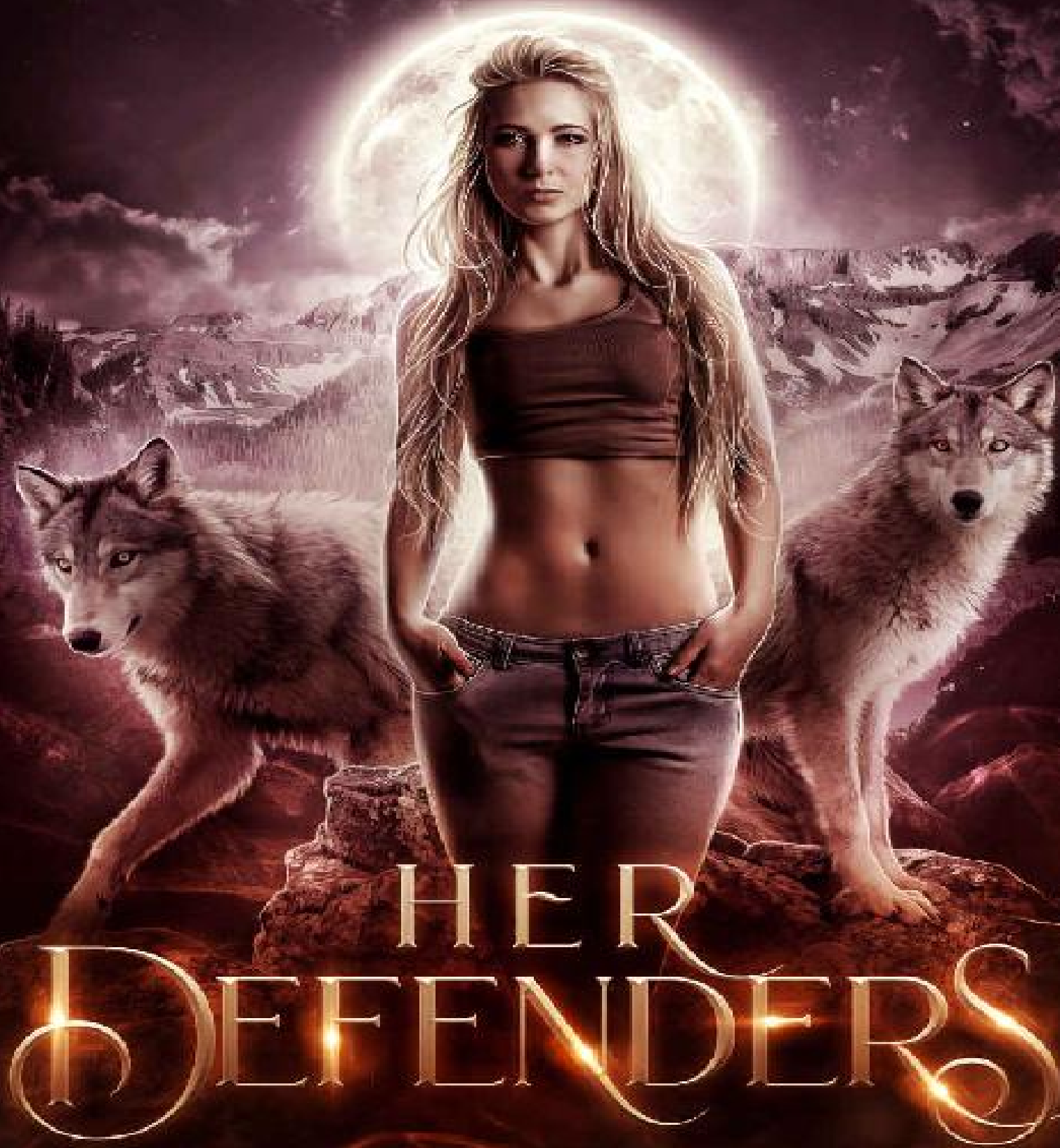


FALL MOUNTAIN SHIFTERS
BOOK TWO



HER
DEFENDERS

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

G. BAILEY



HER
DEFENDERS

Fall Mountain Shifters

HER DEFENDERS

Fall Mountain Shifters Series: Book Two

G. BAILEY

Contents

[Other Books by G. Bailey](#)

[Map](#)

[Description](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Author's Note:](#)



[HER GUARDIANS SERIES](#)

[HER FATE SERIES](#)

[PROTECTED BY DRAGONS SERIES](#)

[LOST TIME ACADEMY SERIES](#)

[THE DEMON ACADEMY SERIES](#)

[DARK ANGEL ACADEMY SERIES](#)

[SHADOWBORN ACADEMY SERIES](#)

[DARK FAE PARANORMAL PRISON SERIES](#)

[SAVED BY PIRATES SERIES](#)

[THE MARKED SERIES](#)

[HOLLY OAK ACADEMY SERIES](#)

[THE ALPHA BROTHERS SERIES](#)

[A DEMON'S FALL SERIES](#)

THE FAMILIAR EMPIRE SERIES

FROM THE STARS SERIES

THE FOREST PACK SERIES

THE SECRET GODS PRISON SERIES

THE REJECTED MATE SERIES

FALL MOUNTAIN SHIFTERS SERIES

ROYAL REAPERS ACADEMY SERIES

THE EVERLASTING CURSE SERIES

Her Defenders 2021 (c) All Rights Reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental and formed by this author's imagination. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Design by Rebecca Frank

Edited by Polished Perfection

 Created with Vellum

Map





*Some people are born with a million stories in their minds.
This is one of mine.*



The alpha rejecting me was just the start of my revenge...

Being an outcast of the wolves was always something I accepted until I met them: the four alpha wolves of Fall Mountain Pack. They showed me I could be so much more than the rejected wolf they found on a beach and saved. They healed me and made me stronger, fixing what was broken in my soul.

But they lied.

Dragged back to the Ravensword Pack, I learn who I am before being left in the hands of the alpha I ran from, starting a war no one can stop. The past that I couldn't remember has caught up with us, and it turns out they were always a part of it. The four alphas, the four parts of Hades's soul separated into alpha wolves.

I never thought being rejected would lead me to my past, but it has, and my past comes with more than a bite.

It comes with wings.

This is a full-length reverse harem romance novel full of sexy alpha males, steamy scenes, a strong heroine and a lot of sarcasm. Intended for 18+ readers.



CHAPTER

ONE

*R*un, little Mary wolf. How do your wolves grow? Run where they can never catch you.

The world spins as I force my tired eyes open, the room around me spinning in a blur of pale greens, vibrant golds and frosty blue colours. I can't scent much other than thick dust, an underlying scent of wolves, and a musky sweetness that lingers in the room. The air around me is brittle, cold, but warm enough to let me know that I'm not outside. There is no breeze here, and from the odd shuffle of feet or paws on the stone, I know I'm not alone. I keep hearing the same word in my mind, played over and over again, as the room comes into focus.

Run. Run. Run.

But I can't.

Not from here.

The first person I see, sitting on a throne made of woven gold in the shape of a wolf's head, is the man who tried to kill me what seems like eons ago. The wolf throne is just as I remember it from all those years ago, back when I was impressed and dazzled by its glory. Back when I trusted an alpha when I was a teenager and got tricked. The gold shines from the light of the frosted indigo blue windows behind it, casting a muddy yellow haze against the massive dome filled with white wolves. The dome has giant white-painted walls fitted with sculptures of gold wolves in various forms in different sections, and the doors reach the ceilings in between them, the wood as ancient as this pack.

But there is only one wolf here that I can't look away from, fear strangling my body like his hands did once. I can't move from the panic and

fear controlling me as I meet his unfeeling hazel eyes.

My fated mate.

The alpha who rejected me.

Alpha Sylvester Ravensword.

My heart is pounding so loud in my ears as I force my palms flat on the cold marble floor underneath me and lean myself up. I'm back in the pack I used to call home, even when it was a poor excuse for one. Daniel's face crosses my mind, the image of him dead in my bed. He did that. He took him from me. Anger makes my bones feel like they are shaking as I see nothing but red. The same red as the god I'm bound to. I refuse to cower in front of this man, this alpha who forces his will and kills anyone who doesn't cower to his rule. I never will again, no matter what he does to me here. I can handle pain, I can handle his attempts to break me. The house exploding, the angel, Phim, all of it comes back to me in a matter of seconds, hurting my heart, one after the other until my heart threatens to burst. The sharp jab I feel deep in my chest has nothing to do with everything I've learnt from Phim but instead, the lies the alphas of Fall Mountain told me. Their names are etched across my heart, and I let them make their home there, assuming they couldn't hurt me. That they wouldn't. I knew I felt familiar around them, and I knew they were keeping secrets.

I just never expected those secrets to be about our past, how deeply woven we all are, apparently since we were children. I can't understand why they didn't tell me, but for some reason, they decided to talk about a woman they all miss who they thought was dead—who is me? I know that I'm never going to get answers now, not without seeing them again.

Even if it risks letting them part with another piece of my already tattered heart, I need the answers they can give me. They know who I was before I was twelve, the answers I've searched for, begged for, and it hurts they never told me. I force myself to push my thoughts to the back of my mind, to focus on the present and keeping myself alive.

How did I get here?

Heavy footsteps fill the silence of the room as I sit up, feeling my hot, sticky blood dripping down the side of my face from an open, stinging cut. My mind seems to finally remember the state of my body, the cuts and bruises from the fallen bricks and rock, and pain jolts through me. I bite down on my tongue as I force myself to sit up, using all the strength I have, my ribs protesting every single movement.

The man who walked past me now stops, and I remember him. The angel. The angel who claimed to be my father. His white hair looks as soft as feathers, maybe even softer, and his wings are gone. A smooth black cloak lines his back.

I don't trust him, and I don't believe for one second he is a good person. He reeks of something foul, and all I want to do is run as far away from him as possible. It seems this room is full of men who make me want to run.

"Alpha Sylvester Ravensword, thank you for honouring me in your pack court."

Kiss ass.

Sylvester inclines his head but never once takes his eyes off me, those eyes burning a hole into the side of my head. The urge to pick myself up and run away from him is all I can hear being roared over and over in my head. But my body doesn't move, and I refuse to cower in front of him ever again. I couldn't run if I tried, let alone fight my way out, but I won't always be injured. If I can get them to lower their guard, just briefly, I could escape in the future.

A tiny part of me knows this might be the last part of my life, that the second he can, Alpha Sylvester is going to kill me.

And I won't get to say goodbye to them. I won't find out any answers.

Not so long ago, I would have embraced death with open arms, wanting the escape it can give me, but they taught me how to live. How to want to live again, and now dying is the very last possible thing I want.

The man who broke me once locks his eyes on mine, his dominance like a thick cloud in the room. "How dare you bring *that* into my pack."

"Mairin is your fated mate, chosen by the moon goddess herself, and you would be wise to take her as your mate, alpha," the angel claims. "She has more power that you could very well use."

Alpha Sylvester laughs, a bellowing laugh that vibrates around the room, and many wolves howl in agreement. My cheeks flush, but I do not lower my head. I'm not that cowering mess of a foster kid anymore.

I'm not weak.

I'm not just a broken doll, just as he called me once. *Broken little Mary, just like a doll that the wolves would destroy.*

When the noise dies down, the angel speaks. "All these years, you have listened to my advice, alpha. As did your father, and his father before him. Do you dare *laugh* at me?"

The tension in the room suddenly builds as two powerful supernatural creatures stare each other down. The angels have been here before? Advising them? How old are they?

I have so many questions, but I stay silent, knowing this isn't the time to ask them.

"You are always welcome, Oisean, but your advice is not. I will accept little Irin as a gift. She has been nothing but troublesome to kill."

Oisean folds his hands behind his back. "With all due respect, killing the goddess's chosen is a grave mistake."

Wolves immediately start to howl, and whispers from the back of the room echo throughout the dome. I remember that voice in the mating pool, the whisper of a promise about being her chosen. I thought I'd imagined it...but maybe not. I haven't a clue what being the chosen means. Nothing pops up in my memory.

Alpha Sylvester's eyes tighten. "You claim this with no proof."

"Are you suggesting I am lying?"

The question is laced with an unsaid threat.

He turns his head to the side, finally looking away from me, and I let out the breath I felt like I was holding in. "What is it you want, Oisean? Isn't your master beckoning, or did he send you here himself to deal with a rejected mate?"

"He knows of her existence and has made his wishes clear. Mairin is to be the next alpha female of Ravensword, or he will call you back to him... displeased."

Whoever this man is, he causes Alpha Sylvester to jolt backwards in fear, mimicking the fear I feel building in my chest like rising water in a stormy sea.

But this wave, when it crashes, would destroy me. All of me. I can't be mated to him.

"I'd rather see you both burn in the pools of the moon goddess than ever mate with him," I say, my voice echoing around the dome. "I am my own wolf."

The silence is deafening, but I am done caring. Done cowering.

Ignoring the pleas of my body and the dizziness I feel, I force my shaky legs to hold me up as I stand. "I refuse you, Alpha Sylvester."

"I'm afraid the choice is not yours, as it is not any female in *my* pack," he coolly replies, a bite behind his words. Many wolves howl, and other

laughs echo around me, the idea of a female having a choice in her mating nothing short of hilarious to them. I've been away from this pack too long, and I've seen what it's like to be treated with respect. I almost forgot what the Ravensword Pack is like, despite living here for so many years. "I believe I will enjoy breaking you in as we mate."

I step back in disgust and fear, memories of that snowy night flashing into my mind.

"I once thought getting rid of you was the correct way to deal with this, but I have seen a different light. We will mate on the next full moon."

"NO!" I angrily scream at him. He doesn't move, my pleas nothing more than whines to him as he sits on his throne. I narrow my eyes. "I will *never* be your mate!"

Oisean looks down at me, his eyes shallow green pits. "I am your father and I own your very existence—"

I laugh, hollow and empty, and he pauses. I believe nothing Phim said about Hades and Persephone, even when a sneaking memory of Henderson showing me that book on Hades comes to mind. Gods and goddesses are gone from the world...and I cannot be one. I don't have an ounce of power. I can't even shift into my wolf, but I am someone. I am myself, and for me, that is enough.

"I am owned by no one, least of all you."

Oisean continues on, like my words are nothing to him. They might be. "Therefore, I can give you to whichever wolf I choose. Alpha Sylvester's breed line has been closely chosen for you and has been for a long time. You will take him as your mate and share your power. What was on that mountain is in your past."

"I will never forget *them*," I counter, holding my head high, despite the poor state of my body. "I will never stop fighting my way back to my pack, the Fall Mountain Pack."

Growls echo around the room this time. Snapping, threatening growls.

Eerily, Oisean only smiles. "The Fall Mountain Pack are no longer an issue. My personal army is currently wiping the island clean of those...wolves. Soon, they will be all dead, and there will be only one pack left on earth. The Ravensword."

The pack under his complete control.

Sickness rises in my throat, alongside enough pure terror that my shaky legs give out from underneath me. They are killing them? The pack, all

those innocent wolves...the alphas. Trey. All of them.

“As always, you know best, Oisean. Will you be staying for the mating?”

The room is spinning, my ears are ringing, and even as I hear them speak about me, I can't think of anything but the horrors Fall Mountain Pack are suffering. They are being slaughtered by angels that can blow up a mountain to get to me. What are they doing to them? How can anyone survive that?

“No, there are important matters waiting for me on the continent,” he claims, but the words are empty to me as I imagine my pack being destroyed. Nothing but grief, panic, and anger fuel me as I shake from head to toe. “But my other daughter will stay here to oversee everything goes ahead smoothly.”

“She will be our welcome guest,” Alpha Sylvester smugly replies. Dread, pure dread, trickles into my soul as Oisean walks past me, not looking back once.

Then I'm alone with the wolves and the alpha who broke me.

The last time I saw him, his wolf refused to let him kill me, and instead he threw me off a cliff, hoping the sea would do what he couldn't. We are bound, in some sick sense, and I have to use it to survive. I can't go back to the broken woman he shaped me into.

Even if my alphas, all four of them, are gone...I won't become what they taught me I wasn't.

I stand up one more time, knowing I don't have much strength left to hold myself up. I wobble, making Alpha Sylvester smile as he enjoys my struggle. Pain threatens to pull me under a dark cloud, but I grit my teeth, and I don't waver.

“I will never be your mate. Moon goddess be damned.”

His eyes blaze green, the same colour as a forest at the height of summer. “This I will enjoy, mate.”

I almost smile at the oblivion he offers as he stalks off his throne and punches me hard in the face.

The darkness just reminds me of them, and they are my home.



CHAPTER

TWO

The one side of my face feels like it's completely broken, or at least my jaw is, for sure. Every breath hurts from my ribs to my face, and even though I can feel myself healing, it's not going to get better for a while. My body aches with the sort of tiredness that threatens the barrier between being conscious and not. Thick purple bruises mark the side of my face, a clash against my pale skin as I stare at myself in the glass's reflection in front of me. Slowly, blood trickles down my chin from an open wound to my lip before dropping onto the perfectly white marble floor. I barely remember being dragged to this room by an unknown male wolf, but as he sharply dropped me on the floor, I woke up enough to see him leave the room. Since then, the only sound I've heard are my laboured breaths and my blood tapping as it hits the floor every few seconds.

The glass window is tall and long, stretching across the wall and rimmed with gold, the same pattern as the dome. But even though it is a window, it offers no view other than a brick wall and a tiny patch of grass below it. This castle is in the middle of the city. I know because I've been here before. So long ago. It's where the alpha lives with his betas and a few selected staff, but I can't hear anything, no sound of life in this cold place. The longer I stare at the glass, the longer I wonder if I could break it, even though it is no doubt shatterproof. It's like a sick joke. A secret way of Alpha Sylvester getting back at me, locking me in a room with a massive window so I could see out but never truly see anything outside. Alone and contained. Exactly as he likes me.

Until I bite back. I might not be able to shift, thanks to Silas, but I will not go down without a fight, even in the state I am in. With more strength than I thought it would take, I manage to crawl the tiny distance to the glass, though I'm sure I slip in and out of consciousness several times before I look up, hoping to see the sky, but instead I see nothing other than closed in walls.

I spent so long fighting to stay alive on that island, finding myself a new home, finding men who are nothing like the men from the pack I came from, only to be thrown right back here to this place that tried to kill me.

The pack who broke me took me from the only place in the world I had healed, sewing back the pieces of my soul I thought were lost.

Now I'm back where I started, but I am not weak. I am not bowing down to him. Part of me tries to remember my training with Silas, and I think about what he would tell me to do if he were here. I can almost imagine his scowl, his anger. Almost. The door to the room opens with a bang and seconds later swings shut as I hear footsteps getting close. Boots click across the floor, each step echoed.

Soon a shadow hangs over me, and I barely have to look up to know who it is. I can almost sense her. The beta who betrayed her pack and lied to us all. Seraphim Fall. If that's even her real name. "Wow. He really messed you up," she says, something akin to pity in her voice. "Alphas are always hotheads, but that one has a nasty temper."

I don't respond to her. She's as bad as him in my books. He speaks with his fists, with his temper, and she excels in lies.

Phim leans down and picks me up off the floor like I weigh nothing, and I have no energy to fight her, not as every part of my body screams in agony as she moves me. She lies me on the soft bed, my blood and dust from my clothes soiling the white sheets.

Finally, our eyes clash as she stands over me. Phim looks as stunning as always, sweet-faced, green angel eyes, with hair like flowing fire. Dressed in leather, weapons littering her body, nothing has changed about her style. Just who she is. I used to look up to her, count her as a friend, and now it's all just a joke to me.

I was fooled. My alphas were fooled by her.

Whatever she sees in my eyes makes her swiftly look away. "I was told to keep you alive until the mating. If you can keep your mouth shut, you might have a chance at actually walking to your mate instead of hobbling."

“I’d rather you kill me, Seraphim,” I growl out.

“I thought he broke you for a second there. I see you’re still alive and fighting, with that spirit of yours.”

“You’re deranged.”

“Everything I have ever told you is true, even the part about us being sisters...in a sense. It’s complicated but—”

“You’re no family to me, Seraphim. Now get out.”

Her eyes narrow on me. “I’m going to look after you, keep you alive, you could at least be thankful.”

“I don’t want your help,” I tell her, moving away from her hands even when my body protests.

She shakes her head at me and grabs my shoulder, pulling me on my back with no effort at all. “I need to stitch up your head so you don’t bleed out. The rest will heal in time.”

Her voice lowers. “The forbidden god won’t let you die here, even if his reach is slim.”

“You said they are the forbidden god. The alphas.”

“They are,” she thoughtfully replies. “And you are more than you think, Mai.”

“You don’t get to call me that,” I retort.

Her eyes shutter, a pretence going up. “Fine. Mairin.”

I’m silent as she disappears and comes back with a bowl of hot water and a first aid kit. As she pulls out bandages, I can’t help the words that escape my lips softer than they should. “How could you betray them? How could you do that? They saved you!”

“You don’t know anything about the world around you, Ma-Mairin. Everything is different now.”

What in the wolf is that supposed to mean?

Her eyes seem to say more than she is saying out loud, or I might be imagining it, wanting her to be anything other than what she is to me now. I can’t trust her. I can’t trust anybody in this pack, not even the goddess they worship. The door opens one more time, and Phim tenses. I stay frozen as Alpha Sylvester comes around the bed, and he isn’t alone. His large hand rests on the shoulder of a familiar boy, Jesper. The eight-year-old boy I knew now looks much different, not cold or cruel but indifferent to me, like Alpha Sylvester’s influence on him has changed him to his very core. The friendly and aloof boy now seems to have developed a frown that’s

permanently etched on his face, his eyes nothing but guarded as he looks over me.

“Jesper...,” I whisper, and he turns away to look up at Alpha Sylvester, a look of longing, almost like the alpha is his father. Daniel warned me about this, that the alpha had taken Jesper in, no doubt to use against me...but now, it’s real. I can’t pretend it isn’t happening, that the boy I see as a brother is now under the control of a man I dread and abhor. I realize what’s happening straight away, and I comprehend exactly why he brought him here.

He’s using him against me like he has dug out a slice of my heart and now holds it on a string, forcing me to comply with his commands. I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes in response, even as my heart lurches in my chest.

“Hello, Mairin,” Jesper eventually says to me. It hurts to hear his voice when it’s like this, when he isn’t safe. I guess, in a way, he never has been. This is my fault, and if he is hurt, it would be my fault too. “You’ve been gone a long time.”

Those words hurt me right down to the core of my soul. I know he means that I left him for longer than I promised I would. I told him I’d go to that mating ceremony, find a mate and convince my mate to let me see Jesper sometime soon. That I’d come back. I promised him that. But I didn’t do it. I left him alone because I had no choice. I wonder if he actually knows that. I wonder if he knows that I didn’t leave my pack of my own free will. What is the story that they’re spinning to the rest of the pack? Because it can’t be the truth.

Phim clears her throat. “Why is the kid here? Do you like showing your young wolves injured females?”

“I cannot help that Irin was injured on her way home to us,” Alpha Sylvester smoothly lies. “The pack is delighted to learn that you’re back from your minor incident where you fell off the cliff and then got captured by the Fall Mountain Pack before escaping home. I thought my darling mate would never return.”

“I fell?” I deadpan.

Tightening his hand on Jesper’s shoulder, Jesper winces just a little. “Yes, you fell. I lost many wolves trying to save you, including my youngest beta. Don’t you remember all this? Did you hit your head that hard?”

But the message is clear from that grip on Jesper's shoulder. I play along with this story, do exactly what he wants, or he's going to kill him. I can do nothing, since I won't risk his life. He is just eight years old.

My life is not worth his. I'm not worth it.

Tears fill my eyes as I turn myself away, flinching at the pain it causes, but I can't look at them anymore. I still feel the alpha's smugness, his awareness that he has won this round. It was always a losing battle for me since he has Jesper. I stare up at the ceiling, wishing it to be something more than the beautiful part of the mural-covered ceiling it is, willing it to be an open glass window I can just fly out of. Eventually, the footsteps fade, and the door opens and closes again.

Once the alpha's presence has left, the room already feels brighter. Better. I barely feel Phim here as she starts brushing the side of my face with warm water and then stitching the cut. I want to say something to her, but a numbness has taken over.

A numbness and emptiness I haven't felt in a long time. A feeling I thought the alphas of Fall Mountain had healed me of...until I found out they had lied to me.

I feel like I'm worth nothing once again. Maybe that feeling never truly left.

When she's done, she leans down, her dark berry scent overwhelming me. She still smells like the mountain. She still scents like our pack.

"Don't give up hope. Remember, the forbidden god is always here."

But hope is a far off, empty feeling as I drift into a restless sleep where I see four vipers wrapped around a pomegranate, embracing and protecting the fruit from the darkness below.



CHAPTER

THREE

*A*s I lie healing in a bed lined with ash, dust and blood, seconds turn into hours. The hours turn into days until all I can feel is trapped, trapped in this empty, soundless room. There's only a heavy black metal-framed double bed, a black chest of drawers that are empty, and the window. The glass window, I found out, is as unbreakable as I thought it would be. Pieces of wood line the floor by the window, one of my many attempts to break it with the chest of drawers. Yesterday, at least I think it was yesterday, I tried throwing myself at the window repeatedly until something in my chest cracked and I screamed.

But no one came for me.

There's a simple marble bathroom attached to this room, with no door and only an open shower, a toilet, toothbrush and paste, and towels. Every day, I sit in the shower until the water turns cold, and even then, I don't move until it shuts off. Even my showers have limits. My unruly hair is a mess of locks now, falling to the middle of my back, and without a hairbrush, it has grown out of control.

Every morning, the doors open just a slight bit for a wolf to drop in a basket full of food and fresh clothing, but I won't eat anything. I flush all the food they give me down the toilet, even as my stomach begs me to eat it. Even as the little weight I carry has disappeared, and I now can count my ribs. That's the only slight contact I get and have gotten for what feels like weeks and days, or possibly longer, I've lost track. Nothing much changes in here unless I sleep, and dreams haunt me more than the silence here. Every dream is the same: the pomegranate and the four vipers. They are

always protecting the fruit, almost in a loving way, but I can't figure out why.

I don't remember at this point how I got to sitting in the middle of the bed, my sheets all over the floor in a dirty pile thanks to the state I arrived in at this place. I pick at the springs in the mattress, digging down deeper into them, hoping to get one out that I could use as a weapon. It's that bit of stubbornness I have left that the alpha can't force out of me, the part of me that still daydreams of four black wolves coming to save me.

But they are gone, that much is clear. The pack I was in love with is destroyed, and there is just this existence now.

Sometimes I wonder if death would be a better ending than this.

But I keep digging until I hear the door handle move. Sylvester walks into the room with a swagger to his steps, stinking of wine and females. His dark hair is a blanket of black paint around his face, stopping at his beefy shoulders. I can't see why any female would find him attractive. Everything about him, from his hazel eyes to his stance, screams anger. Resentment.

I glare at him, no doubt looking like a wild beast as I sit in the bed, and he goes where he always does by the window, folding his arms behind his back.

The alpha comes here once or twice a week to taunt me, and usually I ignore every word he says. Usually I pretend he isn't here. Usually that ends with him storming out.

I don't know why he comes, why he doesn't attack me, why I am even bothering to wonder about these things.

Deep down in my soul, all I want to do is rip his throat out.

Sylvester keeps himself looking out of the window, taunting me with the fact that this window shows no kind of view whatsoever. It shows a wall, a brick wall of a small garden underneath. The most exciting thing I see all day is the odd bee or fly that flutters through the garden before deciding it is not even interesting to them.

"How are you holding up?" he finally asks. The same question every time. The same nice tone. Almost like he expects me to pretend we don't have a bloody and messy past. To pretend I don't want to kill him.

I believe he simply thinks I'm not a threat to him. I can't shift, I can't bite back.

Not yet.

But I will.

“Do you really care?” I dryly respond.

“You’re my mate. We are bound by the moon goddess herself,” he answers, like the word *mate* means anything to him. I grew up believing the fairy tales of mates, how the bond between them was a force of nature, beautiful and empowering, and a way to complete your soul. Mates are the last bit of magic we have in the world from our ancestors, the first wolves to run this world, created by the gods themselves. They created the mating bond, a mimic of their bonds between each other. Love, the very emotion that every god worshipped, more so than any other emotion. The bond is meant to give you access to their minds, to their souls, and open up parts of yourself you didn’t know were closed off, but this is far from that. We don’t have a natural bond. We are so far from the meaning of mates. If anything, the only natural bond I felt to anyone has been how I felt about them—the alphas of Fall Mountain.

I can’t even think of their names, not without a jolt of despair and hopelessness swirling inside my heart. Mates know when the other is dead, when the other is in pain, when their souls have gone to be with the moon goddess. That’s what I was told, and even if this pack has messed up some of the truth, I believe that still stands. Mates’ souls are woven tighter than any rope could bind, and they might not be my mates, but I feel like our souls are woven somehow. We are connected, and I am forcing myself to hope they are alive, like something inside me tells me they are. I can’t give up all hope. I just can’t.

“Where is the goddess now, then? We have nothing other than a pool of glowing water and two statues left to guide us, and she is wrong. This is wrong,” I growl out. His murky hazel eyes watch me, like a snake watching under the guise of a pond.

“When you went over the sea, I could feel you fight for your life and then fight more on that island with them. I felt you, your soul, and my wolf wanted very much to claim you. I, on the other hand, do not have that interest,” he states, never looking at me once. “I have females begging for me every single day, and have done since I was of age, and taking a mate would force my wolf into breeding with one wolf. I want many.”

“So that’s why?”

“As well as your place in the pack. As well as our personal history. You are spoiled goods and of no interest to me.”

“You’re a bastard, do you know that?” I sneer, trying to pretend his words don’t cut me deep.

The look he gives me is downright terrifying. “I am your alpha, Irin, and you are nothing more than a tiny wolf with no family. The only part of you that is interesting is between your legs.”

“You are not my alpha. I swore myself to four alphas, and they are each a better wolf than you could ever be!”

“Our bond says different. Our bond says we are two halves of the same soul,” he responds, his voice calm but his body tense. He wants to snap. He wants to hurt me. And at this point, I’d take the pain to show him that he isn’t right. That he hasn’t won.

“I don’t know how you managed to feel some part of my soul, but I don’t feel this bond that you talk of. I don’t care if the moon goddess linked you to me, but I am certain she didn’t link me to you.”

“You talk nonsense,” he snaps.

But I don’t think I do. He is linked to me, not the other way around. Not surprisingly, he changes the subject. “Do you remember that one time that I snuck you into this palace and we went to see the sacred moon goddess statue while it was being worshipped by the priestesses?”

I do remember that night, weeks before he revealed his true colours. He kissed me that night, just a peck, and even then I thought he tasted like ash.

I should have known, in that sacred place, he was nothing but a destroying fire that would hurt me. But back then, I was desperate for acceptance in a pack that showed me none. I wished for a friend; I wished for company, and I was given the wolf I wished for. Sylvester showed me things throughout the city I’d never seen, never been allowed to see. He took me away from that foster house, and like a kid needing candy, I followed him, never questioning anything about his motives. I loved seeing this castle and learning its history. Apparently, there used to be a queen who lived here until she was killed in one of the many shifter uprisings before this place was locked away from the rest of the world. The castles themselves, they are beautiful creations, only improved by the master builders in the early days of the wall creation.

“The priestesses did not like us watching,” I say, briefly thinking of the women who swear their lives to the moon goddess and do her bidding. They each wear cloaks the same shade as the moon, grey and black mixed together, and I’ve never seen all of their faces, just glimpses of eyes and

chins, sometimes a smile in the right light. On their wrists are metal bracelets with a crescent diamond stone.

He laughs, the noise grating to my ears. I don't know why I bother interacting with him, causing him to laugh. I suppose it's a strange mindset that has fallen over me. Not talking to anyone has made me talk to him, and I bet he knows it. I wonder if this is his plan, to wear me down by this forced isolation, hoping that I would be crazy enough to actually mate with him in the end.

Or he will force me.

I know he likes to do that. My mouth feels full of ash once again, and a disgusted, fearful shiver shakes through me. The funny thing is, I've already decided I'd rather throw myself off that cliff again than ever let him mate with me. He won't have me or my body ever again. Breeding? Even the words he uses to talk about me are disgusting. Everything would be worth it. The falling, the weightlessness, all of it. Even feeling my body crash into the water would be a better feeling than going anywhere near him. He must be able to sense the change in my attitude, as his eyes narrow.

"Their opinion does not matter. I am their alpha, and I own them as much as I own you."

"Apparently the angels own you."

Winding him up might not be my smartest move when he's a wild animal in every sense of the word. Cruel, sadistic, uncontrolled, all those things rolled into one evil piece of shit.

"You know nothing about them," he retorts, a punishing smile gracing his face. "They know everything about you, Mairin. Don't you want to ask me about your past? Where you came from?"

I tilt my head to the side. "I've always wanted to know my past, but even if you told me the truth, I would not believe you. You are a liar."

"Hating me this much will make our mating so much more difficult. Why can't you bow down and accept it like any good female would in your position?"

I pause. "I used to think I hated you for what you did. For rejecting me at the mating ceremony. For forcing yourself on me when I told you no. When I ran away from you and begged you to leave me alone. You took what wasn't yours then, and now, here you are, doing it once more. But the very truth of it is that I feel nothing for you except pity. Pity that you could never be an ounce of good, and one day you're going to fall off that throne

you love so much. Dragged off by wolves, I imagine. Four alpha wolves, and I will be there. I will help them rip you apart.”

He growls. The sound vibrates off the walls as he stomps across the room and grabs my throat with his sweaty, beefy hand and lifts me in the air like a doll. A doll he wants to control and break. Once, I was that. I am not anymore. I try not to fight him, but natural instinct takes over as I claw at his hand, gasping for precious air. This reminds me of the last time he held me like this over a cliff and his wolf wouldn't let him kill me.

As I stare into his hazel eyes, I swear I see his wolf there, biting his way to the surface of his mind.

“They are not going to come for you,” he bitterly warns me. “Loving them is pointless. You are mine. They are too busy dealing with whatever is left of their pack, if they're not dead themselves. The angels always did like to clean up their own mess, and they're very good at it.”

I stay silent, refusing to give him any sign of fear. Any sign of what his words do to me. How they destroy me.

With a huff, he drops me onto the bed, and I gasp for air, rubbing my throat before I start laughing.

“Your wolf is in command, isn't he? That's why you can't kill me. How funny, the alpha doesn't even have control of himself.”

This time, I'm not shocked as he picks me up and throws me across the room, my head smacking against the wall and sending me into blissful darkness.

A graphic for the chapter title. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a large, white, serif font, with the letter "C" being significantly larger than the others. Below it, the word "FOUR" is written in a smaller, white, serif font. The background is a dark, misty forest of evergreen trees, with the trees appearing as silhouettes against a lighter, hazy sky.

CHAPTER

FOUR

“Come.”

The voice jolts me from my sleep. My dream was different this time. There were bats flying around the vipers and the pomegranate. The sight was dark, but at the same time, I didn’t want to leave the dream. And I swear I heard a possessive dark voice shouting at me through the surrounding mist. All I heard was the words *mine* and *soon* repeated again and again. I sit up sharply, looking at the man standing in front of the open door, a slight breeze blowing in from outside.

Outside.

“Come where? Who are you?”

His eyes are a bright hazel colour, with flickers of gold and embers of fire within them. The wolf shifter is handsome, in the way all male wolves are. His thick brown hair curls around his forehead and ears. The tips of some strands look like they are kissed with gold. After being around wolves my entire life, I can sense his power. He isn’t a weak wolf.

“Beta Cenwyn Ravensword.” His voice is deep, commanding, and he speaks with power flowing through his words. Untouched power, I suspect. The alpha of this pack wouldn’t let a wolf this strong become his beta unless he was in check and under his complete control.

Like everyone in his pack must be. Or they die. “And I am here to escort you to the alpha. He is waiting.”

“Th-the mating isn’t today, is it?”

If he says yes, I’m not leaving this room without a fight. I have carefully made myself look weak and untrained, preparing for any single moment I can grab a weapon and fight my way out. I just need a chance,

but if the mating is now, then my time is out. There is no point in plotting and hiding who I am.

“No, Mairin. The mating ceremony is planned in one weeks’ time, when there is a full moon. A tradition, of course.”

I’m sure he sees the relief in my eyes as I slide out of the bed. I never get fully undressed now, not trusting that the room doesn’t have cameras or someone isn’t watching. The shower is the only place I let myself break down, crying and screaming until my voice is raw. It’s the only way I can get myself to sleep in this horror of a castle. Wordlessly, I pull my boots on and brush my hands down my baggy white dress that I was given. The beta’s eyes flicker to the pile of plates, full of uneaten food, the rotting smell filling the room. After the alpha beat me up for a second time, I decided I was done flushing the food he gives me. I’m not eating it, forcing my body to survive on water, no matter how dizzy it makes me.

It’s the little bit of rebellion I have left in me.

“Your room will be cleaned while we are gone.”

“Why?” I bluntly ask him.

His eyes finally stare directly at me. A bold move for a beta, to look into the eyes of the intended mate of the alpha, at least according to my studies in school. Part of me suspects it isn’t the same case in another pack. “Eating nothing will only harm yourself, Mairin.”

I keep my face blank, as empty as I feel. “Don’t you think being forced into mating is going to harm me?”

His eyes flicker from a deep hazel into a forest green, the same colour as my own. But I know it’s his wolf taking over, talking to him. “We must leave.”

I don’t respond to that as he steps back, and I walk out of my prison of a room into the open corridor, staring at the thick tapestry hung on the wall in front of my door. The tapestry is gold and green, laced with silver crescent moons, and it is beguiling to stare at. I’ve only seen glimpses of the tapestry, but now, as I gaze at it, it’s more interesting than it should be. After all, it’s just fabric hanging on a wall, no doubt made in honour of the moon goddess. A goddess I have turned my back on.

Beta Cenwyn wraps his smooth hand around my lower arm and carefully drags me down the corridor full of tapestries, no single one of them the same. We head through an archway that leads outside, a small pathway built into the side of the castle, and I gasp as I breathe in my first

real mouthful of fresh air and see the sky. It's late evening, the slowly setting sun is casting deep colours into the River Thames in the distance. The towering buildings look like paintings in the reflection of the clear water.

Cenwyn softly tugs on my arm, making it clear we can't stay. I miss the cold air the second we are inside once more, heading down a marble corridor with gold-rimmed walls, chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and a few paintings of wolves that must have taken the artist many months to complete. Soon, too soon, we go through another archway and into the dome I was in that first day here. The gold throne is the same, the intimidating sheer gold woven wolf, each one of its teeth the size of my head and daunting as I look into its eyes. I remember seeing it for the first time, a mixture of wonder and fear filling me at the sight. I had heard about the throne—everyone has done—but seeing it in person is something else. I remember Sylvester telling me the gold wolf was given to his ancestors as a gift from the moon goddess herself, one of the very few things touched by her in this pack. They say the gold wolf gives the alpha the right to judge anyone before them, and it is meant to be a token of luck for the alpha. They are one wolf. But to me, seeing how it's curled around Alpha Sylvester as he sits on the throne, the wolf reminds me of a snake.

A snake about to bite anyone who dares to come close.

The rest of the dome is empty, but I hear the chatter, the soft movements of paws on stone not that far away as I breathe in the light breeze that smells like the nearby river and wolves.

"Put her on her knees," Sylvester demands, almost lazily, but his eyes are too alert, too locked onto me to be anything other than aware. It's a test for Cenwyn, who he no doubt knows is a good person, a good soul. To him, it is a weakness. To this pack, it is a sign of someone being easy to manipulate, and it's one of the reasons I will never be in this pack. I will never be their alpha female.

Cenwyn's eyes are apologetic as he leads me to the side of the gold wolf, and rather than forcing him to push me down, I willingly fall to my knees with his hand on my shoulder so it looks like he pushed me. I look to the side as Cenwyn walks away, locking my eyes on Sylvester and hating the smile on his face.

"Bring them in."

The command is simple, and soon we aren't alone anymore. The room is slowly crammed with shifters, some in human form, others in their white wolf form. The sight is overwhelming as I feel all their eyes on me at once, examining me, wondering what the real truth is behind the story the alpha has told them. At least I hope some of them are wondering. They deserve to know the truth.

Usually a familiar face in the crowd would make me smile, help me not feel so alone, but not when it's Jesper. Not in this place. He walks to Sylvester's side, and Sylvester inclines his head as Jesper looks forward. I almost let out a little noise from the back of my throat, an almost silent plea for Jesper to look at me. I want to embrace him, telling him it's okay and I'm going to save him from this pack.

But the truth is, I'm just as much a prisoner as he is.

The skies open, rain tip-tapping on the glass dome, filling the dome with much needed noise. As I look back down, I spot Phim resting against a wall, picking her nails with a dagger and looking bored in a tight red lace top and high-waisted jeans. She doesn't look at me, but I almost feel like I can sense her attention directed my way.

Eventually, the room goes quiet with the lift of Alpha Sylvester's hand, and a pathway is made through the wolves for a man to walk in with a young woman at his side. The man is an older wolf with short grey hair and bright brown eyes that match the woman's eyes. The woman is about my age, if I had to guess, and her eyes are bright compared to the veil of thick, dark brown hair that falls to her waist in unusual braids and plaits. And she is beautiful in a classic sense, with a curvy body under a torn grey dress.

Her eyes turn my way, and I see nothing but pure rebellion in them.

And I smile.

Only for a second, enough for her to know she isn't on her own. Everyone deserves to feel like they aren't on their own. Just once in their lives, because they will never forget it.

I know I haven't.

They both stop before the alpha, and the seconds tick on in the sheer silence of the room.

"Explain yourselves."

Two words that tell me everything about what is going to happen next. This is a wolf trial, and they never end well for anyone involved. To be

brought in front of the alpha means the betas couldn't deal with whatever has happened. And that's not good.

My hands are sweating as I curl them into fists.

The woman goes to speak, but the man places his hand on her shoulder, and she stops, defiance sparking in her eyes.

The nervous man clears his throat. "My name is Artair Ravensword, and this is my daughter, Breelyn Morgan Ravensword. Last month, my daughter entered the mating pool, and a mate was chosen."

"My beta, Dragos," Alpha Sylvester adds, and harsh whispers fill the room.

"Y-yes, alpha," Artair reluctantly agrees. "We were excited for such a mating and happy to invite him into our family, as we joined with his. But the mating did not go as planned. Dragos had a temper—"

"Whatever he wished to do with his mate is allowed under my laws," Alpha Sylvester interrupts. The laws in this pack always favour the males. Always. "I don't want to hear from you anymore. Speak, Breelyn Morgan."

She holds her head high, her words strong. "After many, many nights of beatings and more...I stabbed Dragos in the heart and watched him die on my bed. I do not regret my actions."

This time, the room explodes into chatter, shocked gasps and whispers.

Breelyn never even blinks. Not one tiny bit of regret enters her face or eyes, and I instantly like her. She doesn't want anyone's pity, even mine, as it burns in my chest for what she must have gone through.

At least the bastard is dead.

Alpha Sylvester stands, and the room goes silent as he walks to them. Artair steps in front of his daughter, trying to block her from the alpha's wrath, but Alpha Sylvester grabs him by his shirt and throws him out of the way. He slides to a stop near me, something cracking on the impact, and he cries out. Before I've thought about it, I rush to Artair's side and help him sit up.

Sylvester has Breelyn by the throat, her feet dangling in the air, but she doesn't fight him. She just stares.

"For your crime, you will die by my hand. I do detest killing females when there are so few of them in our pack, but you are clearly too wild for anyone to tame. Although taming you does sound tempting."

The wolves laugh, mostly male, the sound grating on my nerves even as the thought makes me want to puke over all of them.

“Wait!” Artair screams, crawling out of my grip and to his feet. He holds his hands up and walks towards them. “Wait, please!”

Alpha Sylvester slowly turns his glowing green eyes to Artair as I kneel right behind where he stands. “Take my life and spare hers. Please. She is young and was foolish, but she has a good soul underneath. Please don’t take my only daughter’s life because of a reckless decision she made.”

“Father, don—” Breelyn tries to shout, but Sylvester tightens his grip on her neck, cutting her off.

“Beta Cenwyn,” Sylvester says, dropping Breelyn to the floor. Cenwyn is there in seconds, picking Breelyn up and holding her to his chest as she tries to fight his grip. “Make sure she watches.”

“Understood,” Cenwyn dutifully replies as Breelyn starts cursing him and the alpha to hell.

Sylvester walks past Artair, who holds himself up, and stops in front of me. “Stand, my female.”

Gritting my teeth, I stand up and narrow my eyes on him. “You have a choice. Kill Artair, or I will take both their lives.”

I go numb, unable to feel anything as sickness rises in the back of my throat. I can’t do this. I just can’t. I’ve taken one life before, and it killed me to do that, haunted me for weeks and will always be in the back of my mind. Taking another life would be my undoing. Especially like this. I can’t do this. I can’t.

“Bastard!” Breelyn screams, the sound echoing around the room. “I will kill you if you touch him! I will kill you all! All of you are going to burn with Hades in hell!”

Sylvester doesn’t even flinch at her screams, not like I do. Cenwyn simply holds her in place, his face blank of emotion.

Artair turns to me and meets my wary eyes. “Please save her.”

The request turns my stomach to stone and my heart to rock as every last bit of my morality flies out of my soul. “I will take your life.”

“Good,” Sylvester purrs, sliding a gold hilted dagger out of his side pocket of his trousers. He wraps his hand around the hilt and presses the tip into Artair’s chest, above his heart.

“Press on my hand and take his life with me. It will be a bonding moment for us.”

I barely hear Sylvester’s words as my ears are ringing with Breelyn’s screams amidst the crowd’s cheers and taunts as I walk closer.

“I’m sorry,” I tell Artair.

I expected to see him fear death in these moments, but instead, he looks happy. Peaceful just before he looks over his shoulder at his daughter. Without thinking too long on it, I wrap my hand around the base of the dagger and push it forward with all my strength. It easily slides into his chest, and he gasps, a choked sound. I catch him as he falls forward, and gently lie him down on the stone floor.

In death, he looks at peace. That’s all I can repeat in my mind to stop myself from falling apart as I close his eyes. Then the same words I told Daniel as we buried him repeat in my mind before I speak them.

“Gone, but not forgotten. Our wolves will run together in the afterlife one day.”

“Now for you...” I glance up to see Sylvester smothered in burning dark green shifter energy before his massive alpha wolf is standing where he was. He howls, the sound echoing around the room before he lifts a giant paw and slashes it across Breelyn’s face. Shock makes me freeze as Breelyn’s scream hurts my heart. I will never forget that scream.

“Stop!” I cry out, but before I can move, enormous hands wrap around my upper arms, two massive shifters grabbing me, and they start dragging me away. The last I see of Breelyn is as Beta Cenwyn picks her up and carries her out of the dome, covered in her blood as the alpha howls, his delight soaking the room in turmoil.

That’s what happens to a female who dares to fight back in this pack.

And after today, I know if I don’t escape this pack, it is going to break me.



CHAPTER

FIVE

The ringing bells are the first sign that this is the day I'll be mating to the alpha of Ravensword Pack. This is a day I prayed and hoped would never come, but every prayer and plea over the last month has fallen on deaf ears. No one is saving me, and I cannot save myself. I can hear the bells outside, the constant echoing of them haunting me as I wake up from dreams that I still don't understand. The dreams seem to be more pressured this time, like they are trying to tell me something. The four vipers have their red eyes locked on to me. The way they caress the pomegranate so slowly, never crushing the berries inside, makes me wonder if it's him. Well, them. The forbidden god. I don't know how they can be them in my dreams or what the vipers and pomegranate are supposed to mean, but it shouldn't surprise me. This is god magic, and they have more than anyone has seen in a long time. On that first day we met, they used magic on me to save my life, poured magic into my soul, fixing me, healing me, and linking my soul to their god. Magic they shouldn't have had. I just never questioned it, and I should have done.

But I may never get to ask them the questions burning in my mind, because I'm far past the point of desperation. I'm done. I'm numb to it all, and there is only one way out for me now. There's a balcony I can jump off on my way to the mating and not survive the fall. It's the only plan I can figure out. The only way I have a chance. I have to do something, because mating with that monster is not happening. My soul will never be bound to his. Unsurprisingly, my bedroom door opens with a click, and it's the alpha himself that walks in, a dress folded over his arm. The dress is white and sparkling, with bits of green littered all the way to the edges. It is beautiful

and toxic all at the same time. The alpha isn't dressed for the day yet, wearing a dark emerald shirt and combat trousers that stink of whiskey, and they are dotted with blood on his sleeves.

"Good morning," he says, almost cheerfully. Like yesterday didn't happen, like he didn't force me to kill someone and he didn't mark a young woman's face for life for defending herself after repeated abuse.

The alpha's mark, claws across the face, is a barbaric and old way of alphas marking females as their own. The woman isn't allowed to heal, and the mark's set for the rest of her life. I heard about it in history class in school.

It's haunting me now to look at him, to be reminded about absolutely everything he has put me through, and he doesn't care. There isn't an inch of humanity left in him. He kills for fun and sport. He hurts people and takes great pleasure in it, and I know this because I've seen it every time he beats me, the thrill in his eyes. I fall off the side of the bed in my escape.

"Get out," I hiss. He throws the dress onto the bed for me, his eyes eating me up like a dessert before he starts smoothing out the dress almost delicately. "I'm not mating with you."

He shakes his head, clicking his tongue as he stalks around the bed towards me. My heart beats fast as he comes closer, boxing me into the space between the bedside cabinet and him.

"That's not what you're going to be begging me to do later when I chase you through the forest in the mating ceremony. I will hunt you, bite you, claim you, and the pack will enjoy it almost as much as me," he says. I revolt in disgust, turning away as my heart pounds. *Don't be sick. Don't be sick.*

He sighs as he steps back, making it possible for me to breathe again. I watch as he goes to the window and just stands there for a second, taunting me with the fact that I've spent more weeks locked in this room, trapped with my mind, dreams, and that window that shows nothing of the world outside. "Put the dress on, brush your hair, and then knock on the door. You'll be escorted to the ceremony."

My hands shake, and I clamp them down on the edge of the bedside unit. "I told you, I'm not mating with you."

He turns around, his eyes frosting over into a luminous green, his tall frame towering over me like I'm a bug. "I will kill everybody that is close to you, slowly in front of you, if you dare show me up today. You will be

my mate, you will accept everything I give you with a smile in public or face consequences that will have you begging for my forgiveness. You've always been stubborn, Irin, and once I thought I loved that about you. I thought you felt the same, but—"

"But you turned out to be a monster who couldn't take no for an answer. How could I ever, ever love you?"

"You will!" he roars into my face. "You will be my mate!"

"Never," I sneer. His jaw pops before he punches me hard across my face, and I slam into the mattress, seeing stars.

"Look what you've made me do! I didn't want you bruised today when the pack is watching."

I don't answer him as he rants on and I struggle to get my eyesight fully back. I roll onto my back, my face aching as I stare at the ceiling. Every snarky word is lost from my lips, because he has someone I would sacrifice myself for. Jesper. I know exactly who he means when he threatens to kill someone I love. Because I do love Jesper, and he is just a child. There's only one person in this pack that particularly means something to me. Maybe two if Mike is here. He's missing. If what Daniel said is true, he's been missing for a long time; he could be dead already. Part of me wants him to stay hidden, well away from the dangers here.

Thankfully, Alpha Sylvester walks to the door, pausing. "At least take a shower. You smell like mountains and forbidden magic. It's repulsive."

"I scent like them."

His growl fills the room, even as the thought makes me smile. He slams the door, the whole wall vibrating with the force of it, and I collapse to my knees, tears streaming down my face. I've tried to hold them in for so long when he is here, because I know crying and screaming does nothing but show him weakness that he can use against me. I won't show him that. He's not getting any satisfaction from me. The bells never stop ringing as I weep, and they won't do until the mating is over. I only heard about the bells in stories. The sacred bells to mark the alpha mating, only touched and rung by the priestesses.

The ceremony, the mating itself, will destroy me. Fear trickles into my body enough to get my heart pounding, enough for me to force myself to my feet. I've decided what I'm doing, and I have decided that I'm not mating with him. Sitting here crying is not going to get me any closer to that balcony, and if I scream my frustration out, knowing my luck, Alpha

Sylvester might come in and force me to dress and escort me by carrying me to the mating. I need to be able to walk. I need a second to jump or do something or grab a dagger or anything.

I jump into the hot shower and only leave when the water is cold, when it's clear I need to. I brush through my wet hair, not bothering to dry it as it dries pretty quickly anyway, before sliding my dress on. The laces take me at least half an hour to tie them one by one, making the corset tighter until I feel it's the only thing holding me up. This might be the last dress I wear. It has to be.

I turn and look at my reflection, staring for longer than I usually do. I've decided I never want to wear white again or green, for that matter, despite it being my favourite colour. Now it will just remind me of this dress, the green leaves woven into layers of white lace chiffon and white silk flowing around my feet. It's tight, tying at the top of my neck and falling into a low neckline that leaves nothing to the imagination. The curves I do have seem more enhanced than ever in this dress. The back is completely exposed from my shoulders up, and part of me wants to put my hair up so everyone in this pack can see my forbidden god moon marks on my neck and back, how they go down between my shoulders. To show them the god I worship and always will.

This mating ceremony will never happen because I don't worship the moon goddess anymore. In my mind, she barely exists. Just dregs of her magic left in this pack that has been twisted and corrupted to benefit only male wolves over time. I wonder if this is what she wanted, this much pain, this much destruction of people's souls over nothing other than her words. Her rules. Her magic.

Were the gods this cruel?

Whatever it was that the moon goddess believed in, I like to think that this isn't what she wanted, because why make a pack to only let it destroy itself? Who could enjoy that much suffering? I know nothing much about the gods, other than when Phim clearly stated that I'm meant to be a reborn goddess, Persephone. But I don't look like a goddess, I have no powers. I'm sure if I were a goddess like they claim, I could escape this hellhole, but I can't. I can't even shift into a wolf. I can't do anything other than this one thing: I can choose to leave this world, to make sure the alpha doesn't get his precious mate.

My rebellion. The name I was once given now following me here to death. I see their faces in front of me, so clearly in the glass reflection, like they're here when they're not.

My four alphas.

I want to believe more than anything else that they're going to come for me and save me from today. My alpha wolves are the people I'm closest to, despite all the lies, despite how mad I am at them. I want to believe they will come to save me in the end, like they promised. That they haven't left me to this fate.

But a deeper, darker part of me knows the angels must have killed them. I can't see how or why they would have left them alive, and if they would have been able to escape, they never would leave their pack to be slaughtered. I know that for certain. I've gone over every option, a million different scenarios in my head, to try and work out a way that they could come here to save me. But none of them came true, and I'm here alone. If they are gone, then at least I'll get to see them in the afterlife. At least I get to run with them as wolves, something I've always wanted to do since I met them. Be a real pack. Be a real wolf. Tears stream down my face as I stare at myself. I almost want to laugh at my reflection as I watch the tears fall down my pale cheeks, my damp hair falling around my shoulders, and my too perfect mating dress made of material too nice to be real. The wolf who can't shift, crying alone before leaving this world. What would my alphas say if they saw me here? One laugh escapes my lips before my laugh turns into a sobbing chuckle until I freeze.

The made-up image of them, their faces, disappears like mist in the breeze until it's just glass and they were never really here. As much as they're stuck in my mind forever, they're not here. They're just gone, but I can imagine they are with me for this last part. I walk to the door, my hands shaking, and knock twice. The door opens, and I'm not surprised to see Beta Cenwyn on the other side. I step out of the room, looking back once, realising I will never have to see this room again, before smiling.

My bare feet barely feel the cold marble as I pause in front of Cenwyn.

"Dresses suit you, Mairin," he says, and I don't respond to him, keeping silent. I don't need to give him any excuse to pause, to see what's going on in my head. It is going to be bad enough that he's going to be blamed for my death, blamed for letting me jump. But I can't care what will happen to him right now. He is a powerful male wolf. He will survive whatever

punishment he will get. I will not survive the mating ceremony, not without losing my mind and soul.

I would be broken once more, beyond repair. And without them, my true family, I wouldn't be able to recover from it. They saved me, fixed the parts of my soul I felt were destroyed and taught me how to live.

Without them, it isn't living.

My body naturally tenses up, and he starts leading the way, a frown on his pretty face and a look in his eyes that speaks volumes about how he feels doing this. He might be a magnificent wolf if he weren't such a coward. When I see where we are going leads to the balcony, my heart starts thunderously pounding away so loudly that I wonder if Cenwyn can hear it. Every step I take makes the ringing in my ears slowly build until it feels like an orchestra is playing in my head. My body feels clammy and my hands stickier with every step, while my vision blurs with pure dread for what comes next.

I struggle to put one foot in front of the other as we get to the door that leads out to the balcony.

I have to do this.

I have to do this.

I repeat the same thing over and over in my head, trying to convince myself this is what I want when I know it isn't. I just don't have a choice anymore.

When I step onto the balcony, my stomach drops.

Phim leans against the balcony edge, watching me carefully with no smug smile to be seen. She doesn't have a dress on, but she is dressed how she normally does, leather and weapons, reminding me of our real pack. The one she betrayed so easily.

And she is in the way.

No.

Usually, Phim looks at me with something akin to resigned indifference, but this time, I see nothing but sympathy and something else that I can't read. If I weren't so fearful of what I'm going to do next, I might think it was hope.

My eyes flicker to the balcony edge before going back to Phim. Very slowly, almost unseen, she shakes her head. No, she is telling me not to jump, because she would be forced to stop me. I wonder how she knew I

wanted to jump. I don't know how she did, but she knew I was going to. The last tiny bit of hope I had is gone. It's all gone.

I have to go to the mating. The thought nearly makes me pass out, and I have no idea how my legs hold me up. The world is spinning in my mind as Cenwyn leads me through the castle, all of it a blur until we come outside and my feet sink into soft grass, savouring the small little joy of being out.

How long has it been since I was outside? Really outside like this. I might not be free, I might be walking to a forced mating, but I try to focus on the little things so I don't break down completely. The sun is high in the skies, dark clouds in the distance like looming ravens about to swoop down on us. Several birds fly across the sky in formations, swirling around each other on the current of the wind. Other than the sound of the wind, I hear the heavy beat of the nearby river's fast currents, which are not far behind the gardens on this side.

The gardens themselves have never once changed over the years, always perfectly set out for a mating ceremony. There's a massive archway in the middle made of old gold stone, a moon goddess statue on either side of the archway, her hands reaching up like she could cup the moon. The gold stone looks like the goddess painted real gold dust all over the place. A little leaf of orange blossom flies right past my face in the wind, the sweet scent distracting me for a simple second. I arch my neck to look up at the four massive blossom trees spraying beautiful orange blossoms in the wind.

And all of it turns my stomach. I just want out. I just want to run away, fight, do anything.

I have to do something, but my mind is so panicked I have no idea what just yet.

Feeling eyes on me, I look back to see every balcony, archway, and window is filled with faces and wolves watching the ceremony, watching this cruelty with glee. Their faces are happy and gleeful for this magical mating of their alpha. None of them see the fear in my eyes, in my scent, and if they do, they choose to ignore it. Which, in my opinion, makes them as bad as the alpha himself. No wonder they all adore him. He feeds their need for pain, coldness, and lack of humanity.

Unaware that I've frozen to the spot, Cenwyn carefully puts his hand on my back and guides me forward with a slight nudge, reminding me to keep walking to the archway.

Where *he* is.

My fated mate. The man I hate and fear in equal amounts. He's shirtless, wearing only furs around his waist, a traditional thing that wolves wear to this kind of ceremony so they can easily shift.

I suppose I will be able to shift and then run. If that's even possible.

No, I need another plan. Anything. Something. There must be something.

I look at the river about five feet behind the gardens, only a small wooden fence between me and that river if I threw myself in it. The currents are deep and dark, perfect for me, and hopefully it would make it impossible for me to get out. That's what I've got to do.

That's my plan B.

I tell myself it won't take long to break away and run if I punch the alpha, using my training Silas taught me. The five hits he taught me to bring any man down.

Hopefully, they work on an alpha. I just have to pick my best moment for it. My legs feel like they're about to collapse by the time I get in front of the alpha, and Beta Cenwyn stands back, pity shining in his eyes. I barely look at him, and I don't look at the alpha, not giving him the satisfaction.

Instead, I stare at the gold-dusted stone under my bare feet, letting it ground me.

"You look positively ravishing, Irin," Alpha Sylvester purrs, his breath blowing over me. The jingle of the melodic bells attached to the priestesses runs through the gardens, and an unusual tension builds in the surrounding space.

It takes me a second to realise it's excitement, and their excitement builds nothing but fear in my stomach. Once, when I was thirteen, Mike took me to the sunrising ceremony held once a year to celebrate the moon goddess. The priestesses dance on boats on the river, holding lanterns in their hands. It was magic, pure and simple, and I felt like it was the first time I saw the beauty in the moon goddess. Even if I thought the idea of the priestess wearing bells was as funny as a cat wearing them to stop them hunting birds. But now the bells seem almost melancholic, haunting as they sing their beautiful sound. If it's the last piece of music I will ever hear, I'm lucky in at least that.

Just as the priestess gets to us, bowing her head, her face hidden under her long cloak, there's a loud explosion far away but close enough to shake

the ground under my feet. Wolves' howls echo around us from a distance, and terrified growls echo with them.

My eyes only drift to Alpha Sylvester for a second, seeing him distracted with whatever is happening, before I take the chance I've been given and run. I take off out of the archway and onto the grass just before massive arms wrap around me from behind, picking me up. I scream and curse, fighting my way out of his grip in a panic until I feel a cold blade pressed into the side of my neck.

"I will never let you go, Irin. You're mine."

"I will never, ever be yours," I growl back, and in the distance, four gigantic black wolves jump out of the river, landing with a thud on the grass, shocking me to my core.

Their combined growl raises the hair on the back of my neck as their red eyes lock onto me.

Each of them stares my way, and there is no doubt in my mind.

The alphas of Fall Mountain have come for me.



CHAPTER

SIX

“Well, well, well. Seems like you weren’t all killed after all. The angels’ commander must be getting sloppy.”

The angels’ commander. Does he mean the man claiming to be my father? It doesn’t surprise me he is a commander of some sort as I recall the way they both spoke about another man; he follows some leader they both fear. I remember hearing it in their voices.

One of the wolves shifts back instantly, that vibrant red shifter energy as beautiful as I remember it to be.

Alpha Sylvester whispers in my ear, his lips too close, his scent surrounding me like a toxic cloud. “You must have been good in bed for them to come this far. That’s why you scent like them. That’s why they will die in front of you for daring to come into my pack.”

My breath hitches, my mind almost seeing my four alpha wolves’ bodies on the ground beneath my feet. Until I look at him. Ragnar crouches in a mist of red shifter energy, his eyes locking onto mine, an unexpected warmth sinking into my stomach. Naked, completely naked, he owns the space around us. He is a real alpha wolf. His dominance, his possessiveness, dominates everything. I almost forget who is holding a blade to my neck as a tear falls down my cheek. I’ve missed him. I know without a doubt Alpha Sylvester will take my life rather than let me run to them. Let me go home.

Not surprisingly, he presses the blade harder against my neck, nipping my skin, the scent of my blood filling the air. I hardly feel the pain as hope builds and dies in my soul.

Ragnar's eyes narrow, rage building in them. "I believe you have someone who belongs to us. Let her go. Now."

"I don't think so," Alpha Sylvester taunts, leaning his face down next to mine. I flinch as he presses a poisonous kiss to my cheek. "This is my fated mate and—"

"You rejected her, and I don't give a fuck if you regret your actions. She is not yours anymore. She is ours."

The alphas of Fall Mountain snarl and growl in agreement with him.

One of the wolves snaps his teeth, drawing a paw forward on the grass, looking ready to pounce. Silas. His eyes burn into mine, telling me to fight my way out of this.

"I've told you once before, and I will say it one more time," I state, my voice strong and bolder than I thought it would be. "I am not yours, Sylvester. You will never own me or my soul."

Using the skills Silas taught me, I slam my fist into Sylvester's groin at the same time I slam my head back, hearing a sickening crack of his nose. His hand slips enough for me to slide out of his grip, and before he can even blink, I punch him hard in the front of his neck. Shock coats his eyes as he gasps, green shifter energy blasting around him as he stumbles.

"Run!" Ragnar roars, and I don't hesitate as I run across the grass towards them, my legs eating up the space between me and them. I turn my head back for just a second, seeing seven white wolves running to their alpha as he shifts. And in the distance, on a balcony, I see Jesper.

Like a ghost in the window, he doesn't look real.

He stares down at me, an empty stare, before turning away, my heart breaking with him. Tears fall down my face as I run straight into Ragnar's arms, and he pulls me with him down to the left, the others surrounding us. His subtle spicy and woody scent comforts me, even for a brief moment. It grounds me.

I'm almost safe. I might be able to survive this and live. Really live.

"You got to jump," Ragnar tells me, picking me up by my waist and lifting me over the gate, onto the rocky bank and the fast-flowing river below.

"Wait, I can't leave without Jesper!" I say, grabbing his muscled shoulder.

His eyes turn to mine. "He won't come. You know that, and I promise if we could have gotten him, we would have. You have to live now to save

him later.”

I give him a shaky nod, the best I can do as my heart hurts. Jesper. The innocent eight-year-old boy, a brother to me, is being left behind, and I can't go back. I'd be killed, or worse. And worse nearly happened today. The bluish green water makes me pause, and I look back just as Ragnar shifts mid-air and crashes into Sylvester, a battle of claws, teeth and fur as the two powerful alphas fight. My breath halts as I watch Valentine's wolf tearing through the seven wolves that came to defend their alpha. The sight is unforgettable.

I don't get to look for long before something hard, a wolf's head perhaps, smashes into my back, and I fall over the edge of the river. My body slams under the water, my eyes closing on instinct as water fills my lungs. The current swallows me in its depths, pulling me along as I flail my arms around, trying to stop myself, to catch anything. The cold makes me freeze, my body going numb right before I manage to open my eyes. The water is too dark, too cold, and I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I panic just as a wolf dives in above me, swimming down and crashing into me. I wrap my arms around his neck, digging my hands into the wolf's fur and knowing without a doubt this is Henderson. His wolf uses his powerful body to easily swim the currents, and I desperately hold on, unable to do anything else.

Eventually Henderson breaks out of the water, jumping onto the edge of a medium-sized boat that nearly tips into the river under the weight of his paws. I gasp for air, my fingers still clenching Henderson's fur, my thighs wrapped around his back as he climbs onto the boat. I slide off his back, panting as I glance at the rickety and broken-but-floating-somehow boat. The white paint is peeled in areas, and there is nothing but the flat surface, a bordering metal green banister, a steering wheel and what I think is an engine.

Red shifter energy blasts around Henderson, and I look away, spotting wolves in the water swimming towards us, nothing more than blurs in and out of the river. There is a mix of white and black wolves, not just my alphas, and I flinch as they fight each other even in the current.

The engine blasts to life, and I turn to see Henderson at the wheel, the boat jolting forward and almost making me lose my footing. He turns to me, offering me a towel, and I turn away, preferring the cold. Henderson

quickly throws on joggers and a black top, his wet hair dripping water down his cheeks. Gods, I missed him.

“Are you okay?” he asks me. I know we only have a few seconds before he has to drive us away, the second the others are on board, and I don’t feel like telling him anything but the truth.

“No. You lied to me. You all did.”

He closes his eyes like my words physically hurt him. Like the truth hurt my heart all the same not so long ago.

Henderson’s pale eyes, perfectly cerulean in colour, watch me with sorrow and regret. The moment is broken, his reply lost, as two black wolves climb onto the boat, tipping it to the side before they shift back. Silas and Ragnar barely look my way as they bark orders at Henderson about cutting the anchor, and I’m too distracted as three more wolves climb on board. One of them is white furred with three long scars down her face. Breelyn. As much as I’m curious about her, I only care about the other female on board.

I clench my fists as Valentine shifts back, walking towards me. Then Phim shifts, and Breelyn doesn’t shift back at all, curling up in a ball at the edge of the boat, the furthest she can get away from us.

“How dare you come here!” I shout at Phim, walking over, not caring one bit about anything other than shoving her off this boat. Henderson drives us off, the force of the boat’s acceleration making me slide back across the boat a few steps. I straighten up and storm towards Phim once more when Valentine steps in front of me.

“She has always been on your side, Mai,” he firmly states, still completely and utterly naked. I feel all of my alpha wolves’ eyes on me, assessing me, figuring me out. “Calm down.”

“Get the hell out of my way, Valentine, unless you want to be just like the alpha you rescued me from and force me to back down,” I demand, and instantly I regret my harsh words. I know he is nothing like Alpha Sylvester, and they just saved me.

And I’ve thrown it back in their faces.

Valentine looks away, and I feel his hurt like a second skin wrapping around me, choking me with guilt. I briefly close my eyes before walking past him and to Phim. She doesn’t pause as she pulls on a male’s shirt, long enough to reach her knees, before fully facing me. I can’t read her green eyes or anything about her expression.

River water splashes up the side of the boat, the city drifting away, but the memory of the last month trapped here is stuck in my mind. My constant screams for help, her standing there, doing nothing. I remember it all as I look at her. My old friend. Someone I trusted. “How could you?”

“When you’ve calmed down—”

Anger fills me, and I step forward, slamming my hand into her shoulder. She doesn’t fight me back, even when her eyes flash red for a second. “Don’t you dare tell me to calm down! You don’t get to tell me anything! You betrayed me, us, the whole pack! How many died on Fall Mountain? How many deaths do you have on your conscience?”

She doesn’t reply to me, and fury like I’ve never known fills me as I growl low and harsh. Fury and pain. She hurt me. They hurt me. “For the first time in my life, I thought I found my family with you all in Fall Mountain. You were my family, and family do not lie to each other. We protect each other, and I can’t say any of you haven’t broken one of those rules.”

I’m not just talking to her. I know they are listening to every word.

“I will say this once, sister.” She emphasizes the word *sister*, and I flinch. “My pack, my alphas, are on this boat, and I am only loyal to them. Always them and you. Talk to me when you’re ready and when we are out of this hellish city.”

Phim walks around me to the front of the boat, and I am tempted to chase after her, but I know deep down I’m too weak and outmatched to fight her. And it would get me nowhere. Valentine said she has been on my side, but I don’t believe it. I can’t trust him, anyway. They lied to me. I turn away to the city, tears falling down my cheeks as I stare out, my mind empty of anything for a few moments.

I’m free.

For a second, it doesn’t even feel real. I gently pinch the back of my hand, expecting to wake up back in that room, but I don’t. The river seems endless as the city drifts off in the distance, but even here, I listen to the angry howls of the pack.

“The Ravensword alpha lost his eye today. Thought you’d like to know,” Ragnar says, leaning on the banister. “Silas’s wolf ripped it out.”

I turn to look at him, keeping my face blank even when the sight of him nearly brings me to my knees. They all have an effect on me. “You should

have killed him. All of you should have. No matter where you take me, he will come for me.”

Ragnar smiles, his eyes drifting over my face like he is trying to memorize me. “We are taking you somewhere impossible for him to reach. The place we were all born. Leaving him alive, embarrassed, and missing an eye is a good punishment for now. Don’t think we are done with him, Mai. We aren’t. He is going to pay for what he has done to you.”

My heart stings, hearing him admit to the lie they told me. That they know who I am. “Where?”

“The Galatea Court. Outside the wall.”



CHAPTER

SEVEN

I'm free from him.

I can barely believe the truth of it as I watch the sheep dozing in the fields on the other side of the river. The howls of the city have all but gone, leaving nothing but the sounds of the countryside and the tweets of birds that have never known what it's like to be trapped in a cage. I still feel the walls of that room surrounding me, the threat of the mating hanging over my head, and the madness that I was slowly slipping into it.

The boat jolts as Henderson switches the engine off and anchors us to the riverside where there is an old stone-covered path. We aren't alone out here. Several eyes are on us in the distance where canal boats are parked up, wolves watching from the windows. There is still silence, and they don't acknowledge us before closing the curtains of their boat. I can't blame them, to be entirely honest. God knows what we look like on this boat that is barely standing. I must look a mess in my unchosen, river-soaked mating dress, blood dried down my neck from a cut that's almost healed, and a bruised face. The alpha wolves stand out on their own, and I've felt their attention on me all of the time I've been on this boat, but I haven't found the words to say to them yet.

I know once I start, I won't stop, and I can't do that here. We aren't safe, and I will do anything to make sure I don't have to go back there. I glance at Breelyn as she straightens up, her wolf dry now thanks to the blinding sun. The dark cloud left London in rain and not us.

"Come on," Silas commands, his voice cold as he picks up a flat plank of wood to create a makeshift bridge off the boat onto the path. I let go of

the banister that I've held on to the entire time since we started down this river, my hands feeling as cold as ice. I didn't let go, because I needed something to remind me I was escaping, and that bar was a lifeline for a second, holding me up. I felt like if I let go, then I would be right back there and it'd all just be a dream.

Acting stronger than I feel, I hold my head high as I walk past them and climb onto the wood plank. The river shakes the boat, making it difficult to walk over the plank, and Henderson puts his hand out for me from the other side. Reluctantly, I slide my cold hand into his warm hand, and the usual fire I feel in my chest burns bright once more, sending a shiver down my spine.

I have to force myself not to look at him too closely, to let him see the longing in my eyes and how I actually feel. At some point in my room, I realised each one of them is far more than just a friend to me. I knew it with Silas. That kiss is etched into my mind, but the others I was in denial about.

They are the only wolves in the world I would want to follow and protect. And the fact that hasn't changed, even with the lies and deception between us, scares me. I've never wanted to be one of those women who naively love their mate, their wolf, despite the stories they know of them. Falling in love with a monster must be an undoing like no other.

How I don't want to let go of his hand, feeling the pressure of his gaze bearing down on me, his presence like a darkness searching the sky full of stars for just one. I move my hand away first to walk on my own, determined to not give in to them until they've explained everything, every truth that they've ever lied to me about. I want to know all of it because we're never going to have trust between us until that happens.

I wait until everyone is off the boat, Phim last, and she kicks off the plank until it falls into the river, and I glance over to Henderson who cut the rope that had the anchor on. The boat starts floating down the river once more, none of us on it.

"Hopefully, the idiots track our scent to the end of the river and assume we dived into the North Sea," Ragnar states.

"Where are we going?" I ask them.

Valentine purposely walks past me, pausing. "Did everything that happened make you trust us so little?"

"The lies did."

“Enough. We aren’t safe here, and we are not having this conversation with guests around,” Silas growls out.

I go silent, my eyes locked onto Valentine’s stormy, inhumanly illuminated green eyes. Phim clears her throat, and I turn away at the noise as I feel like screaming at them all.

I need to know everything. It’s ripping me apart as much as it has done for a long time now.

Breelyn walks past, and I stare at her for a second too long, thinking about how I was forced to take her father’s life.

She must hate me, and I still don’t understand why she’s here. Henderson follows my eyes to her before looking back at me, and he gives me a look that says he will explain later.

“It’s about a mile walk to the abandoned train station,” Henderson says. “Be on guard.”

“Why would you want to use a train? All the train tracks, at least the ones I’ve seen in London, are old and broken,” I question as we start walking. Ragnar stays near me, keeping a distance but close enough for me to hear him.

“Didn’t you ever question where we got modern, human tech from?” he asks with a smile. “We have a working train, hidden in the mountains of Scotland, usually. There is a tunnel from Scotland, under the sea and the wall, to the outside. The wolves in the north are poor, and it’s easy to bribe them with food to say nothing to the alpha. Plus, they may have been forced to swear their loyalty and serve him, but he has no loyal wolves up there after what his father did to their pack.”

“He destroyed their pack from the inside out,” I say, remembering hearing the stories of it. “It was a brutal takeover, bloody and cruel. They killed all the alpha’s family and betas, and anyone powerful in that pack.”

“I wish we were around to help back then,” Ragnar admits, running his hand through his hair, his eyes like blue sea diamonds watching me. His silky black hair has grown, and he hasn’t shaved recently, giving him a more rugged and feral look. He was knee-dropping gorgeous before, and now he is more dark, more defined, more intense. I can’t look away. “The tunnel we are heading towards was built by shifters before the wall was ever made, before humans knew of us, and we just added a train track with members of our pack we saved,” he explains, and I’m shocked into silence.

I did wonder how they had much more modern things, everything from the satellites to the cars.

“There aren’t even many wolves that live in the Scottish parts of the pack anymore. Not since the pack war that destroyed the pack there and the old alpha took over. It would be perfectly hidden,” I say, breathing out a puff of air. “Was this always your escape plan?”

“From the wolves’ pack courts, yes—”

“The what?” I ask.

Ragnar’s eyes drift to the other alphas, and I have no doubt they are watching. “That’s what the world outside the walls calls this place. It has been called that for a long time. We have more to tell you, but trust—”

“Trust?” I cut in, raising my eyebrows.

“Yes, trust us. We have never hurt you, and we never would have left —”

“Funny.” I pause mid-step, and he stops with me, turning to fully face me. “Because I’ve been in danger for a month and beaten, forced to kill someone, and locked away like a bird in a cage. Where have you been? How could you possibly think I was in no danger with him?”

My voice cracks at the end of my plea, my confession, and I don’t know who it hurts more. None of the four faces I search look anything less than regretful, angry and furious.

That came out more pleading, like I am begging them for an answer, than I wanted it to be. But sometimes, I think I’m the weakest I have ever been around them. They have a way of stripping me down to my soul like no one else can. They did it from the first day we met, marking my soul deeper than the moon marks on my body.

Ragnar looks down and Silas answers, his voice almost feral. “We will talk about all of this on the train. Our people are waiting, and every second out here, we leave them in danger. Do you want to go back to him?”

“No,” I grit out.

“Then move your pretty ass and get on the fucking train,” he growls before storming off. Ass.

I growl at them all, which only makes Ragnar smirk in an amused way as he follows Silas.

Phim is the only one who pauses to look back at me. She searches my face for something and relaxes somewhat. I try to ignore her, following along the path until it turns into nothing but broken branches and dead

leaves that litter the ground among broken pebbles. My dress scrapes across the ground, catching on every pointy stick, sharp rock and spiked bush that it possibly can. Like nature itself is trying to destroy it.

Go right ahead. I hate the thing.

Through a break in the path, I see down a hill to the many empty fields filled with cows and sheep, even some lambs to remind the land that it is early spring now. We carry on walking the entire trip in silence before I see the train that they talked about. It's hidden, almost nestled in an old train station under a hill that casts a huge shadow. The train is huge, much bigger than I expected it to be.

"When you said train, I assumed a small thing," I mutter to myself.

"If any of you makes jokes about large things, I'm running away," Phim jokes. The alphas chuckle, and I smile a little until I remember.

The smile turns sour on my face.

The train has at least forty-five cars, from my quick count, stretching all the way down the track. The main part of the train at the front is an impressive steam engine with steam pouring out of the top, hidden well by the hill and making it unseen to anyone looking from a distance. They planned this out down to a T. There are two carriages filled to the brim with massive piles of coal, and I spot three people in the front carriage, the door slightly open.

Three black wolves jump out from the bushes, and Henderson nods at them. They run to the train ahead of us. Lookouts. As we walk to the carriage, I admire the detailed work of the carriages themselves, made of solid wood, weathered with time, but I can still make out the swirl designs on the doors. Humans make beautiful things sometimes. Shame they like to lock those things away just as much as they enjoy making them.

"Home sweet home for the next few months," Valentine sarcastically says, walking past me. "Everything you wanted, princess?"

"I don't admire the new nickname, jackass," I say to his back.

He tenses and doesn't turn back. I won't say sorry to him, yet. We've all hurt each other, and we have found neutral ground in our need to escape this pack, but things aren't right. I'm not sure how we're going to fix us.

I've never been over to this side of England before; it's too far away from my foster home, and it's known there isn't much out here. The land is a lot flatter here, easy to see for miles in each direction except for the hill. I can see why they chose this place.

More steam rolls out the top of the steam engine as we get close to the front, and I start to notice that the train is actually full of wolves, their faces pressed against the glass windows watching us, many children's faces.

"How many are here?"

"All that's left. The ones we could save," Henderson gently says, but I hear his sorrow and feel it as my own. My mind fills with the memories of the Fall Mountain Pack and how alive it was. Vibrant, beautiful and happy.

And full of wolves, young and old. Thousands are dead, by the looks of it. Sickness rises in my throat, and my hands shake in anger. "There are about two hundred on board, mostly children. Trey is alive, just. He had two broken arms from the blast, but he has healed now. The children were in school, and the parents held off the angels with us to get them out. Only fifty-two adults survived."

"Gods," I whisper in horror, tears filling my eyes at the same time I'm relieved Trey is alive. "I'm so sorry. The angels...why would they do that?"

"That's a story and a half," Henderson tells me, making it clear he isn't explaining that one right now. I'm pretty sure I know the answer without him saying it. I saw it in the eyes of the man claiming to be my father.

Ragnar isn't done though. "That's what we were doing while you were taken. We were saving them, or at least trying to save as many lives as we possibly could do. Don't you dare think for even a second that it didn't rip our hearts to pieces to put the pack before you. I almost left them, all those children, for you. Almost. I always wanted to put you first, but I am an alpha, Mai, and I don't blame you for hating us, but I know we did the right thing."

I know they did.

Ragnar walks past me into the carriage, Henderson following closely. Silas and Valentine are talking to three male shifters I haven't met at the front of the train, so for a second, I'm alone. Phim walks to the train, stopping nearby me. I think she is going to say something until Breelyn walks between us.

I nearly jump when Breelyn's wolf very carefully brushes her face against my hand. Just a tiny bit of comfort to someone that's a complete stranger to her, someone who killed her father because she was forced to.

I don't understand it or her, but I feel ever so thankful for this, like a weight is lifted from my chest. She doesn't hate me.

I look down at the white wolf, the terrible scars that are still quite red and sore, even two weeks after it happened. I look past the scars to her pretty, soulful eyes. “Thank you,” I tell her. She doesn’t say anything, of course, but she walks with me to the door of the carriage, and I step back to let her go through first. I feel Phim behind me as I step inside.

The carriage is warmer than I expected it to be. It’s mostly red, with velvet seated sections with a small, square, dark wooden table in the middle of them. Small curtains line the windows, and the ceiling is covered in a jagged piece of wood with several holes in it that have been taped up. The floor is in better condition, with only scratches, but at least it’s solid. It’s old and tattered, but it makes me smile. It’s an escape.

I sit down on one of the red seats for two, and Breelyn’s wolf waits at the other end of the carriage door. Phim walks to her and pulls it open, both of them heading out, and the door shuts behind her. The train soon starts to rattle as it comes alive, a humming building under my feet. Henderson, followed by Valentine, jumps onto the train through the door, and Valentine shuts it behind him. Silas comes in a second later from the door near me, followed by Ragnar.

All five of us are stuck in this small carriage, alone and complicated. So damn complicated that it feels like my heart is being ripped apart even when I’m perfectly still.

But the silence is deafening, even as the train starts to move, taking us away to safety. Or where they have planned. Whatever it is, it must be better than being mated to my fated mate who rejected me.

“You need to explain. If you ever want me to trust you again, you need to start at the beginning, and you need to tell me absolutely everything, and I mean everything,” I start off. “Otherwise, I will walk away from this the second I am free and safe. Lies will destroy us.”

“Okay,” Ragnar agrees with me, his voice thick with emotion.

Silas walks over, leaning his hands on the table and looking me dead in the eyes, his voice low and dangerous. “Trusting you has never been the issue. We don’t trust the world with you, and every secret we spill risks not only us, but you.”

“Tell me,” I demand, clamping my shaky hands together under the table. “Why don’t we start with the fact you know who I am?”

Henderson clears his throat, moving past Silas and sitting opposite me at the table, his leg brushing mine. I don’t pull away. “We should have told

you everything from the second we met. We are sorry.”

“‘I’m sorry’ doesn’t really cut it,” I firmly say. “I have no clue who I am, or who I was for twelve years, and it haunts me. My life haunts me, and the fact each of you knew me from the second we met on that beach? Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t any of you say something?”

They all keep their expressions carefully trained, and Valentine surprises me when he gruffly answers. “How could we tell you? You’re not the girl I remember, and to us, you were a stranger. The things they did to you in that pack, the way they broke you... We knew. We all knew something had happened to you, something darker than being rejected. You were broken.”

“All we knew was that you were broken, so, so broken. You’d almost given up on life entirely when we met, Mai,” Henderson agrees. “None of us wanted to give you anything but hope.”

Silas continues. “Our priorities were training your very unskilled ass to fight, to defend yourself, to become strong and whole as your mind and soul repaired itself. You don’t kick someone when they are down.”

“We were going to tell you everything when you were ready, because the past is difficult to hear. Shit, it’s heartbreaking, Mai,” Ragnar pauses. “How do you tell someone who’s completely broken something that’s going to shatter their heart more?”

My throat feels raw with emotion as I take in their words, knowing somewhere deep down that they’re right, even if I am mad at them because they still should have told me sooner. They didn’t know me, how strong I really am under it all.

But I was in a mess when we met.

“I got better with you guys, but I understand your point,” I say. I blow out a breath. “You shouldn’t have treated me like I was weak and hidden the past...but I understand.”

None of them say anything to that, but I see and feel the relief like a presence in the carriage room. “I know the past is bad. In my soul, even if I can’t remember exactly what happened, I just know. I wish I could remember and I didn’t need to ask you to tell me...but tell me.”

“Are you sure? You can rest first—”

“No,” I firmly say, straightening my back. “I always knew you guys deep down, even if I can’t remember why. I thought you were all familiar to me when we first met. I trusted you from the get go, even when I thought I

was insane for even thinking that you could be my—” I pause. “Well, anything to me. Tell me how we know each other. Is Mairin my name?”

“Yes. Mairin Elysia Astra Fall,” Silas tells me. Each one of the names I didn’t know makes me pause.

“I have two middle names?” I whisper. Elysia. Astra.

“Your mother, Baia Fall, told us once she gave you three names to honour the three falling stars in the sky she saw fall on the day you were born,” Henderson tells me with a soft smile. “And then she gave us a hiding for eating the sweet cherry cakes she had made for prayer night.”

“The cake was worth it,” Ragnar jokes, the humour helping me stay grounded as my emotions fly from wonder to pain and finally to hope.

I gulp, my throat thick with emotion. “Is she alive?”

Valentine steps forward and shakes his head. Tears fall down my face as I turn away, a sob escaping the back of my throat. They stay silent as I process it.

“Maybe we should take a break,” Henderson suggests.

I shake my head, turning back to them all. “No. Go on. Please.”

“We all grew up together in a pack called Fall, all of us did with two others,” Henderson says, getting a sharp look from Silas.

“No secrets, right?” I say, making sure to catch Silas’s eyes.

“Some secrets are nightmares, and you don’t even want to speak their names, Mai,” he warns me.

“This isn’t going to work if you don’t tell me—”

“All you need to know is, because of you, thousands were killed to save your life, and ours were saved to protect you!” Silas snaps.

I jolt back, tears stinging my eyes as I freeze in shock.

“Mai,” Henderson reaches for me from his seat at the table, and I pull my hand back.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Ragnar and Valentine are glaring at Silas, who steps away, his hands in tight fists at his side. “She was going to find out one way or another.”

“Not like that though,” Ragnar roughly growls out.

Henderson softly calls to me. “Mai, listen to me. When you were twelve, a war broke out on earth, and the angels took over. They sank parts of the world, murdering millions of humans and dividing the land left into courts. I will show you a map. America stayed untouched mostly and traded with the angels, but the world suffered. Nothing is the same, and our pack

was one of those things. As for our pack, as for us being gods, I need to explain from the beginning.”

“Go on then,” I coldly say.

Henderson looks to his brothers, and they each must agree as he turns back to me. “The pack we grew up in wasn’t big, a couple of thousand here and there. Our people lived in what used to be France, which is under the North Sea now. We had a village in the middle of a ten-thousand-acre forest, privately owned, and we hunted for food and everything we needed at night with no one around. It was easy to hide our wolves from the humans who locked the rest of our kind away. The humans were curious about us but mostly kept to themselves, calling us gypsies.”

Ragnar snorts. “Funny, considering what we are. They were clueless for a long time, assuming wolf shifters would never dare live outside the wall.”

“Our pack wasn’t allowed to live outside the wall—no shifter was back then—but the grounds we lived on were sacred to our people, and our families didn’t want to leave. They believed the gods themselves died on the land and blessed it with their protection,” Henderson says, his eyes tensing up. “But the humans were too curious, and people were worried... Then he found us. Our pack had never heard of angels and was immediately fascinated by another supernatural race.”

“The man claiming to be my father? And Phim’s?” I guess.

“He is not your biological father but he claims to be because he feels he created us. He can’t actually have children,” Silas states in a deep and authoritative voice. I breathe out in relief. “But Phim is your half-sister, your younger sister by two years. You don’t remember her. Your actual father, we don’t know anything about. Not even a name.”

“That man’s name is Oisean, and he is the angels’ lead commander and a very dangerous man with an army behind him like nothing you’ve ever seen. The army is called the Blood Sea because they wash away their victims. He came to our pack before we were born, with a promise of protection in exchange for seven pregnant wolves. All they had to do was be present in a ceremony when he called for them. Over the years, he called each of our mothers away.”

“What did he do to us?” I ask.

“We don’t know what happened in that ceremony, neither did any of our mothers remember, but it was obvious early on in our childhood that we weren’t normal wolves. Each of us, all seven of the babies born, had

abilities like nothing else seen, and we are stronger than the average wolf, alphas through and through.”

“I’m no alpha,” I remind them.

They each ignore that, rather not agreeing with me or wanting to bring it up right now. Valentine, usually silent, weighs in his part of our past. “Our mothers decided to bring us up together in case we needed each other in the future. It was unheard of to bring alpha children up in a group, but there wasn’t anything they could do.”

“Did the ceremony change us with the souls of the gods? Hades and Persephone?”

“Yes. As a child, we all heard a voice in our minds and saw a man in our dreams. The man would change into vipers and guide us through life. When we were nine, we told each other about it. The man told us to go into the forest in the middle of the night and find a lake.”

I lean forward, listening to his story. “We each dived into the lake, and down there, our souls came alive with power. We changed, down to our very core, and accepted the power of Hades as our power. We are the four parts of Hades’s soul, and we are the forbidden god...but we are split. Together, we can access only a drop of his full power, and we use it to heal our pack, bind them to us and protect them.”

Ragnar’s voice is hoarse, rough. “We felt every death, Mai.”

My heart feels wrenched out of my chest, and the word *sorry* seems too weak, too little for this. They lost thousands, nearly a whole pack, and felt it all.

“We still hear him now and then, guiding us. Hades told us you were on that beach,” Silas tells me.

“Because I have Persephone’s soul? Hades’s wife?”

“His soulmate, in his opinion,” Henderson says with a small smile. “Yes. We found that out from Oisean when he came to collect you for his own purpose when the angel war broke out. He told us each of our souls was created and given to the gods, only for the gods to link our souls to them. It was you he wanted. Our pack said no and stood to protect you. We did too, even when we were kids ourselves.”

“And Oisean killed them?” I whisper, tears building in my eyes, my voice scratchy.

“Yes. We lost sight of you in the battle, and then we never saw you again until the beach. We searched for you, planted spies everywhere to find

you, and nothing. We thought you might be dead and it was all for nothing,” Valentine admits.

“Seeing you gave us hope,” Ragnar says. “And now we are taking you home.”

“Home? You said the pack lands in France were gone.”

“They are. We found a new home, and we can’t tell you a thing about it. We promised a god to keep its secret, and you will understand when you get there,” Silas answers.

“Another secret?”

“Yes,” Ragnar states, unapologetic.

I know, at this point, I have to give in a little. I trust them enough to know they wouldn’t take me somewhere dangerous.

“Okay,” I say, sliding out of the seat. “I think I need some space and a shower. If that’s possible.”

“Yes, of course,” Ragnar says, and I feel his profound relief. “This way.”

I follow him through the other alphas, and I pause. There are a million questions I want to ask, but there is one that’s important to me. “When is my birthday? I’ve never had one.”

“May the thirtieth,” Silas answers me. “You were born at one minute past midnight on May thirtieth.”

For the first time in a while, I smile.

“Thank you for coming for me. I know you risked everything, and I will pay you back for that debt. You’ve saved my life twice now.”

“And we would a million times over,” Valentine tells me. “There is nothing in the world that would stop us from saving you.”

I know.



CHAPTER

EIGHT

*S*tep through the sealed space between the carriages and into the next one, which has two dark wooden doors side by side with bronze door handles. The rooms are rectangular-shaped, and there is a long, carpeted corridor spreading out to a bigger space at the back of this carriage. The same design is shown throughout the walls on the peeling, light green, sunflower wallpaper and dark green half-sectioned walls. The windows are half frosted at the bottom, and there are catches to open them at the top, but all of them are closed, even when it's colder in here than the first carriage. At the end of the corridor, the space is taken up with boxes of supplies and a few chairs.

“This is our space,” Ragnar explains to me and pulls open the first wooden door, which heavily creaks in protest. The room scents of all four of them, dark and woody, and it comforts me more than I want to admit. “I’m sorry to tell you that we’ll be sharing because of limited space on the train. Every carriage is crammed with people, and all the beds are used up. We haven’t even got a spare bed for Breelyn. It’s almost helpful she is staying as a wolf.”

“I don’t mind sharing with you,” I say, even when my heart pounds at the thought. I want to ask about Breelyn, but my mind feels too full of information at the moment. If she is here, she must be trusted, and I hardly suspect she would do a thing for Alpha Sylvester and the Ravensword Pack.

If he hears my heart, scents the change in my body, he doesn’t comment on it. “This room is one of the few that has five beds, all bunk beds. Have a look. You can take any of the beds.”

I step into the small room, looking around at the space. The same thick red carpet lines the floor in here, and the walls have lined grey paper that is mostly faded into jagged lines. The tiny room does indeed have five beds, three on one side and two on the other, all on top of each other with a ladder to the left. There is a tiny chest of drawers bundled into a corner, and underneath the beds are boxes full of clothes, by the looks of it.

“I’ll take the top bed of the three, as I’m the smallest, and it would be uncomfortable for any of you,” I suggest. Each of the beds has cosy thick blue blankets and a pillow each, but with all five of us sleeping in here, it will stay warm.

“If you’re sure? No one has tried sleeping in that bed,” Ragnar admits. “But I would find it amusing to see Silas, Val or Henderson try to slide their asses into that bed and not fall out.”

I chuckle just imagining it. Ragnar’s eyes are soft as he inclines his head back out into the corridor. “Here is the bathroom, and it is shared with two other carriages, so don’t take too much time. There is also no hot water, and the train is only heated for a few hours a day, so the nights are cold. The days too when we get through the Scottish lands.”

“Honestly, it’s perfect. Anything, anywhere, other than the Ravensword Pack is better, Ragnar,” I reply. “I can deal with the cold.”

His eyes darken, and I feel his wolf’s dominant presence. “One day, when you’re ready, talk to me about him. Everything. I want to know everything that has ever happened to you.”

“Why?” I whisper.

“Because I want to know everything about you. Every dark part, everything,” he possessively demands, and I want to tell him everything about me. I want to trust him with all the dark parts of my story, but I still wonder if he would run if he knew. Or worse, look at me with pity. At some point, deep down, I know I have to learn to open up more, because keeping everything buried deep within my soul only makes it unstable.

“Maybe we can trade stories then?” I ask, feeling that undeniable tug between us.

He gives me a crooked, sexy smile. “Deal.”

The train shakes as we go around a curve, and my feet slip on the floorboard, crashing me into his chest. He effortlessly catches me in his arms, every part of me feeling on fire where he touches and holds me. Some things haven’t changed then. At least not for me.

“It’s going to be a bumpy road for a while,” Ragnar admits, delicately letting me go and drifting his hands down my arms.

I shiver and miss his touch the second it is gone.

“But we will be stopping off somewhere called The Fenrir, and it’s in the Fenrir Court,” he explains to me, running a hand through his dark hair. “It’s somewhere safe with friends we can trust. We will need food and supplies by that point.”

I look over at the window, watching the countryside flicker past. Nothing but free fields, not a city in sight. I’m sure they have designed the trip to miss any of the other wolf cities, but I still worry about Alpha Sylvester getting to me somehow. The sooner we are out of the wolves’ pack courts, the better.

“Are you okay, Mai? I mean, really okay. I know Henderson asked you that before, and you said no, and I—”

I nervously reach out and touch his hand, just for a second, and he pauses. “He didn’t hurt me in the way you’re thinking. I can handle beatings, and most of the time, I welcomed them for the darkness passing out promised.”

His eyes shift to red instantly, a low growl escaping his mouth. But even through the anger he expresses for the Ravensword’s pack alpha, he faintly touches my cheek with incredible softness. The tips of his fingers, the soft caress, send quivers down my spine. “It is not okay or acceptable. No one should ever touch you like that. Ever. I swear on my life I’m going to fight to the end of the world to make sure that no one ever hurts you, especially not him.”

I shudder with the protectiveness in that voice, and he doesn’t push it anymore, not while I’m standing in this dress, not when I need space. And he knows that, after everything I’ve just learned, I need some space even from them, even when I desperately want them all close to me.

“I wish I could remember everything before I was twelve,” I admit to him, gnawing on my bottom lip. His eyes track the movement, and this time, I can scent the difference. A slight change in his scent takes over. I’ve never been able to scent things like this before. It’s a new change, and it makes me feel more hyperaware of everything.

Including his clear arousal, and the way my body comes alive in response.

Everything tightens as I clear my throat and let my lip go.

He seems to snap out of it at the same time. “We are hoping our friend in the Fenrir Court will be able to help with your memories. He has a certain skill set.”

“You’re going to have to make me a map,” I say with a smile. “I want to see all this.”

“On it, Mai,” he says. “Right, I should go. We’ll be checking out the train, answering questions, helping whoever needs it. If you need us, ask around. We won’t be far, and just so you know, you’re safe to go anywhere you want. We don’t expect for them to catch up to us from London, but there are two cities we pass that could be a problem in the next twelve hours to the tunnel. Still stay on alert. Okay?”

“Got it,” I nod.

Ragnar steps around me, his shoulder brushing mine. He comes back a second or so later, holding a dagger in a leather holder. “Keep it close to you. It will clip onto your jeans. There is a bundle of clothes in the bathroom. Phim told me she put them in there.”

I narrow my eyes at her name. “How the hell is she my sister?”

“The obvious,” he teases with a smile. “You two are both stubborn and strong. Remember, Phim was only ten when the war happened, and she lost everyone, including you. Give her a chance to explain her story. You might feel differently then.”

“Did she protect me in the Ravensword Pack?”

“Yes,” he answers simply. “And killed for you. Talk to her when you’re ready. She is your sister.”

“Thanks,” I say with a soft smile.

“There are clean towels in the bathroom, and there’s a basket on the floor to put them in when you’re done. We swap them around and have a carriage for laundry.”

“I’d like to help. I know how to wash clothes and dry them,” I point out. I may have gotten the colours a bit wrong at their house, and the dryer somehow made the clothes smaller, but I have improved. I think.

His lips twitch, and he clears his throat. “I’ll ask the ladies running it.”

“Thanks,” I say before stepping into the bathroom and closing the door, pushing the tiny lock shut. For a few moments, I stare at nothing, listening to the surrounding white noise filled in by the sound of the train engine running. The constant beat reminds me I’m not alone, and I’m not back in that room, trapped. I rush to the small frosted window and pull it open,

leaning up to feel the cold air blast across my face. An open window. The silly little thing makes me laugh until tears are falling down my cheeks, and I lean away from the window. There is a water-stained mirror above a dark wooden cabinet, a toilet and a shower cubicle with a flimsy flower-patterned shower curtain on a pole. Towels are in a pile on the counter, next to a bunch of folded clothes and new black laced boots. I place my dagger on top of the clothes and pause.

I smile to myself as I slide the dagger out of the holder and lift a bunch of the dress in my other hand before ripping it with the green dagger. Time disappears as I rip and tear the dress until it's a bundle of dirty river- and dirt-soaked fabric on the floor, puddled at my feet.

Good riddance.

Placing the dagger down first, I grab the bundle of fabric, what is left of the dress, and shove it all out of the window. I watch it float away in the wind, separating in every direction. I barely feel the cold water of the shower fall on me as I turn it on and fall to my knees, crying out every emotion I have held in, letting the shower take my pain away with the water.

Eventually I raise my head from my knees and grab the soap on the side and a bottle of something flower-scented that has hair written on it with a permanent marker. I scrub my hair, pulling out twigs and leaves before I can run my fingers through it, and the water finally runs clear as it falls off me. I towel dry myself quickly and spend longer drying my hair the best I can before pulling the clothes on. The white panties and bra are my old ones Phim bought me. The top and jeans aren't mine though. They are very loose, my hips just about holding the skinny jeans up, and the black T-shirt with a faded peace sign falls mid-thigh. After tugging on the socks, I pick up my dagger, throw the towel in the marked basket, and carry my shoes out with me to the bedroom. I place the boots by the wall and bite down on the dagger before climbing up the three bunk beds to the top one and burrowing under the blanket, wrapping my hand around the dagger.

I fall asleep before I can even register how safe I feel, knowing my alphas are close and I am protected.



CHAPTER
NINE

Ragnar Fall

“*I*s she still sleeping?” Silas abruptly questions when I head into the front carriage. I brush off sawdust from my hands, clapping them together. The light of day is fading into night, the blinking, crap bulbs on the edges of the windows turning on. Well, most of them do. No matter how much I fix this train, something is always broken.

“Yes,” I answer. I couldn’t help myself as I went into our room and found her fast asleep, curled up near the edge of the top bunk bed. I needed to see her, just one more time, to breathe in her scent, to believe she is really here and alive. I can’t help myself around her. I’m addicted, tortured by her soul and enchanted. I will never forget seeing her running across the grass, dressed in white, held and captured by a man who rejected and broke her. Or almost did. Her blonde hair was damp, the gold locks bouncing the light of the sun off them, and her green eyes were more beautiful than anything I’ve seen.

But her scent was pure, undiluted terror.

Until she saw us.

I want to be near her all of the time, and the last month has been nothing short of torture. Complete torture, and not just for us, but for her. I can’t imagine what she has been through, and I want to tear the head off anyone who touched her. My wolf stirs, and the darker side of my soul, the part I feel is more Hades than me, burns into an angry tornado. If I let that side take over, I would burn the world to make sure it could never harm her. Before we went into that lake, my soul, my wolf came alive any time she was near, and I never understood it. Mai was like family, pack, and other than being overprotective of her, I found myself staring at her sometimes. She was beautiful, always, even young when I had no idea girls could be beautiful. I grew up loving her, protecting her, and when we went into that lake...we found out why. We are Hades’s soul, changed and warped, but underneath we are him. He is us and she is ours. Hades’s and Persephone’s

souls were bonded, linked, mated and married. They couldn't be more attached.

And that's how it is for us, even if she doesn't realise it. I know if she told me tomorrow that she could never love me, I'd be broken as I stepped away and protected her from a distance. I scented how she felt about me earlier, the slight touches I stole. Thanks, train.

I don't think she doesn't want me, and I'm done pretending like we have the rest of our lives to tell her how I feel.

We will never let her be taken from us again. Never.

The fact I couldn't go after her before, it's something I will never forgive myself for. Leaving her for the good of the children on board, our people, and getting them to this train was one of the hardest things I've done. I try to remind myself that she wasn't alone; Phim was always on our side and protecting her, but anything could have gone wrong with that. I remember the first time Phim mentally reached out to Valentine, telling him Oisean had sold Mairin to the Ravensword Pack and demanded she mate with the alpha. Why the sick asshole wanted that to happen, I'm not sure, but we will find out more answers in the Fenrir Court.

"How did she seem to you?" Henderson asks me, his eyes lifting from the maps on the table in front of him. He crosses his arms.

"She is sleeping peacefully. That's a good sign," I answer, leaning against the seats. Silas grumbles under his breath about that being nothing.

"It looks like she hasn't eaten in a month. Phim said she...well, she was going to kill herself rather than mate with him," Silas eventually bites out. We all have noticed the weight loss. It doesn't make her any less exquisite and beguiling, but I want to see her eating soon.

I growl. The thought of that bastard having Mairin as his mate, forcing her, makes me want to rip the pack apart one by one. The thought that she would rather die, and planned to kill herself, shatters my heart into pieces. We all know where she is, in some perspective. After most of our pack was killed, the lands destroyed, and Mairin most likely dead, we were hopeless and lost.

My growl is echoed by Henderson's, Silas's and Valentine's own wolves.

I pick up one of the maps off the table, running my eyes over the tracks Henderson has chosen.

“This one is close to the sea. It might not even be there anymore. We haven’t travelled on it in two years,” I point out.

Henderson frowns. “We can’t go the usual way, it’s too open, too easy for them to attack us from the Cumbrian City on the west. There isn’t much on this side, a few villages here and there. It’s a better risk.”

“Still a risk,” I state and rub my temples. “Okay, we take the other route.”

“We will be there by tomorrow morning,” Valentine says, who is better with trains than any of us except for the triplets who live on this damn thing and drive it. They are crazy buggers, but they have saved our asses on more than one occasion. “The train will get us to Fenrir, just.”

“Should we have told Mai about him?” Henderson asks.

None of us have an answer to that. No. Yes. I don’t ever want to keep secrets from her again, but explaining him...would bring up more answers than we can tell her until we are at our destination. Our real home.

When she is finally safe, because in this world, she is never safe. Not even with us.



CHAPTER

TEN

I wake up slowly in the warm, dark room and blink my eyes a few times, thinking over the dream I had, thankful it wasn't a nightmare like I expected to have. Maybe I was too tired for nightmares. Maybe it was because I am with them. In this dream, I was on my own, and dozens of bats flew around my body, swirling and swirling.

I wonder if, in the way the alphas speak to Hades in their dreams, my own dreams are a connection to Persephone. She doesn't speak to me, not that I can remember. The only time I felt I heard a goddess talk was in the mating pool. She called me her chosen. Her voice was enchanting and unique. Part of me doesn't want to move, as I'm cocooned in the safety of my blanket, and the humming of the train is comforting me. Rolling on my side, I glance out of the tiny, thin window above the other bunk bed. It's night time, and I must have slept for a lot longer than I thought I did. Bright stars litter the sky, a mixture of molten-gold and polar white, sparkling and gleaming. I simply let myself relax and stare at them as they pass by, the different colorations of shapes. Finally, I sit up slowly, nearly hitting the ceiling with my head, and jolt back when something touches my nose. I blink when I see something is tied to the ceiling above me, hanging down.

A yellow paper note.

I carefully pull the little note off the ceiling, unable to see what it says as it's too dark in here, but light shines in from the outline of the closed door. Grabbing my dagger, I climb down the bed, past Silas who's underneath me, and on the bottom bunk, Henderson is sleeping with his arm over his eyes.

The coldness of the floor spreads through my socks to my feet, and I make a mental reminder not to get out of bed without socks on in the future. I turn around, pausing as my eyes follow a thin strip of light hanging over Ragnar's bare chest, illuminating his thick chest, strong muscles everywhere on him. His stomach is flat, narrowing at his waist, and there is a small line of hair disappearing into his trousers. Over his heart are his moon marks, four moons of all shapes are in a line where his heart is. They move up and down as he breathes, and I stare at this honourable, rugged and flawless alpha, feeling butterflies coming alive in my stomach.

He is a beautiful man... They all are.

Too beautiful, like I imagine the gods were once.

I tiptoe to the door when I hear Ragnar speak, his voice low and deep. "Morning."

"Morning," I whisper back, turning on my heel.

"Did you sleep well?" he questions, moving slightly on the bed, but I can't see his face in the shadows.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Help yourself to breakfast, two carriages down. There will be people in there, we all sleep at random times," he explains.

"Thanks, Ragnar. I'm sorry I woke you."

"Don't be, Mai," he whispers back. "Now I get to go to sleep with your voice and scent on my mind."

I blush in the darkness, speechless at what to say back.

His amused chuckle makes me open the door and escape the room. Damn, I'm not good at flirting.

Not with them. I feel like a bird is flirting with a bug, our relationship completely incompatible, and as the bug, I will be the one with my heart squished in the end. Yet I keep fluttering around them like a fool with my heart in my hands, happy for them to take it.

Destroy it.

Love it or keep it, it's theirs anyway. That's why I fell apart when they didn't come for me. Now I look back and regret I didn't fight more, that I didn't come up with another way other than death.

I grab my boots on the way out and pause in the corridor to slide them on, finding they fit nicely. I tuck the dagger into the boot edge, preferring it there over my jeans. There are eight dim light bulbs hanging between the

windows stretching down the corridor, with just enough light for me to be able to see the note.

A stream tied together and impossible to be undone.

We are bound and woven into the earth, across sand and grass alike.

We share the same path, our journeys crossing but never touching.

What am I?

With a smile, I lower the riddle and suck in a breath. I missed his riddles, the answers always meaning something. It's our way of talking, a bridge in the darkness for us. I try to figure out the riddle as I slide the paper back into my pocket and quickly freshen up in the bathroom, which is luckily empty, before walking down the corridor past all the boxes littered in this carriage. The back of this carriage is full of cardboard, wicker and wooden boxes that smell like herbs.

I pause at the end door, seeing shadows through the frosted glass on the other door. Once I step out there, I have to face what is left of my pack, my family, and feel their sorrow mixed with my own. I have to face them and the knowledge that the angels wouldn't have come to the Fall Mountain Pack if it weren't for me. They slaughtered them because of me.

Gods, they must hate me.

My stomach rumbles, and I look down, breathing out my nerves and forcing myself to do this. I can't and won't hide. I turn the handle and go through to the other carriage. The second I open the door, the sounds of hushed chatter and the scent of cooked food surround me. It's warmer in here, and it's a larger, narrower carriage than our rooms. There are at least seven people sitting down at breakfast, the sun rising over the cliff edges in the distance, casting orange and yellow light across the room. Every single one of the people in here turns my way, and I pause, noticing that at least five of them are teenagers. The other two are adults, a man and woman. The woman slides out of her seat and walks to me, a kind smile on her face.

"We are so happy to hear you are safe and well," she tells me, taking my hand in hers. Her bright blue eyes expel warmth and light. The woman can't be more than twenty, with thick curly brown locks of hair and a slim face.

"Thank you," I say, my throat tight.

She smiles and releases my hands. "Let us know if you need anything, Mairin."

I nod, feeling so grateful and relieved as she goes back to her table, several of the others smiling at me.

Feeling his eyes on me, I turn and look at the last table of the row, where Valentine is sitting on his own like no one wants to sit by him. They probably don't. He holds my stare for a moment with those transcendent, earthy green eyes of his. His dark hair has grown out, along with his wisps of a five o'clock shadow. The memory of him seated between my legs, my fingers buried in his hair, cutting strands of it away, makes me feel warm.

I felt like we had a moment, something unspoken and untouched, right then.

Now he looks at me like I'm a stranger, and it's my fault. I hurt him, the man I wanted nothing more than to fix.

He looks away. The pressure of his gaze is like a weight being lifted, and he stares down into a bowl of some kind of rice concoction mixed with what looks like chicken and vegetables. My stomach rumbles once more. I look around and spot against the wall, there's a table set up with several large metal pots, stacks of bowls and piles of spoons. I get my bowl and open the pots to find rice, a mixture of carrots, broccoli and peas, and one pot filled with a broth. I fill my bowl, glancing at the empty plate with only bread crumbs left. Bread would have been nice. I find a canteen of water and hook it under my arm before walking through the tables, feeling people watching, hearing their whispers about the alphas and me.

I hold my head high as I get to Valentine's table, ignoring his "leave me the hell alone" vibes, and sit down opposite him. The sections have high enough half walls I can imagine we are alone and in private. The half walls are made of red velvet, torn in places, but they're soft against my back as I lean on them.

Valentine completely ignores me as I dig into my food. About halfway through, I pause and softly kick his leg under the table. His eyebrows raise as he finally looks at me, frowning.

"Did you just kick me?" he asks very slowly.

I grin. "Yes. Hi."

"Hello," he replies before he laughs and laughs. His deep, bellowing laughter echoes around the carriage, and I feel lighter, happier to hear it. I end up laughing with him, not being able to help myself. Eventually we fall into light chuckles, and I eat a bit more of the food in front of me, finding myself more starving than I thought. I lost weight in the Ravensword Pack,

refusing to eat their food. My body is clearly now making up for it. Excellent, safe food is something I've not eaten in a while, and I have to take it slow bit by bit to stop myself from feeling sick and too full. Valentine surprises me by sliding several pieces of buttered bread over from his plate and then picks several berries off, placing them next to the bread.

"Are you suggesting I need to eat more?" I ask.

He smirks, leaning back and crossing his arms. "I like feeding you, caring for you. Eat."

I sigh at the possessive alpha tones leaking through his words. Even him giving me food could be seen as a mate thing. Males, when they find their mate, give them their own food as a sign of wanting the mating. I've heard of the tradition before, an old custom that our wolves apparently buy into.

Wolves.

"Has Silas...well, has he given me permission to shift?"

"Ask him," he replies.

I narrow my eyes. "I'm in danger now. All the time. Being able to shift would help—"

"Ask him," Valentine repeats, and I grit my teeth.

"Fine," I mutter. "I never understood why you held me back from shifting."

"The first time we shifted, we heard him. You never shifted young, and no one knew why. Usually most young do by age one. Sometimes, but uncommonly, before they are five. You didn't, and I remember our mothers concerned about it. Silas was concerned about the effect forcing a shift could have."

I sit back. "He did it to protect me."

"Does that surprise you?" he asks, no hint of judgment in his tone. "That we protect you? That we would do anything to protect you?"

"I hate that I'm so helpless," I admit. "Maybe the risk is worth it."

"Not if it costs you your life, princess," he replies.

"What's with the new nickname?"

I sigh when I'm met with silence, knowing the conversation is over. "Thanks for the riddle. I haven't quite figured it out yet, but I'll go think on it."

His lips tilt in slight amusement. He made this one hard for me; I know it. The door to the train opens in front of me, and I smile when I see a very familiar face. Trey runs across the carriage and crashes into me on the seat,

nearly knocking my head into the back of the seat. But I don't care as I wrap my arms around him, squeezing him tight as I breathe in his scent.

"I've missed you, kid," I tell him, trying not to note how he reminds me of Jesper. I can't think like that. Jesper didn't want to come with us, and one day I will go back for him, but I can't right now.

"I wanted to see you yesterday, but you were sleeping. Are you okay?"

"I'm good," I tell him, seeing his relief.

"They told me that you're okay, but I just want to see that you're actually okay," he rambles and looks down. "A lot of people died...my friends. We just about got out from the angels' attack."

"I'm so sorry," I reply, hugging him tighter. "The world isn't fair sometimes."

"Kid, you have school," Valentine lightly tells him. "And you're squishing Mai."

"Sorry!" he replies, climbing off me, and I note that he looks taller now. Older somehow. His blond hair is cutting into his eyes, and his clothes are tight on him, but I'm so happy to see him alive after what happened. "You need to eat more. Did they not feed you in the Ravensword Pack? That Alpha Sylvester is crazy."

I flinch a little at his name, and Valentine clears his throat.

"School, boy," he commands. Trey's cheeks are bright red as I give him a soft smile, and he rushes to the door, stopping and looking back.

"I'll see you later for lunch, Mai!"

"Sounds good!" I call after him before he opens the door, the movement making his shirt lift, and I see some scarring on his back.

"He's all right," Valentine says, clearly realising why I went pale. "We all have scars, and it's whether you choose to wear them as armour or let them be your downfall that matters. Trey wears them as armour."

I nod to that and finish my food, still feeling a strange sensation in the pit of my stomach. Dread of what comes next, if the angels find us, where we are going, and how it might be safe.

"How long was I sleeping?"

"About seven hours," he replies.

We both stare at each other for way too long, tension building in the room around us as something changes. Then I clear my throat, leaning back a bit, and it's gone.

“I’m going to go explore the train unless there’s anything else you need me to do today?”

“Silas wants you to train in the morning when he wakes up, which will be in about two hours. He sleeps from eleven at night to seven in the morning,” Valentine comments. “He expects you to carry on with training exactly how you left it.”

“Of course he does. The sadist wouldn’t have it any other way,” I mutter, making him smile.

“At least he can’t make you run two miles on the train,” he replies, and I laugh with him.

“Henderson wants to give you a history lesson of sorts on what is outside the walls and what to expect, who we are going to meet, etcetera.”

“I’m half excited and half dreading going outside the wall,” I admit.

“There’s a lot to understand,” he softly tells me. “And a lot you’re going to hate and dread in equal measures.”

“Like what?”

“Henderson’s lesson will be at night,” he replies. “I have nothing to teach you, unless you want to learn about the mechanical workings of the train.”

“I honestly thought Ragnar would be the one doing things like that,” I reply.

“He helps, but when we were kids, I was obsessed with a broken train near our pack. I spent hours of my childhood reading the manuals and trying to fix it. It didn’t have a roof, mind you,” he tells me, his voice soft. “You used to lie in the main carriage, looking at the stars with me. Sometimes.”

“I’ve always loved the stars.”

“I know,” he replies, that tension between us burning back to life.

“I’m sorry for how I spoke to you,” I tell him gently. “I was in the wrong, and I was upset. I lashed out because I was overwhelmed, and it’s no excuse for what I said. I know you’re nothing like him and you could never be. I’ve always known that, and I’m sorry. I regretted it the second I said it,” I tell him. “I should have told you the truth: I was terrified and fearful, and spent a month mentally begging for you to be alive, and I was, and am, forever grateful you are.”

“I know you were hurt, and you lashed out. I just happened to be the unfortunate one in the way,” he replies with a sigh. “It killed me to be

unable to come for you right away, as much as it did the others. Part of me thought I deserved what you said.”

“You didn’t,” I say, gently pressing my hand on his. He doesn’t move his hand, instead twisting it so our palms face against each other.

“We all have things we regret in our past, princess,” he comments. “Our past doesn’t mean we give up on our future. I’m not going anywhere, even if you snap at me, or even growl or bite me. I decided a long time ago I’d be anything, do anything, to be in your life.”

“No matter where we run, we will find each other.”

His eyes spark with something I can’t read. “How do you remember that?”

“In a dream I had... I don’t remember anything else but that saying,” I tell him.

“It’s something you used to say to us. It started when we were seven,” he explains. “Because you got lost in the forest, following an injured fowl, who died in the end. The pack was searching, and we snuck out, and our wolves found you.”

“I like the saying. It’s true, even now, even after all these years apart. Right?”

“Yes,” he replies.

I clear my throat and climb out of my seat. “I’m going to explore and see if anyone wants any help before finding Silas.”

“Don’t be late. He is already in a mood,” Valentine warns with a smooth grin.

I like this warmer, not drunk, side to Valentine. For the next hour, I head off through the carriages to find my way around, figuring out the system and how the kids have been placed in wide ranges of ages so there is someone looking after the little ones. The train is similar in design all the way through, warmer in some parts than others. As I walk through it, I notice that the further back I go in the train, the better quality some of the carriages are and the more supplies I find in boxes placed randomly everywhere.

In the eighth carriage along, I find Breelyn and Phim, who slams the bathroom door shut as she goes inside, making it clear she isn’t speaking to me. I don’t care; I don’t want to talk to her yet. Mainly because I don’t have a clue how to talk to her, to understand her. Breelyn, in her wolf form, is

lying on the ground near some boxes, which two male children about six are sitting above, drawing on them and paying us no attention.

Breelyn's bright eyes look at me as I kneel down next to her wolf.

"If you want to talk or need anything, I'm here," I softly tell her. "I owe you a life, Breelyn, and I won't leave your side unless you order me to. Everything that happened...I can't take back. I can't change it, and I wish to all the gods I could do, but they are not here to help us. So I'm here. I'm a friend, no questions asked."

Her wolf looks up at me before standing up on her legs and stretching out. I tilt my head to the side, trying to read her expression.

"She wants to go with you and stay close. Protect you," one of the little boys tells me. I look up at him, but he has gone back to drawing, ignoring me.

"Well, if you want," I tell her. In response, she brushes her head against my leg. I glance back at the bathroom door, knowing Phim is right there—yet she might as well be a million miles off—before heading down the carriage, Breelyn on my heels. I can't imagine what Breelyn must be going through, but it's clear she is too fearful to shift back, and I won't ever make her.

It's a bit of a mess to get through some of the next carriages, full of kids' clothes, bedding, messy plates, and bottles. Not to mention the young children running about and the teenagers trying their hardest to manage them. There are a few adults desperately trying to clean up after the children, picking things up here and there, but they are stressed and tired. Not caring about Silas and how pissed he is going to be, I get to work and help clean up five carriages before finding a carriage with seven babies and two adults alone, completely run off their feet. Thankfully, three of the babies have shifted into pups and they run to Breelyn, who huffs as they bite her legs, and she sorts them out. I clean and organize baby clothes, bottles and help rock two of the four babies to sleep.

I don't know how much time has passed when it's calm enough for me to leave, and Breelyn is fast asleep on the floor, three pups curled up with her. I quietly leave them to it and make my way back up the train to the second carriage, where a very unhappy Silas is waiting for me.

He is sitting on the edge of a box, drawing something on a small notepad, which he slides into his pocket when he sees me and straightens.

“You’re late,” he comments, his voice full of disdain. I used to think he hated me. His tone and demur are always so closed off, but I remember that kiss. I saw how he fought for me, how he protected me.

The sun is now rising over the cliffs that we’re passing, and I can hear the sea in the distance. The beautiful sounds of the waves only induce fear in me. Fear of being pushed off cliffs by Alpha Sylvester, of nearly drowning, of falling and hitting the sea, the waves swallowing me.

“I was—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he cuts me off, stalking towards me. “You’re weak, you need to eat more, and nearly all the training we did went down the crapper from the lack of strength you currently have. We will have to start again.”

“I’m not weak,” I hiss.

He huffs, stepping into my space. “Didn’t know you like to make jokes, Mai.”

“I’m not training with you when you’re being a total ass,” I tell him.

Silas is almost intimidating as he leans over me, his towering form like a shadow from a tree. His silvery grey eyes, which remind me of the moon in the night sky, watch me closely. The navy shirt he has on stretches across his muscles, his trousers doing the same thing, and I recognise I’m checking him out, as I find nothing about Silas that I don’t like on the outside.

Shame he has to open that big mouth of his.

“You are,” he growls out, the noise coming from deep within his chest, a possessive and alpha move.

Most wolves, even me at one point, would submit to such a command. But something stirs in my chest, and a snarl escapes my lips. “No.”

His eyes turn into a wicked mix of amusement and desire. “Is that a challenge, little wolf? Are you finally coming out to play with your alphas?”

I stare him down, not willing to back down even as his eyes turn red and my own eyes feel like they are burning. He moves closer, our bodies touching in every space they possibly can, and I’m keenly aware of him touching me.

I notice every inch of his body, how it fits against mine.

And I want closer, I want more.

“There you are,” he breathes out, his voice softer than I’ve ever heard it. A door clicks open, the simple sound ripping us apart, and I step back,

glancing over to see a man I don't know in the doorway, his head bowed. *Dammit, I didn't get to ask about the permission to shift. In fact, this entire conversation felt a little too out of control.*

“We have a problem.”



CHAPTER

ELEVEN

The man who stands in the doorway has a clean-shaven head, bright brown eyes and narrow nose, which he scratches as he looks between me and Silas, wiping coal on his face. The man has coal-stained, dark blue dungarees, one of the straps not clipped on his shoulder. Other than that, he is bare chested and wearing heavy-looking black boots, the laces undone.

“Fox, try knocking when you enter this carriage,” Silas growls out.

Fox bows his head, showing his neck, submitting.

“Sorry, Alpha Silas,” he says, his voice deep and gruff. He smells like cherries and rainwater, mixed with coal. “Alpha Valentine sent me. It’s urgent.”

“Show me,” Silas demands and looks at me. “This is Mairin. Mairin, meet one of the triplets running this train. Fox.”

“Nice to meet you,” I tell him, and he playfully grins at me for just a second before we both hear Silas’s low growl. Fox moves quickly, leading the way past the carriages of coal, down a narrow pathway where I have to hold on tight to the bars on either side of me before we get to the main part of the engine.

Valentine stands watching as two nearly identical men shovel coal into the fire. I feel the heat across my body as Valentine turns to me, nodding once before looking over my shoulder. The other two triplets have shoulder-length red hair, the same eyes as Fox, and they are wearing the same dungarees.

“My brothers, Falcon and Finch,” Fox introduces. They both pause for just a second and bow their heads with matching cheeky grins before going

back to work.

“What’s going on?” Silas demands, walking to the glass above the controls. He pauses before stepping back. “Well, fuck.”

I rush over and glance out at the view in front of the train, breathing in the familiar scents of both Ragnar and Henderson nearby getting closer to us.

About a mile away, maybe a bit further, where the track is close to the cliff, it is just gone. A part of the cliff has fallen away, taking the track down with it, and there isn’t much left, and we are going too fast to stop now. Plus, judging from the surrounding highlands, we are close to the Scottish lands and the tunnel; our escape is close. The track leading up to the missing part isn’t in good condition either, and I might have never been on a train before, but I can judge that it is going to be a bumpy ride.

“What is going on?” Ragnar demands as a long gust of wind blows over us. The heat from the nearby fire makes it feel warm out here until the wind blows.

Before anyone can answer, I turn around. “A part of the track has been completely eroded away by a cliff edge. We are going to have a big problem. Soon.”

The truth is, there’s no way we could stop the train before hitting that.

Valentine, ever the thinker, makes the command. “We need to go faster. As fast as you can make the train travel. Do it.”

“Yes, alpha,” Fox answers for himself and his brothers. “You might want to hold on to something, Mairin.”

“Go inside,” Henderson half-heartedly commands, touching my arm. I find all of them watching me with varied degrees of concern. We could fly off a cliff with this train, and the chances of us surviving that are slim.

“I’m going to warn our pack,” I tell them. “You make sure we don’t fly off the cliff.”

Ragnar’s eyebrows lift. “Bossy for someone who claims she couldn’t be an alpha female.”

I chuckle as I rush past them and let myself into the train, passing Phim.

“Help me warn the train to hold on to something. And secure the young children,” I ask her. She pauses mid step and looks at me, nodding once before rushing down the train with me. We both shout at anyone we find and tuck children under the seats, telling them to hold on. I run down the train, losing Phim in the madness, shouting to anyone that can hear me to

hold on to something, while most of them look at me like I'm completely insane. But they listen. I pass Breelyn in the train with the young pups, five of them now, and she is tucking them under the table before lying as a barrier to hold them in. I help the woman get under the table with the babies before I carry on.

"We have emptied these trains, hearing what you were shouting, but there is one girl missing. She must be in the last two carriages," a man not much older than me explains as he holds two toddlers.

"Get them safe, and I will find her," I tell him. I don't look back to see if he listened as I pull the door open and rush through the carriages, shouting for the girl. I get to the last door when I hear the crashing of the wheels, the high-pitched noise grating on my ears. The train jolts to the side, going off the rails, and a scream gets lodged in my throat as my feet leave the floor, and then I slam back onto it, unable to stop myself. My body slams into the side of the velvet half wall, and I grab onto it, looking up the path just as I hear an ear-splitting scream.

Right above me, the little girl who I was looking for goes flying past me as she falls, and I reach out, barely catching her dress before she slams into the door. She cries as I pull her to me and roll under the table, using the middle leg to balance my weight and hers.

"You're okay," I tell her as she holds my neck tighter.

"Fell," she whispers, but I barely hear her over my own heart thumping, panicking about what is going to happen next. I feel the train jolt forward, howls and screams echoing around us, and then we're weightless. The train bounces over the gap, and for a split second, everything is peaceful.

Until this last carriage doesn't make the jump. I grab hold of the table leg as my stomach drops with the carriage, and it slams harshly into the brick wall. The searing sound of wheels on track as the train tries to keep going to pull up fills my ears, and I grit my teeth, holding onto the table leg to stop myself from falling. A table snaps and breaks on the other side, crashing past me and cutting a line down my leg. I hold in a cry from the pain, watching as the table slams into the doors at the bottom, forcing them open with the weight before falling down the cliff, breaking on the rocks way before hitting the sea. But I realize quite quickly they need to cut this train carriage off, otherwise the whole train is going to be lost as it struggles to go forward. I look down at the little girl, her bright brown eyes looking up at me, and kiss her head of brown hair.

“We are going to climb like a monkey and get out of here. Okay?” I tell her. “But I need you to climb onto my back and hold my neck tightly. You must not let go.”

She doesn’t use words to reply to me, but I can tell she understands when she carefully climbs around me and attaches herself to my back.

Silas was right. I am weak in my body. I can tell from the second I try to climb out of this train and my arms protest, carrying my body weight and the little girl’s.

“What’s your name?” I ask her, needing a distraction.

“Shailey,” she whispers to me.

“I’m Mairin, or Mai, or Irin. I don’t mind what you call me,” I tell her, pulling us out to the edge. I hear the sea below, the whistling wind, and for a second, I’m back in Alpha Sylvester’s grip, hung over that cliff about to fall. Shailey’s whimper snaps me back into the present, and I pull us into the next seating area.

My muscles strain with every movement, and sweat soon builds on the back of my neck. I need to get to the door and then figure out how to open it.

I keep climbing, a little at a time, trying to ignore the sounds of the sea and the way the carriage is softly swaying. I look up at the doors, relief pouring through me when the door is ripped open and Henderson fills up the doorway. I can hear the crying of wolves and children now, but I don’t look anywhere else except into his eyes.

I can see him assessing the situation, and I make it easier for him. “I can do this.”

“Climb to me,” he commands, outstretching his hand as far as he can. His legs are spread apart on the edge of the doorframe as he leans down and uses just one hand to hold himself up.

“Hold on, Shailey,” I tell her, and with more strength than I thought I possibly had, I get moving up the train, climbing from one seating area to the next. The train wheels grind against the tracks to hold us up, the noise getting louder and louder as it strains.

“Faster, Mai,” Henderson demands, and like his voice gives me strength, I climb as quickly as I can until I’m close enough to reach for him. With everything I’ve got, I push myself off the side and slap my hand into his. And he doesn’t let go. Like I weigh nothing, he lifts me and Shailey out of the carriages and into his arms, placing us both in the other carriage on

flat land. Shailey climbs off my back and rushes into the arms of an older woman, who is weeping as she smiles at me.

“Thank you,” she mouths to me before taking Shailey away.

I turn back as Henderson unhooks the last train carriage, and it falls straight down into the space between the cliffs, diving into the sea.

He straightens up, and before he can say anything, I walk up to him and lean up, pressing my lips to his.

He freezes against me, and I pull away.

Gods, I made a mistake. How—

My inner thoughts are cut off as Henderson cups the back of my neck and kisses me passionately, washing away any doubts I had with one kiss. Our first genuine kiss. His lips are firm but tender as he pulls me closer, pressing our bodies against each other. Every bit of me he touches feels alive, like a fire being lit throughout my body. I want him closer, and I want —

Something clashes against the floor, and he pulls back, his eyes wide as we both stare at each other.

“Thank you for saving me once again.”

“What you did was brave, Mai. Saving that girl,” he tells me. “I’m proud.”

I clear my throat. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yes. Valentine and Ragnar are dealing with train repairs, and Silas is helping stitch up some wolves injured,” he explains to me.

“Silas can stitch cuts?”

“He learnt as a kid. His father didn’t have much respect for women and liked hurting his mother,” he tells me. “Silas cleaned up, and when his mother died, my mother challenged his father for Silas. She won.”

My heart hurts for Silas, and I’m starting to understand him a little better.

I change the subject, knowing Silas wouldn’t want us talking about his past. I know Henderson only told me because I asked to know everything bad and good. “How about we have our lesson early? After clearing the train up?”

“Sounds good,” he replies, offering me his hand. His hand seems like more now, thanks to that kiss. A kiss I will never forget and hope there is more of.

I slide my hand into his, and I never look back.



THE MADNESS of the state of the train takes us hours to help sort out before we can escape and go back to our carriage. Breelyn is lying in a spot between boxes when I head in, and I nod her way, following Henderson into the bedroom.

He sits on the lower bunk and pats the space opposite him after kicking his boots off. “This is the quietest place on the train right now. We can go somewhere else if you want.”

“No, of course not,” I softly tell him, understanding why he asked in the first place. I sit down opposite him, crossing my legs after taking my own boots off. Henderson pulls out a massive steel box from underneath the bed and opens it up. Inside are books, drawing pads, and lots of paper, and he starts rummaging through it all, clearly looking for something. He pulls out a picture on rough paper and hands it to me. I run my fingers over the oil sketch picture of some sort of disgusting creature I’ve never seen before. It’s almost human, maybe longer, but it has a wolf’s face with gruesome teeth and what looks like slime dripping from the corner of its mouth. Its claws are black and long in place of where hands would be, and on its back are something like wings that drag along the floor.

Its lack of eyes is the creepiest part. Where eyes should be, there is nothing but empty pits of darkness, and I get the feeling it wasn’t drawn wrong. “What is this?” I ask.

“The Leviathan. Or Levi for short,” he explains, taking the picture back. “And they live in almost all of the earth now, except for the walled area courts. The wolves’ pack courts escaped them because of the wall.”

He pauses, seeing my wide eyes no doubt, and he goes back to searching in the box. He finally pulls out a yellow paper map of the world.

“Why does it say Lapetus instead of Earth?”

“Another change the ever so mighty angel king has made out there,” he sarcastically explains. “He reshaped the world. Why would he not rename it?”

“The more I hear about this king, the more I equally fear and hate him,” I mutter, but my words dry up as I really look at the map in front of me. I recognise parts of the world from maps I have seen, but this is barely a wisp of what it was. I trace my finger over the wolves’ pack courts, surrounded by the wall. But that’s all I really recognise. The main continent is

completely reshaped now and split into four sections, named courts which must be their territories. The courts are marked with names I don't recognise, and outside of that, there's America, which is still missing massive chunks of it; it seems like it is mostly the north of America left. What I think is Australia is still there, but it's called the black land now.

"I have so many questions," I say. "I'm starting with how the hell is the land a different shape. How?"

"The angels can control earth, ground, dirt. That's how they destroyed the world, but their power is nearly gone. He used it up to make the world as he wanted," he gently explains.

Ah, this king no one wants to tell me about.

"And the Leviathan? What are they?"

"No one really knows what caused them. They started appearing around the war, killing off anyone in their way until the angels used them against the humans. Angels can fight, just like wolves, but humans held no weapon strong enough to stop one. Guns were their best bet but the Levi move quick, too quick for the human eye to slow down. Their armies were gone, thanks to the angels by that point. It was a slaughter. What humans are left either live in the America territory or they are slaves. I'm afraid the courts all hold human slaves, and it will be something you see," he tells me. "Angels see humans as food. Nothing more."

Disgust curls in the pit of my stomach.

"Your book said that they drink blood. Would they drink ours?"

"No, we are poison to them. Our blood is," he tells me. "Back to the Levi. They don't fly, and they travel in packs. They only hunt at night, and we will be keeping the train off and silent at night. I've never seen one alone. You must never let them scratch you, they're like an infestation. They scratch you and sometimes you turn into one of them. I've seen it happen. Even with wolves."

"Are we safe outside the wolves' pack at all then?"

"It's only a matter of time before they get in here. The wall is old and not impenetrable," he states. "This place is a ticking time bomb."

All I think of is Jesper. I look down at my hands, and he pauses.

"Talk to me, Mai."

"Jesper," I quietly say. "He is family to me, and I left him there with..."

"You had no choice, and as far as Phim explained to us, Jesper is more than a ward for that pack. He is protected by them because he could be a

powerful wolf one day.”

Henderson reaches over, taking my hand gently in his. I feel nothing but warmth and understanding coming from him. “We’ve always known that the wall will fall, but trust me, when it does, we will offer them help. Where we’re going is safe. You will understand it all soon.”

“I hope so,” I admit.

“The Fenrir Court is just a stepping stone on our way to the Galatea Court, where we are heading.” He shows me by tracing his finger over the map. “This is the main court, the Neso Court, and their capital city is in the gap in the mountains. The Sycx Court is one we hope to avoid.”

“So who is the Galatea Court run by?”

“Officially, no one. The Galatea Court is considered empty land, nothing left but stray human settlements, runaway angels and traitors. There have been angels who tried to rule there and soon died or failed. The king, from our spies’ knowledge, doesn’t care about it. Never has done,” he explains. “The king lives in the Neso Court, in a palace that towers above the busy city of millions.”

“Seeing as I’m smart enough not to ask too many questions about this king, I want to know about the court we are heading to. Who are these people we trust?”

He sighs, closing the box and shoving it under the bed. “Viscount Deimos and his consort, Indra. They are angels, ruthless, and you need to be on your guard around them at all times. Deimos slaughtered hundreds in a battle to the death for his title. And regularly fights challengers for sport.”

“Why in the name of wolves would we trust them with our lives?”

Henderson leans back. “When our pack fell, and we were running, we met Deimos. He was gravely injured, his mate dead in his arms. We saved his life, healed him to health, and buried his mate with him. Then, for two years, he trained us and hid us from the war. He might be ruthless and brutal, but we saved his life and gave his mate peace. Those debts bound us, and his word can be trusted, as can his silence.”

“And Indra?”

“I have not met her yet, but if she is at his side as consort, she will be a strong-willed woman to handle him,” he warns. “Maybe not as strong as you, Mai.”

“Sometimes I don’t feel strong,” I admit. “But being around you, this pack, my alphas, it makes me feel like I am.”

“You are, with or without us,” he tells me.

I shake my head. “Look what I became when I was kidnapped.”

“That was different. You weren’t given the chance to be strong, and you were captured by a man who—” He pauses, anger hitching his voice up and making me shiver. “That bastard tried his hardest to break you, and you are here, alive and happy. You won.”

I lean my head back, watching him carefully. “If I ask you, will you kiss me again?”

His eyes widen a little, surprise written clearly on his face. He smirks and slowly moves across the bed to me. I feel tiny when he grabs my waist and tugs me closer to him so we are both side by side, facing each other.

“When you want to kiss me, Mai, kiss me.”

And I do.

A rectangular graphic with a dark green, misty forest background. The word "CHAPTER" is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the top. Below it, the word "TWELVE" is written in smaller, white, serif capital letters.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

I wake up with a jolt, sweat making my hair stick to the back of my neck, and I gasp in the warm air around me, closing my eyes tightly to block out the dream from my mind, like it wasn't a memory. It was real. The nightmare was just a reminder, promising me I can't escape my past even now. Even when I'm not alone anymore and I'm as safe as I can get in this world, it doesn't matter. My past will not disappear and will haunt me.

I can't pretend I'm normal, like I didn't take another life. Two lives are gone because of my hands, thousands more from a pack I don't remember. My mother is gone, her life taken for mine. And look at the monster I have become. What would she think of me now? Is she watching from her place in the stars with the gods? Images of the dream flicker into my mind, and I can't push them away, my breaths becoming laboured. I still see his eyes as his life drained away, hear Breelyn's screams mixed with the painful gasp of her father, his hot blood on my hand. I shiver as I turn my eyes towards the window, watching the stars flicker past the tall mountains of Scotland.

I grab my dagger and blanket, taking it with me on my shoulders as I climb down the bed, past Valentine, who is sleeping soundly. I quietly tiptoe out into the corridor and glance down, shivering in the cold of the corridor. Breelyn is sleeping in her wolf form on the floor, her white fur shining in the moonlight from the window. Without thinking on it, I walk over and pull my blanket off my shoulders, placing it over her wolf.

She doesn't stir as I lean back and walk back to the bedroom as Ragnar comes out of the bathroom. He smiles at me, glancing past to see Breelyn and my blanket.

“Want to share my blanket? I swear I don’t snore,” he whispers. Warmth creeps through my body at the idea of sharing one of those tiny beds with his big form.

But it is too cold to sleep without a blanket, and I doubt the others would want me sleeping in their beds. Okay, maybe Henderson.

“Did we used to sleep in the same bed as kids at all?”

I don’t know why I want to know that, or if the answer will change anything, but I want to know.

“When we camped out for the night, yes,” he whispers back. “If you’re not comfortable, I will sleep on the floor.”

“You’re not sleeping on the floor,” I sigh, making him grin. He tugs the door open, and I head in, sliding my dagger into one of my boots before going to Ragnar’s bed. His scent is all over his pillow and blanket as I curl into the bed, my back pressed against the cold wall of the train. He climbs in with me, rolling on his side to fully face me in the darkness.

Our bodies fit perfectly like this, facing each other, not an inch of space between us. I feel his every breath, hear his heartbeat like it’s my own, and smell his subtle woody, spicy scent that comforts me as much as it draws me into him.

His startlingly intense dark blue eyes that I felt like I saw when I fell off that cliff—his eyes are the same colour as the deep part of the sea.

“It was kind of you to give Breelyn your blanket. We are low on them,” he tells me. “And she won’t accept anybody else’s.”

“How is she here?”

“Phim was in contact with us, through our mental connection to all our pack,” he starts off, and I’ve always wondered what that connection is like. “She told us what happened to Breelyn and you.”

I don’t look away from his eyes, needing his strength, stealing part of it for just a moment. “I was forced to kill her father in front of her. I wish—”

“You had no choice, and his blood is not on your hands,” he gently interrupts me. “I suspect Breelyn knows it as well.”

“I will never be able to say sorry enough to her,” I say. “Victim or not, I took her father’s life, and it will haunt me forever.”

“I heard he gave his life for her,” Ragnar says, and I nod. “Well then, you honoured him by accepting his wishes and saving Breelyn. Phim made it clear Breelyn had to get out of the pack and you wouldn’t be able to live

with yourself if she wasn't freed. Breelyn didn't hesitate when Phim got her during the escape."

"Phim was right," I admit. "Seems she knows me better than I thought."

"Sisters," he mutters with a grin I suspect is there even when I can't see it in the darkness. His tone changes, growing softer. "What woke you up? Was it Valentine's snoring?"

I quietly laugh. "No, it wasn't that. I like his light snoring."

"It's better now. When he used to drink, he sounded like this train. But louder," he replies, and I can't help the louder laugh that escapes my lips.

"I don't want to talk about my nightmares. I want to forget them. Tell me something about our childhood," I ask. "Please."

"I will always tell you anything to escape your darkness, Mai. You never need to say please," he tells me and moves a little, brushing us closer as he gets comfy. "We were six, and it was our birthday. Henderson and I were born on a Solas night in the middle of June."

"What is a Solas night?"

"Once a year, the pack worships the sun god for giving us food and life. The day time is filled with food, dancing and parties. The night is full of...well, sex and love. We celebrate and make life."

I'm glad he can't see my red cheeks in the darkness. "So, children aren't allowed out after eight o'clock on Solas night, but we never listened to the rules. We snuck out, just Henderson, me and you. We got about twenty steps away from our hut before my mother, in wolf form, found us. She marched us back home, gave us a lecture about being responsible, and for the next two weeks, we were made to run around the pack, all four miles of it, every night at eight, as we loved being out at night."

I chuckle lowly. "Your mother is a badass."

"Yes," he replies. "And your mother was her best friend. They were like night and day. One kind and sweet, the other scary and passionate. But both of them were powerful and amazing women."

Not for the first time, or the last, I wish I could remember these things. "What about your father?"

"Never knew him," he tells me. "My mother was only nineteen when we were born, and she told us our father was a wolf passing through. A stray wolf who never came back. She mated a man who brought us up as his own, mind you."

"I wonder if my father was similar."

“It is possible,” he admits. “I don’t have those answers for you.”

Carefully, I place my hand on his chest, over his T-shirt, and push him back onto the bed. He lies back, and my heart pounds as I curl up on his side, placing my head over his heart. “Can I listen to your heartbeat for a bit? Until I fall back to sleep?”

It sounds like he doesn’t breathe for a moment until his arm wraps around my waist, his other hand resting on his stomach. I place my hand next to his on his stomach, near his ribs. “Sleep, Mai. I’m protecting you.”

“Sometimes, when I’m close to you, I feel like sleeping is the last thing my body wants,” I admit, my mouth feeling dry, my heart pounding. “Is it the same for you?”

“Yes,” he rasps. “Being around you is a special kind of torture. All I want to do is kiss you, strip off your clothes, and kiss from your lips down until I own every inch of your body. Until you can’t think, can’t breathe, without scenting me. Knowing me. Owning me as I own you.”

Speechless, my body feels feverish, and heat pools between my legs. The scent in the carriage changes. I lift my head and we both pause, our lips close together in the darkness.

Ragnar lifts his hand and traces his fingers down the back of my neck, over my moon marks. “My wolf wants to claim you as our mate. He wants to bite you here.”

He pauses, his hand on my shoulder, marking the spot with his fingers. Pleasure like nothing I’ve ever known, it burns from his touch. My blood heats as his fingers tauntingly explore their way from my shoulder to my neck. His finger slowly drifts lower, and my breasts tighten.

“Tell me to stop,” he asks, pleads. We haven’t even kissed, yet all I want is for him to kiss me, to trail his fingers lower and into my core. To find out what it is like to be touched like that. “And I will.”

The seconds tick on as his hand explores the soft skin between my breasts, over my shirt. I become hyperaware of everything, including the fact we aren’t alone.

Valentine is sleeping nearby, hearing everything, and I can’t do this. Not with him here, not like this.

“We aren’t alone,” I whisper, and he pauses. “And I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“I know,” he admits, moving his hand away and letting me settle back onto his chest. In the darkness, I see the large bulge of his trousers, even

under the blanket. “I’m yours, Mai. I will wait forever for you.”

“You can’t say things like that, Ragnar,” I say. “You must have a fated mate out there and—”

“Fated mates are connections made by gods. The moon goddess forced a connection for you, but I will never be forced into any connection. Real, true mates are only found during sex,” he tells me. “No god can create that true bond.”

“Another thing I didn’t know,” I say, feeling angry at all the teachers I had in school for not teaching us this. At myself believing that Alpha Sylvester could ever be my true mate. We are linked by the moon goddess, whoever she really is, and I will get rid of that connection when I find my true mate.

I wonder if it’s possible to have more than one true mate. Four alphas, to be exact.

“Sleep, Mai,” Ragnar softly suggests. “Sleep.”

His heartbeat slowly calms my wandering mind, and I’m silent as I slowly close my eyes, letting his strength and protection push me into a deep sleep.



“MAI, YOU WANT TO SEE THIS,” Trey exclaims, practically jumping on the spot as I put down the box of dry food after counting it and marking it on my list.

I furrow my brow but place my clipboard down and take his hand, Breelyn climbing to her feet with me and following us as we go through the train to the front carriage where the alphas are. Their presence is like a wave as my body sparks to life, and all of their eyes turn to me.

“What are we watching then?” I ask, being dragged to the window by Trey. We are curving around a bend, and in front of us is a tunnel entrance to a mountain.

“We are leaving the wolves’ court, and everything is going to change now,” Trey tells me with wide eyes, watching the darkness of the tunnel get closer. I turn back to my alphas, Silas’s eyes catching mine.

We all stay silent, even as I see Fox come into the carriage out of the corner of my eye.

“I like this vow of silence,” Fox comments, making my lips twitch. “It’s like a play. All of us watching for the tunnel of doom. The humans should make a movie—”

“Shut up, Fox,” Silas suggests.

“Well, I was just—”

“Fox,” Henderson warns, and Fox grumbles before winking at me, earning him a smack on the back of the head from Ragnar, who is nearest.

The train takes no more than a few seconds before it is flying through the tunnel, the darkness immediately encompassing us as the lights flicker to life inside the carriage, making it dim. The train heads down for what feels like a long time but might only be fifteen minutes, and we all hold on to something to stop our feet slipping. I hold on to Trey’s hand, watching the train’s front lights marking the path wall before it levels out.

“Are we under the sea now?” I ask.

“Yes,” Ragnar replies. “It’s a shame to blow up this tunnel, but we can’t have anyone following us.”

“We are blowing it up?” I ask.

“Yes. The triplets—”

“Me!” Fox interrupts Henderson.

Henderson sighs. “The triplets will be dropping small bombs behind us, and we will blow them when we are out on the other side. The tunnel takes two hours to travel through at this speed.”

“So you should get to work, Fox,” Valentine suggests.

Fox bows his head with a smirk before leaving.

“He’d make a good beta. If you’re looking for one,” I suggest.

Silas laughs. “The problem with the triplets is two of them don’t speak more than one word, and the other one never stops talking.”

“Usually utter bullshit,” Ragnar adds.

“And they are all devils at poker or any card game. Don’t play against them,” Henderson warns me.

A graphic for the chapter title. The background is a dark, misty forest of evergreen trees. The word "CHAPTER" is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the middle. Below it, the word "THIRTEEN" is written in smaller, white, serif capital letters.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

*W*e break through to the main continent, near the edge of the Fenrir Court, in the middle of the day. The train switches from empty darkness to blinding light that forces me to turn away, clenching the pole bar under the window. I close my eyes for a few seconds before opening them to look over the Fenrir Court lands for the first time. What is left of Europe. The towering buildings and beautiful architecture of a nearby city we pass are just hollow, empty and broken scraps of the city, taken back by nature. The city is a burst of colour, thanks to the trees, ivy and moss that have grown everywhere, and I'm not sure where to look first. A breeze blows through the slightly window, the thick scent of grass and trees filling my senses, and it's colder than I expected.

I wrap my arms around myself. My small tank top and leggings are too little for this weather. Training with Silas is in half an hour where he is no doubt going to make me work for it. I don't mind, knowing the dangers out here.

Breelyn's wolf comes to my side, and I stay very still as she bursts into green shifter energy, changing back to her human form. When the energy flickers away and there is silence in the carriage, where there is only us, I lean down and pick up the blanket I gave her to sleep on and hand it her way without looking. She takes the blanket from me, and I look forward, seeing her in the reflection.

Despite hating myself for it, the first thing I notice is her red, angry scars drawn across her face. They start on her forehead, trail down her nose and cheeks, and stop below her lips, but she is still beautiful. She tucks her muddy brown hair back and looks forward.

“Now I am truly free; my wolf feels safe enough to let me shift back,” she firmly, no waver in her confidence, tells me.

Guilt gnaws at my chest as I carefully pick my next words, knowing there are only two words I can say to explain everything. “I’m sorry.”

She turns my way, and I face her. She is slightly taller than me, her body definitely slenderer, and I admire her confidence. “No, you were forced into that situation as much as I was. Neither of us should spend another second looking back at the past and regretting what we did to survive. Deal?”

I hold my head higher, holding her fierce gaze. “Deal.”

She slowly smiles, relief coating her eyes. “The past is something I want to forget, and I want to offer myself as a second in command to you. I see who you are, I’ve witnessed your strength and kindness, and there is no one I would rather serve. I am not skilled at fighting, but my father was a blacksmith, and I used to pretend to fight with his spare weapons. He also taught me to smelt.”

I freeze for a second. “You’re suggesting being a beta for me? I’m not an alpha.”

“You are almost an alpha female, judging from the way the alphas here —”

“I’m not an alpha female,” I softly interrupt. “I can’t offer you any position.”

“Alpha females used to have omegas. Did you know that?” she asks, and I nod. I remember reading about omegas, but the Ravensword Pack never let their alpha female have them. Not for hundreds of years. “The alpha female chooses one or two females they trust to have their back, fight alongside them and be marked as their omegas. It’s a high honour, or it used to be. Let me train to be that for you.”

“But I might not become anything, and your time would have been wasted.”

She shrugs. “I would have gained a close friend and fought beside a brilliant and brave wolf. That isn’t wasted time.” She places her hands on her hips before continuing, “And, for the record, I’ve only known you a short time, but I know for certain you will never be nothing. You’re the goddess’s chosen. Your fate has been picked by her.”

“I don’t even believe or serve her anymore. She is just one god, and there are many.”

Breelyn nods. “The forbidden gods are here on this train. My wolf told me, and she trusts them.”

“You should.”

“So, what do you say?”

“What’s the question?” Phim interrupts, and I turn to see her leaning against the doorframe, the door slowly shutting behind her. Phim’s hair is up in a ponytail, braided down her back, and some wisps fall into her eyes, the pale green reminding me of the moss on the unknown city outside this window. Dressed in clothes similar to mine, but with a hoodie tied around her waist and at least three daggers strapped to her thighs, she raises an eyebrow.

Breelyn answers her. “I asked Mairin if I could be trained to be her omega. One day at least.”

“Omega, huh?” she says, and I don’t know what she is going to say about it until she holds her head high. “Sounds good to me. I will come to training with Silas and train Breelyn while Silas trains you.”

“Thank you,” I tell her.

She smiles. “You have to ask Silas first. Good luck with him.” I cringe a little inside as she looks to Breelyn. “Good to see your wolf has let you out. Let’s get some clothes and food while Mai sweet-talks her alpha.”

My face feels hot as Breelyn nods my way and heads off with Phim, who winks at me. I am almost tempted to laugh before the stark reminder of how I don’t fully trust Phim comes back to haunt me. Fox passes Breelyn and Phim as they head back, and I walk down the carriage, heading for where Silas is waiting.

“Good afternoon, Miss Mairin,” Fox says, jogging to my side. “I never do get you alone.”

“I’m certain the alphas did that on purpose,” I joke.

He laughs and throws an arm around my shoulder. There is something about him that doesn’t make me throw his arm away, a lightness to his soul, perhaps. I sense he doesn’t mean me any harm. His next words make that certain. “Honestly, I love winking at you to piss them off. Don’t get me wrong, I love my pack and my alphas. I would die for them. But I can’t miss an opportunity to piss them off—and get away with it, as they won’t do a thing when you’re there.”

“I feel used,” I say, laughing.

He laughs with me as we walk through the carriage and into the next one. “Tell you what, Miss Mairin. I’m happy you’re here. You make them...happy. Relaxed. Keep being pretty and not breaking their hearts, and I will keep winding them up. Together, we will keep this pack on the right track.”

“Quite literally, huh?” I say, making the lamest train joke, and he bursts into laughter. His laughter is contagious, and I chuckle.

“Fox. Mairin.”

We both pause to look up at Silas. He stands, legs apart, arms crossed, his eyes locked on Fox’s arm on my shoulder.

Fox, wisely, lowers his arm and lowers his head in submission.

I don’t.

“Leave.”

Silas’s warning is less human, more wolf, and Fox disappears out of the door we came through. Silas storms towards me, and I back away a step until my back hits the wall of the carriage. He doesn’t pause, even when our bodies are touching, and he moves that bit closer, pressing my body into the wall.

His eyes are burning red as he leans down and places his face in my neck, breathing in deeply. My knees feel weak as my heart pounds and my body goes warm.

“Touch him and he dies.”

“I’m not yours, Silas,” I warn him, but I don’t feel like I get through as his hard body presses further into mine.

“Want to bet?”

“Silas,” I softly warn him, knowing it’s his wolf I’m talking to right now, the deeper, darker parts of his soul that are primal and possessive. “I’m not interested in Fox. Calm down.”

His red eyes, the very colour of rubies, slowly drain back into the colour of winter. He steps away from me quickly and turns around, facing the window, his back tense.

“Ask me, Mai,” he demands. “Ask me about what is pressing on your mind.”

“If you already know the question, why not just tell me the answer?” I ask instead.

He smirks at me over his shoulder. “Where did you learn to be so evasive?”

“You,” I smoothly reply.

Silence drifts over us again, and I give in first. I shouldn’t with him, I know that, but I want to know. I need to know. “Do I have your permission to shift?”

“Yes,” he simply says, like the word means nothing. Like it isn’t life changing for me. “God help our souls if your wolf is more goddess and less you. I feel mine is more Hades at times.”

“Why did you stop me?” I quietly ask, wondering if I could make myself shift right now. Even with his permission, nothing feels different. How do I shift?

“When you were eight, they tried to make you shift. The elders of our pack,” he tells me. “And you nearly died. I didn’t and don’t want to see that ever happen, but I know I was holding you back, and I shouldn’t have. I am sorry, Mai. I really am.”

I walk over and place my hand on his back. “I understand. I would do the same to protect you... It’s hard to see where the line is. Where it steps over from protecting to damaging the one you care for.”

“I crossed the line,” he admits. “And I regret very few things in my life, but that is one. Do you forgive me, Mai?”

“Yes,” I give him a simple answer. All the tension, well, most of it, seems to drain away. “How do I shift?”

“It’s different for everyone and there are ways of coaxing out your wolf...but with your past...,” he pauses and I hear in his tone of voice he doesn’t want to disappoint me.

“We have time and I won’t give up,” I say, tenderly smiling. “Are you ready for training, as I have a question?”

He turns to me. “If you ask for a day off, the answer is no.”

I grin. “I wanted Breelyn to come and train with us. Phim is coming to help.”

“Has she shifted back?” Silas asks, tilting his head.

“Yes,” I answer. “So, what do you think?”

He looks at me for a second more. “Fine. The more wolves on this train that can fight, the better. She needs to swear loyalty to our pack soon, though. Being bonded to—”

“The Ravensword Pack like I am, is bad?”

“You are different.”

“So is she. Let me deal with her. Please,” I gently ask. “I know it’s a lot ___”

“It’s not. We trust you, and if you want to deal with Breelyn, then you can,” he simply replies, not even needing a second to think about it. “Let me know if you need any help.”

“Thank you,” I say, lowering my tension-filled shoulders. “I mean that.”

“You won’t be smiling at me when we are done. Forty push-ups. Ten for every second you teased me with Fox. Now,” he commands, and I groan before getting on my hands and knees, seeing the smile on the sadistic bastard’s face as the torture begins.



CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

“So, everyone in the Fenrir Court bows when the viscount enters the room?” I question, trying to understand the dynamics that Henderson is quickly trying to make me learn before we arrive. It’s been two weeks since we left the wolves’ pack courts and came onto the main land, in the Fenrir Court lands. The last two weeks have consisted of intense lessons from Silas, who is more concentrated than ever before. Breelyn hasn’t given up, and neither have I, but we both collapse in a sweaty mess at the end of the lesson. Silas claims we are now at the point of weapon-learning once more, but considering we have few weapons, it has to wait. He has instructed me on a few more ways to use my dagger if I come into trouble in the Fenrir Court. Other than sleeping, helping with the children and helping with the meals, I spend my time with Henderson, learning about the court life.

As far as I can understand, it’s extremely complicated in the court life. The viscount and his consort are basically king and queen of their own court. Everyone listens and respects them and their command. They have a council of three angels, who help them make major choices, but at the end of the day it’s always down to them what changes and what does not. Henderson, despite not having met Consort Indra, thinks she is definitely the one in control, as Deimos has always been the type to fight for power and enjoy the benefits more than care about the consequences of such power. She makes all the difficult decisions and pretty much rules the court on her own, from the alphas’ spies’ word over the years. How they have spies in a city of angels is surprising to me.

“Yes, everyone is expected to bow to the viscount,” he tells me, closing the book he had open. He leans back, crossing his large arms. My mind drifts to our kisses. And lack of them in the last two weeks. Ragnar has been distant with me as well, and Valentine has left me more riddles, but I don’t see him other than at meals when he is covered in soot and coal. Silas...well, he is more interested in kicking my ass on a daily basis. “But not you. Or us. We bow to no one, and they will respect that.”

“We want their help, shouldn’t we—”

“Help should not be given in trade for respect. They are not our rulers, and we will bow to no one in this lifetime, Mai. Not us.”

I feel the firmness in his words and don’t press it anymore. I am trusting them, as I don’t have a clue what I’m walking into and they do. “Okay.”

His eyes lock onto mine. “They will test you when we’re not with you. So remember you’re not their subject and they have no control over you.”

“I’m only sworn to one pack, and I will only ever wear your marks on my neck,” I say. Specks of red flicker into his eyes. Flickers of desire. “Even if I can’t shift and I’m a pretty useless wolf.”

“You are not useless, Mai,” he tells me, leaning across the table. Henderson picks my hand up. “Your soul is linked to Persephone, the goddess of the underground spring and maidens. Your wolf, like ours, has a deeper connection to the god part of our souls. When you shift, it will be extraordinary.”

“I like your confidence in me,” I tell him, my chest warm. “Maybe it’s just the Hades part of your soul that is linked to me. Our souls have been woven together for thousands of years.”

“Even if our souls weren’t woven, Mai, I’d still see you for who you are.”

My heart pounds as we stare at each other, a familiar tension rising as his scent changes, just a little, and he clears his throat. “When you’re in the Fenrir Court, you will have someone around you all of the time, so look to us if you are worried or need anything.”

“You’re surrounding me because you don’t trust my fighting skills and my lack of being able to shift to defend myself.”

“We are protecting you because we have lost you twice now, and it is never fucking happening again.”

I shiver at the possessive protectiveness in that statement, and I can’t find the words to answer him, so I nod.

He changes the subject. Thankfully. “It’s been years since we’ve gone through this court, and we can’t trust the viscount completely. He has been newly mated for a year, and that may have made him think differently. Who knows what the master of the angels has done in that time to test his strength. The court rulers are heavily tested for their positions.”

“Do we have another choice?”

“Not if we want to get home with all the children alive,” Henderson replies with a sigh. “Fox and the brothers have been there several times over the years for supply runs and trades. It’s where Ragnar gets his cars and other junk from. The triplets told us that there haven’t been a lot of changes, so we hope things are pretty much the same.”

“Is there anything good to look forward to?”

“Your face when you see the Fenrir Court city,” he claims. “You will love the court, I’m sure. I saw you’ve noticed the change in weather the last few days.”

“I’ve never been anywhere this warm,” I answer, and that’s an understatement. Breelyn gave me my blanket back for me to never use in this heat. It’s cooler at night but not by much. “And there is sand everywhere. I’ve never seen so much sand before that isn’t attached to a beach.”

“Where we are going is a place that used to be called Egypt, and it’s been restyled with a lot of what was left of Greece. The angels used humans to bring the Greek architecture and restyle it to their own tastes.”

“And how many humans died in that work?” I ask, feeling an emptiness in the pit of my stomach.

“Not as many here as in the other cities. We all have our roles to play. I know it’s hard, but try not to think on it and don’t say anything while we are there. Our peace with them is on a fine line, Mai.”

“The humans don’t deserve what happened to them.”

“Neither did the wolves. The angels...”

“Are a different matter?” I ask.

“Wrongly led is the phrase I was going for,” he replies.

“Tell me who leads them,” I question.

“Not yet,” he tells me. “Until we are home, we can’t tell you that. We are bound not to speak his name or anything about him outside the city.”

“Who bound you?”

“Someone we can’t tell you about,” he replies, looking as annoyed about it as I am.

“Lesson learnt, don’t let anyone bind you to secrets,” I reply with a smile.

He laughs low. “Sometimes you don’t get a choice.”

I think his words over before going back to the talk of the court city. “I’m really interested in all these places we are travelling through. I’ve only read about these places in books, the human version of them, anyway. I know I will only be seeing ruins, but I’m excited as much as I’m nervous.”

“We won’t let anything happen to you,” he promises. “Not ever again.”

“I know.”

He smiles faintly at me, somehow knowing my trust in them never truly left. “Let’s find the others before we get there. I want to double-check everything.”

“That’s a good idea,” I say, climbing out of the bed and stretching my arms out. Henderson puts his box back under the bed before we leave our room. We head outside, and I glance down to see Breelyn and Phim in the lunch carriage.

“Breelyn has really settled into the pack,” Henderson comments. “I might be wrong, but you both seem to be friends.”

“We are,” I say. “I think our pasts and how terrible they were, and how we met, made us friends. I care about her. Phim and Breelyn are the only female friends I’ve ever had.”

“Have you spoken to your sis—”

“Phim?” I interrupt. Every time they mention her as my sister instead of their sole remaining beta, something inside my chest hurts. “No, not yet.”

“I understand. You don’t choose your family.”

“You seem to have. You treat all of the other alphas like brothers when only Ragnar is related to you,” I point out. “And you treat Phim like a sister. I’m not sure where I fit into this pack, if I’m being honest.”

“Like you and Breelyn, our past made our connection,” he replies. “As for your place in the pack...it will become clearer soon.”

“I wish I could remember our past, our connection,” I reply, and he gently leans closer to me. All the air leaves my body as he reaches out and tucks a stray strand of my hair behind my ear, looking into my eyes the entire time.

He lowers his hand and nods his head towards the front carriage. Another moment cut short by the situation. Crossing my arms, I follow him through the carriage and into the next one. All of the alphas are in here with the triplets. Fox and his silent brothers are in the corner of the room, going through some sort of chart with Ragnar, him nodding to whatever they are saying. Valentine and Silas are seated, talking quietly, and they go silent as we come in. Ragnar looks over and softly smiles at me before going back to his conversation.

I walk past Henderson, and Valentine moves across the seat, patting the space next to him. I sit down, my side pressed against his, with his scent surrounding me like a comforting embrace.

“How did the lesson go?” Silas enquires, leaning back in his seat. His foot brushes mine under the table, and I swear the tiny touch buzzes through my body.

Henderson leans against the arm of the seat, so close I can feel the heat coming from him.

“Good,” Henderson replies. “I cannot prepare Mai for everything, but she knows enough not to be too shocked.”

Silas turns his gaze to me. “I hate their way of life, and if I had my way, the entire city would be destroyed into a black hole, but I will keep my guard up, play nice and keep my opinions to myself. Can you do the same?”

“Yes,” I bite out. Silas somehow uses one sentence and manages to piss me off.

I lean slightly against Valentine, watching Silas carefully. His eyes narrow, red flecks appearing in them. I might not have a clue what has changed between us all, but something has, and it is making them avoid me and act jealous more often. I know I shouldn’t tease Silas with Valentine, but I don’t move.

Neither does Valentine, letting me rest my head on his thick arm.

“Is what I’m wearing suitable for this place?” I ask.

Ragnar walks over and smiles, but I see the tension he is hiding. He looks between Valentine, Silas and me. Henderson stays silent.

“Considering this is the best we’ve got”—he tugs at his black soot-covered shirt—“we’ll have to do. I’m sure they’ll be able to give us clothes.”

“Okay,” I say with a soft smile. “This is a moment I wish I could shift, and then it wouldn’t matter what I wore.”

Ragnar's eyes light up. "I cannot wait to see you shift, Mai."

"None of us can," Valentine whispers to me, his lips grazing the tip of my ear. Something deep in my core comes to life as I feel frozen, the full force of all four of their scents changing along with mine. Desire. It flickers around us, and my body feels like it's been woken up from a long sleep. I part my lips, locking eyes with Ragnar as Valentine soundlessly kisses the tip of my ear, and I feel the press of his lips like they are all over my body.

A throat clears across the room, and a low growl escapes Valentine. I'm so close I feel the growl, like a current shooting through my body.

Ragnar is the first to move, stepping back. I glance across the room to see Fox and his brothers are on their knees, their heads bowed. My cheeks burn with embarrassment as I realise they are in the carriage.

"Mai, come and look. You can see the city coming up now," Ragnar offers. I bolt out of the seat, hearing Silas's low chuckle of amusement following me. Ass. I see Fox and his brothers standing as I walk to the other side of the carriage and look out the window. In the thick sand lands around us is a massive city in the middle of the sand. It's huge, twice as large as London and more built. The Fenrir city is shaped like a square, with everything surrounding a pyramid. The massive pyramid is made of shiny, smooth white stone. It shines brightly, and it's almost hard to look at in the blistering heat of the sun. I wonder what it looks like at night. At the top, it looks like it is made of pure glass, and all the way down the pyramid, there are several massive balconies with greenery on. There must be a good thousand glass windows up the pyramid, and I lose track of trying to count them, especially when other things catch my eye. I see what looks like birds flitting around the pyramid, landing on the balconies before I realize they are angels.

Like the angel that kidnapped me.

It's almost comical, looking at this immense city, how the wolves in my old pack thought they were alone in the world apart from humans. We were never on the top of the food chain, not when there are cities like this around the world. There are so many of the angels flying in and out of the pyramid, their golden bat-like wings looking see-through in the burning sunlight.

There are several smaller pyramids around the edges of the city and seven watch towers on this side, kitted with dozens of angels in leather, swords on their backs. I can't see the back of the city from here, it's too large, and I can only imagine how far it stretches. The rest of the city I can

see is filled with sandstone houses, with metal staircases wrapped around them that lead to gated rooftops filled with trees and plants. They look beautiful even from here. Around the edge of the city are tall, huge spiralling walls made of the same stone as the pyramids. But these have jagged tops, and there's only four gold and black metal gates that I can see, all of them closed shut.

I follow the train track, which seems to end near the wall, but it doesn't go into the city itself.

"I presume the tall walls are to keep out the Levi?" I ask Ragnar.

"Yes," he says. "It's also why the humans don't leave. Outside the wall is death unless you are lucky."

We have been lucky. I've heard them say it a few times in the last two weeks. We haven't seen or heard any creatures on the way. We've been quite lucky, is an understatement. One pack of Levi could destroy our train, especially in the condition we are in. I remember how it is every night on this train, the silence, other than our breathing and turns in bed. The train is turned off, even the lights, and we lie in darkness until the sun rises.

As Henderson has explained to me, the trip has been planned to avoid any caverns, large bodies of water, mountains or tall hills where the Levi like to hide. I suppose I can pretend they don't really exist at the moment, even looking at the tall walls. There are enough monsters in my life, and I certainly do not need another to haunt my dreams.

The lives I have taken and the alpha I have escaped are bad enough. But I know when we leave this court, we're heading into mountains and areas they're more worried about but impossible to avoid. I completely understand why stopping at this court is absolutely crucial for us, and I have to keep my opinions on their life to myself.

Truthfully, I already hate everything about this court. It's a nightmare.

We need weapons and stock and things that will actually get us through there without being killed.

"This place isn't all bad. They have the best wine that tastes like the sweetest nectar," Ragnar tells me. "And they love to party. I'm sure they will throw a party in our great honour. Any excuse with them."

"I've only ever been to two parties. The first one ended with a beta chasing me through the woods, and the second one you all left me alone," I point out.

“Silas stayed,” Henderson offers. I turn to Silas, feeling surprised. He doesn’t look at me.

“What’s really interesting is that the back of the city is pure sea and beach, golden sands full of turtles and dolphins. The beach stretches for miles, an endless beauty,” Ragnar continues.

“The beach is amazing here. It’s beautiful, completely crystal clear, and you can dive for shells. If you’re lucky, you might find a clam with a pearl inside,” Henderson adds.

I smile. “I’m excited to see that.”

He grins at me. “I’ll take you.”

“Does the viscount have heirs? Or is the title given to whoever challenges and wins?” I question.

“It is passed on by blood. Viscount Deimos had two twin daughters outside of mating, but best not to bring them up. They were taken by their leader. A way of controlling the viscount.”

“That must be terrible for them,” I whisper. “How old were they?”

“Young teenagers, from what I heard,” Silas adds. “Our spies told us the city went into mourning for a year. No parties, no joy, and many fights to the death. They thought the viscount would be weak after losing his children, but they soon found out he was not. Even when he was down, I heard he ripped them apart like paper.”

Brutal and powerful. I must remember that when I meet this viscount. The hour seems to go quickly before the train comes to a halt at the end of the track. After a few words with Phim and the triplets, Henderson opens the door to the train. As I step outside the train, the sun’s blistering heat blasts against my skin, and my mouth immediately feels dry as I step onto the sand. Even through my boots, I can feel the sand is hot to touch.

The alphas surround me, and we move as one, even when I feel small in the middle of them. They look powerful, and even when I hold my head high and my shoulders straight, I don’t feel as though I look like anything next to them.

Silas gently touches my side with his hand as we all stop, and I watch the gate open slowly until we can see the city. On the other side of the gate is a pathway of thick blue stone. Beautiful blue flowers are growing in lines down the edges of the path, and behind them are rows of trees. The path veers off in five directions about fifty feet away, and in front of that is a water fountain. The water fountain is shaped in two angel wings, water

spraying into the air from the tips of the feathers before falling into the huge basin below.

Five black wolves, each of them quite large in size, run down the path and out onto the sand, the heat not bothering their pads. Or they don't react. They make a line and one by one bow their heads to the ground.

"When we were last here, we left some of our pack," Silas explains to me, though he seems a little taken back. "A token of goodwill."

I sense what he isn't saying. They didn't have a choice. The viscount wanted leverage.

I don't know why I was expecting to see someone walk out of the gate, but of course, they fly. At first they look like a blur of birds in the distance, but then as they get closer, my heart pounds that bit faster at the sight of them. Disturbing the surrounding area, seven angels drop to the ground about three feet away. Two are at the front, the clear leaders, and a row of five angels stands behind them. Judging from their matching brown leather, various weapons and sun symbol etched onto their bare forearms, they are guards. They fold their various sized golden wings behind them before I look away at the other two.

They are a completely different type of angel. The guards could be described as beautiful, but these two are nothing short of eternally exquisite. I don't know how else to describe them other than completely enchanting to look at, no doubt designed by the gods to lure humans in with their beauty and not to see exactly what lies beneath it. Humans are said to love beauty over their instincts. I can't say the rest of us haven't fallen for that once or twice either.

Both of the angels have bright white hair with a radiant glow that matches the warm gold tone of their skin. Their wings are darker than their guards', almost brown in colour and much bigger. They rest them behind their back before they disappear altogether, surprising me. *How do they do that?*

Their white hair flows down below their chests, braided in an unusual waterfall pattern from the sides of their heads down.

Their crowns match as well, gold woven leaves in a circle shape, with diamonds encrusted in between glittering in the sun. The diamonds match the colour of the man's eyes. Grey, rough, impenetrable, but strikingly glorious. He looks over at me directly as I take in his strange clothes and stunning appearance.

His white tunic starts at the shoulders and stops at his ankles, his feet bare even in the hot sand. The tunic is embroidered with gold, and tied around his waist is a gold belt, the same sun symbol on the belt. The woman, Consort Indra, is wearing some kind of satin, with sheer, star-designed material that's shaped into a dress over the top. It shows every inch of her curves, large breasts and narrow waist. The top of the dress is fashioned into a corset that swells into a gown that falls down to her feet. All of it is in a light blue colour, and it's really beautiful. Her eyes, though, are as beautiful as the stormy sea, blue and completely full of clouds. She inclines her head my way, her expression sharp, but I suspect she has a more laid-back side. I incline my head towards her in respect, and she smiles.

"My good friends," Viscount Deimos exclaims, stepping forward. "And a newcomer. It is good to see you again, but I must say, this is unexpected."

Silas is first to speak. "Our mission is complete, and we must head back. We are in need of assistance."

Viscount Deimos looks at me. "So you found her, then? Dear Mairin."

"You've always been an observant one, Deimos," Henderson replies. Deimos laughs, still looking at me.

"But, my friends, if one is not observant, one may miss something important."

We all look over as one of the black wolves, the largest of the five but somehow slender, runs over. The angels glance at the wolf but do not move.

Deimos smirks at me.

The alphas seem to tense just a little before the wolf shifts in a burst of red shifter energy. The woman who appears in the red energy has blonde hair similar to mine, but it's longer than mine, falling down to her feet and just about covering up her body. It doesn't cover up her moon marks, their marks, across her upper stomach. But she doesn't seem to care that she's naked as she runs the last few feet to us.

I know shifters don't care about nudity, and I've been used to it before, but for some reason, her nakedness bothers me.

My throat holds back a growl. Her eyes are blue, a blue that reminds me of robin eggs that Mike used to steal from nests for his breakfast every spring. Her lips part, surprised as she stares at me like she knows who I am. I'm starting to recognise that look.

“You found her!” she says, coming closer. She sounds so overjoyed, but there’s something I notice, something that I don’t trust about her voice. Every instinct in me tells me I shouldn’t trust her.

But maybe I’m just being jealous because she is beautiful and the alphas clearly know her. I was always aware they had female company before we met. I even killed one of their ex-lovers in a challenge, but it bothers me.

And they don’t touch me anymore. Not like that. They aren’t mine any more than I am theirs. Just because our souls are made of two god lovers, it doesn’t mean we have to be together.

Even if it’s what I want. Desperately.

She’s a bit shorter than I am as she comes extremely close to me, and she smells like cherries. She places her hands on my shoulders, and I knock them off to step back.

Hurt marks her face as Ragnar steps slightly in front of me. “Adira, wait. Mai doesn’t remember anything before she was twelve. None of us.”

Adira looks confused, her eyes wide as she stares at me. Silas looks down at her, and she stares up at him.

I recognise the look she gives him. I scent the slight change in her, the desire there. She is in love with him. Maybe all of them.

My stomach feels empty as my heart roars in pain and jealousy. “Mai doesn’t know who you are, and considering we didn’t know you were here, we haven’t told her about you.”

“It’s okay, we will catch up,” she tells me with a big smile. She is too happy that I don’t remember her. Before I can blink, she runs and throws her arms around Valentine, who catches her. Roaring jealousy curls in the pit of my stomach as I watch like a hawk, noticing how Valentine only pats her back awkwardly.

“I’ve missed you all so much. I can’t wait to catch up!” she exclaims, stepping back from Valentine.

“But not right now,” Henderson states, colder than before. “Shift back, Adira.”

She shifts immediately and moves behind us, and I feel her wolf’s eyes on me.

I’m a sheep to her. A sheep in her way, I suspect.

“Mairin Fall, is it?” Viscount Deimos questions me directly.

Silas growls low, and Viscount Deimos only flashes him a wicked smile.

I clear my throat and step between Silas and Henderson once more. “Yes. I’m told you are Viscount Deimos, and this is your consort, Indra.”

“Ah, your spies have been talking, then,” Viscount Deimos points out.

“I’m sure you would expect nothing less,” Ragnar smoothly replies.

“Well, my dear friends, I am mated. It is a wonder to find your mate,” Viscount Deimos says, gently placing his hand on Indra’s back.

Until now, she has been silent, but when she speaks, her voice is honey sweet. “You are most welcome in our city, and we will protect you however we can, in payment for old debts.”

Henderson smiles at her. “It is a pleasure to meet you, and we are thankful for your offer.”

“Tell me, who is on board?” Viscount Deimos questions.

“We have about two hundred children on board,” Silas says. “They need food, clothing, and rest within the city. We will need to restock our train with weapons and fuel before leaving to go home.”

Viscount Deimos’s eyes flicker to me. “Understood, though that will take a few days, if not up to a week. The train clearly needs repairs, and they can only be done in the day.”

He turns back to his angels, and three of them fly off into the city. “You will stay and enjoy the festivities of your arrival. We will have the grandest party.”

Ragnar catches my eye and winks at me before speaking. “Of course, it would be an honour.”

Out from the city, eight angels fly towards us with a mat on four logs, with gold fabric seats around the edges and tall glass windows that connect to a roof. There is a small glass door at the front, and the male angels easily carry the seating over to us and place it in the sand.

My stomach twists when I realise what that is for. I hate heights.

Silas wraps his arm around my waist as we all head to the seating, and we are the last to climb in. Adira is running back into the city with the other wolves as I sit down in the middle of Ragnar and Valentine, trying not to think of how high we will be going in this thing.

Just before the angels take off, Viscount Deimos catches my eye.

“Mairin, tell me about your life, and do call me Deimos. We are going to be good friends after all.”



CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

*M*y stomach is turning as the angels finally set us down, judging by the feel of the seating hitting the ground.

“You can open your eyes now,” Valentine softly whispers to me. “You look a little green.”

“I feel it,” I mutter, opening my eyes like he commanded even when I’m terrified. The wind blows locks of my hair in front of my eyes, and I tuck them back, breathing in the scents of the city and the distant sea salt in the air. I’m met with Deimos’s stare when I look forward, from across the seating area, and I give him a tense smile. He is comfy in his seat, his large legs outstretched, his mate’s hand on his knee.

“Flying is not for you, then, no?” he questions. There is no judgment in his words, just pure curiosity. His accent is something I need to get used to, it’s thicker than my accent or the alphas’.

“I’ve never much liked heights,” I explain as the alphas stand at my side, and I take Valentine’s offered hand, standing on my wobbly legs. Deimos offers his consort his hand, and she takes it as she stands with him, and they both walk off the seating onto the balcony. The balcony has white tiles, glass borders, and it is filled with pots of green, vibrant plants. Some of the plants have red and pink flowers growing on them, and their sweet scent fills the air. The angels themselves all have an underlying scent of something bitterly sweet, reminding me of lemons. We pass through white stone archways with white, sheer fabric that blows in the breeze, brushing against my arms. The room is one massive open space, a mosaic floor of tiles in several circular shapes, and dotted around are beautiful handcrafted white statues.

“Welcome to my home, dear friends,” Deimos claims, pausing by the statue of a woman in a cloak, with a veil covering her face. The attention to detail on the statue is so perfect it almost looks real. Deimos places his hand on the statue’s shoulder. “Do you like this statue, Mairin?”

With Deimos, I feel every word, every action of mine is being heavily judged by him and every angel he has hidden in the shadows of this room. I can’t see them, but I know they are there. It’s hard to keep my racing heart under control, to not let my hands shake from nervousness. “Yes. Whoever made it has skills from the gods.”

“It is human made, and it was given the title of *The Maidenhood*. Don’t you think it is special?”

“They all are. Your collection is very interesting,” Ragnar says, humour lacing his words. “And you haven’t changed a bit. Still the bragging bastard that can’t hold his drink.”

Deimos playfully laughs, a gleam in his eye, the statue and me forgotten, as he walks to Ragnar and pats his shoulder. I want to thank Ragnar, but I know I can’t say anything out loud. “How about you and I have that drinking match you promised me when you were younger and I wouldn’t let you drink?”

“You best get the good stuff out,” Ragnar replies, just as much affection and humour in his tone. “I can’t wait to see you pass out face-first in front of your mate.”

“Bastard,” Deimos bellows, patting Ragnar hard on the back. They walk off together, leaving Valentine, Silas, Henderson and me alone with Indra.

“We will accompany them,” Henderson suggests, looking at Silas who nods in agreement. They don’t ask Valentine, and I’m thankful they don’t. He doesn’t need that temptation. “Make sure they don’t bring the pyramid down in their drinking games.”

I squeeze Valentine’s hand. “Have fun.”

“Stay safe. Call and we will be there,” Silas firmly tells me. Henderson gives me a single nod before leaving with Silas.

Indra is standing still where she was, and when they are gone, she steps forward, her hands held together behind her back. “Your baths are being prepared, and you are in the rooms next door to each other. There is a connecting door for your comfort.”

“Thank you, Indra,” I reply for us both.

“Come,” she beckons, walking in the opposite direction. I watch as, in the shadows, angels fly up and down tunnels built into the sides of the room. That’s how they move around inside of the pyramid.

“I’m afraid we have little built for wolf or human travel,” Indra states as we walk over to a tunnel that is wide and empty. I glance down, seeing the sheer drop past dozens and dozens of floors, and gulp.

“How do your humans travel around the pyramid, then?” I ask.

Indra looks at me dead in my eyes. “Humans are bound to their floor. If they, under unusual circumstances, need to go to a new floor, an angel guard will carry them.”

Any chance of us being friends dies away with that one statement. I could never be friends with anyone who has slaves bound to one floor for their entire lives. Valentine squeezes my hand, and I feel the tension coming off him.

“We will have to carry you to a new floor,” Indra coldly states, no doubt reading my expression too clearly. She clicks her fingers, and within a few seconds, three angels dressed in guard uniform appear in front of us.

More heights. Gods.

Valentine walks over, letting my hand go, and stands in front of the two guards. Indra’s wings appear once more, and she flies up the tunnel entrance. Valentine meets my eyes, and he tells me, without words, to be strong. The angels place their hands under his large shoulders and lift him up with them, slowly going up the tunnel.

The last guard inclines his head towards me, his wings larger and so bright they almost look white. He has a head of wavy, blond, sun-kissed hair, and his amber eyes are a swirl of brilliant yellows, sunset oranges and muddy browns.

“Are you ready, my lady?” he questions, his voice low and gruff.

“What’s your name?” I ask. I don’t know why I need to know his name, but a part of me urges me to find out.

“Callahan of the Fenrir Court,” he formally introduces himself. “I am here to escort you. I will need to carry you, but I swear on my court, you will not fall.”

“My name is Mairin, but most call me Mai,” I tell him, walking closer. “And I’m honestly terrified of heights. I thought we should know each other in case I’m sick on you, and then anytime you hear I need a lift, you can run.”

His lips twitch, and amusement coats his eyes. “It will be my honour to serve you, Lady Mai.”

“Just Mai,” I suggest with a small smile that dies away when the fear of flying kicks back in.

His eyes soften as he comes closer to me, and I gasp as he picks me up. He smells like rainy days and dusky nights. “When we are infants, we are taken to a high point and thrown off to learn to fly.”

“That sounds frightening for a child,” I mutter as his wings stretch out.

He looks down at me, holding my gaze as I wrap my arms around his neck in fear when he moves his wings and we move off the ground. His skin feels hot under my touch. “Here in Fenrir, we worship the goddess Nike, and we are told her words before we fall.”

I can’t speak as he flies us up through the tunnel, past floors. “If we fall in a test of strength and victory, then we are never truly fallen. Our souls will rise.”

His words, the power behind them, make me almost forget about us flying as I lock my eyes with his.

Suddenly we are on the ground once more, and he gently places me down.

Valentine is next to me in a heartbeat, his arm wrapping around my waist, his tense body pressed against my side. I feel all of his tension like it is my own, his possessiveness reminding me of how I felt seeing Adira embracing him. Callahan and Valentine stare at each other for a long time before Callahan takes a step back and turns his gaze to me.

“Good greetings to you, Lady Mai.”

“Her name is Mairin Fall to you, guard,” Valentine growls out.

Callahan doesn’t answer him and flies off into the skies. Indra walks around us and looks up at Valentine.

“Do excuse our court commander. Callahan has a habit of being overly personal with women,” Indra states before turning and walking across the marble-floored room to the four doors opposite. There are eleven doors in the massive space, two balconies and four tunnel entrances. The ceiling of the room has a beautifully hand-painted sun symbol.

Callahan is the court commander? I wasn’t wrong about him being an unusual angel. Valentine steers me after Indra, who opens two of the doors.

“These are yours,” she explains, placing her hand on the right door. “There are ten humans who live on this floor, and they will assist you. You

have five hours before the festivities start.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Valentine replies, although tensely. He pauses. “Why was the court commander assisting you in carrying us?”

Indra pauses. She doesn’t even attempt to act innocent. “We trust him deeply and value his opinion. I wanted him to meet you both. He will meet your brothers in our personal rooms.”

“And what do you think of us, Consort Indra?” I question.

She watches me like a hawk. “You know that answer already, Lady Mairin. Females in power, like us, simply understand each other.”

Her idea of power and mine are very different, but still, in respect, I incline my head.

“Rest up,” she says before taking flight and flying down one of the tunnels. I feel I can breathe a little easier now that I’m alone with Valentine.

Of course, our alone time lasts all of three seconds.

“Mai! Valentine!” Adira shouts. We both turn to see her in the arms of an angel man, who gently places her down before flying off. Adira has a tunic-style black dress on that clings to her body, and the two slits on either side of her legs mean her full, long legs are on show as she walks. What I’m sure was once a tunic is low around her chest, and there is a bare strip across her waist, showing off her golden and toned stomach.

She flips her golden hair over her shoulder as she stops in front of us. Valentine coldly snaps at her. “What are you doing here?”

“I can’t say who sent me, but I was sent here. Just like you, I follow orders,” she replies, holding her head high.

Valentine’s jaw tightens. “Fine. We could use all the help we can get here, if I’m being honest.”

“That’s your funny way of saying you are happy to see me,” she replies, flirting with him. He doesn’t smile back at her, but his eyes lighten enough to tell me he has a soft spot for this female.

Gods, I hate her.

Adira looks at me, a patronizing smile on her lips. “Shall we get you cleaned up? No offence, but your clothes and hair need a wash. I’d be honoured to help! We can catch up!”

“I will leave you two alone,” Valentine says, his eyes awkwardly looking between us. Coward. He leaves for his room, shutting the door behind him and leaving me alone with this stranger who flirts with the alphas and claims to know me.

I want to hate her because of how jealous I feel, but that's not fair. I have no claim on the alphas, and she could be their mate for all I know. She should hate me. But everything in me thinks differently, replays the stolen kisses I've had with them and wishes for more.

I always want more when it comes to my alphas.

Leaving Adira to follow me, I walk into the room and go still at the beauty of it. Each wall is a mural of angel wings, dozens of them painted gold, yellow, white and brown to make one impacting image. The bed is a white four-poster and has satin sheets and tiny pillows in front of larger ones. A circular soft rug is in front of the bed, and there is a small balcony with thin white curtains blowing from the warm breeze drifting in. In front of the balcony is a copper clawfoot bath filled with warm water that smells like oranges and lavender. There are two doors on the right wall, one no doubt a toilet and the other must be the connecting door to Valentine's room. I run my fingertips over the satin sheets, feeling Adira's eyes on me.

In the back of my mind, I know if she wants the alphas, she might challenge me to the death like Eleline did, and taking another life isn't something I want to do.

But losing them is something I cannot imagine surviving.

"So, where did you live all these years while they searched all of Lapetus for you?" Adira questions, placing her hands on her hips.

"The Ravensword Pack," I answer. "I was...a foster child they found in the forest when I was twelve. And I can't remember anything before that."

"Unfortunate," she sighs. "I know you were one of the chosen babies. Did you get powers?"

"No," I bite out.

"I did," she blows out and smiles. "Ah, you didn't know I was one of the seven. We are the only two females left from our group. You were never the only female in the group, but you were the one who caused a war that killed millions. Don't worry, the alphas have always been protective of me, and I doubt they would tell you of my existence."

My stomach turns in loops, burning all over. I wish they had told me about her, but I see their point: they didn't know she would be here, and I imagine they wanted me to meet her in person. That only leaves one more baby that was given a god's or goddess's soul. Judging by her saying we are the only females, the last one must be a man.

"You have a goddess's soul?"

She holds her head high. “Yes. My soul is made from the goddess Peitho. Do you know her?”

“She was not one of the goddesses I was taught about,” I say.

Adira smiles at me like I’m a clueless idiot. “She was the goddess of seduction and persuasion.”

Great, just what I wanted. An enemy who is built for seduction and persuasion, the polar opposite of me. I’m not as curvy as Adira, I don’t have a sweet voice like hers, and my goddess didn’t give me any powers.

I can’t even shift.

“Leave,” I demand.

She looks taken back, just a little, at the demand and the growl that escapes my throat with it. The surprise turns into a more sinister look, one I won’t forget, before she turns around and walks out, leaving the door open behind her. I close my eyes for a second and sigh, knowing I could have handled her better. I walk around the bed and go to the balcony, stepping out into the small ledge, and the view wipes away any negativity, anything from my soul other than the view in front of me.

The city spirals down in rows, all within the thick walls that go across a white sand beach and crystal blue waters. The sea stretches for miles; the walls are built deep into them and go further than I can see. Birds make strange *chirping* noises, mixing with the smell of the sea salt that fills my senses.

I can’t wait to explore that ocean. It is nothing like the sea in the Ravensword Pack.

“Excuse me, we have been sent to assist you in your stay,” a woman’s voice calls to me, and I turn around as a woman steps through the curtains. She is older, maybe in her fifties, and very much human. I’ve never met a human in my life, but I can tell from her scent, the mixture of salt, and the very way her eyes look old, her skin damaged with little blemishes and scars from ageing. Wolves don’t have little blemishes like that, we heal too quickly. The only things that last are deep scars.

A second woman, much younger but clearly related, steps through the curtains. She has short, light brown hair that is bobbed under her chin. The older woman’s hair is pulled back into a bun at the back of her head. Both of them are wearing white tunics with a white rope wrapped around their ribs, but it’s the sun symbol, burned into their necks, that makes me feel

sick. They both have matching symbols. The burn looks old, and I wonder how young they were when they were branded like cattle.

“You don’t have to help me, really,” I say. “I’m quite capable of dressing myself.”

They look at each other, and the older woman answers me. “Truthfully, if you don’t like us or want our help, they will replace us. I wouldn’t dare beg for you to let us stay, but—”

“They would kill you?” I question, shock coating my voice and no doubt showing in my eyes.

The young woman nods. “Yes. This is a position of great respect, and there are many who would replace us in a moment’s click.”

“Then you should stay,” I say. “I mean, I would like to bathe alone, but you can stay.”

“We will wait out here for you. Call for us so we can do your hair and help you lace the dress,” the older woman says.

“What’s your names?”

“Fenrir Slaves,” the older woman tensely answers. “We are not allowed to use or speak our human names. The punishment is losing a hand or death, depending on the mood of our slavers. Working here is a blessing compared to the city.”

I gulp, tears stinging my eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes lock onto mine. “The gods have not given up on us yet, Lady Mairin. Pray to them with us.”

“We all pray,” the younger woman whispers before both of them turn away. Tears fall down my face as I strip and climb into the tub, letting the steam and water hide them from the world.

And I pray to Persephone to help me find a way to free the humans.

I pray to my soul. To my goddess.



CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Soft butterflies made from pink and purple petals are softly placed on the edges of my eyes, which are brushed with soft lilac powder to complete my outfit before my human helpers step back. My lips are the colour of light coral, and they match my dress. The dress I can't quite believe is real. The humans helping me said this is a floor length chiffon cocktail dress with a halter neckline made of lace, the same lace that is pulling the top of the dress against my ribs so tight it's hard to breathe. My hair has been brushed to an inch of its life, curled with hot tongs and twisted up into a high bun with strands left out to shape my face.

I don't recognise myself as I look into the mirror.

Startled, I place my hand on my head for a second, closing my eyes quickly as a sharp pain rings in my ears along with a strange sound. The pain disappears, and when I open my eyes for a flash, I see another woman in the mirror. The woman is enthrallingly beautiful with long silvery blonde hair that falls in curls to her waist, her body naked from any clothes, and her eyes as bright as diamonds and as clear as them, too. Her whole body glows a faint, light, soft pink.

Then the woman is gone, and I blink my eyes a few times, wondering what the hell I've just seen. Maybe all the stress is getting to me now, and I'm seeing things.

"Thank you," I say as I turn around to find I'm alone, the human women gone like blossoms in the wind. I quickly walk out to the balcony and find they're not there before coming back inside. I imagine they have gotten good at being invisible around the angels, and I can't blame them.

On the bed, there is a pair of silver heeled shoes, no doubt intended for me to wear. I've never worn shoes like these, and I feel myself falling over from just looking at them. I sit on the bed and pull the contraptions on before standing, wobbling on my first few steps before gaining some balance. I feel like a toddler learning how to walk for the first time. I practice walking around the room a few times before I hear a knock at the door. Not the front door but the side entrance to Valentine's room. I wonder if he shares a room with the others, and part of me hopes they do, just to have them all close to me. This massive room is as daunting as it is beautiful, and I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight. I've gotten used to sleeping in the same room as them, but nothing compares to that one night I slept in Ragnar's bed. Not that I sleep much or often, thanks to the constant nightmares that no one can protect me from. But one of them always wakes with me and checks if I'm okay before going back to sleep.

It's impossible to protect me from the past, my memories I have to find a way to heal from. These alphas heal me slowly; I know that, and one day I hope my cracked and bruised soul can find redemption from the sins, from the lives I took.

I shake my head, coming back to reality as Valentine knocks once more. At least I think it's Valentine. The other alphas must be back from drinking with Deimos by now.

"Come in," I shout, my voice echoing around the high ceilings of the room. The door opens, and Valentine steps into the room, followed by Ragnar. Both of them pause like wolves in the bright light of the moon.

And by the gods, it's me who feels paralyzed under their stare. Neither of them hides their thoughts. I can read them easily.

They like the dress...and me. Perhaps.

Their scents change with mine as I stare at them, running my eyes over their outfits. They're both wearing tight black trousers and soft white shirts with black buttons, the sleeves rolled up, showing off their golden muscular bodies. They look absolutely gorgeous, and I can't think that there is another male wolf, outside their brothers, who could outdo them. There's no word for them other than godly. They are made in the image of gods.

A particular god. Hades. My heart pounds in response to their scent, the thick desire I can feel in the air coming from us all. My body itches to go closer, to kiss them, to know what it's like to be in their embrace. I've never wanted a male in my life like I want them. All of them. Neither of them

have ever kissed me, and many, many nights I have lain thinking about their lips, their bodies on mine in the heat of passion.

“I didn’t think you’d be coming to the party,” I say to Valentine, desperate to fill the room with words to break the tension. It helps, a little at least. “I mean...I didn’t—”

Valentine takes pity on me and my stumbling. “You’re right. It’s just not the place for me now. Too many temptations, but I will show my face so Deimos doesn’t take offense.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, even when I suspect he doesn’t want my sympathy. “I could come back with you—”

“No, Mai. You haven’t seen anything of the world outside the wolves’ pack courts. You should enjoy the party and experience it,” he softly tells me. “I’ve been to parties, balls, celebrations. Too many, to be entirely honest.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I’d much prefer if you stay and enjoy the party,” he firmly replies. “Plus, Ragnar would never forgive me if I stole you away. Silas and Henderson would feel the same as well.”

“Okay,” I say with a small smile as Ragnar playfully smacks Valentine’s arm.

Ragnar walks over and picks up the slight stray curl around my face, popping it.

I stare up at his deeply blue eyes. “You look absolutely beautiful, Mairin Fall. No goddess in this world or the next could compare.”

I feel his words from my head to my toes, and I shiver.

Like, my mouth goes dry. “You guys look good too.”

Gods, that was a lame thing to say.

My cheeks burn as he laughs, deep and husky.

“And by the way, you really should have told me about Adira. I was blindsided by her,” I say while we are alone, just the three of us. I’d rather all four of them were here, but with their mental connection, they might as well be in the room. I sense them here, even now.

“I—we had no idea she would be here,” Ragnar starts off, holding his hands up. “It is complicated, but we can’t tell you anything about our home, and she’s part of that.”

“Dammit,” I mutter. “I understand that you told me you’re bound not to say anything about your home, but I find it hard to even understand where

we are going. It's just hard to find out that she's here, and she's a goddess of persuasion and seduction, and really close to you guys."

"It's not like that," Valentine states, stepping to Ragnar's side. "She's like a little sister to us, and we are protective of her."

"Adira is younger than you by three months, and she was the last one to be given the goddess' powers. Her parents kept her hidden away until she was eight and then changed their minds. Wanted her to be close to us. You two were close friends, nearly as close to her as us," he explains. "We found her in our search for you over the years. Adira had run away in the war, and humans, who also were on the run, had kept her safe, thinking she was like them."

I loosen my shoulders a little. "There is something about her I don't trust."

Ragnar sighs, placing his hand on my shoulder. The small connection makes my body feel alive. "It's difficult for her, as she is seen as an outcast. Try to speak with her, you may change your mind," he suggests, but I suspect they don't see her for who she really is, just the little sister in their mind. It makes me feel better; that raging jealous side of me is settled a bit.

The door is knocked three times, and Ragnar steps back from me. I glance towards Valentine as he heads to the door and pulls it open to find Commander Callahan there.

"Good afternoon," he says, his voice deep. He doesn't bother looking at Valentine or Ragnar. His eyes focus on me. "Mai."

"Hello, Commander Callahan."

"I wasn't aware friends needed titles," he smoothly replies.

"Who claimed we are friends?" I enquire, raising an eyebrow.

He places his hand on his chest, a smirk tilting his bow-shaped lips up. "Lady Mai, my apologies."

I chuckle at the thick sarcasm.

Callahan slowly walks in, and Valentine stops him with one hand on his chest and pushes him back an inch.

"She is not your friend," he growls out. "Look at her with those thoughts in your mind one more time, and I will rip your heart from your chest as you watch. Then my wolf will finish you off."

I gulp at the sheer power in his words. He isn't joking.

To his credit, Callahan holds Valentine's gaze, his wings appearing from nowhere behind his back. I realise they must use a certain kind of magic to

hide them.

When I realise they aren't moving, I clear my throat and step forward only for Ragnar to wrap his arms around my waist and pull me to him.

And then he kisses me.

I'm so shocked I don't move against him, my body pressed to his. His lips are warm as they possessively take my own, and I melt into his touch, my body responding to his as I kiss him back.

Longer than I should. I push away from Ragnar and glare at him. "Kissing me to show people I'm yours is not the reason you should kiss me!"

He is silent as I take a step away, his eyes stubborn, possessive, and filled with desire. I turn to Valentine. "And I'm allowed to make male friends without you threatening to kill them. You can't keep me at a distance and then demand me as yours when there is a threat. That isn't love, and I am not a possession of yours. I won't be a possession of anyone's ever again."

"Mai—" Ragnar starts, but I step away from him and walk up to Callahan.

"Will you escort me to the celebration, Callahan?" I ask.

Callahan smiles and holds out his arm. "It would be an honour, Mai."

I hook my arm in his, and he walks me out. I look over my shoulder at my alphas, who stare at me like they don't know who I am anymore.

Maybe they don't, because I have never been given the chance to be who I am, to find myself and my goddess. I owe a lot to them, but it never once meant they own me or my soul unless I willingly chose to give it to them. Hades and Persephone might have loved each other, but we are not them, and if we have a chance at anything in our future, we have to figure out what we are.

Because I am sure, deep within my heart, I am in love with them.

Completely in love with them, and if they don't feel the same way, my heart will shatter.

I clear my throat and force myself to look away. Four angels fly into the room and land behind us as Callahan pauses.

"May I carry you?"

I nod, stepping into his space and wrapping my arms around his neck. His head rests near mine as he wraps his arms around my waist and then takes off. I gasp, pushing myself closer to him as he flies us around the

room, and then he dives into one of the tunnels. I keep my head close to his chest, feeling his fast heartbeat against my chest as we spiral down the tunnels before he flies straight. The sound of melodious music fills my ears, and a woman sings over the piano, drums and harp. The beautiful sound is unforgettable. There are other sounds, women's laughs, the clinking of glasses, and I can't think straight from all the other scents in this giant room.

"Look up, Mai," he whispers to me, and I do. Right above us, on the ceiling of the ballroom, is a river of water defying gravity. The river flows across the entire ceiling, moving slowly, and nothing drops from it onto the ballroom full of angels below. I reach my hand out, smiling as it sinks into the water that flows through my fingers.

"Incredible," I say, my voice like a ghost.

I glance back at Callahan as he lowers us in the middle of the room, and I feel the judging gaze of many on us. "Indeed."

I don't for a second think he is speaking about the river. The river water casts a soft blue hue across the room as we land, and I step back from Callahan, inclining my head.

"There you are, Mairin," Deimos exclaims behind me. "Thank you for bringing our dear guest, Commander Callahan."

Callahan bows his head. "Naturally, I am at your service."

Deimos looks directly at me. He is in a suit similar to what Valentine and Ragnar are wearing, but his trousers are white, and his shirt is a deep gold colour, matching what many of the men here seem to be wearing. Indra is at his side in a sparkling white dress that stops at her thighs and is tight around her waist. Their gold crowns look almost silver from the blue hue of the river.

"The river is amazing. How is that possible?"

"Magic, my dear Mairin," he tells me with a crooked smile. "I'm sure you know little of angel magic, but anything to do with nature is our jurisdiction."

"I know your leader, king, or whatever you like to call, him levelled cities of millions with this angel magic of yours. I'm not that ignorant of your world as you might think," I reply. It hasn't escaped my notice the lack of humans in this room; it's all angels, but I suspect the humans are banned or hiding where they can't be seen, like they aren't people. Like they don't have emotions or feelings. With that way of thinking, we are all animals.

Emotions and common sense are the gold tickets we were given, human, angel or wolf. I sense Valentine and Ragnar landing nearby behind me with their angel guards, but I don't look away from Deimos. He is under the impression I'm naive and easy prey.

I can't let him think that any longer. "Well, well, well, Mairin. You are correct, of course, but do not judge a race on the actions of a few."

I bite my tongue to stop from saying anything stupid or telling him how I really feel, after seeing the treatment of humans here. I don't need any more proof of Deimos's character.

"We leave you for a second and you cause trouble," Silas whispers as he stops next to me, his arm brushed against mine. I know Valentine and Ragnar are nearby, but after what just happened, I can't blame them for not being the one to come to my side. He raises his voice. "Deimos, Indra, do excuse us."

Deimos inclines his head, and Callahan nods at me as he walks past to Deimos. Silas guides me away into the crowds, and many turn their heads our way, making me feel like an animal at a human zoo I once read about. Silas leads me over to Henderson, who is sitting on a stool, facing Adira, who is laughing.

The wolf is dressed in dark red silk wrapped tightly around her body like a snake. The material leaves little to be missed, and I admire the dress, the style of it, even if I don't like the wolf in it. I remember Ragnar's suggestion to try and be kind to her, and I have to respect that they clearly see her as an important member of their pack. I have to admit, I might have judged her too harshly, and I'm not too proud to admit I might be wrong about her. I can see why any female would be interested in the alphas, and I have no claim to them.

I can't hate her for just that alone.

Silas stays at my side as I go over to them, and Henderson looks my way, his eyes brightening. "You are simply stunning, Mai. What do you think of the party?"

"It's amazing," I say with a grin and turn to Adira. "Hello, Adira. You look amazing in red."

She smiles, and I try not to glance at the drinks lining the table, the thick blood resting in the glasses. Adira is easier to look at as she sips white wine. The scent of human blood fills the room, reminding me exactly what these

creatures are. I can't forget, even if some of them are growing on me. "It's my colour, thanks."

I turn back to Henderson, admiring his dark blue shirt, tight black trousers, and his hair brushed for once—though I did like it messy and casual.

"Dance with me, Silas? I love this song," Adira asks him, and I try not to tense.

Silas moves past me and leans against the wall, his arms crossed. "I don't dance for anyone."

"Mai—" Henderson starts, but Adira is in front of him and talks over his words, making him pause.

"Dance with me, Henny? Don't leave a girl waiting."

Henny?

"Sure, Adira," Henderson sighs, looking over her shoulder at me. "Can I have the next dance with you?"

"Yes," I tell him, our eyes locking as Adira takes his arm and all but drags him into the dancers. I watch them as the music changes, turning slower and softer, a folk song about the beginning of the wolves. I heard it once in school, sung by a classmate who had a distinct voice. I loved the song so much, and my body sways as I watch Henderson guide Adira effortlessly around to the music.

For some reason, a deep sadness fills my chest as I watch them. They look perfect together. Her body fits next to his, and he laughs at something she says. Maybe—

"Dance with me, Mai," Silas says, and I blink as he offers me his elbow.

My heart beats fast as I meet his winter snow eyes. "I thought you said you don't dance for anyone?"

"You could never be just anyone, Mai."

Every argument, every fight we have ever had, seems to flash before my eyes in this moment as I realise all of it was a tension between us. This tension, this unspoken thing we don't want to admit.

I slide my arm through his, and he guides us onto the dance floor. I barely notice anyone as Silas takes me into his arms, tugging me hard against his chest with his one arm and holding my hand up with his other. He controls the dance. Even with my uncoordinated feet, he makes us look like we have danced together our entire lives.

I will never forget this, this stolen and unexpected moment of tenderness from Silas.

“When you were five years old, our mothers took us to a celebration for the goddess Psyche, deep within the forest. The others were grounded, but we had behaved, so they saw it as a treat of sorts. They danced naked under the moonlight while we sat by the trees, trying not to laugh for a while until things changed. They shifted and we both felt the magic in the air. The goddess was there,” he tells me, his eyes locked onto mine. “Your eyes glowed as bright as the emerald necklace my mother wore that night, and you secretly told me you wanted to dance even though we weren’t allowed.”

I can barely breathe as he suddenly dips me down and slowly pulls me up before spinning me around and pulling me back to him so my back is pressed against his front. I feel all of him at my back as he sways us to the music. “I took your hand and danced with you that night and then again every single year until the war and you were gone. That’s why I will never dance with anyone else, Mai. My dances were saved for you. You stole them when you were five.”

“Silas,” I breathe out his name, wanting to kiss him, even as I’m slightly overwhelmed.

The song ends, and before Henderson can get to me, I turn away from them both, speaking over my shoulder. “I need some air, and I will come back.”

None of them call for me as I rush through the crowds, dodging angels’ wings and anyone who tries to speak to me. My heart pounds quicker and quicker until I see the balcony ahead. The river flows above the balcony before falling down into a waterfall, blocking the view of the city. It’s like hiding inside a waterfall. There isn’t much fresh air as I step out and pause at the door, leaning down and pulling off my heels. I head to the balcony edge and stare at the running water flickering down in front of me.

I’m not alone for long. A certain angel joins me on the balcony, and I tense.

“I’m not your enemy, Mairin,” Deimos claims.

“I never claimed we are enemies, we just have different values on life,” I smoothly reply.

He doesn’t reply for a while before I turn to look at him. His eyes look out through the water, like he can see the city. “I am the viscount, through

no small means, but I have never claimed to like killing or suffering but I cannot do what I wish. I can't be seen as weak or my place would be taken in a second and this city would suffer. I'm smart in my choices. I am not my king, Mairin. If the king decided tomorrow to free humans and give us true ruling over our cities, I would throw parties that would last decades."

"Really?" I question.

"My mother and father were murdered by angels, in jealousy of their natural power, during the war. They didn't even know I existed, and they sure as hell didn't expect what they thought was a weak angel to kill them in a blast of power," he tells me. "I fought for this city, and I will until my dying breath, Mairin, but I cannot change anything. Other angels, even here in my city, hate humans for forcing them and their ancestors into hiding for years. They now see them as food, and they are plain terrified of wolves. The balance in this city, in this world, is unstable, and the few things I can change are always to protect the weak. Yes, that means the humans. The main rules are not set by me, so I would appreciate if you could take a step back from your judgment of me."

I stay silent for a long time, processing his words. "I was treated with nothing but cruelty from the age of twelve, and I remember nothing of the kindness before. Any time I see someone suffering, I want to fix it, but I should not have blamed you. I am sorry for your parents, and I would like us to start anew."

"Very well, Mairin—"

"You can call me Mai. I prefer it," I interrupt, and he smiles.

"Mai," he corrects. "The king bestows a certain amount of power on me, and with it, I can do many things like keeping this river running or protecting the city from the Levi and much more. But, in my family, we have a gift. My mother once told me the goddess Demeter blessed our family with this gift. I can touch your mind with my own and encourage your wolf out. I might even reveal a memory or two."

My eyes widen. "That's something I've wanted for a long time."

"Then let me help you," he suggests, offering me his hands, palms up. "Take my hands and close your eyes, and don't fight me. It won't hurt, but it will feel intrusive in your mind."

"Okay," I say, placing my hands on top of his. I close my eyes, and the second I do, a cold breeze brushes against my palms, like I'm touching ice, and then it feels like a car slams into my head. I gasp from the force, my

legs wobbling, but I don't let go. I hold on to Deimos's hands as I hear a noise getting louder and louder until I recognise it as angel wings.

And I open my eyes. But instead of seeing Deimos, I'm in the arms of a man I don't know. His wings are as black as the night, his eyes the same hollow black colour. We are flying over a clear blue sea, and I can see nothing else but the stars.

I close my eyes and open them one more time, this time to see a forest of cherry blossom trees and a blast of green shifter energy that shoots out from the trees and cuts into the sky.

The vision is gone quickly, and I stumble back into someone's arms, and I turn to see Valentine.

"I got you," he whispers to me as my legs give out, and he picks me up in his arms. Everything is spinning as my ears ring so loudly I can't hear what they are altogether saying. Just before I black out, I hear Deimos loud and clear.

"She was sent a vision from the goddess. You must take her to the Cerasus Forest to find her wolf. To unlock her soul."

A graphic for the chapter title. The word "CHAPTER" is written in large, white, serif capital letters, and "SEVENTEEN" is written in smaller, white, serif capital letters below it. The text is centered over a background of a dense forest of evergreen trees, with the trees appearing in shades of green and grey, creating a misty or ethereal atmosphere.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

“Does your name begin with an *E*?” I question the older human woman as she brushes my hair. Of course, she doesn’t answer me, but her lips twitch a little, making me think I was right. Yawning, I step off the stool when she is done and walk to the balcony, glancing at my dress that is shaped around my breasts, laced in the middle, and it’s the colour of sand. It falls to my mid-thigh, moving as I walk and hiding the dagger strapped to my thigh. The warm air blows against my shoulders as I look out at the glittering sea in the distance.

I hear the door knocked and then hushed words as one of the humans opens it for me. I feel Ragnar and Henderson before they come outside and stop on either side of me.

“How are you feeling today?” Henderson asks me. After the ball where I passed out, I apparently slept for two days, none of them able to help me. Ragnar claimed my body was softly glowing with a mixture of green and pink. Shifter energy. I woke up this morning with Valentine by my bedside, and he was nothing short of relieved...and tired. I sent him to bed with the others, who do share a room next door. When I don’t answer, he speaks. “Phim and Breelyn are with the children, and if I don’t send a message to Phim, she and Breelyn might come here and threaten the viscount themselves.”

“Good,” I tell them both with a small smile. “What actually happened to me?”

“Deimos said his power was hijacked...by a goddess’s power. Yours, Mai,” Ragnar tells me. “He is calling you a saint, a goddess reborn, and he has pledged himself to you. Seems you have a new fan.”

“I saw a man carrying me, an angel unlike any angel I’ve seen before, and then I saw a forest filled with cherry blossom trees,” I explain.

“Deimos didn’t see your first memory, only sensed you were experiencing it, but he saw the forest. It’s a place called the Cerasus Forest, and it’s in the Galatea Court. It’s a risk going near it, but we all believe you were sent that vision for a reason. We suspect you will be able to find your inner wolf in the forest,” Henderson says. Since Silas told me I had his permission, I’ve tried to call my wolf out, but nothing ever happens. Phim advised meditation to help, Silas suggested fight training, and Henderson suggested reading might help. Nothing did, and at this point, I’m willing to try anything. “The Cerasus Forest is ancient, and it is dangerous. There were once beasts called griffins that roamed the world. The griffins are said to be creatures made from fire, and if you are unlucky enough to meet one, they have a history of eating humans and shifters alike. Many believe the last of the griffins live in the forest after they were hunted for clear reasons.”

“We don’t have to go if you think it’s too dangerous,” I say, even when I instantly feel disappointed and wrong about that choice. I want to go, everything in my gut begs me to, but I won’t put a train full of children and my alphas in danger.

“No, we are going,” he says. “We told you our power came from a lake, our connection to Hades. We believe there are points all over the world that are connected to gods’ magic, and our souls are maps. You must go to this forest as much as we had to go to that lake, and the children are not safe anywhere outside our home. If anything, you being able to shift would be a good thing for the journey ahead.”

“Phew,” I breathe out. “No pressure at all then.”

Ragnar gives me a lopsided smile. “We are taking you into the city and to the beach for the day. If you want to, that is.”

I jump into him, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Yes! Thank you!”

He chuckles low, hugging me back, and I only step away when I sense the slight tension brewing in the air. I turn to face Henderson. “Was this your idea as well?”

“No, I think going outside of the pyramid is dangerous, but...” He pauses to sigh. “I think we can risk it this once. Plus, you have been assigned four angel guards to protect you everywhere.”

I ignore the little voice in my head that questions if Callahan is one of those. I wonder if Henderson guesses where my mind drifted to, as he growls while he stalks through the door.

My heart hurts a little as I raise my head and turn to Ragnar. He is watching me very closely. “Was it this complicated between us all when we were young?”

He smiles softly, taking my hand and lifting it to his lips. I shiver as his warm lips brush over my knuckles. “Always, but just because it’s complicated doesn’t mean it’s not worth risking everything.”

“If we are doing this, we should go!” Henderson gruffly shouts, and I duck my head, his words replaying over and over. We are worth risking it all for, but my soul feels like it’s being tugged in different directions, and I’m not sure how this is going to end for us.

I could be their mate, that’s true, according to the way mates are really found, but we couldn’t find out unless...

My cheeks do burn as I imagine myself in bed with any of them, doing sinfully wicked things that would be unforgettable.

“Are you alright?” Ragnar asks as we walk, hand in hand, to the door. I can only nod, my mouth feeling dry and my voice gone as I try to banish the images from my mind. In the main room, there are four angel guards, and two of them step forward. None of them are Callahan, and I don’t know why I wanted one of them to be. We hardly know each other, but for some reason, when I’m around him, I feel safe...like I know him. And I can’t say that is impossible, because my past is a blank, and I hate that. I hate that I can’t remember anything from what my mother looked like to my friendship with the alphas. I forgot my entire pack, and I want those memories back, even if my gut tells me they are gone.

“We are here to serve you, Lady Mairin,” one of them says, his hair the colour of ice and his voice colder. “My name is Berganza, and if you need anything, simply ask.”

“Why are you here? Why do I need guarding?” I ask.

The other guards look between each other, but Berganza answers me, even if he looks like he sucked a lemon to force himself to. “After your performance at the welcoming celebrations, the angels are fearful of you and the power you might bear. Our viscount has tasked us with your safety in case any of the angels turn their fear into hate. It is an easy step.”

“Indeed, it is,” Ragnar replies, his voice cool. “And it will be an easy step for me to slaughter every angel in my way if one hair on her head is touched.”

“I am the messenger only,” Berganza responds, bowing his head.

I clear my throat, feeling unsure with the pressure of their gaze on me. The new news. I should go back into that room, and I can feel Henderson’s protectiveness of me growing by the second. But I’m not hiding or pretending that I’m not here, and I might never get a chance to see the ocean like this again, to see the city. I didn’t get to see a lot of the city from outside the mountain, and now it is gone and nothing more than a graveyard. I survived so I could live, and it’s not living if I hide myself away. It’s just hiding and letting the evil of other people win. “I want to go to the city, near the sea, and look around with my...alphas.”

Berganza clicks his fingers in the air and inclines his head. Two more angels fly out of the tunnels, moving to Ragnar and Henderson. Reluctantly, I head towards Berganza, who leans down and picks me up before flying off. I close my eyes for the flight, holding onto his leather collar tightly when I feel the wind whip around me and the bright sun against my skin. I’m too scared to do anything but hold on until I feel us descending.

Their wings make the wind blow sand around us until my feet finally land on the ground, and I move away from Berganza, turning and pausing in pure shock at the little town. The houses are sweet and tiny, filled with plants and trees around and on top of the roof, making the street bleed with colour. The street is filled with little angel children running between the houses, their giggles making me smile until I see the humans following after them. The skinny, worn down humans who try to keep their heads down while watching the children. I shiver, tears stinging my eyes—even something as beautiful as this is filled with darkness.

I look beyond them at the sea, at the beach that starts at the end of the road, and I don’t wait for the alphas before I start running towards it. It feels freeing to run down the path, seeing angels flying above me in the far distance, the city smells and noises mixing with the sound of the ocean. I don’t stop as I get onto the warm sand and run straight to the waves. I stop on the wet line of sand where a wave just crashed, and I watch the water move back before another wave crashes and lands on my bare feet.

The warm salt water makes everything sparkle as it goes back, and I relax my shoulders, enjoying the sea breeze blowing my hair and dress

around, the noises of the seagulls flying over my head.

“I was worried you might fear the sea...after—”

“After I was rejected by him and thrown into the sea?” I fill in for Henderson.

I shake my head, smiling. “For years, I let that poor excuse for an alpha have power over me, power he gained from hurting me, trying to ruin me, and then his poor example of trying to kill me somehow gave me strength. Strength I desperately needed, as I was going to give up. I wanted to give up on my life because I was so tired. I was tired of living the life I was given.”

I look across the ocean, taking the peace and silence it offers. “I was scared I was ruined and disgusting when he forced himself on me, but then you showed me in a few seconds the compassion and understanding I had been looking for. You showed me that no matter what he took from me, it only matters what I gave away. My nightmares won’t go away forever, but now that I’m with you four, I feel like I’m strong enough to face them and go back to sleep.”

“The true reason we didn’t kill him when we could have done was because he is your life to take. You are owed revenge, Mairin. You are owed that entire pack on its knees, and it will be,” Ragnar vows. “Rejecting you was the biggest mistake that alpha ever made.”

“But us finding each other, despite everything, was the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Mai...we—”

“No more serious talk. I want to swim and find a shell to keep,” I cut Henderson off, because part of me isn’t ready for what he might say next. Putting my heart on the line isn’t easy, and I am still recovering and finding who I am.

“Come on then,” Ragnar says, and I try not to stare as he pulls his shirt off and starts tugging at his shorts. I leave my dress on, knowing it won’t mess with my swimming anyway, and paddle into the water. There is no shock of coldness from this water. It is soft as it brushes my legs, and I finally get deep enough to float. I dive under the water, the salt stinging my eyes for a few seconds before I adjust to the beautiful clear sea and the colourful corals, jewel-scaled fish, and many other colours that burst to life. Nothing short of joy fills my heart as I dive deeper and look across to see

Ragnar and Henderson underwater, swimming to me. Their torsos are bare, in fact all of them are, bar the tiny black shorts.

Truthfully, they are a view all to themselves, wet and swimming towards me.

I swim up and gasp a breath of air before diving once more and finding them down by the coral. As I swim to them, Henderson holds his hand out, and I grab onto it, letting him pull me in between him and Ragnar, their hot bodies pressed to my sides. Ragnar points down, and there, nestled between two pink coral stems, is a bunch of shells. I push off Ragnar to go deeper and grab hold of the coral, feeling my lungs starting to burn with the need for air. I search through the shells before finding a green, twisted shell that is black in the centre.

It's perfect. Henderson pats my shoulder and offers me his hand, which I take. We all swim up together, and I suck in a deep breath as we break out of the water. Breathlessly, I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and hold up my shell in the light. It's not big, fitting perfectly in my hand, and I close my palm around it.

"Thank you for bringing me here," I tell them both.

"Mai, if you haven't noticed it yet, there isn't anything you couldn't ask us for that we would say no to. We want you happy," Ragnar says, clearly for them all. I have a feeling they have had more than one discussion about this. "And you were right, the other night with Callahan. We want you."

"All of us," Henderson adds. The water isn't making me feel warm anymore; they are, having their eyes on me, sensing the change in their scent no doubt mimicking my own. I'm more aware of them and what I want than I ever have been before.

Ragnar's dark blue eyes are lighter out here, so I can almost feel like I'm looking into his soul. "And our wolves are possessive of you, and they don't understand our emotions or reasoning. We don't own you, Mai, and I'm sorry we made you feel that way."

"You all confuse me. Sometimes you each make moves, and we have kissed, and the next you push me away," I say. "And then you get possessive when another male even talks to me."

"Mai, the only reason we keep you at a distance is to protect you. Our lives, the responsibilities on our shoulders, you don't understand, and you can't until we get home. If you still want us then, when you find out what it means, then—"

“Alright,” I cut him off. “So it isn’t that you don’t like me or feel anything?”

Henderson starts laughing deeply, and I scowl at him.

“You’re the most beautiful, strong and smart woman in this whole dark fucking world, and you think we don’t like you?”

I flick some water at his face and stick my tongue out at him. His eyes flicker red, and he grins. “Oh, you want to play?”

“If you can catch me,” I reply before swimming away from them as fast as I can, but of course, they catch me.

My alphas always will.



“I REALLY ENJOYED TODAY,” I say as Ragnar wraps a cloak around my shoulders, given to him by the angel guards who have waited nearly all day for us to get out of the sea. I don’t want to leave, but my growling stomach has different ideas. I squeeze my hair to get the water out before sliding my arms through the cloak and smiling at them.

“Go ahead. We are going to get changed,” Ragnar says.

“Valentine has food in our room for you if you want to clean up and go next door,” Henderson suggests.

“When I shift, will I have the cool mental connection thing?” I ask, stalling, because flying doesn’t sound appealing in the slightest.

“Yes. Anyone in our pack can send thoughts out, and you can learn to place shields in your mind to let in who you want,” Henderson tells me. “Now get your pretty ass back to the warm room.”

I grin at him before walking to the angels.

“Good evening, Mairin,” Berganza says. “Ready to fly?” he asks, sarcasm lacing his words.

“I don’t think I will ever get used to it,” I answer, walking closer. He picks me up gently before shooting off into the sky, taking my breath away and hurting my neck with the force. I bow my head, closing my eyes to stop myself from freaking out. We hurtle through the sky before I’m suddenly falling. I barely get to scream before I slam down onto stone, a sickening cracking noise filling my ear, along with my own cry of pain. Dizzy, I clutch my painful shoulder, the source of the crack, and tears sting my eyes

as I stand up on a balcony. I'm not sure where I am, but I sense someone nearby. I look up to see Berganza is gone, and my breathing quickens as I pull out my dagger from my thigh holder.

"Whoever is here, come out," I demand. The white, lacy curtains of whoever's room this is blow in the wind as three shadows step forward, their angel wings clear. One by one, they step through the curtains, their faces painted red with a sun symbol. They each have sharp swords in their hands. They want to kill me, and it wouldn't take much with those weapons. I need to outsmart them and move quick if I want to stand a chance.

"Gods like you are not welcome back. We rule now."

That's all the warning I get before the angel who spoke runs at me, sword drawn. My shoulder burns as I block his sword with my dagger, and it snaps out of my hand with the force. I gasp as he slams his body into mine, pushing me closer to the balcony wall, wrapping his hand around my throat. My body, in my panic, freezes for just a second before I react.

I am not dying here.

I slam my head forward into his nose, and he jolts back, giving me space to land a solid punch into his stomach before ducking out to the side. I look around the empty balcony for anything I could use and find nothing but plant pots.

"Dammit," I mutter to myself, backing away.

"That hurt, you bitch," the angel hisses. "And for that—"

He doesn't get to say another word as a black wolf jumps from above us, landing on his back and biting into his neck. He screams as the wolf tears into him, ripping him to pieces, and I turn to see the other two spinning around to run.

I lean down, pulling the sword from the now dead angel, and I grip it hard before throwing it into one of the angels' wings. It slices right through, and he roars, falling to his knees. The other angel backs away only to slam into someone.

Callahan steps through the white curtain, which brushes against his wings. In a series of swift moves, he grabs the other angel and rips his wings off with brute force. He throws the wings on the floor and snaps the angel's neck before letting his dead body drop to the floor. Only then do I notice both he and the wolf are covered in blood. When the wolf turns to me, I smile.

“Phim,” I say just before she shifts back, and Callahan catches me before I fall face-first, jolting my shoulder.

“The alphas were all attacked as well, and Callahan came to find me to track you in the chaos,” Phim explains to me, standing naked and covered in blood. She looks at Callahan. “Take her somewhere safe, and the alphas will come to heal her.”

“I’m—”

“Don’t you dare claim to be fine. I can sense your pain,” Callahan tells me. “And the angels involved in this will pay dearly.”

He turns to Phim as I lean into his chest, the pain from my shoulder beating hard like a drum. “There is an angel outside to escort you.”

“Deimos needs to learn what stairs are,” she mutters. “Sliding down from a balcony had my wolf freaking out.”

“This place was made for angels,” he smoothly replies.

“I expected nothing less. I’m trusting you to keep her safe,” Phim warns Callahan. “The alphas trust you for some reason.”

“Then we trust him,” I tell Phim. “Thank you for saving me.”

“You were holding your own, by the looks of it.” She grins at me before shifting back and running ahead. Callahan holds me close as he takes off, the stark reminder of falling not long ago stuck in my mind. We fly up all the way to the glass top of the pyramid, where there is a painted floor of angels, their wings gold. We fly down one of the tunnels and into a warmer room with lush cream carpets and light blue walls with cream arches. The sound of running water fills my ears as I’m gently laid down on the carpet, and I glance up to Indra leaning over me.

She runs her hands over my body before placing her hands on my injured shoulder, and I cry out from the pressure. I feel Callahan’s hand slide into mine, holding tightly as the pain drifts away, and instead, I feel cold, bitter cold, the sensation coming from my shoulder.

“I can freeze the pain for a little while until you heal. This will last for two days,” Indra tells me, her eyes brightly glowing. “Who dared to do this?”

“Over a hundred attacked the alphas, both down by the beach and up here. That’s from the body count alone. It was a planned attack,” Callahan says.

“And we have found the planner. We will be leaving in the morning,” Silas states, his growl echoing around the room. I turn his way, slowly

sitting up only for Valentine's scent to surround me as he picks me up.

"Are you okay?" he asks, holding me tightly, even though he is covered in blood. A screaming noise hurts my ears, and I turn to see Silas dragging Berganza, his wings broken, across the floor. With a hammer, he nails Berganza to the wall by his wings, and I have to turn away as he screams.

"My dear gods," Deimos says, landing nearby me. He reaches for me, but Valentine moves me out of the way.

"Anyone touches him, I will kill them," Silas coldly warns, walking to me. "He stays until your city remembers what happens to anyone who touches her."

Their power, something I've only felt once on the sofa with Henderson when he saved my life, flares into the room. It gets darker in here, a deep red darkness, a comforting and terrifying dark that touches everything.

Threatens everything...but me.

Deimos's eyes widen, and he steps back, lowering his head. Indra and Callahan do the same. Only Silas, smothered in blood, stops in front of Callahan.

"You are in my favour for saving Mairin," Silas claims. "You will come with us, if you wish."

Callahan looks at me, and I see his regret. "My loyalty is to this city and my viscount. I cannot."

Silas nods at him before walking away, Valentine carrying me after him to the back of the room, and I let myself close my eyes, where I dream of frosted snowflakes, four vipers, a pomegranate, and an angel carrying them all.

A graphic for the chapter title. The background is a dark, misty forest of evergreen trees. The word "CHAPTER" is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the middle. Below it, the word "EIGHTEEN" is written in smaller, white, serif capital letters.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

We spent the night in the same room, none of us sleeping much, thanks to the events of the day and the screams of the five angels Silas pinned to the walls outside. Deimos and Indra came to apologise, and Callahan is permanently stationed outside of our room, guarding us. Henderson and Ragnar were furious when they got back here and told me they were attacked on the beach.

Thanks to Indra's gift, my shoulder barely hurts anymore, and my own healing has fixed what was broken. In the early morning, before the sun had risen, two new human women came with fresh clothes for us all and bags for each of us with supplies, other outfits, and dried food. I miss the other two but I'm smart enough to not draw unwanted attention to them by asking where they are. I braid my hair after showering and getting changed into the sleek thick black leggings and long-sleeved grey T-shirt. My boots are waiting for me by the door when I come out with my socks already on, and I pull them on before straightening. I slide my new silver-bladed dagger into my thigh clip and look across to see Valentine watching me.

Valentine, like the other alphas, is dressed in black, reminding me of the angel guard uniform, but it suits them more.

"Time for us to leave," Valentine gruffly states. All of them have been tense since the attack, mostly because I think they thought they might lose me.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the children and Trey. And Breelyn," I admit. I know they stayed in smaller housing outside the pyramid, in a protected and gated area, but I wanted them in here with us.

Valentine smiles softly. "Trey is fond of you, as well. I cannot speak for Breelyn. She gives us the impression she hates everyone."

I cringe a little. "I think she hates men in general, or doesn't trust them, let alone alphas. Don't take it personally."

"I won't," he responds.

I walk over, hearing Silas and Ragnar moving around on the balcony. "Trey told me once that the forbidden god said we would be friends. Was that you?"

"Hades connects with every wolf in our pack. As our pack grows, so does his power and his grip onto this reality. Sometimes, he can whisper to wolves through us," Valentine explains. "And sometimes, when our pack is threatened, his power becomes our own."

"That's how Henderson healed me?" I question.

"Yes," he replies smoothly. "His power becomes ours when we need it."

"Do you think I will be able to do that when I shift?" I ask.

Valentine brushes some of his hair from his eyes. It's growing quickly once more, and I wonder if he will let me trim it. I enjoyed when he let me last time...or maybe it was just having him that close to me. "I believe your power will be stronger than ours or any god in this world. That's why the war was started. Persephone was known as one of the strongest goddesses with a power unlike much else."

"Tell me what you know of Hades and Persephone, their story?"

Valentine leans against the wall. "Humans have their own stories, but they do get some of it wrong. They claim Persephone was stolen by Hades because of her beauty and taken to the underworld. There he fed her a pomegranate seed, and she was trapped in the underworld with him for six months of the year."

"And the truth?"

"Persephone was the daughter of Demeter, who controlled her daughter and never let her live. When Hades offered Persephone a way to escape, she went willingly and fell in love with Hades as much as he loved her. Together, they made a plan to stay, and Persephone only returned to earth six months a year because her mother threatened to destroy the world if she didn't."

"So she risked everything for Hades?" I ask.

"In a way, but they were the only gods who stayed loyal to each other for centuries. For a long time," he says, a longing in his voice. "Their love

was worth everything, and I bet they would fight again for it.”

“What did Hades do? How did he leave Persephone alone and commit something so terrible that his soul was separated into four parts?”

“He killed his brother Zeus and Persephone’s mother, Demeter, for killing Persephone. They murdered her in spite of the love Hades and Persephone shared. Only, in his pain, he didn’t realise his power was destroying parts of the world. He levelled the tallest mountain in the world, which was full of cities, people, millions dying. When his remaining brother took control of the gods, he willingly let him separate his soul and end his life. He didn’t want to live in a world without Persephone in it.”

I shiver, like I can feel Persephone’s death, the pain it caused Hades, the destruction that followed...our lives before now, and somehow we almost mirror each other. I don’t know how I have her soul, and I might never know, but I won’t let us have the same ending.

I won’t lose them.

“Are you ready, Mai?” Ragnar asks, walking into the room.

I step away from Valentine, turning to Ragnar. “Yes. I’m guessing we need to fly?”

“We have transport together this time,” Silas growls, walking past us all and opening the front door. Callahan moves aside, and I notice the bag on his back. There is also one of those seating contraptions we first came up here on, and of course, Adira is ready and waiting with her bag. Deimos and Indra are near the door, talking with Henderson.

“Are you coming with us?” I ask Callahan.

He smiles at me. “Yes. Viscount Deimos suggested I could be needed and wanted to send me with you because of the attack. I believe he thinks he is in your debt. I am happy to serve.”

“Don’t you have family or someone here you don’t want to leave behind?” I question.

His smile drops just a bit. “The only family I had are gone from this world. My friends here understand why I must go.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “I’m sorry.”

“Mai,” Ragnar gently prompts, placing his hand on my back, his voice turning colder as he looks at Callahan. “See you on the train, Commander Callahan.”

Callahan inclines his head before stepping back and dropping down a tunnel, making my heart pound from the sheer drop that he took like it was

nothing.

Ragnar guides me over to Deimos and Indra, who both incline their heads. I do the same, and Deimos watches me. “I am afraid your visit here hasn’t been a good one. I hope change comes soon for us all, goddess.”

“My name is Mairin or Mai,” I correct him. “And I hope to return to your city one day.”

When it’s safe, I don’t say.

He seems to understand my unspoken words. “You have an ally, Mai, and an owed debt because of the attack. I hope we are even with the gift of my best commander. He will protect and keep you safe in a way only an angel can, that I am sure. Travel well.”

“Thank you, Deimos. Stay safe, both of you,” I softly say before climbing onto the seating. I sit down beside Adira, and Henderson comes to sit next to me.

“I’ve never been on a train. What is it like?” Adira asks me. Another sweet smile flashed my way. Even though I feel on edge around her, I try to push it down.

“Small, but it’s amazing to see all of the views of places we travel past,” I say. “Silas, Phim, and my friend Breelyn, who you haven’t met yet, train every morning. Would you like to join us?”

I’m not excluding her, because I know what that felt like, and I want to be the better person here.

“I’d love to join you,” she says, and I think she genuinely means it.

I turn to Silas, who is watching us, and he looks a tad shocked. Maybe he thought I’d never invite Adira to anything. “I’m sure you are happy to have another girl to boss around in training.”

Ragnar laughs. “Adira is well-trained enough I’d fear barking at her, Silas, man.”

“I am aware, I trained her,” Silas grumbles. “But you are welcome, of course, Adira.”

She flashes him a wicked smile that makes me want to growl. “I can’t wait to get hot and sweaty in training.”

Thankfully, the angels lift the seating contraption into the air and we all go silent, even as Adira looks at me, lowering her voice so only I can hear her.

“You haven’t won. Play the game of forgetting everything if you want, but you won’t win. I will die first before you get to have them.”

I frown at her, wondering what game we are playing and why she thinks I want to win, but the angels start lowering us down, making my stomach drop, and I try not to puke instead. It feels like forever before we are landing, and I'm the first one out of my seat, climbing off the platform. I get my first look at the train, impressed to see each carriage has been repaired and even painted in the four days we have been here. The once red train is now black with red-rimmed windows, new frosted glass windows lining the carriages. Phim is at the door, glaring at Callahan, who waits as I walk over, not waiting for the alphas.

"Hey," I say when I get to her and Callahan. "Are we standing outside in silence for a reason?"

"No," Phim says. "I was warning the angel commander here what will happen to his balls if he betrays us."

"I don't want to know," I say, holding my one hand up. "But I would like to see the train."

"Oh shit, sure," she says as she moves aside. Things are still tense between us, but her saving my ass and us fighting together has repaired some of the damage. I walk past her, and Trey runs headfirst into me, hugging me tightly.

"We have new clothes, blankets and food. The little ones have toys, and the train works better. Want to see?" he asks me, and I barely get to nod before he is dragging me down the train, showing me all of the changes. I manage to escape Trey as the train starts moving, and I make my way back to our rooms to drop my bag off. There are four new beds in the carriage with us outside where there was once boxes, and Breelyn is sitting on one. She stands when she sees me and rushes over.

"I heard you were attacked. Are you alright?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I tell her. It's mostly true. "How was it in the houses?"

"Quiet but good. We enjoyed being looked after for a bit and having some angels help with the children," she tells me. "Talking of which, I sleep here. Phim is in that bed, Trey there, and this is a spare—"

"It's mine then," Adira says, coming in. "Unless you want to sleep near your friend, Mai, and I can take your bed with the alphas?"

Breelyn growls at her, and Adira bares her teeth. "Your friend is rude."

I place my hand on Breelyn's arm, and she turns to me; I shake my head slightly. "Is she even bound to our pack? What is a stray wolf doing on this train?"

“No one has to give you answers, Adira, but if you want them, you might try asking nicely,” I suggest. “And Breelyn is part of this pack, bound or not. It isn’t your business, and as for swapping beds, it isn’t happening.”

“Shocking,” Adira snaps, shoving past us and going to the spare bed. Breelyn walks with me to the alphas’ and my room. I place my bag on the end of my bed, admiring the new jade green bedsheets and fluffy pillows. I yawn despite myself.

“What’s her problem?” Breelyn questions.

“I’m trying to give her a break, but she doesn’t make it easy. The alphas see her as a sister and are protective, so I want to try to be her friend,” I tell Breelyn. “I could use your help.”

Breelyn scowls. “Your alphas have bad choices in friends.”

I chuckle. “I know. It’s good to be back on this train.”

“I’ve missed training,” Breelyn admits. “When I was growing up, I saw you once. We weren’t in the same school, but my father had work near your school. You were sitting alone, looking so different with your blonde hair, but you had your head held high. You didn’t see me, and I couldn’t say hello to you from where I was, but I was thinking about it. I wish we had been in the same school.”

“I never had one female talk to me in anything but disrespect or to embarrass me at that place,” I admit.

“I wasn’t liked either. Apparently my sharp tongue kept them away, but honestly, they never tried in the first place. I wasn’t like them, fawning over the males, hoping for one of them to be my mate. I never wanted a mate from that pack,” she tells me.

“Don’t give up on every male because one of them was cruel, Breelyn. One day, you will heal.”

“You don’t know what he did to me. Every night. What he invited other males to do while he watched...,” she admits, and my heart cracks. I pull her into an embrace, whether or not she likes it, and after a second she hugs me back.

“You’re right, I don’t know how you feel, but that is in the past. Trust me, life gets better. Soon, it will still be a nightmare, but one you wake from. I was a toy for the alpha before he found out I was his mate. I’m still healing from it, but I won’t let him continue to ruin my life. I won’t let him win. Don’t let that bastard beta ruin your life either,” I softly encourage her.

“You know, I’m glad we met, even as we did, because I think we are always going to be friends, Breelyn.”

“I’m glad we met too,” she tells me with a rare smile, one I’ve never seen, and she leans back as I grin towards her. “Now, you look tired. Get some sleep if you want.”

“I think I might do,” I tell her. She nods at me before leaving, closing the door behind her. I kick my boots off and climb into bed, pausing when I see something on my pillow. It’s a black circle with lace woven to fill the inside, making a spiral web pattern. There are two green ribbons hanging from the circle, and tiny silver shells are at the bottom that clatter as I move them. Under the strange thing is a note that reads:

*This is a dreamcatcher I made for you.
They were said to catch nightmares, and I hope it helps you sleep.
Henderson.*

A dreamcatcher? My heart warms at the unexpected gift as I lay it and the note next to my pillow, hoping it does what it is meant to as I fall into a deep sleep the second my head hits the pillow.



CHAPTER

NINETEEN

“*H*ey, sleepy,” Ragnar says as I step into the first carriage, which is full of people. Fox and one of his brothers are playing a card game with Adira and Phim, while Ragnar and Henderson are sitting together in a booth, looking over a large map. I smile at them and head over to the game, curious about what they are playing. I recall playing rummy with Jesper until he decided he didn’t want to play anymore. I remember the tell he had when he scratched the back of his neck, which always let me know if he was close to winning or not. We occasionally played with Mike, but he always beat us both in a couple of moves. I miss them both. It was still one of my favourite things, along with reading.

“What are you playing?” I ask, leaning against the booth near Fox.

He looks up at me and grins. “Poker. Do you know how to play?”

“Not that game, unfortunately,” I admit.

“Shame,” Adira sarcastically mutters, and I choose to ignore her.

I look at Phim, who meets my eye. “Good luck.”

“I don’t need luck against these three,” she replies plainly, with a brief twitch of her lips when I grin. I chuckle as I walk away to Ragnar and Henderson.

“Thanks for letting me have a small sleep,” I say. From a look out of the window where the sun is still high in the sky, I’d bet it’s midday. There is nothing but sand everywhere to be seen, but it’s not too warm in here. The breeze from the open windows helps with the temperature, no doubt. When I first woke up, it was boiling. “Henderson, can I have a private word with you?”

His pale eyes fix on me. “Of course.”

“See you later, Ragnar,” I say, touching his shoulder for a second before walking away and into our bedroom within the carriage, Henderson close behind. I walk into the empty area where Trey and the others’ beds are before turning on Henderson.

“Thank you for my gift. I don’t know if it’s magic or not, but I slept with no nightmares,” I tell him, and he lightly smiles at me. “When I woke up, I figured out I want to give you a gift in return, to say thank you for thinking of me—”

“You don’t need to give me anything, Mai,” he expresses.

I shake my head and open my hand, revealing the shell I found at the beach. “Well, it’s for you. It’d make me happy if you accepted my gift.”

He sighs, and I know I’ve won even before he picks up the shell from my hand. “Thank you, Mai. I will treasure it.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds too long, that familiar tension building up, and I step closer, breathing in his smoky wood scent. My heart pounds as I lean up and tenderly brush my lips across his, tasting him before leaning back.

His hands are gripped tightly at his sides, his eyes no longer blue but a roaring red. Shifter energy flickers around him as I watch. “Thank you, Henderson.”

Before he says anything else, I walk away, feeling his gaze on my back like fire until I escape into the next carriage, my body flushed.

“Mai!” Breelyn calls, snapping me out of the strange trance I was in, and I turn to see her sitting on her own. I hold a finger up to tell her one second before grabbing some toasted bread, jam, and a bottle of juice. I sit down opposite her, and she smiles at me before a shadow falls over us. I look up to find Callahan.

“Can I join you both?”

“No—”

“Yes,” I interrupt Breelyn, kicking her under the table. She glares at me as I move over, and Callahan sits down with his own tray of food. We all dig in, an awkward silence falling over the table as Breelyn continues to glare at Callahan.

“How are you finding the train?” I ask Callahan.

Callahan chews on his toast, his eyes carefully watching Breelyn, who shoots daggers back his way. “It’s similar to flying but less effort on my

part. Did you rest well?”

“I did,” I reply. “Oh, I haven’t introduced you two. This is Breelyn Ravensword and, Breelyn, this is—”

“I don’t care,” she bites out.

“My name is Callahan, wolf,” Callahan calmly tells her. She growls at him.

If it was awkward before, it is a lot more now. The pair of them just glare at each other as I finish my food and pray for a god to save me.

I get a god, that’s for sure, just a far moodier one than I expected. Silas storms across the room, stopping at our table and looking between me and Breelyn.

“We are training late today, thanks to your nap. Both of you, hurry up,” Silas demands. “Come.”

“He is such an ass,” I mutter as he storms off.

“Why do you like him then?” Callahan asks, calling me out.

Breelyn snorts. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not to me,” Callahan replies, turning his gaze on her. The way they stare at each other is far from friendly.

“Then you’re stupider than you look, pretty bird,” she coolly replies before sliding out of her seat and walking away after Silas.

“If it helps, Breelyn isn’t a fan of most people,” I tell him.

He crosses his arms, watching her go. “Neither am I. I guess that makes us two peas in a pod.”

“If the pod was on fire, sure,” I reply with a low chuckle. “I have to go.”

“Of course,” he replies and gets out of the seat so I can climb out myself. I clean up my plate and Breelyn’s before going back to Callahan.

“See you around,” I tell him with a smile.

“Is anyone allowed in this training? I would like to watch, perhaps help,” he asks.

“Let me ask Silas first and get back to you, okay?” I suggest.

He inclines his head. “Thank you, Mai.”

The door opens on the other side of the carriage, and Adira walks in, wearing a tiny crop top and shorts, and nothing else. Every inch of her golden skin is on show, and I know damn well why she chose to wear clothes, or lack of them, to training.

“Let’s go, Mairin. I’m interested in seeing how much you suck at training,” she says in that sweetly sarcastic voice, and I have to remember

my promise to myself to give her a chance. To not hate her for being attracted to the alphas when I can see why anyone would be.

Rather than play into her little wind up, knowing she is trying to make me angry, I smile at her. "Let's go."

Callahan winks at me as I go past, and I have a feeling he is proud of me for not rising to her bait.

Adira waits until we are near the door before opening it harshly and it nearly slams in my face.

"Careful now. You don't want to fall over like a human pretending to be a wolf, do you now?"

Don't call her a bitch. Don't call her a bitch.

I smile, but it's tense. "Adira, I don't pretend to be anything. Maybe you should try learning from that? All pretences fail in the end because the truth always comes out."

She pales, searching my eyes. "You remember?"

"What?" I question, and immediately she looks relieved before going through the door. Something happened in the past between us, and my gut has always told me not to trust her. One way or another, I'm going to find out what.



CHAPTER

TWENTY

A bead of sweat drips down my back as I circle Silas, who stands straight, not a tiny bit of sweat on his entire body even after hours of training. We have run the length of the train four times and then done hundreds of squats, sit-ups and jumping jacks before this more embarrassing training. Silas told me to hit him, and I've failed to get a single hit in since we started this. He effortlessly moves out of the way, looking like he hasn't moved at all, and I flail around, trying to figure out a way past his defence. His black shirt is smooth, as are his dark trousers that tightly show off his thigh muscles as he stands still. My hands itch with the urge to slap that smug smile off his too perfect face. I breathe in to calm myself, only to scent nothing other than his scent. He smells like lavender soap, with a pepper and masculine undertone. He smells too good.

I bet I don't.

Breelyn, Phim and Adira long left training after completing their much easier tasks than what Silas decided I needed to be doing. The sun is starting to descend in the sky now, and in about half an hour, the train will come to a stop, preparing for the night ahead.

"You might not be able to shift, but you are a born wolf, with deeper instinct than what's on the surface. Hit me using your wolf," he commands, widening his stance.

"I don't know how to do that!" I breathlessly tell him, crossing my arms.

"I've heard your wolf possessively growl through you on more than one occasion, Mai," he states, watching me with an unfeeling gaze. "Search

deep within yourself, because without your wolf, you're a human using a pack to defend you rather than being part of the pack."

"That's not fair," I bite out.

"Is it not?" he replies. "Ah, my bleeding heart. Oh wait, the world isn't fucking fair at times, Mai. Don't you know that by now?"

"Can you feel no sympathy for anyone?" I shout at him. "Or is the big, bad Silas only good at throwing insults rather than understanding? I don't get you! I don't get any of you!"

"Are you going to cry about that too?" he questions.

A burning fire, something forceful and uncontrollable, snaps inside of me, and I roar as I run at him. The world seems to slow down as I lock onto Silas, watching him move to defend himself, but I see his moves this time. I level a punch into his face, catching his nose, and he takes a step back. With blood dripping down his nose, over his lips, I step back, shaking my head.

He only grins. "About time. If I knew making you mad got your wolf out to play, I would have been an ass much earlier today."

"You were playing me," I mutter. I go over and pick up a towel from the side of the room and come back. I step up close to him and press the towel to his nose. He lets me wipe the blood away, guilt gnawing at my heart. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"Don't be, Mai," he replies gruffly. "It was the sexiest thing I've seen you do. That includes you dancing next to me in that dress."

I sigh, feeling my blood warm as I finish wiping the blood away and look up at him. "Silas..."

He takes my lips in a punishing, wicked, and somehow loving kiss. His hand slides up my back, sinking into my hair and pulling me harshly against his body. Our bodies fit together as he picks me up with his other arm, and I wrap my legs around his waist as his tongue explores my mouth. He pushes me against the wall, both of us lost in each other, the feel of his lips on mine, his body so close, everything so much.

His lips gently trail down my jawline, every kiss branding my skin as I arch my back. When his lips press on my neck, above my pulse, a little moan escapes the back of my throat. "I could kiss you all day, all night until I've kissed every inch of you, Mai."

His dark, deep voice makes me shiver even more than being held by him does. I look down at Silas, and I brush some stray locks of his blond hair away. "I don't know what we are, but I never want it to stop either."

He presses his forehead to mine. “When we are home, everything will change.”

“Will it?” I question. “I’m more nervous about going to your home, wherever it is, than finding out all your secrets.”

“The last of our secrets lie within our home, Mai,” he softly tells me, gently placing me down as the train comes to a stop, the engine noise getting slower. “And they aren’t about you.”

“But they affect me?”

“They affect us,” he explains, cupping my cheek with his large hand. I press a kiss to his palm and move away. I walk over and sit in the only booth in the carriage, watching out over the sandy hills around us, the sun setting and nearly out of sight. For a brief second, the world is a beautiful violet colour before the sun is gone. In the darkness, the moon shining down, I can see the tips of old buildings, ruins of human worlds gone and lost.

“I did get you something while we were in Fenrir,” Silas says, surprising me. He comes over and places two daggers on the table. The hilts of the daggers are fashioned into three gold and leather stars underneath clear resin, and the blade itself is a beautiful hue of green.

“These must have cost a fortune, I can’t accept them!” I say, even when I want them badly. They are extraordinary, and I know no weapons on this earth could look like them.

Silas smirks. “I won them in a fight. Technically, they cost me a few bruises. You can kiss them all better if you wish.”

My cheeks burn, and his laugh is dark, wicked, and sensuous. “Take them, Mai, and use them if need be. You’re better at close combat than distant, so you need good weapons.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, picking one of them up and resting it in my hand. “When I was fighting the angels, one of them managed to knock the dagger out of my hand. Can you teach me how to grip the dagger in a way that can’t happen?”

“Yes,” he replies, leaning across the table and taking my hand. My skin feels like it burns where he touches me. Silas shows me how to grip the dagger differently, locking my fingers around it almost backwards. “You can do moves like this.”

He uses the other dagger to show me a move where he holds the dagger at eye level before slamming it down, and then he stands and shows me

several other techniques. “You’re small and fast, use that to your benefit.”

“I wil—” I pause, seeing something outside. There isn’t much light in here, other than the moonlight, to make it possible to see around and outside as something moved. Silas places a finger to his lips and silently walks over to the window. I try to keep my footsteps silent as I head over with him, nearly jolting at what is outside.

The Levi.

The creatures are worse than I imagined them to be, and they feel wrong. They feel evil and tainted as three of them look our way. The train is silent as we watch the Levi, its inhuman features grotesque and twisted as black slime drips from its mouth and claws. They are taller than I expected them to be, much taller than I am, and their claws are the size of my hand. They’re wearing old clothes, rags that barely cover much. Quickly one roars, the sickening sound a mixture of a howl and cry, before all three of them run off into the distance.

I finally breathe, looking up at Silas, who has paled. “Every time we see or fight them, they are worse than before.”

Silas, who I have never seen even a little fearful of anything, seems put off. Off kilter. I place my hand on his arm before embracing him, pressing my head to his side. He wraps his arms around me, holding me close. And I don’t move, never wanting to leave this carriage. Not with them outside.

Not now I’ve seen the empty hollow of their eyes and felt it in my soul. Some creatures shouldn’t exist.

The chapter title is presented in a graphic format. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a large, white, serif font, with the letter "C" being significantly larger than the others. Below it, the number "TWENTY-ONE" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. The background of the graphic is a dark, misty forest of evergreen trees, with the text appearing to be overlaid on the scene.

CHAPTER

TWENTY- ONE

Branches and trees snag on my floor-length, dark red dress as I run through the forest back to my foster home. If I can just get there, Mike will protect me. I won't be alone with him.

"Irin!" Alpha Sylvester roars through the forest, making my skin crawl. My arms are still marked with cuts where he grabbed me to stop me escaping. Tears sting the corner of my eyes as I run faster and faster, losing track of where I am.

I know this is a memory wrapped up in a nightmare, and I want to wake up. I can't see this again, I can't, I can't, I can't...

I wake up with a gasp, panting as I stare at the small window on the other side of the room for the clarity I need. The moon, surrounded by pretty and bright stars, hangs high in the dark sky, casting a dim light down on the room. I clutch the blanket tightly and calm myself down with the alphas' scents, their heavy breathing filling the room. Ragnar and Valentine are in here with me, the others guarding the train from the Levi.

Knowing I won't be able to sleep again—not with that memory fresh in my mind, my body still jittery and nervous—I climb down the steps, careful not to wake Valentine, who is sleeping soundly, but Ragnar isn't. Silently his eyes meet mine in the darkness, and he lifts his blanket, moving over. I smile and climb into bed with him, facing him on the pillow.

"Can't sleep or bad dreams?"

"Both tonight," I softly tell him. "Did I wake you?"

"I couldn't sleep anyway," he admits. He reaches up and brushes a stray bit of hair away from my face. Every touch of his skin against mine makes the bed feel smaller, his presence so much more noticeable. How close we

are, the heat coming from his body, and how his scent is borderline addictive to me now...

“Want to talk about it?”

“It’s hard to explain, Mai,” he breathes out, kissing my forehead once. “Being around you, having you back, brings a certain tension to us all that has never been there before.”

“I’m causing problems?” I whisper. “I’m sorr—”

“Don’t be. These problems aren’t your fault, Mai,” he considerately tells me.

“Can...” I pause and gulp. “Is there any way to help you sleep?”

“I can help you sleep, and it will help us with the tension keeping us awake,” he suggests, moving closer. He tenderly runs his fingers down my hair, and goose bumps litter my skin in response. All of my body feels tightly coiled, ready for something, anything he offers me. His fingers pause at my hip. “Turn around if you want, Mai.”

Once, I might have paused and questioned his command, but now, I want to do what he asks. I want to do anything he wants as long as he is close to me. I feel this way about all of the alphas, I realise, as I turn over.

I hate that we aren’t alone, and like the last time I was in Ragnar’s bed, things can never go too far. Ragnar moves closer to my back as I focus on Valentine in his bed opposite me, his body an outline in the darkness. I gasp when Ragnar kisses the side of my neck, his hand resting on my hip, and slowly he pushes up my T-shirt with his fingers. His hand flattens on my stomach, and my body feels on fire from his touch.

Valentine moves on the bed, and I feel frozen as he pushes the blanket down and grips his large length in his hand. My core tightens and my breasts feel heavy as I watch Valentine firmly stroke himself, and even though I can only see shadows of him, I feel his eyes on me. Watching me with Ragnar, pleasuring himself to us.

It only makes me want more.

“Watch Valentine as I please you,” Ragnar whispers, his teeth grazing the edge of my ear. “If you wish.”

“Don’t stop,” I manage to beg, my plea making Valentine move faster. Our scent fills the room, tangled with desire and need as Ragnar slides his hand down my stomach, his other hand sliding under my side and cupping one of my breasts under my T-shirt. He runs his finger around my hard nipple in circles, and I jolt against him, pleasure like I’ve never felt it

dampening my core just as Ragnar presses his fingers into my fold, finding the sensitive nub of nerves. He rubs my nub in a similar motion to my nipple, the mixture of both sending my body into a new kind of existence.

I feel nothing but pleasure coursing through me, lighting up my body with how Ragnar touches me, and I push back against his body, a groan escaping his lips near my neck. Valentine is groaning himself, mixing with the sound of my own moans that I can't control. Ragnar lowers his hand and plunges two fingers into me, the intrusion welcome as his thumb carries on his slow, torturous rhythm.

"I'm—" I whisper, unable to say the words, but Ragnar knows. I feel Valentine getting closer, seeing how he rubs the tip of his length harder as Ragnar moves faster, plunging his fingers in and out of me as pleasure builds and explodes in my core. I cry out in sheer ecstasy, never wanting this feeling to stop. I hear Valentine find his own pleasure, the groan he makes, whispering my name, which is echoed by Ragnar behind me. I collapse back against Ragnar, who takes his hands off me slowly and pulls me into his arms.

Only then do I feel a little embarrassment for what we did, knowing we have crossed a line from just kissing to something else.

I don't regret this, I never could, but somehow I suspect this wasn't planned.

"Sleep, Mai," Ragnar whispers to me, and in my sated body, I let my eyes close, and this time, I dream of nothing but them holding me, never letting me go.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

*S*pin my spoon around in my bowl of corn cereal, wishing for any of them to say something. The alphas are all sitting around the six-seater table, and Trey is on the edge, talking about the rainforest we have passed through.

“Jenny said she saw a tiger. A real tiger!” Trey exclaims. “I’ve only seen them in books, but she said they are bigger and brighter coloured than she thought. I wish I was there, but I was stupidly looking at a bright red flower.”

“That’s so cool,” I tell Trey.

“Kid, you’re going to be late for the drawing class Breelyn is hosting,” Ragnar gently tells him. He shoots up and basically runs out of the seat and down the carriage.

“I think our little boy has a crush on a certain white wolf,” Henderson points out. “It’s cute.”

“It is,” I say before going back to turning my cereal around, my appetite gone. Though, I have eaten three pieces of toast and four slices of bacon before this, so that might be the reason, not just the uncomfortable silence that has occurred since I woke up in Ragnar’s arms, alone in the carriage. I haven’t slept that well in a long time, my body so relaxed, and even then, I burned for more from Ragnar this morning. I was almost glad when Phim knocked to say it was my time in the bathroom. Valentine winks at me when I look up once, and my cheeks burn red.

“Last night...,” I start. “Well, you all look—”

“Pissed off we weren’t there?” Silas states. “Yeah, that’s what the silence is about. Sweetheart, your moans echoed, and it was fucking hot.

My wolf is jealous, that's all."

"And we promised not to touch you until we get home and you know the cost," Henderson growls at Ragnar.

"A word in private, brother?" Ragnar growls right back.

"Please don't fight," I ask.

"We won't," Henderson carefully replies, but I don't for one second believe him with that tone. They both walk out of the carriage, and I look at Valentine.

"Go after them?" I ask him.

He sighs, climbing out of his seat. "For you, anything."

Silas crosses his arms, watching me, a wicked smile on his lips. "Time for training."

"Why do I get the feeling training is going to be painful today?" I ask.

"Because it is," he deadpans.

I groan, wishing I hadn't eaten so much for breakfast as we clear the table before heading to the nearly empty carriage we use for training. I pull off my jumper and pile it on the side as Adira and Phim come into the room. Breelyn trains with Phim later today so she can have time with the children. That way all of us are with the kids at some point in the day, which means they get into less trouble, which is good for all of us. I don't think I will ever forget the day they decided to revolt and not wear nappies.

I shiver from the memory.

Adira walks up to me, shifting the air and growling low before shoving my shoulder as she walks past me. Phim just laughs and winks at me, choosing to lean against the wall nearby. If I wasn't blushing before, I am now. It seems like everyone knows what happened last night now, but I don't regret it. I had no clue being touched like that could feel so good, so incredible. There is an ache now, between my legs, that wasn't there before. I want to do that again and again, and find out if sex can be just as pleasurable, even if some part of me fears sex because of what happened in my past. I know they would never hurt me like he did, but perhaps just because of that tiny bit of fear, I'm not a hundred percent ready to take it to a new level with them. I'm not sure how I could fit the impressive length I saw last night inside of me. Doesn't even seem possible.

"Adira and Mai. Combat training today. I'm going to draw a circle, and the objective is to get the opponent out of the circle," Silas instructs. "No hits to the face or below the waist."

Adira nods, looking pleased, and I gulp, getting the feeling this is going to hurt. The sadistic bastard only smirks as he grabs chalk and draws a large circle. I blow out a breath as I tie my hair back and step into the circle. Adira doesn't pause as she moves fast, running at me and slamming into my body hard. I fall out of the circle straight away, pain lacing my shoulder.

"Come on, at least be a challenge, or I'm going to sleep right here in this circle!" Adira taunts. I climb to my feet and get back in the circle, bouncing on my feet from one foot to the other, ready if she pulls that move again. Truthfully, I want to let her win a few times so I can observe. I already know she thinks her left side is stronger, and she steps forward with her right foot. She favours her left hook, and she looks up as a cue she is about to move. I see her cue, and I smoothly sidestep her, almost making her stumble from the circle herself. She wastes no time swinging her leg and kicking me in the stomach. I nearly fall back from the pain, but I hold my own and only rub my stomach.

This time, I go for her.

Copying her move, I swing my leg out, but I catch her left hip instead, knocking her back a step. With my hands, I shove her shoulders, and she falls arse-first out of the circle. Breathlessly, I grin at her.

"Looks like I win."

"You won't always," she hisses, climbing to her feet and storming to me. She punches me hard across the face, surprising me, and I taste my blood in my mouth as I spin to her.

"I said no hits to the face, Adira!" Silas shouts. "Get the fuck out of here if you can't behave."

"Sorry, alpha," she says sweetly, inclining her head. Silas comes to me with a towel and holds it against my cut lip.

"Jealousy is a real bitch, isn't it?" Phim laughs. "Maybe you should keep your eyes on that one, alpha."

"Beta Seraphim, don't you have other things to do?" Silas coldly snaps at her.

She only winks his way. "I know you don't."

"Is this the day for females to disobey and piss me off?" Silas demands.

I chuckle, meeting his eye. "Be honest with yourself, the females you surround yourself with are hardly submissive, and you love it."

His eyes glint with a challenge. "Making certain wolves submit is an interest of mine."

“I bet,” Phim jokes, but the tone of the room has changed. The scent coming off him has also as he looks at me, red leaking into his eyes. “Right, that’s me out,” Phim says.

I barely hear the carriage door open and shut as I watch Silas. “You’re trouble.”

“I know,” I reply, letting him move closer. He leans down and ever so carefully brushes his lips across mine, the sting of pain and pleasure almost as one. My blood coats his bottom lip as he runs his tongue across it and steps back, a low groan escaping the back of his throat. “You were sent to this world to torment me.”

I shrug a shoulder. “What is a better way to be tormented?” I walk around him and to the carriage door.

“Training isn’t over,” he growls at my back.

“Yes, it is,” I reply, knowing he won’t stop me as I leave him in tormented silence, a train carriage full of our desire to keep him company.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

I climb onto a plastic brown storage box, which looks filled with clothes, before crawling between two more and finally making my way to the back of the train carriage and to the newly fitted floor-to-ceiling glass window that overlooks everything we pass through. The last carriage is a new addition that the Fenrir city happened to have, and it's used for storage, meaning it's nearly always empty. Thankfully, no one else has found my secret hideaway. We are currently gliding through the remains of a small town covered in grass fields and tall trees that stretch into the sky. The small houses, with no roofs and covered in moss and ivy, are sad to look at, to see the shell of the homes they used to be. Now humans aren't free, not unless you count being in slavery as free.

I sit down, crossing my legs and resting my back against the box, happy to be alone for a while. I found this place four days ago when I stormed off from training when Adira was overly flirty with Silas, and he either doesn't notice or he is stupid. I'm not sure which it is when it comes to Adira, mostly because every interaction the alphas have with her shows they dote on her like a sister they are bound to protect.

They don't see how she looks at them, and despite our stolen kisses, our moments, I have no claim on them.

It's all so complicated, and my heart hurts deep within my chest when I think about it all. I rest back just as I hear the boxes move, and instinctively I slide a dagger out of my thigh clasp and lift it. When I see familiar red spiral hair right before Phim climbs through, I lower my dagger and she raises an eyebrow at me.

“I’m happy to see you finally learnt to trust no one. Not even your pack,” she states. I roll my eyes at her and slide my dagger back as she takes a seat next to me, not close enough to touch, but enough that it would be uncomfortable if I didn’t talk.

“This is meant to be my secret hiding place,” I say.

She laughs. “Make me leave then, bitch.”

I playfully lean over to elbow her, almost remembering the friendship we built before the mountain came crashing down on us, and then everything happened. She was my first friend and then, it turned out, my sister.

So many questions have been burning in my mind about her, about our past, and what she did in the Ravensword Pack.

“I’ve been a coward for not finding you and talking with you,” I start off, clearing my throat. I keep my eyes on the train track we leave behind us, hoping this talk will end with us putting our past behind. “I’m sorry for that, Phim. I want to know everything, if you will tell me, starting from the beginning. It’s also fine if you want to sit here with me in silence. I’m done assuming shit.”

“Thank fuck,” she mutters before crossing her leg over her other one and leaning back. “I’m your half-sister, as you well know, but you don’t know that my father went to the alphas of our pack and demanded I be given to him and his mate. I was taken as a baby, forcibly, from what I was told. They weren’t bad parents to me, and I only found out I wasn’t one of them when I shifted at five. As you well enough know, any female shifting before mating is made out to be impossible in Ravensword, and they control the young female wolves there with some kind of goddess magic. It didn’t work on me, so they hid me, forced me to never shift, and it’s a main reason why my wolf can be a real mean bitch.”

“Gods,” I whisper, unable to speak of the horror. Taking a baby from a mother is disgusting and cruel. The mother should always be able to choose what life she wants for her child. “So you were taken to Ravensword? I thought the story of you being thrown out for loving a woman was made up. Or at least part of it.”

“It wasn’t. My father and his mate took me out of the Fall Pack and to Ravensword Pack, making a special agreement with the alpha. Not the bastard currently ruling that shit show of a pack but his father,” she explains. “He told the Ravensword alpha all our secrets and, in exchange,

my father was allowed to live there if he bound himself to the pack with his mate. I was to be bound when I found a mate.”

“So we were in the same pack all those years?”

“Yes. I heard of you, who didn’t? The female wolf found in the woods and kept as a foster kid,” she mutters. “But I didn’t live near you or the main city, mostly because my parents wanted to stay off the alpha’s radar as long as they could. I was thirteen when they both died, poisoned by the alpha himself, and I ran, only to be caught. I was kept, mated off to an idiot who couldn’t understand why I hadn’t shifted in front of him. He was high up in the wolf society, and I knew he would throw me to the alpha if he saw my black wolf that didn’t change white, because I may have said the binding words, but my wolf didn’t want to change alliance. Things were rough, and my worst fear was falling pregnant. That fear came true,” she tells me. My heart hurts for her.

“Oh, Phim,” I whisper, my voice a mess of emotions.

A single tear falls down her cheek. “I found a healer who could…fix my problem with medicine, old science from humans. I couldn’t have that baby; I was barely a teenager, and I hated my mate. I couldn’t do it.”

“I don’t judge you for your choice,” I softly tell her.

“I met Lucinda Ravensword the same night, and we fell in love. My mate”—she says the word with disgust—“found out somehow, even though we were careful, and ripped her apart. I killed him and ran, jumping into the sea before any of them could find me. Before getting to the Fall Mountain Pack, I really had given up hope on finding my past, and my current life was nothing short of painful. The alphas told me who they really were, who I was, when they met me and knew my scent was like yours. Your bloodline.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I tell her. “I really am.”

She nods. “I’d rather we didn’t speak of Lucinda again. It hurts to even say her name, and it will take many years for me until it doesn’t.”

“Of course. I’m honoured you told me,” I tell her. “If you ever want to talk, I will be here.”

She smiles, just a little bit. “Did you know you were from the Fall Pack at all then?”

“No, I didn’t. They told me everything, and I wanted to find you, desperately. I fought hard in the pack to become beta and teach the alphas I could be trusted, and they became my friends as my respect for them grew.

So, with the alphas' permission, I went to the commander of the king of the angels and he loved me so much he claimed me as one of his "children". It's a title to him as he sees himself as a creator of life. I played him, stayed close for eight months, looking for you when I was supposed to be spying on the alphas for the king. I told him lies about the alphas, pretending to hate them, and did terrible things to stay by Commander Oisean's side, just in case you turned up.

"We went to every city, everywhere, and nothing, but I could feel you were alive just like the alphas could. It was like I knew you existed, something in my gut connected me to you. Maybe the gods told me, I don't know. I gave up when it was clear you weren't being kept by the angels, and I came back empty-handed, pretending to be Commander Oisean's spy, but the alphas knew everything." She pauses to laugh, humourlessly. "Then you just turned up, and you couldn't remember our mother. When the mountain fell, I was blindsided. Oisean found me first and told me he was disappointed in me for not telling him that you were found. I lied and said I didn't know who you were. He fell for it, and I had to play my part in the Ravensword Pack to save both our asses. I was lucky Alpha Sylvester never saw me and no one recognised me, or if they did, they didn't say anything. Likely too scared to annoy the angels or their alpha."

"You did that for me?" I whisper, tears stinging my eyes.

"This world is brutal, and I didn't want you to be broken before I could save you," she admits, looking away from me. "I was too late, and I fucking hate that."

"And I didn't remember anything to tell you. I don't remember our mother either," I say, understanding her. "You wanted to find me so I could tell you what she was like."

"I wanted to find you because you're my only family left in this world, and I won't let the world take you from me. I'm your sister," she firmly states. "Yes, a part of me longs for you to tell me what she was like, but I suspect that is something neither of us will have."

"The alphas have told me little things," I mutter, "but it's not enough. I feel that."

"Look at us on a train, driving through lands of ruins and human remains, and feeling sorry for ourselves. We have a lot to be thankful for, Mai. We have each other; even if you hate my guts, you're stuck with me."

I chuckle. "You're not that bad."

“I’m the best, thank you very much,” she corrects me. “I’ve never been in doubt of that.”

“I wish I could have saved you too,” I quietly tell her. “I wish I knew you’d risked so much for me. For years.”

“But you were broken. I’ve been there once,” she admits, her voice hazy. “That’s how I knew to be on that balcony, to stop you from making a big mistake. I’ve been there. My heart still paused for you when that white-haired, old beta walked you out.”

Cenwyn wasn’t old or white-haired?

“Cen—”

“I spent those days killing any male that came near your room and paying the whorehouse to bring females to the alpha’s door to distract him. I never left your side, and you weren’t alone there. Even as you screamed and cried and begged for someone to help you. I was there...I just couldn’t,” she says, her voice breaking.

I pick up her hand and squeeze it tightly. “I hated you in that moment for stopping me. I was so tired of fighting, and you’re right, I was broken. I had been broken for a long time, and what that monster did was like adding another rock to a sinking ship. But you stopped me and you saved me. Thank you, Phim. Thank you for saving me then, for every single time I don’t know about, and for every time in the future when I no doubt get in trouble.”

“If you try to hug me, I’m going to—”

“Shut up,” I say, pulling her into a hug. Gods damn me. “You’re my sister, and I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for everything.”

Slowly, she wraps her arms around me and hugs me back, and I relax a little. We stay like that for a while before she moves back and clears her throat. “We need vodka for the next little chat we have.”

“Why do I get bad vibes already?”

“The bad vibes came on board in Fenrir. Don’t trust Adira,” she carefully warns me. “I’ve observed her for five days on this train, and everything in me is saying she is trouble dressed like a lamb for dinner.”

“I know,” I admit, gnawing on my bottom lip. “I didn’t want to exclude her, but she seems to have a problem with me. Apparently, we knew each other for a few years before I went missing at twelve, and whatever happened, she doesn’t want me to remember.”

“Do you think if I hit you really hard on the head, your memories would come back?” Phim enquires. I laugh, only to realize she isn’t laughing with me and being dead serious. I cough on my laugh and move away from her before she smiles. “I was just joking.”

“I really, really don’t believe you,” I mutter with a grin.

“You shouldn’t,” she replies with a shrug, and I smile at her, really smile at her.

“I’ve always wanted a sister,” I tell her. “In fact, I always wanted a family. A sister is a bonus.”

“Same,” she tells me, and for a while, we sit in silence, watching the train take us far away from that forgotten town, leaving our joint past in it. We have a much better future to fight for.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

“I was seven when I first learnt wild boars will chase you if you throw rocks at them,” Breelyn tells me, and I laugh, just imagining her being chased by a boar through the forest. She wrinkles her nose at me and chuckles. “I assumed they were like lazy pigs and didn’t move fast. They do.”

“How far did you run?” I ask, sipping on my water.

She shrugs. “A few dozen miles over rocks until I got to the river bed. The rocks slowed it down or I would have been hurt. The boar gave up then. Thank the gods.”

“Maybe—”

I barely get one word out before there is a loud screeching noise, and I grab my ears to protect myself from the awful noise.

“The train is slowing!” Breelyn shouts to me over the noise, and I realise she is right when I look outside at the massive, clear lake we are passing by. The train moves very slowly as it comes to a stop, and I still jolt forward from the movement. The screeching stops, and I climb out of my seat, rushing to the front of the train with Breelyn at my back. In the first carriage, Phim and Henderson are talking loudly, their voices panicked.

“What is going on?” I ask.

“Yes, what the hell?” Adira demands, running in after us.

Henderson turns to us. “There is a problem with the engine. Ragnar, Fox, his brothers and Valentine are working on it. We could be stuck here awhile.”

I glance out the window at the sun hidden behind thick clouds, still casting a little light on us. “It’s going to be dark soon.”

Henderson gives me a grave look without saying a word. This is bad. So bad. “If those rain clouds come close, it will block out the sun, and that’s a risk. We might not even have until nightfall to get that noise to stop.”

“We need to prepare everyone on board,” I say, holding my head high. “Phim, Breelyn, Adira, we should leave the alphas sorting the engine, and we should give everyone over the age of ten a weapon to defend themselves. Then we space ourselves out down this train to protect the children.”

“I’m not listen—” Adira starts.

A snapping growl escapes my lips, and she glares at me. “Do you want the children to be alone when the Levi come?”

“No,” she plainly states, crossing her arms with a pout.

Ignoring her, Breelyn and Phim nod my way before heading off. I take a few steps before Henderson catches my arm, his new necklace bouncing on his chest—my shell, attached to a dark black chain.

I turn my eyes up to his. “Be careful. I—we can’t lose you.”

“I can’t lose any of you either.”

The words linger between us in the silence, making my heart pound like a drum.

“Get the train moving away from that lake,” I gently tell him. “I’m fighting to the end. Our pack deserves that.”

“The pack is very lucky to have you,” he softly tells me before reluctantly letting me go and heading to the front. I rush down the train, shouting to everyone that I find to follow me if they are over ten. I pass Adira on the way, talking to a young girl who is crying, and find Breelyn and Phim in the storage, ripping open the weapon boxes. The carriage soon fills with people, mostly teenagers and the few young adults we have.

“What has happened?”

“Are we going to die?”

“The creatures are going to—”

I cut off whoever it was that spoke by clapping my hands, climbing onto one of the unopened boxes and gaining all of their attention. “Hello, everyone.”

I swallow down my nerves, knowing the twenty or more wolves in front of me are young, untrained, and scared. They need me to be strong, and I am strong. “The train engine has an issue, but our alphas are working hard on it with Fox and his brothers. They will get this train moving once more,

but as you can see, there are dark rain clouds heading this way, and they are blocking out the sun as I speak, and the train is still making noise loud enough to attract the Levi. I know the alphas told you all about the Levi, the reason why the train is silent at night. The Levi might come—”

They break into whispers, and I look down at Breelyn and Phim for some help on how to get them to listen, not that I have a clue what to say. Phim places her fingers in her mouth and lets out a loud whistle. They all go silent once more, and I just speak from my heart. “I want everyone here to grab a weapon, just in case, and then hide where you can on the train. Phim, Breelyn, Adira and I are going to station ourselves down the train, and I promise we will fight until our last breath for our pack. We will survive this as wolves, as a pack, and the gods will help us. The forbidden god blessed our alphas and our pack, and we will not die in his darkness.”

A few of them nod my way as I climb down and get to work handing out weapons to everyone and trying to give them brief ideas of how to grip the weapon and use it. “Maybe we should open training for all when we get home. Wherever that is.”

“Don’t look at me, I don’t know either,” Phim reminds me. “But I agree. We should all know how to defend ourselves.”

“We—” I pause mid-word when I hear a crying noise echo from outside, right before it starts to pour down with rain. The rain taps against the window as I walk closer and look out over the lake, watching the rain drop into the water. The sound echoes once more throughout the air, and a sense of dread fills my body as I slide my daggers out of my clips.

“Get down the train,” I tell Phim and Breelyn, who pause mid-step to look at me. “None of the children die today.”

“Agreed. Be careful,” Phim warns me.

“What she said,” Breelyn comments before shifting into her white wolf, the green shifter energy filling the room. They both rush off as I watch the lake carefully, praying the train gets moving soon as the feeling of dread gets worse, almost making me feel sick. Slowly, the lake ripples once and then twice before a black shadow appears under the water, rising to the top. My hands feel sweaty as I tightly clench the daggers as the shadow breaks out of the water. It’s not a shadow but a group of Levi, at least thirty of them, and they pause, standing inhumanly still. Like they aren’t alive, which they aren’t in any sense of the word. The lake fills with similar

shadows, and I realize they were at the bottom of the lake, waiting to come and kill us. It's dark down there after all, and they just need darkness.

When at least a hundred of them are standing in the lake, looking like gruesome statues, they attack. Like a wave, they rush at the train, and I head into the next carriage, seeing some children hiding in the bedroom, one teenage girl standing guard. I nod at her before shutting the bedroom door and standing in front of it as the Levi crash into the train like a storm. They slam hard into the train, enough to make it shake to the side, and I hold on to the wall for a moment as two of them smash the windows, climbing through. I rush forward, slamming one of my daggers into its head before it can get into the carriage. It roars, swinging out at me with its nasty claws, narrowly missing my stomach as I jump out of the way. The Levi slumps out of the carriage, and in the time it took to get rid of that one, another has climbed in. I turn on the Levi as it makes a whining noise and runs at me, claws outstretched, black slime dripping from its mouth. I brace myself and duck under its arm, slicing my dagger through its stomach as I pass. Black blood sprays all over my arm, stinging like fire as I roll myself to stand behind the Levi. I slam my foot into its back, and it falls face-first before I slam my dagger into its neck, killing it as it roars. I try to pull my dagger out to no avail before leaving it. Tired already, I breathlessly stand up and climb over its body, hearing screams, howls, and growls filling the air.

My pack is in trouble. I open the door and come face-to-face with a Levi. Before it can attack me, I slam my dagger into its chest and use my free hand to punch it in the face. It collapses onto the ground, and I climb over the body only for another Levi to slam into me, sending me flying backwards into the carriage. My head slams onto the floor, the Levi pouncing on top of me, and I barely manage to lift my dagger, slamming it in the neck as it opens its mouth, hundreds of sharp teeth flashing in the dim light.

Fear pounds through me as it coughs on its blood, and I push it off me enough to climb out, wiping the black blood away. The smell is disgusting, filling the train with the stench, and I try not to heave as I climb over the Levi bodies, refusing to give up. My head is still spinning as I get into the next carriage, finding a pile of dead Levi bodies and Adira in the middle of them.

She smiles as she turns to me, covered in black blood like me.

“Seems like the alpha female wannabe can hold her own after all,” she exclaims. Her eyes change so swiftly, turning into a light blue glow.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

“Persuading,” she purrs. I turn just in time to see dozens of Levi rip through the wall of the train, making a huge gap and turning to us, like puppets on a string. Their eyes glow with a faint blue, and they move as one towards me.

“You could try running, but I doubt it will help,” Adira suggests.

I turn on her, and I realise what she is doing right away... She is using her goddess gifts to control the Levi somehow. And she wants them to kill me.

“You crazy bi—” I scream at her right before a Levi grabs me and throws me out of the train. I scream as I fly through the air and land harshly in the lake, coughing on the water that fills my lungs. I swim to the surface, gasping for air and looking up at the dark rain clouds above me as I hear it.

The train.

“Wait!” I scream, attracting more than one Levi to turn my way from the train. My heart pounds in pure fear as I swim to the edge of the lake, my legs and arms burning as the train starts to move, steam pouring from the front like a cloud embracing it. The Levi roar as they let go of the train and turn my way, and I call for them.

My alphas.

Help me. Help me! I'm outside. Please help me.

Clutching my one dagger, I stand still in the lake as the Levi run at me, wondering if this really will be my last moment. If these creatures are going to take my life.

I will go down fighting and taking some of these things with me.

I suck in a deep breath, bracing myself right before Henderson's wolf lands in front of me, a cloud of red darkness blasting out of him in every direction. It burns the Levi away into dust, and it embraces me like a lover, holding me up as I watch the gods' magic destroy everything around us. In the red darkness and the dying screams of the Levi, Henderson's wolf turns its glowing eyes on me, and I walk forward, running my hand over his dark fur.

I don't think for a second Henderson is in control, or his wolf for that matter. I see someone new in his red eyes, feel his passion as my own.

Hades. I climb onto Henderson's wolf, and he runs after the train, jumping on board before the train picks up speed.

"How did you get off the train?!" Ragnar demands, picking me up off Henderson. Everything is blurry, spinning as I try to make words come out, but I'm not sure I said a word.

I hear their rushed voices, feel them grasping my arm as Ragnar picks me up.

The only words I make out before everything goes black make me wonder if I'm going to die.

"She has been scratched by the Levi."



CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Silas Fall

“*H*ow the fuck did she fall off the damn train?” I demand, growling at everyone as Ragnar carefully places Mai down on Valentine’s bed. My beautiful wolf is dying. I can hear it in her heartbeat, how slow it is, and her rattling breaths. Mai is leaving this world over my dead body. She tosses and turns, as a faint sweaty shine to her skin fails to lower her fever as her body struggles to fight the infection. I kneel down, pulling up her sleeve and staring in fear at the nasty cut I find there. Two claw marks are dug in from her elbow to her wrist, like one of them grabbed her and threw her out.

“I saw it happen before I was bombarded by Levi,” Adira says, coming into the room. She places her hand on my shoulder, and I growl at her.

“Don’t touch him right now. Everyone other than the alphas, out,” Ragnar demands.

“But I won’t—” Breelyn cuts in.

“I’m the alpha of this pack, and I told you to get out. Leave,” Ragnar coldly states, his power flickering into the room, the demand in his voice clear. I feel his power like my own, swift and forceful. Henderson is silent, kneeled by her head, brushing her blonde hair away from her face. Valentine is kneeling at his side, all covered in Levi blood and grim as much as she is. But we didn’t get scratched, and our life isn’t at risk.

“We all need—” I start out, but Valentine interrupts me as Ragnar kneels at my side. This woman, the one we have all loved for many, many years, is the only wolf in the world we would kneel for. Bow for.

“We pray to Hades,” Valentine states. “We pray and beg the gods for her life, no matter what it might cost us.”

“We pray,” Ragnar agrees, placing his hand on her lower leg. Valentine rests his hand over her heart, and Henderson holds her upper arm. I slide my hand to hers, and she grips it tightly. Even dying, she shows me how strong she is.

“Come back to us, Mairin Elysia Astra Fall. Come back to your alphas.”

The room explodes into red and green shifter energy, coming from both us and her body. The green shifter energy, so foreign to our own magic, is as vibrant as the forest and as deep in colour as an emerald. Our ruby red energy dances with hers, filling every inch of space it can find in the small carriage room, bringing up the temperature in here.

Then, like my brothers, we sense him.

Hades.

His magic is like a dark storm as it enters the room, taking out the light but never harming a soul we deem to be our pack. The red darkness, the shade of blood itself, is an old friend to our souls and part of us.

Hades is part of each of us, and I don't have to say a word out loud to know my brothers and I are begging the forbidden god for one thing.

To save her.

His and our Persephone, our Mai. The woman we all love and would die for without a moment's delay.

The green magic, much like vines, spins around the room, dancing with our red darkness, both of them like soulmates finding each other again. Then, suddenly, they crash into Mai's body. The room goes dark and silent before Mai breathes in a deep, healthy breath, and I sense her strong heartbeat once more.

Something in my own chest near enough stops in relief. The rattle she previously had is gone as she rests back, peacefully and beautifully sleeping. I glance at her arm, lifting it into the dim light. Where the scratches were is something else: a pomegranate with four vipers curled around it rests in the middle of her arm. A marking from the gods.

"The pomegranate is the symbol of Persephone, and the vipers are Hades. They were both here, marking her in payment for saving her life," Ragnar gruffly whispers. "The gods blessed her."

"She really is their chosen," Henderson says, leaning down and pressing a kiss to her forehead. My wolf grumbles at seeing any male touch her, touch what is his. But it's Henderson, and we have a bond, one my wolf seems to accept. He doesn't like it, and may never do, but he won't challenge any of his brothers.

Maybe he would challenge the angel, who was conveniently out flying to a local settlement to send a message to Deimos and to hunt his food before we cross out of his border, when the attack happened. He looks at

her fondly, and she trusts him. I would rather we left his angel ass in Fenrir, but here he is.

I don't like it.

I pick up my blanket from my bed and roll it over her, not giving a shit about the Levi blood she is going to get all over it.

“Do you think she will still want us when—”

I glance sharply at Ragnar. “That’s her choice, but no matter what...my feelings won’t change.”

“Neither will mine,” Valentine agrees. “It’s like life has been breathed back into me. I forgot what it was like to be with her. I forgot what it was like to live over existing.”

“To want a future, to want to fight for it,” Ragnar agrees.

“To love,” Henderson finishes. The pack bond is buzzing with nervous energy, pain and worry from the attacks. We can’t stay here with her and leave what is left of our pack alone to deal with the Levi bodies and heal the injured.

“I will stay,” Valentine says. “I’m shit with children anyway.”

I pat my brother’s shoulder before leaving him alone with Mai. If the gods are on our side, maybe all hope isn’t lost.

Maybe our futures aren’t set in stone.

Chapter 26



I run my fingers over the pomegranate marking, touching each one of the vipers softly, wondering why I woke up feeling like my arm, the marking in particular, is on fire. It's been a week since the train stopped, and I woke up the next morning with all four alphas explaining they healed me with a little help. From the gods. However our souls are connected to Hades and Persephone, I don't know, but this marking is just like my dreams I had in the Ravensword Pack. Even then, I think both Hades and Persephone were telling me I wasn't alone. We lost one teenager in the attack; the Levi murdered him as he fought to defend six children, and every day since, I've felt the guilt and seen the same guilt in the alphas' eyes. It shouldn't have been him who died, and it might not have been if Henderson hadn't left the train to get me.

Sunlight streams in from the bathroom window as I finish braiding my hair and fling it over my shoulder. I pull on the skintight brown crop top and the skinny jeans before clipping on my thigh clasp. Finally, I slide my boots on and fold up my old clothes, placing them in the basket. The door is knocked twice, and I finish by sliding my daggers away and going out to find Adira waiting.

“You take forever,” she says, and I glare at her, stepping aside to let her in. She dramatically sighs, reaching for my arm, and I step away. The first thing I said when I woke up was that it was Adira who tried to kill me, controlling the Levi, and the alphas believe I was confused. I wasn’t.

“I wouldn’t suggest touching me,” I growl at her.

“Look, I’ve told you more than once I can’t control the Levi, and you were seeing things due to the poison in your blood from the Levi. You were literally going crazy, Mai, can’t we—”

“My name is Mairin to you, and the alphas might believe you, but I don’t. Just know, at some point, you’re going to slip up,” I warn her. “Until then, stay the hell away from me. I know a snake when I see one.”

The pretence drops, and she smiles. “I’m not the one with four snakes on her arm. Anyway, you’re not in charge. My alphas believe me.”

“For now,” I say. “And, by the way, the markings are vipers, and they are mine. Careful, you might get bitten.”

She huffs as I walk out, and she slams the door at my back. Gods, I want off this train and away from her.

I should have trusted myself and how I felt about Adira when I first met her instead of trying to be nice and welcome her in. She is a wolf, through and through.

“Mai, I painted this for you,” Trey says, walking over to me. I proudly smile at Trey as I take his offered painting and admire it. Trey has painted the sunflower fields we passed by yesterday, and it’s a really amazing drawing.

“Thank you so much,” I tell him, pulling him into a hug. “Come with me to hang it up near my bed?”

“Okay,” he replies. “Did you try the new maple bacon Henderson made this morning?”

“No, but it sounds delicious,” I reply. “I’m heading there next.”

“Do you think if I wear a hat, they won’t see me go for seconds?” he questions, and I chuckle as I climb the bunkbeds to the top. Using the pin

Valentine left up here when he pinned a riddle to the ceiling, I pin the painting on the ceiling before climbing down.

“I’m going to grab a jumper, it’s a bit chilly today. Want to go ahead to the food carriage?”

“If you share your bacon, yes,” he teases. I ruffle his hair, and he pushes me away before running out of the room. I grab Silas’s used jumper, which falls to my knees, before leaving our room.

“Mai!” Breelyn calls just as the door behind me opens and Callahan walks in. After he got back and learnt about the attack, he vowed not to travel far from the train again. I know he needs to feed, and our blood is poison to him, but I try not to think about what he does when he leaves the train. We could have used him here during the Levi attack, but it is what it is. Breelyn’s smile drops, and she frowns as she walks over.

“Mai, the alphas say we are stopping at the Cerasus Forest in fifteen minutes and want to go over the plan,” Callahan says. “Are you coming, Breelyn?”

“Do you need me there, Mai?” Breelyn asks me, still staring at Callahan with a look of indifference.

The room feels colder by the second.

I clear my throat. “I would like you there, Breelyn. If you wish.”

She nods her head, and Callahan smirks at her, his eyes watching her so closely. I wonder what exactly he is thinking, if he is trying to figure her out. Callahan is charming in a way anyone close to him couldn’t help but notice.

Breelyn is his opposite. Everything about her pushes anyone away, from the way she stands to the harsh words she speaks to everyone but me. I know that deep down, under the walls she has put up to hide her pain, she is a good person with a kind soul who cares passionately. Following Callahan into the front carriage, I delicately smile at Valentine, who waves me over to where Ragnar, Silas and Fox are seated. Henderson is leaning on the other side of the carriage, watching out the window at the passing fields.

I place my hand on Ragnar’s shoulder, looking at the drawing in front of them. It’s a trail through a forest, the map labelled as Cerasus Forest.

“Two of us, Valentine and Silas, are going with you into the forest. They are the best fighters and trackers in wolf form. Callahan is going to fly above, keeping an eye out,” Ragnar starts off, picking up the map and handing it to me. There are at least fifteen marked paths through this forest,

and it wouldn't take much to get lost. "Henderson and I will watch the train."

"The stop would be useful for some repairs to be done," Fox interrupts. He looks tired, and I smile sympathetically at him, knowing he is doing everything he can with his brothers to keep this train running. We owe the triplets an enormous debt. "I will get some of the kids carrying the spare parts to the front in the meantime."

Fox climbs out of his seat and pauses in front of me. "Be damn careful, Mairin. We don't need another life lost."

"You know it wasn't your fault, right?" I ask him.

"This train is my life, has been for a long time, and I should have seen the fault before it happened," he states, clearing his throat. "I let my alphas down."

"You did not," Silas interrupts. "You saved us, and you will be rewarded for it."

Fox bows his head towards the alphas, then gives me a rueful smile before leaving. Breelyn and Callahan step aside to let him out of the carriage before looking our way.

"Wouldn't it be better, and faster, for Callahan to fly me around the forest?" I question.

"We run just as fast," Valentine states. "We are going to shift, and you can ride on my back."

The thought makes me feel warm, and I look out through the window, feeling something in my chest, like a sense I didn't know awakening. Just before I see Cerasus Forest, I feel it, like an old friend waving to me from a distance. My marks, not only on my arm but on the back of my neck, feel like they are burning as I watch the pink forest come into view. The cherry blossom trees are massive, thousands of years old, and they tower into the sky for all to see. The blossom is coloured pink, and with so many of the trees, it makes it look like a pink cloud floating in the sky.

"I can sense it," I say, placing the map down. I feel everyone looking at me as I move around the seat and to the window, watching the forest. I don't know how, but a soft song, like a lullaby, fills my ears, and I press my hand to the glass, wanting to be closer.

I've heard the song before. I know it. I need it. I—

I feel Henderson place his hands on my shoulders, and when he turns me, I snap out of it, the song gone. "You okay, Mai?"

I shake my head, my ears slightly ringing. I rub my ear, only to lower my hand and find my hand marked with my blood. “There was a song... I heard...”

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this,” Silas suggests. “Not—”

“I am going to that forest and taking what is mine and has been mine since birth. I am a wolf who can’t shift, and none of you understand that,” I say, stepping out of Henderson’s grip. “It’s who I am, and I need to find out what is waiting for me in that forest. No one stopped any of you going into the lake and connecting to Hades. Persephone is waiting for me.”

“This is a game of the gods, and you might not come out the same person you once were,” Breelyn gently warns. “This is power, magic, that none of us really understands. But I still believe it’s your choice.”

“It’s always been your choice,” Valentine agrees with her.

“And this is my choice. I’m going into the forest.”

My decision hangs in the air between us all, and I turn to Breelyn. “I would like Breelyn to come with me.”

“Why?” Callahan asks. “She is an untrained wolf, not bonded to your pack, and she would be a liability.”

Breelyn’s cheeks burn red as her eyes flash green, and she rounds on the angel. “Who asked you? You’re not exactly bonded to this pack, and I have been training, thank you very much.”

“You need not thank me for pointing out your obvious weaknesses,” he smoothly replies.

The pair of them look close to killing each other, and I clear my throat. “This forest is magical, old and powerful with things we don’t understand. Silas and Valentine are connected to Hades. You are an angel, and Breelyn is a neutral wolf. If something magical goes wrong, it’s a good idea to have a neutral wolf there. Her scent will confuse any creature in there.”

“I want to go,” Breelyn says, stepping forward.

“You will shift and run with us, Breelyn,” Silas invites her, nodding at me. “Mai is right, but I want you to be aware of the danger ahead.”

“I know my place in this pack, and I admire you all greatly, but none more than Mairin. I will protect her with you,” Breelyn says, and I grin at her.

Phim comes into the carriage, picking up on the silence, followed by Adira. Phim makes no attempt to hide her disdain for Adira as they both walk in.

“Sorry I’m late. There was a fight down train. Teenage love triangles,” Phim says, rolling her eyes. “I was tempted to hang all three of them out of the train and see if the fresh air knocks some sense into them all.”

We all laugh, unable to help ourselves, and I grin at her. “We have made a plan. Want to get caught up?”

“Why wasn’t I invited?” Adira demands and turns to glare at Breelyn. “She is here, and she isn’t even in our pack. I’m not even going to mention the angel.”

“They can be *trusted*,” I point out.

Phim steps in front of her, almost pretending like she isn’t there at all, and bumps my shoulder with hers. “Tell me everything, sister.”



STEAM IS STILL RISING from the train as we head over a hill, the drop to the edge of the forest ahead of us, as the wind blows soft petals of blossoms into my face. There is no path into the forest, only this steep cliffside hill, and we have a short climb down before we hit the trees. The forest floor is laden with blossoms, peaks of green grass and moss sneaking through. The forest itself is dark. Only beams of light that occasionally make their way through the thick clouds, heavy blossoms on the trees, cast a pink light. Valentine’s wolf shakes slightly underneath me, his giant head turning back and his red eyes asking if I’m ready. I look over at Silas’s wolf at my side and Breelyn right behind us, her green-eyed white wolf watching me closely, having my back.

“Ready,” I tell Valentine, just as an angel flies above us and over the forest. I look up at Callahan as he soars in the sky, my stomach turning at the sight before looking down as Valentine’s wolf jumps. He skids down the cliffside, jumping occasionally, and I hold on to his fur tightly, clenching my legs around his back.

The forest hums with ancient energy, old magic, like nothing I’ve seen or sensed before. We run through the trees, finding a path of sorts, covered in twigs, old blossoms and dirt. Valentine runs fast, and I look up just in time to see Callahan come through the blossoms, flying through the trees above us.

A ringing noise softly starts in my head as we run through the forest, which seems to go downhill slowly. The ringing only gets louder, stronger as Valentine runs, and soon it becomes too much. Without thinking, I clamp my hands over my ears to stop the noise. Hot blood coats my fingers, and when Valentine jumps over a fallen log, I tumble off his back and roll across the blossom-covered ground, hurtling down a hill. I can't focus, can't stop myself from tumbling as I hold on to my ears, the ringing never stopping.

"Mai!" I hear Callahan shout, and I look up just in time to see a wall of ivy appear in front of me, stretching to the tops of the trees before blocking them out as it stretches. Everything goes pitch black as the ivy grows around me, smothering me in a dome of it. The ringing has gone from my ears, I realise, as I sit up and try to blink a few times to see in the darkness.

A warm breath blows on my back, a crackling noise filling the air. Everywhere else, there is silence, utter and complete silence.

Which doesn't make sense, not with the alphas, Callahan and Breelyn outside the ivy dome. They would be trying to get me, making a lot of noise. Unless something was stopping them.

Whatever is behind me isn't human, isn't wolf or angel. It is wrong, so wrong.

It's hot, sticky breath blows on my back as I feel like freezing, pausing and not fighting, but instead, I do as I've been trained and slide my dagger from my clasp on my thigh, the sliding metal grating on the silence.

"Proserpina..." it hisses in an accent I've never heard, and it's barely understandable. I don't know what Proserpina is, nor do I like the creepy way it said it.

"Who and what are you?" I demand, forcing myself to stand and turn. The darkness is too much, and I can't see anything, not even a shadow in front of me.

The ground moves, shaking slightly to my left, and I sense the creature is walking around me, floating perhaps, as I don't hear footsteps. I don't smell anything, not even the forest. It's like my senses have gone blind, and it's enough to throw me off my game. Silas's vigorous training makes me stand my ground, and it's the sheer reason I'm not giving up on my life. If I'm dying, which I've been close to so many times, I've realised I would rather fight than give in.

My life is worth a million wolves to me. I'm worth it, and I am the one who needs to give myself hope, to teach myself how to live and fight for it.

I feel the strength of my alphas, my pack, everyone I love and care for as I stand tall.

"I can be what you wish. Together, we can be all you wish and see."

The darkness fades into light, beaming in front of my eyes, and I blink a few times before I can see the house in front of me. A pretty, sweet little brick house with yellow fences and a well-looked-after vegetable garden in the front. I turn to see views of the mountains in the distance and nothing but fields between us.

The door to the house opens, and a little boy runs out, his hair gold, and the locks fall into his perfect green eyes.

My eyes.

But everything else about this small boy, who is only three or four at best, looks like the alphas. I fall to my knees in shock, realising who he is as tears sting my eyes.

"Son, come in! It's dinnertime!" Ragnar shouts from inside the house.

The boy doesn't move, instead he walks up to me and offers his tiny hand. "Are you coming inside, mother?"

"I—I," I stutter, speechless as I stare at his hand, wanting to take it more than anything else. This is the life I want with the alphas, a world away from the life we have been given. If I take his small hand, I could go inside and live that life forever.

Forever.

It's real. It's real. It's real.

"Until it isn't," I whisper to myself, my throat catching on a sob as I stand and take a step back. "You aren't real. None of this is, and I am not a victim to nightmares anymore."

I spin around and slam my dagger into whatever is behind me, breathing down my neck. The perfect mountain view disappears, and instead I'm left face-to-face with a creature. It's beautiful, covered in glittering white feathers and shaped like a human, with a beak for a mouth. Its eyes, on the other hand, are hell. A million spikes burn inside its large eyes, and my hand warms from its green blood that leaks from the dagger in its chest, right where its heart should be.

I let go and step back, looking around at the ivy encasement, the forest still silent of all sounds.

“Release me from your hold,” I demand as the creature dies in front of me. It falls onto its side, and I lean over. “You’re a griffin, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes,” it hisses, its hot breath smelling like rot. I try not to gag as I grit my teeth. “And you are death to the world, Ppp-rrr-oserpin-aaaa.”

My blood runs cold as the creature looks up at me, its words feeling true even when I know it’s evil and I shouldn’t believe a word that comes out of its mouth. “Tell me where to look for Persephone in this forest. Why I was brought here.”

It crackles one last sentence out. “This forest is where the goddess was born, but it is where you will begin. Both of you are death, and together, the world will beg for creatures such as me to kill it.”

I sense the second the creature dies, the coldness and silence of the forest disappearing. I hear the sounds of howls echoing through the forest and, in the distance, my name shouted over and over.

Instead of going to them, knowing they will take me away from this place, I kneel down, facing away from the dead creature. I brush the blossoms away until I can dig my hands into the soil, and finally I close my eyes.

“I don’t know what I’m doing or if you can hear me, but I call for the goddess Persephone. I call her to me.”

A gasp echoes through me as green energy bursts into the ivy dome, and something else appears, something different, as a familiar song starts to play in the distance. The song I heard before, so hauntingly familiar.

Powerful.

I feel the magic, old and dangerous, will itself around me like a current in the ocean, constantly moving. I look down at my hands embedded into the ground, and they are glowing green, the colour of the Ravensword Pack and the moon goddess herself.

The glow spreads up my arms, across my body, and then I hear her like an echo, a voice familiar to my soul but new.

“My chosen. You have finally come to me after all these years,” she whispers, her voice as soft as honey.

In the shifter energy around us, the shape of a woman appears, locks of silver hair shining through, and my eyes hurt to look upon her. She is beauty, pure and simple, and yet she reminds me of myself.

“Do I really have your soul?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “He found a way of taking our souls, our essence, and binding it to wolf souls. You and I, we are one. You and I, we will love and die the same. I could not connect sooner, but now we are one. You only needed to touch a part of the same earth or water I once walked on.”

My heart pounds as I look at a goddess. A real goddess. Persephone. “You were born here.”

“Indeed,” she laughs, and it’s the most glorious sound I’ve heard in my life. “Tell me, wolf child, what is it you want?”

“To shift,” I whisper. “To be able to defend myself and be who I am meant to be. I don’t want to spend my life being defended by others anymore.”

“And in return, you will get the crown,” she whispers to me. “I want us to rule, and the crown must be on your head by the end of the year. That is our deal, between mortal and goddess.”

“You can’t bribe me!” I say.

She laughs once more. “I am not bribing you, but all magic comes at a cost. We speak the cost to the world, or we mark it on flesh. I am thousands of years old and bound to you. Listen to me, sweet wolf child, and together we will win this world back from him.”

“Who is he?”

“He was a light to the world once, and now he is a blight. Be wary, for outside this forest, I cannot warn or guide you. Be wary and get the crown, Mairin.”

“What crown?” I demand.

She chuckles. “We are alike, our souls similar, and it seems my lover’s soul is similar to who he is bound to. Hades did always like his secrets. Secrets in the name of protecting me.”

“Tell me—”

She cuts me off. “Close your eyes, and when you open them, you will shift. Go, my chosen.”

“Why is the shifter energy green like Ravensword?” I ask one more time as I close my eyes, seeing nothing but green light even through my eyelids.

“I was once called the moon goddess many, many years ago...”

Shock makes me open my eyes, and it feels like my body explodes into energy, pure green energy. I feel every bone painlessly crack and change throughout my body in a matter of seconds before my eyesight changes last.

The ivy falls around me, broken from the blast, and the forest ahead of me is amazing. I can smell everything, see the veins on the petals, and feel how alive this forest is.

Everything is overwhelming until I scent them.

Valentine's and Silas's wolves. My white furred feet are pounding off through the forest in seconds, right towards them, following their scent. Being a wolf is incredible, and I finally feel like I'm right, not broken anymore. My wolf is me, just more possessive, reactive and instinctive, but under her emotions, I can control my own. It's like nothing else in the world, and all I want is to see them. I stop in a clearing of pink light, seeing my alpha wolves standing side by side, waiting for me. I walk right up to them, and their red eyes watch me before I circle them, scenting them for my own.

I pause in front of them and very slowly bow my head, my wolf submitting to them. My alphas. They both brush their heads against mine, on either side of me before shifting back. If I were in my human form, I would be embarrassed to see them both naked, but it's not the same.

"Your wolf is spectacular, Mai," Silas tells me, stroking the side of my head. "The mix of white and black fur... I've never seen something like this."

"You really are unique," Valentine comments, and I turn my head his way. He cups the side of my head and strokes my fur. Something like a purr radiates out from my wolf's chest.

She likes him then.

"You had us worried, Mai. You've been gone hours. Callahan and Breelyn have gone back to the train to get help. Do you want to shift back and tell us what happened?" Valentine asks. I snap my teeth and growl, and he laughs, holding his hands up. "Or not. How about we all run back to the train to show the others? Ragnar and Henderson want to see how beautiful you are."

I run off towards the edge of the forest, sensing no more danger here anymore, even if the forest is still soaked in ancient magic. It's not tainted anymore, not with that thing dead.

Lifting my head, feeling free and alive, I howl, and my alphas howl with me.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

Waking up on the floor, butt naked, is new. I quickly sit up, the chill of the train making me shiver, and I quickly grab the nearest blanket, Ragnar's, covering myself with it. My legs feel shaky as I stand up, and Phim walks in, pausing.

"Finally, you're back!" she says and puts her head out the door. "Breelyn, come quick!"

Phim barely gets through the door before Breelyn crashes through it and rushes to me, relief shining in her eyes. "Are you okay? I messed up by losing you—"

"The griffin took me, and nobody could have done anything. He is—was—a trickster and controlled what you saw. He made you get lost in the forest," I quickly tell her before I grin, pulling out a twig and some blossoms from my hair. "I'm finally a wolf."

"You've always been a wolf," Phim reminds me. "Now you're just in on the hairy side of us."

I laugh before pausing. "Where are my alphas?"

"I told them to give us a second for you to get dressed. We don't need all that sexual tension scent filling this room if they came in here when you're naked," Phim bluntly announces.

I shake my head, knowing she is right. "Give me a second to get dressed, and I will come out."

"I got you a new set of clothes out and a hairbrush," Breelyn says, pulling a pile from my bed. I smile at her in appreciation before she leaves with Phim, and I spend a god-awful amount of time pulling things from dirt to blossoms out of my hair. Everything changed in that forest, secrets I

didn't know came out, and I made a deal with a goddess, a goddess bound to my soul. How do I even begin to process any of it?

I want to spend hours processing everything that happened, but I can't do it alone. The alphas can help me, and I'm so happy my wolf seemed to care for them as much as I do. We are one and the same, and every time I worried about my wolf being in control too much seems silly now. I overthought shifting, worrying about it to the point of being fearful when I was young, and as I got older, I realised if I never jumped, I couldn't fly. In this case, if I never shifted, I would never know what it feels like to have my soul complete.

I'm complete.

After pulling on my light green sweater, underwear and jeans, I slide one dagger into my boots after putting them on and head out into the corridor. It's colder out here, and I head to the first carriage, unsurprised to find the alphas, Phim, Breelyn and Callahan waiting for me.

My eyes find Silas first, and he slowly smirks. "Welcome to the pack, newbie."

"Your wolf is something else," Henderson says, standing and offering me his seat next to Valentine.

"You didn't get to run with her, yet, brother," Valentine says, wrapping his arm around my shoulder when I sit down.

"Soon we will run together at home," Ragnar says with a grin. "I'm proud of you, even if you did worry the shit out of us all."

"Tell us everything," Silas demands, all celebration gone. As the train rattles and chugs, I explain everything that happened in the forest, from the griffin to Persephone, but I skip out on what the creature showed me. It seems too personal, and I'm keenly aware of how many people are listening to my story about magic and gods.

"I've never heard Persephone referenced as the moon goddess. It would make sense why her magic bound you to the alpha. She wants power," Valentine states. "The crown is power."

"What is this crown?" I question.

"A myth," Silas simply says.

Henderson sighs. "It's more than a myth. The crown has a name, The Wolven Crown, and it was made of pure god blood crystallised into a crown, but it has been lost for thousands of years. I wouldn't even know where to suggest we find it."

“I suspect it’s going to come into play soon if Persephone made a deal for it,” Ragnar states, rubbing his chin. “Anything else happen?”

“Nope,” I say, lying slightly. “But I can’t feel the pack or you. The bond...it’s not here for me.”

“We noticed and don’t understand why. There is something blocking us from you,” Henderson gently tells me, and I can’t hide my disappointment.

“We will find a way. Maybe it will come more naturally as you shift more,” Valentine softly tells me.

“It’s not fair,” I mutter, looking at the glass of water in front of me. I reach for it, to take a sip, and green energy blasts out of my hand, like a stream of water, and wraps around the glass. It smashes into tiny pieces that clatter against the table, and I lower my hand. “I—I was trying to get a drink...”

“It’s okay, Mai,” Ragnar tells me. “When we first had powers, our emotions did similar things. It will settle soon.”

“Or you’ll bring the train to a stop. Let’s worry about it later,” Phim interrupts. Callahan is silent as he watches me, and I give him a tense smile.

“I let you down in the forest,” Callahan admits. “I do not like to admit I failed, but I should have saved you.”

Though they might not say it, I feel like the alphas are speaking through Callahan in this moment. I don’t know why men feel like it’s their fault when a woman is in danger not caused by them, but it’s not true. We might be a different sex from them, but we are not their burden. I held my own in that forest, just as I had been trained to do, and nothing they could have done would have made a difference. The alphas have already explained that their connection to Hades was silent in the forest.

“No, you didn’t,” I correct him. “All of you did the best you could. The griffin was powerful, and I nearly fell for its tricks.”

“You said it gave you a vision, what of?” Breelyn questions.

“Nothing interesting,” I lie.

Phim senses how uncomfortable I am as she steps forward. “I’m stealing your girl for the day to celebrate the fact she is a bad bitch wolf and took down a frigging griffin!”

“Are we not welcome at the celebration?” Ragnar asks with a frown. Phim grabs my arm and drags me from the seat, grabbing Breelyn’s hand on the way past.

“No men allowed!” she shouts, making me giggle as she pulls me from the carriage, and I look back just in time to see Valentine laugh. Phim drags us both back into the alphas’ and my bedroom, shutting the door behind us. She reaches under Ragnar’s bed and pulls out three bottles of a green liquid in a shady dark blue bottle.

“What is this?” Breelyn asks, taking the bottle Phim hands to her. I take the other and pop the cork off, breathing in the alcohol scent and coughing. If it makes me cough before I’ve even drunk it, goddess knows what it’s going to be like when I drink it.

“Don’t ask, you don’t want to know,” Phim says before taking a long sip and jumping on Ragnar’s bed. I sit on the other one, and Breelyn chooses to sit on the floor, stretching her legs out. “We are celebrating, and I think we should play a game.”

“What game?” I question, moving Valentine’s pillow so it’s behind me.

Phim grins. “It’s simple. You drink if you’ve done whatever is said. Example. I’ve killed a legendary griffin creature on my own.”

I chuckle nervously before lifting the bottle and taking a deep chug. The drink tastes like grapes and death.

“My turn!” Breelyn says, humming to herself. “I have shifted.”

“I’m so happy to drink to this one!” I say with a laugh before we all take a long drink. “Is it my turn?”

“Yup,” Phim replies with glazed eyes. I feel amazing already and warm, even in the cold room. I chuckle to myself, making them laugh as I try to get my words out. “I have secretly eaten some of the chocolates hidden in the storage.”

I take a deep drink as they both burst into laughter.

“What chocolates?!” Phim demands around chuckles.

“I think they are Silas’s. I saw him sneaking in there and coming out smelling of chocolate!” I say, and we all can’t help but laugh. The hours seem to pass quickly, the bottles near empty as the sun starts to set in the sky and the train comes to a halt.

“Okay, it’s my last turn. Judging by how much I have left,” Phim states, her voice a little slurred. I’m sure I’m seeing four of her as I try to focus my eyes and snort in laughter to myself. “I have fallen in love with four alphas.”

“Bitch,” I mutter, and I don’t move. “I’m not drinking to that one, even if it is true.”

“Girl, you never say anything. This train is full of sexual tension and longing looks, and that one morning I definitely scented a change in you. Spill the beans!” Phim whines. I sigh and take a long drink.

“Spill! Spill! Spill!” Breelyn chants, and I try to elbow her, nearly falling flat on my face.

“I don’t even know what we are!” I exclaim. “But I like it and want more, whatever it is. I mean, who wouldn’t? Look at them. They are alpha males, sexy and possessive. Every time they growl, I swear my—”

The door creaks and Silas walks in, holding his hands in the air as I stop mid-sentence. Part of me is embarrassed, but I quickly down the rest of my drink to push that emotion away for another day. Like tomorrow. “I’ve been sent to break up the party, girls. It’s nearly dark.”

“You’re always the boring one,” Breelyn grumbles, and we all burst into laughter. Silas rubs his face and holds the door open.

“Out,” he commands.

Phim hooks her arm into Breelyn’s before sticking her tongue out at Silas as they pass. Silas shuts the door and looks down at me, sighing as I hold up the empty bottle. “Today has been the bestest day, grumpy pants wolf. Wait, do you wear pants?”

“Bestest isn’t a word,” he grumbles, leaning down to help me up, but with my new strength, I grab his arms and pull him onto the bed next to me. I know he lets me shove him down on the pillow, but I still grin like I’m the strongest wolf ever. He frowns as I rest my head on his chest and curl my body to his side.

“You’re the bestest,” I mutter, yawning. “And you’re cuddly.”

“I’m not,” he assertively states.

“My cuddly wolf,” I say, right before drifting off to sleep, feeling his arm wrap around me and knowing I’m going to be safe for the night in his arms.



CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

The train ultimately comes to its final stop, weeks after we started so many miles away. An entire lifetime away, or at least it feels like that.

Steam blows around the edges of the train as I step down onto the flat grass on top of a hill. There are several mountains in view, fields of lush grass for miles and paddocks of flowers of all colours, their lovely scent filling the warm air.

“Welcome to our home,” Ragnar gently says, offering me his hand. I take his hand, like I always will do, even as I wonder what exactly there is about here that’s home. There is nothing but grass fields, forgotten land that is brimming with life. It’s really astounding here. If this is his home, it needs to be built, and it won’t be safe here like they said it would be. We are all tired, the train is wrecked and barely standing, and we need a home. The children need more than the carriages can give them. Keeping my eyes forward, I trust my alphas right before I sense it.

Energy. Shifter energy and lots of it. I walk forward, my hand clutched in Ragnar’s. Valentine comes up on my other side, alongside Silas and Henderson, and together we walk up to something like an invisible wall that I can feel and not see.

“What is that?” I question, reaching out my hand to touch it. The second I touch the wall, my body jolts like I’m hit by lightning, and I clench my stomach, foreign shifter energy blasting through me. I stumble a little, and Valentine wraps his arm around my waist, holding me up as my hand burns. I lift my hand, my eyes feeling foggy until I can focus them and see an upside mountain marking on my palm.

The mark is almost forgotten as I look up.

“The city was shielded,” I whisper in awe. In front of me is a massive crater, stretching from the slight hill we are on to the mountain in the distance, filled with a city of houses and tall buildings. Two long rivers curl through the thousands of houses and forests in the crater, and I can hear birds chirping, children’s laughter, and the general buzz of a city of what must be a considerable number of people. Wolves. I sense the energy of them, the impact they have that is unmistakable. I might not be able to tap into the bond and hear the wolves of my pack, but I can still feel how big the pack I belong to is. The city is thousands of years old, I can tell from the difference in the white, grey and brown buildings littered around and the trees that have grown and stretched to the sky. The sun shines down on the rivers, making them glitter, and a real sense of being home fills my chest.

“Welcome to the true Fall Mountain Pack. This is where Hades brought the mountain down once, and it is protected from his spilt blood,” Henderson proudly says. “This is our home.”

“Fall Mountain Pack,” I whisper, completely speechless. “How many?”

“Millions,” Silas proudly states. “This is a city of millions of wolves, hidden from the world and preparing for one thing.”

“War,” I say, feeling the truth in that one word throughout my body.

I turn back to see Phim, Breelyn and Adira walk through the shield, their eyes widening. Phim actually falls to her knees in shock, holding her marked hand, Breelyn looks frozen, and Adira, as usual, is smiling with a scheme in her eyes as she holds her hand up in front of the city.

“This is what you couldn’t tell me about. The city?” I question the alphas, but everything they have told me is clicking into place like a giant puzzle.

Valentine clears his throat. “It’s—”

A howl fills the surrounding quiet right before I hear a small group of wolves running towards us at full speed. Their paws are silent, but the weight of them disturbs the ground and makes it impossible not to see the twenty or so black wolves in a tight formation run up the hill and stop near us. The wolves are impressive, and I sense most of them are strong male wolves, but they don’t come across as threatening. The alphas are still, and Ragnar gently squeezes my hand. Two wolves in the middle break forward from the group, one of them bigger than the rest and the other more slender

but graceful. They walk forward before shifting back in a burst of red shifter energy that flickers in the sunlight.

A beautiful man and woman stand in a dust of red shifter energy, naked, and a young, red-haired man runs up the hill, breathlessly chasing them while carrying clothes. He hands the two people the bundle of red fabric, and they pull on the cloaks, clipping them at their necks. The redhead bows his head before shifting into a black wolf and making his way to the back of the group.

There is something regal about the way the man and woman hold themselves, and it's only made clearer when the other wolves step back and lean down, bowing in submission. The man has greying brown hair, a thick beard that reaches his chest, and kind but stern pale blue eyes. The woman, on the other hand, has thick black hair that falls to her shoulders in a straight line, moon marks for the pack across her forehead—the same colour as her hair—and her eyes are stormy, powerful, and the same as Henderson's.

“Mother,” Ragnar says with affection. “Father.”

“Our sons have returned,” Ragnar and Henderson's mother exclaims with joy, her eyes looking over each of them before falling on me. “Gods above, you look like your mother, Mairin.”

My heart pounds as I try to control how that makes me feel. A mixture of grief and joy at knowing I look like her, that there is someone in the world that knew her closely, and she is right here. “It's an honour to meet you...”

“Alpha Female Reine Fall of the Fall Mountain Pack. This is my mate, Soren, the alpha.”

The statement lingers in the air between us, and I look up at Valentine at my side, who turns to me. “You are finally home, Mai.”

“Finally,” Reine says with a hint of affection. Her mate, the alpha, is silent, but I suspect he is taking in everything, making his own mind up. Reine walks up to us and pulls Ragnar into an embrace first before hugging Henderson, then Valentine, and patting Silas's shoulder last. She knows him well enough to not try to hug him. Finally she comes to me. “Where have you been all this time?”

“Lost,” I say. She seems to understand and inclines her head.

“Adira, is that you?” she questions, and I step aside to let her pass. She hugs Adira, who fawns over her, before turning to Phim. “And you are?”

“Seraphim, our beta,” Valentine says.

“You are very welcome, Seraphim. We honour strength in our pack,” Reine claims and finally turns to Breelyn, her voice sharper and cold. “Why are you here?”

“I am—”

I take a step forward. “Breelyn is a guest of our pack and poses no threat—”

“I am alpha female, young girl, and any wolf not bound to this pack is a threat. Her fate will be decided soon. Guards.” She clicks her fingers, and four black wolves spiral forward.

“Mother, be kind—” Ragnar warns, and she sharply turns her eyes to him.

“You are not alpha here, and you won’t be until you take The Rite of Wolves and find a mate. I assume that’s why you are back here, to take the rite?”

Valentine grabs my arm as I step forward to Breelyn, who stands still in the group of wolves. His voice is quiet. “She will be okay and kept safe in a house. Protected. This is not the time to fight.”

Reine watches me, and I turn to Breelyn. “Go with them. Trust me.”

“I do,” she replies, and even though I can see she is fearful, she doesn’t once lower her head as she is guided off.

“We have an angel on board and a lot of children who need aid,” Ragnar explains.

“An angel?” Reine hisses. “That kind cannot be allowed into the city under any—”

“Mother, Commander Callahan will be let into the city,” Henderson speaks. “We have other angels here, he is no different, and his knowledge will be of great use in the future.”

I can see she isn’t happy about it as she looks to her mate, a pause long enough I know they are talking in their minds. “The decision on this will be made with the full wolves assembly. Until then, he will be held with the female wolf.”

Knowing they will be together makes me feel better...unless they decide to kill each other first, that is.

“Now, back to the rite. Is this why you are here?”

“Can’t we get a drink and settle in before you demand—”

“No,” she clearly states. “We have been without an heir for a long time, and the people are restless. News of your return will have already spread, and if you refuse this time, I will have no choice but to force the decision on you.”

“What is the rite?” I question.

Silas steps forward and turns his eyes on me. “The rite is a battle to the death for the chance to be the alpha female of the pack and mated to the alpha, or alphas.”

“I’m entering,” Adira claims, and Reine looks at her in delight. “It sounds wonderful.”

That comment was for me.

Silas watches me closely. “The rite will go forward, and we will take our place as alphas. As kings of Fall Mountain Pack.”

I feel like the entire city of millions is watching as my heart drops in my chest. This is why they kept me at a distance, why they never let themselves truly love me.

If I want them, I have to fight in an ancient and deadly test, and the truth is, I could lose them. Coming back here, being the pack’s alphas, could mean us losing everything. Part of me wants to tell them to leave, to run away with me right this minute to somewhere we can hide. To that vision the griffin showed me, the things I truly want and hope for. This life, as alphas to millions who could change the fate of the world is never something I wanted. But a life without them is a life I don’t want. I want them.

If I want them, I’d have to be alpha female to millions.

Hades and Persephone had it easy for their love, for their future in the underworld. Maybe the alphas and I aren’t fated to be together; we need to fight if we want that.

“I will enter the rite.”

The alphas all turn to me as I walk away from them and to Reine. I incline my head, and she gently places her hand on my shoulder, pulling me into an embrace. “Your mother would be proud.”



CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

“*T*he city is this way. Come on,” I softly instruct a group of three boys, who must only be five or six. They look out the window at the line of wolves, both shifted and not, waiting to help the children into the city, but my mind isn’t on them.

“I will enter the rite.”

Mai’s declaration rings in my ears even now, hours after she said it. The rite is a brutal death trap, and she will stand out like a white flag in a battle. None of us had any intention of letting the rite go forward, but my mother had to push it. She always does. Pushing her will, trying to make our lives “better” because watching the woman we love die in the rite and promising us to some brutal warrior wolf would surely make us delighted.

Mai is not entering the rite. In fact, one way or another, I’m going to stop it. My brothers have gone ahead with the girls, and I offered to stay, even if I want to be with Mai. Bringing her here was always our last plan because of the rite and what she will be asked to do. I don’t want her fighting in this barbaric test, and she is the sole reason we put it off until now. Our pack in France was a tiny portion of this pack, our true home, hidden from the world for thousands of years.

So many of my ancestors have fought and died for this city.

It’s our home as much as it is hers. Being here makes us more powerful, and I suspect it will further Mai’s own growing powers.

“I’m scared,” one of the boys claims, speaking for them all, I suspect. I lean down to his level.

“The city is big and scary,” I agree with him, watching his blue eyes and how much he reminds me of Trey, who all but ran off this train and is

staying close to Phim. “But it’s our home, somewhere we are forever safe. They will have adults to care for you, and I promise it is worth it. You need to be brave and step off the train.”

“Can I take my teddy with me?” one of the other boys asks, clutching a hand-knitted teddy.

“Of course,” I say, standing up and offering my hand. His hand shakes as he takes my hand, and I guide him to the door before helping him and the others get down.

“I think that’s everyone,” Fox says. “Want me to double check the train?”

“I’ll do it,” I tell him. “Go ahead.”

He nods as I turn around and then make my way through the empty train. I head into our bedroom and pick up the bag from under the bed before filling it with my spare clothes and placing it outside my door before going down the train. Every carriage is empty and messy from having kids living in them twenty-four seven, but it kept them alive, and that’s all that matters. The end train is filled with empty boxes, and I’m about to turn away when a box moves.

“Come out, there’s nothing to be scared of,” I say.

The boxes tumble onto the ground, and a man I haven’t seen in many years steps out.

Cenwyn Fall, the king of the angels.

The half-breed monster who killed millions and destroyed our pack.

And he is here.

I reach into my mind for my brothers only to find silence, sheer silence.

“You interrupted my plans for Mairin. Honestly, it pissed me off,” he begins as I growl. I try to shift, but it doesn’t work.

Fuck.

I take a step back, and he tuts, his wings appearing behind him. Unlike normal angels, the tips of his wings are cut into sharp tips. He can kill with one swipe of those. “Don’t make me judge you by running. We both know I can stop you.”

“How?” I ask.

“I followed you and got on board in the Levi attack. It was easy to hide and wait to see where you were going with my darling Mairin.”

I growl low. “She isn’t your darling anything.”

I hated when he called her that as kids. His darling. His everything.

She never once belonged to him, and we both know it. Maybe. He was always insane.

“How did you find her when I couldn’t?” he questions. “Never mind. Once my commander, the idiot who never found her either, heard where she was, the world stopped for me. I wanted her in the Ravensword Pack, and I had it all planned out. The second she got the power from the alpha, the moon goddess’s true power, I would take her as my mate. Now, my plan has to change.”

He pauses, looking over in the fields. “So much has changed. You’ve been keeping this place a secret from me. It’s my birthright as well.”

I laugh. “You betrayed the wolves the second you decided to destroy the world to make a new order that you control. You’ve murdered millions. You’re a traitor, and I won’t let you taint her.”

His lips tilt. “You won’t be able to stop me.”

I jump for him at the same time his purple power, his unique mix of shifter energy and angel slams into me and throws me against the wall. I grunt from the force, pushing with my own power, but I can’t tap into it without my brothers. Fuck. Tendrils of his magic wrap around my neck, choking me as I fight the hold.

“Make me look like him,” Cenwyn commands a cloaked woman. I don’t know who she is or where she suddenly came from, and all I can scent of her is ancient, dark energy.

She holds her pale hand out, and the air ripples in the carriage like it’s alive, changing and shaping Cenwyn until he looks exactly like me. A pit opens in my stomach, knowing what he is going to do, how he is going to get close to Mai without revealing himself. Not only that, but Fall Mountain Pack is doomed having him here.

He scents like me; he tilts his head to the side, his eyes just like mine. It’s like looking at a moving mirror, but in hell. This is hell. Hades protect her. Gods protect her.

How the fuck can he do that?

The woman, whoever she is, steps aside and walks into thin air, disappearing.

“Have you slept with her yet? How long do you think it will be before I bed her in your body?” he questions. I roar, fighting with all my strength to escape the hold, but it doesn’t work. I start to feel dizzy, my vision blurring as I fight, and the smell of blood fills the room.

Cenwyn steps up to me. “Nighty night, old friend.”

“It will never work. Mai will know you’re not me,” I growl.

He laughs. “Not until she is my mate and I am hers. I grew up with you all, and I know you well enough to pretend. She is, and always has been, mine.”

“No—” I scream before everything goes dark.

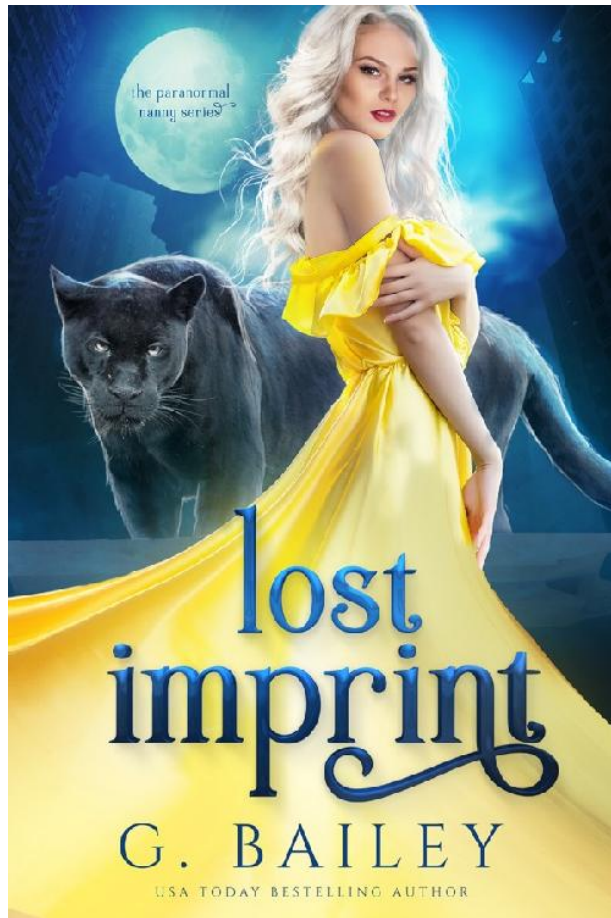
[READ the next book by clicking here...](#)



Another cliffhanger...what? How did that happen?
Thank you so much for reading Her Defenders! After writing Her Wolves, I dove head first into this book and loved writing the next part in Mai's and her alpha's story.
Thank you to everyone who helped, edited, poured me coffee or inspired this book in my mind.
The next book in the series, Her Royal Wolf, is on pre-order already. [You can click here for the link.](#)

Thank you so much for reading my story!! Lots of love, G. xoxo

Bonus Read



[WANT A FREE SHIFTER BOOK TO READ? CLICK HERE.](#)

zlibrary

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>