even, than she had here. We provided her with clothing—more than she had here. And not once did she ask for alternatives. Not once did she whine or demand more.

Fuck, she probably thought that if she complained, we'd take away what little we'd given her. It makes sense, and the realization pierces like a blade through my chest.

“Calder said she was in the late stages of CSDD,” Riven says, finally speaking up. “It makes sense now. Why she was trying so hard to Nest with her clothing that day in the library. For an Omega who’s never had a Nest, or anything to Nest with, the closest fabric to hand was her clothing.”

He sighs, shaking his head. “Poor girl. She’s been living like a prisoner her entire life. With an Alpha even meaner than you.”

Dax doesn’t take the bait. He groans, running a hand through his hair.

“This is… fuck.”

Like someone sucked all the air from a balloon, he deflates. Turning, he makes his way back toward the balcony, one hand clenched into a fist at his side, the other holding tight to Idril’s book like it’s now his entire reason for existing.

What is it about that book that shook him up so badly?

The doors shake so hard when he swings them open that the glass rattles in its frame. His shoulders are strung tight as bowstrings, and the back of his neck is so red it looks like a sunburn.

“Is he about to throw himself off that balcony?” Riven asks, but makes no move to stop him.

I bite my lip, consider the possibility, then shake my head. “Nah. He just needs some time away from everything. To process in total silence.”

A roar rips out of Dax that’s so loud I scream and jump backward, tripping over my own feet in the process. Birds startle, scattering from the trees of the forest in flocks.

Dax is still screaming, still making that horrible sound. It’s so fucking despondent, so full of grief and agony, desolation and raw, unbearable disillusion.

I wonder if this is what a star sounds like when it dies.

I turn wide eyes toward Riven, and we launch into action, sprinting across the room. As we get closer, I slow to a stop and put a hand up for Riven to do the same.

My Packmate is… *wrecked.*

He’s leaning over the balcony, holding onto it with one hand like it’s the only thing keeping him on his feet. His expression is fucking anguished, lungs heaving, head thrown back, veins throbbing along the sides of his neck.

In all our centuries spent together, I’ve never heard him make a sound that even comes close to the one he just made.

It’s horror. Trauma. Pure, unadulterated guilt.

It’s the sound of Daxen’s world shattering into a thousand pieces.

When his lungs finally run out of air, he doubles over, shaking. His shoulders heave, muscles straining in the aftermath.

Next to me, Riven clears his throat awkwardly. I ignore him, but he does it again, louder this time. Annoyed, I turn to him with a scowl.

He lifts his brow. “So… do we need to discuss the definition of ‘silence,’ or…”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “No. Thank you. Nope.”

With an awkward pat on the shoulder, he strolls forward to join Daxen on the balcony.

“Well,” I mutter, planting my hands on my hips. “On the bright side, everyone within a fifty-mile radius knows with absolute certainty that Daxen fucking feels bad.”

I probably won't be winning any Packmate of the Year awards this year. Betrayed one Packmate and dragged the other straight into a mental breakdown at the scene of a crime.

Fucking solid.

A few minutes later, Riven returns with Dax shuffling in behind him. I try to catch his eye, but he won’t look at me, and I’m not going to force him.

“So, who’s ready to go find the willow tree?” I ask, but my voice sounds shaky even to my own ears.

Riven doesn’t seem to be affected at all. He grins and claps his hands together. “Right. The nervous breakdown part of this evening's entertainment has concluded. Up next, horticulture.”

No one laughs, which makes Riven sulk the whole way through the house and into the yard. The world itself feels like it’s too heavy.

When we step outside, it's obvious which tree Idril’s mother was referring to. The willow sits at the far back edge of the property, but not so far that it blends in with the forest.

Compared to the monstrosity of marble and stone behind us, the tree feels alive in a way the house simply doesn’t. It’s also the largest willow I’ve ever seen in my life.

Long branches are weighed down with sweeping fronds, long enough to kiss the ground. They sway gently, like a waterfall of greenery. Its roots are

ancient and gnarled, poking from the ground like a silent reminder that it's been here far longer than any who come to kneel before it.

With a reverence I feel but don't understand, I lift my hands to gently separate the fronds, holding them to the side so we can enter by ducking under the canopy.

Sheltered under the willow's branches, the world transforms into a silent, shadowed place. This is where a child comes to hide and dream. To pretend for just a little while that the real world doesn't hurt.

I can easily imagine a younger Idril here. Alone and scared and fervently trying to cling to the only source of love and joy she's ever known once her mother's gone.

Standing here now, an odd sense of tranquility washes over me. If I ever believed there might be some way to step into another world, this is where it's possible.

Right here. Right now.

Knowing Idril's mother left her something, entrusted it to this tree's care and safety, feels inevitable.

Perfectly logical, in fact.

The wind shifts, whispering through the branches. I frown, certain I can hear the murmur of voices speaking in the distance. Muffled, like they're underwater.

I close my eyes, straining to hear, but just when I think I can pick out a word or a sound, it's whisked away like sand slipping through my fingers.

An elbow jabs me in the stomach, and my eyes snap open. I turn, shooting a glare at grinning Riven. "Sleeping on the job already?"

"Fuck you," I snap, smirking.

I almost tell them about the voices, but when I open my mouth to explain, I realize I can't hear anything at all anymore.

"Do we just start digging or what?" Dax's voice seems loud to me now. Or maybe I'm losing my mind here.

Or… maybe I'm just hangry.

Riven shrugs and walks toward the trunk. He lifts a hand and presses it against the rough bark.

"Unless you have any better ideas." He lifts his other hand and places it alongside the first. "Idril's mom didn't say anything else? Just that it was under the willow?"

I shake my head and glance up. Afternoon sun trickles in, filtering through the branches. The tree is so big I almost can't believe three Alphas fit under here without bending over or crouching. It seems kind of abnormal, honestly. *Do willows really get this big?*

Riven crouches down to examine the Earth at the base of the tree.

"I doubt you're going to find a flashing neon sign with an arrow pointing toward where we're supposed to dig," Dax points out dryly.

"Not neon, no," Riven glances over his shoulder and gives him a grin that's all teeth. He raps a knuckle on the trunk, right where his palm had been just a moment ago. There, carved into the wood, are the initials "I.V.' and a symbol that looks identical to one of the runes I remember seeing painted in the basement where Annalise was being kept.

"Well, hot damn!" I crouch down next to him, and Dax joins us as I pull out the three small shovels from my backpack. Excitement bubbles up through my chest, sparking and jumping like tiny electric shocks. I spin the shovel with a flourish, finally feeling like we're on the right track for the first time in weeks.

I glance at Riven and Dax with a grin.

"Whaddya say, boys? Ready to see what we can find?"

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Chapter 31

Idril

"I'm freezing."

Branwen's teeth are chattering, and she keeps wrapping her arms around her middle, then pulling them away like she can't decide which is actually helping.

We've been exploring the large open cavern for a while now. It's so much larger than it was in my dream—Branwen says it's probably the size of half an American football field.

Unfortunately, it's also a bit chilly, and we're soaked through.

"It wouldn't be so bad if we weren't wet," I complain, debating for the hundredth time if I should just take off Caelan's sweatshirt. I do my best to wring the water out, but it doesn't help much.

I pull my still damp hair over my shoulder and continue the arduous task of combing it with my fingers before braiding it back.

Fates, I'd do anything for a hair tie.

Sliding down the wall, Branwen sighs, letting her head fall back against the rock. "We need to come up with a plan."

I follow her lead and take a seat next to her, crossing my legs under me.

"Besides, *don't die*?"

She chuckles, but she sounds exhausted. "Yeah, besides that. First things first—we need to get warm."

"What's second?"

May as well lay out the whole list. Maybe it won't sound so bad if we take it one problem at a time.

"We need food. We've been down here for probably twelve hours so far—"

I whip my head to the side, eyes widening in shock. “Twelve hours? It’s been that long already?”

“At the very least,” she answers. “My family have always been very attuned to the orbit of the sun and moon. It’s intuitive. I’m not always spot on with my guesses, but I’m never more than fifteen or twenty minutes off.” She shrugs, like that’s not incredibly cool. “Either way, we need to get warm and dry, and we need to eat.”

A long, heavy beat passes. Branwen’s eyes are a heavy weight on the side of my face, and when I finally look over, she’s looking at me with an expectant expression.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

She smiles, and honestly, I’m a big fan of this new expression, too.

“I’d look at myself, love, but you’re the only one here who can make fire.”

A shocked laugh erupts from my chest. “I hate to break it to you, but I only did that once, and it was basically on accident.”

She just keeps staring at me, unblinking.

“Seriously, Branwen. I don’t know how,” I insist. “If I did, don’t you think I’d have done something by now?”

She huffs, rolling her eyes like I’m being difficult on purpose. “How did you do it before?”

“I don’t know!” I shoot to my feet, suddenly irritated. *I’m cold, I’m wet, I’m hungry and tired, and now Branwen is looking at me like all I have to do is magic up some warm clothes and a nice hot meal and everything will be alright?*

“I just did it. It just *happened*,” I insist as I start to pace back and forth in tight circles. “The fire… It’s like it reacted to my emotions. The only time I purposely made it do something useful was when we were in the basement, and a Severed was about to attack Daxen. Even then, I don’t know where it came from. The same thing happened earlier that evening with Shade and the wind. But I don’t know where the fire actually came from.”

Chewing anxiously at the nail of my thumb, I wait for my friend to say something. She doesn’t. And the longer she stares at me without talking, the more sure I am that I’m going out of my mind.

“It reacts to my emotions,” I reiterate when the silence gets too loud. “Every time. But there was always a fire in the room or near me.”

“Except when you used it to protect your Mate,” she argues.

I groan.

“That was *one time*. And it was barely anything at all. Honestly, I’m lucky I didn’t accidentally kill Daxen in the process because I had no control over it whatsoever.”

“Why was that time different, Idril?”

“I don’t know!” I shout. “I just saw that Severed coming for Dax, and I remember thinking that there was no way I was going to let him die down there, and I… I….”

I trail off, remembering the fear and the anxiety as I shouted his name. I can remember the feel of my mother’s hand in mine, and the sound of my blood rushing through my ears. I can almost feel the overwhelming anger as I realized he was either ignoring me or couldn’t hear me, but either way, he wasn’t going to see the attack coming in time to protect himself.

Then came my mother’s voice, and the gentle squeeze of her hand, followed by a surge of adrenaline as I decided that if he wasn’t going to protect his back, then I’d do it for him.

“You chose to use it,” Branwen answers gently, and when my startled gaze snaps up to meet hers, it’s so kind and understanding and full of love that it makes me want to weep.

She stands, and with hesitant steps like she’s trying not to spook a scared animal, closes the distance between us.

My heart’s racing, and despite the cold, my palms are starting to sweat. She reaches out, takes my hands in hers, and squeezes them gently. Then, she pulls me close and wraps me in a hug—one I think I’ve needed for years but at some point forgot how to hope for.

“You chose to protect him,” she whispers fiercely. “You made that choice, and that’s why the fire responded. It’s why Daxen wasn’t hurt by it.”

I shiver, but not from the cold. “If I try, and I’m wrong—”

“Then we stay cold and wet.” Branwen pulls back, mouth twisted in a mischievous smile. “Same as we are now. And we figure out something else. But listen to me, Idril. The fear you’re feeling isn’t going to go away. If you don’t face it, then you’re going to stay chained to a life that was never yours to begin with.”

“I don’t want to be a monster,” I admit in a broken whisper.

It’s been days since I actively felt the flame that lives inside of me, but I know it’s still there. I left the interaction with my mother feeling a thousand

times more connected to it, and part of me feels like all I have to do is reach out my hand and will what I wish for into existence.

But every time I close my eyes, Daxen's voice echoes in my mind, reminding me of how little I know about what I can do, who I am, or where I even come from.

If my own Mate is worried…

Branwen catches my chin between her fingers, forcing me to look at her.

"Monsters don't protect. Monsters *take*. Monsters *hurt*. You are not a monster. You've never even accidentally done something with this power that could hurt someone you love. That's not you."

The tears stinging behind my eyes finally fall, running in warm trails down my face.

"You can spend the rest of your life terrified of what might happen if you try, or you can decide what will happen," she continues. "This power? This ability? It's yours, Idril. Not your father's. Not your Mates'. Not mine. *Yours*. And the choice of how to use it… That's yours, too."

My heart is pounding. I can feel it pumping at my temples, my neck, the center of my chest. Branwen's words hang heavy, suspended in the air around me.

Choice.

Part of me wants to laugh at the idea.

I didn't choose to lose my mother or to be imprisoned by my father. I didn't choose for my Fated Mates to steal me away just to treat me like garbage. I didn't choose for my father to steal my own blood from my veins.

Every choice I might have had was crushed or ripped away before I could make it.

I've lived my life as a ghost in my own skin, forced into a box when I should have been given room to grow. To flourish.

I remember Daxen's face when he discovered I willed that burst of fire to destroy the Severed about to attack him.

That choice—*to protect him—had* been mine.

What if these abilities—these powerful, terrifying abilities—are something only I can choose?

My father has tried to steal them, but he can't. He can't cut, scrape, or carve them out of me. No matter how many pints of blood he steals, they're

still there. Inside of me. Simmering and sparking with heat, ready to be unleashed.

Because they're not his.

They're mine.

I've spent my life in a cage. *And fear… that's really just another cage, isn't it?*

One of my own making.

My chest tightens at the realization.

I'm not afraid of my power. It's the thousands of unanswered questions I have, with nowhere to go for answers. There's only one way to find the answers I need, and if I never find the courage to try, then I'm going to spend the rest of my life living in yet another cage.

I squeeze my eyes shut. My teeth bite down, sinking into my lower lip, as I concentrate on the flame inside my chest. My Mother taught me how to breathe life into it, how to stoke it higher and higher until it became a roaring flame that no one could touch except for me.

She gave me a gift. Something stronger than my father. Stronger, even, than my Mates.

And it's mine.

I open my eyes. The first thing I see is Branwen, wearing a beaming smile that's so full of pride it makes my lower lip tremble. She looks at me like she knew what my decision would be even before I did.

With a jolt, I realize… she probably did.

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. My lips tip into a watery smile, and I give her a single, decisive nod.

"Alright. I'll try."

Branwen's smile grows, and she nods, eyes bright with excitement.

"Fuck yes you will."

My laughter is so loud it echoes off the cavern walls. I return her grin with my own, letting the weight of my decision and the accompanying feeling of empowerment surge through my veins, making me feel alive.

With a clap, Branwen straightens, ready to get to work.

"Alright," she says, voice full of determination. "Let's blow shit up."

My eyes almost bug out of my head.

"For the love of the gods, don't say that out loud. I'd really like to not bring this cave down on our heads before we figure out a way out of here."

Her laughter is giddy, and for a second I wonder what the heck else she's seen and if I even want to know.

I decide quickly that I don't. Better I go into this with the naive hope that I won't kill us.

Shaking my hands out to get rid of the excess adrenaline, I straighten my spine, flip my braid over my shoulder, and out of my way.

"So… uhm… how do I start?"

Branwen shrugs. "How am I supposed to know? Why don't you start with… I don't know… asking it nicely."

My lips part, but she talks over me.

"Not with your words, obviously. With your thoughts. You said it feels like a little flame inside your chest, right?"

At my nod, she replies, "Alright then… so try communicating with it."

That… might actually work. If I focus on speaking to it, showing it what I want through the way I felt in specific moments, and then sending it those memories….

Feeling more confident, I let my eyes flutter shut and clear my head. Then, I focus all my attention on the flame in my chest.

It's so much easier to connect to it now than it was before. Like instead of speaking through a thick wall, we're now in the same room, just on opposite sides.

Reaching out, I let myself fall back into the memory of that moment in the basement. I try filtering through all the intense emotions and instead pinpoint exactly how I felt right before I called on the fire that saved Daxen's life.

I can feel the heat of the basement. How wrong the air itself feels. Heavier than it should be. *Warmer.* It presses against my skin, like it has a tangible presence.

The glowing iridescence of the runes pulses and hums, casting an eerie glow on our skin and giving the illusion that the shadows were twice as long as they really were.

And the smell. *Ozone.* So overpowering I can taste it. It doesn't bother me, but it's strange. Out of place, like everything else down there.

Most overwhelming, though, are my emotions. So I concentrate on those. First is the fear. Fear that I've led us all into a trap. Then, as the fighting increases, fear that Daxen's ignoring my warnings on purpose,

simply because they were coming from me, and that his hate might lead to his death.

Then comes the anger—that my Fated Mate is about to be seriously injured. Anger at him. Anger at the Severed, preparing to attack, pointed teeth exposed and dead eyes bright with anticipation.

Which is what led to the torrent of determination I felt when I realized that no one was going to save Daxen because no one was paying attention: no one but me.

And despite his cruelty, despite the pain he'd caused and the ache in my chest and the terrible truth of who we were to each other that I carried like a weight around my neck, I knew—with undeniable certainty—that I could not let him die.

The idea of losing him to some disgusting Severed filled me with rage.

I recall each moment, and I push the memory to the flame like a gift.

A gift wrapped in a request. A question.

'Like this. When this happened, remember?'

The flame flickers, flares, and just like before, an intense warmth fills my limbs, rushing through my veins and heating me from the inside. I hold up my hands, palms out, and dismiss that night, replacing it with an older, far more comforting memory.

Like this, my love. See? Gently, now… if you blow on it too hard, it will go out.

Like this, mama?

Yes, my little ember. Perfect.

Eyes closed, I imagine that little flame given to me by my mother so many years ago. I imagine cupping it in my palms, blowing so, so gently. I imagine it growing, becoming bigger and bigger, burning hotter and hotter, until—

WOOSH!!

My eyes shoot open as fire erupts from my hands. It blasts across the cavern, twin cyclones of flame, so hot the air around it shimmers. With a yelp, Branwen throws herself to the side right before it flies past her, inches from where she'd been standing.

In this moment I'd swear that the air itself is bending around the flames, which continue to pour in a stream from the center of my palms. I try to close my hands, to pull the torrent of fire back, but I can't. It's too much—

too intense. It’s as though it’s waited this whole time to be free, and now that it is, it’s in no hurry to be extinguished.

It jets through the empty space, a spinning funnel of red, orange, blue, and white, swirling faster and faster toward the cavern's opposite wall.

I don’t need Branwen’s gifts to see what’s about to happen. I strain harder, screaming with the effort to curl my hands into fists.

It’s no use.

The pillars of flame *slam* into the wall with a thunderous roar. The stone itself *screams* as the wall blackens, then blisters, melting like candle wax.

I’m shaking so hard I can barely stand. Tears stream down my face, and even though the fire doesn’t feel overly warm against my skin, they evaporate from the strength of the heat.

Steam floats up around me as my clothes dry in less than a minute.

I cry and shake as I struggle to put an end to the torrent flowing from my palms. Branwen inches closer, murmuring gentle encouragement, but I can’t focus on anything except stopping the destruction.

My jaw starts to ache from clenching it so hard. Blood flows from my nose in steady streams, dripping over my lips and chin, before falling to splatter against the floor.

I pay it no mind. Not when I’ve finally begun to feel my fingers twitch—bending little by little. With one final scream of effort, my hands snap shut, curling into fists and trapping the flame inside.

Panting, I stare at my hands in awe as fire peeks through the skin, pulsing so bright I can see the bones of my skeleton. With one last mental pull, I yank the flame back inside of me.

The fire disappears.

I stagger back, unable to get a breath. I can taste the copper and iron of blood coating the back of my throat as I bend over, planting my fists on my thighs.

That—that was not like anything I’ve ever experienced before. It felt like something latched onto the flames and *pulled*, forcing it to the surface. *What the absolute hell just happened?*

“Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and all the Saints,” Branwen curses, running to my side. “Are you alright?”

I grind my molars, frustrated with my absolutely abysmal first go at this whole figuring out my own power thing.

“Well, I almost blew us up, so… no?” I stand, swiping the blood away from my face with the sleeve of Caelan’s sweater. Just like last time, my body feels weak, and my arms and legs feel like they weigh a thousand pounds.

I’m so tired I could fall asleep right here, right now. It’s not nearly as bad as it was before, but it’s still awful. Which is kind of strange, considering the amount of fire I just produced must have been fifty times more than the fire I used to kill the Severed.

“Well, it was certainly epic, at least,” she replies, and I glare at her.

“Sure. Epic. So epic I couldn’t even get it to stop, and I blew out the entire wall of the cave.”

The rock is still sizzling, dust and smoke billowing off what remains of the wall. Eyeing the mess warily, I hesitantly make my way toward the destroyed section of the wall.

Branwen falls into step beside me. “Listen, it wasn’t a total disaster. Look. Our clothes are dry!”

Her optimistic outlook has the corner of my mouth tipping into a smile. “Silver linings, I suppose.”

The wall I destroyed is about forty feet away from where we were, and as we get closer, I realize the destruction is much worse than I thought.

It looks less like a bomb went off, and more like some kind of laser ate through the stone and Earth like acid. Rock is warped and glazed, and in some places, entire sections have hardened into rippling waves like black glass.

Thin tendrils of steam and smoke are still escaping, hissing from hairline fractures in other areas where the damage isn’t as catastrophic. The scent of burnt minerals hangs heavy in the air, making every breath taste metallic and kind of sweet.

The light is concentrated in the middle of the cavern, so it’s not until we get close enough to touch it that I realize the hole isn’t just a hole—a shimmer of movement flickers, twisting back and forth between the misty veils of smoke. Curious, I lean in closer.

“What are you doing?” Branwen asks, bending over alongside me. But before I can answer, she gasps.

“What the bloody hell...?

At first, all I see is darkness. Then I realize the glimmer I saw through the smoke is actually light from the cavern reflecting off polished surfaces

in the distance.

“What in the world is this?”

Before I can consider what to do next, Branwen’s moving. She scurries forward, climbing over the rocks and glass and dashing into the chamber.

The chamber that was apparently hidden behind this wall. The one we absolutely never would have found, because there’s no way to get to anything behind this part of the cave. The rivers split off, but unless one of them twists around and doubles back, they don’t lead this way.

With a curse, I hoist myself up and pick my way carefully over the rock, making sure not to step on anything sharp.

The moment my feet land on top of the polished stone floor of the hidden room, I gasp.

Branwen turns at the sound and reaches out, wrapping her hand around my upper arm.

“It’s a hidden chamber,” she breathes, voice full of wonder.

I bark out a laugh, and when she raises a brow, I explain, “All I had growing up were books. It’s the only thing my father didn’t regulate, and he kept our library well-stocked. My favorites were always fantasy, and I was thinking that only someone who grew up reading the same kind of books would call this a hidden chamber. Because I did the same in my head.”

“I knew we were going to be best friends.” She laughs, and the sound is giddy and full of excitement.

The chamber is massive. It stretches wide from one side to the other, with a ceiling arched so high our voices echo even at their lowest volume. The domed ceiling itself is astonishing, and not something I would ever expect to see underground.

I can’t tell from here, but I’m fairly sure it’s covered in overlapping segments like fish scales. They have a reflective, iridescent finish that seems to change colors depending on how the light hits them.

It’s even cooler than the main cavern, but lacks the damp smell that makes it clear you’re underground. Each breath I take feels like inhaling a huge lungful of night air during the fall—*crisp, sharp, and clean.*

Along the walls, shelves run the whole length of the circular space. They begin at the floor and extend up the wall probably seven or eight feet. And remarkably, they’re not empty. In fact, they’re full of stoneware and bound paper and boxes and gleaming glass bottles containing various substances in a thousand different colors.

And despite the part of me that yearns to begin exploring what's in those boxes and bottles, my attention keeps straying toward the middle of the room.

More specifically, to the circular dais in the middle of the room, large enough to fit ten or more people and carved from what looks to be a single slab of onyx.

Unlike the platform in the cave, this onyx dais has been polished until it gleams. Its surface is carved with symbols inlaid with gold that shimmer in the light.

Around the outside edge, four repeating symbols have been etched and inlaid with gold in the same way. They're simple compared to the runes I've seen before, but somehow more beautiful for their simplicity.

Spirals, flames, waves, and mountains. Each one is carved so perfectly that there's no question what they represent.

The four elements.

At the sound of Branwen's gasp, followed by a string of exclamations in a language I've never heard, I shoot to my feet. I whirl around, heart racing at the thought of what she might have stumbled into.

Thankfully, it's clear she's fine. She's also apparently super excited, jumping on the balls of her feet and pointing at the walls above the shelves.

On shaky legs, I cross the room to see what's going on. It's not until I'm almost right next to her that I finally see it.

What in the…?

I take a few steps back, close my eyes, then open them. All I see is a blank, empty wall.

This time, I keep my eyes focused on that empty space and slowly inch closer. As I do, the space shifts and blurs. It morphs in and out of focus until I'm a half step behind Branwen, who's watching me with a furrowed brow.

When her lips part, I raise my hand and decide it's best just to show her.

Taking her by the arms, I turn and walk her backward. Then, I make her follow my exact steps.

Her wide eyes grow wider, and her mouth falls open in shock; I know she understands.

"But—but—you see them now, right?" she asks in a pleading tone that has me answering before she's even finished speaking.

"Yes. Same as you do, I assume."

"But then… when I step back—"

I nod again. “Yes.”

“And then when I’m all the way back there—”

“They’re gone, yes.”

She blinks. Blinks again. Then throws her hands up and exclaims, “I’m sorry but, what the actual fuck is going on with this place?”

I have no answer, so all I do is shrug and turn back to face the wall and let myself finally get a good look at the absolutely astonishing mural that only appears when you’re within a certain range.

Which, yes, is one of the weirdest things I’ve experienced—and that’s a really, really long list.

To compare it to the previous murals would be like comparing a child’s first finger painting to Picasso. These are captivating. It’s the only word I can think of to describe what I’m looking at, and even that *wildly* undersells their otherworldly enchantment.

Murals cover every open inch of space, starting above the shelves and extending to the dome ceiling, in an unending loop around the entire room. The paintings are brilliantly detailed and perfectly preserved, as though they were painted just hours or days ago.

“It’s like the walls above the river,” Branwen breathes, reaching out a delicate finger, but quickly realizing she’s far too short to reach the art itself. With a huff, her arm falls to hang at her side.

She’s right. They’re murals, but aside from their otherworldly quality, they’re rendered with such perfect detail that I could swear they’re moving. While the others were done so well they looked like photographs, these are simply… *more*.

I keep reminding myself that the figures depicted aren’t going to step off the walls and come to life.

I inch closer until I’m as near the wall as I can get without straining my neck to look up, and I study the details of this part of the painting, still unable to accept that what I’m looking at is real and not some strange dream or illusion.

In front of me, a woman stands on a cliff. She’s barefoot, hair billowing behind her in a sweeping cascade of flame. Her arms are outstretched and hundreds of spheres made of fire float through the air.

They’re moving—or *were* moving— springing and twirling through the air in deliberate, intricate arcs. The light catches the paint, giving the illusion that the flames flicker and burn even now.

Wait. That's not right.

The balls of fire, beautiful as they are, are not moving. They haven't been. It's a picture. A painting. And while it's clear what they're *meant* to be doing, they're most definitely *not* doing it now.

I flick my gaze to the side, and my eyes fall on another man standing beside her. Strong, handsome, with dark grey hair and palms raised toward the sky, not unlike his female counterpart.

His stance sends a shiver down my spine, so reminiscent of the way I stood when calling on the fire earlier that my heart skips a beat.

From his palms, thin silver lines flow upward, each line painted impossibly thin. The paint is an unnaturally bright silver that shimmers like lightning frozen mid-strike.

Each scene flows seamlessly to the next as I make my way around the chamber, attention zoned in on the mural. A glance behind me shows Branwen walking in the opposite direction in a similar state of awe.

I don't know how the artist managed it, but despite each scene clearly depicting its own individual moment, they're drawn in a way that makes them feel like they belong together—*a unit.*

A story.

I stop before a woman kneeling in a garden full of vibrant growth. The color shifts from the darkest forest green to the brightest green of new spring, and it makes me sick with longing for Soren.

The woman's hands are thrust into the ground, buried in the soil—

No.

They're hovering over the Earth. They're not even *touching* the ground.

Lifting my hands, I press my palms into my eyes, then lift them and wait for my sight to refocus.

I look at the scene once more, just to be sure.

Her hands are still where they were before, hovering in the air.

So why did I think they were buried in the dirt?

I blow out a breath and decide to chalk it up to exhaustion. After the fire, I'm running on fumes. I need to lie down, but I can't seem to pull myself away from these paintings.

In the garden, new growth bursts from the soil. Some are sprouting while others burst into bloom, bulbs unfurling to expose delicate, velvet soft petals in colors so striking I don't understand how they're real.

I feel myself drawn to the new life, overcome by something deeper—a purpose unfurling through the new life brought forth by the kneeling woman.

There's a light in her eyes—tiny flecks of gold that, when they catch the light, look like they're focusing not only on the garden, but specifically on me.

The sensation makes me uneasy, and I move on, frowning back at the woman as her eyes follow.

Further down, water spills from a man's open palms, flowing in graceful, arching streams. Each stream follows its own journey, ultimately coming together with the others and morphing into a magnificent waterfall that crashes over a cliff and spills into a powerful ocean below.

On and on it goes, scene after scene, creating a perfect harmony that was clearly intentional. Each moment is perfect. Packed with wonder, awe, and enchantment.

"They're using the elements," I murmur, scanning the scenes I've already passed. "They're shaping them. Moving them."

Branwen comes to stand beside me, brow furrowed and head cocked to the side. "Is this supposed to make sense?"

"You don't feel it?" I ask, turning to look at her.

"I feel… something," she admits. "Almost like a resonance."

Reaching out, I place my hand on her arm and nod enthusiastically. "Exactly. That's exactly what I feel too."

Her gaze flits around the chamber, never quite landing on any one area for a significant amount of time. She walks to one of the many shelves and reaches out, delicately picking up a glass jar. Lifting it higher, she angles it toward the light and squints, trying to make out the contents.

When she shakes it, a muted rattling comes from inside.

"What is this place?"

"I don't know," she answers, replacing the jar where she found it. She hesitates, hand hovering a few inches from the glass, before picking it back up again.

She does the same with the jar next to it, and the one after that. Once she reaches the end of the first row, her expression twists into confusion.

"There's no dust," she murmurs. "You'd think after who knows how long, there would be freaking piles of dust in here. The whole room is made of stone, for Fate's sake. The air is clean. Where the hell is the dust?"

Fates… she's right. This room has been perfectly preserved. As though someone simply stepped out a moment ago.

"This place has to be centuries old. There's certainly no way in or out; it was completely sealed up. And look at this." I reach out and grab one of the jars. This bottle is clear, and so are its contents. "Fresh seeds. How are there *fresh seeds* down here?"

Eyes wide, she shakes her head in wonder, then asks, "What the heck else is in all these jars and bottles?"

We exchange a loaded look, and she crosses to another shelf, sits down, and pulls bottles and jars down one by one to inspect them.

I don't know how long we search, but it must be hours. We're both aware we have no food and no way out, so we attack our search with equal parts hope and dread.

Hope that we might find something to help us. Dread because the chances of finding a protein bar or bag of chips are only slightly less than our chances of finding something that might lead us out of here.

For a while, the hope feels endless as each new thing we search contains something brand new. What we find is fascinating.

Coal, feathers, ink, marbles, sand, dirt. All sorts of random things you could find basically anywhere, yet still labeled and sealed with the same care and attention as the next.

Under one of the shelves, we found a large brazier. Another contains piles of old parchment and ink, but nothing to write with.

There are blades, daggers, and knives of a thousand types and uses; tiny mirrors in multiple shapes and sizes; and an entire row of stoneware jugs of water labeled with the names of rivers and seas and lakes I've never even heard of.

Then we find stranger things—a jar with a gold-veined leaf that seems to be suspended in air. Sand so blue and fine it feels and looks like silk. A large basin covered in runes that hums when we get too close.

"I don't understand," I say, setting a round jar the size of my head back on one of the top shelves. It has a perfectly circular bubble inside that actually moves away from my fingers wherever I touch the glass.

"It's like… an apothecary and a science museum had a baby."

Branwen laughs, tucking her hair behind her ears and glancing over at the dais. Neither of us has gone too close to it yet, but now she stands and

stalks straight for it. When she reaches the edge, she crouches and runs her fingers delicately across the symbols etched into the sides.

"I've been trying to *See* since we walked into the cave from the forest," she whispers, voice choked like she's admitting something she didn't want to. "But the whole time it feels like my gift's been blocked."

Alarmed, I cross the room and sit next to her. I lean over and wrap her in a hug.

"Why didn't you say something? You must have been so terrified this whole time," I say, squeezing her tight before pulling back. She meets my eyes and gives me a soft smile.

"I was going to tell you, but then this happened and—" She trails off, bright eyes scanning the room with a look of… *gratitude, maybe?* "In here, it feels like I could *See* the entire world if I wanted to."

My brows shoot to my hairline. "Wait, really?"

Her smile is mischievous. She leans in and lowers her voice to a whisper. "I was just casually wondering what that massive bloke, Gavran, looked like with his shirt off, and just like that my Sight kicked in. And there he was, in all his shirtless glory. All 783 miles of sweaty, gleaming, tanned abs under silky skin and that little trail of hair that starts at his belly button and disappears into—"

"Okay, okay! Oh my Fates!!" I throw my hands over my ears, grimacing and trying not to gag. She throws back her head and laughs, and it's not long before I find myself doing the same.

Is this what it feels like to have a friend? To share secrets, talk about crushes, and giggle? Would we have done this when we were younger in another life? Hid under the covers late at night and covered our mouths to keep from laughing too loud and waking up our parents?

Another world where the punishment for that would have been a stern reminder to go to sleep, along with a fond, pointed look from my father as my mother pulled on his arm, sending me a wink and a kiss when he wasn't looking.

Our laughter dies off, mine a bit faster than hers. To keep her from asking about my sudden shift, I ask, "So you think this place is what's causing the shift in your abilities?"

"It's the only thing that makes any sense."

She stands, then slowly turns around the room, spinning in place. She plants her fists on her hips and says, "If I take into account the obvious

cultural differences, the best I can figure is that this was a place to learn. Like… a classroom, but more hands-on. More specifically, I think this is where the people in the mural—whoever they were—came to practice their magic."

My heart jumps, slamming against my ribs. I push to my feet, take in the room, and consider her theory. I think of the murals, and the sense of intention I felt behind what each figure was doing. The familiarity in their stances—arms extended, palms out, as though summoning something from that specific part of their hand.

Something like wind.

Something like fire.

Elements, just like the symbols etched around the dais. *Air. Fire. Water. Earth.*

And all the stuff packed on and under the shelves. *Training implements, to help the user practice specific abilities?*

The more I consider it, the more I realize she has to be right. And if she's right, and this was a training room, and the people here were actually able to do all the wondrous things in the murals…

"Who were they?" I whisper, suddenly so cold my fingers stiffen and tingle. I wrap my arms around myself and turn to Branwen, pleading for answers I know she doesn't have.

My friend studies me for a long moment, lips thin and brows furrowed. Then, she shakes her head.

"I don't know, Idril."

She crosses the room and makes her way to the onyx dais.

"Whoever they were," she whispers, bending over and running her fingers along the gleaming, polished stone, "I think it's safe to say, you're one of them."

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Chapter 32

Daxen

Each shovel full of dirt I dig up feels like I'm digging away at pieces of my soul. My jaw aches from clenching it, and a throbbing pain has taken up permanent residence at my temples and the base of my neck.

It doesn't matter. I keep going.

All I see is that room. *That fucking room.* I can't stop thinking about how empty it was.

Not just empty but *sad*. I could feel it, the emotion wrapping around me and trickling into my lungs with every breath. It pulled me down, suffocating me with the truth I spent so long denying.

I don't understand how she lived like that. An Omega existing in that kind of environment is *unfathomable*. They need a Nest. It's not a Fatesdamned personality trait; it's imperative to their physical health and mental well-being. Sure, going without for a month or two won't do much outside of making them antsy and uncomfortable, but push it too far and it turns into abuse real fast.

Families pour their fortunes into Nests for their Omegas. Parents won't even consider letting their Omega daughter court a Pack without a Nest or Nesting room, plus documented proof of funds set aside to furnish it however they want.

It's the first thing an Omega does when she designates. A biological imperative that takes over and pushes them to create something safe that's all their own.

Hell, in most countries, entering an Omega's Nest without explicit permission is a federal crime punishable by up to ten years in prison and a massive fine.

That's how fucking far society will go to ensure Omegas feel safe and secure in their Nests.

And despite what she told me—despite how often she explained how things were while she was living here—part of me *still* didn't truly believe I'd walk into her room and find *nothing*.

Not even a makeshift closet with soft blankets. Something that would just pass for the bare fucking minimum.

I just can't wrap my mind around it. Her whole life. Her whole fucking *life*.

The whole time she's probably been living in a state of panic. Her adrenal glands have probably been working overtime for years, keeping her in fight-or-flight. *How long did that go on until her body finally accepted what her brain already knew?*

That there was no safe place for her. Nowhere to hide. Nowhere to escape.

Nothing.

And when she finally did escape that fucking hell, I made it my mission to reinforce all her feelings of inadequacy with my stupid bullshit just because I *had* to be right.

It was more important for me to be right than to fucking *listen* to what she was saying and—

FUCK!

I pound my shovel into the ground, rocking it back and forth to dig around another huge tree root. It clings to the Earth the same way guilt clings to my ribs. I lift my shovel and bring it down harder than before.

If only I could take my anger out on myself the same way.

Fates, I'd been so damn confident. So sure she was manipulating me. Her tears, the stories about her life, the insistence of her Mate Bond with Caelan.

Every time I looked at her, it was just like seeing—

No.

I thrust the shovel harder and pull out a huge clump of grass and dirt, tossing it aside.

I'm *not* going to think about her. Not after I've done everything in my power to forget that one night of weakness.

The one night that cost me so fucking much. My greatest shame. The one thing no one—*not even my brothers*—knows about.

Sweat drips down my temples as the pounding ache in my head gets worse. It's like my own brain is betraying me. Forcing open the doors of my past after I've spent centuries keeping them locked tight.

I sit back on my heels, rolling my shoulders and neck, trying to stretch the kinks out of my muscles.

This should be easier. *Step one: Dig a hole. Step two: Find out what the Omega's—Idril's—mother left behind.*

But it's been far from easy. This damn tree is ancient, its roots sunk deep into the Earth. It makes it almost impossible to dig, and we have to keep working around and under them.

My shovel *thunks* into the ground once more, and dirt tears from the Earth. I don't even mind this part, really. I've never had a problem getting my hands dirty, contrary to popular belief.

There's something soothing about working with the soil. It's cool and wet, carrying the faint scent of iron and minerals and reminding me of simpler times.

It's rained recently, but for the life of me I can't remember when. I can smell it, though. The deeper we dig, the more intense the scent becomes, reminding me of rain and blood and—

Rain and blood.

Just like that night.

It'd been raining for what felt like forever, making it harder than it should have been to navigate the horses through the overgrown area behind the cabin.

That's where we found them. Ten Omegas. Tied up outside, huddled together for warmth. Most of them were human, but a couple were vampires.

They'd been exhausted. *Terrified.* Unwilling to believe we weren't working with the Severed who'd taken them in the first place.

Back then, I was just out of training. Too green to know better than to walk right into her trap. Too confident to consider that a threat can come from anywhere.

Too besotted by a pretty face. Too susceptible to all the ways she knew how to use my biology against me.

Too stupid to keep my fucking mouth shut.

My shovel hits another root, and the impact shoots up my arm and into my elbow. With a biting curse, I twist my tool and use the sharp edge to saw

through the foliage.

Next to me, Vae mutters something low, and Riven laughs. I know they're talking, but I can't hear the words. All I can hear is my shovel digging through the packed soil, the sound of my own breaths sawing in and out of my lungs. And her voice.

Always her voice.

"Please don't leave me."

"I won't. I promise."

Gods, I was such an idiot.

"What's your name, Omega?"

"Elsbeth, if it pleases my Lord."

Elsbeth. A gentle Omega. One of ours. The youngest daughter of a noble house. She told me that first night that she'd never even set foot off her estate, content to spend her days caring for her ailing father. Her mother died in childbirth, and she was running the household in her place.

"They took me when I was walking through the garden. I shouldn't have been out. I just so wanted to feel the fresh night air on my face after days spent cooped up inside."

I felt terrible for her. This small, sweet, naive Omega, only twenty three. She was beautiful and innocent, and I'd fancied myself some kind of knight in shining armor, riding in to save her from the Severed.

I kept her to myself, tending to her and promising to contact her family. She whined—one of those piercing Omega sounds full of distress that made the Alpha in me want to swaddle her in soft things, purr, and promise her the world. Then she told me the Severed had killed her father when they took her, and she was too afraid to go back to his estates.

For four days I looked after her—ignoring every duty I could get away with. Letting the rest of the Bastards and trainees handle the other Omegas. We rode on horseback all the way back to London, and by the time we were on the outskirts of the city, I thought I was in love.

I was so excited to tell Vae and Caelan. So excited to introduce them. She wasn't our Fated, *but what were the chances we'd ever find our Fated Mate? Surely we weren't meant to wait around forever. What harm was there in courting her?*

The wind kicks up, whispering through the swaying fronds and cooling me down for a brief, wonderful moment. Leaning back on my knees, I

swipe the sweat from my brow and do my best to ignore the blisters forming on my palms.

I'm a vampire. An Alpha. A Warrior. I can heal from damn near anything so long as I've consumed enough blood.

Except for beheading.

And fire.

I woke that final night on the road back to London with the thick scent of smoke in my nose. At first, I thought it was the wind shifting smoke from a campfire. Annoyed, I rolled back over and did my best to ignore it, telling myself the wind would shift soon and take the smoke with it.

I hit another root and bend over wrapping my hands around it and using my enhanced strength to snap it in half. When it comes loose, the dirt around it shifts, tumbling back in the hole.

The Severed swarmed our camp the same way. Coming out of the fog like ghosts given flesh. I'd only fought them twice before, and both times we'd greatly outnumbered them.

Not this time.

There were only five of us. Five Bastards, and ten terrified, traumatized Omegas.

I remember racing through camp—sword in one hand, slashing and hacking at anything without a soul. Through the smoke, all I could hear were screams. All I could smell was rot and decay.

And under that, the sickening scent of burnt flesh.

Fifty Severed to our Five, including me. We never stood a chance. It was a fucking slaughter.

They killed the Omega's first. Burned them alive in their bedrolls, trapped in their tent with no way to escape. The sounds—*Fates, the sounds*—five hundred years later, and I still hear them in my nightmares.

After that, the Bastards were cut down one after the next. They put up a good fight. Took down half their ranks until only one of us was left standing—*me*.

I've never felt closer to death. Could feel it breathing down my neck.

Then I saw her standing at the tree line. *Elsbeth.*

I nearly fell to my knees in thanks.

I shouted her name across the burning clearing until my voice gave out and I could barely breathe through the smoke coating my lungs.

Just hours before, she'd looked at me with big brown eyes brimming with tears and begged me to take her home with me when I returned. She'd admitted how afraid she was. She told me the only time she felt safe was with me.

Her eyes had been as bright as honey.

Now, they were dark as pitch.

Through the flames, she looked straight at me with cold, dead eyes. A Severed—high-ranking—stepped out of the trees behind her.

And placed a hand on her shoulder.

I should have seen it then, but still—STILL—my first instinct had been fear—*for her.* That's how fast she rewrote my instincts, turning my self-preservation against me with a well-placed whine and the scent of her Omega perfume.

Like a fucking chump I knelt there as her mouth tilted into a smirk. She turned to the Severed and placed her hand over his.

Then he pulled the neckline of her chemise aside.

Through the burning, crackling flames that took the lives of five on my team and *nine* innocent Omegas, a perfectly placed Mating Bite was revealed on her shoulder.

That's when it finally hit me like a boulder to the chest.

She'd used me. A pretty little Omega planted alongside the innocents, she took one look at my vainglorious showboating and knew I'd be the perfect mark. She knew just how to use her Omega wiles against me, and she did. She used her biology to lure me in until I was ready to Mate and Mark her in less than a *week*.

And I fell for it all. The pretty smiles, the demure, searching gazes, the trembling lips, the Omega whines and need for safety and comfort, the moments when her perfume would burst in the air around us, making her interest clear.

Every. Fucking. Thing.

I reach for my shovel and slam it into the dirt again, relishing the ache in my shoulders. Hatred, that old familiar emotion, resurfaces all too easily when I think about Elsbeth.

But it's been a really, *really* long time since I've allowed myself to relive it like I am now.

I make myself sit with the most shameful moments now. I deserve it. I fell for the way she used her Omega to manipulate me. To get me to let my

guard down. To spill my secrets.

The submission.

Thunk.

The pheromones.

Thunk.

The whines and the breathy tones.

Thunk.

The desire for my Scent.

Thunk.

All of it—*fucking manipulations.*

When Idril showed up with those trembling hands and big, beautiful blue eyes and submissive nature, I did what I've done for centuries—Treated her like an enemy.

Because the last time I let an Omega get to me, the cost was the lives of four good males and nine innocent Omegas. Maybe not a huge loss in the grand scheme of things, but all of their blood is on *my hands*.

I punished Idril for my fuck up and told myself I was protecting myself and my brothers.

I treated her like a fucking monster. I terrorized her. I kept food from her. I Alpha Commanded her *multiple* times. I withheld Nesting Materials and even a fucking bed. I set her the most arduous tasks I could think of to break her.

And when she didn't, I doubled down.

I push down into the Earth harder, a grunt slipping past my lips as once-unfamiliar pressure appears behind my eyes for the tenth time in the last few days.

The self-loathing I've carried since that night is nothing compared to the hatred I feel for myself now.

I never even told Caelan and Vae what really happened. When I got back, I gave my report but kept Elsbeth out of it. I'd been too ashamed. Too disappointed in myself. I vowed to never trust another Omega again. Not unless we met our Fated Mate.

Half a millennium later and we still haven't.

Maybe that's my fault, too.

Because the brown eyes that have haunted me for centuries are gone, and now I'm being haunted night and day by eyes of purest blue. Eyes that

look at me with distrust and pain, and since the night I threw her in the cells… *betrayal.*

Panting, I toss aside another shovel full of dirt. This hole must be three feet deep by now, and I still haven't found anything.

I didn't think this would take so fucking long. After a night spent tossing and turning, followed by the arrival of a fucking magical barrier from hell, the world's worst ass-beating, and a mental fucking breakdown, I've about hit my limit for the day.

I'm sweaty, exhausted, and my head is *throbbing*. The moment Calder confirmed that Idril was in the late stages of CSDD, the seeds of guilt were planted. It's only been a few days, but after what I've seen in this house, those seeds have sprouted, bloomed, and erupted into a tree of self-loathing as big as this willow. Its roots are sunk as deep as the ones I'm struggling to dig around now, steadily growing day by day as they feast on my shame.

How am I ever going to look at her again? How can I possibly ever look at Caelan again now that I understand the magnitude of my betrayal? What the fuck was I—

CLANG

I drop my shovel. Vae freezes next to me, mid-swing, and Riven's dirt streaked face snaps to me, hope-filled eyes wide.

I blink, staring into the shallow pit I've carved in the Earth. The metal edge of my shovel definitely hit something solid, so I reach through the maze of roots until I touch something at the bottom that definitely isn't dirt.

"Shit."

Shifting to get into a better position, I reach into the pit with my other hand and use both to swipe at the layers of dirt. My fingers catch under the lip of something solid and shimmy it out of the packed soil. When a gleam of bright metal catches the sun, I suck in a sharp breath.

"Damn, I was starting to think Idril's mom was hallucinating or something," Vae breathes. "Also, why are there eight thousand roots? How did she dig between them all in the first place?"

I don't answer. I can't. Just like earlier, a part of me didn't actually believe we'd find anything under here. Up until this moment, I genuinely thought Annalise's words were most likely nothing more than the ramblings of a dying, broken female.

Once again, I was wrong.

It takes another ten minutes of digging through the labyrinth of roots and soil before we can finally unearth the metal box. Once I've got a solid grip on it, I maneuver it carefully between the roots and out of the Earth.

Vae makes a shocked noise in his throat as I lay it on the ground between us.

"There's no rust. If she buried it before she disappeared, then it's been down here for almost a decade…"

Of course there's no rust. It's been sealed away.

Like everything in Idril's life. Her joy, her childhood, her free will, her mother's love. All of it, buried under layers and layers of lies, secrets, and betrayal. *Why not this, too?*

I run a steady hand across the top of the lockbox and notice there's something etched into the metal.

"A.E." I murmur. "What does that stand for?"

"Could be Annalise's name. Her first and maiden name, maybe?" Riven shrugs. "Idril probably knows."

I slide my fingers along the edges. There's no lock, just a simple clasp you can flip to unlock it.

A wave of dizziness passes over me, something inside of me suddenly shifting. This moment feels intimate, like the final step in accepting how catastrophically wrong I've been the last three weeks.

Caelan should be here. Soren, too. Idril most of all. But if Idril can't be here, then Caelan should be the one doing this. Her Mate should open this final gift from her mother, not the male who's made her life a living hell when he should have been protecting her.

I'm the last male who deserves to take part in this.

That familiar pressure returns, making my eyes and nose burn. Swallowing thickly, I blink back tears and flip the latch.

It gives way with a soft *snick*, and a faint exhale of air as I lift the lid.

Riven and Vae crowd closer. The wind whispers through the willows' fronds, and a bird chirps in the distance.

A grin blooms on my face when I see what's inside.

A book.

It's beautiful. Bound in leather, with edges worn smooth and wrapped with a leather cord. It's a deep brown, aged with scratches and marks layered on top of each other. Signs it's been well loved and handled often.

My hand wanders to my backpack, and I feel absently for the rectangular shape of The Two Towers. I still don't know why I took it, but when I read her flowing script in the margins, I felt like someone had sucker-punched me in the chest.

Even my Alpha surged forward to claim ownership. I still don't know if his ***"Mine!"*** was about the book… or Idril.

I don't expect to find anything else when I lift the book from the box, so I nearly miss the letter wrapped in a neatly folded square of linen.

It's sealed with a wax seal shaped like a flame, and for the briefest moment I swear I can smell the smoke of a burning fire.

Vae reaches for the letter, but my hand latches onto his wrist before he can touch it.

"No," I tell him gently, ignoring his look of confusion. "It's Idril's. Her mother left it for her."

His shoulders relax, and I let go of his wrist. Riven arches an eyebrow. "You're not going to read it?"

I shake my head before he finishes speaking. "We'll bring it back to HQ. We can give it to her when she gets home."

Vae sucks in a sharp breath the moment my own lungs stall.

Home.

For the first time, I realize what that must mean to Idril. She's been without a home for so long. Even when her mother was alive, this place was never a home. No laughter echoed through the halls, no happy family Christmases, no memories of sleepovers with friends. The few good memories she has, I ripped to shreds in an attempt to make her feel guilty for having them.

The memory feels like a knife to the lungs. My eyesight tunnels as the pounding pain in the back of my skull increases tenfold.

I called her selfish. I called a girl who had nothing more than those few precious memories selfish.

She was so fucking brave, sitting in that chair surrounded by Alphas. Terrified, but still willing to tell us her story. I can still see the soft smile playing along her lips as she shared those few moments of joy she and her mother were able to steal for themselves on the rare occasion it was safe enough to do so.

My throat tightens reliving how her face fell, and she flinched as I attacked her and shamed her for…

Fates, what bullshit was I spewing? That she wasn't doing enough to help other Omegas?

She was a fucking child!

Thirteen years old with bruises in the shape of her father's fingers. Hiding under the blankets as her mother holds her close and whispers of a world where little girls don't have to hide from their father's fists.

I'm hundreds of years old, and I let my past fester for so long that it eventually turned me into a monster. And I let it. I let my fear and past mistakes dictate my future.

If I hadn't made my distaste so obvious… *would Caelan have come to me sooner and told me about Idril? Would he have been caught at all if he hadn't felt like he needed to hide her, knowing how I'd react and knowing he had to protect her from me?*

The what ifs are going to eat me alive.

A hand lands on my shoulder and my head snaps toward Vae, who's looking at me with concern. "Dax, it's al—"

"No, it isn't." I snarl. "It's not fucking alright, Vaelenor. None of this is fucking alright." I stand and run my dirt-stained hands through my hair. *When did I start shaking?*

"I shouldn't have pushed you today," Vae says softly, and his kind tone makes me want to scream. "I shouldn't have forced you to—"

A sardonic laugh bursts out of me. "To what? See the truth? Face the fucking nightmare the Omega I've been mentally and emotionally abusing for weeks has lived through?"

I turn on my heel and slam my fist into the tree trunk. Bark cracks apart and falls to the grass. My knuckles are split and bleeding, but it's not good enough.

I wind back my fist and keep going, punching it again and again and again. Hands grab my biceps, and I snarl, yanking myself out of Riven's hold.

He snarls back, fangs razor-sharp and inches from my throat.

"Calm the fuck down!"

"Calm down? Are you—*Fuck*! I thought—I thought—"

I tunnel my fingers into my hair and pull, tugging at the strands until pain shoots through my scalp. Blood drips hot and wet down my hand and over my wrist.

“I thought she was lying,” I croak, shaking so bad my teeth are fucking chattering. “I almost *killed* her the first time I met her in that cell because she asked about Caelan’s gunshot wound. I was so fucking blind I thought she was taunting us, Riven! She was terrified for her Mate, and I almost *killed* her for it. I called her a liar; I threw a whiskey glass at the wall two feet from her head. I could have seriously hurt her!”

Every day—*every godsdamned moment around the Omega*—flashes through my mind like snapshots of my failures.

“I felt relieved when she cried. I fucking relished in her sadness, because if she was weak it meant I didn’t have to feel bad for making her cry. I told myself—genuinely *believed*—that every tear she shed was a manipulation unless I was *making* her shed them. I thought, *‘Yes, that’s real. Those tears are real*,’ and I felt *good* about it. Justified. Like I was getting revenge for Caelan.”

Neither male says a word, but Vae’s looking at me like he wants to. I know him; I know he wants to open his mouth. Offer me absolution. Forgiveness I haven’t earned and isn’t his to give. His fucking faith in me is unshakeable, and I hate myself because I don’t fucking deserve it.

“I dismissed every fucking concern you had, Vae. Every single one. Each time you told me you were afraid we were taking it too far, or that we might not have the full story, I did exactly what you blamed me for doing—made you feel bad for not drowning in anger like I was.”

Vae’s eyes narrow, nostrils flaring. His fist slams into my jaw, and my head wheels to the side.

I don’t look at him or Riven in the silence that follows. I can feel Vae in front of me, can see his hands fisted at his sides, and hear his furious panting breaths.

“Are you quite fucking finished?” Riven drawls. “In case you’ve forgotten, this isn’t about *you*, asshole. We’re here to get answers for *Idril*. If you want to help, then shut the fuck up and help. If you want to confess, then piss off and go find a priest.”

I exhale a long breath, wiping the blood from my split lip off my chin. I’ll need to feed when we get back to HQ.

Straightening my shoulders, I nod. Riven’s right. This isn’t the time to break down. And that’s all I’ve been doing since we got here—breaking down, making this all about me. Losing my shit and feeling sorry for myself is just another way I’m failing Idril. Just another point in a long list of

crimes I've committed against her. Crimes I don't even know if I can come back from.

"Yeah, okay," I mutter, shooting Vae a wary glance. He still looks pissed, and honestly I can't blame him.

Gods, how am I ever going to make it up to him? And Caelan?

"Sorry," I grunt, holding his gaze and letting him see the truth in my words, praying he understands that I'm not just apologizing for what just happened.

Eventually, he inclines his head. "You're not the only one who failed her. I made my own choices. I'm as much to blame as you are."

He's not, but I'm not going to argue. Instead, I crouch down and pick the leather-bound book off the ground, grimacing as I wipe soil and grass from its back. I take little comfort in knowing I'm at least doing something to help her while she's… wherever she is.

I have a long road of groveling ahead of me, but I can start with this.

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Chapter 33

Daxen

"Should we wait to get back to HQ before we open it?" I ask, turning it over in my hands. The worn leather is soft and supple under my fingertips, and now that I'm holding it, I want nothing more than to unravel the cord and find out what's inside.

"Let's look at it here first," Vae replies. "I feel like we need to."

He purses his lips, like he hadn't meant to say that last part out loud. I want to smirk, because I know exactly how he's feeling, but I can't quite get my lips to move. Not with the guilt still thrumming through my veins.

Flipping the book right-side up, I begin to unravel the leather binding. The cover falls open as though moved by an invisible hand.

The paper smells like lilacs. The scent surrounds the three of us and settles like a blanket where we stand. There's no title, just a blank page and something written in sprawling, tidy script at the top.

For my daughter. I've always told you to never forget who you are, but I did you a disservice by keeping that knowledge a secret. Someday, you will have answers, but until that day…

Here's one final story.

My stomach falls. I glance up, exchanging uneasy looks with Riven and Vae. It's clear, looking back, that Annalise's stories aren't the same ones most mothers tell their children before bed. Instead of Jack and the

Beanstalk and Snow White, Idril grew up with ancient Irish fables masquerading as fairytales that read more like prophecy.

I flip the page, and the scent of lilac intensifies.

This page includes artwork—hand-drawn and painted in painstakingly beautiful strokes. It's breathtakingly gorgeous—something you'd find in an archive.

I wonder if Annalise did the illustrations as well.

It's a sweeping panorama painted across the first two pages. Four quadrants connected via swirling, streaming lines of light that meet in the center before combining into a great glowing orb.

Each of the four quadrants contains its own distinct landscape. Volcanic Mountains and molten rivers; vast meadows with flowers and trees blowing in the wind; a crystalline ocean with spires rising from its depths; and a dense forest overgrown with ivy that seems to be swallowing an ancient stone ruin.

Celestial beings watch from above, each face a unique blend of features that merge seamlessly with the constellations in the night sky

Once, long before the world was full of glass buildings and people flew in metal birds across the sky, Our world was ruled beneath the keeping of a single Breath. It moved through all things, though no eye could see it.

From the Breath, four hearts were born. And by their pulse, the world was sustained.

Flame, Earth, Water, and Air.

I turn the page and continue the story.

For time beyond memory, all things lived in harmony with the Breath. It bestowed its gifts to its children freely and none of its children were denied its blessings. Yet there were certain Bloodlines in whom the Breath bestowed its gifts even deeper—like hidden gems beneath the earth.

Four Bloodlines. Four great Houses. Each defended from one of the Four hearts.

Through those four Bloodlines, the pulse of the Breath ran with no limit. Those born to that lineage held dominion over the gift from which their House was birthed—Flame, Air, Water and Earth.

In addition, the other three Hearts gifted them with a smaller modicum of power so that even a child of Flame might hear the song of Water and a son of Earth might dance among the magical currents of Air.

The illustration on the next page shows two men and two women, wearing flowing robes and crowns. They stand in a circle, hands stretched outward. They're beautiful—whether by natural design or the artist's whimsy, I can't begin to speculate. Each one holds an element in their cupped palms. Spirals of water, cyclones of air that buffet their clothing and hair, handfuls of soil with flowers blooming, and fire—burning so bright I instinctively want to shade my eyes.

At the center, all four elements braid together to form a crown of light. It pulses faintly, and I blink, running a finger cautiously over the illustration.

I could have sworn it just *moved*.

"Go on," Vae urges, leaning closer, and I force my attention away from the crown of light and turn the page.

These were the keepers of balance. Their laughter and secrets danced in the air; the Earth wept when they grieved. Their joy fed the rivers and land, and their rage could set the heavens alight.

But light cannot exist without shadow.

For there existed those blessed by the Breath with an abundance of power, yet looked upon with mistrust and fear by Light and Humanity alike.

Envy and greed grew and grew, planting roots and digging deeply.

On the page below, a man throws his head back and laughs as clouds part around him. Elsewhere, dozens of tiny animals made from wispy clouds spin through an open field as children chase after them. Hidden behind a grove of trees, a kneeling woman weeps, and flowers bloom where her tears fall.

After centuries of indifference and dismissal, the children of Shadow were beginning to hunger. They watched millennia after millennia as humanity turned to the Light, bestowing upon them limitless praise and affection.

Yet when they offered their own gifts, children ran crying to their mothers and door after door slammed shut in their faces.

They raged and gnashed their teeth with envy. For their gifts were of the mind and spirit, and what moves in the dark and the depths of the soul will always come second to the warmth of a fire and a fertile harvest that fills the belly of a child.

And man will always fear that which they cannot see, and do not understand.

The bright colors of the art start to change as dark, misty tendrils of shadow creep in from the edge of the pages, reaching toward the glowing kingdoms in the distance.

Clearing my throat, I flip the page.

At last, the Shadow struck out—as those drowning in pain oft do when they're ignored. Perhaps, if pain and dismissal had not been left to fester, there may still have been room and time for compassion. If the wound had not been left to rot and fester until its poison began to rot all that surrounded it.

But that is not this story.

The hand that may have been extended in brotherhood, reached for steel and drew first blood instead/

Weapons were drawn. First blood fell.

War arrived like a thief in the night. It crept over the land and into the skies. It entered sleeping chambers on the silent feet of assassins and the finest golden goblets filled from jugs of poisoned wine. It was fought with fists and blades, treacherous whispers past ear-to-ear and legions of marching armies that left once beautiful flowered meadows in bloody ruins.

And through it all, the most dangerous and deadliest weapon of all.

Magic.

For generations, Light and the Shadow turned their gifts upon each other, and the Breath bore every strike.

Until eventually… it could take no more.

For the Breath was never meant to wage a war upon itself.

It started small, as so many catastrophic events in history do. For centuries, both sides ignored every sign their world was dying. What is a single failed harvest when there is war to be won?

What are ten failed harvests in the face of battle? Even a dozen are easily dismissed when the reaper of death is breathing down your neck.

Millenia passed with eyes trained on the threat beneath the enemy's banner.

All the while, the Earth was unraveling. And as history has shown time and again, those who suffer most for the sins of the powerful are those without power.

Humanity watched year after year as their crops died, their rivers and lakes dried up, and their loved ones fell to famine and disease.

Feeling helpless, a shocking number of humans took up swords. They stood with the Light, whose gifts their stories remembered with love and stood against the Shadow—and the destruction it wrought.

Below the text, shadowy figures loom over beds as the occupants writhe in fear—locked in a nightmare inside their own minds. Rows upon rows of humans, each sporting an injury that makes it clear this is some kind of field hospital.

Fates… the lack of control…trapped in your own head but unable to escape? The thought of it makes me nauseous. It's not something I ever considered. Abilities that extreme don't exist outside of movies and books, but now…

I turn the page, unwilling to linger on the image any longer.

A woman stands at the head of an army, hundreds of soldiers—male and female alike—lined up in a now-familiar pose. Arms extended, hands out, balls of fire explode from their palms, soaring in an arc across the empty stretch of sky.

Across the battlefield, a second enemy army, dressed head to toe in black and charging straight for them, is another now-familiar sight.

Most rush forward on foot, gripping spears and swords. Some, however, lead the charge on ebony warhorses who, like their riders, snarl and bare their teeth in fury.

For a moment, I swear I can hear the sounds of battle. The screams of dying males and females and the pounding of heavy hooves along a muddy bank. Someone—a female—barks orders in the recognizable tone of a seasoned commander. Her voice sounds amplified, but it doesn't sound like a megaphone; it sounds like—

"Fates," Riven whispers, "What battle is that?"

The noises disappear.

"I don't think it's an actual battle," I murmur, surveying the illustration once more. It's so detailed. So realistic. More like a photo than a painting.

Before the sounds of war return, I flip the page and continue the story.

As the world fell apart all those alive began to fear there would be no recovery after centuries of damage. Too much had changed; nothing remained unmarred by destruction.

Finally, after weeks of messages passed in secret both sides agreed to meet.

Eight delegates were chosen. Four representing the Light and four representing the Shadow. For months they argued with words as outside, the world continued to fade and change.

In the end, only two paths remained. Continue fighting until either no one remained to fight for the world, or there was no longer a world remaining to fight for.

Or remove themselves from this world completely.

When asked, all eight answered the same.

And so, separately, Light and Shadow gathered their peoples and wove themselves and their realms away. They locked themselves in the place between breaths—where even time could not find its way in.

The Light sealed the Gates with their own life's blood. Save a singular token, they left nothing behind.

Only the faint melody of their voices—a song that even now can only be heard in those still, silent moments between breaths. Within that song linger the hopes of a people. The dreams of an empire. The sorrow of thousands upon thousands, those who sacrificed everything for the mere chance that the world and those it belongs to may have enough time to heal before the pain that was yet to come.

Soon, legends of their beauty and grace, myths of their love and kindness, and lore of their brilliance and gifts faded into nothingness.

Until the world forgot them completely.

Just as all stories—even the most beautiful—will fade when there remains no one living who remembers.

And those who did, find their memories unnaturally slipping away, like mist on a chill, foggy night.

The four figures depicted at the beginning of the book return, but this time they’re in a circle, their hands linked, heads bowed, and faces lined

with expressions full of pain and grief and… *hope?*

I get the impression that these four figures are accompanied by thousands more just like them. They're not meant to be a literal representation of four singular lives, but of an entire Species collectively.

How…? How could I possibly know that?

I know *nothing* about art. I'm not the kind of person who can look at a painting and tell you that the blue car the subject is driving represents the painter's inability to travel through life without depression as a vehicle or whatever.

I mean, I simply *don't understand it.*

But somehow, looking at these figures, I know with absolute certainty that they're meant to symbolize thousands upon thousands of others.

Fates, this is so disturbing.

What makes it even more disturbing, however, is the river of red that runs from the insides of their wrists. The blood—because that is most certainly what it is—streams down their hands, flowing between their linked fingers in steady streams that fall to the Earth, merging into shimmering pools at their feet.

Reflected in the still surface of blood are images. Mountains, forests, fields, rivers, and oceans. But they're twisted, as though they're bending or folding in on themselves. The water of the rivers and oceans warps like melted wax, and the mountains, hills, and trees curl and arc inward like a volcano collapsing in on itself after erupting.

The entire world… *all of it… gone.*

"They died," I whisper, feeling shocked by an overwhelming sensation of loss. My brain wants to skip this part. Turn the page. But my fingers won't work.

I don't know who these people are. Hells, I don't even know if they're real. But the idea of an entire Species—because that's what the figures standing in a circle, hands linked together and blood at their feet represent, I *know* it is—dying in some last-ditch attempt to save the world is so impossibly heartbreaking.

Eventually, Riven reaches out and gently turns the page for me. Even then, the feeling of loss is still there, wrapped around me like a shroud.

One day, the Gate they sacrificed everything to close will open once more. For not even life, however freely given, can pay for eternal

rest. Not even the loss of an entire people can unmake what Fate itself has decreed must occur.

Light and the Shadow will face one another once more. Their ancient battle will begin again and the world will tremble beneath the onslaught of war.

I’m not sure why I do it, but I tilt the book. The change makes the illustration shimmer. Under the writing is the illustration of a night sky so dark it seems to pull the shadows right toward it. Four stars stand out in stark relief, burning brightly against the sky's dark backdrop.

Only one of them is burning gold, however. The other three are, oddly enough, blue, green, and red.

And they’re arranged in the shape of a door.

No.

A gate.

My pulse skips two beats, then starts up again. My fingers curl into the edges of the book. My head snaps up, eyes locking on Riven’s. His are wide, and I’m sure he’s thinking the same thing I am.

My hand shakes when I turn the final page.

The final piece of art is simple, yet more beautiful than any that came before it.

A girl sits in the middle of an open field interspersed with tiny flowers. She sits with her back to the reader, barely more than a silhouette.

Her hair is painted in metallic strokes of color that fall to her waist and merge into strands of flame, water, wind, and root.

Above her, the night sky covers the Earth, stretching endlessly into the horizon. The stars from the previous page shine bright above her, set in the same constellation—a burning gate.

The girl reaches out with delicate, graceful fingers, as though she might pluck a star from the sky if she were close enough. And though I can't see her face, I feel exactly what she’s feeling.

It pulses through me. *Fear. Curiosity. Awe.*

“What’s it say?” Vae whispers, twisting his neck to try to read it when I don’t do so quickly enough.

One hope remains, however. Inside the heart of a girl not yet born. Within her blood, all four hearts—our entire legacy—will beat once more. Together.

All that we are, all that we were or may once have been will pass into her keeping.

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The future will shift the night of her birth. With her first breath, a flame will spark, and the world will begin a new journey. Destiny will call, and she will answer. And when the time is right, the Gate will open once more.

Light. Shadow. One cannot exist without the other. They are opposites. And yet they are the same.

Only she will weave the foundation that will bridge the divide, binding to her fang, claw and shadow.

And when the hour of battle arrives, she will stand ready.

For only one who has lived a life in the dark will have the strength to face the Shadow without flinching.

By the time I finish, my mouth is so dry I'm struggling to speak. My lips tingle, and so do my fingers.

"This is—" I hesitate, unable to finish the thought.

This isn't just a story. It's not just a book. It's something so much more.

I've never truly believed in magic outside the scientific explanation that attributes it to differences in the DNA of a small percentage of vampires and wolven. That genetic mutation lets some of our kind manipulate our blood and use it to scry or create wards for protection.

It’s science. It makes sense. It’s no different from how only a few inherit perfect pitch while others never come close to what might seem like magic, when in reality it’s just genetics.

This, though… This is *not* code. It is not DNA. At least, not the way we know and understand it. Whatever this is, it’s ancient and powerful and… *alive.*

“What does that all mean?” Vae asks, and a strain in his voice makes me squint to study him more closely.

“What aren’t you saying right now, Vaelenor?”

He scrubs a hand down his face and frowns, eyes falling to the book in my hands. “It’s Idril.”

My default is to tell him he’s wrong. I’m already opening my mouth to do exactly that when I catch his expression and suck in a breath, stopping myself.

Fuck, what am I doing? Haven’t I ignored his instincts enough? If I’d listened to him just once when he came to me about Idril, shit wouldn’t be nearly as bad as it is now.

My Alpha grunts, acknowledging my self-recrimination. The judgment in that single sound makes me wince.

But what really hurts is the shock in Vae’s eyes when he realizes I’m not going to contradict or browbeat him.

For both our sakes, I ignore the exchange and follow his gaze back to the still open book in my hands. Riven leans in closer as well, and mutters, “Well, shit.”

Cautiously, I run the pads of my fingers across the girl’s delicate form. The dried paint is soft and powdery against my skin. My lips part, and as if the universe itself reaches into my chest and pulls it out, her name forms on my tongue and falls from my lips in a voice that sounds nothing like my own.

“Idril.”

The air beneath the willow stills. The world around us freezes. The fronds that have been swaying since we arrived abruptly stop. The chirping birds go silent. Even the faint noises from the forest cease to exist.

“What the—” Riven curses, and we all tense. It takes longer than I care to admit before I notice the book—still open in my hands—moving.

“Shit!”

Vae and Riven spin to face me, their eyes snapping to the book I've thrust away on instinct. The faint trembling quickly turns to shaking, and I have to tighten my grip so I don't accidentally drop it.

"Is it humming?" Vae asks, leaning in closer. Riven and I exchange confused looks, and right as I'm about to tell him I don't hear anything, the noise reaches my ears.

Well damn… he's right.

Bright light explodes from the pages, shooting straight into the sky like a fucking spotlight. It takes everything in me to keep my hold on the tome and shield my eyes from the light, but somehow, I manage it.

It reminds me instantly of Daniella, the Omega who lit up randomly after being injected with Idril's blood. Riven shouts a string of curses, and Vae does what I wish I could do and takes a huge step back, throwing his arms up to shield his eyes.

As fast as it appeared, the light begins to dim. Only a few seconds pass before I can look at it once more. Right as it begins to contract by folding in on itself.

I blink repeatedly to clear the afterimages from my vision. The humming intensifies, and I pull the book closer and lean in, watching in awe as the light—now folded into a slim beam shaped like a pen—starts moving across the final, blank page.

"It's writing something," Riven breathes, grinning like it is the best thing that's ever happened to him. *Knowing him, it actually is.*

Vae's smile is a little more hesitant, but as we watch the light-pen move in precise, sweeping scrawl, it's hard not to give in to astonishment.

That feeling only intensifies as radiant golden letters appear, forming words that whisper into existence along the parchment with a soft hissing sound, as if they're being burnt into the very fibers of the paper itself.

The light flares brightly before unraveling. It floats into the air and disappears amongst the fronds, leaving a message etched in fire and a faint ringing hum in its wake.

Vae exhales like he's waking from a dream. He reaches across the space between us, pausing with his hand hovering right over the still glowing words of the book.

Riven reaches out and smacks his hand. "What are you, five? Sure, Vae, go ahead and touch the flaming prophecy that just appeared in the back of a glowing book buried underground and saturated with magic. Hey, I've got

an idea! While you're at it, why don't you lick it? Really get the full sensory experience."

Vae glares at him indignantly. "I wasn't going to touch it; I'm not Silas."

Riven raises a single brow, and Vae's eyes drop to his shoes. He stuffs his hands in his pants pockets and mutters, "I just wanted to see if it was hot."

Riven rolls his eyes and steps closer. "Alright, what's it say?"

Rather than adjusting my hold again, I press it into his chest. "Here, my arms are starting to ache, and I can't read it. I'm still half blind from that light."

Riven takes it from me with the same reverence someone would give a priceless artifact. He mutters to himself, eyes flitting back and forth as he reads and rereads the passage. I try to be patient, but my patience ran out hours ago.

"Well?" I ask, and Vae's brows shoot to his hairline at my tone. Riven glances up, brows furrowed.

"It says, ***Elydrien***. Under that it says, ***Child of Flames, Wielder of Lineages. Child of Prophecy, Bearer of Four.*** All capitalized."

"That would denote a title," I murmur. "Something official."

"Official to whom?" Vae asks.

"This at the bottom," Riven gestures at a barely legible line. "***The Last Daughter. The Last Hope.***"

"The Last Daughter," I breathe, mind spinning in circles. I read the words over and over again until—

"Elydrien," I gasp, the word finally clicking. "Fuck! The murder board!"

Vae's eyes snap to mine, wide with shock. I snatch the book from Riven and scan the passage. The words don't change, but the pieces in my head begin to move, rearranging and slotting together until they form a picture I'm starting to understand

"It's the word that was tacked up to Alberton's murder board," I repeat.

"What in all the Fates is he talking about?" Riven asks.

"When we found out who the Doctor working with Varenthrall was, we went to his house and did some recon," Vae explains. "There was an actual murder board in his closet."

Riven grunts. “Yes, I remember you saying that, but what does that have to do with this?”

“In the middle of the board was a paper with a single word on it. I thought maybe it was the name of the project or something.” I point at the page, right above the word.

“***Elydrien.***”

Vae’s face drains of color, and he turns, stumbles a few steps, then reaches for the lock box and points to the inscription.

“A.E. It’s not a maiden name at all. Or…” he runs his thumb over the etched letters. “Maybe it is her maiden name. Maybe it’s actually—”

“Annalise Elydrien,” Riven finishes, looking as shocked as I feel. He falls back, leaning against the tree for support.

“Fates, that makes so much sense. If the blood’s coming from Idril *and* her Mother— *Elydrien blood.*”

“It’s not just a name. It’s a *bloodline,*” Riven says. “Don’t you see? It’s Idril’s bloodline. Annalise’s bloodline.”

He gestures for me to hand him the book, and once I do, he crouches down and flips through the pages. Once he finds the one he’s looking for, he turns it around.

“‘There is one hope, however. That hope rests in the life of a girl child not yet born. One who will hold the pulse of all four hearts in her veins. When the day comes that the Gate opens once more, she will stand ready.’”

My body reacts before my mind does. I stumble back, my heart skipping what feels like a dozen beats before thumping back to life.

My chest aches, throbbing with a sharp, insistent pain that won’t go away.

And yet even though I’m spiraling physically, my mind is strangely calm. When my gaze lands on open pages of the book, I realize with a jolt that… I already knew.

Everything Riven’s saying isn’t a shock because, on some fucking level, I’ve already come to the same conclusion.

Vae’s eyes fall to the book—to the girl sitting alone in a field that suddenly seems a thousand times bigger than before—and his eyes harden.

He clenches his jaw and straightens his shoulders. Then he lifts his chin and looks me straight in the eye. I’m so fucking shocked by the sudden change in his demeanor I almost miss the growl vibrating in his chest—something I haven’t heard from him in decades.

But even that's not as shocking as the words he shoots at me like bullets, each one aimed right at my chest.

"If you say one fucking word about her—just one, Daxen—I'll make Caelan's beat down this afternoon look like a tickle match. You're not going to use this shit to hurt her. Not again. Never again. I've tried to be nice. I've tried to be understanding. I've tried easing you into it. I'm done trying. So whatever it is you were just about to accuse her of because you're fucking scared and don't know how to process emotions when it comes to this one female, I highly encourage you to take those words and go fuck yourself with them."

Maybe I am losing it because the fury in Vae's voice and the clear promise to go to war for the Omega fills me with pride.

He really would beat the shit out of me right now. He means it.

My eyes soften, and when I give him a gentle smile, his anger literally melts out of his body, replaced by confusion.

Well, that makes two of us.

"You're right," I tell him, ignoring the way his eyes widen to saucers. "I actually wasn't going to say any of the shit you're imagining, but I don't blame you for expecting otherwise. I've given you every reason to think I'd do exactly that. Besides, the truth is literally staring me right in the face," I tell him with a wry smile, gaze flicking down to the illustration in the book.

To Idril.

The girl in the story. Her bloodline, her legacy, who and what she is—it's all attached to these people. Whoever—*whatever*—they are.

She is the last hope written about in that book.

And I tried to ruin her. *Break her.*

'For only one who has lived in the darkness will have the strength to face it.'

The words are right there on the page, taunting me. One who has lived in the darkness. *And she has, hasn't she?* Not just before we found her, but after that, too. She was alone and scared, in a strange place with strange Alphas; her Mate was injured and hidden from her, while every word out of her mouth was denounced as a lie.

She still has no idea who she is. No idea what she's capable of. *How many times has something happened and she's had no idea how or why?*

I remember the sconces flaring down the hall when I yelled at her. The beams in the attic that exploded when Vae cut her down with cruel words.

The truth is right there, in the illustrations. Males and females with palms outstretched, summing fire and air, water and Earth.

“Do you need me to draw you a picture like a toddler so it sticks?” Gavran’s taunt from that first day rings in my ears.

I snort a laugh, but there’s no amusement in the sound. This isn’t something I can fix. It’s not something I can hack or search or test. I took a helpless Omega and made her life miserable when it was already a nightmare.

I tried to ruin someone who’s supposed to… *what?* If this book’s to be believed, she’s going to somehow stop a war that’ll be so catastrophic it might rip apart the very world itself.

“She has powers,” I admit, tasting the words as they roll from my tongue. “She has magic. Real magic. Magic she doesn’t understand or know how to use. Whoever these people were—she’s somehow related to them or… something.”

I search for the words to try and explain, *but how the hell do you explain something you don’t understand? Who are these people? Why are there no records of them? Were they humans who could do elemental magic?*

“Gods, it's almost painful at this point, watching you continue to realize all the ways you orchestrated your own downfall,” Riven sighs.

I shoot him a glare, and he smirks. “I think the first thing we need to do is get this information back to HQ,” he says. “I’m sure her Mates would love to know what you just figured out.”

I nod, exhaling in relief as we all start to pack up our bags. We work in silence, cleaning up and replacing everything the way we found it for our drive back to HQ—including the box and the sealed letter addressed to Idril.

Once I’m sure we’re ready to go, I follow Vae and Riven through the fronds and out from under the tree.

For the fourth time, I feel around the outside of my bag, making sure I have both books with me—Tolkien as well as the book Idril’s mother left for her.

The silence lasts the entire drive home, all three of us lost in our own thoughts. I’m sure a thousand questions, theories, and memories are running through Vae and Riven’s minds, just like they are through mine.

It’s not until we pull into HQ’s circular drive that I come up with what might be the most important question of all.

If Idril’s related to these beings that the book refers to as the Light…

Then who the fuck are the Shadow?

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Chapter 34

Idril

The water laps at the edges of the cavern in an oddly meditative rhythm. If my anxiety weren't dialed up to a thousand, it might even be enough to lull me to sleep.

Unfortunately, sleep has been difficult to come by, despite exhaustion weighing me down. After another hour of silent exploration, Branwen yawned and declared it time for bed. We did our best to create a semblance of a pallet from the outer layers of our clothing, but it didn't last long.

It's freezing down here, and after an hour of tossing and turning, I pulled Caelan's hoodie back on, grumbling the whole time.

I tug at the hem of it now, wishing it still smelled like him. My eyes are heavy, and my head still aches. I know it'll only get worse if I don't get some sleep soon, but I can't.

I can feel Branwen behind me. Can sense her presence, even thirty feet away. Despite being jealous, I am glad she's getting more than the few hours of sleep I managed. The guilt I feel for dragging her down here is eating me alive.

My eyes drift across the water, pulled toward the platform. I don't fight it, letting my gaze settle on the pillar. I can feel *its* presence, too. Whatever's inside. It tugs at me, demanding my attention.

The eye I saw in my dreams is the only clue I have about what's inside, and *"it has at least one eye"* doesn't narrow it down at all.

That moment is still so clear in my mind. The bright, blinding blue of the iris, landing right on me. Like it knew I was there.

I'd swear it was looking straight into the depths of my soul.

Whatever it is, it's not evil. I know that for sure. I also know, even though I have no way to prove it, that it's trapped. It wants out. It wants to be free.

It's a feeling I know all too well. The idea of being imprisoned for so long with no hope of rescue has tears gathering along my lashes.

Before we leave, I have to free it. Some part of me has known that from the moment I stepped into the cave up above.

I push myself to my feet, trying to ignore the cold pain in my joints. The stone floor is set with large, smooth slabs that start in the center and spiral out toward the entrance.

Who laid them? What was this space used for originally? A bathing chamber? A swimming pool?

I hear a throat clear behind me and jump in shock. Spinning around, I find Branwen a few feet away, braiding her hair with nimble fingers. She flips her braid over her shoulder and crosses her arms, looking like a disappointed kindergarten teacher.

"Did you get any sleep at all?"

"A few hours," I tell her truthfully. Her eyes land on something over my shoulder and her lips turn down at the corners.

"Whatever's in there, I swear to the Fates, I can feel it," she murmurs. "It's not bad energy, but it's heavy."

"It wants out. It's trapped—sleeping—and on some level it's aware, but mostly—" My mouth snaps shut so fast my teeth click together. I feel my face heat, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

Gods, she's going to think I've lost the plot.

"I told you we need to wake it up," my friend replies calmly. When my startled gaze shoots to her, she gives me a wry smile and rolls her eyes.

"No need to censor yourself. My whole family would have been burned at the stake a few hundred years ago. I know what it's like to have to watch what you say because the world is full of people who refuse to acknowledge what they don't understand."

Feeling my body physically relax, I return her smile with one of my own. She's right, of course. I should have thought about that. If anyone would understand, it would be Branwen. Caelan and Soren would believe me, but believing is different than understanding.

"So, priorities are as follows. Number One: Food. Number Two: Free whatever's in that ice prison. Three: Get the heck out of here." She ticks

each point off on her fingers. “Food is still a work in progress. So is our escape plan. So let’s talk about number two—freeing the prisoner. You need to wake it up.”

She says that last sentence so confidently that I almost ask her if she knows something I don’t.

“And how do you suggest I do that?” I ask, trying not to let my irritation bleed into my tone. It’s hard, though. Especially when the word *how* is quickly turning into my least favorite word in existence.

How do I control my powers? How do I make fire? How do I feed us? How do I get us out of here? How can I discover what I am and what’s happening to me? How is it that I’m somehow the only person in the history of the world with multiple Mates from different Species? How do I wake up what’s in that pillar of ice?

Branwen’s head tilts to the side, considering. “We’ll know when the time is right.”

“Did you *See* something?”

Oh gods, please, please let her have Seen something. I need to know I’m going to get us out of here. I can’t fail her. Can’t fail whoever’s in that pillar. Can’t fail my Mates.

She smiles, eyes bright. “I *Saw* you. You were climbing out of the ground, covered in dirt, eyes blazing. I was there too. The forest was alive with anticipation, and the air was buzzing, like it was charged with electricity.”

I swear to the Fates, my knees actually get weak.

“So. We know we get out of here at some point.”

“Hopefully before we starve to death,” I mutter, wrapping my arms around my middle. Fates, it’s so cold down here.

Branwen walks up to me and reaches out, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Hoping and wondering aren’t how we get out of here. I know that much at least.” She glances at the chamber, then back at me. “Come on, let’s see what else you can do.”

I sigh, but follow. The chamber’s just as we left it last night. The air’s still crisp, and there’s a faint glow coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. The paintings shimmer when we get close enough to see them, and they seem brighter today, as if they’re lit from within.

Heading straight for the shelves, Branwen grabs a few jars, then walks over and sets them on a table off to the side. *Water. Soil. And something*

else. Something that glitters faintly with a silver sheen.

"What's that?" I point to the last jar. She uncorks it, then sets it back down.

"No idea," she shrugs.

"Oh, Fates. I'm going to blow us up, aren't I?"

I start to back up, away from the table. Visions of the cavern exploding and burning us both to a crisp in some out-of-control fire pop into my mind, giving me yet another thing to worry about.

At least, Branwen would die. I don't know what would happen to me. I know for a certainty that when Cage pushed me into that fire, my hand went through it and I somehow came out totally unharmed, so there's a chance I might be fine.

Maybe.

Branwen wraps her hand around my arm before I can get too far and pulls me back, rolling her eyes.

"Come on, we're going to start with dirt first."

I eye the jar of silver liquid dubiously, but try to ignore it. Branwen takes one of the other jars and turns it over, shaking out a pile of wet soil onto the table. My eyes flick from Branwen to the soil, then back to Branwen.

"Try moving it," she suggests, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Moving it?"

"With your mind. With your hands. Whatever. Wiggle your fingers. Glare at it menacingly. Imagine it's Daxen's face. Then punch it."

The laugh that escapes is unexpected, but helps me relax. I reach out and press my fingertips into the soil.

It's oddly warm. *Smooth.* Dark as coffee grounds. Closing my eyes, I clear my mind and focus only on the way it feels on my skin. I imagine it moving, stirring under my fingers. I picture it scattering across the table, like a plume of smoke.

I open my eyes, and—

Nothing.

I try again, pushing harder this time. I keep pushing, focusing all my mental energy on the dirt until my hands shake and the pounding in my temples feels like someone's taking a bat to the inside of my skull.

Sweat breaks out on my forehead, and I wipe it away with my shoulder.

When I open my eyes and nothing's changed, I start to get frustrated.

Okay. Think, Idril. You were able to call on the wind and fire, so there has to be a way to call on the Earth.

Thinking back to Branwen's earlier suggestions, I decide to try a different approach. I beg.

Please, please move. Just do something. Anything. Turn into a dirt snowman, or a dirt sandcastle. There are so many things you could be!

Grunting with effort, I press my fingers harder into the soil. Then I open my eyes.

Freaking. Nothing.

For the next ten minutes, I chant a continuous litany of *"Please, please, please…"*

Still nothing.

"Maybe you're holding your breath too long," Branwen suggests. I open one eye and glare at her.

"Or maybe—and I could be totally wrong, but hear me out—maybe… *it's just dirt."*

She rolls her eyes, gesturing toward the mound of soil that's still the same as it was when she poured it out.

"Of course it's just dirt. *It's* not magic, *you* are," she says, eyes twinkling with mirth. "Don't let it win. You're more powerful than the dirt."

I moan, shaking out my hands to work some blood flow back into my arms. "Sorry. I'm just tired and hungry and… *ugh.* Let's try something else."

There's no way I can go back to talk to soil again. I just can't do it. If I had to create a list of my enemies right now, this dirt would hold the number five slot.

My father.

Cage.

Daxen.

Vae.

The Dirt.

Branwen's quick to agree, and we move to water and fire. With sure movements, she uncorks another jar and pours a few inches of water into the bottom of a stone bowl.

"Just heat it a little. Enough for it to steam."

Exhaling, I repeat the exercise from yesterday, but this time I imagine the fire curling through the water, gently heating the molecules and changing it on a fundamental level, specifically willing it to be gentle, rather than the torrent from hell we experienced last time.

A faint tremor works through my arm and down into my hand. Excitement thrums through me, and suddenly I'm sure—*I'm sure*—I got it right this time.

Until the water flashes to a boil so fast the glass cracks and explodes into pieces; with a yelp, Branwen drops it and jumps out of the way as scalding droplets fly through the air.

The water hits the floor with a hiss, and vanishes into vapor.

I stumble back from the table, heart hammering, hands curled into fists. I'm terrified to open them, just in case I lose control and the flames shoot out of my palms again.

A whine falls past my lips. Clutching my fists to my chest, I close my eyes and retreat on shaking legs. The urge to run and hide is nearly overwhelming.

Fates, I almost hurt Branwen. I almost hurt my friend. *What do I think I'm even doing? I have no control over any of this!*

"Idril?"

"No!" I shout, cutting her off. My eyes snap open, and I point a shaking finger at the floor, where tiny rivulets of water snake across the stone. "I can't. I can't do it. I can't—it's not supposed to—"

She grabs my shoulders and snaps, "Idril! Stop! You're fighting it. Stop fighting it!"

My moan is pitiful, especially when what I really want to do is scream. She doesn't get it. Doesn't understand. Of course I'm fighting it. *It's the only thing I know how to do!*

My entire *life* has been a fight. A fight to survive. A fight against my father. A fight against my Fated Mates. I fight to bite back retorts, to push down my instincts, to ignore these Bonds in my chest. I fight to be heard, fight to be believed, fight to be included. I fight, *all day, every second*, for some small semblance of peace in the never-ending nightmare of my life.

"I asked it," I argue weakly, but we both know that's not the full truth.

"You're terrified of it," she tosses back, and when I scoff, she narrows her eyes. "You are. And that's okay. You have been afraid your entire life. You had to learn to be quiet and small, and that's so fucked up, Idril, but it's

also your reality. It's the only way you knew to survive. To fight. But this…? This doesn't have to be a fight, love."

There's something about hearing someone else acknowledging everything I've been through that feels so… *validating.* For the first time, it feels like someone actually sees me. I know Soren and Caelan understand, but this is different somehow. This is someone like me. *An Omega. A female.*

Silently, I watch the rivulets of water snake across the floor and cry because I don't know how to stop. I don't know how to let go of my fear. I don't even know if I can.

"What am I supposed to do?" I expect to see pity on Branwen's face, but there's no pity. No fear. She's calm. *Collected. Confident.*

She wraps her hands around mine, eyes gleaming with sincerity. When she answers me, her voice is gentle and kind… and full of conviction.

"Stop asking for permission, Idril. Stop asking for permission to use what's already yours. Stop asking for permission to *live*."

* * *

After that, we decide on a break. Branwen explores the cavern more on her own, then returns to sifting through bottles and jars of things I didn't even know could exist until we found this place, humming softly as she worked.

Nothing shakes that Omega. Somehow, she takes everything in stride, staying calm and positive even when things seem their bleakest. I know she saw us escaping, but there's a little voice in the back of my head that keeps asking if she might be wrong. It keeps telling me to ask her if her visions ever don't turn out the way she *Sees* them, but frankly… I don't want to know.

I can feel the Bonds in my chest, but they feel muted. Constant anxiety comes from Caelan and Soren, and neither Alpha has bothered to block their side of the Bond since the fire cut us off.

Sitting cross-legged next to the lake in the cave, I watch the water lap gently at the edge of the natural shelf in the floor. It's probably been hours since I first sat down, pulled once more toward the pillar of ice and Earth, and increasingly unable to look away from where it looms across from me.

Every now and then, my palms start to tingle. Like they physically itch to reach out and rub the ash away. More than once, I've found myself considering jumping into the water and figuring out a way across. It's one

thing to float down a river with the current and quite another to doggy paddle across a still lake.

And yet… I still have the strange feeling like I'm not ready. *How can I possibly free something else, when I can't even free myself?*

Beneath the ice, a faint glow pulses. Something else it's recently started to do, and only sporadically.

Branwen grins, clapping her hands and wearing one of those smiles I'm starting to understand means she's planned some new scheme.

"Alright, clearly boiling things alive is where you excel."

I roll my eyes. "You're insane."

"Probably," she agrees, hands on her hips and a determined glint in her eye. "But I'm who you've got, and we're going to figure this shite out if it's the last thing we do."

"Why are you so excited to die?" I groan, rubbing my temples. "I haven't managed to do anything except accidentally dry our clothes while simultaneously blowing out half the wall."

"And look what you found! A teaching chamber. Tell me that's *not* a coincidence."

When all I do is stare at her, she huffs, stalks over, grabs my hands, and yanks me to my feet.

I fly forward, barely managing to stop myself from falling into her at the last second.

"Gods, you're like… weirdly strong," I mutter.

"So are you," she replies, voice soft and full of love.

"I don't know about that," I argue, falling into step next to her as we make our way back toward the Chamber of Failure.

"Stop saying that shit about yourself," she snaps, and I stop walking, suddenly frustrated as hell.

"I don't know if you know this for sure or not, but Dax and Vae are my Scent-Matches." I don't know what I expected, but I'm certainly not expecting her to throw back her head and laugh.

"It's not funny," I grind out through clenched teeth. She stops laughing, but not before wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

"You're right," she agrees, all levity gone as quickly as it came. "What they did to you is *not* funny. The fact that you thought you had to tell me is what had me laughing. I've known since before we met. I thought you knew that."

“I assumed, but we’ve never talked about it.”

“I’ve warned Daxen multiple times that he should rethink his actions, but I don’t think he ever took me seriously,” she complains, shaking her head.

Scoffing, I hoist myself up the mound of rubble, picking my way across it and into the chamber. “The only person Daxen takes seriously is himself. Neither of them knows about the Bond. Caelan and Soren do, but I asked them to keep it between us. I know they’re my Scent-Matches as well, but…”

“But his Packmates don’t know about you and Caelan’s Scent-Match Bond,” she finishes for me, heading for one of the shelves. “I thought so. I assumed you guys had just played up the other Bond so they wouldn’t ask.”

Grabbing another jug and two stoneware bowls, she sets them on the table we used last night.

“We don’t understand that Bond,” I tell her. “No one does. I have two Bonds with both Soren and Caelan, but Vae and Dax think I’m only Scent-Matched to Soren. And considering no one knows what the heck this other Bond is…” I trail off as she fills up the bowls with water. I really hope she isn’t expecting me to try and heat them again.

“Makes sense,” she says, nodding as she recorks the jug. “If they knew about the Scent-Match with Caelan, they’d assume—correctly—that you’re their Scent-Match as well. Considering there’s fuck all information about the mystery Bond, it works in your favor. They’re not questioning it.”

“They wouldn’t question it if it was staring them in the face,” I scoff. “And truthfully, I think they’d rather die than be Bonded to me.”

Resting both hands on the table, she leans forward and narrows her eyes at me. “You don’t really think that. You can’t possibly. Especially with Vaelenor. He’s been running around buying you things and sulking like someone kicked his puppy since he found out you’re really Caelan’s Mate.”

“Right. And he did *nothing* before that. He wasn’t as cruel as Dax, but he was a coward.” I clench my jaw, misery changing to anger. “He snuck around *trying* to do things for me behind Daxen’s back because he didn’t want to fight with his Packmate. Now he feels bad because Caelan is angry and maybe… *maybe* he feels bad for how he treated me, but he’s never even apologized.”

My voice cracks, and I have to blink away tears. I turn from Branwen and press my palm to my sternum, where our Bonds rest. Like usual,

they’re listless. Almost non-responsive. Coiled in on themselves.

They don’t even reach out for my Mates anymore. There have been a few moments—like when I discovered Vae bought me Nesting Materials and had all those clothes delivered—when his thread would perk up and reach out for him. Then it would inevitably hit that wall and retreat further than before.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” I whisper, urging myself not to cry. I’ve cried over them too much already.

“Idril…”

The way Branwen says my name has my instincts immediately on edge. My Omega, who’s been much more present lately, if mostly silent, starts pacing like she knows something I don’t.

I turn around, lock eyes with her, and know deep in my bones that I’m not going to like whatever she’s about to say.

“Don’t freak out.”

“That is literally the worst thing you can say to someone.”

She winces, biting her lower lip. Then she blurts, “I can smell your Omega perfume.”

No. No way.

I’m on suppressants. My Scent is muted, like it’s always been my entire life. Just like my Omega instincts are…

Except… are they? Wasn’t I just saying my Omega has been much more present lately?

A deep inhale confirms what I wish I could still keep denying. The scent of wild honey, smoked vanilla, and musk invades my senses, making me gasp.

It’s been so, so long since I’ve scented my own perfume. And last time, I’d been barely conscious. *And now…*

The tears I’ve been fighting back fall. There’s no stopping them.

I calculate how long we’ve been down here and realize I’ve been off my suppressants for over thirty-six hours. That means I’ve missed one full dose and am probably close to missing a second.

My Scent is only going to get stronger.

“They’ll Scent me,” I whisper, horrified as the thought sinks in. The blood drains from my face as I turn my wide, tear-filled eyes to my friend. “They’ll Scent me, and they’ll *know*.”

Branwen walks around the table and wraps her arms around me. I fall into her embrace like a puppet with its strings cut. Fear rushes through my limbs, making me shake. I feel concern surge down my Bonds, and I do my best to send reassurance back, but I'm not sure I do that well.

"They'll know, and then they'll hate me even more," I cry, envisioning just how awful it's going to be.

"No, we'll figure something out, okay? Maybe when we get out I can run ahead and get a dose. Caelan and Soren know how important it is; they'll make sure no one Scents you."

That's… actually a good plan. It's not like Dax and Vae will be waiting for us. We don't even know exactly where we are. If Branwen can sneak back and make it to Calder or Lenora…

Pulling back, I wipe my hands across my cheeks to clear the tears, taking deep breaths to calm myself down.

This can work. It has to.

"Better?"

I nod, and truthfully I do feel better. At least we have a plan.

"Feeling well enough to get back to work?"

My stomach growls, reminding me again just how hungry I am. I don't complain, knowing Branwen must be just as hungry as I am, and there's nothing either of us can do to fix it.

Well… that's not true. I might be able to do something if I can figure out enough to get us out of here using my abilities. I just need to work harder. Do better.

With renewed purpose, I return to stand before the bowls. "What am I trying next?"

"Wind," Branwen answers. "You're going to make the water move with wind."

"Alright. Just… one question. Why two bowls?"

Branwen tucks her legs beneath her and winks.

"For when you make the first one explode, Darling."

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Chapter 35

Caelan

Standing in the training yard, I watch with dry, unblinking eyes as the fire blazes and the sun dawns on a new day. I haven't slept since it first sprang to life, cutting me off from my Mate and creating a barrier miles long that I can't get through without burning alive.

Branwen's note is tucked into the back pocket of my jeans, but I don't need to take it out to remember what it says. I've read it so many times, looking for any hint or clue I might've missed, that I can recite it from memory.

'I'm sure Shade would like to leave the forest at some point.'

Snorting, I shake my head. As if my biggest worry is for the panther with the entire forest to himself. He's probably frolicking through the trees, chasing rabbits, sharpening his claws against bark, and living his best fucking life.

My Mate's out there, somewhere. I know it. I can feel her through our Bond, even with it muted.

I pick up a stick and hurl it at the flames, watching as the fire feasts on the wood. The bark curls, the embers spread and flare, and within seconds the stick is nothing more than ash.

Soren pads up next to me, his huge paws leaving actual indents in the grass. The fucker stands to my shoulders in his Beast form, like a damn direwolf on steroids.

I've seen plenty of shifted wolven before, but none have ever been as massive as Soren. It gives me an odd sense of security, knowing my Mate won't ever be unprotected so long as they're together. I doubt even a Pack of Severed could take down a Beast the size of a Clydesdale.

He hasn’t said anything, but I know it meant everything to him when Idril accepted him in his shifted form so easily. I never would have known just how worried he was before that, but if I had, I would have told them there was no reason to be.

Idril’s the kindest, bravest female I’ve ever known.

She’s been through Hell in ways even most Alphas wouldn’t have recovered from, not only at the hands of her father and his twisted experiments, but also because that’s where it should have fucking ended. She never should have been forced to watch her Mate nearly die, only to be taken by his Pack and treated like an enemy, only to then discover that very Pack are her Scent-Matched Mates.

I don’t even know how the hell she’s standing some days.

And I still have so much fucking pent-up anger and aggression coursing through me when it comes to my Brothers and my team. The only two I’m not pissed at are Ford and Evander, and I wish with all my soul they’d been here when Idril was brought back. If they had, no one would have gotten away with treating her the way they did.

Evander’s a gentle giant and has a heart of gold. He had an Omega sister who was killed by a Pack of Alphas a few centuries back. It left a mark on him that still hasn't fully healed.

After her death, which came only a year after the death of their parents, Evander was all alone, just trying to make it through each day however he could.

I think that’s one reason why he reads so much. Books were how he escaped as a child. They allowed him to dissociate from the things he was forced to see living on the streets and what he had to do just to stay alive. As he grew older, they never stopped being his escape.

He and Idril are going to get along so well, I know it. Books are the same for her—especially fantasy books, which are his favorite too.

He told me that when he was a child living on the streets in the early 1800’s, he’d read whatever he could get his hands on, but when Fantasy started to become more mainstream, he fell into those and never came up for air.

By then, he was a full Bastard, but he modeled his code on the pages of those books. He saw what was right, what was good, what was honorable, and then he emulated it as a Bastard, becoming a real-life hero to hundreds of thousands of people across all three Species.

Loyalty. Mercy. Restraint. Honor. That's what Evander brings to every interaction. It's who he is.

Ford's very much the same when it comes to having a strict moral and ethical code. He's also a product of his generation. A male cut straight from another decade. Another century.

He was Turned in 1953, and for reasons we may never understand, he never stopped living like he's still there. He's the very last of his kind, in every possible sense of the word.

Ford went through hell the night he was Turned, and came out the other side with fangs and a thirst for blood, but otherwise the same. He clung to his humanity with an iron grip, and never let it go.

Fates, the male, still carries handkerchiefs. Still reads the morning news with his coffee. Still tips his hat to women and calls everyone he meets *"pal,"* or *"kid,"* even if they're centuries older than he is.

There's something inside of Ford that never bent. Never broke. I always thought it was the same steel backbone that kept him alive during his Turning, when ninety-hundred-and-ninety-nine out of a thousand others don't survive, but I've never asked. And I don't think he'd tell me if I did. He's never once discussed what happened that night out loud. Not with anyone.

Ford would have taken one look at Idril, clocked the way she sometimes flinches when someone moves too fast, and that would've been the end of it. Cage certainly never would have gotten near her. Vae would have cowered under his disappointed gaze. Hell, even Daxen would have backed down.

Because when Ford reminds you what it means to be decent—*what it means to be honorable*—you listen, and you remember.

Ford and Evander are exactly what it means to be a Bastard. *Strength with honor. Power with integrity.* They're the kind of males who'd rather die than hurt an innocent.

And gods help me, they weren't here when Idril needed them the most. And neither was I.

I glance to my side, where Soren's crouched beside me, a formidable mass of white fur and solid muscle. What a sight we must make, two males camping alone in front of a wall of fire, praying to every god in existence to watch over our Mate.

“We aren’t getting past that fire,” I sigh, finally breaking my self-imposed silence. My voice sounds like gravel after not speaking to anyone in over twenty-four hours. Hell, I’ve barely moved from this spot, let alone had a chance to talk.

Soren chuffs, nodding his massive head. His ears almost seem to droop, and I have the strangest urge to reach out and run my fingers through his fur. I almost do it, too. Fates, it’s not like it’d be the strangest thing that’ll happen between us.

But instead, I curl my hand into a fist, and let it fall back to my side.

I’m at a total loss. I have no fucking idea what to do. There’s no getting into the forest. No way to turn back time and demand Gav keep Evander and Ford here instead of sending them to Chicago. No way to foresee Varenthrall’s ambush so I didn’t get shot and drugged in the first place.

There’s only today. And I need to make it count.

Glancing over my shoulder at HQ, I notice a light on in Vae’s room, and his figure leaning against the railing of his balcony. His eyes are trained straight ahead, but he shows no sign of noticing that I’ve seen him, not with how focused he is on the fire.

When I tap into my enhanced vision, I don't expect to see the intense longing in Vae’s eyes. It’s so visceral it makes my stomach drop.

He wants her.

No. That’s not right. If I’m being honest with myself, then I have to admit that what I see in my brother’s gaze is a thousand times more potent than want.

It’s need.

I can see it in his eyes and the lines of his face. A need so fierce, he looks like he’s in physical pain.

The question, however, *is whether this is a man who needs his Mate because he can’t stand to be away from her and is terrified she might need him? Or the need of a man who lost something he didn’t realize he wanted until it was truly out of his reach?*

Either way, I don’t have any sympathy for him. He had his chance. It doesn’t matter that he wasn’t outright cruel to her; he was still an asshole, and he didn’t treat her anywhere near as close to how she deserved to be treated.

“Fucker hasn’t even apologized,” I grumble to myself, turning away from my Packmate. I wish I could spend this time researching if there’s a way to break our Pack Bonds, but I can’t concentrate on anything. Not when Idril’s out there, trapped by this fire.

Having heard what I said, Soren swings around, and when he notices who I was looking at, a deep growl starts vibrating in his chest, thrumming through his whole body. It’s so loud and menacing in this form that I can feel the vibrations through the ground.

“You can’t eat him,” I warn. He turns his glare on me, and when I don’t back down, he chuffs once more and rolls his eyes—which is honestly the fucking weirdest thing I’ve seen in longer than I can remember. Glancing back at Vae, he snarls, lips peeling back from his teeth. When he looks back at me, I get the feeling his snarl has turned into a grin.

It’s impossible not to laugh, because despite being in a different form altogether, with no way to speak, somehow I know exactly what point he’s trying to make.

“Yeah, man, I get it. I want to smash their faces in, too. We’ll deal with them eventually.”

Soren snorts derisively, once again making his opinion clear, then settles back into a crouch. I squeeze my eyes shut and rub circles around my temples, trying to work out some of the tension in my head. When Soren starts to growl, though, my eyes snap open and I’m instantly on alert, following his gaze to the forest.

I expect to see the same thing I’ve been staring at for days, but shockingly, the wall of fire isn’t burning as tall as it was minutes ago. It’s dimmed, too, and looks almost like it’s shrinking in on itself.

At one point, it reached close to forty feet, but if I had to guess, I’d say it’s closer to twenty. Without thinking, I take a step forward, but Soren lunges and snags the back of my jeans between those stupidly sharp teeth and pulls me back.

Stumbling, I turn and level him with a glare. “Okay, first of all, boundaries, dude. Second of all, how is your jaw so fucking strong?”

He obviously doesn’t reply, but swings his head back to the tree line and growls insistently. The fire’s shrunk even further, down to around ten feet, and seeing it retreating sends adrenaline rushing through me. My heart starts racing, pounding behind my ribs in anticipation.

Is it her? Is she coming back?

Only a few seconds later, the fire is gone, leaving nothing behind in its wake. The grass and trees are pristine, and not even a single flickering ember remains, as though it had never existed at all.

“Gods, how is that possible?”

Soren is zeroing in on something I can’t see. His ears twitch, and he lifts his nose, inhaling deeply and scenting the air. The vibrating growl in his chest gets louder and more menacing, and my hand instantly flies to the blade fastened at my hip.

“Easy,” I soothe, wrapping my grip around the hilt of my dagger. “What is it?”

The Beast takes a single step forward, his huge claws sinking into the Earth and leaving deep gouges with each step. I squint, straining to see into the forest shadows, searching for whatever the hell he’s picking up on.

It’s not Idril. If it were, he’d have raced off after her by now. The closer we creep toward the trees, I start to make out swirling tendrils of smoke I hadn’t seen before, clearly left by the fire. It seems thicker in some places than others, and doesn’t seem to be moving the way normal smoke does.

Something about it feels familiar, and my Alpha suddenly goes on high alert, sure we’ve forgotten something important.

Fates, what is it? Something about the smoke… or… something about the War Room?

It’s no use, though. The harder I try to remember what it is I’ve clearly forgotten, the harder it is to keep myself focused on it at all. It disappears completely, though, as a pair of yellow eyes appear from between the trees, flashing bright gold in the reflection of the early morning sun.

“Shade.” My chest tightens, and shockingly, so does my throat. A wave of emotion rushes over me, my heart swelling with affection as the behemoth of a feline slinks from the shadows of the trees, passing through the swirling smoke and making his way calmly toward us.

His pure black coat shimmers beneath the sun as he slinks across the yard. Like Soren, his paws also leave imprints with each step, if not nearly as large.

Releasing the hilt of my dagger, I exhale a long, relieved breath. Looks like Branwen was right again; Shade did want to leave the forest. And as happy as I am to see him, he seriously looks like he’s glaring at me, his features twisted in indignation.

“What are you doing, boy?” I ask, crouching down so I’m closer to eye level with him, and letting him decide how close he wants to get. He finally stops just a few feet away and sits, letting his long tail curl around the front of his legs as he stares at me with shimmering golden eyes that feel like they can see all the way to my soul.

Then he swings his head, golden gaze landing on Soren. The Beast makes another one of those chuffing sounds, which I’m assuming is meant to convey some form of greeting. Shade blinks slowly, then returns his attention to me and just stares, like he’s waiting for something.

For a long, awkward two or three minutes, we all sit here in the back of the training yard, one man and two feral, furry monsters. Then Shade apparently gets sick of my inability to read his mind, opens his mouth, and releases a low, scratchy, strained yowl. His piercing stare turns into a narrow-eyed glare, and his tail starts to move, flicking back and forth in a jerky, agitated motion.

He blinks once, twice, then stands, turns in a single fluid movement, and begins walking back toward the forest.

“What in the actual hell—”

No sooner have the words left my mouth than the panther stops abruptly and glances back at us. This time, his yowling howl of displeasure is much louder.

Fuck.

Groaning, I explain what I think is happening, just in case Soren hasn’t picked up on the same vibe.

“I’m pretty sure he wants us to follow him.”

That’s all Soren needs to hear, apparently. Without so much as a glance in my direction, he shoots to his feet and lunges, bounding off after the panther, and leaving me to hurry after them so I don’t wind up falling behind.

The forest is eerily quiet. Birds chirp in the trees, and the wind rustles through the leaves and branches, but other than that, all I hear are paws and boots thudding against the ground as we walk through the foliage.

The sun's position above us means we’ve been walking for about an hour, if my estimate is correct. It’s nothing I’d call strenuous work, but it’s incredibly boring, and I wish we could hurry. But every time I get irritated

by how long this is taking, my Alpha makes sure to picture Idril in my head, walking out here at night. All alone, and with no idea how to get back to us.

It's basically been an hour-long, endless circle of loathing, self-guilt, and shame, so by the second hour mark, I've about hit my limit. *This forest isn't that fucking big, for Fatessake; where could he possibly be leading us?*

Ten minutes later, I get my answer. Shade stops, turning his head to look back at us, like he's making sure we understand who's still leading this little expedition. Satisfied with what he sees, he weaves through a small copse of trees, apparently confident we'll keep following because he doesn't look back.

Like obedient puppies, Soren and I take off after him. Thankfully, the Beast's massive form is wide enough to part the branches enough for me to sneak through as well, as long as I stay right behind him.

Nothing could prepare me for what I see when we finally step out of the trees.

The ground in front of us has been split open, like a giant took a hammer to the Earth and just kept swinging. There aren't just a few random cracks, either. Something must have collapsed, because a deep fissure easily twenty feet long and two or three feet wide in places runs from right where we're standing across the open clearing until it finally stops at a pile of rocks and boulders.

"What the hell happened here?" Floored, I jog to the pile of rocks and bend down to inspect them.

Right behind me, Soren follows, a growl rumbling through his chest. He bares his teeth at the boulders, as if they've personally offended him, then turns and takes off, running along the edge of the massive pile. His growls quickly turn to snarls of fury, making it clear something's pissed him off.

It doesn't take long for me to put together what must have happened. At one point, this pile of rocks and Earth must have been a cave, and the boulders had covered the mouth of it. The huge pile butts right up against one of the larger hills on the back of the property, which means there must have been some kind of cave in.

There's no way in, and no way out. Not anymore.

The sound of claws scraping against stone draws my attention to Shade, who's pawing at the rocks that have blocked off the cave entrance. He makes an annoyed sound, and when he pauses long enough to acknowledge

me, he cocks his head and looks at me with an expression I easily interpret as, *"Well now what, asshole?"*

And just like that, it all clicks together, and my fucking stomach flips before falling all the way to hell. The blood drains from my face, and I have to swallow multiple times before I can speak.

"She's down there, isn't she?" I ask, voice strained and reedy. Shade growls once, then returns to his task, pawing at the rocks.

It's all the confirmation I need.

My Mate went into this cave. I don't know why or when, but she did. Then, there was some kind of cave-in. *A fucking cave-in!*

My Omega is down there, all alone. She's *been* down there for fucking days now. *No food. No water. Nothing.*

Gods, this is the worst possible outcome. *How did this even happen? Why?*

I can hear Soren's paws thudding against the dirt as he comes up behind me, then without warning, he shifts. I blink, momentarily disoriented at the change and how quick it is. One second, his Beast is right behind me; the next, I turn to face him, blink, and his Beast is gone, replaced by Soren's human form.

He stands there, wearing nothing but jeans and boots, his wide, bare chest billowing with each gulp of air. He bends over, bracing his hands on his knees, and another snarl—no less ferocious, despite the less intimidating form—rips from his throat, splitting the air between us like thunder.

"Our Mate is fucking in there," he shouts, pointing at the rubble. "We have to get her out. Fuck, she's all alone in there! What if she's hurt?"

Fates, I hadn't even considered that she might be injured. If she'd been anywhere near those slabs of rock when they fell, she could be stuck in there, trapped under a boulder. Unable to move.

That's what does it. The last of my control snaps, and I throw myself at what used to be the cave's entrance, digging my fingers into a crevice between the piled rocks. I tap into my enhanced strength, lift them one after the other, and toss each one haphazardly behind me, not giving a shit where they land.

My nails split and break against the rough stone, then heal. The air fills with dust and grit, collecting in my mouth and teeth and grating along the back of my throat with each panting breath.

I only pause long enough to shout her name, feeling the word rip from my throat and thunder through the air. I barely pause long enough to listen for a reply before I start digging again, forcing my fingers between slabs of rock and shimmying them apart.

I've hardly made a dent at all when rough hands grab me from behind, wrenching me back with incredible strength. I spin, fangs bared and ready to tear into whoever the fuck's trying to get between my Mate and me.

Soren doesn't even react to my threat. He stares me down, chest heaving and eyes wild. I barely spare him a glance before I pivot and lunge back toward the cave, determined to get back to work.

When his hand latches onto my upper arm again, I wrench myself away with a hiss. I don't know what the fuck he thinks he's doing, but—

"You'll bury her alive!"

His shout is frantic, and so loud that the birds remaining after my last shout explode from the nearby trees in a rush of fluttering wings. I pause with a massive rock gripped in both hands, trying to make sense of his words. Soren takes advantage of my silence.

"You'll bring the entire Fates-damned thing down on top of her!"

I try to unclench my jaw, but I'm so tense my whole body may as well be one of these rocks. The most I can manage to do is convince my fingers to slacken enough to let go of the boulder before turning to face him.

"I can't just stand here," I argue, voice cracking with emotion. "She's down there, Soren. She's under the fucking ground, and she's alone with no water, no food, no—"

"I know!" He roars, features twisting in anguish. He stalks across the few feet separating us and reaches out, fisting the front of my shirt with hands shaking with fear.

"You think I'm not terrified?" he demands. "You think I'm not cycling through the same shit in my head right now? Godsdamnit, Caelan! If you keep digging, you'll fuck with the integrity, and you'll bring the whole fucking thing down on top of her. If she's anywhere near it, she'll be crushed."

My hands curl into fists at my sides, and I glance toward the pile of rubble, then back to Soren, debating his words. Now that he's said it, it seems obvious, and the horror of what I may have just done starts to creep in.

“You’ll kill our Omega,” he breathes, and the words slam into my chest, ripping something apart. The mere idea of hurting Idril causes something inside of me to recoil in terror. I reach frantically for our Bond, suddenly terrified that I’ve done exactly what Soren’s describing. It takes longer than usual to latch onto it, but when I do, I sag with relief.

“She’s alive,” he confirms, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Frustrated, but I don’t think she’s hurt.”

“Why is it so fucking hard to feel her since she went down there?”

He shakes his head, scrubbing a tired palm down his face.

“I don’t know. But I do know that if she were in real danger, we would know, even with the Bond being muted the way it is.”

“There has to be an explanation. If I could just get to her…” I trail off, shaking my head in frustration.

“I want to get to her just as bad as you do,” Soren replies. “It took everything in me not to rip into those rocks and help you. But I’ve seen a cave-in before. We lost two Betas and an Alpha when the floods came a few years ago. The Alpha’s Packmates found the cave and went in just like you were doing and brought the entire structure down on top of them. I was there when they felt the Bond snap.”

The silence that follows speaks volumes. He swallows thickly, like he’s trying to push back his emotions.

“It was *horrific*, Caelan. I’ll never forget the sounds they made. The way they suddenly went still. I never want to see something like that again.”

“I’m sorry,” I reply, at a total loss for words. *How do you even respond to something like that?* I can’t fucking imagine witnessing it, let alone going through it myself.

Soren shakes his head, long blonde hair shifting around his shoulders. “Don’t be. It was terrible but… it was a long time ago.” He turns, placing both hands on my shoulders and looking me straight in the eye. “I’m only telling you because I want you to know… that’s *how* I know she’s okay. If she were hurt—truly hurt—we’d feel it. I know we would. We have two Bonds with her, Caelan. Two. And I can’t imagine that Fate would give her these Bonds—including one we know nothing about that is somehow so much stronger than the other—just to lead her to a cave to die.”

His words make sense, and I’m surprised by how much better I feel after hearing them. Once again, I’m struck by how grateful I am for Soren.

Without him, I would have felt a thousand times more alone since waking up in the clinic. It's not easy trying to process the loss of my Pack—let alone their betrayal—and Soren has fit into my life seamlessly, like he was always meant to be here.

A rustling comes from my right, and I glance over to find Shade padding toward us. He narrows his eyes at me in a way that's becoming far too familiar, then lets out a sigh that's even more unnatural than normal. When he gets close enough, I extend my hand like I used to when we had horses. I don't even know why I do it. *Habit, I guess.*

He doesn't take in my scent, choosing instead to butt his head against my hand in greeting before slinking between Soren and me. Thinking he's dismissed me, I'm shocked when I feel something solid and warm pressing against my thigh, and glance down to find Shade rubbing against me like a house cat would rub against the legs of its human.

I turn wide-eyed toward Soren, who's sporting a shit-eating grin. That grin turns into laughter when Shade opens his mouth and runs his raspy tongue from my knuckles all the way up my forearm.

Then, like he hadn't just freaking kitty-comforted me, he turns around, stalks back toward the cavern, spins in place twice, and lowers himself to the ground. He yawns, showing off a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth, before laying his huge head on his paws.

"What the fuck just happened?" I mutter in disbelief.

"Haven't you ever had a cat? That's what they do when their people are sad," Soren responds, clearly biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

"Of course I've had cats," I answer flatly. "Just not ones that weigh as much as I do."

I glance back at the feline, lounging in a patch of sun. His eyes are half-closed, his tail twitching back and forth like a metronome, but I'd bet my last dollar he's more alert than either of us.

Following Shade's lead, Soren and I both take a seat not far from Shade, leaning our backs against the now-destroyed cave. I don't know how long we sit there, two pathetic Alphas waiting for their Mate, but it's long enough for the sun to reach its zenith and begin its descent.

I wonder if this is what life will be like from now on—coming out here every day, where we're closest to our Omega, waiting and praying she returns safely.

It’s only because it’s so damn quiet and I’m so attuned to the sounds around me that I clock the instant Shade’s tail stops twitching. A second later, Soren cocks his head to the side, which I know now after seeing it enough times means he’s speaking to one of his Pack.

And just like I always do when I’m around, and it happens, I marvel at the wolven’s ability to mind-link. It’d be so fucking nice to be able to speak to other Bastards without relying on comms units when we’re away from each other.

A few minutes pass before Soren stands and reaches out a hand to help me up. I take it and climb to my feet, searching the forest and wondering what the hell's going on.

“Someone’s coming,” Soren murmurs, answering my unspoken question. I tap into my enhanced hearing and easily pick up the sounds of movement. Whoever it is isn’t bothering to hide their approach, crashing through the forest loud enough that I almost wonder if they’re trying to announce their presence.

Despite the low chance it’s an enemy, my hand drops to my dagger, and my fingers curl around the hilt, just in case.

This is as close as I can get to protecting Idril. If that means I have to take up sentry duty in front of a hill of rocks, then so fucking be it.

Soon, a youthful voice rings out through the forest, and Soren’s shoulders relax.

“Alpha Heir!”

“Here!” Soren shouts in answer. A silent pause follows, then comes the distinct sound of a scuffle, a string of muttered curses, and a figure bursts through the trees, nearly stumbling over his own feet as he skids to a stop.

I don’t recognize his voice, but I recognize his face—a younger Alpha, with shaggy blond hair and boyish features. His eyes land on his Alpha, and he bares his neck, panting as he tries to catch his breath.

“Alpha, I was sent to find you. Both of you. By the Bastard, Daxen.”

Frowning in confusion, I take a step forward and ask, “Dax sent you? Why?”

The wolven shoots me a glance, then turns his attention back to Soren. He waits until Soren inclines his head, then turns toward me and straightens his shoulders. I’m strangely in awe of the respect Soren’s Pack has for him. The Bloodbound tend to fuck around a bit more, but when it’s time to act, we’re always on top of it. Soren’s warriors very rarely act anything less

than battle-ready, especially around outsiders. It's clear they know who their leader is, and go to great lengths to ensure everyone else does as well.

"He told me to tell you someone showed up at HQ. Someone important, and that they need your help to interrogate," the wolven reports, tone clipped and to the point.

"Who?" I push, irritated at the lack of information, even though I don't know why I'd expect any different. Daxen would never send someone outside the ranks with important information.

"I don't know, sir. He didn't tell me. I'm too far away to mind-link with anyone else from the Pack, but he said it was important. He said—" At this, he hesitates, shooting a nervous look toward Soren.

As much as I respect their Pack Hierarchy, I don't need the damn kid looking to Soren for permission every time he opens his mouth. Snarling, I take another step forward and straighten my spine, pinning the kid with a glare that's made lesser males shit themselves.

Thankfully, this one's made of sturdier stuff, but sweat breaks out on his brow, and he swallows thickly before answering.

"He—he said it's about your—your—Mate. About Omega Idril, Sir."

"Why didn't you lead with that, Lincoln?" Soren snaps, and the wolven bares his neck, lips parting to reply, but Soren talks over him.

"It's fine. Let's go."

The kid spins and takes off, Soren and I at his heels. It's at least a two hour walk, but if we run, we'd make it back much sooner.

We're only a few yards away when movement behind me makes me glance back, unsurprised to find Shade following. What's strange is that rather than the relaxed loping gait I'm used to, his ears are pinned back and his shoulders are tight, each stride tense and his frame primed for attack.

That alone puts me on edge, and I get Soren's attention, gesturing over my shoulder with a flick of my head. He frowns, spotting the same signs I have, and we exchange a long look before wordlessly picking up speed. The idea was to cycle between jogging, running, and sporadic sprints, but we wind up pushing ourselves—and the poor Alpha pup—and run the entire way back.

By the time we exit the forest and arrive in the training yard, I'm exhausted and quite literally running on fumes. I haven't slept since Idril walked into the forest, and it's catching up to me in a big way now. At the

same time, the forty minutes spent in a constant state of anxiety, in addition to the adrenaline, have me ready to fuck someone up.

I wonder, not for the first time since we started our run back, if this has something to do with the book Vae and Daxen found and brought back from Varenthralls. To say I was pissed that they went there without me would be an understatement. When they brought it back, I stayed long enough to hear what happened and their theories before leaving the War Room and returning to my silent vigil in front of the flames.

After thinking it over, I have to admit they're probably right that Idril is somehow related to these humans who could do magic. I guess I always assumed there were never any humans who had supernatural abilities, but maybe there were. Maybe they existed a long fucking time ago, and now they're all dead.

That still doesn't really explain why Idril has them, but it gives us something to work with, at least.

Whatever she is, someone out there knows. There's one person who has all the fucking answers and never bothered to share them with his own daughter, but had no problem using his knowledge for his own fucked-up gain.

Jonathan Varenthrall.

Part of what keeps me going the whole way back is the hope that somehow, against all odds, that asshole is stupid enough to come sniffing around HQ, and that's who they have waiting for me.

And if he is? I'll kill him. I'll torture him until he spills everything he knows, keep him alive long enough to make sure we free the Omegas he's stolen, then slit his throat and be done with it.

Then Idril will come back home, and I'll be able to tell her she never has to worry about her father hanging over her like the sword of Damocles, and we can concentrate on what matters most—*her.*

By the time we stumble inside, I'm deep in fantasies of all the ways I'll torture information out of Varenthrall. One of the staff greets us, telling us Gav, Vae, and Dax are waiting upstairs, and Soren thanks him before sending the pup back out to find Kane and update him.

Apparently, their mind-link has limitations.

Soren had to explain it to me on the way back when I kept asking him to ask his Pack what was happening. He said the closer you were to someone —Bonded Pack, family, Mates, etc.—the easier it was to speak. You could

be miles away and carry on conversations. But if you weren't Bonded to them, or didn't share blood, shit got difficult. There was a range, and sometimes he could only send a few words or impressions to his Pack members and warriors.

Still handy as fuck, though. Would have been Fatesdamned amazing when Varenthrall destroyed my comms during the ambush.

By the time we get to the War Room, I'm so ready to fight that I slam the doors open and stalk in, ignoring the way everyone's eyes snap up at the sound of the doors crashing into the stone walls on either side.

Soren shoulders up beside me, giving me a pointed look when he notices I'm shaking with rage and pent-up aggression. All I want to do is get my hands on Varenthrall and ruin him for all the pain he put my Omega through. I've never been someone who enjoys physical torture, but for this asshole? I'm happy to make an exception.

My gaze bounces around the room, hands curling into fists at my sides as a snarl vibrates through my chest and three sets of eyes take me in with varying levels of shock and concern.

When I speak, my voice sounds half-animal, the demand cracking through the room like a gunshot and making Vae flinch.

"Where the fuck is he?"

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Chapter 36

Caelan

The silence that answers is fucking deafening. I can hear my pulse pounding in my ears as my blood races through my body, spurred by adrenaline.

I half-expected to walk in and find Varenthrall trussed up like a pig ready for slaughter on top of the table, so when I really take in the fact that only my Pack and Gav are in the room, part of me deflates.

A deep inhale makes me wrinkle my nose in disgust as the scent of copper and decay hits me. The next breath is so disgusting I almost gag, and my gaze finally homes in on what actually is sitting on the table—a cardboard box.

It's taped up, but blood has soaked through the bottom and up the sides. The shock of seeing something so out of place in this room steals the rest of my fire. The overwhelming scent is so foul I raise my hand to cover my nose, but even breathing through my mouth doesn't help.

It's not like I've never smelled a dead body, but a decayed dead body is a very different experience. Even centuries of experience aren't enough to get used to the scent.

"He's downstairs in the cells," Gav announces, and when I realize he's responding to me, I forget all about the dead thing in the box.

"You locked him up?" I ask, stalking in and taking a chair next to Soren, not bothering to spare Dax and Vae a glance, let alone a greeting.

The betrayal's still too damn fresh, and it's better for everyone if I ignore them until I can figure out how we're going to handle them. I still want to find a way to break our Bond, but Soren's right—we need to find out how it might affect Idril.

Either way, I've had Idril occupy my thoughts every waking moment since I woke up, and I've gladly fixated on her rather than face the agony of my Pack's actions. Now, though, I'm forced to do exactly that, and I'm finding my anger has turned into a bonfire of rage.

"Yes," Dax replies with a smirk. "He showed up at the Gates half-dead. Claimed to not be aligned with Varenthrall anymore. Begged us for sanctuary."

When his words penetrate, I swear to the Fates I hear a record scratching explosion through my skull. *What the hell does he mean 'not with Varenthrall anymore'?*

Something in me snaps, and before I know it, I shoot to my feet, slamming my fist on the table before planting my palms on it and leaning over the wood. My fangs lengthen and something bright flashes in front of my eyes.

"Who *exactly* do you have in the cells if it's not Varenthrall?"

The rage I feel toward both my brothers is always there, always simmering in the background. I can feel it heating up now, turning into something explosive. Logically, I know it's not their fault Varenthrall isn't here, and if I weren't so fucking exhausted, on edge, and Fatesdamned hurt, maybe I wouldn't have set my heart on him being here to begin with. But I am, and I did, and now that I know he's still out there, the idea feels fucking unbearable.

"Why in the Fates would you think we had Varenthrall?" Gav asks, looking at me like I've finally cracked, which only pisses me off more.

I throw out my hands in disbelief. "Who the hell else would you have? Who the hell else would show up here having anything to do with Idril?"

"It's Albertson. The doctor." Daxen answers, and this time, his tone is raw. There's something in his voice as well… something that latches onto my instincts and stops my meltdown in its tracks.

I look at him—*really look at him*—and nearly recoil.

The last time I saw him was last night when he got back, and I know for a fact he didn't look this bad then. His eyes are bloodshot, there's still dirt caked under his nails, and his beard is scruffy like he hasn't shaved in days.

He looks as tired as I feel. But on top of that, he looks… *Lost.*

"What's wrong with you?"

The words fall out before I can think, but I'm even more shocked by Daxen's reaction than by the fact that I even care.

He flinches.

Since the day we met, I've never seen Dax flinch away from anything. *Never. Not once.*

It's so out of character that I can't wrap my head around it. Still shocked, I fall back into my chair and stare at him as he struggles to pull himself back together.

He clears his throat, picks up some papers, and shuffles them around before shoving them into a folder sitting open in front of him. His eyes flick up and meet mine before darting away again.

"Nothing. I'm fine."

Oh, we're lying to ourselves again? Perfect.

"Yeah, Daxen, you're fine. Especially when you've got innocent Omegas to terrorize. Even better when they can't fight back, am I right?"

The room freezes. I clench my jaw, but refuse to take it back. I've been looking forward to a fight the whole way here, and if I can't fight Varenthrall, then Dax and Vae are the next best things.

They hurt her the most next to him, after all. In some ways, they hurt her worse. They're her Fated fucking Mates, but they hurt her over and over and over again.

I wait for Dax to fight back, but the heavy silence persists. Next to me, Soren clears his throat to get my attention, inclining his head in solidarity when I glance over at him.

The silence goes on for what feels like forever. Right as I'm about to open my mouth and ask about the bloody box on the table, Daxen finally lifts his head and looks at me.

"Do you think I don't know that I'm the monster in this story?" His voice is rough. *Broken.* He sighs, and the sound is so full of self-loathing it throws me.

Only for a moment, though. Then I remember what he did to my Omega. *Our* Omega.

"I think you don't fucking care that you nearly broke my Mate," I snap back. "I think you care more about being right than you do about *doing* what's right. I think neither of you," I glare at Vae, making sure he knows I'm including him in this as well, "have even bothered to offer my Omega a fucking apology in the last week and a half."

Vae's mouth opens, but I cut him off. "Fucking save it, Vaelenor. I know you two think you've somehow gotten away with treating Idril like trash,

but you haven't. I've been more concerned with her since I woke up than with the two of you—but she's not here right now. I can't work on healing all the shit you two broke in her until she comes back, so you're going to listen to what I fucking say."

Neither male spoke, but Gav cut in. "Caelan, I know you're mad—"

"Respectfully… you don't know shit," I snap, turning my glare on my leader.

"You sanctioned all this bullshit. You handed her off to Cage. You gave these two free fucking rein to do as they pleased. Did you even consider sitting down and talking to her? Did you even think to verify her claims or find out her story?"

Gav's jaw ticks. "I was more concerned with you. You were dying, Caelan, and I had to look at the facts."

"Fuck your facts, too, Gavran! That's the fucking problem here—your 'facts' were just shit that *this* one," I gesture toward Dax, "decided mattered. The fucking *fact* is, you all decided before you'd even met my Mate that she was the enemy, and you treated her like one. Someone needs to fight for that girl, and while it should have been my Pack and the people I trusted the most, it wasn't."

The words suck out the last of my adrenaline, and now I just feel defeated. Weighed down and bone-weary. The anger is no longer enough to keep me going, and now all that's left are the intense feelings of betrayal and pain.

And maybe that's what I'm truly feeling. *Betrayed.*

Not because I thought we caught Varenthrall and I'm disappointed he's not here, but because I'm finally being forced to face the fact that, despite believing for hundreds of years, my Pack—the males I've called family—aren't who I thought they were. And every time I think I've got it out of my system, the pain comes roaring back with a vengeance.

"We have a lot to apologize for," Dax says, laying his palms flat on the table in front of him. He stares at me with eyes filled with shame and guilt, but even that's hard for me to believe.

"You're right, Caelan, about all of it. We fucked up. I fucked up. I know it doesn't matter, but I had a reason for that—something I've not told you about."

My jaw clenches so tight I'm afraid I might break a molar. *Do I even care about his excuses?*

The answer comes right away.

No. I don't. Nothing he could say would make up for what he did to Idril. To our Pack. *To me.*

"I hope that one day, you'll let me tell you about it," he continues. "I realize today is not that day, but I can promise you, I'll do everything I can to earn your forgiveness. And hers. *Especially* hers."

I grunt in reply. "We'll see."

"I was a coward," Vae blurts, like he's been holding the words in and can't hold them in any longer. "I knew what was happening was wrong, and I should have pushed harder. Shouldn't have let outside influences determine my actions."

I almost laugh, but it's really not funny.

Outside influences. He means Daxen. Of course he does.

"Regardless, I made my own decision," he continues, bringing his palm to his sternum absently and pressing against his chest. The movement looks familiar, and maybe if I weren't so fucking tired I would have put it together sooner.

It's the same way I used to press against my chest when I was feeling the ache of my Bond with Idril, even though I didn't know that's what it was at the time.

Fates, it's right there… right in front of him. Both of them. And they can't even see it.

Unbelievable.

Vae keeps speaking, oblivious as usual.

"It's no one's fault but my own. I haven't wanted to bother either of you since you woke up, but that's cowardly, too. I regret every single time I didn't open my mouth, and every single time I did." His throat works as he swallows. Leaning forward, he braces his elbows on his knees and looks up at me with pleading, emotional eyes.

"I'm sorry."

I can hear the sincerity in his voice. Can see it in his eyes. Part of me even believes it. I know Vae. I know the kind of male he is. Which is why I know what he's saying is probably the complete truth. And also probably incredibly hard for him to admit out loud in front of everyone.

I know all those things; I just… *don't care.*

"I am as well," Gav jumps in, almost making me snarl at the sound of his voice. "I did what I thought was right at the time, but I made a bad call."

Soren snarls, eyes flashing bright green. He turns a menacing glare on Gav, and I let him, not bothering to do jack shit to talk him down.

Something I never would have let happen a month ago.

Gav crosses his arms and leans back. “Snarl all you want, pup, but it’s true. I fucked up. Made a bad call. Made a series of spectacularly bad calls. I don’t always get it right, and I never claimed to. This is one of those times. Truth be told, I was a bit overwhelmed. With all the shit happening with the Omegas, two of my best warriors in Chicago, the fucking mysteries, and no answers,” he hesitates, clearly wondering how much to tell an outsider. “When Caelan showed up barely clinging to life, I delegated and didn’t bother to pay much attention. I tried to set ground rules but…” he trails off, shaking his head. Perhaps he’s realizing no excuse exists to explain away his fuck up.

“I, too, owe Idril an apology. I know that. I can’t change the past, but I promise to do better.”

For a long while, I sit with their words, turning them over in my head. I wish I could say they make me feel better, but the truth is, they fucking don’t.

The worst part is that Idril’s not here for any of it. She’s the one who should hear all this. She’s the one who deserves it. Deserves the apologies. Instead, she’s somewhere I can’t even reach her, alone except for another Omega.

Eventually I decide just to say what I’m thinking. No part of me feels like I owe them anything, and pretending otherwise won’t make any of this better.

“To be honest with you all, I don’t give a shit about what any of you have to say. You broke my trust. You nearly broke my Mate. There’s so much shit you don’t know, and…” I shake my head furiously, biting back my words, not daring to even hint that Vae and Dax are Idril’s Mates.

It’s her decision when to tell them, and she’ll do it when she’s ready.

“It doesn’t fucking matter,” I sigh, waving the thought away. “There’s only one thing that matters right now. Idril.”

The words hang in the air around us like something physical. I can feel the truth of them in my soul, down to the marrow of my bones.

Gavran’s eyes lock on mine, and I can see the worry staring back at me, along with the guilt. It’s fucked up, but it makes me relieved to see it. If he’s

not even feeling guilty, then he's not the male I thought he was. He wouldn't be fit to lead the Bloodbound, that's for sure.

His expression hardens. "We should start with the only person we know who has more information that could help us, then."

Albertson.

I nod my agreement, attention darting toward the doors like I can see through them and down the halls and stairs, all the way to the cells in the basement.

"Send someone to bring him up here," I demand.

"He's in the cells," Gav replies, frowning in confusion. "We'll just go down there."

I shake my head in denial before he finishes speaking. My answer is swift.

"No. I won't go down there. Not now."

Gav still looks confused, and Soren scoffs obnoxiously. He's kept quiet so far, but just having him to lean on has been a relief.

I should have been able to lean on my Pack, and Soren's Pack now too, even if neither of us quite understands how. Regardless, we're connected and always will be, thanks to Idril.

"We're not going down to the cells where you put our Mate for days when she was sick from being Alpha Commanded nearly to death," Soren informs him, speaking slowly and clearly like he's pointing out something obvious to a child. Another thing I like about him—he has no problem calling people out on their shit.

"Send someone to retrieve the quack, like Caelan already suggested."

Gav grinds his molars, then quickly realizes we're not fucking around and inclines his head.

Ten minutes later, the doors are swinging open, and two Bastards walk in, holding Doctor Cecil Albertson between them.

He looks very different from the male I last saw in the basement of Varenthrall's estate. That man looked harried and torn, but this one looks a thousand times worse, absolutely wracked with guilt and fear.

He's a Beta, but I can still sense his distress. It's pouring from him, wafting through the room. The faint scent of linen would normally be soothing, but not now. Now it's burnt and twisted, only adding to the obnoxious scent of decay.

“In that chair,” Gav says, pointing to the Bastards who brought him up. I incline my head in greeting as they throw the old man into the solid oak chair at the end of the table, then leave as quickly as they’d come.

Albertson’s breathing is labored. His whole body shakes, making the cuffs rattle against the armrests, the sound grating and loud in the heavy atmosphere of the room.

He doesn’t look like a doctor anymore, that’s for certain. Hell, he barely looks like a man. With shoulders curled inward and his long, bushy beard in desperate need of a trim, he looks like he’s been locked in a cell for much longer than a few hours.

He refuses to look up, only moving to push his glasses up his nose, just for them to slide back down not ten seconds later. Finally, Gavran stands and takes a few controlled, deliberate steps toward Albertson. The Beta flinches, and his shoulders somehow curl forward even further. Once he’s closer, Gav leans back against the table and folds his arms over his chest.

“Doctor Albertson. You’re going to tell us why you showed up at our gates with a box leaking blood. Let’s start there.”

Albertson visibly tenses, and he finally looks up, eyes darting past Gavran and landing on the box sitting on the table. His eyes plead as he finally focuses on Gav, and he licks his lips before answering.

“I—I didn’t have a choice. I’d been trying to leave for weeks, but there was no safe way. When Varenthrall sent me with the box, I knew this was my only chance to get out. He told me to deliver it personally.”

“Why?” Gav pushes, keeping his tone even and controlled.

“He’s become increasingly erratic since he discovered Annalise’s death,” the Doctor hesitates and glances up, scanning the room and gauging our reactions. With a sigh, he pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose with his cuffed hands.

“I suppose I should have known you were already aware of her. I hope Idril didn’t have to witness her mother like that.”

“Don’t say her fucking name.”

The threat comes from across the table, and my head snaps up in shock to find Daxen glaring menacingly at the Doctor. The look he’s leveling at Albertson is fucking terrifying, and even the most skeptical part of me has to admit there’s no pretending that level of anger.

Soren and I exchange an uneasy glance. Even Vae looks startled by Daxen’s reaction.

Gav moves closer, blocking Albertson's view of Dax. Probably smart, considering the guy's about three shades lighter than he was thirty seconds ago.

Tilting his head to the side, Gav decides to take advantage of how thrown off Albertson is by Dax's threat.

"Whose head is in the box?"

His eyes squeeze shut and his lips thin into a grim line. "It's Mara. The Varenthrall's head of household staff. She and Idril were…not close, but Mara was probably the closest thing Idril had to a friend in that house."

I know what it looks like when someone's expecting to be hit. Hell, anyone would recognize Alberton's reaction when he flinches back, and it's so reminiscent of Idril that I find myself unwillingly softening toward the guy.

Then I remember how he dosed me with silver and took Idril's blood, and anything soft I momentarily felt hardens again.

Gav doesn't react. He waits patiently for Albertson to open his eyes before asking, "Why would he send you here, with her head?"

"It's a message. Varenthrall wants his daughter back. He—he *needs* her back, to continue his… ah… project."

I stand so fast I have to brace myself on the table and fight the wave of dizziness that washes over me. Once I'm steady, I shoot forward with my enhanced speed and wrap my hand around the Doctor's neck. I couldn't prevent my fangs from dropping if I wanted to.

"He will never touch her again, do you hear me? Never. And neither will you. You'll never take another drop of her blood. You'll never hurt her again. If you even try, I will send your head back to him in that same box."

Soren's suddenly next to me, his eyes shockingly bright in the overhead light. He growls, and I swear I can actually see his Beast pressing against his skin.

"He'll do that *only* after I rip your limbs off your body one at a time," the wolven spits. There's nothing human about either of us at this moment, two Alphas ready to rip the world apart for our Omega. Nothing in this world could get to her through either of us.

Except a bunch of rocks, apparently.

I growl at the taunting voice in my head and peel my fingers away from the Doctor's neck. Neither of us steps back until Gavran clears his throat

pointedly. Soren turns his glare on Gav, who simply gestures toward our vacated seats, holding Soren's gaze until he forces himself to look away.

I follow Soren back to our seats, making sure to keep my eyes trained on the traitor Doctor the whole time.

The old man looks like he's about to piss himself, and the primal part of me wishes he would. He's nothing more than prey. Prey that took something that wasn't his to fucking take.

"I understand there are a lot of biological impulses that are hard to control in a situation like this," Gavran says, addressing Soren and me once we've both sat back down. "However, I'd like to point out that this man did request sanctuary, and it's been formally offered. It is against our Code to harm or kill him unless provoked."

Vae scoffs. "You allowed him sanctuary?"

"I did," Gav replies steadily. "Varenthrall isn't going to react well to his pet scientist running away. Not with how much knowledge and secrets he has. If he comes for Albertson here, that's an act of war. If he's stupid enough to start a war on our soil, then we have every legal right to burn him to ash under the Old Laws."

Vae barks out a short, incredulous laugh. "I hate to break it to you, Gav, but we're already in the middle of a war. Your declaration's about six months and a few dozen missing Omegas too late."

Gavran's expression doesn't even flicker. "I'm aware, Vaelenor. But there's a difference between a shadow war and one we can publicly justify. You may not give a shit about politics or public opinion, but I do. It's my job to care. It's always better to have the law on your side when dealing with sadistic psychopaths trying to breed an entire army of super-soldiers from trafficked Omegas."

"Ah yes," Vae grumbles, slumping back in his chair. "Nothing says justice for the wronged quite like bureaucratic paperwork."

Albertson seems to straighten a bit now that it's obvious he won't be shredded by fangs. I bare mine at him anyway, making it clear I don't give a flying fuck about sanctuary.

"If we keep Albertson alive, he's both a witness and a weapon. We need the information in his mind—" he cuts off, pinning me with a glare that I return. He waits until I reluctantly retract my fangs, folding my arms over my chest petulantly.

I know I'm acting like an asshole; I just don't give a fuck. I'm so far past giving a fuck I can't even see it in my rear-view mirror.

"Varenthrall will come for him eventually. When he does, we'll be ready, and the Council will be forced to recognize the asshole for what he really is." Gav pushes off the table's edge and walks confidently back to his seat.

"The council is nothing more than a bunch of old assholes who pretend they have power," I toss back. "They're figureheads and nothing more. Most people forget they even exist."

"Maybe," he concedes. "But people also forget how dangerous figureheads can be when they decide to prove they're still relevant. It's why we all pacify them to make sure their egos stay just inflated enough not to cause us any issues."

He's not wrong. The Council of Nine—three Alphas from each Species—was formed as a symbol of unity in the years after the Treaty was established. Instead, they've turned into little more than a decrepit circle of assholes who hand their titles down like family heirlooms and spend all their time drinking scotch instead of governing.

They claim to be Keepers of the Old Laws, but the truth is, they're nothing but figureheads. And somehow, everyone knows it but them. Unfortunately, their names still carry enough weight in certain political circles to cause problems. They're not feared. They're not respected. They are, however, listened to, and that makes them potentially dangerous, especially when you're dealing with inter-Species issues.

Living in Massachusetts, we might answer legally to the American Government, but if we were to outright start a war with the humans, we'd have to answer to the Council. Assuming they put down their booze long enough to give a fuck.

From the other side of the table, the Doctor perks up. "Wait—you're—you already know? About the breeding? The injections?"

The poor idiot looks so shocked I nearly laugh. *What the hell does he think we do here? Work out so we look pretty?*

His eyes flick to me, then Soren, then back to me. I can literally see his mind working, and I tense as he starts putting the pieces together.

Then it clicks.

"Oh Fates—you're both Mated to her." Albertson sits up straighter, shock replacing his terror. "She's Mated to a vampire *and* a wolven? But—

how? That's—"

Soren's chair screeches across the wood floor as he surges to his feet. He starts back toward the Doctor, but my hand snaps out, and my fingers wrap around his wrist, halting him mid-step. He tries to shake me off, but it's my turn to hold him back.

"It's fine," I mutter. "He would have found out eventually."

Soren doesn't take his eyes off the Doctor, and I'm starting to wonder if the man's heart could take the level of violence radiating in the air.

"You don't ask the fucking questions," Soren warns between clenched teeth, pointing at Albertson. His eyes flash, his Beast backing him up.

Fates, if he shifts, I think the Doctor might actually have a stroke.

Albertson snaps his mouth shut and nods frantically. Wiping his palms on his pants, he tilts his head to the side, baring his neck to the wolven Heir.

The act of submission isn't natural like when Soren's warriors perform it, but it does seem to calm him down just enough for me to pull him back to his seat.

"Let's start from the top," Daxen declares, pulling Albertson's attention off Soren. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to answer truthfully. You're not going to hold anything back. You're not going to lie. You're going to be the most well-behaved Beta to have ever walked through these walls."

Another nod.

"Words, Doctor. If I want to speak to a bobblehead, I'll raid Silas' room and call it a day."

His voice is croaky and strained when he replies. "Yes, I understand."

Dax flips open the file in front of him. "What is Idril?"

Alberton's brow furrows. "She's—uh—an Omega?"

"Don't be cute; we know she's an Omega." Dax glares, making the Beta lick his lips anxiously. "What Species is she?"

"I don't know," he mutters.

Daxen bares his fangs. "My fucking favorite phrase. Would you like to hear a story about how much I love the answer 'I don't know'? It's not a pretty one. I'll be apologizing for my reaction for the next five hundred years at least."

The words are meant to scare the Doctor, but we all know what he's referring to. Idril told me about the night in the library. How angry Daxen was when she didn't have answers to his questions. How he reacted.

“No! No, I don’t need to hear a story; I just—I *really* don’t know,” Albertson pleads, glancing around the room like he’s looking for someone to back him up. “I know she’s not human, nor is she vampire or wolven. I can tell you about her blood, and quite a bit about what I think she can do, but Varenthrall kept the knowledge of what or who she was a secret. I honestly am not sure he even knows for sure.”

Daxen glances down at his wrist, and that’s when I notice the bracelet he’s wearing.

Holy. Shit. It’s Riven’s. The one he never takes off. The one he found in a forest in Europe centuries ago that changes temperature when someone’s lying.

I don’t know how he got Riven to let him borrow it, but the fact that he did makes me smirk. Daxen must feel my eyes on him because he glances up, returning my smirk with his own.

The shared moment lasts only a second before I pull my eyes away. My smile falls, and from the corner of my eye I see his smile falter too, replaced by regret.

He smoothes out his expression before continuing, shifting to face Albertson.

“We know he’s been injecting Omegas with her blood. We know he’s trying to somehow recreate her abilities in others. What we don’t know is why.” Dax’s green eyes bore into the Doctor. “Why is he injecting Omegas with Idril’s blood?”

Albertson’s already nodding. “Yes, you’re right. The first phase was to create subjects capable of surviving the transfusions. Eventually we were able to isolate the DNA that allows each of her abilities and turn it into a serum. We saw much more success with that.”

I grunt, lips twisting in disgust at the callous way he speaks about them. “Isolate how?”

“Idril has… many abilities…” He hesitates, like he’s not sure how much we already know.

“I’m her Mate,” I reply sardonically. “I know about her abilities.”

“So then you know she can manipulate all four elements. Water, air, Earth and fire.” He straightens, and his body language shifts completely. Almost like he’s much more open to discussing this now that he knows he’s not sharing any of Idril’s secrets. Once more, I find myself softening toward the guy, and I hate it.

“You still haven’t answered our question,” I point out. “Why is he doing this?”

He leans back in his chair slowly, wincing like his bones ache. The cuffs around his hands jangle with each movement. His shirt’s half torn at the sleeve, and his pants are covered in dirt. This isn’t a man who was dropped off at the front door nicely. He had to fight to get here.

“At his core, Jonathan is a power-hungry megalomaniac who thinks far too highly of himself. From what I understand, when he was younger, his father used to work in accounting for a minor vampire house. He had access to archives that most humans had no idea even existed. One day he found something hidden among them. A prophecy or a myth or—” he shrugs. “I don’t know. Whatever it was, it made him believe there was a girl out there who would be born with the ability to do unnatural things. ‘The blood of gods that would wake the world,’ I’ve heard him say.”

“Idril,” Vae breathes, taking a fortifying sip of his drink.

The doctor looks surprised, but continues. “Yes. When his father was killed, Jonathan inherited only that story. It consumed him. He was obsessed. He spent decades combing through libraries, folklore, and ancient history. He went on trips all over the world, searching for the next piece of the puzzle. He was sure the prophecy was real and that finding the girl would make him powerful. If he controlled her, he ultimately controlled her power.”

My throat constricts, and I have to bite back a snarl at the thought of anyone controlling my Mate like that.

“So that led him to Annalise somehow?”

The Beta nods. “I don’t know how, but yes. He found her and, presumably, charmed her long enough to force a Mate Bond on her. He wanted an Alpha son. Thought it would be his legacy and his weapon. Proof not just that he had been chosen to sire a being with immense power but also that he was just as important as the vampires and wolven.”

Gav hums, tapping his fingers on his chair arm. “He wanted a seat at the table.”

“He wanted to sit at the head of the table,” Albertson corrects. “Make no mistake, Last Shield. Jonathan Varenthrall had no plans to share his eventual power with anyone.”

“It wouldn’t have been his, though,” Dax argues. “It would have been his sons. Or—in this case— daughters.”

“You don’t understand. He would have groomed that child to let him control every aspect of his life. The child would have been loyal only to his father, giving Jonathan the real power. If that hadn’t worked, I have no doubt he’d have found a way to force the issue.” He waves his hand like he’s batting the idea away. “It makes no difference. Who’s to say that would have even worked? The fact is, Annalise didn’t give him an Alpha son. She gave him an Omega daughter.”

He inhales deeply. “He… broke. Whatever bits of him remained that made him human were gone after that. He hated his daughter. Hated Annalise. Now, mind, these are things I picked up after years of working for him, so I’m only extrapolating. What I do know is this— eventually he started to believe that the power didn’t come from the bloodline, but from the blood itself.”

“Back up,” Dax leans in, bracing his forearms on the table. His brows are furrowed, lips twisted in confusion. “I understand him wanting an Alpha son, but why would he dismiss Idril so completely? If he were so sure he would father a child with all this power, what made him so sure the power didn’t simply come in a different package?”

Alberton’s shoulders rise and fall with a weary sigh. “Because Jonathan —and men like him—will *never* accept a reality where a woman could be capable of containing power. Only bearing it.”

Daxen’s frown deepens.

“He believes that women are vessels. Their only gift comes from their ability to pass power *through* them to whatever children they bear. We’re not talking about a stable man, son. Jonathan Varenthrall is a misogynist as much as he is a sadist and a psychopath. *You* can immediately accept that Idril would—and could—carry the power Jonathan sought, but to him… it was never a possibility worth entertaining. In fact, it was more of a cosmic insult than anything.”

Dax leans back in his chair, considering. “So… he punished Idril for being born female.”

“He didn’t just punish her,” Albertson snorts, but it’s clear he doesn’t find anything funny. “He ensured that every moment of every day she knew just how worthless she was. He set out to take any bit of confidence she may gain, and obliterate it before it could fully form. Every time he looked at her, it was a reminder that he wasn’t Chosen.”

Albertson coughs, swallowing repeatedly to try and work moisture into his mouth. He stares longingly at the whiskey decanter on the table, licking his dry lips.

Frustrated with myself, I reach over, snatch a glass, fill it with water, and set it in front of him. Before I turn away, I catch the look of gratitude on his face, but as far as I'm concerned, the old man can choke on his gratitude. I just don't want him dying of thirst before I hear the rest of what he has to say.

"He was angry with his Mate, but he *loathed* his daughter," he says after taking a long sip of his drink. "I was her Doctor for years—hired off the books in what I've deduced was a precaution in case anything strange ever showed up in scans or blood draws. Jonathan was paranoid, even as a toddler. I didn't know him well, but I was struggling after being ostracized by the scientific community for helping a young man who was having issues with his Designation."

He waves the thought away. "That's neither here nor there. Let's just say I was looking for work, and while I may have been denied the ability to practice, I still had a well-known reputation as a geneticist. The money he offered me to take his daughter as a patient was substantial, so I said yes."

He takes another sip of water, seeming more relaxed. Even his linen scent has mellowed into something calmer.

"I only saw him a few times before Idril Designated," Albertson continues. "She came for yearly checkups, and was a normal, healthy child, if a bit underweight. That's normal for pre-awakened Omegas, however. She was always very quiet, very shy. I had to really work to get her even to crack a smile, but I didn't see her enough to catch on that something was wrong at home. I just always assumed she was a melancholy child, especially because her Mother was the same."

"When Idril was around eleven, Jonathan asked to speak to me after one of her appointments. He told me his wife had a strange gene mutation that she wanted to know more about. He provided me with signed consent forms when I asked. I believed him. I had no reason not to."

"What did you find?" Soren asks, finally speaking up. Albertson looks up from the spot he's been staring at on the table and gives Soren a wan smile.

"That he was right. She did have a rare mutation. Many rare mutations. Her blood showed genetic markers I didn't understand and couldn't explain.

Dormant sequencing that belonged to no known Species on the planet."

Even now, his tone is awed as he recounts what he found. It's easy to see the renowned geneticist and once-famous doctor beneath the ragged clothing and roughed-up exterior.

"When I explained what I found, Varenthrall was elated. It was obvious that what I told him simply confirmed everything he thought. He asked me to—he wanted me to…" His face twists, and he spits out his next words, as if they taste foul on his tongue.

"He wanted me to wake them up."

"Wake them up," Vae repeats flatly.

"By the time I realized what I really had in front of me, I was in too deep. He funded all my research without a single complaint. He paid off my house, my car, my debts—even built me my own lab. I should have seen that something was wrong, but my findings," he bites down on the inside of his cheek and looks away, face heating in obvious shame. "I was too excited about what I found."

"At some point in the decade between Idril's birth and then, Jonathan had concluded that he'd had it all wrong before—that it wasn't the bloodline that mattered, but the blood itself. Unbeknownst to me, he began negotiating with the Severed around that time. Now, I'm fairly sure he was already working with others, but to this day I haven't figured out who. And as for the Severed, I don't think they actually met face to face until a year ago, but when they did, they quickly came to an agreement."

Gav's expression is tight. "What agreement?"

"Varenthrall wants an army," he admits bitterly. "The Severed want a weapon strong enough to wipe out vampires for good. He promised them both in the form of dozens of children born with supernatural abilities and raised from infancy to obey only Jonathan. They would be loyal only to him. Fight for only him. The Severed, from what I understand, funded Jonathan to continue his research, and they both worked to find and kidnap more Omegas. They even went so far as to wipe them completely from the Omega Registry. Those Omegas were injected with a serum made by modifying the DNA from Annalise, force-Bonded and bred, and their children would be raised as super-soldiers."

"Which Varenthrall would essentially rent out to the Severed in their war against vampires," Dax mutters, piecing it together easily. "Fates, that's *sick*."

“There was only one problem,” Albertson whispers. His scent shifts, turning burnt and bitter with fear. “It wouldn’t work. I couldn’t get the dormant genes in Annalise’s blood to ‘wake up.’ When it became clear that nothing I did would produce the results he wanted, I was honestly relieved. I didn’t *want* to be a part of this anymore. I hadn’t for a very long time. I spent years and years working on this project… and while the scientist in me was awed by my findings, I prayed every time I attempted to dose an Omega that it would fail.”

“It should have,” Dax replies. “So what the fuck happened?”

The Beta doesn’t speak for long moments. The silence goes on for so long that I wonder if he has any plans to answer at all. The fear and shame radiating off of him is so thick it’s starting to make me nauseous.

Gav had already sent the box away to be ID'd, but the smell still lingers. Combined with the Doctor’s scent, it’s a struggle to take a deep enough breath without gagging.

“I fucked up.” Alberton’s words immediately put me on edge.

“Explain,” I demand through gritted teeth, ignoring the way he seems to shrink in shame.

“I was curious about Idril’s blood. I took a sample during one of her visits and ran it, just to sate my curiosity. No one knew. No one but me.” He leans in, bracing his elbows on the table and slumping forward, dejected. Never before have I seen a man so obviously regret a terrible choice.

And he doesn’t even know that whatever choice he made, it’s not the only one he’ll come to regret. If he’s why my Mate’s being targeted by her psychotic father after finally escaping him, I’ll break the rules of Sanctuary and laugh while I do it.

“You can’t even imagine what I found,” he whispers, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes like the coward he is.

“I have a pretty fucking good idea,” Dax replies sharply. “Blood that doesn’t decay and shimmers in the light. That smells like ozone and lavender and amber when it hits the air.” He leans forward slowly, menacingly. “Or are you referring to the way things grow when her blood is placed in soil? Or maybe the way it reacts to fire?”

“It—what?” All the color drains from his face, and he starts to shake his head in furious denial. “No! No—I—I never thought to test it with outside stimuli. All the rest, yes, I saw that as well, but… gods,” he exhales a

shocked breath. “Things grow out of soil? What grows? You have to tell me, this is—”

“I don’t have to tell you shit,” Dax snaps. “I’m starting to see where this is going. You ran Idril’s DNA. Her father found out that her markers were active, and you’re the reason he wants her back. Does that about sum it up?”

Fates… it all makes so much sense now. Annalise’s blood wouldn’t respond or do anything because she was never the carrier. *Idril is. She always has been.*

How many generations of women, going back how many thousands of years, have carried these dormant genes? And what in the Fates caused Idril’s to be the first to activate?

The Beta falls back into his chair with a soft thud. He stares at the ceiling like it might hold answers, then shakes his head.

“You’re right, but you’re also wrong.” His words crack with emotion. “He started threatening my ex-wife. My children. He said if I didn’t start giving him results, he would make sure there were no more distractions so I could concentrate on what I was being paid to do. So I swapped out Idril’s blood for Annalise’s. I never told him. I *swear* to you, I never told him.” He scans the room, pleading with each of us wordlessly to believe him.

“I just needed some time,” he explains. “Time to get my family somewhere safe, where Jonathan couldn’t find them. Time to figure out how to escape. As soon as Annalise died, I knew it was only a matter of time before Jonathan came for Idril. She was only ever a backup copy of the key to him. He was always so sure her blood was less important than Annalise’s.”

“But he knows now, I’m assuming?” Gavran’s heavy amber eyes narrow on the Beta. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

Albertson shrugs. “If he doesn’t know yet, he will soon. He was having me draw blood for a while to keep as a backup. Idril was always so small, though. I needed enough blood to keep running my experiments and to swap out her blood with Annalise’s, but I also couldn’t draw too much because her body couldn’t take it.”

“What do you mean her body couldn’t take it?” Vae’s question comes out as a whisper, and his hands grip his glass so tightly I’m shocked it hasn’t shattered. The look of horror on his face is gut-wrenching.

“I mean, he would punish her for whatever slight he could come up with, lad.” He tries to throw his hands up in exasperation, but the cuffs keep them still. With a huff, he lets his hands fall into his lap.

“He spent years physically starving her for the smallest infractions—leaving her room without his permission, walking too loudly, humming under her breath when she was meant to be quiet. Whatever bullshit he could think up. I heard his guards discussing it on multiple occasions. The girl was in a constant state of starvation, but that wasn’t anything compared to the punishments I found out about much later. Those… they were barbaric.”

“And yet you chose to keep silent,” Soren’s voice is soft, but each word is an accusation. “Which makes you just as culpable as her father.”

Albertson huffed, indignant. “I told you—”

“Yes, I fucking heard you,” Soren shouts over him, slamming a fist on the table. “I’ve come to find, much to my absolute fucking shock, every single male in my Mate’s life except for *one* has let her down over and fucking over again. Every fucking one of you has either perpetrated her abuse, taken part in it, or watched silently while it happened, like fucking cowards.”

“My children—” Albertson turns his pleading eyes on me, and I let out a sardonic laugh, baring my teeth in a smile nothing short of feral.

“Don’t look to me for fucking absolution, Doc,” I hiss. “You won’t find a knight to rescue you. Only a man ready to burn the world to ash for his Mate—And you’re standing in the kindling.”

“Give me one reason why we shouldn’t let our Mate light you on fire herself,” Soren demands. “Explain to me why we should let you continue breathing.”

Albertson gulps. “I was offered Sanctuary,” he argues weakly.

“As much as I appreciate our leader’s reasons for offering you Sanctuary, the only people who know it’s been extended officially are in this room. Strange coincidence, wouldn’t you say?” Dax hums, spinning back and forth lazily in his chair.

“I haven’t fed directly from a vein in decades,” Vae adds, lips tipping up in a terrifying smile. “He won’t offer much in the way of sustenance, but maybe presenting Idril with his drained corpse will help with groveling.”

“I—“

I chime in to keep the ball rolling. “We could give him to Shade and see how fast a wild panther can maul a Beta.”

“No, please. You don’t—”

“Ohh, that would be fun,” Dax replies, his eyes lighting up. “I wonder if panthers eat humans after they kill them. Might be an interesting exper—”

Albertson slams his hands on the table, hard enough to slosh the whiskey in our glasses. “Jonathan wants immortality from Idril’s blood, and I’ve figured out how to isolate that part of her DNA. If he discovers how to do it, we are all, and I mean all of us, *seriously fucked!*”

Silence falls over the room, and everyone's attention falls on the Doctor. He swallows and absently wipes sweat from his brow, cringing when he realizes he has the undivided attention of an entire room full of very pissed-off Alphas.

It takes everything in me not to scream at him to explain. *What in the actual fuck does he mean by immortality?*

“I told you I don’t know what Idril is, and that’s the truth,” he croaks between nervous breaths. “But whatever she is, she’s immortal. Vampires can live to see a thousand and some slightly longer. Wolven tend to live about half as long. But Idril…” He shakes his head, like he can’t believe what he’s about to say, despite having plenty of time to come to terms with it.

“If my calculations are correct, and I have no reason to believe they aren’t, then Idril could easily live three to five times longer than the oldest known vampire. That means thousands of years, easily. Her blood doesn’t decay because it doesn’t age.”

He turns to Daxen, who looks exactly how I feel—*shell-shocked.* Albertson tilts his head, frowning. “Surely this is something you’ve considered. It is, after all, the simplest explanation.”

I’m going to go out on a limb here and assume Daxen hadn’t, in fact, considered that as a reason Idril’s blood hasn't decayed. Either that, or there’s another reason why he hasn’t blinked for three straight minutes.

“We don’t age, either,” Gav argues, frowning.

“That’s actually not true. You do age. Just very, *very* slowly. You look to be in your early thirties now, but in five hundred years you’ll look closer to forty. This is well-documented among vampires.”

Gav’s frown deepens, but he nods in acceptance. “Yes. I suppose you’re right about that.”

“Idril won’t age at all,” Albertson says, voice thick. “I don’t know at what age she quit aging, but I believe it was when she turned twenty-one. It happened within the last two years, certainly, based on my research. And somehow, Jonathan figured it out. He saw my report on Idril’s blood, but he thought it was Annalise’s, thank the Fates. Still, he now knows the gene is there. He’s convinced I’ve succeeded in discovering how to ‘wake up’ her other dormant genes, and if I can do that, then…”

Groaning, I roll my shoulders back to try and work out the tension. Soren’s expression is tight, and I’m sure we’re both thinking the same thing.

What Albertson just told us has astronomical implications. This whole time, we’ve thought that Idril would take on my lifespan, and Soren would do the same. Both of them aging at the same rate as a vampire.

But if Idril is the closest thing we’ve seen to immortal…

Soren’s expression slowly relaxes, and so do his shoulders. His eyes brighten, and he leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. The smirk he aims my way is full of mischief.

“Good damn thing I like you, leech.”

I throw my head back and bark out a laugh so loud the Doctor audibly gasps.

Well… Fuck.

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Chapter 37

Idril

The pulsing from the pillar gets more intense as the hours drag on. My eyes are closed, but I can almost see the faint blue glow from across the lake of water behind my lids.

I've found that if I concentrate, the pulsing will begin to sync with my heartbeat. It should be scary, but it's not. It's actually comforting, as though whatever's in that pillar and I are somehow connected. Connected in the same way I am to Soren and Caelan but… *different.* There's no Mate Bond, but like with Shade, something else is inside me, and it's reaching out to whoever or whatever is trapped in there.

'I promise I'll do whatever I can to get you out,' I send the thought out, knowing it can hear me even though the words are only in my head.

My stomach growls for the thousandth time, and I wrap my arms right around my middle, snuggling deeper into Caelan's hoodie. I know, logically, that his scent is long gone, but I still imagine that I can catch a faint whiff of it if I inhale deeply enough.

Soon, even that will be gone.

The light pulses again, and I groan, rolling over onto my other side so I'm facing away from it. I don't even know why I insisted we sleep out here in the first place. It's so much cozier in the teaching Chamber, and my Omega absolutely hates the cavern's open space. The longer I go without my suppressants, the harder it's becoming to ignore those instincts, something I'm struggling with despite my Omega spending most of the day sulking, missing her Mates.

I can smell my perfume all the time now. It's been over forty-eight hours since we've seen the sun, and apparently that's all it took to fully

work the suppressants out of my system.

When I crack my eyes open, I can see Branwen lying on her side a few feet away. Her dark hair falls over her arm and across the floor like curls of spilled ink, and her breathing is slow and even.

For far too long I lay here stewing in my jealousy. I swear that girl can sleep anywhere, any time. It's unfathomable to me. Sleep has stayed elusive for me, and I'm really starting to feel the effects of exhaustion.

Most notably, the constant chills and full-body aches that never stop. I can't remember ever wanting a hot bath more than I do now, but until we get out of here…

The worst part is that getting out is completely up to us. No one is coming to save us, because no one knows where we are. No one even knows this place exists. Which means I need to figure out how to control these abilities, then use them to get us back to the surface.

It's not like we can just walk back the way we came. The entire cave collapsed, and even if we could swim against the current, there's no way past the detritus from the cave-in.

And so we are, in a word, screwed.

Unless I can figure my life out.

No pressure.

With a huff, I turn to my other side and lose myself in the pulsing light. Branwen told me before we went to sleep that she can't see any light, but that she *Saw* something waiting for me, so she's sure whatever's in there is alive.

Or… *alive-ish.*

"You're thinking so loud I can hear it," Branwen grumbles from behind me. Her voice is rough from sleep, and another pang of jealousy hits me. I force my heavy limbs to roll over again, blinking tiredly as she sits up, yawns, and stretches her arms over her head.

How in the Fates does her hair look so freaking good after days underground and a river ride from hell?

"You're prettier when you smile," she winks.

"I hate you," I mutter, forcing the scowl off my face as she throws back her head and laughs.

"You think you can somehow magic us up some toothpaste and toothbrushes?"

“Oh sure,” I reply sweetly. “It was next on my list. Right after I magicked up a gourmet breakfast and world peace.”

She raises a single brow. “World peace is a bit ambitious, love. Why don’t we start with a hairbrush and crepes and see how you’re feeling by lunch.”

“If I had literally anything to throw at you, I would,” I tell her dryly. “You and my mother would have got along so well. She was always overly optimistic. In a melancholy sort of way.”

Sighing, I push myself up and stand, stretching the kinks out of my back, neck, and spine. You would think that after months spent sleeping rough—albeit indoors—my body would be used to harsh conditions by now.

“Oh yeah?” Branwen heads for the water’s edge and crouches down, dipping her finger in water and using it as a makeshift toothbrush. She glances over her shoulder and asks, “What would your mother tell you now?”

I join her, groaning as I force myself back down to reach the water. Bending over, I swallow a few large gulps to fill that empty hole in my belly while I consider Branwen’s question.

“She’d probably tell me a story,” I answer, dipping the hem of Caelan’s hoodie into the water and using it to scrub at my teeth.

“Did she tell you a lot of stories growing up?”

I laugh. A lot would be an understatement. Some days and weeks, Father was in an exceptionally bad mood, and all Mother could do was whisper stories to me beneath my bedsheets. She had so many—all wildly fantastical. I don’t even know how she kept them all separate in her mind. She’d memorized them. I knew because they never changed. Even now I can still repeat most of them word for word.

“So many,” I tell her. “It was her favorite thing to do.”

I leave out the part about how some days it was the only thing we could do, since Father refused to let us leave the house. By the time I was ten, he’d got rid of all the televisions and anything that could be used as a radio. We weren’t even allowed in the library most days.

Lost in my memories, I follow Branwen back to the teaching Chamber. I don’t often let myself fall into these memories, not when each of them is so bittersweet. I miss my mother fiercely, and with an ache that I don’t think will ever go away. I just wish we made it back to the willow to find what

she left me before I got lost down here. I've been thinking about it a lot, and know it's the last thing she—

I shake my head, trying to shake that specific memory away. I don't want to think about her like that. Don't want to remember her the way she looked then—barely like my mother at all. She was so pale and fragile and weak. When she pushed her light into me, it was exactly like when I did the same to Caelan to heal him… except she gave me everything she had, and told me to burn.

'You are my daughter.'

Growing up, she would always remind me of that. Sometimes, she said it before I went to sleep; the words accompanied by a kiss on my temple before she turned out the lights. Her smile never left, but her eyes… her eyes were sometimes sad. *Knowing.* Like she was afraid that being her daughter was a curse as well as a reminder of who I was.

"I wonder who labeled these," Branwen mumbles, grabbing a beautiful ruby-red glass jar and squinting at the slanted writing. "I mean, obviously it was whoever used this place, but some of these things are absolutely wild."

Spinning to face me, she holds up the jar she's been inspecting.

"It's almost like ingredients for a witch's spell," she laughs. "This one is 'Sand from the Castovian Sea, Procured under a full moon by the light of Anaxis.' Who the hell is Anaxis and where is the Castovian Sea?"

Without waiting for an answer, she spins back around and replaces the red jar with another. This one is clear, containing what looks like tree bark. It has an iridescent blue sheen. Taking it from her, I hold it up to the light and turn it to find the label.

"'Balcolon Shards, Procured in the fifth week of the fourth changing.'" I set it back down carefully. "Maybe that's how they dated things?"

Planting her fists on her hips, she chews on her lower lip, brow furrowing as she considers. "Alright, but what's a Balcolon?"

"It's probably a very pretentious name for 'bark.'"

It's impossible not to be awed by the sheer number of items whoever ran this place kept on hand. Reaching out, I run a finger lightly over a small jar the color of the sunset. "I don't think whoever labeled or left all this stuff was shopping at your normal, everyday apothecary. I doubt there was a CVS on every corner wherever it came from."

"Can you imagine?" Branwen replies, gingerly picking up another bottle. "Yes, can you please point me in the direction of the shiny tree stuff?

I'd also like to purchase some sand from the Castovian Sea. It has to be procured by the light Anaxis, mind. No other light will do. It simply *must* be Anaxis."

I throw back my head and laugh. I laugh so hard that tears spring to my eyes and I have to bend over, struggling to breathe through it. I'm not sure if I'm losing my grip on reality thanks to the lack of sleep or food or both, or if the idea of asking some poor cashier where to find the shiny tree stuff really is that funny, but gods… *it feels so good to laugh.*

"Alright, Fire Witch," Branwen drawls over my giggles, shaking her head with a smile. "What are we going to try today? I think it's pretty safe to say by now that you have some kind of ability with all four elements, so pick one."

Reality rushes in, and my laughter dies a fast death. Groaning, I catch myself right before I actually stomp my foot like a child.

"Let's pick something that won't kill us if I screw it up," I suggest, wincing.

"Well, fire and Earth are off the table then."

"Why? What's wrong with Earth?"

She levels me with a flat look, then extends her arms and gestures around us. "We're literally in a cave. In the Earth. I feel like we should stay away from that one until you have a better handle on things, love. Unless you'd like to try and recreate the cave-in, in which case, I have to warn you —in times of great need anyone can serve in the office of a priest, and I haven't been to confession in three years."

I narrow my eyes. "I'm about ninety-nine percent sure that's only for Baptisms. I'm pretty confident you have to have a real priest for confession."

She opens her mouth to reply but hesitates, then shuts it and shrugs. "My point stands."

"Your point is shaky at best, but I get the gist. Let's go with water, then. I can't blow that up… Or set it on fire."

For the next few hours, I sit in front of two bowls of water and try to make them move, with varying results. A few times it rippled, and once, it flew straight up into the air like a geyser. Unfortunately, the only thing I've managed to do with any certainty is prove to myself that I definitely don't have control over my powers.

By the afternoon—or what I think must be afternoon—I'm cranky, starving, and soaking wet. *Again.*

"I just don't understand," I grumble, dipping the bowl into the lake and refilling it after yet another failed attempt. "It came so naturally before when the Severed attacked."

I set the bowl down, fold my legs under me, and lean back on my hands. I moved everything to the floor a few hours ago, worried I was going to pass out if I made myself stand much longer.

"Tell me one of your Mother's stories," Branwen says, sitting down next to me. Reaching out, I run the tip of my finger around the bowl's smooth rim and glance at her warily.

"Why?"

She shrugs. "I'm just curious. My mother always told me stories growing up, but they were the same fairy tales every kid hears. Snow White, Cinderella, etcetera, etcetera." She leans over, bumping her shoulder into mine playfully. "I want to hear one of yours."

"Alright," I reply, thinking back to the dozens of stories my mother told and retold over the years. There were so many of them. So many random tales she wove from nothing but her own memory and imagination. I don't even know where to begin.

I think back, remembering the sound and cadence of her voice. The way she used to play with my hair absently while she talked. The sound of her heartbeat in my ear when I laid my head on her chest.

"Once, a long, long time ago," I close my eyes and my mouth tips into a smile. She always began her stories like that.

"There was a weaver who lived in the forest. She was widely known to be the best weaver in the kingdom. Butchers, Blacksmiths, housewives, and Kings alike would come to her, begging her to make them one of her beautiful creations."

"The Weaver had a secret—she knew how to weave life into her designs. Her art was beautiful, but it was the special pulse of life that brought people from far and wide to offer her riches beyond compare for just one of her weavings."

"One day, a messenger from the palace showed up. The Weaver greeted him cordially and offered him refreshment, as she did with all her guests. But the messenger was in a hurry and refused. He told the weaver that the Queen was going into labor, and the one thing she asked to have for the

child’s birth was a blanket made with the life of the Earth, so he may stay grounded all his days and rule justly when it came time to take his father’s throne.”

“Oh, is that all? Just the fate of the entire kingdom, that’s all they need,” Branwen mutters, but when I open my eyes, hers are twinkling with mirth.

Smirking, I let my eyes flutter shut once again and continue the story. I run my finger around the rim of the bowl, the action soothing and repetitive, making it easier to recall the story in a strange way.

“The Weaver agreed. Who was she to deny the Queen, known to be kind, gracious, and loving to all her subjects? She told the messenger he was welcome to bed down in her barn, and in the morning she would have the Prince’s blanket ready.”

“The first thing she did was mull over the Queen’s request. How could she weave the life of the Earth into a blanket? After a long walk through the forest surrounding her cottage, she came upon a stream, and the answer came to her. She would weave the tiny Prince a blanket with the pulse of the stream. For nothing in this world would exist without the steady, constant presence of water. It flowed through the land like blood through veins, steady, strong and grounding.”

“Decision made, the Weaver returned to her cottage to gather her supplies. She returned to the stream just after midday to begin her work. For hours, she sat by the bank and dipped her fingers into the gentle current before touching the threads. But every time she tried to weave the water’s pulse, the pattern unraveled. The threads snapped, and the colors bled in protest.”

“By evening, the Weaver was distraught. She had never run into this problem before. She’d spent decades weaving life into her creations, but now—the first time she’d ever set out to weave something special—her gift abandoned her.”

I open my eyes and glance at Branwen, who sits still beside me. Her chin rests on her hands, and her eyes are unfocused and distant, like she can see the story playing out somewhere. With a smile, I soften my voice for the next part, just like my Mother did when I was lost to one of her stories.

“By the time the moon began to rise, the Weaver was exhausted and heartsick. She tore her work apart and threw the threads into the stream in anger. She raged at the water, demanding to know why her gift refused to work when she only wished to honor it.”

My finger continues its lazy path around the bowl. I can almost feel the stream's gentle currents—cool, calm, and patient.

“The stream didn’t rage back. It didn’t answer her at all. It simply continued to flow around her threads and her anger, gentle and constant. The Weaver kept shouting, and the water kept flowing, sweeping her ruined art away on the current.

“And when she finally stopped shouting, she realized she could hear the water speaking to her.”

“What did it say?” Branwen asks, leaning closer.

“It laughed at her. For the stream knew something the Weaver did not. The Weaver could bring life to her creations because the Weaver *was* life. Just as the bird in the trees, the flowers in her garden, or the great mountains on the horizon.”

I hesitate, frowning.

“So she sat again, and this time she didn’t touch her loom. She placed her hands in the water and let it run through her fingers. The stream ran steadily, loosening silt and sand, guided by the wind that flowed through the trees and the Earth that made way for its path. She closed her eyes and listened to the water, and soon it was all she could hear. It was life—the pulse of the world just as she was…”

I trail off, dipping my own fingers into the water in front of me. It’s cool and refreshing, gentle and strong at once.

“So the Weaver returned to her task, and when she picked up her threads she found they were already wet—a gift from the Earth. She worked tirelessly through the night, guided only by the light of the moon, the sounds of the forest, and her own heartbeat beating steadily through her veins. Her work was perfect, more beautiful than anything she had ever created, for the Weaver had finally learned that her gift to imbue her creations with life came not only from the Earth, but from within her. They were one and the same.”

I freeze. My fingers still in the water, my breath catches. For a long moment there’s no sound. No movement. Nothing but the faint rush of water and my heart beating in my ears.

There’s something… something I’m missing. It’s right there. So close I swear I could reach out and grab it if I just knew—

Branwen’s eyes open and she frowns. “Why’d you stop? What happened next?”

I shake my head, half my mind on the story while the other half chases the thread of something I'm sure I'm missing.

"Sorry. Uhm... she finished the blanket, and when the sun rose, she went back with the messenger to deliver the gift to the Queen herself. The Queen wept when the Weaver placed it in her hands, as it was the most beautiful piece of work the Weaver had ever created. The Prince was squirming in his father's arms, but the moment his father swaddled him in the blanket, he calmed."

"Well, did it work then? Did the Prince grow to be a good King?" Branwen asks, and I almost laugh at how much she sounds like I did as a child.

"I don't know. That's the end of the story."

"Bullocks," she huffs. "How do we even know if it did what it was supposed to do if that's the end?" Throwing up her hands in exasperation, she points an indignant finger at me. "See, that's the problem with these old stories."

"What is?"

She shoves to her feet and plants her hands on her hips. "The Happily Ever After is always implied, but nobody ever writes a sequel, so we don't know for sure. I mean, isn't it a bit problematic that absolutely no one ever bothered to check up on these people?"

I frown. "I don't think that's—"

"I mean, take Snow White," she continues, pacing back and forth. "What if she didn't want to live in a castle? What if she was perfectly happy in her little cottage in the woods with her seven buddies, huh?"

It's clear this isn't meant to be a conversation, so I don't respond. Instead, I slip my hands into the water and swirl my fingers back and forth, enjoying the liquid against my skin.

"The Prince could be a total wanker. We don't even know him. He like —randomly shows up and makes out with a dead girl? That's some major trigger warning behavior. I mean, did anybody even stop to think, 'hmm, we should ask Snow White if she even wants to marry that bloke'?"

I laugh, nearly missing it when the water trembles faintly against my fingers as though responding to my emotion.

"What good is it being friends with seven dwarves if not one of them thought to at least look into his background? He could be riding through

multiple kingdoms, looking out for sleeping women to make out with. We don't know! Snow White could have married a predator, Idril!"

"Branwen," I whisper, but she doesn't hear me over her tirade.

"Honestly, now that I think about it—what were seven dwarves even doing living alone in—"

"Branwen!" I hiss insistently, and she spins to face me, face twisted in annoyance.

"What?"

"Just… wait," I whisper, letting my eyes flutter closed. I continue swirling my hands in the water, letting the gentle liquid swirl until it stops feeling separate from my body. When I still, the water stills as well. I don't react. I don't think about the water. The only thing I focus on is my fingers and how they feel fully submerged.

The thread I'd been searching for moments ago appears, and I latch onto it before it can slip away again.

Deep in my chest, something shifts.

"They were one and the same," I breathe, voice so low I'm not sure Branwen can even hear me. It doesn't matter, though. Taking a steadying breath, I let it out slowly and focus all my concentration on the feel of my fingers in the water.

I begged my powers to work. I denied them, and then I tried to force them. I pleaded with them and even tried to barter. I commanded and willed them to do something—*anything*—for almost three entire days.

Fire, Earth, wind, water. It doesn't matter which; I tried it all with each one. But the whole time I was doing it all wrong. Nothing worked.

I'd been doing something wrong, and now I think I finally understand what.

I open my eyes, and my gaze settles on the mural in front of me. Specifically, the woman with her hands buried in the dirt, wonder and freedom in her eyes. Plants and trees and blooms sprout from the soil, and not because she's forcing them. She isn't willing the Earth to do her bidding. She's not beginning or cajoling, either.

It's so clear to me now, in a way it wasn't before. The look on her face… she's one with the Earth. One with the plants blooming and the air she's breathing.

My gaze slides toward the dais in the middle of the Chamber. All four elements are etched along the edge, but not separately. They were drawn

specifically to imply a connection. Water overlapping with air, fire with Earth, and so on. So that, at first glance, you see a single entity rather than four separate elements.

This power… It's not something that was given to me. I am my mother's daughter, and whatever this is came from her. And probably her mother before her, and her mother's mother after that. Generation after generation of women, each carrying these gifts and passing them to their daughter.

Until me.

I still don't understand why I'm the only one who can use these powers, but I do understand now that they didn't come from nowhere. They didn't force their way into my body to take over my life. They've always been there. They've always been a part of me.

I was never going to be able to fight them, beg them, or command them because I can't fight, beg, or command *myself*.

"I am my mother's daughter." The words fall from my lips with intent, and my eyes close again.

The fire and wind reacted to my emotions because we are one and the same. The sconces on the wall flared when I was unhappy and wanted to burn—*so I did*. The wind held back an entire contingent of Alphas because I wanted to protect Shade—*so I did.*

And just like the fire and wind, the water will rise from the bowl and float through the air back to the lake in the cavern—

"Fates…" At the sound of Branwen's voice, I smile. I can feel the water, no longer in the bowl, no longer surrounding my fingers, but flowing through the Chamber and into the cavern.

I listen to Branwen's hurried steps as she runs after it, and I don't even need to look because I already know what she's seeing. A stream of water gliding through the air, heading straight for the lake surrounding the platform. There, it hovers over the water before slowly—as though being poured from a pitcher—it spills back into the lake and becomes one with the very water it came from.

I place my hands in my lap, and when I hear Branwen's excited breaths as she returns to the Chamber, I finally open my eyes. And smile.

"How?" She stops in front of me, eyes wide with awe and joy.

My smile widens into a grin, elation and satisfaction thrumming through me.

“I remembered where I came from.”

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Chapter 38

Soren

Once we got Albertson situated, Caelan and I took Dax and Vae to the location of the cave-in. The entire way back to the castle, no one spoke. The moon had just risen, and the only sounds were the crunch of our boots over foliage, rodents scurrying through the brush, and Shade's random chuffs as he herded us forward.

The panther had been waiting at the tree line when we'd started our trek, like he'd known we'd be out there and would need his help finding our way back. The vampires might have, but I was a creature of the forest. I could have found my way back blindfolded.

Everything looked the same, but I think we all just needed to go back out and check. That, and Dax and Vae demanded we take them in no uncertain terms.

There's something different about those two. Something changed after their trip to Idril's childhood home. Since the night I met him, Vaelenor's always seemed like he's in a constant struggle with his emotions, but now it's worse. He usually never shuts up, but his quips and comments have decreased significantly. I glance over my shoulder where he's walking slightly behind the rest of us and take in his tired eyes and perpetual frown.

Somehow, Daxen is actually worse, and I don't know if that's good or bad. The changes in the male are significant. He's been enemy number one since pretty much the moment I arrived. Always argumentative, always so fucking sure of himself and unwilling to listen to anyone else.

Now, he looks like he's been run over by a train. The only time I've seen him act even slightly like his cocky, controlled self was in the War Room with Albertson earlier. Otherwise, he looks like a man who's just

been told there's irrefutable proof the world is flat, and he's been forced to reconcile all his beliefs.

I don't feel bad for either of them. I especially don't feel bad about keeping it a secret that they're Idril's Fated Mates. I honestly don't know how they haven't sussed it out already, or at the very least suspected it. When I found out Caelan was her Fated Mate, I immediately assumed Dax and Vae were as well. They've got to be either lying to themselves or have blocked out the possibility completely.

Part of me can't wait for the moment they find out and realize just how badly they've fucked up. Another part of me hates that this is happening at all, not for myself, but for Idril.

Because while Vae and Dax have no idea, Idril doesn't have the same luxury. She knows, and she has to live with that knowledge every single day.

They're fucking idiots if they think their Mate Bond will somehow erase everything that's happened once they do find out the truth. She can't hide it forever, and one way or another it's going to come out. My Mate is strong, though. She won't bend when the time comes. She's always known her worth; she's just never been in a position to demand what she deserves.

They have no idea just how strong she actually is. I don't know any other Omega who can look her Fated Mates in the eyes as they hurt her over and over and over again without breaking completely.

It's one reason I know she'll come back to me and be alright. There's no other possible outcome. *She's strong. A survivor. A fighter. The perfect Mate.*

So while a part of me wants to go feral and start tunneling deep underground in a fruitless bid to rescue her, I know with unshakeable certainty that she doesn't need me right now. Not for that.

Whatever's happening, I have faith that she can handle it.

It'd be great if her other Mates could get on board.

I can't blame Caelan. Not after he nearly died and woke up weeks later just to discover his Pack had committed the ultimate betrayal against him. He's still a bit shell-shocked. He wants to protect her, and feels like he's failed her somehow by getting captured and nearly dying, leaving her alone and vulnerable.

There's still a lot of trauma there that he's processing, so I don't blame him for wanting to hover over her like a mother hen. As time goes on and

he comes to trust that she won't be ripped away from him the moment he's not looking, he'll loosen up a bit.

Dax and Vae, though?

My attention falls on Daxen, who's stomping through the training yard a few paces ahead of me. The entire way back, his jaw's been clenched, and he hasn't stopped frowning. He's worried about her, even if he won't admit it out loud. He doesn't have any faith at all that she'll get through whatever this is.

Neither does Vae, who obviously wants nothing more than to wrap her up in cotton wool and hide her in the world's largest Nest for the rest of time, where he knows she'll be safe. It's so fucking obvious; every time I look at him, I struggle not to roll my eyes. The male practically radiates yearning, like he's been plucked right out of a Jane Austen novel.

After she disappeared, he went on a massive Nesting Material shopping spree. Every time I walk into Caelan's rooms, more and more fucking boxes and bags overflow with soft things for Idril.

The asshole's probably spent thousands of dollars on her since he found out how bad he fucked up, and she has no clue. I think she assumed Caelan and I are the ones buying everything for her, outside of the three blankets and that first shipment of clothing.

The thought makes me smirk. If Vae's too big of a coward to own up to his weird secret-groveling, then that's his problem.

"Want a drink?" Dax asks, holding open the door as we make our way inside. Caelan grunts what I'm pretty sure is an affirmative, so I nod too. I start up to their wing of the castle when Vae curses behind me. He stops, turns, stalks back to the door, and kicks it open.

Seconds later, Shade appears, slinking past Vae with his head held high like some kind of regal prince of the jungle. His claws click against the stone as he passes us, continuing through the kitchen and into the dining room like he knows exactly where he's going.

He probably does. That is a scarily intelligent cat.

A muscle starts to throb in the side of Dax's forehead, and he turns on his Packmate with a glare.

"Why?"

One word, and despite the tone, it's clearly more of a demand than a question. Vaelenor, who is apparently immune to Daxen by virtue of continued exposure, doesn't even pretend to feel bad.

He shrugs and lifts his chin. “It’s Idril’s pet.”

Dax stares Vae down, unblinking. “I feel like I shouldn’t have to point this out, but clearly I do. *That* is a three-hundred-pound jungle cat that somehow understands what we say. In fact, it’s probably planning seven different ways to maul us right as we speak.”

“Not me,” Vae smirks confidently, shouldering past Daxen on his way down the hall and toward the stairs.

“And why, pray tell, are you immune?”

“Simple. I play fetch with him. Plus I just let him inside. That definitely buys me some brownie points.”

“Good to know what your thought process is,” Caelan drawls, following him up the grand staircase. “Next time a killer is trying to break in, be sure to explain how brownie points work when you open the fucking door for him.”

When we finally make it to the den, Shade’s already there. Even better, he’s sprawled across the sectional with his eyes closed, his head resting on paws as big as my face, his tail flicking back and forth across the leather.

“This is a terrible idea,” Dax mutters when he walks in. “I mean honestly, probably the worst fucking idea you’ve ever had.”

Vae pours himself a drink, then drops into the seat closest to Shade’s head. The panther lifts one lazy eyelid, sees Vae, and shuts it again.

Vae shoots Dax a smug smirk and raises his glass in a mock toast. “See? Totally fine.”

“I’m telling you right now, I will not help you when it attacks,” Daxen replies, taking a seat across the room. “I will sit here and watch it eat your face.”

“I just fed, so I’ll probably heal in like… three minutes,” Vae tosses back, but he shifts just a bit closer toward the edge. “Maybe four minutes. Five… Max.”

“That’s a long five minutes without your lips,” I point out as I pour myself a drink as well.

“Shade stays,” Caelan declares, ignoring the indignant look Vae turns on him.

“Hey, where’s the book we brought back from Idril’s?” Vae asks, changing the topic away from being mauled. “It was on the coffee table earlier.”

Caelan set his glass down on the fireplace mantel and extended his hands toward the flames. “I put it in our room. Didn’t want the staff to come across it.”

That was probably a good idea. I don’t think it’d raise any red flags considering it looks like a leather-bound journal—something there are a shocking number of simply lying around in this place—but there’s no sense in leaving out anything that might be gossiped about or accidentally end up in the wrong hands.

I don’t know any of the staff here, obviously, so I don’t trust any of them. Not for the first time, I’m wishing I hadn’t sent Kane back home with the rest of the Pack, but I needed someone I trust to speak with the Elders. After Vae and Dax came home with the book yesterday, I spent all night thinking about the stories I was told when I was younger. I can’t help but feel like I’m forgetting something, so I sent Kane to request a formal meeting.

Only two males remain, posted outside the cavern to keep eyes out for Idril and guard the area, just in case. It’s probably not needed, but I’m not taking chances.

“Do you think Albertson can really make a serum that gives immortality?” Vae suddenly asks, staring into the glass of whiskey cradled in one palm like it might have an answer.

“I think that if anyone could, it’s Albertson,” Daxen answers eventually. “That man was scared shitless, and if he’s that afraid about the possibility of something like that existing, then I think the chances are higher than we think.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” he complains, shaking his head. “How can someone isolate DNA and transfer it to someone else? If that were possible, wouldn’t someone have done it before? I mean, vampires don’t live thousands of years, but I have to assume that 1200 would be close enough to seem like immortality to most humans.”

Daxen’s mouth curves into a wry, calculated smile. “Oh, trust me, they’ve tried. It doesn’t work. Or if it does, we haven’t found a way to do it successfully. Every attempt so far has ended in complete organ failure within twenty-four hours.”

He leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs.

“Vampire and wolven DNA are locked. Human DNA is even more extreme. Say you isolate the part of our DNA that gives us enhanced

healing and try transferring it into a human—and people have absolutely done exactly that—it won't work. The human's DNA rejects it immediately. It works like computer code that's already been finalized. You can't go back and change it. If you try and adjust even a single line of code, the whole program crashes. Same thing with DNA. The human's system takes one look at the vampire DNA and says, 'nope,' and attacks it, destroying it before it can take."

Vae looks even more confused, and frankly, I can't blame him. "Then why would it be any different with Idril?"

Daxen smiles. "That's a good question."

"Thanks, professor," Vae responds flatly.

My spine straightens as I recall Daxen's request earlier, and it finally clicks. I snap my fingers and point at him. "That's why you asked Albertson for his reports."

He inclines his head. "That's right. I already knew about the previous attempts at transferring DNA between Species, so I knew there had to be a reason Albertson was worried it might actually work this time, so I requested all the reports he has on her."

"And?" Caelan's voice is strained, like he finds the entire conversation distasteful.

"Idril's DNA doesn't behave like a closed system. It doesn't reject anything. It reads what it touches, for lack of a better word, discovers how it works, and then adjusts itself to incorporate it."

"You're talking about it like it's alive," Vae mutters, grimacing.

"It might be," Dax answers flatly. "Think of it like… I don't know—clay that molds into whatever you shape it into. The clay doesn't fight; it *adapts*."

"So Idril's not, what, locked in?" I ask, scratching my head.

Dax points at me and sits up straighter. "Her DNA is still 'open' somehow. Fluid. It's old, too." His gaze wanders across the room and lands on the fire. "It's almost like it was built differently from the ground up. Like it was designed for… evolution."

Caelan throws his drink back before slamming his glass down on the mantle. His nostrils flare. "Designed by who?"

"Gods, I don't know," Daxen scoffs, running a palm down his tired face. "Nature? The Fates? I don't know if I'll ever be able to answer that. I mean… that's like asking where we all come from. There's no way to

answer that. And in Idril's case, we have nothing to compare her DNA to except her mother's. Which, while similar, is nowhere near identical. There's something about Idril's that just feels… *different.* Like it's an original blueprint of something lost to time and memory both.

"So, she's definitely not human," Vae says, eyeing Shade warily.

My Beast stirs, pushing closer to the surface as it senses a threat. From the corner of my eye, Caelan shifts, muscles coiling as he glares at his Packmate.

Dax leans back in his chair with a sigh. "She is, but she's not. Fates, trying to explain this to you lot is like trying to explain a calendar to a monkey."

"Maybe you're just really shitty at explaining things," I suggest. "Try using language someone who doesn't read Science Weekly would understand."

He opens his mouth like he's about to snap back but hesitates and snaps it shut.

Well. That's new.

"DNA is like a string of notes that makes up a song. Vampires, wolven, and humans all create the same melody with slight variations. Idril also has the same melody, but hers is layered with harmonies that no one's ever heard before. Thousands of them. This morning, I would have compared the melody of our DNA to that of a beautiful composition. Now, I can say with absolute certainty that Idril's DNA is an entire symphony, while ours is comparable to a toddler using one finger to play Three Blind Mice on a thirty-year-old keyboard. Badly."

The analogy makes me grin as pride fills my chest. "You're saying she's more. Not less."

"She's everything," Vae breathes. The words are so low I don't think anyone else heard them, but I sure as fuck did. Daxen shifts, funneling a hand through his hair in frustration.

"The fucking kicker is, the structure and patterns of her DNA—they all work perfectly. Like she's the original blueprint for something mythical. Something so fucking powerful that I can't even begin to conceptualize it. And my mind kept wanting to jump straight to, 'she's evolved,' as I read the reports, but that's not right. It makes sense, but my gut is telling me it's wrong."

He stands, walks over, and snatches the decanter from the cart. “My instincts are telling me that what she is, at her core, is fucking ancient. And now that we have that book…”

“I really hope locking her in the fucking attic makes you feel dumb as shit now,” Caean grumbles.

“I’m pretty sure that if she ever discovers just how much more powerful she actually is, she’s going to burn this place to the ground. And honestly…” Vae scans the room and grimaces. “I wouldn’t stop her.”

It’s impossible to bite back my smirk.

These fucking idiots. They still don’t get it. They still don’t understand who she is. They’re so Fatesdamned worried about *what* she is that they’re ignoring what’s right in front of them.

Caelan catches my gaze and rolls his eyes, clearly thinking the same thing I am. Vae and Dax don’t know her. Not like Caelan and I do. Sure, we don’t know her favorite snacks or favorite books or everything she’s been through, but we know *her*.

We know her soul. We can feel how kind she is, how gentle and strong. We know her stubborn will and her intelligent mind. Her desire to love with her whole heart and to be loved in return. We haven’t even Marked her yet, and our Bond’s already so intense it’s almost intoxicating.

Daxen just spent twenty minutes trying to explain her DNA, but even with her biological blueprint right in front of him, he still doesn’t know *her*. And for all his fancy fucking talk, that makes him the dumbest bastard in the room.

Caelan shakes his head and pins his Packmates with a look full of pity. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Get… what?” Vae asks, looking at Dax like he might know what’s happening.

“The shit you’re saying,” Caelan throws a hand out at Vae. “Idril would never, ever do something like that. She would never purposely hurt either of you. Even with no control over her abilities, she still managed to obliterate a deadwalker less than two feet from Daxen’s back without singeing even a hair on his head.” He sighs, squeezing his eyes shut like he’s in physical pain.

“You don’t fucking know her. If you did, you’d know she’d never hurt any of you because that’s not who she is.”

“She shouldn’t just forgive us,” Vae mutters.

Snorting, I lean back against the wall and prop up a foot. “Once again, that’s exactly the point Caelan’s trying to make. You seem to think she’s either a god with all these powers, coming to rain judgment down on your heads, or a weak little girl who doesn’t know her own mind, let alone how she does and does not deserve to be treated.”

“Daxen said—”

“Daxen might know her DNA, but he doesn’t know *her*,” I snap, talking over him. “And if you both have somehow managed to confuse the two, you’re bigger idiots than I thought.”

Caelan narrows his eyes, and I brace myself for verbal beat-down number two of the day when a jolt of shock explodes through my system that doesn’t belong to me.

It—Fates… it came from Caelan.

His muscles strain, his shoulders tightening as he shifts and adjusts his stance slightly. To someone who doesn’t know better, the change is imperceptible. But I recognize it for what it is.

A male preparing to attack.

From his seat on the couch, Shade snarls. His head lifts toward the ceiling, and he braces himself, muscles flexing under his fur like he’s getting ready to pounce.

Vae’s lips part, but I throw up my hand before he can speak. Warily, I follow Shade’s gaze and curse when I see what he’s looking at.

A black mist hangs in the air, tucked up against the wooden beams of the ceiling. It’s coiled into a tight ball, pressed into a natural shadow. If Caelan hadn’t already been looking in that direction when he opened his eyes, he wouldn’t have seen it.

None of us would have.

My neck prickles in warning as my Beast snarls in my chest, pushing to the surface. I can almost smell it—smoke and ozone creeping into my sinuses. Not unpleasant, but not *right*, either.

Shade moves from the couch, slinking across the room to stand between Caelan and me. He crouches down, then lets out a deep, angry, vibrating scream that can only be taken one way—*a warning*.

“Fates, is that—” Vae reaches for his dagger, wrapping his hand around the hilt.

“What do you think your blade is going to do against a fucking shadow?” Dax scoffs, but I can see his pulse pounding in his throat even

from here.

“Gods…” Caelan curses. “I knew there was something I kept forgetting. I knew it. It’s been right there, right at the edge of my memory—”

“Same here,” I tell him, keeping my attention on the shadow above. “Idril and I even ran into it again the other day and just like the War Room…”

“You forgot about it,” Dax finishes for me. “Fuck. Whatever this thing is, it’s screwing with our memories.”

Vae groans. “That’s so fucked up. How the hell do you fight a shadow that you can’t even remember exists?”

Just then, the mist shifts across the ceiling, darting purposefully from one beam to the next. We follow its trajectory, not one of us so much as blinking.

“It can change into a solid form,” I tell them, remembering the afternoon when it appeared and came after Idril. “When we were out back, it formed into a solid block around my legs, keeping me from running. Idril blasted it apart with a beam of light.”

The memory makes me shudder. *How the fuck are we going to fight this thing?*

Caelan crosses the room slowly and stands at my side. “What is it?”

Before I can answer, it moves.

Fast as lightning, the ball of shadow detaches from the eaves and zips through the air, stopping abruptly less than four feet from us. It hovers in the air in the middle of the room like some kind of fucked up black orb.

No one moves. I can feel the tension radiating from the other Alphas, making the air thick with unease. Shade shifts, muscles rippling across his back and the hair along his spine standing on end. His lips peel back, and he bares his unnaturally large incisors threateningly.

The shadow orb pulses and spins slowly. I get the sense it’s studying each of us, taking our measure.

“I feel like it's taunting me,” Vae mutters from the side of his mouth. His grip tightens on his dagger, and despite his flippancy, he’s the embodiment of a predator, waiting to strike at the slightest provocation.

He’s also not wrong. Taunting is the perfect word for what’s happening. Every sense I have is warning me that something’s watching. Either the shadow itself is sentient, or something else is using it to see through.

“Don’t provoke it,” Dax warns him. “I really will let it eat your face off.”

Despite a clear lack of facial features, the shadow turns to face Daxen, who bares his fangs in challenge. I’d laugh if this shit weren’t so fucking terrifying. Daxen baring his fangs at a fucking shadow is something I’m going to seriously enjoy telling Idril.

When it becomes obvious the shadow isn’t going to attack, Daxen relaxes just slightly. Something about it must really piss him off, though, because he steps toward it and unsheaths his dagger, swiping it through the sphere with precision.

“Fuck. Off.” He snarls, and I instantly get the impression that the shadow’s laughing at him. It’s no surprise that the blade doesn’t do any damage. The shadow splits, tendrils of mist curling around the edges before it instantly reforms.

“What—” Vae snaps his mouth shut as the shadow shoots forward straight at him. With a curse, he throws himself to the side, barely getting out of its way in time. We all stare with open mouths and wide eyes as it flies straight for the wall, not slowing down in the slightest.

It hits the wall, breaking apart into a thousand tendrils of smoke that curl and flicker before disappearing altogether.

For a long moment, no one moves, none of us willing to take its sudden departure at face value. Once we’re relatively sure it’s actually gone, the atmosphere lightens, and we visibly start to relax.

Vae slams his dagger back in its sheath, muttering what sounds like insults in Italian under his breath as he makes his way toward the whiskey cart. He picks up a glass, pours himself a generous drink, and throws it back in a single swallow.

Instead of pouring himself a refill, his gaze lands on a half-full glass on the cart; he reaches for it, hesitates for only a second, then shrugs and throws the rest of its contents back as well.

Caelan walks over, picks up the now-empty glass, and glares at Vae, who’s taken his seat on the couch. “That was my drink, asshole.”

Vae’s palms are pressed into his eye sockets, and at the sound of Caelan’s voice, he drops them and blinks up at him owlishly.

“What?”

“Forget it,” Caelan sighs, pouring himself another drink before offering me the decanter. I take it from him, forcing my limbs to move naturally.

A long, low moan comes from Vae's throat, followed by an exaggerated shiver. "Does anyone have the bingo card? Because I think we can officially cross 'sentient shadow' off the list."

Daxen, busy studying the wall where the shadow disappeared, snaps to attention, every limb pulling taut. He spins around, eyes wide and mouth open in shock.

"The Shadow."

"Yeah, are we going to talk about how none of us remembered it before now?" Vae asks. "Because that is some seriously disturbing shit. No one should be able to mess with your memories. That should be off limits. There's no way that's legal."

"Legal according to who?" I ask Caelan, being sure to keep my voice low so Vae can't hear me.

"The imaginary men in his head," Caelan answers flippantly. "Who knows."

"Not now, Vae." Dax snaps, cutting him off mid-tirade. He's pacing now, walking back and forth in front of the couch, eyes squeezed shut as he mutters, "The shadow, the shadow, the fucking shadow."

He stops mid-step and spins, pointing at Vae. "The Light and the Shadow. From the book. I was just asking myself yesterday… who the fuck are the Shadow?"

"You think it's literal?" I ask, walking over to the couch and sitting next to Vae. "I kind of assumed it's a metaphor. Good and evil, day and night, light and shadow."

"I did too," he replies, rubbing his thumb across his lower lip and resuming his pacing. "What if it's not, though? What if the Shadow really is just a shadow?"

"It can't be," Caelan protests, coming to stand behind us. "There was an actual army in that book. In the pictures, they were fighting other people."

That sucks all the air from Daxen's sails, and he deflates.

"Maybe," he murmurs, but he's frowning, and it's obvious he doesn't believe that.

I lean forward, folding my hands between my knees. "We're missing something here. It's like we have all the pieces, but it's not forming a picture."

I raise my hand and tick off each point one by one.

“Let’s lay out what we know. Idril is something different—something more. Someone with incredible abilities and a mysterious Fated Mate Bond that no one knows about. We’ve got the book her mother left, and proof that her mother’s DNA carried a dormant variation of her active genes, and that her father found her thanks to some random writing his own father found decades ago.”

“I’m just going to say it,” Vae declares, throwing his shoulders back and lifting his chin. “Idril’s the answer to an ancient prophecy, born to lead an army in a war against an enemy we don’t yet know or understand.”

“What army?” Caelan’s voice is rough, and the words are forced through his clenched teeth.

We each glance at one another, but it’s obvious no one has the slightest idea what the answer might be.

At least, I assume none of us have an answer. Until Daxen clears his throat awkwardly, clenching his fists in his slacks as our attention lands on him.

“Whatever it is that’s waking up… Whatever’s waiting on the other side, preparing to come through the Ley lines—the Gate—”

His expression is solemn, and he swallows thickly, like he knows once he speaks the words, he can’t pull them back.

“I think *that* is her army.”

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Chapter 39

Idril

"This one is definitely Lizard Tears," Branwen mutters behind me as I watch a sparrow made of water form in my palms. It flutters its wings, spreads them wide, and takes off. I count silently, watching it soar through the Chamber, no bigger than a bottle. Its feathers glint in the light above, throwing a thousand shimmering rainbows along the walls and floor.

When I reach eight seconds, the sparrow bursts into a spray of water droplets that fall to the Earth.

Not the longest I've kept one going, but one of my most detailed by far.

It's shocking how natural this feels now that I've finally accepted my powers as a part of me. It feels like I've gone my entire life missing a crucial part of who I am, and now that I have access to it, I can't fathom living without it.

"Giant's Toenails," Branwen mutters, continuing her inventory. "Oh! This one is totally 'Strips of a Bandage Used to Patch up Bigfoot's Leg After he Cut it on a Sharp Rock.' Suppose that's too long for this tiny label, though."

"What in the world are you doing?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder as three spheres of water hover before me.

Without looking, I sense when they merge, forming a panther that—just like the sparrow—fits in my palm.

Shade.

"I can't go much longer without food," Branwen replies, setting a jar back on the shelf. "We're going on four days, Idril. This is hitting critical levels."

“Four days already?” The tiny water-panther spins, rotating slowly as I admire the detail. Even the tiny hairs inside his ears are perfect.

Branwen nods, standing from her crouch. “The sun is about to rise. Probably within the hour.”

The panther breaks apart, pouring back into the bowl I placed on the floor. “I don’t think there’s going to be a turkey sandwich perfectly preserved in any of that,” I point out.

Despite my words, I understand it. We’ve gone through everything here searching for food and come up empty-handed. *What else can we do, though?*

From what I can tell, practicing with the elements doesn’t use any more of my strength than moving a limb, but even that’s getting to be too much for me.

The hole in my stomach aches and cramps. The more I think about how hungry I am, the worse it gets, which is partly why I’ve been trying to keep my mind occupied by practicing.

Branwen’s normally tan complexion is wan, and there are circles under her eyes that weren't there a day ago. If I stand or move too fast, a wave of dizziness washes over me.

Too often I struggle to make sense of my own thoughts, like my brain doesn’t have enough fuel to understand anything.

We can’t stay down here much longer. We won’t survive.

“I’d sell my soul for toast and jam,” Branwen sighs, flopping down next to me and scrubbing a trembling hand down her face. I can’t remember when my own hands started shaking, but I know it’s been at least a day.

It’s worse to see my friend decline, though. Hunger isn’t the only thing eating me alive. My guilt is, too. She chose to come because of me.

And I’m making water animals instead of trying to find a way out.

My head falls against the wall, and I blink when my vision blurs.

“Oh look,” Branwen mutters, reaching over and plucking a blue jar from the shelves next to her. “These kind of look like walnuts.”

“What?”

Vertigo hits as soon as I turn to the side and I close my eyes and wait for it to pass. Once the world stops spinning, I open them and find Branwen holding a jar out in front of her, shaking it softly. Whatever’s inside rattles against the glass.

“I’m literally about to drool on myself, Idril,” she whines. Her perfume hits me, bitter and burnt with distress. Tears pool on her lower lashes, and her eyes are bright with hope as she passes me the jar. “Do you think we can eat them?”

They look like walnuts, but something feels off about them. *Something….*

A memory pops into my head—one from when I was a little girl, baking with my mother.

My whole body jerks like I’ve been electrocuted.

Oh Fates… I think I know what these are.

Heart racing, I stand—slowly this time—and with single-minded focus, cross the room as fast as I can without passing out.

I remember finding dirt yesterday… *or was it the day before?* The days have blurred together, but I know for sure we found it. Somewhere over…

Yes!

On a lower shelf, a row of clay jars sits, each filled with various types of soil. Kneeling, I hesitate, unsure which to use. I can’t screw this up. If I’m right, then this will give us more time. More time to find a way out. More time to figure out what I’m doing and how to use it to help us.

And how to break open that pillar, too.

At the very least, we won’t starve.

Please, let me be right.

“May as well leave it up to chance,” I murmur, reaching for one from the middle that looks nice and dark.

Good for growing things.

I head straight for the dais, unsure how much room I’ll need and unwilling to take any chances. Crouching down, I pop the lid off the jar of dirt and tip it over, shaking out a generous mound. Setting it aside, I use my palms to push all of the dirt into a small pile about four inches thick.

Screw it.

My hands shake worse than ever, but I pick the jar back up and empty the rest of the contents into the pile.

“What in the Fates are you doing?” Branwen asks, watching me with absolute bafflement.

“Making us something to eat,” I toss back, uncorking the blue jar.

Gods, I hope these are what I think they are. There’s no label on this jar because, of course, there isn’t, but they *have* to be.

“I feel like I shouldn’t have to say this out loud, but maybe hunger is getting to you. Idril, love… you can’t eat dirt.”

I snort a laugh and tip the jar over. One by one, what look exactly like small oval stones with a texture like roughened tree bark spill out of the jar and into my waiting palm.

Biting my lip anxiously, I set aside all but one and hold it up for closer inspection. It’s small, the color of dark clay, with a rigid texture, about the size of a walnut.

It’s not a walnut, though. It’s something so, so much better.

A peach pit.

And if it’s not, that’s unfortunate, because it is now.

I glance up, meeting Branwen’s confused expression with a smile. “I’m not eating dirt. And if we’re lucky, neither are you.”

“Oh. Well, that’s lovely to hear.”

My legs start to hurt, so I sit down, cross them, and scoot closer to the dirt. I dig my fingers into the soil, surprised at how warm and damp it feels. The entire room and everything in it just seems so alive.

Perfectly, beautifully alive.

The trembling in my hands isn’t just from exhaustion any longer. A feverish focus fills me. A determination I’ve rarely felt before. I take a peach pit and place it into the soil, pressing it down until the Earth covers it.

“I don’t understand. What exactly are you trying to do?” Branwen’s soft voice is closer now, right in front of me

“I’m growing us food,” I answer, and the confidence in my voice feels like it belongs there. “We are *not* going to die down here.”

“There’s no light, though. How can you grow something from a walnut? Do walnuts grow on trees?”

I shake my head, lean over, and place my hands on the soil. “It’s not a walnut. And the light doesn’t matter.”

The grit and warmth of the soil pressed against my palms, and I focus all my attention on that feeling. It’s warm and damp, the perfect environment to breed new life. In my mind, I imagine the peach pit settling into the Earth, shifting through the dirt.

Beneath my hands, the mound shifts as I envision a single root sprouting from the pit, shooting through the Earth and claiming this place as its own.

From there, the roots split and spread out in every direction, colors changing from white to green to brown in the blink of an eye.

“I don’t think it’s answering you,” Branwen whispers, but there’s a thread of hope in her voice that wasn’t there before.

I keep one eye closed but open the other, smirking at her as the soil shifts once more against my palms. “That’s fine. Because I’m not asking it.”

Just a few heartbeats later, the warm Earth grows even warmer under my hands. The pile trembles and shakes as warm air stirs around me, lifting tendrils of my hair to flutter against my cheeks. I can feel the roots stretching further before the growth changes direction and pushes vertical, the soil shifting once more to make room for—

“Oh, fuck!”

My eyes flutter open at Branwen’s exclamation, right as a tiny green shoot breaks through the dark soil. I move my hands, lifting them just enough for the stalk to expand and grow, pushing higher into the non-existent sky.

It grows so fast I’m afraid to blink, expanding thicker and climbing taller with every breath. Branches split off, stretching in every direction, creating a skeletal canopy above us. Then, with a burst of color, leaves sprout from the branches, unfurling and trembling with new life.

I push to my feet, feeling the life pulsing from me into the tree as it grows. I can feel its desire to bloom. To become more. Soon, encouraging it to grow feels as natural as breathing.

Flowers blossom along the branches, soft and pink, and smelling faintly of honey and sugar. The scent is intoxicating, and I take a deep breath and grin, basking in the scent of our salvation.

Branwen laughs. The sound is wild and full of joy. She throws her hands into the air, fingers reaching for branches that quiver with delight.

“You did it! Gods, Idril, you grew an entire tree! With *fruit*!”

My own laughter bubbles up my chest as my palms continue buzzing with warmth. My skin tingles as the petals fall one by one, each flower replaced with the velvety fuzz of ripening fruit hanging heavy from its branches. As each peach bursts into existence, the branches sag, weighed down by the harvest.

When the warmth in my palms fades, I reach a shaking hand toward the closest branch, and yelp when a perfect golden peach drops into my palm like an offering. It’s warm, beautifully ripe, and best of all—*food.*

Before I can make a conscious decision, I take a bite. The skin gives way as my teeth sink into its flesh. Flavor explodes on my tongue, sweet and tart and the best thing I've *ever* tasted. My taste buds tingle, and my mouth fills with juice. It drips down my chin, and I moan, eyes rolling back in my head.

I've only taken a single bite, but I'm already grabbing another and another, until my arms overflow with peaches.

"Oh, you beautiful Druid," Branwen moans between bites. "This is *extraordinary*. I could die happy right here, I swear to the Fates."

Wiping my chin with my sleeve, I laugh and take another bite. We don't speak after that, too busy stuffing ourselves full until our stomachs hurt and we're giggling like children.

"You grew a *tree*," Branwen marvels, running her hands along the trunk once we're both sufficiently full.

"Well… we won't die, at least. If I'd been thinking straight, I would have done something hours ago. For Fates sake, one of the first things we found were jars of seeds."

"So… variety then."

"We can't live off fruit forever," I tell her, holding out my hands and grimacing at how sticky they are. Knowing I won't be able to relax until I rinse off, I head back toward the main cavern.

"Speak for yourself. I certainly can, especially if they're magically sourced. Probably packed full of vitamins and all sorts of enhancements."

At the lake, I roll up my sleeves and dunk my hands into the water. It's incredible how much better I feel already. My shaking has stopped, so has my dizziness. Best of all, my brain finally feels like it's back online.

Plopping down at the water's edge, I lean back and let out a satisfied sigh.

I did it. I actually *did it*. I still can't believe I made an entire peach tree grow in this cave with nothing more than a seed and dirt, but somehow, I made it happen. An entire world of possibilities unfolds in my mind, making me giddy with excitement.

What else can I do that I haven't even thought of? How can I use my powers to help my Mates? Can I take on my father eventually? Save the Omegas?

For the first time, I feel genuine hope for the future. I feel like I have control. A sense of agency. An ownership of my own destiny.

I know one thing for certain. If I want to do anything, I need to work harder. I need to become stronger. Not necessarily physically strong, but mentally and emotionally. Most importantly, I need to figure out my limitations. *What's possible? What isn't?*

That part will be the hardest. This isn't one of my books. Unfortunately, it'd be really helpful if a wizened old man with a grumpy attitude and a soft spot for the heroine showed up and taught me how to use my powers.

I need answers. I need to know my limitations. *If the water animals I make only last for ten seconds, how long will the peach tree last? What if we wake up tomorrow and it's gone?*

The thought of rotting, fermenting peaches makes my stomach roll.

I know a lot of these questions can be answered by trial and error, but that can be dangerous, too.

If there are two things books have taught me, it's that every cause has an effect. *By growing the peach tree, did I unknowingly kill another peach tree somewhere else in the world? What about when I call on the wind or fire? What's the cost? Am I pulling that energy from myself? It would certainly explain the nosebleeds and exhaustion. If that's the case, then why do I feel alright now?* Growing an entire tree from nothing certainly takes more power than shooting a blast of fire at a Severed.

Which, of course, leads to the most important question.

Magic always comes with a cost. *What's mine?*

I don't know how long I stew, but eventually the pillar's pulsing glow pulls me out of my thoughts. It's brighter now. More intense.

Branwen appears at my side, sits next to me, and scoots closer to the water. Her gaze lands on the pillar, and together we watch it pulse and thrum.

"What do you think is in there?"

"I wish I knew," I sigh.

"Do you think it's alive?"

I'm already nodding before she's even finished.

"It has to be. Something's in there. Calling to me. Then there's the eye from my dream. It was looking at me. I know it was."

"Dreams are very important," she agrees. "You should take them seriously."

"I don't know how."

Branwen pulls her hair over her shoulder and starts splitting it into sections. “Why haven’t you tried anything?”

“I’m afraid,” I admit, wrapping my arms around my legs. “I wish I had a better answer. Maybe if I’d tried something when we first got here, we’d be long gone by now.”

“You needed this time. To learn about yourself. To come to terms with what you are and what you can do. Especially with all those knotheads running around causing drama at the castle.”

I nod. I certainly would never have found time to work through my issues with my Mates around every corner. Caelan and Soren would hover, and Dax and Vae would… *well… exist.*

For a long while, we sit in silence, both of us lost in our thoughts. Before long, my eyes start to feel heavy, and I bite back what must be my tenth yawn in half as many minutes.

“I need a nap,” I murmur, exhaustion finally catching up to me now that I’m no longer starving.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Branwen moans dramatically, slipping her arm from mine and pushing to her feet. She turns and heads back toward the Chamber where we’ve spent the last two nights, but I don’t follow. I don’t know why, but I don’t want to leave this spot now that I’m here.

She only makes it a few feet before she glances over her shoulder, realizing I’m not behind her.

“You coming?”

I shake my head, gesturing at the pillar. “I’m going to stay here for a bit.”

I have a feeling anyone else would have pushed, but not Branwen. She never questions me when I have a gut feeling, and she never makes me feel stupid for doing something other people might consider strange.

“Suit yourself.” She smiles, gives me a mock salute, and continues on her way.

I scoot back a few feet, so I don’t accidentally roll into the water, then lie down and curl into a ball. My limbs feel like they weigh a thousand pounds, heavy with exhaustion. As I fall asleep, I swear I can hear the faint, deep resonance of a pulse coming from the pillar.

* * *

I’m standing on the platform in the middle of the lake.

I don’t know how I know, but I’m sure of it. There’s nothing around me. Nothing but endless darkness. A black so absolute it extends into eternity.

“Hello?” My voice sounds breathy, but the sound echoes through the Void, folding in on itself before returning at a much higher volume.

I turn in a slow circle, hands extended so I don’t run into anything.

There’s nothing to run into, though. It’s just me, the platform under my feet, and the never-ending Void.

I know this is a dream, just like I knew it was a dream when I was with Caelan in the meadow, and that brings me a small measure of relief.

“Is anyone there?” This time I shout, then hold my breath, waiting for a response.

Nothing.

My eyesight never adjusts. Not even when I strain to pierce through the thick blanket of darkness. I have the oddest sense that the night sky is high above me, filled with stars glittering like a thousand diamonds.

The cavern begins to pulse. Earth, wind, fire, and water—all four elements beating in sync with my heart. The rhythm grows, increasing in intensity until all I can hear is the steady *whooomp, whooomp* thrumming louder and louder.

My skin prickles, every hair on my body standing on end as the rhythm intensifies, reaching a crescendo until—

It stops.

The air becomes still and heavy, the scent of ozone so strong I can almost taste it. It’s like a blanket’s been thrown over the world.

A voice echoes through the darkness, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. The air grows warmer, making goosebumps prickle along my bare legs. It starts as a vibration and moves through the Earth and into my bones. It creeps along my limbs, up my neck and into my head. There, it brushes against the inside of my skull before spilling into my bloodstream.

The vibrations are words. The words are a language. One I shouldn’t know, but do. I know it. I know it as well as I know my name. As well as I know my mother's face. It’s part of me—part of my soul.

A wave of homesickness sweeps over me. I fight back the whimper crawling up my throat and the tears of longing that cling to my lashes.

I have *never* yearned for something as much as I yearn for—*for*—

What? What is it?

The whimper I’ve been trying to hold back escapes. “What’s happening?”

“Osha’riol un viadryn. Shai elienar kai’lyn, shai drai kai’lox.”

The words vibrate inside my skull. They imprint into my soul, making me shudder and struggle to breathe. Spinning frantically, I search for the origin of the voice, eager to find them.

I don’t recognize it, but my soul does. Feminine, ancient, and wise. Threaded with mirth and dark amusement. It’s the voice of someone who’s watched civilizations rise and fall many times over and would never apologize for surviving them all.

“Who’s there? Who are you?”

“I am what your mother dreamed and what your blood remembers, Daughter of gods.”

The glow around me sharpens, bleeding into a bluish silver that’s so bright it threatens to blind me. I throw my arm up to shield my eyes, still searching for any hint of where it’s coming from.

“Do you have a name?”

“I, too, am a last Daughter,” she muses, as though she remembers only because she was asked. ***“Born of Vharon and Nyraxis. The last fire and last breath. They named me Vharax, so I may live on when their bones have long turned to dust. I am all that remains of those two great lines.”***

Every cell inside me lights up with recognition, and I sway, barely keeping my feet under me.

Recognition of what, though? I don’t know anyone named Vharax. What in the Fates is happening?

“Shai elienar kai’vyn, shai drai kai’lox,” she laughs. “***You know who you are, just as you know who I am.”***

I dig my fingers into my temples, shaking my head in confusion. “How can I understand you?”

Vharax hums, and the sound is threaded with confusion. ***“How can you not? You are the Daughter of the last true light. You are mine as I am yours. Our souls have been bound for eternity.”***

The light dims, and I blink as blinding afterimages flash in my vision. My gaze lands on the pillar of ice, formidable in this dream world just as it is in reality. It glows with the same silver-blue light as the rest of the cavern. The pieces snap together, and I know with sudden certainty who Vharax is.

At least… I know *where* she is.

"You're trapped," I breathe, and dread fills my chest, pressing against my lungs like a thousand pounds of stone. I sprint to the pillar, not stopping until I'm pressing my palms against the cool surface. Biting down on my bottom lip, I smooth my hands across the sooty surface as the tears I've been holding back finally fall and slide down my cheeks.

I have to get her out of there. I can't leave her in this prison. Not for a single moment longer.

"I'm sleeping," Vharax informs me gently. "***My soul knows yours, even if we will soon meet for the first time. Once that occurs, we will not speak as we do now. I will not remember this conversation. I am still very, very young."***

"What does that mean?" I ask in frustration. "How can we communicate if we can't speak to each other?"

"You will know how, Daughter of Light. You understand our language now, do you not?"

My eyes widen as I realize she's right. We've been speaking in that odd foreign tongue this whole time. A language I've never heard, but understand as though I'd been born knowing it.

"My body is much younger than my soul." Vharax continues in that deep, melodious voice. It's comforting, almost as much as my mother's was when I was a child. ***"As is the knowledge I possess. Be patient as I learn who I am, just as you are learning who you are."***

"I don't know who I am," I admit softly.

"Do you not?" Her voice drops, becoming a purr. Dangerous and confident in a way I wish I could be. ***"You are a storm brought to life. Flame given flesh. You have suffered, but you do not break. You do not bend. You most certainly do not bow to small men. You, Idril Elydrien, are meant to burn."***

My hands tremble, and I press them into the cool ice and stone. There's truth in her words. A conviction slips into me and searches out every crack and fissure in my heart. The ones that made me believe I'm not good enough. Not strong enough. Not brave enough.

My father created them, chipping away at me for decades. My Mates widened them with their betrayal and cruelty. Worst of all, I ignored them, letting them fester and grow larger every day, until they became a part of me.

Scared. Submissive. Broken.

‘You do not bow to small men…’

Heat flares in my hands, slithering through my blood like fiery silk. It flows through me with purpose, heading straight for my chest where it slips between my ribs. It spreads, growing roots in a deliberate refusal to leave.

‘You, Idril Elydrien, are meant to burn.’

That certainty expands further, searching out those cracks inside of me and filling some with power. Not like my abilities. Something more permanent. A sudden, inescapable awareness of who I truly am.

Not someone who bows. Not anymore.

“Yes,” Vharax hisses with delight. ***“We will burn together, Last Daughter. But first… first we will soar.”***

The pillar explodes under my hands, fracturing into a thousand spiderwebs that explode throughout the cavern. There is no more darkness, not like when I first opened my eyes and found myself in this Void. All that exists now is pure, fiery-hot luminescence, everywhere at once.

The world shatters, the bright white light blanketing me in a mirror of the dark Void I stepped into. It’s all I can see. All I can feel, smell, and touch. The ground disappears from under me, and then I’m falling, or flying, or both—cocooned in light and the thrumming *whooomp, whooomp* of a beating heart.

Moments before I wake, I feel Vharax once more, her voice soft as silk and hard as stone. Both further away and closer than before. It rumbles through the light, its tone threaded with determination.

An order. A command. A plea.

“Do not crawl, Daughter. Rise.”

* * *

Waking up feels like slamming back into my body after falling from a great distance. My eyes snap open, and the first thing I see is Branwen, hovering in front of my face. Her mouth is moving, her hands gripping me tightly around my upper arms.

“Idril! You need to get up, now!”

My body jerks. Air rushes into my lungs, filling my chest. I bolt upright, hands snapping out and latching onto Branwen’s forearms.

I don’t ask her what’s wrong. One glance at our surroundings tells me precisely why she’s so frantic.

Like my dream, the entire cavern trembles and pulses with a bright, glowing light. The ground shakes and sways, matching the rhythm of the thrumming *whooomp, whooomp* that's followed me from my dreams and into reality.

The air's buzzing with electricity, making every hair on my arms stand on end.

Behind Branwen, bathing her in an otherworldly radiance, the pillar beats to the cadence of my own heartbeat. Like it knows I'm awake, the light grows even brighter as Vharax's final words burn through my blood.

'Do not crawl. Rise.'

I push myself up, and once I'm standing, I urge Branwen behind me and turn to face the pillar.

"What—what are you doing?"

She reaches out and pulls me to a stop. Glancing down, I'm startled to find myself dangerously close to the water's edge.

The pillar—*Vharax*—calls to me, urging me closer. I know I need to get to her, but there's an entire body of water between us, and I still don't know how to do more than doggy paddle.

Think, Idril. How else can you get across?

The Earth shifts and sways, and as it does, a plan begins to take shape in my mind.

Could it be that simple?

The moment the question pops into my head, the ground trembles. Not with fear or anger. With excitement.

My lips curl into a smile.

"Idril!" Branwen's shout is panicked, and I spin, taking in the very real fear in her eyes. Her gaze darts to the ceiling as rock and debris detach, falling from unfathomable heights and shattering at our feet.

So far, nothing's been large enough to hurt us. But now, chunks of rock and packed dirt the size of softballs take their place, narrowly missing our heads by inches.

I have to hurry. It's only going to get worse from here.

Giving Branwen what I hope is a reassuring smile, I wrap my fingers gently around her wrist. "It's going to be alright. I know what to do. Just stay here. Do *not* follow me, no matter what."

Her lips part, eyes wild with fear and uncertainty, but before she can respond, the ground swells and heaves. She throws her arms out to keep her

balance, then gives me a shaky nod.

I wait long enough to watch her back up, taking a few panicked steps away from the water.

Once I'm sure she's far enough away, I turn back to the pillar.

I feel as confident as I did in my dream, but this time with a clarity I was missing before. It fills in more of those cracks, reminding me of who I am.

The lake splashes and churns violently, but I feel no fear. Lifting my foot, I let it hover above the spitting, churning water, mere inches from the current. I can hear Branwen's sharp intake of breath as I step down and onto solid ground.

The stone cracks and the dirt rushes up, reshaping to form a bridge of packed Earth beneath my feet. With each step, it lengthens further, expanding until it reaches all the way across the water. To the platform beyond.

It's as effortless as breathing. There's no command. No pleading. I simply form the image in my mind, and it appears.

When I step onto the onyx rise, I have to crane my neck to take in the pillar's height. Up close, it towers above me. Easily ten feet in diameter, it dominates the cavern and reaches so high it disappears into the darkness beyond.

Just as I knew it would, its surface is covered in ash and soot. Without hesitation, I stride over to it and swipe it away with a steady hand.

The ice is cool to the touch, and my palms tingle as my skin heats, melting the ice and creating rivulets of water that smear streaks in the soot.

I press both hands to the surface and pull on the heat inside of me. Life hums through the layers of ice, so I push more heat into my palms in answer.

Branwen curses as the shaking intensifies, but I push it away until it's nothing but background noise.

I need to work faster. This is taking far too long.

Using as much caution as I can, I coax flames to my fingertips and push them into the ice. My skin hums with power. I can feel Vharax inside, and the longer I work, the more desperate I am to get her out.

I still don't know exactly who she is, but it's not hard to imagine her in there, cold and miserable. *How long has she waited, sleeping in this prison of frost?*

No living being should be trapped like that. Locked up like a feral animal and left to rot.

We don’t belong behind bars—metaphorical or solid iron. No one should be forced into that kind of hell unjustly. Not humans, not vampires, and not wolven.

And *certainly* not Vharax.

Determination shoots through me, so intense I can taste it. I’m going to free her. I’m going to get her out of this prison, and she’ll *never* be shackled again.

And neither will I.

Pressing my forehead against the surface of her cell, I will my power to work harder. *Faster.* The ice resists, and the smell of ozone that appears from nowhere makes me feel like I’m working against something more.

Something ancient.

“Rex vorath.” Wake up.

The words fall from my lips in a language I didn’t know existed a day ago, but roll off my tongue as though they've lived inside me since before I was born. A part of me I don’t understand, but belongs to me as surely as the powers that burn beneath my skin.

The command starts as a whisper, but as the cavern keeps trying to tear itself apart and the shaking intensifies, my voice grows louder and louder until I’m fighting to be heard above the destruction.

Just when I think my voice may give out, the universe answers.

Fire erupts from my palms. An invisible shield I didn’t know was there blinks into reality, then shatters like glass, breaking apart so forcefully that I stumble back, nearly losing my balance.

The fragments merge, twisting into a spiral of shimmering red, silver, and blue. They snake and climb around the pillar like a corkscrew, squeezing.

When the first crack appears, a rush of excitement hits me.

Another crack follows. Then another, and another, until the entire pillar is rupturing. Water steams and hisses, thickening the air and making it hard to breathe.

The air roars. The walls crack and splinter above us. Branwen screams my name, but I don’t dare turn around. Soon her voice is lost to the thunderous sound of the world exploding.

The pillar *shatters*.

Light and flame and sound burst apart, then collide and reform into something blinding and raw. The ground shakes and rocks, thrashing and heaving as I fight to stay upright on unsteady legs.

I refuse to run. Refuse to look away or cower.

A sound like rolling thunder breaks through the air. High above, the Earth heaves, then tears apart in a storm of molten stone and shards of ice. Through the chaos, the night sky appears, dark and endless and glittering with a million stars.

I throw my arms over my head and fall to my knees, trying to shield myself. Ash swirls through the air as the ground keeps bucking. I barely have a moment to worry for Branwen and pray she made it to the other Chamber, where she won't be struck.

I curl myself into the tightest ball I can, trying to protect my head and face as the world rips apart around me.

Slowly, the shaking begins to calm. The fire dims, and the sound of stone and soil ripping apart lulls, leaving an ominous silence in its wake.

Clumps of dirt keep falling from high above, skittering down the walls and rolling to a stop.

Bracing myself, I cautiously raise my head, blinking furiously to see through the dust and vapor—the air shimmers from heat and the metallic scent of scorched stone.

The once-dim, quiet cavern is now brilliantly illuminated by a bluish-white fire. It burns along the walls, flickering in jagged streaks like lightning.

As the dust shifts and the air clears, my gaze falls on the now-empty space where the pillar once stood.

No. Not empty.

Vharax.

It's impossible to breathe. Impossible to think. She shifts, and the world narrows until only the two of us remain—the girl who wanted nothing more than to free her, and the creature waiting to be freed.

Her head only reaches my shoulder, but her size is irrelevant. Not when every cell of my body is screaming at me at once, alerting me to the rather obvious fact that this creature is a predator.

White and silver scales gleam in the firelight, each one perfectly smooth and intricately formed. Her wings are only slightly unfurled, letting me

glimpse the bright blue veining threaded delicately along the nearly translucent membrane.

At first, she's too busy studying her surroundings to bother with me. But when her head—attached to a long, delicate neck—pivots in my direction, tears spring to my eyes, and I finally remember to breathe.

Her gaze meets mine—ancient, powerful, and impossibly familiar.

Real. She's impossibly, inconceivably real.

We stare unblinking at one another for what feels like forever. Tears spill from my eyes, leaving tracks down my cheeks at the sheer impossibility of what's in front of me.

"IDRIL!"

Branwen's voice slices through the air, frantic and afraid. Both our attention snaps toward my friend, racing across the cavern, weaving around fallen stone, rocks, and massive chunks of ice. She trips once, stumbles, and nearly falls before righting herself, refusing to stop until she reaches us.

Her eyes are on me, so when I physically feel Vharax stiffen in alarm, I brace myself, getting ready to throw myself between them.

Branwen doesn't even slow when she reaches my makeshift bridge, sprinting over the packed Earth and ignoring the now-calm water on either side. When she steps onto the platform, she skids to a stop and drops to her knees beside me.

She checks me over, cursing under her breath in what I think might be French. When she sees I'm not hurt, she relaxes, and that's when she finally notices Vharax.

Before now, I'd never actually seen someone freeze like a deer in headlights.

"What—what the *fuck* is that?!"

I don't answer.

The dragon takes a deep breath, each sinuous inch of her body pulling taut. Under her scales, her muscles bunch and flex as she shifts back, chest vibrating with a low rumble.

She moves so fast I have to bite my tongue to keep from screaming. One second she's as still as a statue; the next, she's lunging at us without actually moving. She surges forward and, in the same motion, throws her head back to face the sky. Her mouth falls open and a stream of red and blue flame shoots into the sky from her throat, so bright it's nearly blinding.

Even from four feet away, I can feel the heat of the fire against my skin. Branwen yelps, scrambling back on her hands and knees, wide eyed, fixated on the torrent of flame.

Vharax hunches down and swings her body around until she's facing me. The same blue eye I saw in my dream watches me now, lending the whole situation an even stronger sense of unreality.

She tilts her head, and her gaze snaps to Branwen, eyeing her like a wildfire moments before it devours a forest.

"Dragon…"

The word is barely more than a whisper, drowning in awe and reverence. When Vharax's eyes narrow on her, she throws up her hands in supplication.

"Totally get it. No need for another demonstration. You are a super, super badass dragon."

Vharax ignores her and turns back to me. For a breathless moment, neither one of us moves. Then she stands and takes a single, confident step toward me. Claws that look more like talons scrape across the stone with each step, and smoke curls from her nostrils, but I stay where I am, refusing to break eye contact.

I cannot show fear.

Vharax is mine. Just as I'm hers. We're Bonded. Bound.

But unlike Shade, Vharax is the furthest thing from a pet. She's not an animal that, while normally dangerous, will roll over and expose her stomach for belly rubs.

Vharax is dangerous. An apex predator. Top of the food chain.

And she knows it.

We may be bound, but that doesn't make her less dangerous. Even now, she scrutinizes me not as a friend, but as something powerful and strong that recognizes the same strength and fire inside of me.

Mirrors of one another.

Once we're within a few feet of each other, she slows and lowers her head, bending until her face is level with my chest. When she exhales, my hair whips around my face, caught in a current that smells of sulfur and smoke.

Following my instincts and hoping they don't lead me astray, I reach out my hand and let it hover between us. Vharax's reptilian eyes narrow to slits, and the scent of brimstone explodes through the air.

Vharax opens her mouth. Before I even realize it, she aims a stream of fire straight at my arm.

Behind me, Branwen screams. And as much as I want to do the same, I force myself not to react.

This needs to happen.

Vharax hesitates, almost like she's not sure what she's doing, only that it needs to be done. I wish we could speak the way we did in my dream, but as I watch her now, I'm oddly comforted knowing I'm not the only one who's stumbling blindly through just like this.

I see the moment Vharax commits. Fire spirals up from her throat, blasting straight into my arm. A month ago I would have screamed. I would have jumped right into the water.

Now I stand steadily. *Stoically.* I don't blink as the fire washes over me, even as sweat breaks out on my brow from the intense heat. The rock behind us smolders before it starts to melt from the extreme temperature.

I feel no pain.

When the fire dies down, I already know what I'll find. That doesn't make it any less shocking to see my arm perfectly intact. Even Caelan's hoodie remains untouched by the flame.

Vharax watches me until the final ember dies. When it does, she releases a soft trill deep in her throat and, without breaking eye contact, takes a single step back and bows her head. Her wings snap out, fully extended and so beautiful it still seems impossible she's real.

Letting my arm drop, I step back as well and—because it feels like the right thing to do—bow my head in return. The air around us is thick with tension and heavy with importance, and I wish more than anything I understood what just happened.

"I think that dragon just became your best friend," Branwen whispers. I spin around and find her standing far off to the side with her hands still covering her mouth and her eyes wide with shock. She exhales, bends over, and rests her shaking hands on her knees. The air fills with the scent of burnt cherry pie, and I suddenly feel terrible for scaring her.

"I thought you were dead, I swear to the Fates. I think I've aged thirty years in the last hour."

Ignoring us, Vharax walks to the edge of the platform and jumps, gliding effortlessly across the water. She lands, spins around twice, folds her legs beneath her and curls up with her head tucked under a wing.

“What now?” Branwen asks. She tilts her head toward the ceiling, which is now nothing more than a gaping hole in the Earth. Dust motes float through the air above us like flakes of snow reflecting the moonlight. It’s easily five hundred feet to the surface, and the thought of getting up there somehow makes me want to take a page from Vharax’s book and sleep for a week straight.

Unfortunately, that’s not an option.

We’ve been stuck in this cave for far too long, but I know how to get us out.

The stars are shining down on us, glinting brightly in the night sky. It’s the same sky from five nights ago, but I’m no longer the same girl.

And I have a feeling this is just the start of all the changes to come.

With a sigh, I pull my gaze from the stars, turn to Branwen and give her my answer, hoping my voice doesn’t start shaking.

“Now we get out of here. It’s time to go home.”

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Chapter 40

Daxen

It's the middle of the night when my eyes snap open, and I shoot up in bed, wide awake. There's a heavy, painful pressure in my chest, so sharp I almost think I've been stabbed at first.

I press my fist against my sternum, something I've been doing far too often lately. Not for the first time I've considered pulling Calder aside, but something tells me it would be pointless. This isn't something a doctor can fix, anyway.

Not unless there's a new prescription for guilt I don't know about.

Sighing, I deflate, pressing my palms into my eyes and trying to get my bearings. It's been years since I've startled awake from a deep sleep. The last time was…

When was the last time this happened?

Fuck… that's right. When Vae's curse activated in the middle of an overnight mission. *Gods, that must have been, what? Thirty years ago?*

Before that was when Caelan got caught in a rogue Severed attack; he and Ford were mid-stakeout, and the entire thing went up in flames. They both barely made it out.

That was one of Ford's first missions… *so early 80s, maybe?*

Reaching over, I grab my phone from my nightstand and check my notifications, half expecting something from Gav or Calder about an emergency.

Nothing.

I spend the next five minutes debating whether I should get up and check on Caelan and Vae. Just to be sure. Knowing Caelan, he's already up.

I don’t think he’s slept more than a few hours since Idril left—and only when one of us made him.

And by that, I mean Soren. Because he’s sure as fuck not listening to his Pack.

Not that I can blame him.

“Fuck it.”

There’s no way I’m going back to sleep until I know they’re both alright. For all I know, Vae’s done something stupid as fuck, like renting a digger and having it air-lifted into the clearing next to the cave where Idril disappeared. He might be ten minutes from checking off the next entry on his *“Grovel Until Idril Forgives me, or I Die, Whichever Comes First”* list.

I throw back my blankets, climb out of bed, and step into a pair of joggers. On my way to the door, I pass the couch and almost dismiss the sweatshirt draped over the back of it.

Then my brain supplies an image of Vae in the cab of a tractor, wearing a hard hat and a look of determination.

“You better fucking not be,” I grumble, swiping the sweatshirt and pulling it over my head. I pull on socks and shoes too, just to be safe, already cursing my Packmate for something he’s only done in my imagination.

So far.

I’ve managed to work myself into a shit mood by the time I whip open my bedroom door. I’m looking down at my phone, scowling at the 2:14 a.m. timestamp, so I damn near run right into Caelan.

“Whoa!”

My head snaps up at the sound of his voice, seconds before impact. I wasn’t expecting *anyone* right outside my door at this time of night… but especially not Caelan.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He frowns, steps back, and slides his hands into the pockets of his jeans. His expression hardens, and I realize how shitty my question sounded.

I groan, shaking my head. “Sorry, shit. I didn’t mean to sound accusatory. I just wasn’t expecting—”

“For me to be right outside your door at two in the morning?” he finishes flatly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Ah… yeah.”

The silence that follows is awkward as fuck.

“So—”

“I need your help—”

We speak at the same time, and when his words register, I jerk back in shock. *He wants my help? Mine?*

“Where’s your best friend?” I ask, petulantly. “Why can’t he help you?”

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I want to punch myself in the face. *What is wrong with me? Am I just going to spend the rest of my life making sure my brother hates me forever?*

Caelan pins me with a look of disgust that I know I deserve. Then he turns away from me with a scoff. “Just forget it.”

Panic washes over me, and I lurch after him, grabbing his arm to stop him from leaving.

“Hey, no! Wait!”

He tries to shake me off, but I refuse to let go.

“Fates, Caelan. I’m so fucking sorry. I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with me. I just woke up out of nowhere, and every time that happens it’s because something bad’s gone down, so I’m on edge. And I’m being a dick because apparently I have the emotional maturity of a child when I get stressed.”

I’m not sure what part of my tirade gets through to him, but I sag with relief when he finally stops fighting to get away from me.

Until his eyes fill with suspicion and he asks, “What did you just say?”

“Uh, which part?”

“You said you woke up out of nowhere.”

I nod.

“When? Tonight? Like just now?”

Something about the look in Caelan’s eyes puts me even further on edge. “Yes, just now.”

With a curse, he grabs me by the arm and takes off down the hall, dragging me with him. I stumble after him, so shocked by the abrupt turn that it takes until we’re halfway down the hall for my brain to catch up.

“What the hell? What’s wrong?”

I yank my arm free twice before breaking away.

“What’s with the urgency all of a sudden? Talk to me, man. Tell me what’s going on, and I’ll help you. But you have to use your words. You can’t just drag me around like a caveman in the middle of the night.”

He glares at me, then quickly realizes it's probably easier to explain, and throws his hands up in defeat. "Something's wrong!"

"What do you mean something's wrong?"

"I mean… Something. Is. wrong," he growls, aggressively biting off each word. "Soren and I both woke up like twenty minutes ago. At the same time. And we could just… *feel* it." His hand lifts to his chest, curling into a fist which he pounds against his sternum for emphasis. "We felt it here. Right. Here."

"You mean with… Idril?"

He gives me a flat look which… *okay. That's fair.*

"Alright…" I heave out a breath, planting my hands on my hips. "So you came to get me."

He nods.

"Where's Soren?"

"Right here."

The wolven's voice reaches us right before he rounds the corner and into the hall. To my relief, Vae appears as well, trailing after him, both sporting frowns identical to Caelan's.

When Caelan turns to the wolven, his eyes soften, and he lets out a breath of relief. A pang of jealousy hits me like a battering ram.

"Oh good," I drawl. "We're all here. Can someone tell me what the *fuck* is going on?"

Vae frowns at my tone, and at this point I have to wonder if I'm in permanent self-destruct mode or if I just hate myself.

"Well, I found this one outside," Soren announces, throwing a thumb over his shoulder toward Vae. "Pacing at the tree line."

Vae shrugs, and a sheepish smile appears on his face.

This motherfucker, I swear to the gods… if there's a delivery coming from John Deere, I will literally set him on fire.

Caelan turns to Vae, and the look in his eyes is nothing short of desperate. "You can feel it too, can't you?"

"Caelan…" Soren's tone is thick with warning, throwing every one of my instincts into overdrive.

"I know," Caelan snaps, then turns back to Vae and demands, "Tell me why you were outside."

"I just… I felt like something was wrong," he admits in a low voice, like it's not something he should be saying out loud.

“I did too,” I admit, before adding hastily, “I don’t know if it has something to do with Idril, but something’s… off. And if all of us are feeling—”

“Let’s go.”

The words barely leave Soren’s mouth before we spring into action.

I don’t know where this sudden urgency is coming from, but I can feel it. It’s like a hit of adrenaline, but a thousand times stronger, bubbling inside of me and urging me to move faster, harder.

We fly down the staircase, across the foyer and into the hall. Before I know it, we’re through the dining room and kitchen and stepping through the door into the back of the castle—outside.

Above us, the dark night sky is alive with stars that glitter a thousand times brighter than I’ve seen for as long as I can remember. The air is crisp and cool but not freezing. I get the strangest sense that even the moon is closer than usual.

The sprint across the training yard is nothing like the night Idril disappeared. That night it felt like the world was hellbent on keeping us from reaching her.

Tonight it feels like something’s pushing us, encouraging us to keep going.

We reach the forest in what feels like no time, and it quickly swallows us in densely packed trees. The canopy blocks the natural light, so it’s much darker and takes a moment for my eyes to adjust.

“Stay close,” Soren shouts over his shoulder. “Keep your eyes open and watch your step. The forest is covered in downed trees and branches from last week.”

By unspoken agreement, we follow Soren, letting him take the lead. His instincts give him a clear advantage in navigating, and I’m more than grateful. There’s no way I’d know where I was going otherwise.

I’m so focused on watching out for fallen trees that I nearly jump out of my skin when a black shape splits from the shadows, taking the form of a massive beast and falling into step at my side.

Its head swings to the side and bright golden eyes lock on mine.

Shade.

The panther blinks once, then, like an arrow taking flight, shoots off, passing Soren before disappearing into the trees once more.

“Where the fuck did he come from?” Vae sounds as incredulous as I feel, which makes me feel a little better that I didn't notice the beast until he was right on top of me.

“He’s been with us this whole time,” Soren answers. “Been running loops, pushing ahead to scout before doubling back.”

I swear to the Fates, I don’t think I’ll ever understand that panther. He’s different. Different like Idril’s different.

Which, as I’ve recently discovered, isn’t a bad thing. It’s just not easy to make contingency plans when you don’t know what someone–*or something*–is capable of.

I glance over at Caelan, who hasn’t said a word since we left HQ. He’s so focused on getting to Idril, I don’t think he’d notice if Shade shifted into Bigfoot right in front of him.

I wish I knew how to fix this rift between us, but I don’t even know where to start. We’ve never fought like this. Not ever. He’s not even really speaking to Vae, and I fucked up *way* worse than Vae did.

Thirty minutes pass in silence, all of us lost to our own thoughts and fears. Shade returns, and this time he doesn’t leave, running alongside us with intense focus.

We must be getting close when a deep rumbling growl starts up in Shade’s chest. I glance down and start to worry when I notice his ears pinned flat to his head and his teeth bared in a snarl.

Before I can warn anyone, he takes off, shooting ahead of us like a missile and running for all he’s worth.

Caelan curses and picks up his pace to catch up with Soren. The two exchange a few clipped words before they, too, start running faster.

My gut swoops, my chest filling with anxiety. *What the hell is going on? Is it Idril? Is she hurt?*

That thought makes me dig in my heels and push myself even harder. Vae casts me a worried glance but doesn’t ask questions as he picks up his pace, too.

I was right. We were close. Only a few minutes later, we finally reach the clearing where the cave entrance used to be. My gaze darts everywhere, searching for any sign that tells us if Idril’s here or has been here recently, but I come up empty.

“Where is she?” Caelan growls in a clipped tone, spinning slowly as he scans the clearing again.

“Maybe… maybe she’s not here yet?” Vae suggests with a grimace.

“Nothing’s been cleared. It’s all the same,” Caelan snarls. “How the hell is she going to get out of there if nothing’s been cleared away?”

“Are we sure this is where we’re supposed to be?”

Soren turns from his examination of what used to be the cave entrance and frowns. “Where else would she be?”

“I don’t know,” I murmur, shaking my head. “I just… we’re sure this feeling is related to Idril, right?”

“It is,” Caelan snaps.

I glance up, struck all over again by how incredibly clear the sky is. I’ve never seen the stars and moon so bright or close before. Almost like they’re watching… waiting for something to happen.

My gaze falls, landing on the hills in front of us. They aren’t large, but they’re not nothing, either. I haven't done much exploring out here, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know the terrain. I personally ensure our maps are updated every decade.

Which is how I know there’s a small basin on the opposite side of the hills.

Perhaps….

Something in my gut tells me I’m right, which might be why I don’t bother explaining before I take off.

“She’s this way.”

At first I don’t think they’re going to follow me. I can feel three sets of eyes on my back, and my shoulders tense involuntarily.

Until I hear Soren’s distinct voice mutter, “fuck it,” followed by the sound of his footsteps as he jogs to catch up with me.

Vae and Caelan follow a few seconds later, and we walk in silence until a wary voice finally asks, “ Uh… where are we going, exactly?”

“There’s a basin back here,” I tell him, glancing over my shoulder and meeting his eyes in the moonlight. “A place where the hills meet naturally, forming a kind of bowl–”

“I know what a fucking basin is,” he snaps. “But why *there*?”

“Could be the cavern has a back entrance or exit,” Soren answers for me. “But either way, I don’t have any better ideas, and this actually does make the most sense.”

Vae grunts, and I don’t add anymore to the explanation. Truthfully, I hadn’t even considered that as a possibility. My answer was going to be

‘Because this is where my gut says to go.’

Which is ridiculous. *Why would my instincts care about this Omega at all?*

I spend the next ten minutes pondering over the strange feeling and coming no closer to understanding where it’s coming from. We pick over rocks and a few fallen trees, forced to hold onto branches of questionable stability so we don’t slide down the steep embankment.

Finally, we round the side of the hill, and our destination comes into view. A large clearing, covered in soft grass and sprinkled with wildflowers; it’s actually much bigger than I remember.

But the size isn’t what steals my breath or stops me in my tracks.

Right in the middle of the clearing is an enormous sinkhole, a brilliant silver light radiating from the Earth and illuminating the entire clearing.

Where—how—what’s happening?

“What the fuck?” Soren slams to a stop beside me, mouth falling open in shock.

Caelan’s gravelly voice reaches me a breath later as he spits a string of curses and shoulders past me, stepping forward with wide eyes and a floored expression.

He goes to take another step, but my hand snaps out, and I fist the back of his shirt, yanking him back before he can move. He reaches over his shoulder, blindly slapping at my hold without getting anywhere close, because he refuses to look away from the giant hole twenty feet away.

Finally, after a few half-hearted attempts, he wrenches his gaze away and whips around, using his momentum to force me to release him. His menacing glare makes it clear how he feels about being manhandled, and if I were anyone else, I might feel bad.

But I’m not, and I don’t.

I know him well enough to know he’ll do something stupid unless someone steps in and pulls him back from the edge—*literally.*

“I’m not going to go jump off the edge of it, dad,” he says, proving he knows me just as well.

“You don’t know how structurally sound the ground is around the edges,” I argue. “Just… fucking wait, please. Don’t go charging in without making sure the Earth’s not about to give out beneath your feet.”

I brace myself for a fight as he opens his mouth to reply, but I hear a woman’s voice—not his.

One I instantly recognize.

“I swear to the Fates, I am taking the longest shower in the history of showers after this,” Branwen groans. “Fuck caves. Fuck nature. Fuck climbing stairs made of dirt with no godsdamned railing. I can’t believe people do this shit on *purpose*. Absolute nutters, each and every one of them.”

Her tirade seems to go on forever, and the entire time all four of us search for where her voice is coming from. But even with our enhanced eyesight and the brighter-than-usual sky, the Omega is nowhere to be found.

Until, with a sharp, shocked intake of breath, Vaelenor raises a finger and points—right at the hole in the ground.

Caelan lurches forward as a hand appears on the edge. Followed by another. Then, with a final grunt of effort—*is she actually climbing stairs right now?*—a head covered with hair the color of midnight, with a thousand curls sticking out every which way, pops up as well.

Branwen.

Branwen… is climbing out of that hole.

She takes a few more steps—which we can’t see from this angle—before stumbling out of the hole and onto the grass, falling onto her knees with a groan.

Does she even know we’re here?

Something tells me she has no clue because she keeps talking as she crawls away from the opening. She makes it about eight feet before falling onto her back in the grass with an exaggerated groan.

And Fates… she looks fucking awful. Black circles darken her eyes, and her hair’s a mess. Her clothing is torn in some places and covered in dirt and debris, like she’s been in the middle of more than a fucking cave-in.

We’re all so shocked after watching her climb out of that hole that no one knows how to react. So instead of saying something and alerting her to our presence, we stand there like idiots as she keeps complaining about every nature or nature-adjacent thing she can think of.

Finally, Caelan growls and shoves forward, pushing me out of the way in his quest to get to the Omega.

The Omega. Singular.

One. Alone.

Where the fuck is Idril?

As Caelan gets closer, Branwen lifts an arm and throws out her hand, gesturing for him to stop. “Not another step, lover boy. I know you want to see her, but give her a second. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll listen to me and stay right where you are.”

Caelan frowns.

“Not another inch closer. I can hear you trying to convince yourself to ignore me, but that would be very, very stupid.”

What the fuck?

“Seer,” Soren mutters under his breath. “She knew we were here the whole time.”

“Where’s Idril?”

The words come out before I realize I’ve said them.

With a long-suffering sigh, Branwen opens her eyes and pushes up on her elbows. She turns her head, and her eyes find mine with unerring accuracy.

“*What* did I just say, Daxen?”

“To stay where we are,” I answer through clenched teeth.

“Because…”

“I don’t have time for your games tonight.” I can feel my muscles tensing as my eyes dart between the Seer and the giant hole she crawled out of. “Where the hell did that sinkhole come from?”

“Not a sinkhole.” She corrects me, then dismisses my question with a wave of her wrist.

At my side, Soren’s huge frame goes eerily still. Branwen pushes off her elbows and climbs onto her feet.

Taking a few steps closer to the edge, she peers over and calls out. “You alright?”

Silence.

Soren’s chest vibrates like mad, his eyes flashing bright green every few seconds as his Beast pushes to the surface.

I follow his gaze back toward the sinkhole, and immediately understand what has his Beast so worked up.

Pale, delicate fingers emerge, curling around the grass and dirt and gripping onto the edge. My heart starts to pound against my rib cage, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. My hands curl into fists at my sides, and as her other hand reaches up, mirroring the first, I squeeze so tight my nails bite into the flesh of my palms.

Anxiety rushes over me, a wave of it so intense it threatens to pull me under. I feel almost dizzy with anticipation.

What the hell is happening?

With slow, hesitant movements, Idril uses her grip and pushes up and onto the rocky ledge. The pale skin arms and shoulders gleam in the moonlight, like magic given flesh. She trembles, but not too badly.

That doesn't stop me from holding myself back from stepping forward, fingers twitching with the need to help.

She kneels on the ground, head bent and her hair falling forward to hide her face. And despite the subservient position, there's something about her that's… *different.* I can't quite put my finger on it, but I can fucking feel it.

It buzzes against my skin, sparking in the air like tiny bolts of lightning, demanding my attention. It makes me want to get closer while simultaneously warning me to stay the fuck away.

With controlled, graceful movements, she gets her feet under her and stands. She's just as dirty and beat up as Branwen, but I don't notice it like I did when the other Omega first appeared. Even wearing nothing but a cropped tank top and cotton shorts, there's something else calling to me—pulling my attention.

With a jolt, I realize part of the reason she seems so different is the way she holds herself. I'm so used to her always bracing herself for the next bad thing. I've gotten used to the way she hunches her shoulders, curling them in like she's trying to hide from the world. Or the way she's almost always subconsciously fidgeting with something—her hands, the sleeves of her shirt, the fabric of her leggings.

For the first time, that fear is no longer front and center. It's not gone—innate terror like that doesn't simply disappear—but even with her head bowed, she doesn't look like a female anticipating pain.

Her limbs are loose, and her shoulders and back are straight.

And when she finally raises her head…

The world feels like it stops.

Vae gasps. A few feet in front of us, Soren grunts like he's had the air knocked out of him. And Caelan… our brother's spine straightens imperceptibly as a torrent of pride explodes through our Pack Bond.

I'm frozen to the spot, unable to move.

Bright blue eyes—eyes always swimming with terror and pain—are now clear and sharp. Focused in a way I've never seen and, until this

moment, never could have imagined.

She scans the clearing, and I hold my breath, chest tightening as she searches for something. And even though I know–*I fucking know*–I'm not who she's looking for, it still feels like I've been stabbed in the fucking chest when her eyes skate over Vae and me without so much as a flicker of recognition.

Like we're a natural part of the forest, hardly enough to signify.

Like we're *nothing*.

And fuck… *why would I expect any different?* To her, we *are* nothing. I don't even understand why I'm suddenly feeling like this about her. It's—it's—fucking *absurd*. She's Caelan's Mate, not mine.

Not ours.

Idril's gaze lands on her Mates, and her lips curl into a soft, tender smile.

Like that's all they've been waiting for, Caelan and Soren both lunge—

And stumble to a stop when Idril's hand snaps up in silent command to stay where they are.

Caelan's expression falls. Soren's brows pull together in confusion.

Idril's gaze softens.

"Wait… just a moment," she requests, bright blue eyes gleaming with earnestness. "Please?"

The Alphas exchange a fleeting glance, communicating somehow without either one of them saying a word. My jaw clenches.

"Of course, Little Mate," Soren murmurs, inclining his head. "We can wait."

"Are you alright?" The words fly from Caelan's mouth like he just couldn't hold them back any longer. He doesn't apologize, just stares at her and waits for her to answer.

"I'm alright," she answers, smiling indulgently. "I just… I need you to trust me."

"Of course we trust you," Caelan answers, and Idril relaxes, exhaling in relief.

What the fuck is going on?

Idril turns back around and faces the sinkhole. She's still standing at the edge, and instead of backing away, she crouches and peers over the side.

"A'lax shälock," she murmurs in a melodic voice. The sound makes me jerk like I've been shot, but I don't know why.

My breathing picks up as she reaches out, extending a graceful hand over the edge. “A’lax quitôy, Vharax.”

There’s a ringing in my ears. A melody I can’t ignore. I can fucking hear it in my mind—a soft chanting. *What is that language?*

When did Idril start speaking it?

And more importantly, who is she speaking it to?

“Shay’dar,” she whispers, making a clicking noise at the back of her throat as she unfolds from her crouch and stands, taking a tiny step back. “Shay’dar mailōng ay’dōr dolvex. A’lax… a’lax.”

I don’t know why I do it. Maybe it’s something about the way the foreign language rolls from her tongue, calling to me, beckoning me home.

Maybe it’s just the overwhelming need in my chest to be close to her.

Whatever it is, it overrides my judgment, and before I’ve decided to do so, I take a step forward.

Idril whirls around so fast I flinch. Her eyes snap to mine and narrow into a glare so fierce it makes the hairs on my neck stand on end.

“Do. Not. Move,” she snarls, jabbing the finger with each word. “Stay back.”

The pain in my chest flares to life. It throbs sharply, and I press my palm against my sternum, praying for the pain to stop.

Idril follows the movement and her mouth curves into a frown. When she lifts her eyes to meet mine once again, they’re brighter than I’ve ever seen, gleaming with a fire I yearn to feel burning against my skin.

Swallowing thickly, I raise both hands in supplication and step back. The way she’s looking at me… It’s not haughty. Not condescending, either. More like… like she doesn’t trust me to do as I say.

It makes me feel about three inches tall.

A soft trill unlike anything I’ve heard pulls Idril’s attention. She turns, giving me her back, dismissing me.

The way she moves is new, too. Just like the way she holds herself. They’re fluid. *Unbothered.* A graceful confidence she looks born to.

Watching her, I feel something deep inside of me waking up. Stretching its muscles before turning its attention to Idril.

“What the fuck is happening?” Vae asks, but I don’t have an answer. I’m just as confused as he is.

“What… the fuck…”

Idril takes a step back from the edge, then another. She’s not retreating, though.

She’s making room.

At Soren’s whispered curse, she smiles and steps aside as something silver rises into view.

At first, all I see is the slender, delicate curve of the head covered in white, shimmering scales that nearly blend in with the light still shining from below.

It shifts, and a sapphire blue eye scans its surroundings.

Caelan lets out a strangled sound, and the creature’s head snaps toward him, one impossibly blue eye narrowing on him with an intelligence no animal should possess.

It studies him for a long, breathless moment, and none of us dares breathe too loudly.

Then it turns back to Idril and blinks slowly.

“Shay’dar, Vharax.” She drops her arm to her side, and her fingers fall open as though in invitation.

A sharply curved talon appears as the creature extends its arm and hooks it over the edge. Its claws sink into the Earth, tearing at the grass and dirt. Pebbles shake loose and scatter, falling into the cavern as a second talon appears beside the first.

The creature pulls itself up.

My blood freezes in my veins, and though I know the creature can be no larger than a German Shepard, every instinct screams at me to take note.

Because attached to claws designed to rip and tear and demolish are sinuous limbs packed with enough muscle to lift half its weight. And folded tightly against its body—

Wings.

Gods almighty, those are wings.

They’re easy to see as the creature pulls itself up and over the ledge, silver scales gleaming like diamonds as its body emerges from the darkness. For a moment, I think it will never end. Until a long, sweeping tail appears, swiping along the grass and sending a shower of debris pluming into the air behind it.

Its wings shift as it climbs, opening just enough to reveal brilliant blue veining the color of its irises, threaded through the nearly translucent membrane.

There’s one word for what I’m seeing.

Dragon.

Even though it’s right in front of me, a part of me wants nothing more than to deny reality. Dragons aren’t real. They don’t exist. They’re myths. Legends. And myths don’t climb from giant holes in the ground. They don’t turn reptilian eyes on Omegas and cock their heads attached to sinuous necks as if to ask, ‘*Well? Which one are we lighting on fire first?’*

This one does.

Caelan, Soren and Vae tense around me, but Idril doesn’t show the slightest sign of fear. She’s relaxed. Confident. She waits patiently as the dragon crosses the grass, body gliding with the same abnormal grace Idril now seems to possess.

When it reaches her side, Idril exhales.

And lifts her head.

One by one, the Omega we tried so hard to break meets our eyes. Soren and Caelan are first, and while there’s no malice in her gaze, there’s no softness, either.

This is a message—*a revelation.*

It’s almost as though she’s taken ownership of something that’s been inside her all along and is announcing it to the world. Dirty, exhausted, covered in bruises, and with a myth come to life at her side.

That part of me that feels like it’s finally woken up after far too long sees the female standing strong, proud, and whole… and it wants nothing more than to give itself to her completely.

Idril’s gaze moves to Vae, and the challenge in her eyes hardens. I can feel my brother’s awe through our Pack Bond. It’s wide open and bursting at the seams. His limbs tense and his hands curl into fists, and I get the sense he’d get on his knees and beg for her forgiveness if he thought it might make a difference.

But he’s too slow to decide how to react; Idril’s attention moves from Vaelenor to me.

I expect her eyes to harden even further. I expect to see disgust and dislike staring back at me.

Instead, a brief flicker of something that might be disappointment crosses her face before she lifts her chin imperceptibly, somehow managing to stare down her nose at me despite our height difference.

This isn’t a challenge of authority. This Omega doesn’t care whether I’m on the same page. There’s no fear. No anger. No snobery to speak of.

Those blue eyes hold nothing but complete indifference.

“Daxen.”

I can’t look away from her. Never in my life have I seen a creature more beautiful. Not even the mythical Beast at her side can compare.

“Dax!”

Clenching my jaw in annoyance, I turn to Vae and snap, “What?”

I don’t remember when he reached for me, but his hand is wrapped around my arm, and now that he has my attention, he squeezes painfully. “That’s a fucking *dragon*, Daxen.”

“I see that,” I hiss, yanking my arm back.

“Do you? Because you’re awfully calm. You’re all way too fucking calm. Why is no one else freaking out?”

As if it understands us, the dragon turns its head toward us.

For a long moment it watches us, unblinking.

Then it moves. It slinks forward, claws tearing deep grooves in the Earth with each step, until it stops a few feet in front of Idril. The whole time, its head moves, scanning our faces with narrowed eyes.

Like it knows, without a doubt, that no living thing on this planet could be more dangerous.

Without warning, its mouth drops open and an ear-splitting shriek tears up its throat. The sound is so loud the ground vibrates under my feet. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Branwen jump in surprise. At my side, Vae throws up his hands and claps them over his ears, grimacing. Even Soren and Caelan react: the latter takes an involuntary step back as the former reaches to his side for his dagger, then thinks better of it and drops his hand.

The dragon lifts its arms, and its wings unfurl from both sides of its body. They unfold, spreading wider and wider until Idril disappears completely behind a solid wall of silver and brilliant sapphire-blue veining.

A rush of absolute awe washes over me at the sight. Not only does it have a wingspan at least twice the length of its body, but it's broad enough that the light shining from below illuminates each delicate vein running the length of the membrane.

It is as if thousands of shimmering strands of diamonds and silk are holding each wing together.

My throat goes dry as my eyes fill with tears. I blink repeatedly to clear my vision, refusing to miss a second of the incredible sight before me.

Its wings beat once, and even from ten feet away I feel the brush of air from the movement. They beat a second time, stronger and harder than before, and leaves whip around us—Idril's silver hair lifts in the current, streaming behind her.

The dragon throws back its head, the silver scales of its throat seeming to glow from the inside. Golden light spreads, climbing up its throat.

Only then do I realize what's about to happen, and terror like I've never known before snaps me out of my awed stupor. I lunge, ready to tap into my enhanced speed so I have a chance to reach her in time, but before I can move, strong arms wrap around my middle and hold me back.

"Idril!" Her name explodes from my chest. At the same moment, the dragon rears back, and a twenty-foot-tall stream of fire shoots straight into the air, erupting from its mouth in a torrent of orange and blue flame.

Heat slams into me, stealing my breath from my lungs and giving Vae the opening he needs to drag me away from the flames. I wrench out of his grasp, stumbling from tree trunk to tree trunk to get somewhere where I can get eyes on Idril. The flames are so bright I have to turn away, only glancing every few seconds to check my position.

I hear Caelan's frenzied voice shouting for his Mate, but instead of following the sound of my brother, I push on, determined to reach Idril.

"Watch out, Dax!"

Vae's warning reaches me, and I throw my hands up seconds before I slam face first into the trunk of a tree. Panting, I brace myself against the rough bark, squeeze my eyes shut, and growl in frustration.

I can't fucking see anything!

I'm about to lose my shit completely when the heat at my back disappears.

Vae stumbles to a stop next to me, panting as hard as I am.

"Fuck," he curses between breaths. "That was…"

"Is she okay?" I snap, talking over him impatiently. Releasing my hold on the tree, I carefully turn to face the clearing, snarling as bright afterimages of the fire fuck with my vision.

"She's fine," he whispers. "She's alright."

My vision finally clears, and the first thing I realize is how close I am to the massive sinkhole. Fates. Another few feet to the left and I would have

stumbled right over the edge.

Just as promised, Idril is completely unharmed. In fact, she looks… *healthy. Glowing.* Like the dragon fire has somehow revitalized her.

I expect to find Caelan and Soren losing their shit to get to their Mate, but they're not.

Both Alphas stand straight-backed, wearing identical grins. Their pride is obvious, and their scent wafts through the clearing, carried on the breeze.

"This is Vharax," Idril announces in a tone that's both soft and strong. "Unlike Shade, she is not a pet. She is a predator. A dragon. She and I have a Bond based on mutual respect and understanding."

Her voice changes, becoming harder. More commanding. "Our relationship does not extend to anyone else. Not even my Mates. Do not approach her. Not for any reason."

Her eyes lock with mine. "If you ignore this warning, she will burn you alive."

The wind picks up, a huge gust of it hitting me in the face. My next inhale is ripe with sulfur and smoke.

And… something else.

What is that?

My brain switches off, and my instincts surge to the surface, giving my Alpha the perfect opening to take over completely.

I take another deep breath, chasing the barely-there scent, half sure I'm losing my mind.

What is that? Fates, it's… perfect. The best thing I've ever smelled.

Another inhale. *Deeper.*

This time, I get only the barest whiff. Panic starts to set in as I search the clearing frantically, taking deep lungfuls of air over and over until I'm afraid my lungs might burst.

I'm distantly aware of Vae doing the same, and that realization makes me hesitate. I'm missing something. Something important.

But gods… *that scent*. I *have* to find it. I *need* it.

"Dax…" Vae's voice cracks. He sounds strung tight, overwhelmed with anxiety.

"I know," I rasp, stumbling into the clearing, heedless of the mythical Beast I was just warned to avoid. "I smell it too. What is it? I can't get a good—"

The leaves rustle wildly in the trees as another gust of wind swirls around us. It's so strong it blows Idril's hair over her shoulders and into her face.

Then it hits me. Wild honey. Smoked vanilla. Musk and wild flowers.

Mine.

Mine.

That's mine.

My chest splits open, welcoming the knowledge into my soul, where it will remain for eternity. There, right next to my Pack Bonds, a new thread appears. It's a brilliant, shimmering gold that unspools and reaches out, extending from my chest with only one goal.

To find its other half.

I take another deep lungful of air, groaning when the scent of my Fated Mate—my Omega—fills my lungs and infuses my soul. For the second time in less than an hour, my eyes fill with tears.

For five hundred years I've waited. For five hundred years, I've comforted myself with the knowledge that one Omega out there could trust every part of me.

My vision blurs, spinning in and out of focus. I sway toward the scent of my Fated Mate and nearly stumble, then remember I need to lift my feet to walk.

But it's hard to think with her Scent in my nose. Hard to make my brain work when my soul is screaming out for her.

I need to find her. Need to hold her. Need to mark her in my scent. I'll wrap her in my arms and tell her she's safe, that she'll never have to worry about anything ever again.

A whimper pierces the air, and at first I think it's an Omega. But no… I know that voice. It's male. Familiar

Vaelenor.

It's been years since I've heard my brother make a sound like that—a sound of agony mingled with devastation—yet it has the same effect now as it did then.

My vision snaps into focus, and right on its heels, the rest of my senses come back online almost all at once. I spin, searching for my Packmate.

My Alpha is still mostly in control, insisting we find our Mate. But my brain is throwing up red flags one after the other, shouting that something is wrong, wrong, *wrong*.

Why is he so upset? Didn't he just smell our Omega? What's happening?

My gaze finally lands on my Packmate, standing in the copse of trees a few yards away, eyes locked on something over my shoulder.

Moonlight filters through the canopy, making it impossible to mistake his expression.

He's… *wrecked.*

His face has completely drained of color. His eyes are bright and wet with tears. As I watch, he blinks, and two tears fall from his lashes and down his face. He doesn't seem to notice, just like he doesn't seem to notice the six that follow right before his face crumbles and a sob tears up his throat.

His agony is sharp and painful, and each second that passes it only gets worse. It erupts down the Bond, flowing into me and making my hands shake with fear.

In four long strides I cross the clearing. I reach out, grip him by the shoulders, and force him to look at me.

My fucking heart is slamming against my chest. My instincts are screaming at me to find our Omega before we lose her somewhere out in these woods—*Fates, where is she? Why is she out here?*—and I'm so fucking overwhelmed with emotions—his and mine—that my voice comes out far harsher than I intend.

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

He doesn't answer. His mouth parts but no words come out. He meets my eyes, and the horror and pleading in his do nothing to help my anxiety.

Adjusting my grip, I lean in and snarl, baring my fangs. "Tell. Me."

Our Omega's scent is stronger now. So much stronger. Fates, she must be close. The wind is blowing her scent right to us. *We need to fucking go! Find her before it's too late!*

At the sound of footsteps behind me, I whirl around, instincts going on high alert now that I know my Omega is somewhere close. She might be in trouble. Might need me to protect her.

When I see Caelan and Soren crossing the clearing with somber expressions, I exhale in relief. And I know he isn't going to care, and probably won't be happy for either of us—which we totally deserve—but I can't help myself. I could never keep something like this from my brother—even if he does hate me right now.

“We found her. We—we can scent her. Do you smell that? It’s our Mate. Our Scent-Match.”

Caelan just stares at me with the same stoic look on his face.

“Did you hear me? I said we scented our Mate! She must be close, Caelan. In the woods somewhere. We caught her scent on the wind, and we need to find her, but Vae—”

My Packmate makes a choked, strangled sound, and I whirl back around right as his legs give out and he falls, crashing to the ground on his knees with a broken cry.

Every emotion disappears as dread fills my body. My fingers and toes are suddenly ice-cold. I sway, throwing out my arms to steady myself.

What… what’s happening?

“No need to go searching through the woods, brother.”

Caelan’s voice drops dangerously on the word *brother*.

Another gust of wind surrounds me with my Mate’s Omega Perfume, and the golden thread in my chest reaches out, stretching and straining to get to our Mate.

Because inside my chest… in the space right next to my Pack Bonds… is another Bond. A new Bond. It unspools, a glimmering thread of perfect gold, and slinks forward. It moves with a single-minded focus. Reaching out—

“She’s right here,” Soren adds, voice low and dangerous. “Right where she’s been for weeks.”

I shake my head, denying the truth even as it boils to life inside of me. Each lungful of my Omega’s Scent taunts me. It’s the one thing I’ve wanted more than anything else.

“Caelan…” Vae groans, but I shake my head, denying it all.

Denying reality. Denying the truth.

Deny. Deny. Deny.

Until another footstep reaches me, and the thread in my chest shoots forward, curving to the right as if it fucking *knows*.

And why wouldn’t it?

My feet move without my permission. I turn, hands shaking, eyes darting everywhere but refusing to land anywhere for more than a breath. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to face this.

Caelan takes a step closer, sliding his hands into the pockets of his shorts and pinning me with those cold, hard onyx eyes. “All you had to do

was open your eyes," he murmurs.

Unable to look at him any longer, I turn my head.

And meet the bright blue eyes of my Fated Mate.

My breath catches in my throat. For a long moment I forget how to breathe. I forget how to think. I forget who I am, what my name is, how old I am, everything.

Everything but *her.*

I was going to tell her she was safe.

I was going to tell her she was mine, that I would protect her. That I'd been waiting for her for hundreds and hundreds of years.

And despite the pain I've been carrying from Elsbeth, I always knew that there would be one Omega I could trust with my heart and my life.

All of that is meaningless now.

Worthless.

Idril's eyes lock on mine. She doesn't look away. Doesn't cry. Doesn't say a word. Her face is nearly blank except for the barest tightening around the corners of her eyes.

She blinks, then, without looking away, lifts her arm to the side, reaching.

Branwen's there immediately, clasping Idril's hand in hers and lacing their fingers tightly together. My gaze falls to her other hand, hanging loosely at her side. It's shaking.

That small show of vulnerability is enough to crack me open. Pain rips through my chest, making me grunt at the force of it.

Behind me, I can hear Vae pushing to his feet. He stumbles forward, weaving side to side with each step like a drunk who forgot how to walk. When he reaches my side, he grips my arm for balance, leaning his weight against me as his legs shake and struggle to hold him up.

"Idril." He reaches out for her, hand shaking just as much as the rest of him. When she makes no move to respond, he lets his arm fall to thud against his side.

He never once takes his eyes off of her.

This is breaking him.

Gods… what have we done? We've ruined everything. Everything.

I feel my center of balance disappear as I sway, tipping to the side. I throw out an arm, reaching for something–*anything*–to anchor me. My hand passes through empty air. My tingling legs go numb, then finally give out.

I fall, landing in a pitiful, broken heap on the ground. In the dirt.

On my knees.

Where I probably belong.

Without me to support him, Vae doesn't even try to stay upright. He falls to his hands and knees beside me. I watch absently as his fingers dig into the soil like it's the only thing tethering him to reality.

I ruined it. I ruined everything.

I'm a monster.

I'm the only Alpha in existence to purposely hurt the Omega given to him by Fate.

The one Omega I've always believed I could trust… is the Omega I punished for being untrustworthy. I blamed her for my own fears instead of dealing with them like an Alpha. I made them her problem. Her burden to carry. I hurt her over and over and over, until she almost broke.

Bile burns the back of my throat. I choke it back, fisting my hands and curling my fingers into my palms and using the pain to focus.

"What do we do?" Vae whispers. His voice is raw. *Agonized.*

I can feel Vae vibrating with tension beside me. My eyes fall on his—the pleading way he looks at me is so familiar. I blink heavily, trying to sort through my thoughts.

The way I see it, we have two options.

We could leave. *Permanently.* Give Idril the space she deserves and hope Caelan and Soren spend the next couple thousand years giving her all the love and care we clearly fucking couldn't.

Except… my entire fucking soul rejects that option immediately. Everything in me rejects the idea.

So that leaves option two.

We stay. Give Idril the space and time she needs to heal while proving to her who we really are. We need to find a way to confront the awful, hateful parts of us. The things we've ignored that made us the males who would torment an Omega.

And we'll grovel. *Apologize.* Fucking beg and plead and crawl over glass naked if that's what she wants.

I feel something shift in my chest. Click into place.

Yes. This is right. This is the right decision.

I push up into a sitting position and turn to my Packmate. His green eyes latch onto the side of my face with an almost feverish intensity.

“Daxen?”

Like a compass drawn toward true North, my gaze wanders across the clearing and lands on Idril. She and Caelan stand close, heads nearly touching. I can’t see her face, but I can see the pain and fear on his.

At her side sits Vharax, silver-scaled tail loosely coiled around Idril’s ankle, head constantly swiveling, searching for anything that could be considered a threat.

My answer, when it comes, is not only for Vae. It’s for Idril. It’s a promise. A vow. The most important one I’ve ever made in my life.

I pull my eyes away from my Omega and turn my attention to my Packmate. “We fight, Vaelenor. Whatever it takes. We fight until we can’t fight anymore. And then we get back up… and we *keep* fighting. You know why?”

His eyes harden with determination and his chin lifts. “Because she’s worth it.”

“She’s not only worth it,” I say, my voice strained with emotion. “She’s everything. Every star in the sky. Every dream I’ve ever had. I don’t care what the fuck I have to do. I’ll do it. I will not let this be the end of our story.”

“It’s too late for that.”

The words are soft. Feminine. Full of conviction.

I spin around, and my eyes land on Idril. She’s a few yards away, arms wrapped tight around her middle.

I shoot to my feet, but the sudden movement agitates Vharax, who rushes at me with a threatening hiss.

“Ay’ńôck,” Idril commands, letting an arm drop to her side. When Vharax glances back at her, she points insistently at the ground, and her next words are far more forceful.

“Licht’ān, Vharax. Anour *ay’ńôck*.”

With a growl, Vharax returns to her side. Thinking we’re safe, I take a step toward her, but she throws up a hand. I slam to a stop.

“Stay where you are.”

I frown.

“I’m not under the impression we can keep from Bonding forever, but before that happens I need time.”

“Time?”

“To decide how to handle things between us moving forward.”

Vae scrambles to his feet and stands by my side. Idril's shoulders tense and her eyes narrow in warning, but Vae doesn't come any further. He throws up his hands in supplication, greedily raking his gaze up and down her form, taking in every inch of her and not even bothering to hide it.

"Idril," he croaks, curling his hands into fists to keep from reaching out to her. This is killing him. I can feel his need to wrap her in his arms beating in sync with his heart.

Caelan and Soren appear to flank our Omega, one on each side.

Like two knights, standing guard over their queen.

Idril laces her hands together in front of her and smoothes her features into something more neutral.

But she can't quite hide everything she's feeling. I can see her pain so clearly, now. It's in her eyes. The tilt of her chin. The tension in her shoulders. The slight tremble in her hands and the tightening around her eyes.

We hurt her. We hurt her, and somehow she's still the one who's paying for our cruelty.

"How long were you going to keep it from us?" Vae asks before she can speak. "A month? A year? Forever?"

She tilts her head to the side, like the answer's obvious.

"If I could manage it, I would have kept the Bond a secret forever."

Her answer hurts worse than any wound I've ever taken in battle. It's physical. A physical pain that slams into my gut and makes me grunt at the force of it.

And while I'm struggling to remember how to breathe through the ache of knowing she never would have told us who she is to us if she could have gotten away with it, Vae breaks in a different way.

Tears pour down his face, and his expression twists with agony. He tunnels his fingers through his hair, yanking viciously on the strands. *"Why?"*

She hesitates, pressing her lips into a thin line as she searches Vae's features, like she's trying to decide whether he's being purposely obtuse or truly doesn't understand.

Finally, she sighs and shakes her head sadly. "If you don't understand, then I can't help you."

He surges forward. Idril stumbles back as Vharax's wings snap open, and she jumps eight feet into the air, landing between us and blocking Vae

from our Mate.

She makes her displeasure known with a threatening roar that turns into a thin, controlled stream of fire. She aims purposely close enough to scare the shit out of us, scorching a patch of Earth three feet from Vae's feet.

With a flap of her wings, she shoots into the trees where she lands on an overhanging branch with ease. Her curved talons wrap around the bark, claws digging into the wood for purchase like a hot knife into butter.

She releases a final warning shriek, then settles onto her perch, one eye trained on us and narrowed in warning.

I don't even get a moment to get my breathing under control before Caelan steps forward, muscles coiled so tight he looks like he might snap under the strain.

"Don't you fucking *dare* force this Bond on her."

"In the interim," Idril continues before anyone else can interrupt, "I think it's best if we stay away from each other. I know your sides of the Bonds are probably unsettled. That will settle as they come to terms with reality."

The more she speaks, the more controlled she sounds. Her fists are curled tight, and her unbothered tone is fucking killing me.

I hate it.

I wish she'd scream. *Yell.* Call us names and shout at us. *Anything* but this controlled, indifferent bullshit.

Vae's jaw is clenched as tight as his fists. Tears pool at the bottom of his lashes, and he shakes with the need to wrap our Mate in his arms. "What, exactly, do our Bonds need to come to terms with?"

"Please don't make this harder than it has to be," she asks, voice soft as a whisper. Her eyes brighten with tears, but she blinks them back.

"I want to know," he insists, refusing to back down. He won't, either. He'll keep pushing. Needling her until this shell cracks.

Idril's eyes flutter, then close. The sigh she releases is weighed down with exhaustion. For a long moment she stands there, taking deep, even breaths. Then her eyes open and land on Vaelenor.

"It will take your Bond a few days to accept that it's truly unwanted. Rejected. That thread—the golden thread reaching for your Mate—won't disappear. I don't think that's even possible. And it reaches for its other half at even the barest hint that it might be wanted, even if it's only for a moment. For a breath."

She takes a deep, shaky breath and exhales, packing her emotions away again, hiding the pain.

The memories.

“But every time it reaches out, just to be rejected once again, it loses a little more faith. Hope disappears, replaced little by little, rejection after rejection, by acceptance. Until one day, it only moves to make itself smaller. Because everything else is too painful.”

My blood feels frozen in my veins. Sluggish. Each word feels like I’m being stabbed, forced to face what she’s been dealing with for the last week and a half.

Alone.

Her words ring in my ears, burrowing deeper and deeper until they’re fucking branded into my marrow and etched into my bones.

Unwanted.

Rejected.

It will lose faith.

Hope will eventually disappear.

The night of Soren’s arrival surfaces in my mind, and I stumble back like I’ve been shot.

There was a moment… when we walked into the attic. When her screams cut off, and her expression went eerily blank. She had taken a deep breath…

And her whole body deflated. Every inch relaxing for the first time since we took her from her father’s house. Her eyes lit up with hope, joy, and disbelief.

Until she lifted her head, and her eyes landed on Vae and me.

The joy disappeared. Replaced by agony. But it all happened so fast—a fleeting moment, there and gone in a blink.

But I noticed.

Noticed, and filed it away.

At the time, I attributed it to post-dream confusion, *but now…*

Everything we’ve felt tonight, she’s already been through. Gods, no wonder she was spiraling that night. No wonder the sconces reacted the way they did.

She had just discovered her Scent-Match Bond. *Her Fated Mates.* The same males who made her life a living hell after twenty-two years of abuse and abandonment, bruises and deprivation.

And her immediate reaction was to hide it from the very males she should have been able to turn to for strength, love, and protection. To trust more than anything in the world. Without question. Without hesitation.

Everything I did and said to her that night… It's all so much fucking worse now. The way I forced her into the basement. The way I threatened her. Accusing her of working with her father, forcing her to tell us all about her trauma without even giving her the courtesy of believing her.

Why? Gods… why?

Each sin I've committed against my Fated Mate stacks on top of the last, building a mountain made from my fuck ups. My stomach swoops. Bile surges, and I spin on my heel, sprinting to the edge of the forest.

I make it three feet in before my stomach heaves, expelling its contents as tears stream down my face.

Panting, I swipe a shaking hand over my mouth and fall back against a tree.

I've never hated myself more than I do now.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and try to pull myself together. I swipe at my face and push off the trunk with a groan.

A rustling from above makes me glance up, and I almost fucking scream when I meet the glaring gaze of Vharax.

"Fuck, you're quiet when you want to be," I mutter.

I cross the clearing and take my place at Vae's side. Like he's been waiting for me to get back from puking, he straightens his spine and puffs out his chest.

"I–*we*–are going to fight for you," Vae declares with a confidence I don't fucking feel. "We're going to fight, and we're going to keep fighting. We're going to earn your forgiveness."

Idril frowns. "What if I don't want you to fight for me?"

"We're going to anyway."

Like his answer is both expected and a surprise, her face falls. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive you. You may be fighting for nothing."

"You're not nothing," he spits. "You're the opposite of nothing."

Her shell cracks.

Idril's eyes fill with tears that sit precariously along her lower lash line, threatening to spill with every blink. Her lip trembles and she swallows convulsively before trying to speak again.

“So that’s what it’s to be, then. Duty. Obligation.” Her voice is a whisper. Every syllable dripping in pain. Her hand presses against her chest, and her face twists in agony.

“I wasn’t expecting… I really thought—” She dismisses her unfinished thought with a wave of her hand. “It doesn’t matter. Both are equally awful, just in different ways.”

What is she talking about? What’s happening?

“I won’t spend the rest of my life Bonded to two men who hate me,” she chokes on a sob, curling her hands into fists and biting down on her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. “I can’t stop you from doing whatever you decide to do. We both know it. But I won’t let you force me into the role of captor. I won’t tie myself to either of you, knowing you hated me mere hours ago. Knowing that if it weren’t for my scent, you’d hate me still.”

“No!” I shout in objection. I catch myself before I rush forward, forcing my legs to stay put. “Idril, that’s not true. I know—Fates, I know you won’t believe us, but I swear to you…”

“Please don’t,” she whispers, swiping angrily at a tear trickling down her cheek.

“I won’t lie to you. Yes, the Bond changes things a little. But I swear on my Pack… I haven’t hated you since the moment Caelan set the record straight and—”

Her face pales, and I curse, replaying my words in my head. But before I can explain, her eyes flare bright with anger.

“Why don’t I make this easy on all of us.” She plants her hands on her hips, and even at five-foot-nothing, the look on her face makes me feel two feet tall.

A wave of dread washes over me as her words register, each one dripping in finality.

“My answer is no.”

Vae flinches like he’s been slapped. “I don’t… I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” She snaps as Soren lifts his hand and wraps his tattooed fingers gently but securely around her delicate neck.

“My. Answer. Is. No,” she enunciates each word.

“N-no to what?”

“No to Bonding. No to fighting for me. No to having a discussion. No to explaining things. No to all of it. *No*.”

Vae's frown deepens, like his brain just can't comprehend her words. And maybe I'm an idiot too because I don't really understand what she means either. She can't just ignore the Bond forever. Unless she outright rejects us, but from what I understand, only Chosen Mates can do that.

No one—*no one*—fucks with Fate.

"Idril, we're Fated," I explain gently. "But if time is what you need before our Bonds snap, I'll give you time." Her eyes widen, like she can't believe I capitulated.

Gods… have I ever done anything for her? Anything at all?

"But Idril," I try to keep my tone as gentle as possible before adding, "The Scent-Match *will* snap into place eventually. It's only a matter of time."

Her eyes narrow dangerously. "No."

"Fate doesn't give you a choice."

The second the words leave my mouth, I want to reach out and shove them back down my throat. Idril's jaw clenches, and her hands curl into fists.

"What you believe is irrelevant," she snaps. "You still don't understand. *I'm not asking for permission.*"

If it were anyone else, I might have laughed, but something in Idril's voice makes my hair stand on end. Above us, Vharax shifts, curling her claws deeper into the tree branch.

"That's not—you can't—it doesn't work like that!" Vae splutters in astonishment, and Idril's eyes snap to his. Her lips lift, and her mouth curls into a smile that sends chills skittering down my spine.

"You have *no idea* what I'm capable of."

Vae's mouth drops open. Vharax's wings unfurl above us and beat against the air.

Probably foreseeing this ending badly, Caelan steps forward and pulls her into his chest. She goes willingly, melting into him with an exhausted sigh.

"That's enough for tonight," Caelan announces. "We need to get the girls home. They've already been through enough the last few days. This can wait."

Vae scoffs. "Easy for you to say. You have a Bond. Your Mate *wants* to be with you."

“Yes, well, unlike you, I didn’t spend the first two weeks of our relationship verbally and emotionally abusing her.”

We both flinch at Caelan’s words, but he isn’t finished. “Do not compare our situations. They are not the fucking same.”

“But–”

“Idril’s made her decision. Let’s go.”

I wrap my hand around Vae’s mouth before he can keep going. I get why he won’t shut up. I truly do. But Caelan’s right. This isn’t the time. And Idril looks dead on her feet.

“He’s right,” I mutter, ignoring the betrayed look in my Packmate’s eyes. “Listen to me. Are you listening?”

He nods, so I lift my hand from his mouth, glaring at him to keep quiet.

“Idril’s exhausted. And from now on, *she* needs to be our priority. Nothing else. Every decision we make, we do what’s best for her. She’s been underground for five fucking days. This is not the time to have this conversation. Not when emotions are running so high.”

His lower lip trembles, and he bites down on it, struggling to get himself under control. Eventually he exhales, and his entire body deflates.

“Fuck,” he curses, hanging his head. “I fucked that up so bad.”

“Trust me, that’s nothing compared to the shit I’ve done,” I reply flatly. He snorts, but his laughter quickly turns into a groan.

“How do we make this right, Dax?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Do you really believe that?” He asks as we start walking, falling behind the rest of the group and making sure to keep a significant distance between Idril and us.

“I have to. Because if I don’t… what the fuck is the point of anything?”

Vae doesn’t reply, but I’m not expecting him to.

Side by side, we walk out of the basin and start the journey back to HQ. *Two Alphas. Centuries’ worth of battle experience.*

And yet I know in my fucking soul that none of those battles mean shit compared to what’s coming.

This battle is the only one that matters. The only one that counts. It’s going to be the hardest fight of our lives, but every second will be worth it a thousand times over.

If Idril thinks she’s seen me dig my heels in, she hasn’t seen anything yet. I’m an Alpha facing a future without my Fated Mate. I’ll fight for her

until the day I die if that's what it comes to.

She's experienced the strength of my hatred.

Now I need to prove that I can care for her even harder. And I will. I'll prove just what kind of male I really am. I know nothing can erase the way I treated her, but I'll spend the next two thousand years loving her enough to bury the pain.

Or I'll die trying.

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Epilogue

Asterion | The Between | Present Day

It's time.

Adjusting my cufflinks for the eighth time, I lift my chin and straighten my shoulders.

"Did I tell you? The last bit of the Last Daughter's wardrobe was finally delivered yesterday. Cutting it a little close, don't you think?"

Silence.

"Oneric?"

"Yes?"

I narrow my eyes and poke at my Fated Mate through our Bond. He grunts, shooting me a glare.

"You know I hate when you do that. Feels like an electric shock," he grumbles.

"Lies. You just don't like to admit you're ticklish and have to bite back laughter so no one dares question your stoic, broody asshole Commander persona."

"You told me about the wardrobe over breakfast this morning," he reminds me.

"I did not," I gasp, turning from the mirror to face him. "I haven't told anyone that!"

Oneric narrows his eyes, but I can see the dimple in his cheek, so I know he's actually biting back a smile. "Asty, I'm the one who opened the door when the seamstress' apprentice dropped it off. You told me all about

the delays while we transferred eighteen boxes and garment bags from his carriage to ours."

Damnit. He's right.

With a sigh, he crosses the room and stands behind me at the vanity.

"You need to get some sleep, Love. You're running yourself ragged. One of these days you're going to forget your own name." He presses a soft kiss to my temple to take the sting out of his words. "Do you really not remember telling me about the new wardrobe?"

"I remember it now," I tell him. "But you're probably right. I just want things to be perfect for her arrival. She deserves beautiful things to make up for the awful life she's lived so far."

"And no one else in the world is better suited to making sure she has those things. No one else would ever work as hard as you have to make sure she has the life she deserves. You've gone above and beyond, and I'm so proud of you."

Before I can respond to his heartfelt words, my Mate's lips twitch, and a mischievous twinkle appears in his eyes. "I mean… you even admitted to watching three entire seasons of that fantasy show with the dragons—and you hate when humans try to recreate fantasy while simultaneously denying its existence. But you did it anyway, because you said it was the perfect… what was the word you used again?"

He pretends to search for the word, and I roll my eyes. Even after a millennium together, this male never tires of teasing me.

And I never get tired of discovering all the little things he notices about me that no one else does.

"Inspiration," I answer, then make one final check of our rooms to be sure we have everything we need for tonight.

He hums like he doesn't believe my reasons for watching the human-created show, but we've had this argument a thousand times already, so I ignore him and follow behind him as we leave our chambers.

"I'm sure it had nothing at all to do with the fact that the cast are all stupidly good-looking."

"Excuse you," I scowl, falling into step with him as we make our way down the hall of the keep. "I would *never* misuse my time at the scrying pool. I can't help that I *accidentally* saw a scene on some random person's television and fell in love with the costume designer's style. What better way to view the full range than to go straight to the source?"

“You know, just because the Last Daughter has silver hair doesn’t necessarily mean she wants to *dress* like the heroine,” he teases. “Especially after what I’ve heard happened in Season—”

I spring in front of him, skid to a stop, and slap a hand over his mouth.

“No. Spoilers,” I hiss. “Fates! Don’t you know the rule?”

He pointedly drops his eyes to my hand, and after giving him a warning glare, I remove it so he can speak.

“I do not, in fact, know the rules of television, which could have something to do with the lack of electricity, subscription services, and—most importantly—televisions in our realm,” he answers dryly as we continue down the hall. “And in case you’ve forgotten, the valet to the Steward of the Return does not get special, unmonitored scrying privileges.”

“Yes, well, in case you’ve forgotten, I have nothing to do with that,” I tell him for the seven-hundredth time this decade. “Also, I’ll thank you to keep your voice down, lest the council get wind of my research and get the wrong idea.” Glancing around, I double-check that no one’s listening who shouldn’t be—which would be awful for more than one reason. Only Oneric and I live here full time. The staff—what little we employ until the Daughter returns—have long since returned to their own homes for the night.

Oneric hums as we round a corner and come to the stairs leading to the first level of the keep. I want to ask him what time it is, but I know once I ask I won’t stop asking. My whole body is buzzing with anticipation the closer we get, and I have to actively stop myself from skipping down the stairs like a child.

I can’t help it, though. I’m so excited. And nervous. I’m really, really nervous. But mostly excited.

Mostly.

I’m only, like, twenty percent afraid.

As we reach the landing, the town clock tower chimes, announcing the hour. I swear I feel the bell's reverberation down to my bones.

Oneric reaches over and takes my hand. “Are you nervous?”

I shake my head, scoffing as if the question were ridiculous. “Nervous? Not at all! I’ve been preparing for centuries. I know all there is to know about the Last Daughter. I've done as much research on her Fated Mates as

possible—including those useless sacks of shit who are, by the way, our arch-nemeses. Oh!”

I pull him to a stop and turn him to face me so he understands how important this next part is. “FYI, we hate them, alright? Don’t forget. We are officially Team Not Daxen Or Vae.”

“Can’t we just say we’re Team Caelan and Soren?”

Damnit. That’s way more efficient.

“No. Besides, I’m still working on an official team name anyways. So don’t, like, put that in writing or anything.”

I pause in the entryway, rearranging the flowers I picked this morning. I shift the vase a quarter inch to the right so it’s even with the framed painting of the Royal Castle that hangs on the far wall.

Fates, it was *gorgeous*. A feat of engineering impossible to recreate without the kind of magic only the Royals once possessed.

Now it’s *gone*. Turned to dust the moment the realms were sealed. Another irreplaceable marvel in a long list of wonders we’ll never get back thanks to the Veylen.

It terrifies me to think of what else we might lose. *How much more will they take before this is finally over? Our art? Our history? Our lives?*

“So are we just not going to talk about the fact that you haven’t been able to locate her in the scrying chamber for three days?”

Oneric sides up behind me, rocking back on the heels of his combat boots. I shoot a glare over my shoulder.

“We are *not*.” And because it’s important to be polite even when your Mate is being a dick, I add, “But thank you for asking.”

Oneric levels me with a stern look that shouldn’t be so cute when he’s being this annoying.

“And the panther? Any idea how we keep from being mauled by her pet?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about the panther.”

“Oh, do tell.” His eyes are bright with mirth. He reaches for my hand once more, leading me alongside him toward the doors.

“I’m not entirely convinced the beast didn’t sneak through an abnormally thin Ley line and seek her out on his own. That feline is absolutely not from the human realm; that much is clear.”

“He did grow incredibly fast,” he agrees as we pull open the doors and step into the beautiful front yard. It’s a crisp, warm night, and as we turn

right to make our way around the keep and into the back gardens, I can't help but marvel at how beautiful it is here.

The sky is bright and clear, glittering with stars. Stars that remain unfamiliar, despite how long we've been trapped here. It's hard to appreciate the beauty when things are so different. Different stars. Different constellations. Even the moon is different—larger and brighter than it is on Earth.

Our memories were used to create this realm. But when you take memories from thousands and thousands of beings, things tend to get a little distorted. And at the end of the day, that's all this realm really is.

An approximate recreation. *A dream.* This isn't ours, and we can feel it. Our magic can feel it. This disconnect is like an open wound that will never heal. Not until we can finally return to our true home.

To Earth.

It's hard to believe that I'm one of only eleven others who know that tonight is the night our self-imposed banishment finally ends. Because in less than ten minutes I, Asterion Alydryck, eldest son of House Alydryck and Steward of the Return, will open one of the thinning Ley lines between realms and return to Earth.

More importantly, I will be the first to greet the Last Daughter. The female who prophecy foretold would lead us to victory against the Veylen and end the war between our peoples for good.

It's an honor. A dream come true—something I've been preparing for my entire life.

So why can't I stop frowning all of a sudden?

What happened to all the excitement I felt just twenty minutes ago? Why is it that when I think about how drastically the Last Daughter's life is about to change, I feel less like a diplomat and more like a Fatesdamned executioner?

After the life she's lived, it just suddenly feels wildly unfair for us to throw the fate of an entire world and four—five, if you count the Veylen—species on her shoulders.

"Asterion?"

"Hmm?"

"What are you thinking about?"

I turn to him and force a confident smile. One I know he can see right through, but for some reason I can't stop myself from pretending like I'm

not spiraling.

“Nothing at all. I’m just excited to get started.”

He shoots me a grin. “Me too.”

My brain short-circuits.

That’s—that’s it? That’s his response?

He’s not supposed to just—just... *agree with me*! He’s supposed to push back. Call my bluff. Point out that I’ve readjusted my cufflinks seven times since we got outside, which is totally a nervous tick of mine that he normally would’ve pounced on five adjustments ago.

It’s, like, our love language, for Fate’s sake! I pretend like everything—including me—is perfect, and he calls me on my shit and reminds me there are, in fact, things I’m bad at.

Very few things, but that’s neither here nor there.

“So what are you most excited about?”

My brain is basically mid-explosion, so when he not only takes me at my word—which, I might add, is a LIE—but also asks a follow-up question, it takes a solid twenty seconds to process it.

“Uh…Well… I’m really excited for…” I flounder, trying to come up with something—*anything*—as an answer. When my brain refuses to work, I freak out and mumble something like “Ahruebgsd,” which is totally not a word. Then, because I haven’t made this uncomfortable enough, I decide running away will make things better and pick up my pace.

Oh Gods, what am I doing? This is so stupid!

I should turn around. Tell him the truth—that I’m starting to really, really freak out. I don’t. I’m fully committed now to speed-walking through the gardens in a specially tailored, navy blue velvet three-piece suit like I’m in the weirdest eighties music video ever.

The worst part is I’m the only person in this realm who’s even seen a 1980s music video!

Oneric *still* doesn’t call me out. He just walks faster, shooting me a grin as he catches up.

“What’d you say? I must have missed your answer.” His smile turns sheepish, like he’s embarrassed to have missed the garbled sound I coughed out and tried to pass off as a word before running away in fear.

I wave him away with a laugh, “Oh… ah, you know what? I actually forgot.”

He nods, like it’s totally believable that I forgot something I said fifteen seconds ago.

Because I’m fully committed to my speed-walking, I keep it up the whole way through the gardens. When the path changes from cobblestone to grass, I keep going, even though the Ley line is probably thirty feet ahead of me and we have plenty of time to get there.

I imagine we look like quite the pair. Two males speed-walking through their backyard at nine at night. One dressed like he’s on his way to a meeting with the council and the other dressed like he’s about to go to the gym.

Neither of us speaks. Not a word is exchanged the whole way through the clearing. I don’t dare sneak so much as a peek at my Mate, choosing instead to keep my eyes straight ahead—on the Ley line.

Am I blinking? When’s the last time I blinked?

Just in case, I blink twice in a row. A few seconds later I blink again. Then again.

Oh, Fates, am I blinking too much now?

“You realize you let the block on your side of the Bond drop about three minutes before you decided to really go all in on this bit, right?”

When Oneric’s words register, the relief I feel is palpable. With a relieved breath, I stop walking, bend over, brace my hands on my knees, and try to get my breathing back under control.

“Oh, thank the gods,” I breathe. “Because honestly, I had no idea where I was going with that once we got to the Ley line. Like, do I keep going? Just do circles around the seam? Start some other calisthenics and make this a whole series?”

“I’ve got to say, I’m impressed. I haven’t seen you that committed to avoiding your feelings in a while.”

I straighten, grin, and beam at him. “Awww, really? Thank you. I just… kind of went with it, you know? Just felt right.”

Folding his arms over his chest, he nods. “So are you ready to talk about it?”

“You know what? I think I’m good. The workout really got me back on track, actually, I think—”

“Asterion.” My Mate’s eyes narrow dangerously.

“Fine!” I throw up my hands in defeat. If he wants to talk about emotions, then we’ll talk about freaking emotions. “I’m fucking terrified,

okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“What brought this on?” He places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You seemed so excited before we got out here.”

“I just… what if she hates me? What if she’s nothing like I’ve seen? What if her Mates try to step in and force her to make decisions she doesn’t want to make? What if—”

Wrapping an arm around my shoulder, Oneric pulls me close as we continue toward the Ley line. We’re so close now. Ten feet away.

“My love, listen to me. Are you listening?”

I give him a thumbs up, but for a second I forget how to uncurl my fist or put my thumb back down. My brain just… *stops*. My breathing picks up, and my heart starts to race, and oh gods, oh *fates*, I’m going to greet the Last Daughter with a thumbs up *because my hand’s going to be stuck in this position until I die*!

Chuckling, Oneric wraps his warm, strong hand around mine, gently pushing my thumb, then my arm, back into a normal position.

“Thank you,” I rasp.

He lifts his wrist and glances at his watch, then pins me with a serious look. One I know means business.

“We have four minutes. It will take forty-nine seconds to get in position, so listen and don’t interrupt.”

Nodding weakly, I almost give him another thumbs up, but think better of it and let my arm drop with a grimace.

“You *know* the Last Daughter. You know her life. You’ve watched her grow. You’ve seen her pain. Her heartache. You’ve watched her fight. Every. Single. Day. You cried with her, even when she thought she was all alone. When she thought she had no one in the world, *you* were there.”

“You already *know* how she’s going to react. You know *her*. You care for *her*. No one in either realm is better suited for this task because every other being alive would look at that girl and see a job. Or a prophecy. Or a vessel. But that’s not what you see, is it?”

Shaking my head, I swallow thickly and croak, “No.”

“What do you see, Asterion?”

We slow to a stop, and I turn, looking at my Mate—my partner and best friend—in the eyes. He’s only an inch taller than me, so it’s not hard. The hard part is letting myself believe in the confidence I see in his eyes when he looks at me.

One side of his mouth tips into a small, knowing smile.

“I just see… Idril,” I tell him honestly. “I see Idril, and all she’s been through. And I want her to be happy. More than anything, I want that girl to be happy. Which is probably so, so stupid!” Swiping at a tear that escaped, I let out a self-deprecating laugh before throwing up my hands.

“You’re right. Every other person would look at her and see a job. One they know they can’t fail because if they do, our entire race—hundreds of thousands of us—will be destroyed. Killed. Just like the Royals. She is our *only* chance for salvation. We *need* her. The world *needs* her. If we have any chance of surviving what’s to come—”

“If we have any chance of surviving what’s to come,” Oneric interrupts, lifting his hands and cradling my face in his palms, “Idril *needs* someone in her corner who won’t treat her like a commodity. Someone who will remind her of who she is when the Council’s doing their best to make her forget. They won’t do it on purpose. They won’t do it to be mean. But make no mistake, they’ll still do it. To them, she is the prophecy—a tool. But to you, she’s just… Idril. *That* is why you won’t fail.”

It’s like a massive weight’s been lifted from my shoulders. With a deep exhale, I fall into my Mate’s arms and hold him tight.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Don’t thank me,” he says, pulling back. “Get in the right headspace and straighten your spine. I don’t like this whole melancholy sad-prince thing you’ve had going on all day. I miss the loud, sarcastic, chaotic male I Mated.”

Following his advice, I straighten my shoulders and shove all my fears down as far as they’ll go. I *can* do this. In fact, I was fucking *made* for this. I won’t let anyone down.

Especially not the Last Daughter.

I survey the area as Oneric checks his watch once more. Our location is inconspicuous. No one knows about it except the council and us. The keep is only a quarter mile away, which means it’s still on the property. Behind us, the back gardens extend nearly to the side of the structure. In front of us is one of many forests, teeming with flora and fauna that don’t exist on Earth.

And less than three feet from where we stand, the Ley line awaits, shimmering like summer heat above asphalt. I lift my arm and extend my

hand palm up, willing a ball of light into existence. Oneric does the same, which makes it even easier to see the overlap between our realm and hers.

"Time?"

"Thirty-three seconds."

I shift closer, peering over to watch the seconds count down until I can't take it anymore—which lasts about eight seconds.

"Ten seconds."

I close my eyes, clear my head, and mentally prepare. *This is it.* I'll have exactly two minutes to force this Ley line open successfully. Two minutes before it shifts out of alignment and the opportunity passes.

It will be seven days before it shifts back into alignment and I can try again.

We don't *have* seven days. Not with how quickly things are escalating. Idril needs answers. She needs help. She needs to know who she is and where she came from.

So many people in her life have failed her. I will *not* be another name on that list.

"Three seconds."

Determination fills me. I have so much to tell her. So many stories. *And gifts!* Fates, I have soooo many gifts. For Soren and Caelan, too.

Just them, though. Not Daxen and Vaelenor. They don't get gifts. They have to watch everyone else open their gifts and be sad.

"Two."

I am really, really looking forward to making them watch everyone else get things while they have to sit in time-out. *Alone. Gift-less.*

"One."

My eyes snap open and shoot to the shimmering seam. *Gods, I can practically see the other realm!* I don't stop to ogle as much as I'd like to. The timer's already counting down.

I've practiced this a thousand times, so I don't hesitate to plunge my hands into the air where the seam's the thinnest. I position them six inches apart, palms facing inward, and cross my pointer finger and middle finger on both hands. I count to three, then flip both hands upside down, then right-side up, bring them together like I'm praying, then rotate them away from each other without breaking contact.

My movements are swift. *Confident.* I lay my hands flat, palms facing the Earth, wait four seconds, then spread my fingers like I'm holding a large

ball. I twist my right hand thirty degrees to the left.

Count to five.

Twist my left hand sixty degrees to the right.

A thin, blue glowing line appears between my hands and my lips curve into a grin, but I don't stop to celebrate.

I'm not done just yet.

Most magic's accomplished intuitively. It's part of us—part of our souls. More complicated magic, however, requires precise movements—usually with the hands, like this spell—but I've heard of some that require much more. Rumors say one only works if you have a partner and requires both casters to complete a complicated series of dance steps that most pairs have never managed to get right.

No matter what spell you're casting, if it requires movement, you must perform it perfectly. The slightest mistake, one little screw-up, and the whole thing falls apart.

Spells require three things: Intent, movement, and words backed by intent.

A request. *Never* a demand. One does not demand the source of our blessing.

I've rarely come across a spell that includes words spoken out loud, but this is one of them. Despite the fact that it's rarely used, the spell must be spoken in our mother tongue—the language of our people.

Another thing I'll need to teach Idril if she's to use her powers to their fullest extent.

With a deep, calming breath, I begin.

"Shâick moux shâick." Light to light.

"Thai'dar moux, thai'dar." Blood to blood.

"Alatheòn moux Alatheòn." World to World.

"Drax'ven ald rathlöx chy'lith," Let the road return.

"Drax'ven ald plaxlon draxlôt." Let the veil part.

With one last inhale, I fling my arms apart while visualizing myself physically ripping the Ley line apart in front of me. I see the veil between worlds tearing like tissue paper in my mind, replaying it over and over until I swear I can actually feel a physical weight in my hands.

I repeat the chant three times, and after the third, I lift my head to the sky and shout my final request.

One word. A prayer that holds all the hopes and dreams of an entire race.

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“VAERATH!”

Reality *rips* apart. I feel it before my eyes open fully—the air twists and spins. Leaves, grass, twigs, and petals whip on currents of wind and stick to our hair and clothing. A sound like velcro tearing, but a thousand times louder, reverberates in my ears.

I turn to Oneric, who looks from me to the open Ley line, then back. I follow his gaze and my mouth drops.

Oh, my gods! I did it!

“I did it!” I shout, but my voice is lost to the thunderous sound of the realms splitting open. I throw my head back and laugh, overcome with joy.

The opening is at least eight feet tall and half as wide. It’s easy to see the other side—a clearing of grass and wildflowers that leads to a forest.

It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

The wind finally begins to slow, the sound dying down as well. My Mate’s face splits into a grin that grows impossibly wide before, without warning, he grabs my arm and yanks me through the tear between realms alongside him.

I stumble, catch myself right before I fall, and exhale in relief. There is no way I’m falling on my face the first time I step back on Earth’s soil. I am determined to re-enter this realm with dignity, grace, and a dash of swagger, just like I’ve practiced.

“Oh… shit.”

At my Mate’s shaky exhale, I turn and nearly gasp. His eyes are wide, face pale, and all his attention’s locked on something behind me.

For the second time in an hour, my brain short-circuits.

I’ve never seen him react like this. I’ve never even seen him worried, even in combat training. We each have political duties, but like every male,

we train in combat as soon as we come of age.

And Oneric is the best Commander our army has.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, terrified of the answer but desperate to know.

Whatever this is has him so thrown he’s lost control of the block, which means I can *feel* his fear, thrumming through our Bond like the steady, ominous beat of a war drum.

And I feel the moment when pure, unadulterated terror washes over him, so thick it makes my stomach churn, and my neck break out in sweat.

An arm bands around me, and Oneric yanks me against his chest. I spin, determined to see what the hell's happening, when Oneric shouts a warning that reverberates through the clearing.

“Watch out!”

I reach for my sword before the words have left his mouth, forgetting in the moment that I left it behind, choosing—*stupidly*—to come unarmed as a show of respect.

But even if I *had* brought it—or my dagger—they’d be useless. Because no steel, in this realm or any other, can pierce a dragon’s scales.

The dragons are dead.

The words repeat in my head, despite the very real—very young—dragon right in front of me.

The dragons are dead.

Except… *they aren’t. Not anymore.*

The dragons are dead. I was there the day it happened. Thousands of us silently mourned as each creature—all sixty-three of them—died, one by one.

An entire species. *Gone.*

Except for one. Except for the silver dragon, who, right now, is turning toward me; one bright, brilliant sapphire eye locks with mine, and in it, I see my death.

Faced with this very real threat, my mind and instincts snap into focus. Only centuries of training and my Highborn bloodline prevent Oneric and me from burning to a crisp.

Rolling waves of fire barrel up the creature’s throat and fill its cavernous mouth. Its jaw drops, exposing two double rows of dagger-sharp fangs moments before flames pour out of its mouth and shoot across the clearing.

I don’t think. I react.

I react just like anyone else would if they found themselves facing down a mythical creature that shouldn't exist.

First, I let out a high-pitched, terrified shriek that could shatter glass while praying I don't wet my pants but accepting I probably will.

This lasts half a second before my training kicks in, overriding my terror and saving my life. My shriek morphs into a shout of determination as I throw my hands out in front of me and, using every bit of my power, conjure a shield made of air.

One strong enough to protect us from dragon fire.

I can feel my Mate's powerful form at my back, and it bolsters my courage.

This maneuver is one we've practiced a thousand times, but never outside of training. Thank the Fates I have a Mate who insists on dedicating a significant portion of our week to training for eventual combat.

As I stare down the never-ending funnel of white-hot flames battering against my shield, I send up a prayer of thanks that I was born with such a large well of power. Normally I loathe my Highborn status, but this moment makes all the bullshit worth it.

My shield holds against the torrent of flame, but that doesn't mean we're safe. I'm powerful, but not powerful enough to form a shield large enough to cover us completely. Right now, the flame is forced to curve around and above the bubble protecting us, but it won't last forever.

Worse, I can't close the shield completely. It's protecting about ninety percent of us, but there's an opening at my back. Which means we're vulnerable. Exposed to the elements.

Unfortunately, that means we're both subjected to the heat of the flames. And, Fates, I don't remember younglings being this strong. These flames blast around my shield and shoot at least twenty feet behind us. A glance over my shoulder reveals nothing but scorched Earth where green grass and flowers were just moments before. Even a few trees are gone, reduced to nothing but smoking, blackened stumps and smoldering ruins.

I am really, *really* regretting this three-piece navy blue velvet suit. The heat of the flames is so incredible I feel like I'm being baked alive. Sweat drips down my face and back in rivulets. My red hair—meticulously styled after an hour spent getting it just right just moments ago—is plastered to my temples and brow. My eyes are so Fatesdamned dry I have to squint just to see anything.

“What the fuck, Asterion?” Oneric snarls, and his angry tone has my eyebrows shooting into my hairline.

“*Me?* What the fuck? What did I do? I don’t even know what’s happening!”

“Allow me to break it down for you,” he snaps, lifting his shoulder to wipe a river of sweat off his face. “The Last Daughter—you know, the girl you’ve spent hours almost every day since the day she was born so you’d know literally everything about her? Remember her?”

“It sounds familiar,” I grimace, already knowing where he’s going.

“Turns out… despite watching all sixty-plus of them die over the span of an afternoon, she somehow managed to Bond a *fucking dragon*.”

“Wow, that’s wild…”

“Isn’t it? Wanna hear something even more wild?”

“No, thank you.”

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you over the sound of the seven-hundred-degree flames four inches away from my face,” he shouts. “Which leads to my next wild fact: We’re maybe seven minutes from concluding the first-ever Cross-Realm Diplomatic Mission—of which the Fate of four species and an entire planet’s survival hinges upon going well—in the belly of a creature who *shouldn’t exist!”*

“Yes, well, this is no picnic for me, either,” I shout back, grunting as I strain to reinforce our shield.

How is this hatchling so strong? Will this fire never end?

Oneric sighs. “Fates, I know. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to take this out on you. I just don’t know how we’re going to get out of this.”

“Wanna know the worst part?”

“Dying?”

“Dying in this suit! Do you have any idea how long it took for Ralodix to find velvet? Three years and seven months!”

I can feel my Mate’s shoulders shaking as he tries, and fails, to suppress his laughter.

“Oh, Fates! Dragon fire, Asterion! Focus. I love you, but you have absolutely no self-preservation instincts; it’s *uncanny.*”

My arms are starting to tremble under the strain of keeping our shield up, but I don’t want to worry my Mate.

“What do you want me to do? I’m open to literally any suggestions,” I reply, praying he has some idea. Even if it’s stupid, I’ll try it. Anything is

better than standing here waiting to die.

“Anything would be an improvement over spiraling about your wardrobe,” he laughs, but the sound is strained. He’s as worried as I am.

Outside of my power level and fighting ability, I really only have one talent. It’s partly what got me this position in the first place—a position which, like my charm, was inherited from my father.

This is a diplomatic mission, after all. Guess it’s time to be… *well… a diplomat.*

Clearing my throat, I conjure my most gracious, most charming tone, and call out to the Last Daughter, hoping she can hear me over the roaring fire.

“Ahem… Yoo-hoo! Pardon me! I apologize for intruding, but… erm…”

“‘Yoo-hoo’?” Oneric echoes flatly. “That’s what you’re going with? Yoo. Hoo?”

I hear voices, which makes me hopeful that they’ve heard my attempt to make contact and are deciding how to proceed. Which would be all well and good if we weren’t four minutes and counting away from the literal fires of hell.

And I really, really don’t want to die.

“Again, so, so sorry for the rather spontaneous arrival,” I call out. “Believe it or not, we were actually in the neighborhood! Thought we’d just pop in and introduce ourselves! I’m Asterion. The handsome male behind me is my Fated Mate, Oneric.”

*Silenc*e.

“Sorry we didn’t bring a casserole. That is the customary gift, is it not?”

“What’s a casserole?”

“I’m not sure,” I whisper. “It looks disgusting, but I saw it on—”

“After we get out of this, I want to know just how often you just ‘happen’ to randomly find a house with a television while you’re scrying.”

Before I can explain that every house has a television, a male voice shouts from beyond the flames.

“State your intentions!”

“My intentions,” I mutter.

What are my intentions? Oh, gods*… what are my intentions? Why won’t my brain work?*

“Intentions… intentions… intentions… is that even a real word? Oneric!”

A strong hand lands on my arm and squeezes gently. “You are a peaceful delegate sent to offer greetings to the Last Daughter,” Oneric murmurs soothingly. “You have answers to her questions and look forward to explaining who and what she is. You are unarmed. And while you’re incredibly excited to meet her, you very much wish to do so while your heart’s still beating and your skin’s still attached to your bones!”

“Right!”

Exhaling in relief, I clear my throat once more, then repeat my Mate’s words, making sure I sound as chipper as possible.

When I’m finished speaking, another long silence follows.

Just as I start to think they’re content to let us burn, Idril’s voice rings through the clearing—soft, gentle, and kind.

She only says three words, but when I hear them, my mouth drops open in shock. It’s not the words themselves— a simple command—but the fact that she speaks them fluently in our mother tongue.

The language of our people.

Of *her* people.

“Nay’dine sryvìk, Vharax.” Her tone is steady and sure, and I’m not at all surprised when the fire instantly vanishes. Just to be safe, I wait a few extra seconds before dropping my shield. Relief fills me, and my knees wobble, forcing me to lock them before I fall on my face. I bend over, bracing my hands on my thighs as I try to catch my breath and stop shaking.

Holy. Fates.

This was not at all the way I saw this introduction happening.

Oneric places a comforting, gentle hand on my back, and it’s exactly what I need. His touch gives me strength. Just as mine does for him, I can feel our connection pulsing through our Mate Bond, an exchange of strength and energy born of the love we share for one another.

I take nothing from him physically. He is not a battery I use to recharge after wielding massive amounts of magic. Our Bond—our souls and the deep well of affection, respect, and love we have for one another—bolsters me, pulling me back from the brink of passing out and steadying me so I can straighten my spine and take a deep, even breath.

With a final squeeze of my shoulder, Oneric takes a purposeful step back, giving me the floor. He clasps his hands behind his back, positions his feet so they’re perfectly aligned with his shoulders, straightens his spine, and loosens the tension in his neck.

He looks every inch the battle-ready Commander he was born to be.

Knowing he's got my back gives me the final boost of strength I needed to turn and face my destiny.

It's overwhelming to see the girl I've spent the last twenty-two years watching from afar now less than three yards away. She looks different from the last time I saw her, three days ago—before she vanished, going somewhere not even the scrying chamber could locate her.

She has an aura of confidence that wasn't there before. It's subtle, and to anyone else she probably just looks like a normal twenty-ish human female. But for someone who's watched her nearly starve to death while chained to the walls of her father's basement for almost a week, the difference is stark.

It's there—in the slight lift of her chin. The relaxed, ready way she stands, hands loose at her sides. The way her shoulders lack tension. She no longer looks like she's bracing herself for a blow. No longer looks like she's afraid she's taking up too much space in this world, simply because she dared wake up with a beating heart and functioning lungs.

Of course, part of that could be the myth at her side, long silver tail coiled loosely around Idril's leg, striking sapphire eyes with vertical slits narrowed on me in obvious warning.

I shake my head at the impossibility of it all and can't help but throw back my head and bark out an incredulous laugh.

"Is something funny?" One of her Mates steps forward like he's preparing to square up on me for laughing. I can tell by the military haircut and piercing black eyes—this is Caelan.

One of the good ones.

"Oh no. Not funny per se," I tell him. "More… shocking. Or… perhaps, unforeseen. Astonishing? No, that's not right either—"

"What are you talking about?" Caelan forces each word through clenched teeth. *Fates… I think he wants to hit me. What's got him so riled up tonight? I'm the one who just faced down a dragon, for Fate's sake!*

I throw out my hand, gesturing toward the fire-breathing myth poised at Idril's side, waiting for a reason to attack. A shiver runs down my spine, and I shudder dramatically, taking a step back for good measure.

I forgot how absolutely terrifying the winged beasts were. That's one thing that fantasy show got right, at least. Dragons Bond to one person and one person only. That relationship is based on mutual respect and a soul-

deep connection. Dragons are not pets. They are not pretty, scaled birds you can ride on their backs like tamed horses.

They are voracious. *Terrifying.* Fierce, ancient, and incredibly intelligent. Not only that—they're cunning. Entire battles have been won with a single dragon and its rider. Entire enemy contingents—wiped out in the course of an afternoon. Hunted like prey, smoked out of hiding and burnt alive.

One singular creature is impervious to the mental tricks of Veylen dark magic. Their minds cannot be accessed. Their memories cannot be altered. Their dreams cannot be seen. Their futures remain unknown.

Dragons.

For that reason, they were one of our biggest assets in the war.

Well, that and the whole fire-breathing, aerial scouting, flying ten times faster than the fastest horse, stupidly long-lived and impossibly loyal to their rider things.

Oh. They're also fucking huge.

"Words, red," the wolven snarls from behind Idril when I take too long to answer.

"Red?"

I frown. Then it clicks, and a grin splits my face in two.

"Oh, because of my hair! Oh my gosh, a nickname already? This is amazing! Well, goodness, now I need to come up with one for you."

I start to pace, tapping a finger on my chin as I think out loud. "You know, I really should take the time to come up with something *really* splendid. You caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting nicknames for at least another few weeks. I really thought I'd have a chance to get to know you a bit better."

I spin, narrowing my eyes at the wolven. "Quite honestly, I do love the nickname, truly. But don't you think it's a little… oh, I don't know… on the nose? I mean… yes, of course I have red hair. But there are so many more interesting things about me. So while I'm flattered—truly, it's so delightful to be welcomed with open arms—let's wait for a bit before making Red a permanent thing, okay? We can think of it like a trial run."

"What the *fuck* is he talking about?" Soren hisses at Caelan, who shrugs.

"Do you think he's someone's family member? Maybe he escaped from somewhere?"

I laugh at Vaelenor’s joke at first, then quickly remember that we hate him and stop laughing abruptly. I glance up and pin him with my most furious glare.

“You are quite witty, Vaelenor,” I tell him. “That’s not a compliment. I’m simply stating facts. So forgive me if your gift for comedy gets the better of me at first. I would like to formally state for the record that any smiles, giggles, chuckles, snorts, chortles, cackles, titters, sniggers, or guffaws are *not* a wordless endorsement or approval of your character.”

I turn to Daxen, clasping my hands behind my back and standing straighter.

“Thankfully, Daxen does not appear to contain any outwardly redeeming qualities, so I don’t foresee any future situations in which my reaction to—well, anything involving you at all—might be misconstrued as an attempt to form a friendship and/or friendly relationship.”

The Omega—Branwen— throws her head back in laughter. Soon, Soren and Caelan join her, and even Idril’s lips twitch with a smile she can’t hold back.

Well then. I wasn’t trying to be funny, but this is certainly not a terrible reaction.

“I have no idea who you are, mate, but you’re welcome to stay as long as you like.” Branwen’s smile is warm and wide and, best of all, genuine. I feel myself relax just a little.

Neither Daxen nor Vae respond, which I take to mean they understand.

Soren raises his hands and steps forward. “Alright… seriously. Who are you? And where the hell did you come from?”

He points to the tear between realms. From here, you can see the garden surrounding the keep, lit by the stars glinting bright in the brilliant night sky.

A smile pulls at the corners of my lips. I turn back around and lock eyes with Idril.

She’s been quiet, and frankly, she looks exhausted. She’s thin—much thinner than a few days ago. Her clothes are a mess, and she’s covered in dirt. She looks like she’s about to fall asleep on her feet.

Deciding not to waste any more of her time, I hold her gaze and take a step forward. Soren tenses, as if he’s ready to stop me from getting closer, but he needn't worry.

With solemn movements, I take a knee, kneeling right there in the middle of the clearing in front of everyone. Placing my hands on my left knee and straightening my spine, I assume the formal pose like I've practiced for weeks.

"My name is Asterion Alydryck. I am the eldest son of House Alydryck. Steward of the Return. My House has held this post for two-thousand-four-hundred-and-ninety-eight years."

The clearing fills with the sounds of shock. Gasps, sharp breaths, whispers—none of it matters.

My focus is on Idril.

"For over two thousand years, the Shadow has mistaken a truce for victory. They have rejoiced in the deaths of our leaders—your ancestors. Now, two decades after the stars fell from the sky to herald your birth, the truce has finally ended. And with it, so too has our exile."

I bow my head. The words I speak next echo through the air, strong and true. They roll across the night sky like thunder, heavy with destiny.

"The Royal Fae are dead, but their power remains. It lives on, passed down generation to generation for nearly twenty-five hundred years. The Shadow believes the light long extinguished and the war all but won. They're wrong. This war is far from over. And against all odds, one Royal Fae remains."

With tears blurring my sight and my throat clogged with emotion, I push to my feet.

Idril's stunned sapphire eyes meet mine, full of questions. I smile, and my voice is steady despite the tremble in my hands.

My lips curl into a genuine smile as emotion washes over me. "Your throne awaits, My Queen. As does your war."

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Acknowledgments

Book two!

Phew… this has been…. A wild ride. Honestly I can't believe it's only been six months since I was writing the acknowledgments for Caged. So much has changed and none of it would have been possible without all of you.

When I published Caged, I was just excited to get my story out to the world. I never thought it would get the reaction it has, and every day I wake up feeling so, so incredibly blessed. Six months ago I was working full time an hour away from home, staying up until 1 or 2 in the morning writing. Every free second I could find I spent writing. At my son's baseball games, in the car at his practices or between games at tournaments, at work in between customers and on my lunch break. Because that's the only time I could fit it in outside of my days off—and even those were jam packed with household duties, kid-stuff, and all the other adult things that sneak up on you and take up *way* too much of your "free" time.

But now… things are wildly different. I've been able to quit my corporate tech job so I can focus on writing full time, and that's something I never thought I'd be able to do. It's been an absolute dream come true and I can't *begin* to thank everyone who's read, reviewed, rated, posted and shared their thoughts/opinions about Caged. Without you all, I'd still be struggling just to get through the day while sneaking in moments here and there to do what I love.

I'll try not to make this list as long as the last one, but no promises. If you know me at all, by now you know I have a problem with never shutting up so chances are this list will end up even longer than the last. 😂

To my husband—I love you more than I could ever say. You made this dream a reality for me. Without your support I never would have had the guts to leave my job and pursue what I love to do instead. And even though it was scary, it was *more* exciting because I knew you would be there no matter what. Thank you for always supporting me. For taking K to do

things when I'm stressing so I can write without listening to five ten-year-old's have Fortnite crash-outs through the computer speakers LOL. You're the best father to our amazing son, the best husband I could have ever wished for and the best friend I've ever had. I love you.

K-The older you get, the prouder I am of who you're growing up to be. Getting to spend more time with you was the biggest pro in quitting my job, and the more time we spend together the more awed I am of who you are. You're not only funny, kind and smart. You're witty, stubborn and not afraid to own who you are—both the good and the bad. I wish I had even a quarter of the self-confidence you do, and what makes it even better is how incredibly kind you are on top of it. I love how excited you've been about my career, and getting to share things with you has been an absolute blast. (Even if you're not allowed to read any of my books until you're 50.) I love you to the moon and back, always.

Mom— Again, none of this would have been possible without you. You've already read every single iteration of this book (except for the spicy stuff! LOL!) and there's no one else I trust more to give it to me straight. Thank you for always believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. Thank you for all your hard work hand making character-themed wax melts and stickers and bookmarks and all the other amazing, wonderful things you've made for me to send out to readers. Thank you for giving me the confidence to let me see myself through your eyes, and for screen-shooting all the most awesome reviews for Caged and sending them to me so I don't have to accidentally read bad ones that will make me cry, LOL! Thank you for getting upset on my behalf when YOU accidentally read the bad reviews, and for not responding even though I know you want to 😂 I love you so, so much. You're my best friend in the entire world and I can't wait to see what journeys we get to go on together now that I'm writing full time!

Dad- no one else in the world would get on the phone and tell me "you need to find the Scott Boras of literary agents. Find that person, and then hire them." No one else in the world would be able to keep me and mom grounded in reality while never making me feel like you weren't also incredibly proud of me at the same time. Thank you for always being the voice of reason, and for having my back and watching out for me. You've always been my protector, and some adults might find that stifling as they grow older, but I don't. I know I'll always be your daughter, and you'll

always have my back. There's a certain confidence that comes along with the knowledge that no matter what, my dad will be there to call something out if it doesn't sit right. And now that I'm an adult, I finally understand and appreciate your protectiveness for the gift that it is. Thank you for always loving and supporting me. I love you so much.

A-Proud doesn't even begin to cover how I feel in regard to what you've accomplished this last year. I am in freaking AWE of you. You are the most intelligent, responsible, kind, amazing young man. I think between the two of us, mom might actually lose her mind jumping back and forth checking on our creations LMAO. The fact that you've already accomplished SO much and only just graduated HS is absolutely outstanding. Its WILD. I'm so freaking excited to see what you do next and I'll always be right here to support you no matter what. I love you!

Aunt J- I love you so freaking much! Thank you for being there for me since the day this entire thing began and for loving and supporting me unconditionally. I can't wait to start sending you and mom the first draft chapters for Book Three!!! I love you!

To my editor, Elaine—Ahhh!! 250k+ words! We did it! LOL!. Honestly, I don't know how you didn't pull all your hair out when you saw that word count, but I should have known you'd do yet another amazing, phenomenal job and crank it all out in less than three weeks! These books would be dead in the water without you. You're worth every penny and more and I'm so thankful for all your hard work (and gif reactions! LOL!)

Avina- Honestly, your friendship these past few months has meant more to me than you could ever know. Thank you so much for answering all my questions, for Beta reading, for being honest and real with me and for giving me someone to talk to who really understands. I'm so grateful for our friendship and our chats and I'm SO PROUD of what you've accomplished this year! You're a total bad ass and I kinda want to be you when I grow up. (We're ignoring the fact that I'm older than you so just… shhhh)

To Gaia, my cover artist—once again you have blown me away with your amazing, wonderful, perfect work! You took Caelan and made him PERFECTION on this cover, and the details you added are just extraordinary. Your talent is just awe-inspiring and I'm so so grateful that I get to work with such an amazing artist!

Bridget and Jake Bordeaux- I wish I would have been able to put my thanks to you both in Caged, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine my two favorite narrators would be bringing my character's to life in audio form. I cannot BEGIN to thank you for the amazing work you've done on Caged. Not only for your performance, but for the passion and care you've approached this story with and the amazing support as well. Every time I remember that MY book is narrated by the two of you I feel like a child waking up on Christmas morning. I cannot wait to see what you do with Awakened—I just know it's going to be amazing!

To Jason and the team at Simon Maverick—thank you so much for all your hard work and for taking a chance on a debut author with a 600+ page book. Working with Simon Maverick has been an absolute dream come true for me. Not only as an author, but as a reader as well. You all made the entire audiobook process easy and fun and just an absolute dream. I look forward to continuing to work together in the future.

To my Beta readers- You guys got the hard job… which is reading through my very, very unpolished 315k draft and telling me what sucked😂 Picking a Beta team wasn't easy, but I know I made the right choice with all of you. Thank you so much for the hours of work that you all put into helping me get this book polished and (hopefully!) ready for the rest of the world to consume!

To all the amazing artists I've worked with this last year—seeing you all bring my characters to life has been an absolute blast. I've loved working with all of you and am in permanent awe of your talent! Special thanks to @PunYum.art who created the character art I use most often on my socials as well as my preorder incentive art!

And especially @the_elyatian_library, who created the first ever fan art I've received and it was so, so, so freaking beautiful it literally brought me to tears. I not only had to buy an 18x20 and a frame for it for my office, but I had to purchase one for my mom, too lol! And then you shocked me even further by creating art of Vae, Dax and Caelan and now Im officially obsessed and finally understand what people mean when they say that art "moves them." Thank you again, soooo much Elyatian Library!

By far the best part of this entire experience has been connecting with so many amazing readers. There have been a group of you who have been SO incredibly supportive and I'd like to take some time to thank some of you

by name (I did reach out to check whether they wanted to use their name or their IG handle, I promise!)

In no particular order, I'd love to send a HUGE thank you to:

Stephanie Rhamstine who has been my BIGGEST cheerleader since day one—and my biggest advocate for getting another cat. Or three.

Becky Laman who Fate led me to through a Reddit thread I found while randomly scrolling for book recs as a reader and is now the head Commander of my Typo Army. Honestly the funniest/oddest way we could have met but I truly believe everything happens for a reason :). Your work is invaluable and I'm so thankful for Fate bringing us together!

Samatha Hickey, Casie Collette, Lisa, Hope, Jessica Trujillo, Julie Gant (who always has such amazing suggestions!!), Jessica Johnson (who entertained me by live-reacted while reading via email while ALSO catching those last few pesky typos… you are amazing!) @book_goblin_reads (and that phenomenal rebind omg I will never get over how beautiful it is! Thank you!), Nicki (and her live reactions to the audiobook which are always delightful haha), @daydreamingmoms (Who always takes the most GORG photos and recs me to her friends. Also—CHI TOWN SOON!), Jamie Bell-Wright, @scottiethegpreads, Bex (@thespicybooklover), @sedonaferetto (who posted such an awesome review and now when you google Caged, the photo of her maniacally biting her kindle is the first or second pic that comes up and it makes me smile every time I see it lol), Jennifer/@blahkiwi, Jamie Ryan (who has been the biggest help with a thousand different things, most recently teaching me how to use discord haha), Cennet (who has been such a huge help and even read an article to teach herself how to properly content pull so she could help me do that with Awakened! You're amazing! ALLLSO for my new favorite Hotel Horrorshow shirt because seriously… she just gets me.), Gao You Xiong/Little.monsters.favs, @ash.reads.alot (who loves Dax almost as much as I do), and soooo many more of you!

And I know.. I FREAKING KNOW I've left some people out. If you don't see your name here, please know that its not because I don't love and appreciate you and your support, but because I have the most awful memory in history (I honestly forgot Dax's eye color in the fist draft of Caged like 8 times).

I love you all so much and I can't wait to see where these next few years take us. What I know for sure, is that I wouldn't want to go on this ride

without you all.

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About the Author



Bernadette Blackthorn is a full time mom, full time reader, and full time romance author. She's forgotten what it feels like to sleep.

Bernadette is an introverted-extrovert who would rather be at home reading a good book with her three judgmental cats named after Game of Thrones Direwolves than literally anything else. When she's not writing the fantasy Omegaverse reverse harem of her dreams or defending why her books absolutely have to be this long and angsty, you can find her devouring anything written by Brandon Sanderson or at one of her son's 472 baseball games.

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