

*Decadent Publishing*



# BLOOD MOON

ELLEN KEENER

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement (including infringement without monetary gain) is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Blood Moon

Copyright © 2010 by Ellen Keener

ISBN: 978-1-936394-22-7

Cover art by Dara England

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work, in whole or in part, in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by Decadent Publishing Company, LLC

Look for us online at:

[www.decadentpublishing.com](http://www.decadentpublishing.com)

# **BLOOD MOON**

**ELLEN KEENER**

## ***DEDICATION***

***To Sammi, Deedee, Micha and Dee for listening to me plot my stories. You're awesome. And special thanks to the lovely ladies at both PC and YAFF – I couldn't have done it without such fantastic crit partners.***

***Last, to my family, I love you. You're the best there is.***

## Chapter 1

Aria Lagreve forced her hands to relax, blood rushing to her white knuckles. If she gripped the steering wheel any harder, her fingerprints would be embossed in the leather. Slumped in her passenger seat, a teenage boy trembled and shifted the seatbelt away from his neck.

“Where am I going, Steven?”

“Left at the stop sign,” his soft voice quivered.

She tried to keep her attention on the road, but they flicked to Steven, frequently. He couldn’t have been more than seventeen, and he hovered between life and death. Far too young to be in such a mess. It surprised her that he’d managed to stay conscious this long. His face was a swollen mass of dark bruises and cuts, and the rest of him didn’t look much better.

*Shit.* She knew he needed help soon, but a hospital was no place for a Shifter.

Her headlights illuminated a stop sign, and she slammed the brakes, yanking the car to the left. Steven’s body thudded against the door, and she winced. Her foot pressed the gas and allowed the speedometer to creep higher.

“Talk to me, Steven. What were you doing in an empty storefront?”

For a moment, all she heard was his labored breathing, rattling inside his chest and out his parted lips. Cradling his arm, which curved at an impossible angle, he shook his head. “Coming home from work.”

“Work?” she asked, a little confused. She’d found him beat almost to death and if she hadn’t showed up, they would have finished the job. Her fingers clenched around the wheel, and she tried to focus on the drive. Now wasn’t the time to lose control. Answers were less important than keeping him lucid. All she needed was for him to fall asleep if he had a concussion.

“Coffee shop...working after school.” His fragmented sentences were slightly slurred and his shaking started to worsen.

Aria glanced at him, anger replacing her worry. “Steven, listen to me. I’ve had one hell of a year, and if you decide to keel over in my car, I’ll resuscitate you

just to kick your ass. Are we clear?" She should have kept walking when she heard those boys beating the crap out of him. Already a fugitive, she'd stopped because she knew what it was like to be helpless. Now, she just felt stupid. She had enough to deal with on her own.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him cough out a laugh, lips twisting into a strained smile. "As crystal."

She resisted the urge to slow down. The speed limits in Harrison County were already eighty. Her worn Mustang had passed that minutes after they'd hit open road. Even so, it might not be fast enough. Her stomach flipped when she checked the speedometer. The needle hovered near the max, and she eased off the gas. *No sense in killing them both on the highway.*

Steven's hand, crusted with blood, pointed ahead. "S'on th' right. There's... a sign."

"Don't worry, I'll get you home. How far?" She wiped at the moisture beading her upper lip.

"Close."

*Thank God for small favors.* Her conscience wouldn't allow her to leave him there to die—even though she had more to lose for saving him.

"What kind of reception am I going to get? Is your pack going to kill me on sight, or give me a chance to explain?" Aria tried to keep her voice light, hoping humor might draw his attention away from his torn flesh.

"Depends."

She looked at him, waiting for him to continue. But he remained silent with his eyes squeezed shut. They were close to their destination. Now was not the time to pass out. She needed him lucid to explain her position as rescuer and keep his pack from tearing her apart. *Just drop him off and get the hell out of there.*

"On what? Come on, Steven, I need to know if I should open my can of whoop ass."

"Depends...on who—who's there. My Uncle Thaddeus. He's okay."

*Maybe there was hope after all.* She slowed the car as thick masses of autumn-clad hardwoods lined the road, interspersed with spiky dark cones of

pinetrees and cedars. A white sign loomed in her headlights, and she squinted to make out the words. "Deep Forest Farms?"

"Yeah."

Her foot jammed the brake again, the tires squealed, and they careened onto a dirt lane. Aria's heart jumped to her throat, and Steven cursed under his groans as his body shifted toward her. She whipped the wheel back around, dizzying glimpses of thick brush and pine trees flashed along with the car's wild gyrations. The mustang fishtailed on the mixture of dirt and gravel, the wheel fighting her attempt at control.

Adrenaline made everything a little sharper. Her sensitive nose caught the metallic tang of fresh blood, and she knew the jostling had reopened Steven's wounds. She winced. As the car succumbed to her guidance again, she risked another glance at him. "Holy hell in a hand basket."

He'd passed out. Not good. Even worse, a fresh bloom of blood darkened his shirt. When the car bounced through a large pothole, her passenger flailed like a rag doll, held down by the seatbelt. Maybe passing out was his best option, after all. Listening to him moan and groan had made her skin itch. She hated feeling helpless.

Thankfully, the narrow road conditions required all her attention. The dense foliage and brush hugged the road, thick and smothering. Her headlights, set to high beams, only lit a few dozen yards in front. She slowed to a crawl, gritting her teeth until her jaw ached. The need to rev the engine warred with the need for caution. Blinking a few times, her eyes morphed, becoming lupine. The scenery turned grey and shapes became more easily distinguished. Even with the enhanced vision, it was difficult to navigate the unfamiliar territory.

The lane climbed the side of the mountain. As they vaulted over another hole, Steven whimpered. Another moment and the road leveled out into a sharp curve, and opened to reveal a wide gravel loop where several cars were parked. She allowed her eyes to shift back to normal.

A large white farmhouse rested at the top of a slope above the parking area with every window on the bottom floor blazing with light. Her hackles shot up. Tension hung in the air like a tangible fog infiltrating through the windows.

Steven's pack knew something was wrong.

Her gaze adjusted in the dark, and she spotted the sentries watching—dark forms hugging the railing of the wraparound porch. The tires crunched on the graveled drive as three muscled-men emerged from the back of the house, loping toward the car with an easy grace. As they drew close, other pack members spilled out of the house. She swallowed a lump of irritation laced with fear. There would be no leaving until they decided to let her go. Running now would only end in bloodshed.

Jerking the car into park, she threw open her door and ran to the passenger side as the first of the men arrived. Fury outlined the stiff set of the man's jaw. Aria forced herself not to back up at the anger rolling off him. She had dealt with scarier men than this one.

"What have you done?" His rage fueled hers.

She'd done them a favor and refused to be treated like a criminal. "If I had done this, I wouldn't have brought him to you, idiot. Now get out of the way."

He blinked and stepped back.

"I came across some other Shifters beating him in an abandoned storefront." She opened the door carefully and allowed him to help her as the boy leaned toward the ground. Sliding her arms under Steven, she lifted him as if he were a feather. "I chased them off, but the damage was already done."

The stranger reached for Steven.

A growl escaped her throat without her permission. She could not afford to become attached to the boy, but she couldn't help herself. He'd been shown even less mercy than she had. "Just show me where to take him," she seethed. Aria wasn't sure who was more surprised by her outburst.

"He's my nephew. Let me take him, and then we'll deal with you." His voice promised retribution.

Her hold tightened around the boy. Steven claimed his uncle could be trusted, but she felt wary of the man next to her. "Steven told me to ask for his Uncle Thaddeus."

The stranger looked down at the boy and back at her. "At least he had a little sense."



Aria pulled back. "This wasn't his fault, you know."

The stranger's smile seemed reluctant, and it was so quick, she thought she'd imagined it. "Don't worry. I don't blame him. Now, if you please, we'll talk as soon as you hand him over."

Finally aware of being outnumbered, she reluctantly allowed him to take the boy from her arms.

"Follow me."

They went into a wide kitchen where a folding table had already been set up and covered with a sheet. The other two men filed in behind. Aria took note of the exits, but all were filled with large, suspicious wolves. Their anger charged the already tense atmosphere. Gently, Steven's uncle laid the boy down on the table, where another man with short, grey hair began to assess the damage. Trying to make room, she stepped back into a solid wall of flesh.

"I need to speak with you." His dark gaze left no room for argument.

"I'd like to stay and see what the doctor says."

"First, we talk."

She followed him into a large living room with worn, but good quality furniture and dozens of pictures scattered over walls and bookshelves. Her host motioned her to sit, and she took an armchair opposite from him as the other two men positioned themselves behind her.

Aria's lips twitched. The attempt at intimidation was subtle, but she'd been intimidated by the master. This bunch couldn't compare.

"My name is Thaddeus Tench. I'm grateful you helped my nephew, but I have to ask you some questions."

She settled into the seat. The irritating man had the demeanor of someone who could take orders as easily as give them. "You've been most generous, considering how I arrived. Are you Alpha around here?" she asked, bluntly. Pondering the idea of why he hadn't ripped her apart once she'd handed his nephew over, she tried to appear calm even though anticipation kept her alert.

Thaddeus let out a short bark of laughter. "Alpha? No, I'm merely his Third. He and Aaron will be back as soon as they can. They were out looking for Steven when you arrived."

“How long do you plan on detaining me?”

“Are you on a tight schedule?”

She frowned, shifting in the chair. “It isn’t really a good idea for me to stay anywhere long. I’m an Outcast.”

Thaddeus’ gaze narrowed. She struggled to keep her face clean of any emotion. Too many people knew her story. The sooner she left, the safer she’d be. Finally, he leaned back in his chair and gave her a half smile. “I don’t recognize you, but you seem vaguely familiar. Have we met?”

She shrugged. “Possibly. I’ve met a lot of shifters in my former pack.” Too many to remember. Her father had been a powerful man. Had more influence and power than any one person should have possessed, in her opinion.

“Unfortunately, you can’t leave until you speak with our Alpha. He will want to thank you himself.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And see if he can get any more information from me?”

Thaddeus chuckled. “There is that.”

She moved to draw her flannel shirt closer, but it wasn’t there. For a moment, her heart skipped a beat, and she remembered wrapping it around Steven. A low, throaty growl rumbled behind her chair when she started to rise. Panic curled into a lump in her throat and her pulse skyrocketed. She knew it was an unreasonable reaction, but she couldn’t help it.

“I put my flannel shirt on your nephew when I found him. I just want it back, if you don’t mind.”

Thaddeus waved a hand. “It’s probably been thrown away with his other clothes. There’s a blanket behind you on the chair if you’re cold.”

“No!” Her vehement protest caused him to raise his eyebrows. She willed her voice to calm, but the flutter in her gut made it difficult. “You don’t understand. It has sentimental value.”

He watched her, disbelief clearly written on his face. “It’s soaked in blood and will likely never come clean again. What’s so important about that shirt?”

She curled her fingers into her palms. The flannel was a silly memento she should abandon, but sometimes she still thought she could catch her Mate’s scent

on the fibers. It brought her comfort when nothing else could. “It belonged to my Mate. It’s all I have left.”

Thaddeus’ face paled, doubt lingering in his gaze. “You seem a bit young to have lost a Mate. You can’t be more than, what—twenty?” He motioned to one of the guards, who then retreated to the kitchen.

She studied Thaddeus, then rubbed a hand over her face. “I’m twenty-six, but I feel ancient.”

The man returned, empty-handed, and she forgot to breathe. It must have showed, because he quickly reassured her. “I told Alec you wanted it back. Luckily, it was on top of the pile they were going to burn. I’ll put it in the washer for you.”

Aria relaxed, sagging into the armchair. “Thank you. I know its silly, but it’s all I have left of him.” She didn’t enjoy handing out information. The more they knew about her, the more they’d have against her.

“How long has he been gone?” Thaddeus rested his elbows on his knees, a slight sympathetic smile on his lips, which didn’t quite reach his suspicious eyes.

Aria resisted the urge to snicker. She’d been through more interrogations than she cared to remember. He was good, but not *that* good.

She knew pack hierarchy better than most. Thaddeus could do nothing without orders from the Alpha, and he wasn’t here. For now, she was relatively safe. The heat from the hearth’s fire worked magic on her weary body. Her limbs grew heavy. The comfort of the chair surpassed any of the places she had slept in the last few weeks. Days of little sleep and less food, along with the recent excitement wore her down. Her eyelids drooped, and she fidgeted in the seat to remain focused and alert. “A year and a half.”

Thaddeus steeped his fingers in front of him. “What was his name? What happened to him?”

Though sleepy, she would not be manipulated by his attempt at sympathy. She studied the flames for a moment, weighing her options. No one knew Lukas had been her Mate. She could tell this man, relive her memories for a short time. No blood, no foul. What difference did it make anyway? She was so tired of running that being caught would almost be a relief. Almost.

“Lukas. His name was Lukas MacLeod. He was killed trying to help me.” Her voice caught on the last word, and she struggled to keep the tears from coming again as she pictured his broken body on the floor when they dragged her out. The pain was a constant companion now, a dull ache that she had learned to live with.

The casual wariness he exhibited suddenly morphed into something else entirely. His face lit up as if he were a child with a new toy. She sat up, alert at the sudden change in atmosphere.

“You’re Garrett Lagreve’s daughter.”

“What makes you think that?” She tensed, mouth dry. Everyone knew of her father, but no one had known about the marriage. No one.

Thaddeus rubbed his hands together. “Ah, now there’s a question. You’ll see soon enough.”

“You know, I never said I was his daughter.” Aria gave him a tired half-smile as she relaxed. He wasn’t making any sense.

“You didn’t have to. Your face said it for you.”

She shrugged. “Now do you see why I can’t stay long? The longer I stay, the more danger to you and your pack.”

Thaddeus just smirked. “I see why you think that. Oh man, you think life is complicated now? Wait until you meet my Alpha.”

He sounded like the cat that got the cream. In her experience, that wasn’t necessarily a good thing. Sometimes what one person found wonderful, required the blood of another. Haemon Thessangelos, her father’s prodigy, had demonstrated that often enough. And she’d usually been the one bleeding.

Fear curled in her gut.

Thaddeus’ smile only grew bigger. “Don’t worry, Aria. This is one of the safest places you could possibly be. We don’t share a great love for your former pack around here. Any opportunity to annoy them is more than welcome.”

She shook her head. “You aren’t the first to say that, but the sooner I leave, the better off you’ll be. The ones following me don’t care who gets hurt as long as they bring me back.”

“I’m leaving these two here to make sure you don’t try to run. The one who went for your flannel is Hamish, and this hulk”—he rose, clapping a hand on another blond who bore a striking resemblance to him—“is my brother Lawrence. If you need something, ask them.”

“I won’t try to leave until my shirt is returned. After that, I make no promises.”

Thaddeus turned from the doorway to the kitchen. “By then, you’ll have met the Master of the house.”

## Chapter 2

Aria woke with a start. The previous evening's events replayed in her mind as she raked a hand through her hair, blinking remnants of sleep away.

*Shit.* How could she have been so stupid? Falling asleep in another Pack's den? Her fingers dug into her scalp. Unbelievable. She hadn't made this kind of mistake in ages. Sucking in a deep breath, she willed herself to calm. If she was still in one piece when this was over, she'd definitely need her head examined.

She surveyed the room, taking stock of the exits and the men in the room. Behind her chair, two guards stood, shifting on their feet. No chance of sliding out the door unnoticed. Thaddeus faced her on the other side of the room, arguing in hushed tones with a tall, well-built man. The stranger's black, short-sleeved shirt emphasized the strong line of muscles in his back and arms. Since he faced away from her, she allowed herself to admire the way his jeans molded to his body. Her gaze wandered up his spine, lingering on shoulder length waves of blue-black hair. Her fingers itched to run through the thick strands.

*Enough.* She jerked her thoughts from the path they were headed in. Guilt flared in the pit of her stomach for ogling the man. Since Lukas died, she hadn't been able to bear the touch of another, let alone think about one in any physical capacity. Later, she'd deal with those implications. Now, her biggest concern was to escape.

Drawing in a deep breath, she sat a little straighter. "Listen, if you're arguing about me, then..."

The stranger whirled around. The air in the room seemed to disappear. Her body froze.

He was just as she remembered—tall, more muscular, and a new scar ran from his hairline down under the collar of his shirt. When their gazes met, her heart clenched and shock skittered down her spine. His right eye sparkled with the same vibrant green that haunted her dreams. The left was bleached of color, nearly as white as her knuckles. Despite the differences, her entire being knew this was no trick.

Something inside her broke. Her voice shook, and his image rippled with the tears, streaming down her cheeks. “What kind of torture is this? You’re dead.”

The muscles of his throat worked, but no sound emerged. Behind him, Thaddeus winked and gave her a smug smile.

“So are you.”

Oh dear God, even his voice was the same! The warmth in the deep rumble broke her tenuous control. Tearing her gaze from his, she pressed a hand over her mouth and pulled her knees to her chest. Perhaps if she held herself tightly enough, she wouldn’t splinter.

She took small, frantic sips of air, attempting to hold back the sobs pushing out of her throat. A low keening noise, high-pitched and slightly mad, warbled through the room. On some level, she knew it emanated from her, but she spent her energy on making herself small. Her fingernails bit into her jeans. The gaping wound where her heart had been patched over so many times after Lukas’ death ruptured. Her soul bled, and each ragged breath she heard him draw clawed the hole wider.

The whole room seemed to be consumed by Lukas’ presence. Escape was impossible, and she knew it, even as she searched for an exit. She had to get out. If she didn’t, there wouldn’t be anything left to save.

Lukas moved across the room, crouched in front of her, his hands on either side of the chair. His mismatched, unearthly stare met hers, but she couldn’t make the tears stop.

“Leave us.”

It wasn’t right. His voice both soothed and tore at her frayed nerves. The others moved from the room. Her opportunity to run passed as they pulled the door closed with a soft click. She couldn’t have torn her gaze from Lukas if her life depended on it. Hesitantly, as if he too were afraid, he smoothed one calloused hand over her cheek, thumbing away the wetness. At his touch, her whole body jerked like she’d been struck. Every place his fingers touched tingled, and warmth began to shimmer in her soul.

“I need to hear you say the words. Are you Aria Lagreve?”

She drew a deep shuddering breath, captured his hand against her face and rubbed her cheek over the palm. “No.”

Pain and anger flared in his eyes. His features hardened, and he tried to pull his hand away. She stopped him, reaching out with one shaking digit to trace the scar along his cheek. “When you died, I was Aria MacLeod. We were following tradition, doing the human ceremony as well as the shifter ritual, remember?”

Lukas’ features softened slightly. “You were supposedly killed a year ago, when you tried to escape from Haemon.”

She pulled her hand away, unsure of herself and the man crouching before her. They were not really the same people anymore. When they parted, she’d been rebellious, but very sheltered. The last eighteen months had changed many things about her.

“I did escape, several times. And he nearly killed me every time I made the attempt. But I’m not dead. At least, I don’t think I am.”

An awkward pause fell between them, and slowly, like a mirage shimmering in the desert, the reality of the situation came to her—Lukas didn’t die the night they were almost married. She shuddered and renewed tears snuck from under her lashes, until the impact of the thought ripped at the tenuous hold she had on her emotions.

Lukas was alive.

He had been all along.

The temperature in the room dropped several degrees; her tears froze into biting pinpricks of cold on her cheeks. Beneath her cotton shirt, the necklace she wore turned to a block of silver ice between her breasts. Lukas’ breath fogged between them, but his face remained passive. The only show of curiosity was an arched brow. There had been a time when he could have hidden nothing from her. She was not the only one who had changed.

“Where have you been?”

Lukas winced. Inwardly, she flinched as well. She hadn’t intended her pain to be quite so easily read.

His gaze turned away and his face twisted; in anger or shame, she wasn’t sure. Questions hung in the frosty air between them, her words making the chill



worse. Her magic flared out, without her control or consent, in times of high emotion. She thought she'd gotten the power under control, but apparently, it still needed some work.

The hard planes of his face forced her to sit still even though shock began to recede. Too much stood between them, and yet she wanted nothing more than to feel his arms around her, as if they'd only been apart a few days. Instead of a year.

But the time for that kind of forgiveness had passed. Torture, hunger, paranoia and fear had reshaped some parts of her personality. At times like this, she feared she'd never be capable of opening herself to anyone again. Even to him.

Lukas had been the last thing she expected. It was the most amazing and most painful experience she could ever have imagined. She drew a deep breath and looked away from him. Trying to keep the accusations out of her voice, she started again, "I thought you were dead."

A wry grin twisted his lips. "I'm not."

She crossed her arms, pulling in the power around her. "Haemon took me to see your body. You were covered in blood and that scar on your face was a fresh wound. I couldn't detect any life in you."

"That's because I *was* dead."

Aria frowned. "I'm afraid you're going to have to explain things a little more clearly."

He sat back on his haunches, releasing the arms of the chair. "I'm not entirely sure what happened that day. I only know that I was no longer in this world, and just when I was headed off to the next, I was pulled back and returned to my body. I was in so much pain, I barely remember a silhouette over me and then I passed out. When I woke up again, I was in my father's house."

The air in the room grew warmer. Slowly, she reigned in more of her power and regained some control over her wild emotions.

"That's where the scar came from. And the eyes, I would imagine."

He didn't answer right away, and she could see he chose his words carefully. It seemed Lukas had turned his gaze inward to something beyond her reach—something she didn't think she wanted to see.

"Yes. When anyone dies and is brought back, they tend to return...transformed. Part of that was waking up with the freakish changes." His lips sketched another smile, but pain and something else slightly disturbing flirted with the tense lines around his mouth. "Those have taken everyone, myself included, a long time to get used to."

Aria stared at the bricks over the fireplace. While she wanted to wrap her arms around him, doubt niggled the back of her mind. He must have known there'd be a chance she lived, but she squashed the joy ruthlessly. Why hadn't he looked for her? "Freakish or not, I'm glad someone was there to help."

"So am I."

His hand hesitantly covered hers. "For what its worth, Aria, I did look for you. But by the time I was sane enough, there wasn't much left to do."

"Sane enough?" The hoarse whisper that escaped her lips made her wince. Bad enough he could still read her face so easily. Even her voice couldn't be trusted with him.

"When I woke, I went into a rage." He lifted one shoulder and gave a rueful smile. She opened her mouth to ask what exactly that meant, but he shook his head. "According to Thaddeus and Aaron, that is the ultimate understatement. It wasn't pretty. If I hadn't been weak as a kitten, I might have done things I would have regretted forever."

"But, they're pack—" The taut lines of his shoulders and the frown on his lips told her to drop it. She clamped her mouth shut.

"When I could finally get out of bed on my own, my Beta, Aaron, had already sent someone to determine if you were alive. They came back with information that you'd been killed. After that, I don't really remember much." He paused, searching the room as if the words he wanted would be written on the windows or walls. Finally, he sighed, picked up her hand and pressed it gently between his palms. "I went a little mad, I guess. Aaron ran the pack while I lost myself. I stayed in wolf form for almost two months."

A small sound escaped her throat, and she bit her lip. While he might be keeping secrets, she believed him.

“When I got myself under control, I sent out more inquiries, but received the same answer. There were rumors you had escaped, sightings even. I investigated them all. Each time, the lead dried up.” His hands squeezed hers. “Six months after that night, I had to stop. Haemon took over the territory near here, and he’s wanted my head since I attempted to steal you away. Keeping the pack safe has been my life since.”

Resignation covered his face. His story had torn down some of the walls she had built, but she couldn’t release all of them. Large chunks of the story had been omitted. Anger started and faded all in the same instant. Could she really expect him to bear all his secrets if she was unwilling to do the same?

Her fingers curled around the hands cradling hers. “You answered my question with far more detail than I expected. I appreciate that. I could sit here and blame you for the last year, but it wouldn’t be fair. We were both deceived.”

Her mouth opened to add a little of her own account of the year, but she paused. An image of his broken, bloody body rose in high-definition through her mind. She did not want to be responsible for that again. While it might tear her heart to pieces, leaving was really her only option. Getting more emotionally involved would not make it easier.

“As it is, Lukas, I can’t stay here. Knowing you are alive and I’m not responsible for your death is quite liberating, actually. I thank you for that and I’m glad to know we can part with the matter resolved.”

His hand tightened on hers and a small growl burst from his throat. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

Calm swirled around her like a cloak. It was always easier to remain cool and collected when the other person appeared to be losing theirs. “While I’ve learned the value of lies recently, I meant what I said. I cannot risk endangering you or your pack. We’ve seen what happened to you the last time you were involved with me. Leaving is my only option.”

Suddenly, she found herself kneeling before Lukas, pressed against his chest by strong arms. She noticed a bright sheen over his eyes. His arms tightened a fraction more. "Not anymore. You're mine. You've always been mine."

*Angry.* She should be angry at his sudden attack. He lowered his head, his lips teased hers, tickling the corners of her mouth. She should stop him before she lost what was left of her heart, but couldn't bring herself to care.

All thoughts fled as his tongue traced her mouth, while his hands skimmed over her body, mapping the curves. A small whimper moved through her throat as he tore away from their embrace. She flicked an annoyed glare at him. "I'd forgotten just how lethal your lips could be."

A smile tugged at Lukas' face. He pressed another kiss to her mouth, then skimmed the soft skin of her neck. He nipped and sucked, his tongue lapping over the spot to ease the slight pain. Heat and desire swept through her. It was one of the most erotic things she'd ever felt.

Providing encouragement without being aware, her hands sifted through his hair. A low moan escaped, even as she tried to hold back. Lukas chuckled against her neck, the sound vibrating through her body. Pressing a last kiss to her shoulder, he released her.

Aria sagged back against the chair and blinked as tears threatened. He leaned toward her, and she pushed against his chest, holding him at arm's length. "Don't do that again, Lukas."

"Not until you ask me."

"I won't."

His expression darkened, and the light in the room seemed to dim. "You haven't taken another Mate, have you?"

Her chin rose. "And if I had?"

### Chapter 3

She would have sworn he hadn't moved, but in less than a heartbeat, Lukas' face was a breath away from hers. His unnerving stare drilled into hers, while his body pinned her flat against the carpet.

"Don't jest. Answer me." It took a moment for her to decipher his snarl.

Her pulse beat a sharp staccato. "I—"

Liquid warmth trickled over her belly. She looked between their bodies, realizing the spreading sensation over her hand and arm. Blood oozed from his chest, down over the claws she'd buried into his flesh.

"Oh my God! Lukas, I've—you need to get up!" She jerked her claws from his body, pushing frantically against him with both hands.

He blinked, her frenzied movements finally breaking through. Her hand morphed back to normal, still coated with his blood.

He pulled away, glanced down at the wound and then back to her face.

"It's minor. Answer my—"

Before Lukas finished his demand, a large hand closed like a vise over Aria's bicep and wrenched her from beneath him. A brief impression of muscles and snapping teeth flashed past her as she was slammed against the wall. Her attacker pressed his heavy forearm against her throat, his canines bared, snarling, and anger blazing.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Lukas?" The stranger bit the words out without looking away. "She could have killed you!"

Lukas rose, his hand covering the healing wound on his chest. "I started it, Aaron. Let her go."

Aaron's arm pressed harder against her windpipe. Aria focused on squeezing air past the obstruction. Her captor had the build of a back alley boxer. Escape would be impossible even if he released his hold.

Aaron eased from her neck, but retained his grip on her arm. With Lukas near, the nausea from the other man's touch seemed even harder to bear than usual.

“Fine.” Aaron’s furious gaze swept over her as he pulled her away from the wall. “But you *will* answer my Alpha’s question. Now.”

“Let go of me.”

The two men stared, unaffected by her demand. She considered saying something rude, but she stopped at Lukas’ expression. Behind Lukas’ tough exterior, she saw his vulnerability. Despair lurked behind a hurt she didn’t really understand, and it tore at her.

Then Lukas spoke, “I think that’s an excellent solution. You answer, he releases you.”

“Who is he?”

“Aaron Kavoski, my Beta. Now answer him, please.”

Aria glared. “This is not winning you brownie points, you know.”

He raised one brow.

Her curt retort became a growl through clenched teeth. “I cannot bear the touch of another man. I have no Mate.”

He studied her, intense and uncomfortable. “Good.” He jerked his head in her direction. “Release her, Aaron.”

Her captor watched her with disdain. “She could be lying.”

Lukas smiled. “I don’t think so. She kisses like a virgin.”

“And you have a lot of experience with that, do you?” Aria couldn’t help the comment, even when she knew keeping her mouth shut would be better.

Thaddeus’ voice cut in from the doorway. “Well, I do. If you aren’t sure, Lukas, I could give her a try.”

Lukas’ good humor extended only so far. He glowered.

Thaddeus raised both hands in surrender. “Bravo, Aria. I don’t think anyone’s gotten so much emotion out of him in months. You have to be his Mate. Lord knows, no one else would have him.”

“I’m not sure I’ll have him either,” she muttered, rubbing her arm where Aaron had held her and turned her attention to Lukas again. Her glare promised retribution if he tried anything like it again.

Lukas crossed his arms over his chest. "You cannot expect me to just nod and smile and watch you walk out the door, Aria. I'm a strong man, but not that strong."

The admission hadn't been easy, the tight lines of his mouth made that obvious. His audience gawked, rendered speechless by the bald emotion in his voice.

For a moment, she could only stare. He offered her all the dreams they'd once talked about. Could she slap it away so easily?

"I'm a liability, Lukas. If Haemon finds out I'm here, I'll endanger the whole pack. I almost got you killed once. I won't risk that, again."

He reached out and twined his fingers with hers, pulling her closer. "You aren't going anywhere. No one is going to kill me or anyone else."

His insistence that she stay tempted and irritated her. "You don't know that. If your pack knew who I was, would they keep me? Besides being Haemon's obsession, I'm officially an Outcast. If they associate with me, the Council can exact a steep price."

To her surprise, neither Aaron nor Thaddeus uttered a word. She'd been counting on their reactions to help support her case.

Pretending their audience didn't exist, she continued, "Besides, a lot of things have changed. I've changed. I'm not so sure you will like the person I've become. Maybe I won't even like what you've become."

"Brutal honesty isn't going to drive me away, love." Despite his teasing tone, something in his demeanor changed—grew more careful.

"Thaddeus, get a wet cloth from the kitchen. We need to clean up before we go back into the other room."

Moments later, she was scrubbing Lukas' blood from her hands and arms. The blood on her shirt would have to be dealt with later, but no one would question it. They would assume it was Steven's. She pushed aside the pang of guilt. Hurting Lukas had been an accident, and she would never do it again. Never.

Lukas and Aaron were arguing about something, probably her, on the other side of the room near the door. Ignoring the dark looks from Aaron, Aria

inserted herself between them, pulling the hem of Lukas' shirt up to inspect the damage she'd done. The wounds were nearly healed with little scarring.

Lukas' hands trapped hers against his flesh. "I deserved that, Aria. And I'm impressed. You're much faster than I remembered."

"You have no idea." She shook off his hold, wiping away the worst of the blood with the towel. Thaddeus took the dirty cloth when she had finished, slipping out the door. Just before it closed, a tiny woman with curly red hair flew through the doorway, stopping in front of Lukas and Aria. Puffy, red-rimmed eyes fastened on Aria's face. Their intensity made her cringe.

"I know you didn't want to be disturbed, but I had to thank you." The woman seized Aria in a crushing grip. "If you ever need anything, *anything*, you call me. You saved my son. For that I owe you my life."

Aria gave her a squeeze of comfort. Embarrassment sent heat rushing to her face. "You don't owe me. I'm glad to help."

A tall man who shared Thaddeus' family resemblance appeared in the doorway. "You can't imagine the service you've done my wife and I. If you need anything, somewhere to stay, our home is always open."

Lukas bristled. "She'll be staying with me, Sean." He pinned Aria with his gaze. "She is my Mate, and I won't allow her to leave me, again."

"Possessive much?" Aria muttered under her breath. Secretly, pleasure warmed her heart, the cold walls rapidly thawing.

Lukas smiled and winked. Nothing had been decided, but she wasn't about to argue in front of his pack. Beyond Aaron and Thaddeus, no one needed to be aware.

Sean wrapped an arm around his wife's waist. "Then the service is all the more special. We are yours, whatever you need, forever."

Thaddeus entered, stepping out of the way for his brother and wife to pass into the kitchen. He grinned at Aria. "I told you things would get interesting before it was over, didn't I?"

She managed a weak smile. "I thought you meant rubber hoses or Chinese water torture."



He smirked, tossing her a wadded piece of cloth, which she grabbed in midair. The flannel shirt had been green plaid at one point, but had faded to a strange grey color with bloodstains, rips, and tears. The buttons were mismatched as she had replaced them when they fell off.

“What is this?” Lukas’s hand smoothed over the fabric.

She didn’t look up at him, remembering the last time they had stood together. This bit of nothing had kept her strong for so long. “You gave it to me the day we married because I was cold. I’ve worn it every day for the last eighteen months.”

Lukas pulled her to the other side of the room, giving them some semblance of privacy. Picking up her hand, he pressed a kiss to her palm, his gaze intense. “Would you join with me as True Mates? Join the pack?”

Aria froze, stunned and rooted to the spot. Did she want to? Her patched heart jumped at the idea. But things were different now. Much stood between them, and she wasn’t certain if was a gap that could be easily bridged.

“I can’t.”

## Chapter 4

Lukas' vulnerability shined from his eyes, and her heart contracted painfully.

"I can't answer that. Not now." Aria drew a deep breath, blowing it slowly through pursed lips. When he started to argue, she raised a hand. "You have to understand. I'm damaged goods, Lukas. I don't make spontaneous decisions anymore."

His frown turned fierce. "Then promise me you'll give me time. To change your mind, or at least help you if you choose to leave."

The smart choice was to leave immediately. Yet faced with the prospect of losing him again, of spending whatever days she had left alone... she gripped Lukas' hand tighter and nodded once.

He relaxed, gaze searching her face. She smiled, though it didn't feel right.

Without him, she was as good as dead. Knowing the danger her presence would bring, she vowed to protect his Pack. Perhaps she would be able to build enough memories to sustain her when she left. She would take advantage of what he offered. For now.

"You should be throwing me out, but if you don't have the good sense to do it, I won't force your hand. I'll stay, for a little while anyway."

"I'll take whatever you're willing to give." Lukas pressed another kiss to her palm, pulling her with him toward the kitchen. She started to move away when she realized her feet bare, but was surprised when he gripped her hand tighter.

He gave her an apologetic smile, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I can't seem to let go of you. I'm a little afraid you'll disappear."

She smiled, tenderness nudging her heart. "I know, but I want to put my shoes on."

"This is your home now. You don't need them."

"I'll feel better if I have them on. It's a habit."

He reluctantly released her, but as soon as she slid her feet into the sneakers and tied the flannel around her waist, he took possession of her hand again.

“Alec’s finished patching up Steven. Apparently, he’s awake and wants to speak to you,” Thaddeus announced from the doorway.

Horror washed over her. Having to endure stitches and the resetting of bones without sedation made her knees weak. “Awake? Didn’t they put him under?”

Lukas shook his head. “Unfortunately, you know regular pain pills don’t help Shifters. We don’t have the resources yet to get drugs that can do something for him. We’re still working to add a medical room to the grounds.” He grimaced. “I’m not particularly popular with the Council and it affects our ability to get those kinds of supplies.”

He then nuzzled her ear, whispering, “Don’t worry. He’s a strong kid.”

Following him through the doorway, Aria breathed out a sigh of relief. Steven appeared marginally better, now that the blood and gore had been washed away. With one eye swollen shut, purple and blue bruises covered the rest of his face. His arm had been reset, splinted and wrapped, resting on his chest. Even with a shifter’s regenerative capabilities, he would be in considerable pain for awhile. Any other injuries remained hidden under the sheet. Aria had no desire to see his wounds—she’d seen enough the first time. Steven’s head turned in her direction as she and Lukas stopped at his side.

“Thank you.” The soft words escaped through puffy lips. She winced, as if the effort cost her instead of him. “I owe you big.”

Aria patted his uninjured hand gently. “I’m glad I could help.”

Alec appeared behind them and smiled at his patient. “He’ll be as good as new with a lot of rest and TLC.”

A light touch on Aria’s back made her release Steven’s hand. She moved back a step and looked up at Lukas. He smiled, but his expression remained serious. “Was it Ethan and his gang?”

Steven’s mom, who had been watching the exchange, jerked in her seat. “Is this really the best time?”

Lukas patted the mother's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Heather, but I need all the information I can get."

Steven started to nod and stopped, grimacing. "S'okay, Mom. Ethan, Lloyd, Josh, and Martin. I swear, Lukas, I didn't start anything. Didn't even know they were around until they dragged me into that place."

"Don't worry. I know you didn't start it. Haemon's bunch never needs an excuse. Did they mention any reason for trying to kill you?"

Aria digested the bit of information. Haemon was closer than she'd thought.

Steven licked his dry lips. "They might have mentioned something about you, but honestly, they didn't really say anything other than insults until after I was on the ground. Then I just wanted to protect my head."

"Why didn't you shift?"

"I couldn't. I tried, even though someone might have seen it, but I couldn't. The guys seemed to know it, too. They kept taunting me about it and daring me to try."

Unable to shift? What on earth had Haemon done now? Her heartbeat rose and she focused on taking deep breaths. Haemon had a strange fascination for objects with unusual abilities. He talked about them non-stop. She vaguely recalled the long, involved ramblings consisting of myth, rumor and legend, especially the mention of a talisman created to protect the wearer from shifters. Designed to keep them human and reduce their abilities. Her body froze as she tried to collect her thoughts.

If he'd actually found such an item, and given it to the boys, why hadn't it worked the same way on Ethan and his cohorts? The carrier might have been fine, but the others would have been diminished. Her own abilities would have suffered, but they didn't. Now she wished she'd paid more attention to what Haemon had said during her time as his captive audience.

Lukas said something else, and Steven frowned in reply. "I'm not sure. All I can say is that something weird was going on. They were alone, but they had more power than normal. They were drunk on it."

"Were any of them wearing jewelry?" Aria interjected.

Steven paused, closing his eyes, a line between his brows. “Yeees. Ethan had a weird silver piece around his neck. Never seen it before. A couple of the others had pierced ears, but that’s all I remember.”

Definitely the silver piece. No one sent a shifter out with such, until maturity. The results were too unpredictable. Silver enhanced any unusual abilities for some. A normal shifter, with no extra gifts, would find the touch of silver uncomfortable at best, searing at worst.

Lukas bent over Steven, resting his palm over the boy’s forehead. He grimaced slightly and then drew back. Steven’s entire body relaxed.

“I might have to ask you some more questions later, okay?” Lukas waited until the boy nodded, then pulled Aria and Alec to the other corner of the kitchen.

“What was that?” Her neck craned to see Steven’s face, then she looked back at Lukas, surprised.

Lukas shrugged and released her wrist. “I eased some of his pain.”

She crossed her arms, watching him suspiciously. Just how much was she missing here? “You and I are going to talk later. You couldn’t do anything like that before.”

“Yes. We’ll talk. *Later.*”

She didn’t like the finality in his tone. He leaned against the counter, dragging his hands through his hair. Alec mimicked his action by the island in the kitchen. The intensity of Alec’s regard made her uncomfortable. The older man was wiry and thin, but he still held an air of authority and intelligence. She supposed his opinions were not often challenged.

“How bad is it, Alec?” Frustration tinged Lukas’ voice. Aria wondered what else had gone on before her arrival. His tone and the way he’d handled the whole situation gave her the impression Steven was not the first pack member hurt by Haemon.

The doctor released a breath and scrubbed at his forehead with one hand. “He has a broken arm, a hairline fracture in his leg, several broken ribs, multiple internal injuries, a concussion, and was dangerously close to puncturing a lung. I didn’t even try to count the bruises.”

A low rumble vibrated in Lukas’ chest. “Will he be all right?”

Alec nodded. "It's going to take awhile. When he's passed out again, we'll carry him upstairs to the extra room. He can't be moved more than that for a few days." Alec's gaze shifted to Aria. "What I found particularly interesting is that he shows signs of healing, which I had nothing to do with."

Lukas smiled at her. "Got anything to tell us, honey?"

She shrugged, rubbing her arms. "No."

Lukas' eyebrow rose nearly to his hairline, irritation and surprise filling his expression. "I'm sorry. Care to try that again?"

"No, I have nothing to tell you." Aria batted her lashes.

"Aria..." he warned.

Aria ignored him, crossed her arms and looked at Alec. "It didn't hurt anything, did it?" She held her breath until he answered.

Alec shook his head. "No. There were more internal injuries than there are now, and he wouldn't have survived the trip here without your help."

"I was a little afraid something might go wrong. I was still so angry..." She hadn't realized how worried she'd been. His reassurance allowed her to relax.

"Are you really going to ignore my question? I need to know the truth," Lukas demanded, nudging her arm with his elbow.

"I called in a favor. I may be gifted, but I've never been a healer." She bit her lip, unwilling to admit Cern's involvement. Until she knew where things would lead, it was best to keep him out of the conversation. Cern had always been a friend, even with the dark side to his personality, but she couldn't bring herself to betray his confidence.

"I thought you were Outcast. Who would have done you a favor?" Alec flushed under his beard after blurting the question. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"It's okay. I didn't call in any favors from a shifter. Just a friend."

"Does the friend have a name?"

"Of course, he does. But it's...complicated. Now can we move on?"

Aria shifted uncomfortably, noting Lukas' smile, not quite genuine. Maybe turning the conversation back where it had started wasn't the best idea.

“I’ll find out the rest of the details eventually. I can be very persuasive.” Lukas winked at her, and she gulped at the underlying possibilities at his words. “For the moment, I’ll be satisfied if you tell me what happened. There were four of them, Aria. I know they were only cubs, but I’d like to hear how you got them to run. Did this *friend* help you?”

Aria heard a little jealousy in Lukas’ question, and it made her feel inordinately pleased. “Good Lord, no. He’d have only gotten in the way. As for how I got them to run”—she shrugged, attempting nonchalance—“they upset me.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I’m much better at fighting than I used to be. I’ve also discovered losing my temper isn’t beneficial. They were young, stupid, and thought I wasn’t much of a threat. It wasn’t hard to be scary enough to frighten them off.”

“You mean you didn’t have to fight with them?” Alec interjected.

Aria shot him a look that should have stripped paint. “I didn’t say that.”

“What happened, Aria?” Lukas’ arm slid around her shoulders. “The whole truth, if you please.”

She released her breath slowly. “The leader, the one you call Ethan, is part of Haemon’s pack, and recognized me. I was walking back to my motel room and caught a whiff of fresh shifter blood from the shop. It was obvious the building had been empty awhile. No one should have been there. I couldn’t just leave, because I’ve been on the receiving end of those kinds of situations before, and I wished someone would’ve stopped and helped me.”

Lukas’ hand hovered over her shoulder for a moment and dropped away. Anger and sympathy warred in his glance. Pity was the last thing she needed. “By the time I arrived, Steven was in pretty bad shape. I wasn’t even sure he was still alive, and I lost my temper.”

Her eyes traced the pattern of the linoleum at her feet, recalling the scene in the alley. “In my defense, I gave them ample time to leave. But they saw a female and assumed I was weak. They were easy to take care of.”

In her mind, she could still see the three teens lying on the ground, dazed. She’d been angry and careless. Ethan had escaped her attention while she dealt

with the others. He had waited until she finished, before he grabbed her from behind. The memory made her skin crawl.

As if Lukas sensed what she was thinking, he asked, "What about Ethan?"

She slid a glance at him, debating how much to reveal. "He got behind me while I was distracted by the others. It was my own fault—I was careless because they were young. He copped a feel and started whispering things in my ear. Things about how I'd killed you and how my fate was my own fault. About the things he'd like to do to me when Haemon had finished with me."

Lukas gave a loud growl. The rage on his face made her glance away. She smiled slightly, looking back at the floor. "The minute he mentioned you and he started boasting about what they were going to do, I lost it. I don't even really remember what I did, but when I was finished, he was bleeding and his friends had to carry him out. It's a safe assumption he'll have a reminder of me for the rest of his life."

"That won't be very long if I ever find him." Lukas rumbled. When Aria opened her mouth, his hand slashed violently through the air. "The minute he touched you, his life was mine. Later, when we're alone, you'll tell me exactly what he said."

She crossed her arms. What he didn't know couldn't make him upset. "I don't remember."

"You'll remember later."

"It's over with, Lukas."

"Like hell it is."

Alec cleared his throat, and smiled at Aria. This time, the gesture appeared more genuine. "I have to go check on my patient and get a few of the others to help me move him. If you see your friend again, give him my thanks."

"I'll do that."

Lukas stared at her for a few moments more, then pushed away from the counter. The muscles in his jaw twitched and Aria knew he was dying to demand the details from her now, but didn't want an audience. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I have to check in with Aaron and speak to Thaddeus. After that, we need to talk."



He smiled, but his gaze lingered on the dark smudges she knew lay under her eyes. "How long ago since you slept through the night or had a full meal?"

"A few hours?"

"You were never a good liar."

"Only around you," she retorted. He stood there, arms crossed, waiting for an answer. Throwing up her hands, she rolled her eyes. "I can eat later. I don't want to eat alone and I'd be willing to bet you haven't eaten either."

"Are you sure?"

"Lukas. I've been without food longer than this. I'll be fine. You can take care of business, we'll talk, and then we can eat."

"All right. Aaron needs to meet you anyway. He's my Beta, and he needs to meet my Mate, formally."

She didn't really think a formal meeting would change her opinion of Aaron, or vice versa. Scowling, she let the comment slide. There'd be plenty of time to argue later, without the audience. People milled about the kitchen, cleaning up pieces of gauze, dishes, and mopping the floor. Each one pretended to be absorbed in their tasks, while listening intently to their conversation.

She followed him out the door through a large dining room into a spacious study where Thaddeus and Aaron stood next to the window in deep discussion. They were like looking at night and day. Aaron had a distinctive dark appearance with his dark auburn hair and an olive complexion, while Thaddeus had golden hair and ice blue eyes. It suited their personalities.

Aria deliberately ignored the Beta, letting her gaze wander through the room. It reflected Lukas' taste, with its heavy dark woods, jewel-tone colors and two walls of bookcases. Aria could imagine eighteenth-century men coming in after dinner to smoke cigars, sip brandy, and discuss the state of world affairs in a room like this.

A huge L-shaped desk dominated the wall near the door, one side cutting into the center of the room. The longest arm of the desk had been modified into a kind of conference table. Five chairs, including Lukas' worn brown leather desk chair were pushed under the edge. He'd had the same one when he lived with his father years ago, and she used to love curling up on it. Obviously, Lukas

conducted Pack business here. The other side of the room had a fireplace flanked by two more computers and a small television, muted and tuned to the local news.

“Thaddeus, Aaron; Aria will be joining us this evening.” Lukas motioned for them to approach, his expression remained serious.

Thaddeus turned and smiled brightly. Aaron’s face was blank, but suspicion blazed in his eyes. Lukas nudged her forward, and Aria held out her hand. If Aaron tried to knock her over again, she’d take him out. Instead, Aaron took the offered hand, studying her. She wasn’t sure what he searched for, but he must have found it. Without breaking eye contact, he dropped to one knee and put her hand on his nape.

“I swear to serve you as I serve your Mate, with my life, as long as I live.”

The oath surprised her, but she squeezed the back of his neck in acceptance of his oath. Her cynical mind broke in and reminded her that their oaths were likely to be short-lived. With Haemon after her, her life was in constant danger. If he succeeded in catching her and keeping her as he planned, then she had no choice. Death.

As Aaron rose, he amended the pledge, with a hard glint in his dark brown eyes. “I also reserve the right to extract payment if you cause him injury again.”

## Chapter 5

Aaron's declaration left her gaping.

Lukas had not expected it either, judging by his scowl. He stepped forward, anger flushing his face. Aaron squared his shoulders and planted his feet, daring them to argue.

Guilt struck her again. Aria laid a hand on Lukas' arm to stop him from moving any closer, but kept her attention on Aaron. "For what its worth, Aaron, I didn't mean for it to happen the first time. But should it happen again—if there's anything left of me, you're welcome to try."

Lukas sputtered some sort of obscenity, his body vibrated beneath her hand with anger and surprise. Aaron and Aria ignored him, staring at one another—sizing each other up. She wanted to make sure he understood how serious she was. She couldn't blame him for his distrust. Aaron had been the one left to pick up the pieces when she disappeared from Lukas' life. Would she act any differently if their positions were reversed? Of course, that didn't mean she would let him tear her limb from limb, but still...

Aaron's body relaxed slightly and he offered a curt nod. "As long as we understand one another."

The tension in the room eased at his response.

Thaddeus dropped into a leather chair, propped his feet on the desk, and laced fingers behind his head. "And to think I was bored a few days ago."

Aria stepped around Aaron and headed for a chair. When she moved closer to Thaddeus, his grin brightened and his gaze moved from her neck to Lukas' face. "Nice, man."

Suspicion bloomed in Aria's mind and she slapped a hand to her throat. She ran to the large mirror hanging on the wall over the mantle, jerking the collar of her shirt aside. Sure enough, a small, dark bruise had begun to form at the base of her neck. Lukas had marked her. She whirled to face him, hand on hips, scowling. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

He smiled, unapologetically, smug male satisfaction written all over his face. “Can you blame me?”

“Yes, but I’ll save it. Although at this rate, I’m just beat the crap out of you.” Even as she scolded him, something hot and bright lit her heart. Somehow, knowing she bore his mark was arousing and comforting at the same time. But neither could she stop the annoyance.

She had been trying to maintain emotional distance from him, and failing miserably. Every time she thought she’d gotten a handle on things, something like this happened. It didn’t improve her frame of mind.

Lukas sat down at the desk, followed by Aaron. The Beta never fully stopped watching Aria. She ignored him and curled into the plush red sofa chair next to the fireplace. As she moved across the cushions, Lukas’ scent became more pronounced. She wondered if he slept in his office more than his bed. The mixture of soap, trees, and musk wrapped around her like a warm embrace. She surreptitiously rubbed her face against the cushions, inhaling his unique scent. That smell had clung to her flannel shirt and kept her sane the first few weeks when she had been held captive, and then, again, when she had been running for her life.

She curled against the arm of the chair, propping one hand up, and watched the group of men. A rare opportunity to listen in with what was going on in the supernatural world, even if she had no intention of staying or to be involved with any of the pack politics and needs. It couldn’t hurt to be aware of current events.

Lukas leaned one elbow on the table, turning his chair sideways so he could see all of them. “I spoke with Alec, and he says that Steven will be fine. I also spoke with Steven.”

“Did he start it?”

Thaddeus’ seriousness surprised Aria. Lukas had automatically assumed Steven had nothing to do with it. At least, she thought he had.

“No. But he did mention something interesting. He mentioned that he tried to shift, but couldn’t. The boys taunted him about it. And judging by the

questions she asked, I think,”—Lukas swiveled his chair in her direction—“Aria knows why.”

“Imagine that.” Mistrust dripped from Aaron’s words.

“I didn’t beat that boy up, so just get the thought out of your pea-sized brain,” she hissed. The implication sent her temper skyrocketing.

Thaddeus interjected, rolling his eyes, “Children, don’t make me stop this meeting!” When she and Aaron remained silent, he continued, “Steven is a little old, but he is still a teenager. It might’ve just been a lack of control.”

Aria shook her head. “I don’t think so. Haemon has this obsession—”

Aaron cut in. “You mean you don’t have the monopoly on Haemon’s thoughts?”

Irritation gritted her teeth. Lukas growled, staring down his Beta. “Drop it, Aaron. There are more important things to do than listen to you two bait each other.”

Aria curled her fingers into the couch. How did she get dragged into this? She hadn’t started it. Determined to ignore the rage building inside, she focused on the problem at hand.

“Anyway, Haemon likes mythology and legend. He’s made it his hobby to track down old legends about supernatural relics and then find them.”

“But if they’re legends, how does he know they’re real?” Thaddeus appeared genuinely confused.

“I don’t actually know. But he picks the legends that turn out to have truth in them. And there’s always a relic.”

“What do they do?”

She shrugged. “Depends on the item, and what he wants to tell you about it. But I do remember him mentioning a talisman created to protect the wearer by keeping a shifter in human form, and diminishing their abilities.”

Lukas’ brows furrowed. “If Ethan and his gang had that, it would explain the severity of his injuries, as well as why he hadn’t been able to fight back or shift. But only one of them could have been wearing it.”

Aria thought back to the scene in the alley, before she helped Steven. “It was risky to have any of them wearing it. Steven said it was silver. Who would give a hunk of silver, let alone one with magical properties, to a teenager?”

“That’s a stupid question. It’s Haemon.”

Ignoring Aaron again, Lukas rubbed the bridge of his nose, a crease forming between his brows. “That doesn’t explain why you weren’t affected, or the others with Ethan. If what you say is true, only the wearer should have been unaffected.”

She spread her hands on the table. “I didn’t hear the whole story, so there are probably details we are missing. As for myself, I don’t know why it didn’t work. I felt a little strange at first, but then I got angry and...well, feeling weird then really isn’t unusual.”

Chances were good it had something to do with her necklace, but that wasn’t something she would share. Not yet, anyway.

“You mean to tell me you fought them off alone?”

Her arm shot out, pointing a finger at Aaron. “You are really starting to piss me off. If you want, I’ll give a demonstration. Hope you don’t mind getting blood on that shirt.”

“Enough!” Lukas’ roar mingled with the sound of his fist slamming on the desk. “You will both stop antagonizing each other, especially you, Aaron. If you can’t be trusted to watch your words, you can leave.”

The Beta bowed his head in submission. Lukas’ entire body vibrated with impatience and anger. She nodded, taking a deep breath. She hadn’t even been here a full day and she was causing problems.

Lukas waited a few more seconds, his hands clenching and unclenching as he calmed himself. “Now, Aria, do you remember if the talisman had a name?”

Thinking back, she tried to recall the conversation. It was something Haemon had been inordinately pleased about, which usually made her worry. He hadn’t tested that one on her, thank God, but he had tried it out on a few of his pack guards. “I think it’s called the Alistar Talisman.”

Thaddeus scribbled the name on a piece of paper from the desk. “I’ll get what I can about it off the internet later.”

Aaron leaned back in his chair. "Tonight had nothing to do with Aria, but it was still Haemon trying to make a point. He's making this a vendetta, and Aria's arrival will only give him more fuel for the fire." He nodded at her. "No offense."

Lukas nodded, glaring at his friend. Apparently, he'd caught the sarcasm as well as she had. "Tell everyone they need an escort to school and work."

"Don't you want to—" She stopped, clenching her fingers around the cushion in her hand. They weren't her pack, nor did she belong here. Her opinions should not be voiced. But his suggestion wasn't enough.

"I thought you didn't plan on staying?" His words dared her to contradict them.

Lukas wasn't quite as collected as he'd seemed. Irritation had gotten the better of him after all. She was sorry for that.

"I can't stay. It doesn't mean I don't want to see them safe, Lukas. Part of this is my fault, after all."

"You can't have it both ways, love. You can't become involved and then leave at the drop of a hat. If you want to make suggestions, you'll have to promise me some time. Quality time."

She punched at the cushion. "You are infuriating." The need to help, to try and right some of the wrongs her father and Haemon had been responsible for, burned deeply.

"It's one of my better traits, actually." The amusement hovering in his eyes teased her. He knew exactly what she was thinking. She didn't know how, but he did.

Ignoring the fact that he was manipulating her, she jerked her chin up, meeting his gaze. "How much time?"

"Three months."

Aria glared. "That's not time, that's assisted suicide." She waited for Aaron to interject a comment. He remained silent.

"No, those are my terms."

Dropping her head to the cushion, she sighed. "Agreed." Her voice may have sounded annoyed, but a small part of her heart, the piece she thought she'd managed to drown out, sent up a cheer.

“Now, what was it that you were saying?”

She hugged a pillow to her chest. “Keep the children here. Set up a temporary school. They’ll hate it after awhile, but they’ll be safer than at school.”

Lukas winked. “Just what I was thinking. Steven’s incident proves Haemon’s capable of anything. We can rotate tutoring, and the adults will start carpooling to work. Anyone who can work from home should. No one goes anywhere outside of Pack grounds alone.”

Well, she’d walked right into that one. He’d known she would protest his first recommendation. She’d been royally played.

“I’d better start calling everyone with kids so they don’t put them on the bus tomorrow. Once the school office opens tomorrow, I’ll call and make arrangements for their work to be sent here.” Aaron waited for Lukas to consent and then left the room. She assumed he went to see whom he could catch in the house. And probably get away from her.

After a few moments of silence, Thaddeus cleared his throat. “There’s been word.”

Aria stiffened. She tried to keep her body from betraying what she thought, but her heart pounded in her ears and the metallic tang of fear spread over her tongue. Afraid of consequences that had affected only her before, she now had more to worry about. Things had changed, and now the emotion was more than an annoying surge of adrenaline. Her heart felt as if it would jump from her chest, even though she tried to appear confident and relaxed.

Lukas rose, moving around the table to sit on the ottoman next to her. A stronger woman might have turned him away. Instead, she allowed him to put an arm around her shoulders. *So much for maintaining her distance.*

“Go ahead, Thaddeus. She might as well hear it.”

“Haemon sent a messenger demanding Aria be returned to him. He says he’s already claimed her before the Council.”



## Chapter 6

“He did what?” Aria’s power, triggered by a surge of overwhelming fury, spilled into the room. The flames roared in the fireplace, surprising everyone. Lukas smoothed a hand over her cheek.

“I guess when you said feeling weird when angry was normal, you weren’t kidding.” Thaddeus’ gaze moved between her face and the fading inferno in the hearth.

She couldn’t suppress a bitter laugh. “You have no idea.”

“Calm down, Aria. It changes nothing. I’ll appeal to the Council.”

The slow heat of anger joined the fear already settled in her stomach. She tried to ignore the churning mixture, taking deep breaths and forcing herself to calm down. She would not allow Haemon and the Council to take her life from her again. “I’d rather skip the Council, kill Haemon and get on with things.”

Thaddeus laughed. “Bloodthirsty, isn’t she?”

Lukas nodded. “While I like the thought, there might be better solutions to our problem.”

“The Council won’t listen to you, and you know it, Lukas.” The rage began to fade, sadness seeping in to replace it. Lukas held her hand, his thumb brushing back and forth over her knuckles. The small caress calmed her more than anything he could have said. “They’ll help Haemon. He and I are the last link in their precious breeding program.”

“What?” Lukas’s brows wrinkled in confusion.

Her jaw dropped. “You honestly didn’t know?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why did you think they tried to kill you, Lukas?”

He lifted a shoulder, twining his fingers in the loose strands of hair that had escaped her braid. “I assumed it was because I tried to elope with you. I don’t know anything about this breeding program.”

Aria's spine straightened. She needed distance between them. Speaking of the Council's plans made her feel tainted and dirty. Her skin crawled whenever she thought of the things the Council members and her father had planned on doing with her—had done to others in the name of “pure blood.”

“I am the last ‘pure bred’ female shifter in this hemisphere. Haemon is the ‘pure’ male my father considered worthy of being my Mate.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm and disdain. “They’ve been forcing their daughters and sons to marry each other for decades, breeding them like horses for a show.”

“They?” Lukas was deceptively calm.

She kept her gaze trained on the weave of the sofa fabric. “My father and most of the Council members. A few have expressed their opposition, but they have not actively tried to stop it.”

Thaddeus nearly shouted, “But why? What purpose would that serve? They are supposed to be our leaders, to keep shifters together.”

She shrugged. “Maybe this is how they think they’ll accomplish that goal. I gave up trying to understand their motives long ago. I’m not sure any of them really know what the goal is anymore—other than power.”

“But how is this giving them power?” Gone was the carefree, laid back shifter. Thaddeus’ feeling of betrayal rolled off him in waves.

“To have gifts beyond the usual, like Lukas and myself, are rare enough. They believe if they match us up like prize dogs, they can control the power any children produced will have, and through them, control our world.” Aria took a deep breath, before continuing, “Men like my father crave power, and I am the last female they have left. With me, he had anything he wanted. He chose Haemon, because he had good blood and his lineage made him easy to get rid of once I gave them a child.”

“Because Haemon’s family has a history of madness?” Lukas waited for her nod. “Then what would happen to you?”

She shuddered, rubbing her arms. “I don’t know. And I don’t want to.”

Lukas growled deep in his chest. Somehow, she found his reaction comforting. “It’s good your father is dead, Aria.”

“My sentiments exactly. My problem now is that no one stands between Haemon and me. Our marriage was a thought my father put in his head, not something he wanted to begin with. My father’s idea meshed well with his own, so he went along with it.”

“Then why is he still pursuing you?”

She rubbed a hand through her hair. “I’m like a toy. He didn’t want me to begin with, but he’s found uses for me. Now that he’s been told he can’t have me, he’s decided he wants me. If he can’t have me, no one will.”

“That’s it? The whole reason?” Thaddeus shook his head in disbelief.

Her frustration became more evident in her words. “Maybe. Maybe not. I have no idea what his personal plans really are. He’s crazy, but he plays things close to the chest.”

“You’re wrong about one thing, Aria. There is someone standing between you and Haemon.” Lukas’ fingers traced down the side of her face. “Me.”

“Aaaand that’s my cue.” Thaddeus sprang from his chair. “You two need to talk. I’ll relay info to Aaron and see if I can pull his head out of his ass.”

He bounded out the door as if chased by hellhounds. The silence left behind thickened, until she could have scooped it into a jar.

Lukas rose, his back to her. His fists clenched at his sides. “I apologize for Aaron’s behavior, Aria.”

“You don’t have to. I deserved that.”

He jerked out one of the desk chair with more force than necessary, almost knocking it off the casters. “No. What happened was my own fault, not yours. I’m the one who got so lost in my grief that I couldn’t function.”

“I’m not playing the blame game with you, Lukas. We’ve already established a mutual responsibility for the whole thing. It was neither and both our faults. It’s also the past. I’ve got enough to deal with in the present.”

He pulled the chair over, sitting into it heavily. “That much is true. We don’t have time to dwell on the past anymore.”

She nodded. The time for being afraid of her father was over. Her father may have died, but the Council still intended to exact payment for disobeying their wishes. It was just a matter of when and how now.

“What were you doing in town anyway? Not the most inconspicuous place.”

Aria frowned. “Well, I wanted a real bed. Sleeping outside loses its appeal after the first three months. I also needed to stock up on supplies. I honestly didn’t realize where I was. I knew I was in West Virginia, but I didn’t keep very good track of what town.”

“So, happening upon this friend, what was his name?” Lukas sounded like he were gritting his teeth hard enough to wear away the enamel. His hands gripped the arms of his chair a little tighter.

She couldn’t help, but laugh. “Lame. You can do better than that.”

He shrugged with a slight blushing. “I can’t help it. Jealousy isn’t a comfortable feeling.”

“Don’t be jealous. Cern is about three or four hundred centuries too old for me.”

“What did you say his name was?” The smile faded from his face.

Obviously, the name wasn’t as unfamiliar as she’d hoped it would be.

“Cern. That’s what he’s calling himself right now anyway.”

“The one whose been hanging out with the Council and Haemon?”

Now came the tricky part. “Yes.”

He exploded from the chair. “What on earth is wrong with you? Are you trying to make it easy for him?”

“You are sexy when you’re angry.” Her words teased, but she also meant them. Watching him stand there, breathing heavily, the muscles of his arms bunching and relaxing as he clenched his fists, gaze sparking with disbelief and anger... She shook her head. What was she thinking? Alone with him for all of two minutes and she was already focusing on his body?

“You are going to drive me completely out of my mind.” His gaze caught hers, and she saw the edge of something that looked suspiciously like desire. She wasn’t the only one getting distracted. Good. If he focused on her, maybe he’d give up on probing too deeply about Cern.

“I can’t explain why Cern is staying with Haemon. I only know he isn’t quite what he appears. I doubt anyone really knows him that well.” The last was muttered more to herself than Lukas.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

She sighed. “No. All I know is that my mother trusted him. That’s a pretty good recommendation in my book.”

“Baby, your mother ran off and committed suicide.” The words cut a little, but he tried to soften them with a smile.

“She ran off with the man who was her real True Mate. My father had them both killed and set up to look like suicide. I heard him give the order.” She bit her lip. Her mother wasn’t a coward like everyone assumed. Maybe a little misguided in thinking she could get away from her father, but Aria would never believe her mother voluntarily killed herself. Her only fault was for marrying her father.

Lukas stiffened in stunned shock. Finally, he released a breath. “I don’t know why that surprises me so much.”

“Because my father did an excellent job of making the story stick.”

Before he could ask anything else, she interrupted him with her own questions. She needed answers, too. “You’ve told me everything and nothing about the Pack. The last I heard, your father had died and you were returning here to deliver the news. What happened after?”

“I’m pretty certain he was murdered, though I can’t prove it. When I came back, the few of us here decided that the only option left was to become a pack. At least that way, the Council would have to deal with us as equals, rather than poor country cousins.” He shook his head with a short chuckle. “Of course, nothing has really changed much.”

“Why is Haemon so intent on destroying you? Why would he send his pack to hurt yours?”

Scrubbing a hand over his brow, he leaned back in the chair. “Besides the fact that we have a mutual interest in you, Haemon wants something from me. I’m not exactly certain what, but it has something to do with my return from the dead.”

“He’s always feared death. Or, at least, his lack of control over it.”

She propped her chin in her hand. “Speaking of...you mentioned bringing something back. What did you mean?”

He shifted his weight in the chair, a grimace passing over his features. His gaze moved over her head. “It’s complicated.”

“I’ve got some time. I made this deal with a nutcase I know...”

His hands closed over hers. “Aria—”

“Don’t,” she whispered, pulling away. “I’m doing my best to bring up every emotion I can think of, to make myself push you away, but it isn’t working like I planned, Lukas. By now, you should have kicked me out and left me to my own devices.”

“Not that long ago, I believed I had helped cause your death. It nearly drove me mad.” His voice developed an edge. “You want to leave, to keep me safe. What you can’t seem to get through that stubborn head of yours is that I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“I meant what I said, Lukas. I’m not the same person anymore. I’ve done things I’m not proud of. You may not like who I’ve become.” Aria swallowed the knot in her throat, gauging his reaction. The naïve girl had died with Lukas. She’d done her share of killing, and been just as cruel as the Council. He might not want what she’d grown into.

“Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

“Don’t quote me Hamlet at a time like this.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I didn’t fall in love with pieces of you, Aria. I fell in love with all of you, and whether you stay, or you leave tomorrow, I will still love you. You did what you had to in order to survive. I’ve done the same. Who am I to judge what you’ve done?”

Tears overflowed, and she buried her face in her hands. Beneath the anger she tried to keep on the surface, was the love she had never shaken. Happiness, however long it lasted, stood right in front of her. Why shouldn’t she take it? Couldn’t she better protect Lukas if she stayed? Running had been her answer to everything. She had ran from her father, breaking out of the house as a kid, hiding when she was supposed to be in Council, refusing to be left alone with

Haemon. Then she tried to take a stand for something—for Lukas. She took blame for his death. Now that it did not seem to be the case, could she really run and abandon him again?

“I don’t know how to have a real relationship, Lukas. My father had my mother and her real Mate killed when I was ten. I’ve hated him my entire life, and we won’t even discuss Haemon. I’m not sure I’m capable of being with anyone.”

The gentle smile on his face brought more tears.

“I will be happy to teach you. One of the gifts I have is the ability to see the true nature of things. Believe me, you cannot hide nearly as well behind your bluster as you thought. Not with me. You’re capable, and if you ever decide to put your whole heart into something, the results would be...” he searched for a word, “incredible. I can only hope you choose to share that with me. But you should know, I’m not really asking for a few months. I want it all, Aria.”

The practical voice in her head told her it would be harder to lose someone if she grew attached. For a brief moment, she thought of refusing, to keep herself separate.

It was a very brief moment.

Closing the door to the doubtful part of herself turned out to be easy. She’d had enough loneliness. She was tired of running and hiding. When Lukas died, all the color and hope had gone out of her world. Now that he was back, it was almost too much to process. With the harm Haemon and her father had done, maybe she’d be able to right some of the damage by giving herself up for Lukas’ pack.

“All right, Lukas. You win. But you remember what you said when I do something you won’t like.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Butterflies danced in her stomach at the heat in Lukas’ stare. Arousal grew in her core, but she was surprised to find herself a little scared to act on it. Lukas leaned toward her, bracing his hands on the arms of the sofa, his lips hovering so close, only a deep breath would connect them. Before he could kiss her, her stomach churned, gurgling loudly between them. Lukas’ face broke into a wide grin.

He stood, holding out one hand. “We’ve done enough talking for one day. Probably two. Let’s get something to eat.”

She couldn’t suppress a giggle. Suddenly, she felt lighter. Decision made, the time for debating was over. “What does Chez Lukas serve at this hour?”

“With ten teenagers in close proximity? Anything you can think of.”

Aria allowed him to pull her up. She stopped to slip her shoes on, and when she looked up again, he was watching her. “What?”

“Why do you do that? I can remember a time when you hated shoes.”

“I still hate shoes.” She glanced down at her worn-out sneakers. “After spending so long on the move, it’s hard to leave them sitting somewhere.”

He tucked her arm into the crook of his elbow with a heavy sigh, and kissed her lightly. “We’ll have to work to rid you of that habit. It makes me think you’re getting ready to run from me.”



## Chapter 7

Aria patted his arm as they left the room, walking back the way they came. Once in the kitchen, she noticed it was remarkably cleared of any sign of Steven. The table gone, the floors scrubbed clean.

“They work fast around here.” Her words came out strangled as she fought a new wave of worry over the teenager.

Lukas dropped a kiss on her head. “He’ll be okay. Don’t worry.” He released her to open the refrigerator door. “What are you in the mood for? I can make a mean sandwich.”

“You don’t need to do that.” A cheerful voice piped up from the other end of the room and a tiny woman flew past them with a brown paper bag. “Thaddeus called and told me about the newest addition. It is *so* nice to meet you. My name is Angelina, but you can call me Ella. I brought a couple different things, since I wasn’t sure what you liked. There’s chicken and broccoli and Mongolian beef, and then moo goo gai pan for Lukas.”

Ella paused for breath only when the two of them obediently sat down at the breakfast nook. The smell of Chinese food teased Aria’s nose. Lukas rummaged through the bag on the table, pulling out the boxes and grimacing when his large hands emerged with two sets of chopsticks. Aria stifled a laugh, remembering the last time he’d attempted to use those.

He’d ended up wearing more than he ate. Apparently, he remembered as well. He slid the offending items to her. “I’m too hungry to try those again. They’re all yours.”

Aria laughed and shook her head.

Ella returned and slid two bowls and forks in front of them. She leaned over and gave a conspiratorial wink. “So, you already know Lukas can’t hold a set of chopsticks to save his life?” She continued after Aria’s nod, “I figured as much. That’s why I brought forks. I didn’t think you wanted to wait until he learned to use them!”

Aria couldn’t help the laugh that burst from her.

“I’m talking too much, aren’t I?” Ella asked with a wry smile.

Aria waved her hand for the other woman to take a seat. “Please, I don’t mean anything by it. I’m already on overload, and you’re talking so fast I’m still two sentences behind you. And I love chicken and broccoli.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Ella hopped up, retrieving another bowl and fork and filled her bowl from the take-out containers. With one foot, she nudged a shopping bag across the floor to Aria. “I also took the liberty of getting you a few under things. I figured you could wear some of Lukas’ old clothes to sleep in, but borrowed under things...icky. They probably aren’t the right size, but they’ll work overnight.”

Aria nodded, touched by Ella’s thoughtfulness. “Thanks a million.”

For a few moments, unable to speak around her food, Aria looked at Lukas’ across the table, and she could see amusement pulling at the corners of his lips. Struggling to keep her laughter in check, she turned her attention to her plate—surprised to see empty. Apparently, she’d been hungrier than she thought.

“When was the last time you ate, Aria?” asked Lukas.

“Do I really have to answer that?”

“Chicken?”

“It was eggs actually.”

“Aria...”

She scowled at Lukas, and grabbed a fortune cookie. “It was eggs. Yesterday morning, I stopped and ate breakfast.” Annoyed, she broke open the fortune cookie, popping one half in her mouth. “Your patience today will be rewarded tomorrow,” she read aloud. She glared at Lukas. “I better get rewarded, buster.”

“Don’t worry baby, you’ll get rewarded.” His tone made her shiver.

“I think I need to be going.” Ella didn’t give Aria time to protest, whisking her bowl to the sink and waving as she breezed out the door.

“Dear Lord.” Aria leaned back in her chair. “Is she always like that?”

“That’s her normal speed. You should see her when she *really* gets ramped up. The Energizer Bunny has nothing on her.”

Rummaging under the table, Aria pulled out the three pairs of underwear the other woman had bought her. Two were the right size, while the other was a size too big. They were lacy panties in red and blue. There was a sports bra, but one-size-fits-all usually meant her rather large chest would be squashed into painful submission. Lukas stared at the underwear, his fork halfway to his mouth.

Following his gaze, she quickly balled them in her fist, embarrassed. And aroused. Her mouth curved at Lukas' look as he chewed slowly on his food. What harm could it cause? She'd been dreaming of sleeping with him ever since she'd met him. This time, no one would interrupt.

She held the panties up, giving him her best innocent expression. "What do you think? Red or blue?"

His fork fell to the table, hands gripping the edge. Hiding her smile, she was surprised his nails hadn't left indentations.

"You better know what you're doing, Aria. I can see your intentions, remember?"

She smirked. "Definitely red. I think we'd better go upstairs and make sure they fit."

Dropping the underwear back in the bag, she leaned her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her palm while batting her lashes. "Unless you're still hungry."

"Oh, I'm hungry, baby."

He scooped her out of the chair. Sliding her arms around his neck, her finger played with the hair at his nape. She'd always loved his hair and the way it felt. Tears pricked at her eyes at the picture they presented at the moment. This was how it should have been after they had eloped. She blinked; annoyed that she couldn't seem to control her emotions.

Why she'd been allowed a second chance, she didn't know, but she had no intention of squandering it. She stretched and pressed a kiss to the edge of his jaw, over his scar.

Lukas held her a little tighter. A crooked smile danced across his mouth, taking the harsh edge off his chiseled features. Desire swept through her, pooling in her stomach, and warmth curled through her limbs. They moved through the

empty house, and he took the stairs two at a time. At the top, he turned and walked down a long, narrow hallway, and carried her through the room at the end. One strong kick slammed the door shut. He wasn't as calm as she thought.

Moonlight spilled in through the open curtains, the glow bouncing off the white walls. Taking in the sparse furnishings, Aria paused at the king-sized bed that took up most of the space. Her attention centered on the sheets. Anxious shivers coursed through her body as Lukas carried her further into the room. Her fingers tightened in his hair, and she had to admit she was a bit flustered. Not about what would happen—Lord knows she'd fantasized about *that* often enough. After all, she was a virgin, not dead.

He allowed her to slide down the length of him, arms wrapping tightly around her.

"Be sure you want this, Aria. There are still a lot of things we didn't talk about." She knew he could read her hesitation. "Last chance to change your mind. If you want me to leave you alone, I will." His hands crept around and untied the old flannel shirt from her waist, tossing it on the floor. "It might kill me, but I will."

His husky promise made every nerve-ending tingle as if he'd actually touched her. A current of need, one that had been there since he kissed her, sprang to life, traveling from her breasts to her core and back. She swiveled her hips, instinctively rubbing the growing bulge in his jeans. "I'm sure, Lukas."

His lips captured hers in a drugging kiss, while his rough hands slid around her waist and under the hem of her shirt. Aria whimpered as he caressed her skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake. His fingers unhooked her bra, and body stilled as he splayed his hands over her spine and moved slowly as if feeling the contours of her skin. She paused and squeezed her eyes shut, anticipating what was to come.

"Aria?"

She cringed, drawing away from him, struggling to re-clasp the bra. When her shaking fingers failed, she slid it from under her shirt instead. She stared at the scrap of dingy cloth, torn and well worn, searching her mind for something to say to make the situation easier.

“Aria, is that what I think?”

“I didn’t think you’d notice.” She drew in a deep breath, waiting for his temper to explode, but she couldn’t read his expression.

His hands fisted at his sides. “Take off your shirt.”

“I really don’t think—”

“You can take it off, or I’ll take it off for you.”

Lukas flipped on the overhead light. She backed away from him as he drew closer until the bed touched the back of her knees. Lukas stood, hands on his hips, and waited.

Her cheeks burned, and she turned away from him, whipping the T-shirt over her head. It angered her that something she had little control over could make her feel so unhappy. She squeezed her eyes shut when she heard his dark growl. Long pink scars crisscrossed her back, but she hadn’t seen them in so long, she’d nearly forgotten. Aria jumped when she felt the warm pads of Lukas’ fingers smooth lightly over her skin.

“I’m going to kill him.”

His rage pulsed in the air between them: a living thing. A gasp escaped her lips as Lukas’ body shuddered with primitive anger.

“Lukas—”

“Why?”

Holding the T-shirt to her chest, she sat down on the bed. Suddenly, she felt very awkward. This wasn’t how things had played out in her fantasies. She twirled the end of her braid nervously, then jerked the scrunchie off and combed her fingers through her hair.

“You know how Haemon likes to hurt people.” She swallowed and risked a glance at Lukas. He stepped closer to the bed, chest heaving. His face had relaxed, and his hands were no longer fisted, but his expression still made her flinch. “It took me two tries before I was able to get away from him. Each time I failed, Haemon always made sure I was punished.”

“That’s torture, not punishment. Some of those cuts had to have sliced to the bone.”

Lukas sat down, resting against the headboard and pulled her to sit between his legs, resting her back against his chest and wrapping his arms around her. Somehow, not having to look at him made it easier to explain what happened.

“The whole story, baby. I need to know.” He sounded strained, and her heart softened at the plea.

“The second time I got away, I was just over the edge of his territory. I also managed to take out two of his guards. To say he was pissed is putting it mildly. I was punished immediately, and he was not careful. His Beta had to take the whip away before he did too much damage.” It was an oversimplified version, but she didn’t think he’d react well to the detailed version.

Lukas buried his face in her neck and pressed his lips to the base of her throat over his mark. “He won’t touch you again. I swear it.”

Aria twisted in his arms, still clutching the shirt to her chest. Her hand cupped the side of his face, forcing him to look at her. “Don’t make promises you aren’t sure you can keep. If the Council decides to turn me over, you can’t fight it. I got away from him once, I can do it again.”

He shook his head. “Screw the Council, Aria. I don’t care what their decision is. Haemon won’t even be within an arm’s length of you ever again. If he is, I’ll kill him.” He kissed her gently, but she sensed the tension in his muscular frame. “As it is, he still has to pay for what he’s done to you.”

Tears burned, and Aria wrapped her free arm around his neck. She buried her face there for a moment, breathing in his scent.

“It’s over with, Lukas. If you’re going to get upset over everyone who’s ever wronged me, we’ll be fighting battles for the rest of our lives.” She pressed a kiss to his lips. “I’ve had enough fighting for a lifetime already.”

Lukas sighed, shaking his head. “They hurt you, Aria. I can’t just forget, and I won’t promise to try.”

When she opened her mouth to protest, his lips devoured hers, and Aria allowed him to sweep her thoughts of anything but the feel of his mouth and the heat of his body. She released the shirt held between them to tangle in his hair.

He pulled away, and framed her face with his hands. "You're mine, Aria, and I protect what is mine. Don't ever forget that."

"Back at you."

She shifted in his lap, and heat flared. "Aria..."

"Shut up, Lukas."

She hesitantly kissed him again. His mouth opened and their tongues curled around each other. Warm hands cupped her breasts. His thumbs circled her nipples, the unfamiliar sensation sending desire through her gut so intense it almost hurt. She gasped, breaking their connection. Aria moved restlessly in his lap, frustrated at the lack of skin open to her exploration. She tried to pull at the hem of his shirt, getting only a small glimpse of tantalizing tanned muscle before his hands halted her own. Lukas broke away, making a sound halfway between a groan and a growl.

Boneless and weak, she was more than ready to continue. "Why are we stopping, Lukas?"

"You are so beautiful, Aria." Lukas' soft voice was hoarse, brushing over her like wings. He blinked, drawing her shirt from between them and over her chest.

She clasped the Material to her breasts, suddenly uncertain and nervous. "Did I do something wrong?"

Lukas gave a short bark of laughter. "No, that definitely isn't the problem." He shifted her on his lap and the bulge in his jeans became quite evident. "But I don't want to give the Council any reason to doubt you are my Mate. They could argue that I seduced you into agreeing."

"That's the most ludicrous thing I've ever heard." Certain he jested, she waited for him to continue or laugh. When he didn't, she covered her face with one hand. "Let me get this straight. I'm going to spend most of the foreseeable future in a cold shower because you think the Council *might* use this against us?"

He nodded, one hand rubbing her back in small circles.

"Someone better leave that council room bleeding when we finally get there, and it won't be one of us."

He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. He moved her off his lap and stood up, and a strange grimace passed over his features. Realization dawned when he tugged at the waistband of his jeans, and a strangled sound escaped her throat.

“Blue balls are not a laughing matter, Aria MacLeod.”

She pressed her fingers over her lips and smirked. “I can honestly say you did that to yourself. I was perfectly willing to help you out.” Feeling brave, she gave him her best leer. “I could still do something about it, you know.”

His eyes narrowed, trailing over her bare skin. She allowed the shirt to slip a little, and she could see him considering her words.

“Just how would a virgin know anything about that?” he asked, setting his hands on his hips.

“I’m a virgin, not innocent. I read, you know, and watch TV. I might need some help, but I’m a fast learner.”

His breath came out in a loud whoosh. “You are too damn tempting. I’m mad, and I want you so bad, I can’t think straight, and if you try that, I won’t be able to control myself.”

She batted her lashes, smiling sweetly. “I believe in you?”

“Nice try. I’m going to go double check...things with Aaron and Thaddeus. Feel free to dig through my clothes, and there are towels on the rack if you want to shower.”

She shook her head at the speed of his retreat. “Chicken.”

When he didn’t return, she blew out a breath. Her entire body still vibrated with need. But the whole conversation had gone better than she’d expected. She’d known she’d have to tell him when she decided to stay, but hoped it would wait awhile.

Padding to the bathroom, she opened the cabinets under the sink. She pulled out towels and a washcloth and stripped her remaining clothes, tossing them into a pile. The hot water cascaded over her shoulders, helping her relax.

After her shower and a brief fit of giggles over her appearance in Lukas’ oversized clothing, she waited for him, curled up on the bed. By the time she heard him come in, midnight had come and gone.



A little while later, Lukas' arm slid around her waist, and she caught a whiff of woods and night air from his skin. Apparently, he'd gone out to run off some of his frustration. She rolled over, curling closer to his warmth, pretending to sleep. His arm tightened and he brushed a kiss to her hair and was asleep a few moments later.

Basking in the sense of security his arms provided, she allowed her body to relax. As her body relaxed, she offered a silent prayer her nightmares would leave her in peace.

## Chapter 8

*Haemon stood in the clearing, bare-chested and glowing in the moonlight. Any normal, hot-blooded woman would have swooned at the manly physique and chiseled features. Aria's heart pounded, but it had nothing to do with being overwhelmed by the blonde Adonis. She sprinted across the clearing, away from him as he lifted his head to the wind and sought her scent. He'd find her in the end, but she refused to submit.*

*Before her, the woods grew hazy and faint, and his presence made the skin between her shoulder blades itch. He was just behind her. A tree root seemed to appear from nowhere and she tripped, crashing to the ground. Her palms scrabbled in the dirt, searching for something, anything she could use as a weapon. Her fingers met only leaf mould and broken bits of bark. Bare feet appeared in her field of vision and hands closed over her wrist, tighter and more final than a handcuff.*

*"Are you finished?"*

*She writhed against his hold, flipping to her back. His face loomed over hers, an amused smirk dancing over thin lips. She was not a child to be humored. He bent closer, and she spit in his face. "Not even close."*

*"You are beginning to try my patience." He wiped away the spit with slow, deliberate movements.*

*He jerked her to her feet, keeping her hands shackled with his own. He drew them apart and forced her arms behind her back, bringing her inside his arms, against his muscular chest. Their faces were so close, their breath mingled as she struggled to get away from him and she gagged at the scent of blood and wine.*

*"Beginning? I'm not doing a good job then." Each move she made only pressed her closer to his body. Her stomach heaved, and bile rose to the back of her throat. Each place their flesh touched throbbed as if she were being burnt. "I'm getting tired of your bullshit, Haemon. Attacking me in dreams is low, even*

*for you. Scared I'll be more than you can handle in person?"*

*His quiet laugh rolled through his chest. "I know you, Aria. Better than you think. Your bravado will only help you so much." She jerked her head as far away as she could when his lips moved towards hers, but his hold tightened, and she whimpered. Cold lips pressed against her mouth.*

*Her snarl seemed to ricochet around them. Haemon smiled, again. Around her, the scenery grew dimmer, turning black at the edges, leaving only his harsh, cold face. His grip tightened until tears threatened.*

*"Keep struggling, Aria. It makes the winning so much sweeter."*

*His laugh echoed in the darkness as it swallowed everything but those cold, calculating eyes.*

Aria sat up, sweating and breathing heavily. Bright sunlight filtered through the curtains drawn over the windows. She looked down at her wrists, rubbing them, as purple bruises formed where Haemon's hands had held her in the dream. Touching the sheets where Lukas should have lain, she calmed, taking in her surroundings. Safety and comfort pushed away the remnants of her nightmare.

A wry twist of a smile formed on her lips. Lukas must have left early to allow her sleep. A nice thought, anyway. Taking a better look around the room, she realized Lukas did not sleep here on a regular basis. It was devoid of the normal flotsam of a life—no pictures, no papers. Her clothes were folded and stacked on the edge of the dresser. A note was tented on the nightstand, with her name written across in Lukas' bold hand.

*Aria,*

*I didn't want to wake you. You need to sleep more than you needed to see me. I'm checking the borders with Aaron to make sure everything is secure. I will be gone for a few days. Ella has offered to take you shopping for some clothes. While I can live with you wearing my shirts, you'd probably like to have something else. Make sure you take Thaddeus with you. Please be careful and don't be gone long.*

*I love you.*

*Lukas*

She refolded the paper, sighing. Pushing the covers aside, she dressed quickly. Her stomach gurgled loudly. At the same time, she became aware of the sound of conversations, doors opening and closing, and the clatter of pans and cups downstairs. Heading towards the stairs, she took a deep breath and her mouth watered at the smell of hot dogs and vegetables curled into her nose. She followed the scent downstairs into organized chaos.

Thaddeus stood behind a folding table, a giant pot of macaroni and cheese steaming in front of him, and a huge line of teenagers and children waiting with paper plates. He caught sight of her in the doorway and grinned, handing his spoon to Lawrence, who was dishing out hot dogs next to him, and edged his way around the table and through the crowd.

“You’re awake! I hope we didn’t make too much noise.”

“No, it was time to get up. How long have I been asleep, anyway?”

“A little over 20 hours. Lukas wanted to stay until you were up, but he and Aaron needed to get started with their safety precautions and left yesterday evening to start running the borders. You hungry?”

Nodding, she reached up to brush an escaped strand of hair from her face. Thaddeus froze, his grin fading into a frown.

“What happened to you? Those weren’t there before.”

Confused, she shrugged.

Thaddeus grabbed her wrist then fitted his fingers lightly over the marks. “This wasn’t Lukas. Who did this?”

Aria winced and drew away, crossing her arms so the bruises couldn’t be seen. “All you need to know right now is that it wasn’t anyone here.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a conversation best kept for later.” Her eyes flicked to the curious wolves watching them. “There are far too many people around.”

Thaddeus’ lips pulled into a tight line. “I’m asking you now.”

“I would prefer not having to explain this a million times. So can we please wait until Lukas and Aaron are back?”

He studied her for so long; she didn't think he'd let it pass. Finally, he shook his head and blew out a long breath. "You are going to give Lukas a run for his money, aren't you?"

"I'm certainly going to give it my best shot."

Thaddeus grunted. He disappeared for a moment and returned with a long sleeved sweater. "Put this on until we can get something to cover those up."

She yanked it on over her head, secretly grateful. She did not want to explain or answer any questions.

Thaddeus cleared his throat. "Everyone, this is Aria, Lukas' Mate."

She tossed Thaddeus a disgruntled glance. Not the way she wanted to be introduced to everyone. Slapping on a smile, she waved her fingers, trying not to be conscious of her wrists. The adults and older children, who knew what was expected, brushed hair and bandanas off their napes, baring their necks in submission. The younger children squealed excitedly and ran back into the living room to talk among themselves. One very small girl pushed her way through the teenagers and studied Aria closely, standing very still before wrapping her arms around Aria's legs and burying her face into Aria's knees. She looked back up with a wide grin. "You smell good. I like you."

Aria laughed and picked up the child, settling her against her hip. Around her, the bubble of quiet passed and the noise resumed.

"What's your name, sweetie?"

"Hannah. My mama's the one passing out buns over there."

"It's lovely to meet you, Hannah." Aria allowed Thaddeus to herd her towards the end of the buffet line where the mother of the girl stood, passing out buns and paper plates. When Aria reached her, Hannah slid into her mother's arms.

"I'm really sorry. She slipped past me when I wasn't looking."

Aria waved away her apology. "Don't worry about it."

Behind the table, a small plate with food sat, obviously Hannah's lunch. Hannah's mom nuzzled her daughter's neck and then sat her down with strict orders to eat her lunch.

“If you want to eat with her in the other room, I can take over,” Aria offered.

Thaddeus Materialized at her elbow with a paper plate loaded with food and shook his head. “Sorry, but I have strict orders to make sure she has eaten.”

The blonde woman smiled and patted Aria’s arm. Her gaze lingered over the bruises, but she said nothing. “I’ve already eaten, and we’re nearly done as it is. Go eat something. It was lovely to meet you.”

Aria waved at Hannah, who waved back as she happily munched on a hot dog. Thaddeus snagged a second plate for himself and then followed her to the den, crowded with kids eating lunch. Thaddeus glared at a few kids, who scrambled off the couch to make room. Aria threw them an apologetic glance as the kids moved to whisper with their friends in a crowded corner.

“I look like I crawled out from under a rock. I should have stayed upstairs.” Aria sat down, balancing her plate on her lap.

“I think you look hot whatever you’re wearing. But if you tell Lukas I said that, I’ll deny everything. I’d like to be able to reproduce someday.” Thaddeus grinned, popping a spoonful of macaroni in his mouth.

“You have no shame, you know that? You shouldn’t be flirting with a married woman.”

Thaddeus spoke around the food in his mouth. “Nonsense. Married women are the safest ones to flirt with. They are never going to ask me for a date.”

Aria chuckled and shook her head, turning her attention to her plate. Making an effort not to inhale her meal, she tried to chew slowly. “How many cubs does the pack have?”

“There are about fifteen at the moment. Half those are older teenagers, many of whom came to us because they were orphaned.”

“How big is the pack?”

He swallowed his food before answering. “There are fifty-four of us all together, including the children. Fifteen are Mated pairs, and the rest are like me. There are a few unmated females, but not many. As you know, most of us live here, but there are some exceptions. There are ten cottages on this side of the

property, and another twelve spread out through the rest. Most of them are homes for the families, but there are a few shared by some of those who aren't Mated. The Pack Guards sleep here in the house, which is where you and Lukas will live."

"There are more of you than I thought then. How big is the property?" Aria couldn't help but compare them to her father's pack. There'd been over four hundred members when she left. The size made them more like a corporation than a family. Lukas' pack was the opposite: small, close knit, and loyal. Everything she'd always dreamed of when she allowed herself the luxury.

"About four thousand acres. Lukas inherited it from his grandfather and then bought up a little extra. It gives us a very comfortable cushion from the world outside, and on top of that, most of it shares a border with Caynor National Forest."

She was impressed. It was larger than anything she'd ever seen. "No wonder it takes two days to check the borders."

"Exactly." He finished his meal by stuffing half of the hot dog in his mouth.

The teenager sitting next to him wrinkled her nose. "Gross, Uncle Thaddeus. You're supposed to chew and then swallow."

He swallowed and winked. "There was a time when you thought that was an awesome trick." She snorted and turned around, ignoring him. He sighed, pretending to wipe a tear from his cheek. "It's so sad when they grow up and no longer find me amusing."

Aria laughed and finished the last of the macaroni on her plate. "You make a mean pot of macaroni, Thaddeus."

"Thank you. It's one of my more useful skills." He leaned back, eyeing the clothes she wore. "As much as I hate to admit it, your clothes look they're going to fall off. While I wouldn't mind watching, I think Lukas will take issue with it. Did you have a bag or anything? We looked through the car, but didn't find anything."

Aria blushed. "I carried everything important with me all the time and left everything at the motel. By now, Haemon has found all that." She shrugged. "I know it's not a good idea, but I really do need to get some clothes."

Thaddeus' face lost the boyish gleam as he stared past her. "Wally World is the closest place. It's not designer, but it isn't in town, and it's easier to keep track of who goes in or out."

Aria laughed and motioned to her outfit. "Do I look like a designer kind of chick? I don't really care where the stuff comes from as long as it doesn't moonlight as a tent."

Thaddeus snorted. "Go grab anything you want with you, and I'll go round up reinforcements. Ella will have my head if we leave without her, and right now, she's helping with the little ones outside. Meet me on the porch in a few minutes."

Aria rose, taking her plate and dumping it into the trash can. She waded through the crowd, murmuring hellos, to reach the door at the other end. It opened into the foyer, and she quickly went upstairs to retrieve her wallet.

She started to push the sleeves of the sweater up to get the extra fabric out of the way, then stopped. The sweater covered most of the bruising on her wrists, but once in a while, it revealed a little of the purple marks. Tugging on the wrist band, she hoped Ella wouldn't notice.

After shoving the wallet into an oversize pocket, she headed back downstairs. No one else was on the porch yet, and she took a moment to admire the scenery.

The small gravel drive was full of cars, but beyond it, the woods rose up, draped in all their autumn glory. The house itself sat in a clearing, overlooking the valley below, and gave a breathtaking view of the splashes of color. She took a deep breath and letting the smells of autumn and the cool air clear away the worries lingering at the back of her mind.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"

Aria jumped, whirling.

Lawrence looked strikingly alike to Thaddeus, but she could tell he was the quieter of the two. As if guessing what she was thinking, he smiled. "We're fraternal twins. Thaddeus got all the outgoing and obnoxious genes." He turned back to the view, smiling. "When Lukas gets back, you should ask him to take you for a run."



“I may do that.” She enjoyed runs when she had the chance. Taking time to stop and play in leaves and enjoy the weather rather than searching for hiding spots.

They stood in silence, listening to the breeze and the low murmur of the others in the house. Thaddeus, Ella, and another man, tall and wiry with a shock of red hair and a spattering of freckles that made him look younger than his serious expression suggested, appeared around the corner of the house.

“Aria, this is Sebastian. He’ll be coming with us.”

The young man bared his neck after a whispered comment from Thaddeus. Aria nodded, still a bit uncomfortable that the pack seemed so eager to accept her as Lukas’ Mate. She and Lawrence met them at the bottom of the steps. Thaddeus pointed to a silver SUV parked at the end of the drive and they headed over.

“You ride in the back, Aria, between Ella and Lawrence. Even though the windows are tinted, and I’ll feel better about it if you’re not sitting next to one.”

Guilt formed a knot in her stomach. She didn’t want anyone getting hurt because of a mistake in identity.

Ella patted her arm as Lawrence climbed into the car. “Don’t worry, Aria. We’re going to Wal-Mart. Even if they wanted to try something, this is a very small community. They may think we’re some sort of weird cult, but the locals won’t stand for violence in the streets. Haemon knows that.”

Aria nodded, her worry only a bit better. She climbed into the car, sandwiching herself between Lawrence’s huge frame and Ella’s smaller one. Thaddeus pulled the car out, heading down to the main road.

“So we’re buying everything, right?” Ella was so cheerful it almost made Aria want to smack her. She looked at Ella, searching for false cheer. Amazing, but she didn’t see any. Aria wasn’t sure she’d ever met someone quite so perpetually perky. The woman gave her the impression of bouncing, and it made Aria tired just watching.

She plastered a smile on her face. “What I had on isn’t fit for much anymore, and you can see Lukas’ things don’t fit all that well.”

Ella raked her with a frank gaze. "That's true. We'd better watch where we step, or everyone will be getting a glimpse of that underwear I bought you yesterday." Her grin was suggestive. "That went over well, huh? I tried to pick something sexy, but not too obvious. Did it work?"

An image of Lukas' face when she pulled them out popped into her mind. "I think it's safe to say they accomplished the goal." Well, they might have anyway. She didn't have any intention of telling them what actually happened. Let them think what they wanted.

"Oh good! I wanted to get into the house last night and see if I could hear how things were going, but Neanderthal up there wouldn't let me get that far."

Thaddeus' waggled his brows in the rearview mirror. "I had to resort to some very interesting methods to turn her attention."

Ella leaned over, fanning herself with one hand. "Did he ever!"

Aria bit her lip to keep from laughing as Lawrence sighed next to her. "Please don't elaborate. My ears will bleed, brother."

Thaddeus laughed. "You're just jealous. Besides, I'm trying to talk the lady into a repeat performance."

"You're going to have to do better than that." Ella stuck her tongue out at him with a laugh.

He raised a hand from the steering wheel and wagged a finger at her. "Don't put it out there unless you intend to use it, young lady!"

"Is he ever serious?" Aria asked Lawrence.

"Perhaps at funerals."

"Why Lawrence, I do believe you made a joke," Sebastian interjected, never turning his head from the road.

"Don't pick up my brother's bad habits. I can still take you, Sebastian."

"I'm not that much younger than you. Besides, I'm faster."

Lawrence shook his head. "I'm sure Thaddeus told you that. He lied."

They were only in the car a few moments more before the woods of the valley thinned out to reveal a small shopping center cut into the side of the mountain. It held a Wal-Mart, a Chinese take out restaurant, and a small

hardware/feed store. Parking lot only half full, Aria relaxed; less people meant less possibility of anyone getting hurt.

After Thaddeus parked the car, he twisted in his seat and pinned Aria with his blue eyes. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, taken back at the sudden seriousness in his face. "Stay with Ella and I, at all times. The other two will be around, but they will try to stay farther back, just in case. I don't want to rush you, but the shorter this trip, the better."

Aria nodded. "Don't worry. I hate trying things on anyway."

Ella sighed. "I suppose a real shopping trip will have to wait for awhile."

"Ella, you promise, too."

She gasped with genuine shock and anger. "Thaddeus Tench! I would never endanger anyone, let alone my Alpha's Mate. I'll just wait until this is all over and then take her out for a real shopping excursion. I am solely here for moral support."

Thaddeus watched her a moment longer and then gave a curt nod. In sync, the doors opened and they all climbed out.

Ella was fuming as she walked next to Aria on the way into the store. "Wait until I get him alone, and then I'll really give him a piece of my mind."

Aria squeezed her shoulder. "Don't get too upset. I'm told I'm quite a handful, and he's probably heard the rumors."

Ella looked at her with intrigue.

Aria leaned in closer and whispered, "But for now, I'll lull them into a false sense of security."

Ella laughed, shedding her bad mood like a dog shedding water. "A woman after my own heart. Let's go get you some clothes."

Between the two of them, Ella and Aria quickly filled the cart with several shirts, a few sweaters, a pair of dress pants, a black skirt, a new pair of sneakers, a pair of serviceable black pumps, and several pairs of jeans. Thaddeus followed them into the underwear section until Ella shooed him away, ignoring his claim that he had quite a talent for color. They picked out several bras and a few weeks worth of panties and socks, with Ella insisting on some lacy options Aria would have ignored.

The last stop was one Aria decided to indulge in, choosing a long silky nightgown with a low-cut bodice and a high slit in the side. Ella approved the choice whole-heartedly, and even Thaddeus threw out his approval from several feet away.

They were pushing the cart up to the register when Aria caught sight of a familiar, bruised face. Something in her expression must have given it away, as Thaddeus and Lawrence pressed close, tensing.

“What is it, Aria?” asked Thaddeus.

“Ethan was over on the other side of the registers.”

Sebastian started to move away, but she caught the back of his shirt. He turned, surprised and his gaze moved between them. She shook her head. “No, you have to stay. Ethan’s not that smart. He’s planning on one of you following after him.”

Thaddeus gave Sebastian a tiny nod, commandeering him to remain. His lips pressed into a tight line. “Someone has to go. We need to know what they’re doing, Aria.”

“Then give me a minute.” She closed her eyes, leaning on the shopping cart as they waited in line. Concentrating hard, she focused on Ethan’s energy. Her mind skittered away from the hate and anger rolling off him in powerful waves. Instead, she took a firmer grip and forced herself to search out the thoughts floating at the top of his mind, seizing the knowledge of what they were planning to do.

The vision of a van pulled up next to their SUV, two of the boys from the alley slashed the tires and retreated, waiting for them to come back. The rest was easy to gather. They would wait for the group to come out and call the pack for a ride. While they were at the SUV, the gang would attack, incapacitating the bodyguards and taking her into the van to Haemon. The plan grew blurry for a moment and Ella was added to the hostage list. They had not originally planned on two women.

She snapped back to herself, sagging against the cart. Thaddeus and Ella both grabbed her elbows, holding on until she had her feet under her again.

“What the hell was that?”

She smiled wanly up at Thaddeus and explained their plan. “They’re next to the SUV in a van. They’ve slashed the tires and they’re waiting for us. While they’re young, we’re outnumbered.”

Silence greeted her statement. Thaddeus and Ella watched her with incredulity until she whimpered softly, holding her head. Pain sliced through her skull like a knife, driving every coherent thought from her mind.

“Aria? What’s wrong?” Ella’s voice trembled. Behind them, Aria could hear Lawrence making a phone call to the house, asking for someone to come get them.

Aria leaned heavily on the cart, pushing it forward as the line advanced. “I can sometimes read the surface thoughts of people, especially those without strong mental blocks, or the weak willed. Ethan is both.” Another wave of pain made her teeth throb. She took short, shallow breaths. “But its not one of my greater talents. When their emotions are strong, and negative, it makes my head feel like it’s going to explode.”

“For how long?”

Aria shrugged. “A few hours, considering how much rage he was hauling around.”

“Good Lord.”

Aria bent over the cart, taking shallow breaths, concentrating on keeping lunch in her stomach. Ethan hovered a few aisles over, still believing he hadn’t been seen. She’d never been so glad the lines in Wal-Mart were long and slow. By the time the cashier began ringing up their purchases, Lawrence’s cell phone rang, and someone waited outside for them.

“Ma’am, are you all right?” The cashier eyed the men surrounding Aria with a mixture of fear and determination.

She smiled. Sure, it looked more like a grimace than she’d hoped. “I’m having a horrible morning.”

Ella pulled Aria to her, resting her head on her shoulder and patting her back. “Morning sickness, I’m afraid. It’s lasting forever.”

The cashier looked relieved to have a plausible explanation then continued to ring up the purchases. “I understand. It was horrible with my first one, too.”

Aria reached a shaking hand into the pocket of her sweatpants. Thaddeus waved her outstretched wallet away. “Let me pay for it, Aria.” He smiled at the cashier. “After all, I am the cause of all your trouble.”

While he swiped his credit card and paid, Aria frowned. “I have my own money.”

Ella snorted in her ear. “Don’t worry about it. Besides, that wasn’t Thaddeus’ credit card, it was Lukas’. Let him buy.”

Lawrence and Sebastian grabbed the bags and Thaddeus walked over, stretching out his arms with the intention of carrying Aria out. She pushed away from Ella and glared. “Don’t even think about it, Thaddeus.”

“You are in a great deal of pain. Even I can tell that.”

“I will walk out of here all by myself.”

“Aria—”

A low growl escaped past her gritted teeth. She would not allow Haemon’s minions to see her weak. “I’ll walk if it kills me.”

Thaddeus watched her, and she knew if she faltered, he would pick her up whether she liked it or not. But as he turned to lead the way, she thought she spotted a glint of respect in his eyes.

Walking took most of her concentration. Her head throbbed in time to her footsteps, and she winced when they walked outside into the sun. The car waited outside the entrance as promised. Aria climbed into the backseat, this time squashed even closer together since she, Ella, Sebastian and Lawrence all struggled to fit. Sean drove the car, and he waited for Thaddeus to climb into the passenger seat before he pulled away from the curb, both of them watched out the windows. The van she had told them about waited next to the SUV, whose tires were as flat as pancakes.

As they drove past, Lloyd, one of the boys that had been in the alley snarled from the driver’s seat, recognizing Sean and Thaddeus. Sean gave a mock salute and drove off, speeding through the remainder of the parking lot and back onto the road.

“What happened? Lawrence didn’t give me much info over the phone.”

Thaddeus filled him in, while Aria rested her head on her knees. Tears formed at the throbbing pain, but she refused to cry. It would only make the pain worse. Ella's hand rubbed small circles on her back, her concern evident. While Aria appreciated the gesture, all she wanted was a soft bed, a warm compress and Lukas. Only one day and he had already wormed his way into her heart. He'd pushed his way back into her life. Now she couldn't keep him out of her future. Too late, she'd allowed herself to need him, want him.

"We'll be home in no time. Just relax."

Aria didn't respond. She sat still, concentrating on a small stain on the floor, until the car shuddered to a stop.

She jerked up with a croak. "You all have to promise that you won't mention this to Lukas."

"You realize you're asking the impossible, right? I have to tell him. I can't lie to my Alpha." Thaddeus eyed her like she had sprouted an extra head.

"I didn't ask you to lie. It's not lying if you just don't tell him about it." She didn't need to deal with Lukas babying her. She'd allowed him too close already. Besides, they needed to focus on the war with Haemon and the safety of the pack.

Thaddeus groaned. "You're splitting hairs, but I'll make you a deal. I won't tell him if he doesn't ask."

Aria nodded, grunting at the wave of pain that rolled through with the movement. "I suppose that's as good as it gets."

Everyone crawled out of the car, three different pairs of hands offering to help her out. She waved them off, clenching her fists as she trudged back to the house on her own. Instead of going upstairs, she headed for Lukas' study, crawling onto the sofa bed and curling into a ball.

Ella trailed behind, hovering anxiously. "What can I do?"

"A hot compress sometimes helps."

Ella disappeared and returned quickly, carrying a hot water bottle wrapped in a kitchen towel. Aria took it and draped it over her eyes, resting her head on the back of the sofa bed. Thankfully, the heat relieved some of the throbbing.

"Anything else, Aria?"

“You’ve already helped a lot, Ella. I’m just going to try and sleep a little more.”

“Just call out if you need something. I’ll be in the den with the little ones if you need something.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

She waited until the door closed and then sighed, willing herself to relax and let sleep take the heavy pounding away. It took several minutes to clear her mind of stray thoughts. She’d been without real rest for so long, she had a lot of catching up to do.



## Chapter 9

“How do you feel?”

Lukas’ large hand stroked the side of her face. Slowly, she stretched and smiled at him. Her headache had been reduced to a dull throb. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Thaddeus and Aaron slide into the room. “Much better.”

“You attract trouble like honey attracts bears.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Off to the right, someone snorted. Probably Aaron.

“I found out what happened. Do you have anything to add?”

Irritated, she smiled just to irk him. “Your Pack is amazing?”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, my dear.” His grimace made her gut clench. It stretched tight on his lips. A pulse throbbed on the side of his thick-corded neck. Oh yes, he was definitely ticked. “Aria, what would possess you to tell Thaddeus to lie to me?”

She glared at Thaddeus and crossed her arms. “I didn’t tell him to lie. I asked him to omit part of the adventure.”

Thaddeus held up both hands. “Don’t look at me like that, I kept my promise. I didn’t tell Lukas anything. I told Aaron and he told Lukas.”

Aria rubbed a hand over her face. Aaron didn’t need any help thinking the worst of her. “I didn’t want you to get upset, Lukas.”

Lukas’ gaze pinned her down. His appearance was calm, but she could see anger and fear swirling in the depths of his eyes. She was not looking forward to talking to him when they were alone. “Tell me the truth, love. What else do I need to know about you?”

She lifted one shoulder, dropping her gaze to his knees. “Nothing.”

His hand curled around her palm and tugged her until she sat up next to him. His hands pushed the scrunchie down her arm, revealing the bruises. He spread her fingers, lacing his own with them, and then stared pointedly at her wrist.

“Sure you don’t want to rethink that?”

She tried to extract her hand from his grip, but he only tightened his hold. “No one got in, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Lukas snorted. “I’m worried about you. I leave you for two days, in my bedroom, and someone hurts you. You didn’t do this, and I sure as hell didn’t.”

She watched him trace the bruises lightly with his other finger, then sighed at his gentle touch. “Haemon is a Dreamwalker.”

His body jerked as if she’d slapped him. “Dreamwalkers can’t affect the physical world.”

“Haemon’s been parading around in my dreams for awhile. He apparently established enough of a connection to do just that.”

Lukas frowned. “It isn’t supposed to work that way.”

“Well, it does.”

Her Mate paused, his throat working. Not being able to scold her was killing him. Oh yes, she would catch hell later.

“Tell me everything, Aria. I need to know what your father knew, and what Haemon knows. I can’t make a plan or argue the case with the Council unless you tell me everything.”

Aria knew she had to, but still didn’t want to say out loud what she was capable of. Most of her talents were unpredictable at best, and made her feel like a teenager again, embarrassed and without control. And it had been drilled into her head early on to never allow anyone know her secrets. It was a hard habit to break.

“Well, you know about the whole mind thing. I’m also very handy with plants.” She tried for levity but Lukas’ intense frown told her he wasn’t buying it. A blush stole from her chest to her hairline. “It’s not really any kind of power, but you’ve already seen what happens when I get too emotional.”

“You leak power.”

She nodded. “A little. But I’ve yet to learn to control it. None of them are very useful powers.”

Thaddeus shook a finger at her. “Not true. The mind reading was very useful.”

“But unreliable,” she added. No one could argue with that.

Lukas sighed, slid his arm over her shoulders and dropped a kiss on her mouth. “If you ever endanger yourself again, I may have to do something drastic.” Despite the casual tone, his body thrummed with tension.

“Lukas, I couldn’t very well let Sebastian follow Ethan out there and get hurt when I could easily prevent it.”

“His job is to protect you. You have to let them do their jobs, Aria.”

“I won’t have someone dying in my place, Lukas.”

Aaron cleared his throat. “If I may interject, that is our job. We, all of us who are body guards, have sworn an oath to die for you,” he said, with slight distaste.

Surprised, Aria studied him a little closer. A shadow around one eye told her he’d recently been in a fight. Obviously, they had had a “discussion” about her. *Great.* She shook her head. “You don’t understand. I haven’t earned that kind of respect. I don’t doubt that you would all do your duty, but I don’t want your protection, when I haven’t even proved myself worthy of it.”

Aaron surprised them all by laughing. “You have my respect, Aria. You’ve managed to stay out of Haemon’s reach for over a year. That is no small feat.”

“But you hate me!” She clapped a hand over her mouth.

“I don’t hate you. I just don’t trust you.” His gaze flicked to Lukas as his Alpha growled. “I’ll protect you with my life, because Lukas chose you. As Beta, and as Lukas’ friend, it is my duty.”

Stunned, she struggled for words. “I can appreciate that. But on the issue of people dying in my place, well, we are going to have to agree to disagree.”

“For now, you can at least promise me you won’t leave Pack territory without me.” Lukas’ tone brooked no argument.

“That I can do. At least for the time being.” Until Haemon found out she was here and the pack realized the danger she brought, then they’d ask her to leave, and she’d do it. It would kill her, but she’d go.

“Good. Now, if you are willing, I would like to perform the Mating ritual this week.” He gave her a lopsided smile. “I had hoped to be more romantic, but I want to make our bond complete before Haemon has any time to prevent it.”

He must have been joking. She waited for him to laugh. "What?"

"I know. I didn't do a very good job of proposing, but you did say you would stay."

"I've only been here, what, three days? There are still a lot of unanswered questions between us." Using his words against him had no effect.

"Aria, what other choice do we have? You have to become part of the pack, and I'm going to be a jerk and demand it be through Mating. I have a better defense if we can tell the Council we're Mated."

Panic and irritation warred in her chest. Mating with Lukas meant more than just marrying him. If Haemon came after her, Lukas could die. Their souls would be bonded. She wanted it, but could she take that risk? "That was so unromantic. I might just punch you."

"I would deserve it. You don't have to answer right away."

Aria stood. "If that's the case, then I am going to go shower and change."

Lukas' eyed her warily and sighed. "You win for now. You do look like you've been playing dress up in my closet."

She hiked the pants higher on her hips. "I'm aware." Turning to Thaddeus, she waved a finger at him. "You, sir, I will get even with later," she threatened and whirled around, leaving the men to stare after her.

Aria headed upstairs to take a quick shower. When she got out, she wrapped a towel around herself and flipped her hair into a second towel, twisting it up over her head. She opened the door to find Lukas sitting on the bed, arms crossed, waiting for her. He didn't even nod as she stopped in the doorway. A frown marred his face like it had been carved from granite.

He rose off the bed in one fluid movement, his face suddenly inches from hers, his arms braced on either side of the doorway. His eyes glittered with a mixture of anger and fear. "You ever pull that kind of stunt again, and I'll lock you in this room and throw away the key."

Aria gulped.

"Sean called the moment he set out for the store, and all I got was that you were somehow hurt and under attack. Do you have any idea what it was like knowing I couldn't get here in time to help you if I needed to?"

“Lukas, I swear, it wasn’t that dangerous.”

A low growl escaped him as he pressed her against the doorframe. His hips ground into hers, his warmth and nearness wrapped around her, and she melted into his chest, remembering the last time they’d been in the bedroom together. She suddenly had a difficult time concentrating.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Aria.”

Like ice water dumped over her, she jerked away from him, slipping out from under his arm and into the room, anger fizzing under her cheekbones. “No idea? Lukas, I realize I haven’t done much that would lead you to believe otherwise, but I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. You are the one with no idea. You don’t know what Haemon is capable of. Dream-walking and bruised flesh are the least of the things he will do to me if he can.”

Lukas’ face registered surprise and then anger. He stalked toward her, but she raised a hand and glared.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to be afraid to sleep at night—to be physically ambushed because he might visit my dreams? I’ve spent over a year dodging Haemon. I know it’s probably all a game to him, but I am not a cub to be sheltered. My father did enough locking me up to last a lifetime and I won’t take it from you.”

“I can’t help it, Aria.”

“You’ll learn to. You will not shut me in this house and make me feel like a burden.”

He walked up to her, stopping just before their bodies touched. “I won’t let you fight.”

She slapped his chest. “Stupid male! You will, because it’s my right as your Mate!”

“I can’t lose you again!” His roar surprised both of them. His eyes were suspiciously bright, and he grabbed her arms, pulling her tight against him. His hoarse whisper drained her anger as quickly as it had risen. “Until three days ago, I was certain you were dead, and on rare occasions, I entertained the thought you weren’t, I was equally certain Haemon would have made you into a hollow shell of the woman I loved. You can ask me for almost anything, Aria, and I will give

my soul to see it happens, but you can't ask this of me. I can't give let you walk away."

Her forehead dropped to his chest. She'd never really had a choice as his Mate. If Haemon didn't kill her, walking away from Lukas would. "I don't want to be a useless member of the Pack, Lukas. I will not allow anyone to fight my battles for me either. I've done enough cowering."

Lukas kissed the top of her head and sighed. "We are at an impasse, honey. Right now I think you can agree that allowing you to fight would play right into Haemon's hands, yes?"

Aria knew he was right. She was vulnerable in a way she hadn't been before, and it could work to Haemon's advantage. They needed some time to rethink things before she went jumping into any sort of altercation. "For now, I will let you do the fighting. I won't *allow* it for long though, Lukas."

He groaned in frustration, searching her face intently. "I'll take what I can get at the moment. But you will remember to stay on the property."

Her internal radar immediately perked up. "What else is going on?"

"It may be nothing at all, but I want to make sure you understand you cannot leave the boundaries." Lukas released her, moving to the door.

"I said I wouldn't run. I meant it." What he omitted made her heart pound faster. She nodded, pulling the towel wrapped around her hair, which was already sliding off, from her head. As he turned to walk out, a thought Materialized.

"The Council threatened to take custody of me, haven't they?"

Lukas stopped, a lopsided grin appeared. "You always could read too much of my thoughts. Go on and get dressed and I'll see you downstairs."

And then he left, closing the door behind him.

Slipping one of the shirts over her head, she sighed. She picked up her brush from the nightstand and pulled it through her damp hair.

Haemon always maneuvered the Council right where he wanted them even though the Council foolishly believed they had control of Haemon. A mistake that would cost them. Haemon was far more clever than anyone expected. Before this was over, he would bring the Council to their knees, and they would not enjoy the experience.

Pulling on a pair of jeans, she prayed Lukas and her new Pack would be able to get out of the war alive.

After braiding her hair, she stared at herself in the mirror. Dark smudges sat under her eyes, contrasting against her pale skin. For a brief second, she considered trying to cover it up, but remembered that she didn't have any makeup with her, and they hadn't bought any when at Wal-Mart. Vanity was the least of her problems.

Giving a mental shrug, she headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Ella appeared at her elbow, eyes round as saucers. "He proposed and you said no?"

Her hissed whisper was about as discreet as a foghorn. All activity in the kitchen stopped, and several people turned to watch her.

Lukas leaned against the counter, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow. She mimicked him. Without looking at Ella, she nodded. "I turned down a business proposition. If *that* was an actual proposal, it'd go down in history as the worst ever."

The onlookers turned the other way, watching Lukas, who rolled his eyes.

A little louder, she added, "You know, Ella, if he decided to give it a more convincing try, I might be a little more accommodating."

Pushing off from the counter with one hip, Lukas walked over, arms still crossed, giving her a thorough once over as if she was a car. He leaned close to her and winked.

"I'll have to think about it."

## Chapter 10

A titter of laughter wove through the kitchen, before everyone returned to their respective tasks. A couple of the older women threw knowing glances her way. Most of them were preparing food for what appeared to be a party. Several women were making green beans, macaroni, marinating steak and chicken, and mixing pasta salad. Others were taking chips, salsa, and snack foods outside.

Aria moved out of the way, walking to stand in front of the bay window, overlooking the porch and backyard. Sunset was quickly fading into twilight, and autumn's undercurrent of winter prickled her arms through the screen door to her right. Christmas lights had been strung up outside, illuminating a small section of the lawn. Tables were set up on one side, already laden with food and drinks, and someone had brought a huge set of speakers and radio outside on the porch. The teenagers were all gyrating wildly on the grass, while the younger kids rolled and played, their small forms seemingly impermeable.

A couple of wolves ran over from the edge of the woods, shifting under the cover of trees and dressing before walking up to join their friends.

One of the women carried in a cake, and Aria grabbed the door for her. "Who's birthday?"

"The twins, Jacob and Mira. They're turning six." The woman nodded her head at a pair of tow-headed boys, playing with a kickball. "They probably won't last longer than an hour, but any excuse for a party..."

Aria laughed, letting the door close behind her as she stepped back into the kitchen to see Ella scurrying around.

Aria tapped her friend's shoulder before Ella could disappear into the midst of excitement. "What can I do to help?"

Ella flashed a grin and thrust a bowl of French onion dip into her hands. "Take that out, will you? And then, if you don't mind, I need some help carrying the meat to the grill. Lukas took the first batch with him, but there's a lot of food."



Aria found an empty spot for the dip, which was quickly descended upon by the teenagers. Going back inside, she took a huge platter of barbeque chicken breasts from Ella and followed her outside and around the porch to the grill.

Apparently, this was the designated man-station. The older men all stood around, beer in hand, talking. As soon as the women approached, they grew silent.

In a stage whisper, Ella asked, "What could they possibly be talking about?"

Aria tried to hold the smile from her lips. "Girls. It's always girls."

Thaddeus sniffed, flipping a hand at them. "Nonsense. We are discussing world affairs. Important things, like alternative energy and the rising cost of beer."

Lukas took the platter from her, his fingers brushing over her skin. The contact shouldn't have sent electricity arcing up her arms, but it did. She jumped in reaction, almost dropping her end of the platter. Lukas merely put down the tongs and took a swig of beer, his eyes sparking in the dim light.

She was suddenly overwhelmed by the memory of his hips grinding into her towel-wrapped body. Lukas' eyes focused on her sharply as if reading her thoughts and remembering the scene himself, then abruptly turned to flip meat on the grill, without breaking concentration. Her face flushed, but she hoped it was dark enough to keep anyone from noticing their exchange. Beside her, Ella flirted heavily with Thaddeus.

Sebastian leaned over the porch railing, waving one hand at Lukas. "It's time. The natives are getting restless."

Lukas never took his attention from her. "Sure thing, Sebastian."

If he kept this up, she would burst into flame right there on the lawn. Of all the ways to go, she supposed it wasn't a bad one.

"Take this, will you?" Lukas thrust the grill utensils at Thaddeus, and grabbed her hand. Tugging her along, she followed his larger strides with two of her own.

"Lukas, slow down. My short legs can't keep up."

He immediately slowed, stepping carefully over a stray ball as they wove through the crowd of small children. He dragged her up the platform steps, stopping when they reached the center. Her heart sank. She'd hoped for a dark corner for him to have his wicked way with her.

Tilting his head back, a rich, deep howl undulated from his throat. The entire pack turned, joining the song. Without actually thinking about it, she joined in, her own alto tone melding with Lukas' and then the packs, until they became one. When finished, Lukas drew her to his side, his arm draped possessively over her shoulder.

"I wanted to make sure you all were introduced, at least as a group, to Aria MacLeod. She is a guest for now, but will hopefully become a permanent member of the pack. Feel free to stop by and say hello when you get the chance."

Aria waved a tentative hand at the crowd. "Thank you all for allowing me to stay. It means more than you know."

Lukas squeezed her shoulder in approval. "Now, I believe we have some singing to do!" The twins were brought to the center of the crowd. As they finished singing "Happy Birthday", Aria leaned closer to Lukas. "They haven't eaten yet, have they?"

"Their bed time comes fast. The little ones ate earlier. They'll get cake now and go to bed pretty soon. The rest of us will celebrate without them."

The cake was brought out, six large candles winking merrily in the night air. The two children puffed their cheeks in perfect synchronization and blew hard, taking out the flames and spattering their parents with confetti sprinkles.

Lukas pressed a kiss to her palm, desire flaring as he pressed his nose to the inside of her wrist, drawing a deep breath of her scent. Fire pooled in her core. With a smile, started to head back to the crowd of men. "It's my turn to man the grill, but come over and eat with me when you get hungry. Otherwise, mingle, have a good time. You deserve it."

She nodded. What had she done? One evening of nearly having sex, and now she couldn't even look at him without thinking about it. She needed a drink.

When Lawrence found her, she was sipping a fruity drink and resting on the porch rail. Before he could speak, they both heard Aria's name called from the other end of the yard. Ella waved them over.

With a sympathetic smile at Thaddeus, she headed toward Ella, but stopped short when Lawrence hooked his hand in the crook of her elbow.

"I am the last one to give romantic advice, but if you have the chance to be with Lukas, you should take it. You've both paid your dues. Whatever else is going to happen will happen, whether or not you decide to take Lukas as your Mate."

His words were fervent, and she could tell from the pained look on his face, he meant what he said.

She stared at him in surprise. "I know, and I appreciate the sentiment. It's just...complicated."

"Only if you make it so."

\*\*\*

By the time she sat down on the patchwork picnic blanket next to Lukas, Aria had decided the entire pack was insane. Endearing, but undoubtedly and irritatingly insane.

Every time she turned around, she'd had to learn a new name and face, and she'd only been able to retain about twelve of the fifty that had approached her. On top of that, Lawrence, Ella, and Alec, as well as a couple of the older women had given her pep talks about making a marriage or mating work, glowing character references for Lukas or from Ella, just plain demands to stop being silly. They were worded much more nicely, and said with the sincerest of smiles and best of intentions, but after forty-five minutes, her temper was on a very short leash.

"Having fun?" Lukas asked, propping his beer between his thighs.

"I hope to God they're pestering you as much as they are me," she grumbled, mimicking his action with her own cup.

“Same song, different tune. I’ve had enough ideas on how to propose to start my own consulting agency.” He picked up a couple of potato chips from the plate in front of them and shrugged. “They mean well.”

Swallowing a spoonful of beans, she nodded. “I know. That’s the only reason I’ve held my tongue.”

They ate in silence, until she set aside her plate and leaned back on her hands. “You do have a beautiful bit of land, and they are an amazing bunch.”

Lukas scooted around, moving so that his back was against the tree their blanket rested under. He spread his legs, patting the ground between them. “Sit with me?”

She smiled, her irritation draining. “Are you trying to seduce me?”

He flashed a grin that melted his chiseled features into something a little more boyish. “Not yet, but give me time.”

With a laugh, she scooted her body over his and leaned against his chest, his arms curling around her stomach. She laced her fingers through his, tilting her head into his shoulder. They fit like perfect puzzle pieces. His warmth seeped into her body, and her gut clenched in a mixture of desire and love. She’d never get enough of this man.

“I apologize for earlier, Aria. I pushed too soon, and did a lousy job of it.”

She rubbed circles on his arm, reveling in the freedom to touch him whenever she wanted. “No. I understand. But I have to admit, Lukas.” She paused, the combination of the night air, pina coladas and Lukas’ body, loosening her tongue. “I’m trying my best not to act like a girl, but I want a real proposal. The kind I can tell our children about with stars in my eyes.”

The longer she stayed with him, the less convincing her reasons to leave became. They loved one another, and they’d been given a second chance. Should she really pretend this wasn’t what she wanted? The thought of Lukas dying again nearly stopped her heart, but living without him hurt just as bad.

“So you’re saying you’d have said yes if I’d done a better job?”

Laughter rumbled from within. “I’ll think about it.”

“Infuriating woman.” Lukas pressed a kiss to her hair.

She twisted her torso to circle his neck with her arms. "I wouldn't want to make it too easy for you, now."

Their lips were a hairsbreadth apart when someone called Lukas' name from the porch. His forehead touched hers, and he squeezed her waist. "They either have the worst or the best timing ever."

She totally agreed. "Jury's still out."

He untangled them, rose from the blanket, and headed to the porch. She watched his confident swagger as her heart slowed, and she willed the heat of her body to cool. Only Lukas was able to send her emotions in an uproar.

Thaddeus walked over and plopped onto the grass next to her blanket. She sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. He propped himself on his elbow and stared at her with a wide, slightly tipsy, grin plastered over his face. "I know it's none of my business, but can I say something?"

She motioned with one hand, snagging her cup and taking a large gulp of her drink. Just what she needed: more advice. And from a drunk Thaddeus. "Can I stop you?"

"I know I should leave well enough alone, but I'm a meddlesome fool, and I think I need to impart a little wisdom." He took a pull of his beer and studied the label. "Might also be the Dutch courage, but whatever."

"How many of those have you had?"

Brows furrowed, he started to whip out his fingers as if to count, then flapped them in defeat. "Doesn't matter." He leaned a little closer. "I know Lukas botched the whole proposal thing. Believe me, I've told him how much it sucked. But I don't think that's why you turned him down. You've made a great leap since you arrived. Pretty fucking amazing, actually, for someone with your history."

Her eyes narrowed. "Thaddeus, get to the point. You're only making sense every other sentence."

"You two have issues to work out. I get it. Believe me, been there, doing that, knitting the T-shirt." He jerked his chin toward Ella, playing with a group of children across the yard who'd refused bedtime. "She's my Mate, you know. We're both aware, but she's afraid. Once you're True Mated, like, two seconds later you have kids. It's unavoidable."

He stopped for a moment to watch Ella tickle one of the little ones who had refused to sleep until he squealed for mercy. Tenderness softened his features. "Her Mom died in childbirth, and her father grieved himself to death before she was six. Even though she loves the little buggers, she's terrified the same thing will happen to us. So I'm waiting." He flashed a pearly smile. "It's an acquired skill, but I've gotten very good at it."

"And this has to do with me...how exactly?" The story pulled at her emotions, but she waited for his answer. She didn't know whether she'd like it or not since the pack felt the need to offer her advice at every turn. And Thaddeus thought the same.

"You're pretending like you don't love Lukas enough. Like you can walk away tomorrow and still be fine. You're wrong. Anyone with half a brain can see it all over both of you. If you leave him again, he won't come back to us like he did before. And you'll be even worse."

She wanted to protest, but she kept her mouth shut, moving her gaze to the twinkling lights outlining the yard. Fear sizzled in her chest at the truth of his words.

"All I'm saying is that you need to stop being afraid of what's happened in the past. It's easy. You just need to"—he waved one hand in a sweeping gesture—"believe in a few impossible things before breakfast."

Aria smirked. He'd had more than a few beers. "What you're saying, Alice, is I should suck it up and give in?"

"And then fight for it. You've played a good game, but you were lost before. Wandering around without a purpose. What you've been looking for is staring at you from the porch. Go get it!"

She nearly choked on her drink as he slapped her shoulder, nearly knocking them both over in the process.

"Thanks, Thaddeus. You *are* a meddling fool." She studied Lukas as he spoke to a couple of the pack members on the porch. Wiping splatters of her drink from her shirt, she glanced back at Thaddeus. "Are you going to remember this conversation tomorrow?"

He downed the last of the beer and belched. "Probably not."

Thaddeus got up, swaying to the beat of the music. She watched him go, rolling her cup between her hands. “In that case, Thaddeus, you’re actually quite astute.”

He laughed, waving one hand over his shoulder. *Cheeky bastard.* He’d probably remember every word, and she’d never hear the end of that conversation.

“Wow. He’s really sloshed.”

Aria looked up. *Great. Now it was Aaron’s turn?* She sighed, her forehead connecting with her knees. “So help me God, if you offer advice too, I’ll kill you.”

Aaron snickered, leaning against the tree. “As if.”

Taking a deep breath, she rose, holding on to the blaze of her own alcohol infused courage. “Look, Aaron, I get it. You’re worried about what will happen if I leave. But I’m worried about what will happen if I stay.” She searched his face for some flicker of understanding. “Don’t you see, Aaron? We’re worried about the same thing. The only difference is the timing.”

He didn’t say anything, but his gaze didn’t seem quite as hostile as usual. She stuck out one hand. “We got off on the wrong foot. I’m Aria MacLeod. It’s lovely to meet you.”

A smile curved one side of Aaron’s hard mouth. “I don’t want to like you, you know. I wanted to hate you for what you’ve done to him. Lukas and I have been best friends since we could talk, and we’ve dealt with a lot. But when he thought you died that night...” He shook his head with a heavy sigh. “I hope I never see that look on anyone’s face again.”

His hand closed over hers and pumped it up and down. “It’s nice to meet you.” He didn’t release her hand, but his grip remained loose. “Now tell me—are you going to stay?”

She searched his shadowed face for the familiar antagonistic sarcasm, but only saw tired shadows echoing the ones that lingered over Lukas and Thaddeus’ faces when they thought no one was looking.

Flashing a grin, she pulled her hand away. “Only if he asks me the right way.”

The smile that answered hers wasn't large, but it was something. "All right then. Just remember, I'll be watching you."

He wandered off, hands shoved into his pockets.

It wasn't trust, but it was a start.



## Chapter 11

Things were beginning to wind down as the night grew late. Despite the many bits of advice she'd endured, the evening had been very enjoyable. In a strange way, it was annoying, yet endearing.

The urge to shift and take a run in wolf form swept through her. It had been a long time since she felt safe or comfortable enough to want to do such a joyous sport. The desire to give in was strong, but if she shifted and ran, they'd probably think she was escaping. Also considered as a guest, such an action would be unbelievably rude and potentially dangerous.

Content to sit back and observe the others, she spotted a group of teenager sprawled over the porch, fiddling with the boom box yet again, and Thaddeus climbed up next to them, whispering something to one of the girls, who promptly took control of the stereo.

The stations fuzzed in and out for a few moments then the girl looked back at Thaddeus and shook her head. Both of them wore similar disappointed expressions. When he started to turn away, the girl jumped up with a warning to wait.

She disappeared inside the house, returning a few moments later with a shiny silver disc and inserted the CD into the player. Immediately, the cheery pop tones that had been bouncing around the yard all evening faded into a slow tune straight from a popular nineties musketeer movie. Thaddeus gave the girl thumbs-up and nudged one of the boys next to him with an obvious head jerk. Both teenagers looked at Thaddeus like he was out of his mind.

Which he probably was.

Around the yard, men and women slowly rose together and began to sway under the soft twinkling lights. When Ella exited the house, Thaddeus dragged her into a dance, his movements remarkably controlled for a man she'd thought plastered.

She watched the graceful movements of the dancers, and allowed her mind to wander. What would it be like to feel free and comfortable enough to have Lukas hold her in the moonlight like that?

“Would you like to find out?”

Aria jumped, her fingertips flew to her mouth. “I didn’t say that out loud, did I?”

Lukas smiled. “No. I just know you that well.” He leaned down, one hand outstretched. “Dance with me?”

She didn’t hesitate and slipped her fingers over his, relishing his touch as soft as a caress. Aria followed him to the edge of the dancers, where he slid his arms around her waist, and she clasped hers around his neck. He drew her closer, until her breasts were just barely brushing his chest.

The air between them heated as he spun her slowly around the grass. No words were necessary. It was enough to be held in his arms, gazing into his mismatched eyes as they swayed to the beat of the music. She allowed herself to pretend, just for a moment that they were a normal couple, without worries and problems weighing them down.

She drew closer and laid her head on his chest. His arms held her tight, the strength in them at war with the tender way he touched her. Nothing had ever felt so perfect.

The first song ended, but Lukas didn’t release her. She lifted her head to look up at him. The next song, *So She Dances* by Josh Groban, was one of her favorites. The music flowed out of the radio and surrounded them like liquid honey. The other dancers faded from her awareness, until it seemed they were the only ones under the stars. Lukas pulled her closer, shifting his arms to a more formal hold, leading her into a waltz.

When she was a teenager, her father had insisted she learn the dance. And she’d believed there was no point in her knowing the steps. Until now.

Twirling through the warm autumn night, surrounded by soft light, the grass tickling her bare feet, she realized how those lessons paid off. Lukas dipped her and brushed a light kiss on her lips as he drew her close to his body.

“Marry me, Aria.” The words were tender, his gaze intense. She gasped as she spun away from him and back again. “Not because everyone expects it, or because you need my protection, but because you love me and you want to.”

He twirled them around the yard one last time as the music wound to a crescendo around them. Then he dropped to one knee, and tugged her closer. In his other hand, a smooth circle of silver glinted in the dim lighting, and he held it up, the large sapphire winked at her.

She froze. Neither could she speak, much less remember to breathe. How long had he been holding on to that piece of jewelry? Had he been carrying that around all this time? Vaguely, she became aware of the others, who had stopped to watch them.

“I love you, Aria. I have always loved you, and I want you for as long as God allows and then some. Finish marrying me?”

Her conscience argued with her heart. She wanted nothing more than to say yes. If she did, what would be the price? The horror of her past rushed through her. By staying, she’d be putting everyone in danger. No way could she risk their safety for her sake.

She started to pull away, but Lukas tightened his hold on her hand. “Aria, this is about you and me. Nothing else matters.”

Aria stilled at the love brimming from his eyes. His ability to read her like an open book was disconcerting. No one else knew her as well as he did. How could she stand losing him again? Heaving a shaky sigh, she tried to smile. Running was over. She’d stay, she’d marry him, and she’d do everything in her power to protect them. Even if it meant dying. “Yes. If you don’t have the good sense to run screaming at the sight of me, then who am I to argue?”

Lukas pushed the ring on her finger and jumped up, pulling her tight against his body as his mouth closed over hers. She clung to him, only vaguely aware of the clapping and whistling that echoed in the night air around them.

He released her, and she studied the ring, a large, twinkling blue sapphire in an oval setting. Tears tracked down her cheeks. Cheers erupted around them, but Aria vaguely noticed. A slow warmth replaced her fears. “I can’t believe you still have this.”

“You didn’t think I threw it out, did you?” He made an indignant face, ruined by the joy and humor sparkling in his gaze.

Her brows furrowed, she studied it more closely. The band was elegant and sparkled like new, but she realized the setting was old fashioned. “Is this—?”

“It was my mother’s engagement ring.” He kissed her nose, wrapped an arm around her waist and they started toward the porch. “It’s been around awhile.”

Resting her head on his shoulder, she looked up at him. “It’s lovelier than I remembered,” she told him, voice rasping with emotion.

It was the same ring he’d offered her almost two years before, but she had been unable to wear it proudly under her father’s roof, and she’d left it with Lukas for safekeeping. She’d never thought to see it again.

Thaddeus was right. Her purpose had been right here all along.  
Now she had to fight for it.

\*\*\*

“This is ridiculous. I’m beginning to think eloping is a better idea.”

Aria was hiding outside, elbows deep in a bag of potting soil and compost she had mixed herself. Mums were scattered around her in various colors.

On the steps of the porch, Sebastian smiled at her. “What do you mean?”

She tried to blow the hair off her forehead, but only succeeded in making the problem worse. “Ella may be an amazing party planner, but she’s trying to pack four months of planning into two days. It’s driving me nuts. I want to marry the man. I don’t really care what we eat, as long as everyone gets fed.”

Sebastian laughed, a young, boyish sound that had her wondering just how old he really was. He hadn’t offered to help her plant the mums in front of the house, but she hadn’t really expected him to. They both knew he’d been sent to watch her while she gardened.

That was another thing. Every time she turned around, one of the Pack guards Materialized. The only time she felt like she had any privacy was when she went to the bathroom. She stared at the sparkling ring that hung under the neck

of her shirt, sharing the chain with her mother's necklace. Haemon had an amazing network, but she didn't think his network could possibly have gotten this information to him yet. Lukas had proposed less than twelve hours ago. She kept the ring hidden, just in case.

Working out some of her frustration, she pulled the plastic pot off the bottom of one of the mums, placed it in the ground, sprinkled a few handfuls of her dirt mixture in with it, and pressed around the base with gentle fingers.

Gardening had always been her source of comfort—the one thing she could do without getting into any trouble. Her gift fed each plant as she dealt with it, coaxing the best from each leaf and flower.

There were two pots left when she heard the screen door open and caught a whiff of Ella's perfume. Immediately, her serene mood shattered.

"Aria!"

She continued to dig.

"Aria, you have to get in here." Ella's voice reeked with panic. Probably a horrible case of clashing colors.

The footsteps thundered down the steps, and Ella tugged at her arm. With a sigh, Aria rose, brushing off her hands. "So help me, Ella, if this is another color or food thing—"

"Lukas is on the phone inside. The Council called."

Aria's stomach dropped, while her heart tripped over itself. She followed Ella up the steps into the house.

Lukas was on the house phone, the receiver cradled between his shoulder and ear. He'd had some sort of paper in his hand, but when she got there, it had been reduced to a pile of confetti.

"I understand, but you can't place an edict out on that kind of thing. That isn't within your power."

Aria winced at his choice of words. It didn't take a psychic to know whatever they were saying had something to do with her. She was willing to bet someone had tipped off the Council to their upcoming Mating.

His hand curled around the bits of paper he had shredded onto the counter.

“You can tell me whatever you like, but I thought your place was to help, not hinder our kind.”

She stepped closer, but even with her enhanced hearing, the words were indistinguishable on the other end.

“Aria and I completed the human half of the Mating process over a year ago. Before this week is out, we will be completing the shifter ritual.” He paused, and the beginning of a growl rumbled in his throat. “You cannot forbid this. It isn’t up to you!”

His fist crashed into the counter. Panic rushed at her. She didn’t want to hear anymore. She turned to run for the back door, but he caught the crook of her elbow.

“Fine.” Anger vibrated in the husky tones of his voice. “We’ll wait for your call.”

He slammed the phone in its cradle, a cracking noise resonated from the force.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she crossed her arms. *Calm down, Aria. Maybe it’s not as bad as you think.* “Now tell me what they said,” she ordered, heaving a deep breath.

“The Council has forbidden us to join as True Mates.”

Disappointment and worry surged through her. Lukas wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin in her hair. “I told them we would wait for them to deliberate further.”

Thaddeus, who had been standing with Lukas during the call, made a choked sound of protest.

Lukas brushed his lips against her forehead. “I lied. They didn’t give me any sort of reason that would be considered valid. They just didn’t want me to Mate with you. We will continue as planned, although I think perhaps this evening might be a better option for the ceremony. If we wait too long, they’ll send someone to collect you.”

Aria drew back and glanced around the room. She didn’t want to wait either. If the Council knew of their plans, then Haemon would be informed. “I’d rather do this before they get the chance.”

“But the flowers!” Ella wailed, throwing her hands in the air.

Aria repressed a laugh, stepping away from Lukas to wrap one arm around her friend. “Don’t worry, Ella. I know you will come up with something amazing no matter what.”

Ella glare at Lukas as if it was his fault, and then toss her ponytail over her shoulder. “Fine! But I’m going to borrow some of the pack guards. I only have a few hours to get everything ready!”

She stormed out of the room, calling out to the two nearest pack guards, who happened to be lounging in the den watching TV. Aria didn’t envy the poor men. Before the ceremony began, they’d be worn out.

Thaddeus sighed. “I’d better go help. If I don’t, I’ll be in the dog house.”

Turning to Lukas, she watched him carefully. His hands clenched and unclenched, tension lining the taut planes of his face.

“Are you all right?”

His smile was tight, but genuine. “I don’t usually get this angry, baby. But Jonas gets on my nerves like you wouldn’t believe. He knew, *knew*, when he called, he would piss me off. They know we’re not going to listen to them.”

She walked back over to him and placed her hands on his chest, nuzzling his chin. “Don’t worry. We knew we’d have to deal with them sooner or later.”

He shook his head, his hands cradling her face. One thumb wiped at something on her cheek. Probably dirt. “You are reassuring me now?”

Aria grinned. “Well, only one of us can go nuts at a time.”

“I’m never letting you go,” he murmured, then his lips closed over hers and he pulled her closer to his body. She melted into him, her arms sliding under the edge of his shirt, fingertips memorizing the sweeping lines of his muscular back. Everywhere his hands touched, warmth sprang, swirling through her body to pool at her core.

“Hey, you two, stop that!”

Aria waved a hand in the general direction of the comment, sucking Lukas’ tongue into her mouth. Cold water slapped her face. They jerked apart, turning to Ella, who stood, smug with a dripping cup.

“Was that really necessary?” Lukas barely covered his irritation.

Ella nodded to her Alpha. “Yes. You two were going to scorch the linoleum. Anyway, you”—she put the cup in the sink and linked her arm with Aria’s—“need to get upstairs and get dressed.”

Aria looked over her shoulder, helplessly, as Ella dragged her from the kitchen and up the stairs. Her friend deposited her at the door to Lukas’ room with strict orders to shower and get ready.

“But we’ve got hours! And I didn’t finish potting those flowers yet!”

Ella stood firm in the doorway. “I don’t care. I’ll make Sebastian plant the blasted flowers. But you aren’t going to leave this room until I come and get you. Now go shower then watch TV or something. You’ve got a few hours.”

She turned Aria toward the bathroom and gave a gentle push. Aria stood there, waiting until Ella closed the bedroom door behind her.

Ella’s muffled voice called through the door, “I’m not leaving until I hear water, Aria!”

True to her word, Aria didn’t hear Ella’s footsteps leave until the water came on. With a mental shrug, she stripped and stepped under the hot spray. Using scented soap, she tried to wash away the feeling of disaster that threatened to ruin her evening.



## Chapter 12

Aria tucked the edge of the towel around her breasts then squeezed her tangle of wet hair in a smaller towel. The time had come to survey the clothing she had bought earlier. Tears tickled her nose, and she rubbed it viciously. She'd managed to survive this long without being girly; she could make it through this. The serviceable clothing they'd bought was less than appropriate for a Mating ritual. Every girl, at least once, dreamed of their ideal wedding. This wasn't quite what she'd planned. Remembering the elegant dresses and hairstyles she had worn at her father's parties, she wished for just one of the designer gowns.

After drying and brushing her hair again, she stared into the mirror, satisfied with her appearance. Just when she had resigned herself to the black shirt and skirt, Ella burst into the room after a perfunctory knock.

"Please tell me you aren't wearing that!"

Aria just stared. "Well, it's what I've got."

"Really, what kind of party planner do you think I am?" Ella shook her head and flung open the closet door. After a few moments of rustling in the walk-in area, she returned with a suit bag. She shut the bedroom door and hung the bag on the hook on the back.

Unzipping it, she pulled out a white silk dress. The light caught the intricate swirls of silver and white beading that circled the empire waist and hem. A sheer wrap floated around Ella's hands, the color a perfect match for the antique ivory dress. Aria gasped at the pair of strappy white sandals weighed down at the bottom of the garment bag.

Aria fingered the cool silk. "How on earth did you manage this?"

Her friend preened. "I snuck up and checked your skirt size earlier, and I have a friend that works at a local bridal shop in town. It was the only one in your size that I liked. It just screamed your name."

Ella's smile dimmed. "I didn't think about jewelry though."

"That one I have covered." Aria picked up her mother's necklace from the dresser. "I only take it off when I'm showering anyway."

Ella studied it. “Well, it isn’t gold, but I think it’ll do. It’s...unique.”

“It is that.” Aria traced the picture of a seated Cernunos, Celtic Lord of the Hunt, with gentle fingertips. It was a strange piece, not just because of the subject, but also because animals surrounded the god, including a large wolf. It fit snugly into her palm, much larger than she would have chosen herself. She flicked the clasp open and fastened it around her neck. Whether she had wanted it or not, her mother had left it with instructions that it never be shown to her father or the council, and worn at all times.

Ella hooked the gown over the door again. “I think we should leave your hair down. I have a lovely set of pearl hair combs that would look gorgeous. And that covers the something borrowed.”

Her friend scurried from the room before Aria could respond. Aria used the woman’s absence to slip into her underclothes. She admired the dress for a moment, blinking against tears. For so long, marrying Lukas had only been a dream.

“I think these will just look—”

Aria turned to find Ella staring at her with horror. She glanced around the room then realized her hair had fallen over one shoulder, revealing her scarred back.

“It’s okay, Ella.”

“No, it isn’t. I don’t even have to ask where you got those.” Ella wiped at her tears, quickly replaced with anger. “I can’t wait to see Haemon get what he deserves.”

Aria laughed. “Me either. Now can I get dressed?”

Ella eyed the dress. “But the back...”

Maybe she should have been annoyed, but Ella’s sudden embarrassment was endearing. Aria patted her friend’s shoulder, handing over the dress. “My hair will cover what the back exposes. Don’t worry so much. Besides”—she gave her a conspiratorial wink—“I’m hoping no one will be looking at my back.”

Ella threw her arms around Aria, squeezing. “Of course they won’t—not when I’m through with you!”

Aria smiled, letting Ella's renewed enthusiasm sweep away any lingering discomfort. She almost envied the other woman's ability to shift moods so quickly. Lifting her arms, she allowed the smooth, luxurious Material to slide over her skin. Another few hours, and Lukas would be hers.

*Till death do us part.*

\*\*\*

If they didn't hurry, they were going to be late.

More glamorous in the simple wedding dress than she'd ever been in the designer confections of her past, Aria couldn't help staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair flowed over her shoulders, held out of her face with the pearl combs. Ella had also returned with eye shadow and liner that gave her the dramatic "smoky eyes" she couldn't have achieved on her own. The strange pendant her mother had given her was barely visible under the neckline of the dress.

"You look amazing."

Aria allowed Ella to put a last swipe of lip gloss over her lips, and then stood. "You've done wonders with me, Ella. Thank you. I feel gorgeous."

"Come on now. I want to make sure I get a good look at his face when he sees you."

They headed downstairs, butterflies dancing in Aria's stomach. She'd come full circle in less time than she'd thought. For the first time in her life, she wasn't thinking and analyzing every move. And it felt right.

She nodded and smiled to the few people in the kitchen, trying in vain to place the few names she knew with faces. The women were setting out a huge table of food for after the ritual and grinned at her as she exited through the screen door onto the porch.

"You look fantastic."

She beamed at Lawrence and leaned on the porch railing, watching the sunset paint the woods with golden brushstrokes. "Thank you."

Ella appeared next to her, grinning broadly. She threw her arms around Aria's shoulders and squeezed. "I am so excited! Everything's perfect, if I do say so myself. I didn't know what kind of flowers you liked, but I tried to have a variety. Unfortunately, pots I planted haven't had time to fill in. Otherwise, it would look even more impressive."

Aria let the rapid-fire words wash over her as Ella linked their arms and pulled her around the back of the house. They halted, and Aria's jaw dropped.

"I knew you'd like it!"

Ella had set up an arbor woven through with autumn branches and white lights. More led from the top to the porch in six, evenly, spaced rays. The soft light made the area look magical. No seats were set up, as the ritual was a short one, but pots of flowers roughly outlined the area. Some of the pack had already gathered, and the Pack Guards prowled on the lookout for anyone who did not belong.

Aria squeezed Ella tightly. "Thank you so much."

Ella studied the yard with pride. "I'm very good at planning events. I do wish the flowers had filled in a little more, but they aren't bad."

"That I can fix." Aria smiled, glancing over the pots and directing small tendrils of magic to coax the flowers into growing. The plants shook and filled out as if part of a time-lapse video.

"Perfect!"

The golden light of day had faded into a soft purple twilight, and nearly all of the Pack had gathered. Pack Guards marked the perimeter of the yard, minus a few who were patrolling a wider area.

Strong hands slid around her waist from behind. "Are you ready?"

Aria leaned back into Lukas' warmth. "Very ready."

"Let's see what Ella's done to you. From the back it looks pretty amazing."

She spun slowly, her smile glowed a little brighter at the heat and desire blanketing his eyes. "Well?"

Lukas held up one finger as Ella watched him from the sidelines. His whole face lit from within. With a winked at Ella, he turned his whole attention to her. "You're the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen."

“Correct answer. Now, sir, you may marry me.” She held out her hand.

He took it, pressing a kiss to her palm. “I’m sorry I didn’t have a suit to wear. But I doubt I could have competed anyway.”

Her gaze raked over him, taking in the damp, loose hair that framed his harsh, sensual features, and the white shirt and crisp black pants hugging his frame.

Her voice shivered with heat. “Oh, I think you’ll do.”

He laughed, and they headed to the back steps, walking through the crowd up to the arbor. Thaddeus and Aaron stood on either side, holding a box and a long length of flannel. She vaguely recognized the pattern of the shirt whose return she had recently demanded.

Lukas smiled. “I hope you aren’t too mad, but seeing as you have the real thing, I took the liberty of shortening it. I thought it might be put to better use.”

Using her shirt should have made her unbelievably angry. Instead, tears welled in her eyes at the thought of using it as their Binding Cloth, something to be kept with them for the rest of their lives. They took their places in front of the crowd. The moon had just risen over the treetops, and framed the arbor as she had predicted. The Mating ritual was a great deal like a hand fasting, without the “year and a day clause” folklore always added.

Aaron, as Beta, moved to face the crowd. “State your intentions before the Pack, please.”

Lukas looked out over his family, eyes lingering on the darkness under the trees longer than she thought necessary. Panic started to rise when she realized that the pack weren’t the only wolves in attendance. But when his gaze returned to hers, any fears were pushed aside by the moment.

“I claim this woman, Aria Lagreve, as the match of my heart and keeper of my soul. I give to her my mind, body, soul and love, and I take from her the same.”

Aaron turned to Aria, who struggled to keep tears at bay. “Do you accept this claim?”

“I accept the claim of Lukas MacLeod and relinquish my soul, mind, and heart to his care. I take his into myself to keep with love for eternity.”

Aaron picked up small silver knife from Thaddeus and held out one hand. Lukas and Aria reached out to him. With a quick flick of the knife, he opened a thin cut on their open palms and then pressed their hands together, wrapping the flannel piece loosely around their joined hands. "So mote it be."

Aria always thought the intermingling of blood a symbolic gesture. Now she understood how wrong she had been. She became aware of Lukas in a way she had never felt before. Their combined blood forged a new link between them, weaving their souls together so tightly they would never be parted.

"Holy smokes, Lukas."

Aria's gaze turned away from Lukas' briefly to see Thaddeus wince and draw away. "Could you guys rein it in?"

Aria and Lukas looked at each other in confusion.

Aaron laughed, squinting. His face reflected a strange mix of alarm and disbelief. "I never believed the myths about True Mates glowing like the full moon. I guess some legends really are true."

Light, blue-white and brilliant, blazed from their clasped hands. Before she hadn't even noticed. Now that she knew what to look for, it shone intensely from their bodies.

Aria laughed, throwing her arms around Lukas' neck and pressing a kiss to his lips. As their hands broke, the bright light faded to a soft glow, hovering around them for a few more seconds, and then disappeared.

Lukas gripped her hand and turned to Thaddeus, who handed him a box. "We've already been married in a church once, but I wanted to make sure it was official."

He opened the box to reveal a matching pair of wedding rings, fashioned out of silver and Celtic knots. He took hers out, sliding it onto her finger, and then offered her the box. She could barely find his hand through the tears, but she slid the ring home.

*No one can take you from me now, Aria. I love you.* Lukas' voice curled through her mind. Aria should have been shocked or somehow worried at their new connection, but it seemed natural. It was as if a part always missing had been filled in. She felt complete.

*I love you, too, Lukas.*

Lukas kissed her again, stopping only when Aaron cleared his throat. “I present True Mates, Lukas and Aria MacLeod.”

The Pack cheered. Aaron clapped Lukas on the back. “No one who saw that display will ever doubt that you two are True Mates. They’d have to be blind and incredibly stupid.”

## Chapter 13

Lukas led Aria to the edge of the gathered group and began the long process of introducing her to all the members of the Pack. As each one approached to give their congratulations, they also swore their fealty to their new female Alpha. Usually this was done in a separate ceremony. But Lukas and Aaron had decided it would be best to make her part of the pack hierarchy immediately. Aria kept one hand in Lukas' and the other free to touch the napes of each person that knelt before her. Despite being buoyed by the evening's events, the line grew very long, and she was only glad the Pack was small.

As the Pack members left them, some headed to the kitchen to eat, and others lounged in various places throughout the yard, paper plates and cups scattered around while the little ones played. Ella was the last to pledge loyalty, and she came bearing two plates heaped with food. She dropped to one knee, still holding her offering and bared her nape.

"I pledge you my fealty, from this day forward, for life." She rose after Aria squeezed the nape of her neck gently and held out the plates. "And I bring sustenance. I'll be back with something to drink."

Thaddeus appeared with chairs for them to relax.

Lukas sat down beside her, throwing her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry that all had to happen at one time, Aria."

Swallowing a mouthful of green beans, she leaned over to drop a kiss on his cheek. "It's all right, Lukas." She paused, reflecting upon Lukas' expression before he said his vows. "I know they were watching."

His eyebrows rose. "You knew?"

At least he wasn't trying to hide it from her. "I sensed them just before Ella came up to show me the spot for the ceremony."

He nodded. "I felt them a little before that."

They ate in silence for a few moments. As Aria finished her dinner, she had a brief moment of intense emotion. The full moon overhead bathed the yard in



pale, silver glow, accentuated by the light streaming from the windows of the house and around the yard. The little ones ran around, playing games of tag and attempting hide and seek. The teenagers sat or stood in clumps, and the rest milled, talking and laughing as they ate and celebrated.

It was everything a Pack and family were supposed to be, and everything that her old Pack and family up until now had not been. She blinked as Lukas took the empty plate and cup from her hands and drew her from her chair into his lap.

*What's the matter? You're happy, I can feel it, but you're crying? What are you hiding?*

She pulled back, staring up at him. "Hiding? Lukas, do you have any idea what you've got here? They're family, all of them together. I've been searching for this my entire life. And you've given it to me. I will spend the rest of my life trying to thank you, and it will still never be enough."

His hand smoothed over her hair and heat burned in his eyes. "Well, I can think of quite a few ways you can try."

He captured her mouth, her knees weakened and any rational thought flew from her mind. When he finally released her, she wrapped her arms tighter around his neck and whispered, "Don't let go."

His arms tightened. "Never. But how about a run?"

Excitement lit her through her. It had been a long time since she'd enjoy the feeling of freedom and wind on her wolf's fur. Lukas released her, and they stood. They left the kitchen and walked to the woods, stopping when Aaron appeared, arms crossed over his chest.

"You have to take an escort, Lukas."

"We should be fine for a few hours, Aaron."

His Beta shook his head, and was joined by Thaddeus, who gave them an apologetic grin. "As much as I hate to be a party pooper, he's right. There were Council watchdogs here this evening. While they might have all gone, there is the chance they may be waiting for you."

Lukas opened his mouth to argue further, but Aria laid a hand on his arm, pressing into his side. "They're right, Lukas, and you know it. Having a couple of

guards with us won't dampen the enjoyment." She couldn't help the longing coloring her voice. "It has been a very long time since I've gone for a run for fun."

Lukas scowled at his friends, but relented. "Fine. But try to give us a little privacy, would you?"

Aaron's lips twitched, but he kept from smiling. He glanced at Thaddeus, giving orders for him to remain in case of an emergency, and then pulled Sebastian from a third plate of food to run with them.

Aria's excitement bubbled over, the feeling etched in her movements and she surveyed the landscape. Lukas stood at the edge of the clearing, watching her with a strange expression. She gave a mischievous grin.

"I'll race you," Aria teased, and jetted off.

Skimming over the moonlit clearing, she glanced back to see she was a good ten-feet ahead of him. Then, without breaking stride, she leapt forward, changing mid-step. Her clothes fluttered to the ground, sliding off her body in the split second before complete transformation. The change always thrilled her like stepping through a field of static electricity, invigorating and exhilarating.

As her body reformed and her wolf-self landed, she could hear Aaron and Sebastian's surprised oaths. It took great skill and power to change in such a manner. She hardly paused between her forms. Lukas took his own leap, changing just as quickly and following her into the darkness of the trees.

She nipped and licked at his muzzle, playing with him. Aria allowed him to direct her, reveling in the ability to stretch her muscles and feel the ground under her paws. She used the mental link they shared in wolf form to express her joy to Lukas, and felt a wave of his own emotion. It sent a jolt through her body, her own feelings intensifying. She enjoyed the bond between them, but it would take some getting used to.

The night air carried thousands of scents to her sensitive nose and she sorted through them, identifying them the way an artist does colors. They twined through trees and splashed in small streams, constantly followed by Aaron and Sebastian at a distance. After nearly an hour of running, they burst through the underbrush into a clearing where the moon illuminated a small waterfall.

Tongue lolling, Aria plopped down in stunned silence at the rocky edge of the deep pool, mesmerized by the sight, until her gaze landed on her Mate. He was like a shadow, sitting by her side, offering her everything she'd ever wanted. A surge of happiness and serenity settled in her gut. She turned her gaze back to the scene before her, staring at the liquid silver of the water and the reflection of the moon, now at the peak of its course, in the shifting water.

*It's beautiful, Lukas.*

*This is my favorite place. Sometime, when we don't have company, I'll take you for a swim.*

She ran her muzzle over his when he sat next to her. *I'd like that very much.*

Sebastian and Aaron gave them privacy, staying in the shadows of the woods as continued to watch the waterfall in silence, just enjoying each other's company.

They sat like that for several minutes, until Aaron trotted out of the woods, worry broadcasted from the tense lines of his body. The honey colored fur along his spine was a stiff ridge of alarm.

*The pack guards caught a couple of strangers wandering around the house. Apparently, one is quite...interesting. Thaddeus recommends we return immediately.*

Aria's heart thudded loudly in her ears. It appeared her perfect evening was over.

*You remember your promise, Aria. This fight is mine.*

She bared her teeth. *You don't have to remind me.*

She turned, flicking her tail at his muzzle and stalked into the woods. Lukas' longer stride matched hers, then surpassed as they loped back home through the trees on a much more direct route. The trip back took only minutes, and she hadn't realized how close they were to the house.

They padded up the steps, halting only when Lukas turned and pinned her with a lupine stare.

*We'll change upstairs. I'll be damned if the entire pack sees you naked before I do.*

If she could've laughed in this form, she would have. Anger and frustration rolled off her Mate in tangible waves. Thaddeus opened the back door, and they trotted inside, leaving Aaron and Sebastian to shift in the kitchen while they headed for their rooms.

She tried not to stare at Lukas as he shifted just inside the doorway. Even in a wolf's black and white vision, her breathing quickened at his tight backside and muscular thighs. As he jerked on a pair of sweatpants, she watched the play of his back muscles and wondered what they would feel like moving beneath her fingertips.

He turned, and her mouth watered at the broad expanse of chest, lightly sprinkled with dark hair. Her eyes traveled over his flat abdomen following the thin line of hair that disappeared into the waistband of his pants.

"If you keep looking at me like that, we aren't going to make it downstairs. While I can live with that, I don't want to be interrupted once we get started, baby."

He tossed her the button-down shirt she wore earlier. The beautiful wedding dress hung on the back of the bedroom door. Obviously, someone had collected their belongings and brought them up, for which she was grateful. The dress was far too lovely to be left in the dirt.

She pulled the shirt on, freezing when she realized that at some point in her inspection of his body, she had shifted back without realizing it. She scrambled from the floor and pulled other clothes from the drawer. Dressing in record time, she turned to find Lukas waiting at the door. His hip leaned against the doorframe, and he was still bare-chested. He held out one hand to draw her close, the other slid along the back of her neck to pull her hair free of the shirt.

She shivered at the touch. His eyes glittered with need, making warmth curl through her body.

"We, ah, we should get downstairs."

"Yes. We should."

His lips descended, and her lids fluttered closed, waiting for him to make contact with her mouth.

Instead, they landed on her forehead.

“What the—”

Lukas’ arms slid around her waist and squeezed before releasing her. “Just wanted to make sure you feel as hot and bothered as I do.”

Her body tingled with unquenched desire, and she smacked his chest. He didn’t flinch, even though her palm tingled.

“You are going to pay for that, Lukas MacLeod.”

His mouth curved into a sensual smile, and he pulled her out the door.

“Promises, promises.”

They headed downstairs, past the knots of shifters watching the proceedings warily. Pack guards were sprinkled through the house and grounds, just in case any other surprises appeared. Lukas led the way into the basement, a much larger space than she had anticipated. The main part had been finished, but another doorway led them into a well-lit concrete room with a table and some chairs. Five guards, including Sebastian, Thaddeus, Lawrence, and Aaron stood as they entered. Two men sat, separated by the table.

Aria clapped a hand to her forehead and groaned. “Crappola. Cern, what are you doing here?”

Everyone turned to stare. Heat flooded her face, but she continued into the room.

“Making mischief, of course. And doing a damn spiffy job of it.”

Cern, a short, stocky man with caramel skin and thick curly brown hair, relaxed in the metal folding chair as if having a casual conversation. His eyes sparkled, and he crossed one leg. Yes, he was definitely enjoying himself. The man had the worst fashion sense in the world. In a loud Hawaiian shirt, surf shorts, and sandals with knee high white socks, all he needed was a little sunblock to wipe down his nose, and he’d make an excellent tourist.

“Yes, what are you doing here?” Lukas’ voice was devoid of emotion, but she knew his instant dislike to the intruder.

Aria stepped forward as if to shield Cern from Lukas. “We’re friends, after a fashion. Cern is the one who helped me with Steven.”

Lukas’ eyebrow rose. “I believe you had mentioned that.”

Cern wiggled his foot. “Really, really. I wasn’t all that much help, but I daresay it helped get him here in one piece.” His face became more serious. “He did make it here, didn’t he?”

She nodded.

“Exactly how do you two know each other?” Aaron sounded genuinely puzzled.

Cern gave him a cheeky grin. “I’ve enjoyed many years of watching her ass.”

The double entendre wasn’t lost on anyone. She really hoped the floor opened soon and swallowed her whole.

When he didn’t seem inclined to continue, she smacked a hand on the tabletop. “Cern!”

“Oh, all right. I’m an old family friend, on her mother’s side. When she was younger, I used to babysit her. I never liked her dad much, so when she got older, I helped her sneak out when I could. Then the other day, I happened to be passing by when she came out with that boy in her arms. I offered my assistance.”

“But you’re not a shifter.”

“Be careful, that’s profiling.” Cern lifted a finger, wagging it at Aaron. When the Beta didn’t even blink, Cern shrugged one shoulder. “No, I’m not. But I have some very useful skills.”

Aaron studied him closely, shaking his head. Lukas had done the same, and Aria knew Cern was using glamour to play with their vision. She glared, and he winked at her.

“Why are you here this evening?” Lukas demanded.

“To make sure you did right by her, of course. You didn’t think I would keep track of what happened to her?”

Lukas’ mouth opened then closed, and he ran a hand through his hair.

“Now that I’ve seen she’s married to the man of her dreams, I’d like to go on my way. I’ve got places to go and people to see.”

“Err...” Aaron started to protest.

“Lovely. I’ll see you later on then.” Cern sprang to his feet, gave them all a thumbs-up and then winked out of sight, leaving only the faint scent of autumn leaves behind.

“Aria?”

She turned to Lukas, who stared at the spot Cern had previously occupied. “Was that who I think it was?”

Rubbing the back of her neck, she gave him a weak smile. “Don’t think about it right now.”

His stare became unreadable. “Someday you’ll have to explain to me how you became friends with a man who appears to be a Celtic god of the hunt, and why he’s living in West Virginia.”

She opened her mouth to explain, but didn’t get the chance.

“Excuse me, but I’m not used to being ignored.”

The familiar voice made her skin crawl, and her attention zeroed in on the second prisoner. His swarthy features were schooled into an indifferent mask, but his eyes blazed with irritation. Panic rose in her chest, but she quickly squelched it. If Otis found her, then Haemon was already informed of the mating. Lukas’ voice cut into her fear, drawing her back to the situation.

“Forgive me,” Lukas drawled. “I’d hoped to save the less pleasant bits for later, but we can move along with you. Who are you and what do you want?”

The man bristled at the condescension. “My name is Otis. I was sent to bring Aria home.”

“She is home.”

Snorting, Otis shrugged and spread his hands. “Look man, I don’t know why Haemon wants the bitch back. No one’s that good a fuck. Personally, I’d rather let you have her and get out of here.”

Low growling rumbled in Lukas’ chest. “Watch your language.”

Aria leaned against the edge of the table. “Haemon doesn’t send you with messages, Otis. Tell the truth.”

“I was sent for you!” Otis’ lips curled in a snarl, and he launched himself towards Aria. Everything appeared to happen in slow motion. His hands shifted

into paws, and as he reached for her, he took a swipe at Lukas. His wicked, black claws raked Lukas' cheek.

Rage roared through Aria's body at the sight of blood on her Mate's face. Razor sharp claws sprang from her fingertips. Before the others had a chance to reach for Otis and restrain him, Aria slammed her hand into his chest, throwing his body back into the chair and sinking those wicked curves deep into his flesh. She panted, fighting the urge to rend and bite. She crouched on the tabletop, poised to spring again and take his body to the ground. Some part of her recoiled at the intense, sudden need to feel his blood running through her jaw. Another part reveled in it.

For the first time she could recall, fear glittered in Otis' eyes. A guttural snarl echoed around the cement room, rage and revenge transforming the sound. She almost didn't recognize her own voice. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't tear you open."

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Her claws flexed, and he whimpered with pain. Fingers wrapped around her hand gently. "Release him, Aria. I still need him to deliver a message."

It took more effort than she wanted to admit to retract the claws and draw her hand away. Her body thrummed with the need to make him bleed. She took a deep breath and then began to shake. She allowed Lukas to draw her against his chest. Her hand brushed lightly over his cheek, where the shallow cuts were already healing. She'd never felt such an urge before. The need to taste blood, to rip flesh to pieces had been overwhelming.

Otis words held a tinge of fear, but he spoke anyway. "Jesus. He was right. You really are psycho. I always thought you were a loss, but I didn't realize how right I was. You are one hot mess."

The insults rolled off her skin like water off a duck's back. Lukas' body tensed under her cheek. Surprise registered inside her as his eye, the one devoid of color, glowed. She opened her mouth to say something, but he shook his head. "Go upstairs, Aria."

For once, she didn't argue. Thaddeus followed her into the kitchen after a curt word from Lukas. Her stomach twisted as she thought about what had



transpired. While her own anger had scared her, Lukas' made hers seem like a toddler's tantrum.

Without really thinking about it, she let Thaddeus lead her to the kitchen sink, where she washed her hands. She scrubbed three times before the heavy, thick feel of the blood faded. After drying her hands, she wrapped her arms around herself and stood by the bay window. Outside, some of the pack guards walked the perimeter of the yard and then disappeared out of sight.

"I didn't know he could get so angry." Her hushed whisper carried farther than she realized in the quiet house. To herself, she added, "I didn't know I could either."

Backing away from the window, she leaned against the kitchen counter. The pack had disbursed, many of them heading to their homes. The rest were outside, talking quietly.

Thaddeus leaned against the counter next to her. "I haven't seen him that way in a long time. But they had it coming. They snuck onto our grounds to kill you, tried to do so in front of the five of us, and they insulted you."

"If he gets upset every time someone insults me or tries to kill me, there's going to be a lot of blood."

Thaddeus chuckled. "I'll invest in some mops."

Aria tried to respond in kind, but failed miserably. "I should have kept running when I had the chance."

"Don't say something so foolish." Sean surprised her. Aria hadn't even noticed when he entered the kitchen. She looked away from the intensity of his gaze.

"You saved my son."

Guilt left a bitter taste in her mouth and a knot in her stomach. "I'm not sure anymore it wasn't done just to draw me here." The idea made her flinch.

Sean's hand sliced through the air. "No. Haemon has been harassing us for months. That had nothing to do with you. Lukas is your Mate. You belong here."

Aria sniffed, smiling at him. "Thank you."

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

Her body jerked around, only to see Lukas in the doorway behind her. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to know I may need to give Thaddeus cleaning duty, and you are too foolish for words.”

Aria sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

His leaned heavily against the doorframe. His attention turned to Sean and Thaddeus. “Let everyone know that anyone who wants, can stay here tonight. There’s plenty of blankets. I know a lot of them have gone home, but send a Pack Guard to check on everyone, and whoever hasn’t left yet, needs to take a Pack Guard with them if they do leave. At least, to walk back and forth. The Guards are paired for patrols until further notice. Have a good night.”

Thaddeus nodded, and Sean headed outside to spread the news. Lukas moved, catching Aria’s hand. “If you’ll excuse us, Thaddeus...”

Thaddeus gave Aria a sympathetic shrug as she allowed Lukas to pull her past him. He led her up the stairs and into their room, where he shut the door and then leaned against it, pulling her tightly to his chest. Beneath her ear, she could feel his words rumbling through his body.

“I know tonight was difficult for you. I’d really like to lecture you about breaking your promise, but I’m pretty sure you didn’t do it on purpose.”

She winced at the censure in his tone.

“I’ve never seen anyone move like you did.”

Was that pride? She looked up at him, desire and a glint of something else stared down at her. Hurt?

She lifted a hand and caressed his cheek. “What is the matter?”

“In the back of your mind, you still think running is an option.”

Aria kept silent. She couldn’t deny that she’d thought about it. And seeing Otis had renewed her fear. Maybe it would be best if she left.

“You still don’t understand, do you? You and I are bound now, beyond a mere mortal marriage. We’re bound soul to soul. There is nowhere you can go where I cannot find you.” Lukas tightened his arms around her, eyes boring into hers. “I want to make it clear, Aria, if you run, I *will* find you. You’re mine, and what’s mine I keep.”

“I’m not your toy.” She bristled at the condescension in his tone. “You aren’t going to fight with Haemon over me like two boys in a sandbox.”

“You’re right, I’m not. If we fight over you, it won’t be like two cubs, Aria. You’re my Mate; he’s going to have to kill me to have you.”

Ice wrapped around her heart at the thought of him dead. “We’ll make sure it doesn’t come to that.”

Lukas didn’t say anything for a moment. He loosened his hold and relaxed, some of the tension draining out of him. “Let’s hope not. I might be good at killing, but I don’t really like it much.”

Aria kissed his chin. “I wouldn’t be able to love you so much if you did.”

His hands made small circles on her back and he stared down at her, His head cocked to the side. He searched her face for something, but she couldn’t tell what. The warmth of his hands became very distracting.

“What is it, Lukas?”

He pulled her tight against him again. “Haemon wasn’t the only one who sent a message today. The Council also sent a messenger with official written notice forbidding the ceremony. I didn’t want to tell you, but I thought you should know.”

Of course, they’d send orders. Tilting her head back to tell him exactly where the Council could put their directive, she stopped. His eyes were fixed on her mouth. Slowly, his lips eased over hers, his hands gathered her tight. Whatever she’d planned on saying promptly disappeared in a puff of steam. Heat flooded her body, and she couldn’t help wriggling against him.

His hands moved from holding her to sliding under her shirt, brushing the sides of her breasts and then he drew her shirt over her head. He broke their kiss long enough to dump the Material to the floor. He hooked his thumbs under the band of her underwear and slid them down her legs. She kicked off the restricting garments while his mouth captured hers again. His tongue pushed inside her mouth, but she took a step back.

Giving him what she hoped was a come-hither smile, she shook a finger at him. “You’re overdressed for what I had in mind.”

Attempting to be bold, her fingers traced the hard planes of his chest, giving special attention to his nipples. Beneath her touch, his muscles jumped. When her hands tickled his bellybutton, he sucked in a great breath of air.

“I thought you said you were a virgin.”

Quirking an eyebrow, she pushed his sweatpants over the ridge of his hips, stopping as the Material caught his erection, standing at rigid attention. She swallowed hard, desperately hoping her nerves weren’t showing.

“I told you I had an excellent imagination.”

He stopped her movements, holding her hands away from him. She glared.

“While this whole dominant female thing is pretty sexy, I can only take so much.”

In one swift motion, he stripped off the pants. Her mouth hung open, she knew it, but didn’t care. Suddenly, she was very aware of the cool air on her naked flesh. She’d never been more intensely aware of another person in her life.

He should have been carved out of marble. All the slopes and planes of his body were emphasized in the light from the windows, and she couldn’t see anything that wasn’t perfect. Her eyes skipped over his body, breath struggling to pass her lips, and cheeks burned as her gaze lingered over his erection.

He pulled her to him, closing the distance. She gasped at the feeling of his hair-roughened skin against her own, and her nipples pebbled. His body blazed with heat and his fingers slid down her back to cup her bottom, drawing his hard length against her belly.

Lukas’ lips traveled down her neck, sucking gently on the nearly, faded mark at her neck. By morning, the spot would be a deep purple again. Somehow, she knew the mark would be there as long as she lived. And she wanted him to mark her for life.

He bent his head to her breast, kissing a line along the tops of her breasts and finally drew a tight bud into his mouth. He suckled gently, and her hands gripped him tighter, even as she rolled her hips against him. Her desire rose at his amazing ministrations.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. Need whipped through her as he nipped her skin.

He smiled, releasing her long enough to murmur, “No, baby. Lukas.”

One moment his hands and mouth were sending shards of pleasure through her, and the next, he was lifting her against his body, gently biting her shoulders as he laid her on the cool sheets, and joined her, skin-to-skin, from head to toe.

She couldn't help a small strangled sound.

“Am I too heavy?”

He started to pull away, but she caught his shoulders with her hands, unable to bear any distance between them.

“No. I just...wasn't expecting it to feel so good.”

His weight should have felt stifling, but instead tightened the coil of desire in her core.

Settling back against her, he smirked. “It does, doesn't it?”

Without waiting for a response, his mouth teased hers, again. Her whimper was caught between their dueling tongues. Her hips moved against him as his tongue stroked hers. His hand caressed her stomach, moving lower in slow circles designed to drive her mad. Finally, one blunt finger moved through her slick folds. She arched off the bed, and Lukas' sexy chuckle vibrated through her whole body as he did it again. “Like that, do you?”

“Please, Lukas...”

There wasn't enough air in the room. Running her hands over his shoulders, the heavy muscles of his chest and back, she waited for something. She wasn't quite sure what, but he apparently knew. His finger stroked her sex, and Aria moved against his hand. Nothing she had read or seen had prepared her for the sensations he created with just his mouth and hands. She panted and sobbed his name.

“Please, Lukas, I need you.”

“How do you need me, baby?”

Frustration grew as her body clenched with the magic he elicited. She moaned, but stopped short when he withdrew his hand, leaving her bereft. Her legs wrapped around him as he positioned himself at her entrance.

All the more aware of the tension coiling in her stomach and her heart threatening to burst with love for her Mate, she cupped his jaw and saw the mirror of emotions. "You. I need...I need you."

One hand braced him above her, while the other held her hip. He slowly pushed into her, stretching her. She cried out at the brief twinge of pain. Lukas pressed kisses to her face, whispering in her ear until the discomfort faded. She moved slightly, and he pushed again until his full length rested inside her. Whatever notions she'd had about how this were blown away by the reality.

"Just don't move, baby. It'll be okay." He gritted his teeth, beads of sweat appeared on his brows as he struggled to still his movements, allowing her to grow accustomed to his girth.

The heat inside her grew in intensity, and she wanted him to move. Instinctively, her hands gripped his forearms, pulling her knees higher. She gasped as a new wave of sensation flashed through her. "Lukas..."

He groaned, pulled almost completely out of her body and then returned, thrusting into her completely. Aria thought it was the most amazing things he'd ever done. To her. He continued, his strokes deep and designated to drive them both into oblivion. Her nails dug into his flesh and she needed more. Any of the expectations she thought she'd had flew out the window, replaced with pleasure that made her want to weep.

Emotions verged on overwhelming, and she teetered on the edge of something profound. He pushed deeply and the world splintered into a thousand tiny pinpoints of light. She cried his name, clutching tighter as she embraced her release. A few seconds later, with a shout of his own, he collapsed against her.

They lay there, trying to recover. Aria felt as if the entire world had just shifted and put everything on its ear. Lukas' heat curved around her like a warm and comforting blanket.

Her body hummed with satisfaction. "I knew it would be amazing, Lukas, but I hadn't expected to see stars."

"Amazing? I think that was as close to perfect as I'll get."

Lukas chuckled and rolled to the side, tucking her against him. Cuddling against him, her panting gradually slowed. Her eyelids drooped with the warm lassitude sweeping through her body.

“Just as well I don’t have a basis for comparison.”

Lukas snorted and lightly pinched her butt. “And you aren’t going to get one.”

Aria threw an arm over his chest and yawned, then smiled up at him. “It’s good for you that I don’t want any other comparisons.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Go to sleep, baby. I’ll give you something to compare it to later.”

Lukas reached over the side of the bed and pulled the comforter over them from where it was lying on the floor. He hugged her once and gave her another kiss. “I love you, Aria. Whatever happens in the next few months, remember that.”

“I love you, too, Lukas. Please don’t do anything stupid.”

He chuckled. “What are you talking about?”

She pinched his nipple. “I don’t want to worry about anything at the moment. Even if you hadn’t totally blown my mind with your lovemaking, I don’t want to ruin the moment.” She sat up suddenly, recalling the number of guests invited to stay overnight. “There are people downstairs. Oh my God, Lukas! They probably heard us!”

Lukas pulled at her arm until she landed next to him with a thud. He struggled not to laugh, but she spotted the corners of his mouth twitching. “Aria, we are newly married and Mated. They know exactly what we’re doing up here, whether they can hear us or not.”

She groaned against his chest. “How am I ever going to look them in the face again?”

“Don’t worry about it, love. No one will remember in the morning.”

For the first time in a year, Aria slept without nightmares.

## Chapter 14

“Lukas?”

Aria groaned at the booming voice. One eye opened, noting the sunlight filtering through the curtains. She flicked a glance to the doorway. Aaron stood, hand on the open door, watching them with a smirk hovering over his lips. Beside her, Lukas sighed, pulling her a little closer. She curled into Lukas’ chest, grateful for her Mate’s ability to hide her. They were naked, with the sheets tangled around their waists, and she had no desire to give more of a show.

“Aaron, I really hope there’s a good reason you’re in here. ‘Cause if there’s not, I may kill you.” Lukas yawned midway through his sentence, and stretched without releasing her.

“I came to tell you Steven’s awake and seems to be better. Alec even let him walk around the room with help.”

“That’s great!” Pleased, she almost sat up, then remembered her lack of clothes, as a blush worked its way up her cheeks. Lukas chuckled at her expression.

Aaron remained at the doorway as he announced, “Alec told Steven’s family he can go home day after tomorrow.”

“I’ll check on Steven later,” Lukas replied.

The Beta blinked, not moving.

Her Mate frowned. “Is there some other pressing news that couldn’t wait?”

Aaron flashed a wicked grin. “Nope. Just wanted to see how long it took before you got annoyed. I’ll see you later.”

Lukas waited until he heard Aaron’s footsteps retreat before he relaxed again. “Ten bucks says Thaddeus is running a pool to see when we get up.”

Aria rolled onto her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows. “I won’t take that bet.”

“Not like we can stop it anyway.”



Brushing a lock of his hair off his forehead, she kissed him then whispered against his lips, "I feel the need for a bath."

She rose from the bed before he could catch her and crooked a finger at him as she sashayed to the bathroom. "You wash my back and I'll wash yours?"

\*\*\*

When they finally emerged from their bedroom, it was near dinnertime. They stopped briefly at the open door where Steven lay watching a small television someone had brought him.

Lukas nudged her towards the stairs as she waved to Steven. They stopped at the study first. Aaron sat at one of the computers, frowning at his email. He didn't look up when they came in.

"What did we miss?" asked Lukas. His features hardened, ready to get down to business.

Aaron swiveled his chair around to face them, hands braced behind his head. "Well, a couple of wolves were sniffing around town earlier when we went on a grocery run, but other than that, nothing exciting."

"Sniffing around town?"

Aria rested against the edge of Lukas' desk. Judging by the concern etched into her Mate's features, the honeymoon was over. His Beta turned in the chair and slapped his palms on his thighs. At least his irritation wasn't directed at her this time. It seemed the Mating ritual had relaxed his bad opinion of her. For the moment.

"Well, they were asking questions around the place where Aria rescued Steven. Apparently, Haemon has reported the incident as being Steven's fault. He claims Steven provoked Ethan and his friends and forced them to defend themselves."

She bit her lip to keep from cursing.

Lukas had no such inclinations. "What a load of shit. They actually believe that one teenager *forced* four others into an abandoned store and made them so scared they nearly beat him to death?"

Aaron raised his hands. "I'm just repeating what the email said. It's from the Council's Head, Jonas Bontham. He says they are debating whether or not to demand Steven be turned over when you come."

This time, she couldn't keep her mouth shut. "I don't remember penciling them into my social calendar."

Aaron pointed to the computer screen. "I wouldn't even have known about it, because the email was in my junk folder, except your friend, Cern, called earlier. He gave me the heads up that shifters were asking questions around town. I checked my email and the junk folder, too, just in case."

"The one time the Council uses modern technology, and we still can't get all the information. No one's called yet?" Lukas' voice dripped sarcasm.

Aaron shook his head. "Not yet. But if they called your cell, we wouldn't be sure. I'm pretty sure it's still plugged in on your desk." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the massive desk.

Aria swiveled on the polished surface and stretched over the table to grab the red flip phone that was, indeed, charging quietly on the tabletop under the computer monitor. She tossed it to Lukas, who flipped it open.

"Damn." He punched a few buttons, then pressed the phone to his ear while she and Aaron waited.

The message had apparently been brief. In only a few seconds, he viciously snapped the phone closed and shoved it in his pocket. Pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers, he began to pace the room.

Aria's palms curled, fingers biting into her palm as she waited for Lukas.

"They decided to let Steven's case drop," Lukas finally said.

She relaxed. "So that's a good thing."

Lukas heaved in a deep breath. "Except, they expect us and a small group of bodyguards at Bontham's house in Virginia in three days. The Council has decided to hold a Meet there and determine who Aria's rightful Mate is."

Her stomach flipped. Disbelief rose along with shock as she tried to register his words.

Aaron rose, shutting off the computer. "I'll get a couple of the others together. We can be ready to go—"

“No.” Lukas’ glare brooked no argument. “I’ll call a Pack Meet. Everyone needs to understand what’s going on. And what the contingency plan is, just in case.”

Fear curled icy fingers around her heart. Aria snagged his hand as he paced by her. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. She didn’t want to think about the possibility of losing this argument, but he was right. They did need a plan for the pack if the worst happened. The two of them had gone too far now to separate. Unless she could...

“Do not even think about it.”

Aria jerked at Aaron’s tone.

Furious and hazel eyes spitting fire, he glared. “I damn sure don’t want to be stuck hauling your bleeding carcasses back, and I don’t want to be in charge here.”

“Aw, come on. You don’t have any illusions of grandeur?” Aria tried to be playful, but Aaron’s demeanor didn’t change.

The Beta took a deep breath, clenching and unclenching his fists. She knew he could see Lukas’ determination just as she could. Her Mate had already made up his mind. Yelling wasn’t going to change it. She’d try some other methods out later.

Aaron crossed his arms, slightly calmer. While he teased, tension was still apparent in the fine lines of his face. “If you die, I have no one left to pass the buck to. I’ll make certain it doesn’t come to violence, even if I have to strap the whole assembly to their seats.”

With a hard expression, Lukas turned to his friend. “Haemon wants blood.”

The glint in his eyes made her heart skip. Her mouth dropped at his next words.

“And I’m in a mood to give him exactly what he asked for.”

## Chapter 15

“You have to be the most arrogant, thick-headed man I have ever met.”

The man in question, the one who only hours earlier had shown her pleasure she’d never known, shrugged and continued to devour his spaghetti.

Aria stabbed a meatball, waving it in the air as if needing it to emphasize her argument. “Haemon is not going to play fair. Your plan cannot consist entirely of kicking his ass.”

Calmly, Lukas wiped his mouth with his napkin and then tucked it under his plate. “Aria. I understand that you are a little concerned—”

“A little? I’ll be prematurely grey before the next week is out.”

He continued as if she hadn’t interrupted. “I have a plan. I just don’t care to share the details at the moment. I’m still working out the finer points, and you’ll just get upset if I tell you while it’s still flawed.”

Chewing furiously, she could only glare until the last bit of beef slid down her throat. “I’m already way past upset, Lukas MacLeod.”

“Exactly. I’m not telling you now. You might explode. As it is, your glare would have stripped flesh from a lesser man.”

She flipped the tines of her fork in his direction. “You are going to pay dearly for that.”

Leaning forward and pushing his empty plate out of the way, he flashed a brilliant smile. Her stomach flipped despite her silent commands to remain impervious to his charms.

“Just what did you have in mind?”

It should have been an innocent question, but she felt every word like a caress over her skin.

“Stop that. There are several teenagers present in the other room.”

He shrugged. “They’re old enough to watch R rated movies, and I only asked a question.”

“That tone of voice should be illegal.”

“What tone of voice?”

She snorted and nearly choked on the spaghetti she'd shoved into her mouth. They hadn't been out of bed more than two hours and she already wanted to head back. Hell, if he touched her, she'd probably settle for the pantry.

She sipped on her ice tea. “Innocent you ain't. How can you be such a tease at a time like this?”

“A time like what? I have officially managed to attach myself to the most gorgeous woman ever, have incredible, mind blowing sex with said woman, and there is a distinct possibility it's going to happen again in the very near future. What worry can possibly distract me from that?”

As he spoke, his hand crept across the table to clasp hers, his thumb rubbing small circles over the back. Never in her life had she imagined how erotic that could be. Tiny fissions of desire throbbed down her arm to her core. He deliberately made it difficult for her to concentrate.

Ever since the conversation with Aaron, she couldn't squelch the fear. The Meet was mandatory, and she dreaded the possibilities. Going to a Council member's house was the worst possible scenario. They could hold them there indefinitely. And she refused to be parted from Lukas again. Giving a mental sigh, she caved to Lukas' distractions, more annoyed by his teasing touches. She had plenty of time to worry on the drive to Virginia.

Shaking off his hand, she rose. He pushed away from the table, and she waved him back to his seat. Two could play this game. She leaned over the table to pick up his plate, subtly pressing her upper arms against her sides and exposing her generous cleavage to his gaze. The shirt she wore already had a scoop neck. Bent over, she knew he could see all the way down to her lacy bra. Lifting his plate, she tilted it just enough that his fork slid off.

“Oops. Let me get that.” She moved to his side of the table, curling one hand over his thigh to brace herself, leaning over his lap, and wiggling her denim-clad rear end under his nose. Her breast pressed into his inner thigh and she snagged the fork. As she pushed away, her hand “accidentally” grazed the zipper of his jeans. A choked sound passed over her head.

She turned away, smirking, as she noticed the considerable bulge in his jeans and the involuntary twitch of his fingers. Good. Her nipples were stiff through both her bra and shirt. If she was going to be worked up, he should be too. She sauntered across the kitchen and opened the dishwasher, bending over to put the plates in and making sure he got an eyeful.

“Dude, pay up. I totally win.”

She whirled around so fast, her hair snapped across her face. Thaddeus and Lawrence stood in the doorway behind Lukas. Lawrence’s mouth hung open as he slapped a twenty-dollar bill into Thaddeus’ outstretched palm.

“Holy shit, Lukas.” Lawrence cleared his throat and eyed the two of them. “She got any sisters? Cousins? Remote relatives of the female persuasion?”

Her blush started at her collarbones and burned its way to her hairline.

Thaddeus smacked his Alpha’s shoulder. “Why’d you leave that bedroom again?”

Lukas growled, and Thaddeus grinned, raising his hands in surrender.

“Hey, we were just coming in for dinner. Totally unintentional.”

“Thaddeus?”

“Yeah, Lukas?”

“Shut up.”

She backed away from the counter, heading for the screen door to her left that led outside. Thaddeus moved next to her and winked as he opened a cabinet next to her head and pulled out a couple of clean plates. It would be a long time before she lived this one down.

Lukas stood, pointedly ignoring the two men. Striding to the screen door, he opened it and gestured for Aria to lead the way onto the porch.

“How about I take you back to the clearing for a swim?”

She rushed through the doorway, still blushing furiously.

“Bow-chica-wow-wow!”

Lukas disappeared back inside the doorway. Silence, then a thud and a loud “Oof!” followed by Lawrence’s laughter.

When he came back outside, he cracked his knuckles. Glancing at her face, he shook his head. “Don’t ask. You’ll just feel sorry for him, and you shouldn’t.”

She shrugged, and then lightly leaped over the railing, bending her knees to absorb the impact. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she tossed him a grin. "Race you."

She sprinted through the neatly trimmed yard, enjoying the feel of soft grass between her toes and the cool autumn wind blowing over her skin. Behind her, Lukas gained speed and she pumped her legs faster. When her feet hit the higher grass marking the edge of the meadow, she shifted, shedding her clothing and allowing the shiver of magic to touch and twist her form. She landed on large paws without breaking stride.

This time, she knew where she was going, and didn't stop to take the detours they had on their previous visit. Under the canopy of the forest, the night grew darker and somehow more intimate. Lukas slid into step beside her, moving like he was her own shadow.

When they broke through the trees, Lukas didn't even stop to change. He bounded straight into the deep pool of water, splashing everywhere. The droplets clung to his dark fur, sparkling in the light of the gibbous moon like diamonds, and her breath caught. In the pool, his form changed, the droplets forming beads on his skin she wanted to lick off.

He lifted one hand, and she shifted, taking a running leap to join him. The ice cold water jolted her, and she shot to the surface, dark hair plastered over her face.

"Crappola! It's freezing!" Her teeth clacked together as her body shuddered. Once the initial shock faded, she glared at Lukas. Judging by the quirk of his lips, she guessed the wet clumps of hair hiding her face ruined the effect. "You might have warned me, you know."

Laughter echoed around her, and she dunked her head, pushing the hair out of her face and coming up for air again. The pool was deep enough that only the tips of her toes scraped bottom. Her arms stretched along the surface, trying to stay afloat.

"Watch out, Aria. It's cold."

Water sprayed both of them as she swiped her cupped hands across the surface toward him.

He shook his hair, droplets flying around him as he closed the distance between them. The heat in his eyes balanced the chill. His arms slid around her waist, his hands kneaded her bottom as he pulled her tight against him. Without actually thinking about it, she wrapped her thighs around his waist, bringing her feminine folds up against his length.

The banked desire from their teasing in the kitchen flared back to life. Around her, the currents suddenly became more like fingers stroking and teasing every inch of submerged flesh. Her nipples beaded into hard peaks, so tight they hurt.

Lukas' head dipped to nip at her shoulder. His breath swirled against her skin, the warmth somehow more arousing when the rest of her was drenched in the chilly water. Slowly, she flexed her thighs and rubbed her cleft against his erection.

A groan echoed from him. "Jesus, Aria. I won't be able to last long if you do things like that."

Just for good measure, she did it again. His eyes shot open and his fingers bit into her hips. Leaning forward, she nipped at his earlobe, biting gently and releasing it. Lukas stilled under her hands. "I've had enough foreplay, Lukas. If you don't do something right now, I'm going to burst into flames and disappear in a puff of steam."

"Well, we can't have that, now can we?" His hands wrapped around her back, pulling her tight to his chest. She slid her arms around him, burying her face in his neck and breathing in his scent. His words vibrated through her body, setting off small fireworks where they were pressed together.

"I used to have more control, you know. Someday I'll get it back."

The water grew shallow, until it lapped at her bellybutton like a lover's tongue. Lukas tilted her back against the smooth, cool boulder at the edge of the pool. He plundered her mouth, one hand moving to grip the back of her neck. She sucked his bottom lip into her mouth, nipping and tracing the edges with her tongue.

His knuckles brushed the undersides of her breasts, and she reached between them to wrap her hand around his hard length.



Raising an eyebrow, she gave him a wicked smile, then asked, “Do I have your undivided attention?”

Her thumb rubbed over his tip, enjoying the feel and heat of him in her palm, and the sense of control it gave her. Lukas stiffened, and she wasn’t sure if he was breathing. He shook as her fingers danced over his length, exploring and teasing the rock hardness.

“Baby, if you don’t put that where it will do both of us the most good in the next two seconds, I will explode.”

Gravely, she nodded, squeezing him lightly. A strangled croak escaped him.

“Well, I wouldn’t want that. I have big plans for you.”

She guided him to her entrance. That was all the encouragement he needed. Grabbing her wrists, he pinned them over her head, bending to suck a hard nipple in his mouth as he sheathed himself completely in one hard thrust.

Water splashed violently around them as he thrust into her, his lips moving over her chest and finally her mouth. He released her arms to grip her hips tightly, pounding into her body.

Spiraling higher and higher, she thought she’d die from the pleasure. His tongue mimicked the actions of his body. Finally, with one last thrust, they climaxed together and their mingled cries echoed over the water.

Lukas carried her out of the water, and they settled down on the soft moss at the edge of the pool. She just smiled dreamily up at him, boneless.

“Why do we have to go back to the house, again?” she asked, rolling into his side as she stretched beside him. She rested her head on his chest, and his hand rubbed her arm absently. After the chill of the pool, the air was warm on her bare skin, and she fought to keep her eyes open. She was so relaxed, she could have easily fallen asleep.

“If I could keep you here forever, just like this, I would baby.” Sadness tinged his words, and she lifted herself to look at his face. “Don’t worry. I’m just being maudlin.”

She pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “Right now, there’s only us, the pool, and the moonlight.” Reaching up, she smoothed a damp strand of hair out of his face. “Everything else can wait for tomorrow.”

He pulled her against his side and nodded. She settled against him again, determined to forget their problems for a short while.

## Chapter 16

*"This has gone from mildly annoying to pissing me off."*

*Aria pulled her knees to her chest, willing clothing to appear and cover her naked flesh. An oversized men's shirt appeared in her hands. With a mental shrug, she pulled it on. It wasn't quite what she'd had in mind, but she'd rather that than her birthday suit.*

*She sat in the clearing, resting on the same patch of moss she'd fallen asleep on. Haemon perched on a boulder at the edge of the stream, looking like a runway model in designer clothing. His eyes followed her every move.*

*"That's a shame." Haemon pouted. "I was enjoying the view."*

*"What, exactly, do you want?"*

*He flicked at an imaginary wrinkle in his pressed khaki slacks. "I am not pleased with you."*

*She couldn't hold back a snort. "And this should matter to me because..." Rising from the ground, her hands pulled at the bottom of the shirt. It covered her, but she still felt too exposed for this conversation.*

*"I have plans for us, Aria. They do not include the fool you've attached yourself to." His benevolent smile turned a little toothier than she would have liked. "It is very fortunate that I have made arrangements to correct that oversight."*

*Condescension was never something she'd handled well. Planting her feet, she fisted her hands on her hips. "Listen carefully, Haemon. The only plans I have for you involve a swift kick to the seat of the pants, and a few choice words. Neither you nor my father could ever control me. You never had the right, and you aren't getting it now."*

*"It's really a shame you pretend such ignorance, darling. But it's all right. Enjoy your sabbatical. It won't be long before you come home."*

*She moved closer, anger dancing through her body. "I will never go back to you, Haemon."*

*He laughed. "You are so cute when you're angry."*

*A savage snarl erupted just behind her. The sound crawled over her skin and her heart pounded in her ears until she identified the source. Lukas crouched at the tree line, sweatpants slung low over his hips, glaring at Haemon.*

*"How did you get here?" Haemon's brow furrowed and displeasure twisted his features. "I did not bring you here."*

*Lukas moved in front of her, one hand twisted in the fabric of her shirt to make sure she stayed behind him.*

*"Hey! This is my dream, Lukas. You can't get all bossy without permission."*

*Haemon pushed away from the tree, a smug smirk on his face. "Very nice showing, Lukas. Do you think she bought it?"*

*She'd really love to claw the smirk off his face. Instead, she settled for stepping around Lukas, who shifted until she was staring at his back, again. The overprotective thing, while sometimes nice, grated her nerves. This was her dream, damn it. No one, not even Haemon, would tell her where to stand or what to say.*

*"You're going to have to do better than that to turn her against me. Surprised to see me?" Lukas was a little more civilized, but still sounded as if he were two seconds from shifting.*

*"I must admit, you weren't expected." While he tried to keep it out of his voice, an edge of irritation cut through the honey in Haemon's smooth tone.*

*"What the fuck do you want?"*

*She'd known Lukas was angry, but she hadn't realized just how angry. The words were half human, half growl. Later, he would have to explain how he managed to get inside her dreams. Right now, she just wanted to make sure no one got hurt. Killing Haemon before they got to the Council could only make things worse.*

*She froze, turning the idea over in her mind. Kill Haemon in a dream? Was it possible? After all, she'd left her dreams with bruises from Haemon*

*multiple times. But death? She tossed the idea around for a moment and then shook her head. It would require too much energy.*

*Too bad.*

*“Tsk. Language, Lukas. Really, you’re supposed to be setting an example.”*

*She snorted. “Right. You’re so young and impressionable.”*

*Haemon ignored her.*

*“Answer me,” Lukas demanded, ignoring Aria’s attempts to uncurl his fingers from her shirt.*

*“I was just checking in on our lovely Aria. On occasion, watching her dreams is very educational.” His mouth curled into a disgusted moue. “Today wasn’t. I’ve never really been enamored with the shape of your ass.”*

*“My ass?” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.*

*She blushed, refusing to answer him. Something skittered through her awareness. Throwing her senses wide, she tried to locate it, but it stopped as suddenly as it started.*

*Lukas and Haemon snarled insults and threats at each other, and she stopped listening, focusing her attention. When the disturbance came this time, she followed the power to its source.*

*“Lukas.” He didn’t turn around, but continued to recommend Haemon perform an anatomically impossible feat.*

*“Lukas! Get out of my dream! NOW!” While she shoved him off balance with her body, her mind shoved him as well.*

*The velvet night sky of her dream began to crack at the edges. Lukas toppled over, fading with an incredulous oath.*

*“Well done, my dear. I didn’t know you had it in you.” He motioned to the place where Lukas had stood. “Apparently, he didn’t either.”*

*“I’m just full of surprises.”*

*“Not enough, I’m afraid.”*

*Her shoulders lifted and dropped.*

*He bowed, pretending to tip an invisible hat. “Until we meet again.”*

*Her dream world began to melt at the edges, each color twining around the other until it spun into darkness.*

“You know, every time I think things are calming down a little, you prove me wrong.”

Mismatched eyes, dark with irritation hovered over her head. Lips pressed against her nose in a chaste kiss.

“You’ve slept enough. I’ve got a burning desire to know exactly what that was all about.”

She blinked again, sitting up. Morning brushed at the edges of the sky. They’d slept longer than she’d thought.

“I don’t know? Why Haemon shows up in my dreams? Because he’s a nuisance.”

“Lame. Try again.”

“You’re a pain.”

“Maybe. But we aren’t leaving until you tell me what he really wanted. And how you managed to kick me out.”

She rose, stretched, and snorted. “Maybe you aren’t leaving, but I certainly am.”

Her form hadn’t even finished shifting, before she bounded through the trees, listening to his colorful curses as he followed.

Lukas wasn’t far behind, and his voice swirled through her mind.

*When we get back, you’re going to talk to me.*

*Not if I can help it. I’ve got English to tutor. I want to make myself useful around here while the kids are stuck at home.*

She stretched her legs longer, putting on a last burst of speed into the forest. In the corner of her eye, far to the left, a familiar honey colored wolf also loped through the clearing.

*Lukas, did he—was he out there the whole time?*

She could hear the amusement in his thoughts. *Well, I tried to get him to stay away, and he didn’t come until later, but yes. There was someone around the entire time.*

*Damn. If she hadn't been in this form, she knew her entire body would have flushed. I am never going to be able to look them in the eye, again.*

*They weren't that close, baby. Believe me, no one's getting a glimpse of that behind except me.*

Her tail flipped in his direction, and she pointed her nose in the air. They neared the house again, so she slowed her gait to a trot. Wolf ears pricked as she heard car doors slamming in the distance and an engine starting. The kitchen of the house was already lit with a soft glow and pack members were inside, getting ready to carpool to work for the day. A few teenagers lounged on the porch, yawning heavily and whispering to each other.

Her hindquarters dropped to the ground. She sat, watching the house come to life. The sense of belonging overwhelmed her. A tight band around her chest constricted. Pack should always feel like this. For so many years, she'd been a member of a pack who stayed together because of fear and old family ties. There had been none of the friendship, love, and loyalty permeating everything from this bunch. Their interactions had no ulterior motive, no reluctance. Even the house radiated comfort.

Her apprehension, brought on by the dream, melted away in the warm glow of morning. She had a place now, a good one. Her resolve hardened to steel. She would never give this up willingly.

The last year had tested her mettle in ways she hadn't ever thought she would experience. As she watched, a small group of women giggled and gossiped their way to the car, sipping insulated cups of coffee. Friendship was apparent in their laughter and facial expressions.

Later, she wouldn't be able to tell anyone why she'd done it or where the urge had come from, but it felt as natural as breathing and just as necessary. Still sitting on the grass, with Aaron and Lukas next to her, she tipped her head back and howled.

It poured from her throat like a living entity. Every emotion she felt, the sense of belonging, the relief of finding her place, her love for Lukas, and the overwhelming sense that they were her pack and hers to protect; each thing was its own note and it blended together, seamlessly. The howl stretched out and

filled the air, calling everyone's attention. As the note began to arc and taper off, she was surprised when howls sounded from across the mountain. The women at their car, the teens on the porch, Lukas and Aaron, and wolves out of sight all joined in.

Tears wound their way down her fur as the song faded. The carpool group waved, a few wiping teary eyes, and left for work. The teenagers yawned again and giggled at something, and life resumed. No one else seemed to notice her life had just made an irrevocable change.

*They noticed, baby. Believe me, they noticed.*

His muzzled caressed hers and he nipped at her flank with a small yip. She trotted towards the steps.

*They're mine, Lukas. Whether they like it or not. And I intend to keep them safe. Whatever it takes.*

\*\*\*

Embarrassment seemed to plague her constantly. She'd blushed more in the last week than she could remember. Her first day as surrogate teacher had been uneventful, though she was certain her charges didn't think so.

Most of them had individual assignments. Several of them were in different sections of the same class, so they worked in groups to read and answer their assignments. The hard part was keeping them all on track.

By the time they'd finished, they were all groaning about how much she'd fussed at them to stay on task. She had enjoyed the day, allowing herself to pretend it was her job. At one time, getting her teaching degree had been a major goal. Until she'd learned of the Council and her father's dreams of the pitter patter of little, well-bred feet.

A pack Meet had been called this evening. Already, Ella and Thaddeus were cooking up a storm in the kitchen. Not wanting to leave a mess, she picked up the papers and writing implements around the room, then stacked up the cups littered on the table.



“They’re old enough to know better. Next time, don’t pick up after them. Keep them here until they pick up.”

She continued tidying things, stopping briefly to allow Lukas a kiss. “I don’t mind, really. I feel more useful than I have in a long time.”

His hands closed over hers, gently removing a stack of cups. He dumped them on the table and pulled her into his arms. “You’re nervous, I can see it on your face.”

“Not nervous, precisely. Just anxious. They’ve all been so supportive of everything, and I still can’t wrap my mind around how easily they accept me sometimes. I don’t want to disappoint anyone.”

“You won’t. How could you? Everything is going to go off without a hitch.”

She snorted. That was ridiculous, but she appreciated the attempt to make light of their situation. Smiling a little too brightly, she tried to change the subject. “What have you been doing all day?”

He sighed, burying his face in the crook of her neck and squeezing her tightly. He drew a deep breath, pressing a kiss to her neck. “Working. I’m trying to get the pack a little more financially secure, but it’s taking more time than I thought.”

“What are you doing?”

He laughed. His hands fiddled with the end of her ponytail where it brushed the small of her back. “I’m a jack of all trades, didn’t you know? I run a small security agency, and right now, we’re trying to turn a few acres of our land into an eco-tourist attraction. There’s plenty of land, and”—he flashed a wide grin—“we can guarantee wolf sightings.”

A laugh sprang past her lips, “You’re serious?”

He shrugged. “Well, only if things get very, very dire. But at this point, we need whatever help we can get. You aren’t married to a rich man. All my money is tied up with the land we’re living on.”

“And the Council won’t help?”

He paused, his features losing the teasing smile. “No. I’m almost certain they’re the ones blocking all my applications for permits and contracts. I don’t know why, but they’re doing their damnest to help us fail.”

“They want to make you beg for help.”

“To save the pack, I would. They are more important than my pride. But I won’t until I have no other options left.”

He was a far better man than she’d ever realized. Pride swelled and she kissed his chin. “Then for now, we’ll play by their rules.” A smile tried desperately to pull her lips upward. If they played by the rules just right, she might be able to help with more than anyone thought.

“We have to, at least for now.” The unspoken implication was there. They had to play by the rules because if the Council chose to, they could make life a living hell for the entire pack. They could disband them, separate them into other packs, and do worse to Lukas and herself. Aaron and Thaddeus would gather heavier punishment as well, being high up in the pack hierarchy.

She patted his chest and pecked his cheek. “Lucky for you, I know all those rules like the back of my hand. Now let me finish cleaning up.”

“Don’t dwell on all the things that could go wrong.”

She looked back up at him, startled. Their bond was stronger than she realized. He sent her a lopsided smile. “You’re face is like reading a book.”

Scowling, she shook her head. “This mating bond does have a down side. No one else sees through me so easily.”

“I don’t really see that as a bad thing, you know.”

She snorted, piling things on the coffee table. He sighed, heading towards the kitchen. “This pack isn’t going anywhere, and Haemon and the Council will have to deal with that, whichever way the verdict turns.”

## Chapter 17

The pack gathered in the backyard. Dinner had been cleaned up, and now everyone waited. When Lukas rose from where they had been sitting on the porch steps, the teenagers and the children started to leave. He raised one hand.

“No, the older ones should stay. Everyone needs to understand what’s going on.”

The little ones followed a couple of adults off around the other side of the house, while the teenagers sat down. Apprehension was written all over their faces. Only for very serious matters were the teens allowed to stay.

“You all know Aria was running from Haemon and his pack. Unfortunately, the Council is also involved now. They have requested our presence in Virginia.”

A low murmur moved through the pack.

“We can’t ignore them. We’re too small to stand on our own against them. I’ve made some calls to ask for help, but things being what they are.” Lukas shrugged. “We’re on our own for now.”

Aria’s ears perked. This news she hadn’t heard. He must have seen her need to ask questions, because he glanced down and gave her a slight shake of his head. *Fine*. Worry weighed heavily on her heart.

“Aria and I are leaving tomorrow morning. We cannot take a large group, but we are permitted to take a small number of pack guards with us. Under the circumstances, no one will think less of anyone who decides they would rather not come with us.”

Lukas turned to Aaron who leaned against the porch railing behind him. “You’ll have to stay, in case something should happen.”

Thaddeus frowned. “You can’t leave all of us behind. You need me,” he said, then added, “Lawrence needs to get out more anyway.”

A few cracked a smile at the jest. Beside Thaddeus, Lawrence nodded in agreement.

Sebastian moved forward in the crowd. "I'll be honored to accompany you."

Lukas nodded in Sebastian's direction. Sean stepped out, but Lukas shook his head. "You've got a family to worry about, Sean. If anything goes wrong, you need to be here for them."

He turned back to the strangely silent group. "Please, don't get me wrong. This wasn't meant to be a meeting where I struck fear into your hearts. But Haemon has an agenda, and for the moment, the Council does as well. Until we know exactly what they're after, we can't take any chances. If something should happen, Aaron will be in charge until the pack can choose a new Alpha."

Aaron nodded once, his face turned gravely serious. His features, always guarded, seemed even more deeply shadowed than normal. Aria could sympathize with his pain. To be saddled with so much responsibility was his job, but to know if his Alpha died, losing his best friend did not make it any easier. Hopefully, it would not come to that. Lord knows, she didn't have any intention of going quietly into the night. Her mouth tightened. If she went, someone would be going down with her.

Lukas' arm slid around her waist, squeezing slightly. The silence of the pack made her antsy and uncomfortable. Faces watched them, carefully, and while anxiety, fear, and concern etched into their expressions, none appeared to be angry or blaming her for their trouble. They needed to understand her position.

Aria took a deep breath, releasing it slowly from her mouth. "I apologize for bringing all this to your doorstep. I never intended to stay here, which many of you know. I must tell you, before we leave, that has changed. Not just because of Lukas, but also because of you all. You've accepted me without question and have made me one of your own. You are my pack."

She couldn't quite make eye contact with any one of them. For so long, she'd kept her emotions bottled and letting them free made her pulse race and her face flush. Rising tears burned her nose, but she continued, "I've never felt closer to any group of people than I do you. The pack I was born into was never close. You are the family I never had. I have no intention of losing you now."

Holding her breath, she waited for their rejection. It didn't come. She only saw acceptance and admiration. The pack, as a group, bent their heads forward, baring their napes and then covering their hearts with a fist. It was an old gesture, used only for the most sincere expressions of loyalty and love.

Possessiveness and pride surged through her. Haemon would never be able to break these people. They had a bond he couldn't understand. And she would do her best to make sure it never came to that.

Lukas' arm tightened around her, and she leaned into his side, her vision blurred by emotion, overwhelmed by the show of acceptance.

Lukas raised his hand. A few others stepped forward, Ella included.

Her Mate shook his head. "We can only take a small group. I think the volunteers we have are enough."

Aria watched another wave of murmurs move through the crowd.

"You can't seriously be considering leaving me behind. She needs a friend to even out the massive amounts of testosterone." Ella crossed her arms, stuck her hip out and tapped one foot. "I have to go."

"Do we take her, Aria?"

"Not this time."

Ella's face fell. "What?"

Aria jumped down the steps and grabbed Ella's shoulders. Her friend's face was a study of shock and hurt. "Don't take it that way. I would love for you to come, Ella, but you're easy game for Haemon."

"But why? Why is it any different for me than for them?"

"Because you're a woman." When Ella's expression darkened, she hastened to add, "It has nothing to do with what you are capable of, and everything to do with your sex. I can't go into detail right now, but trust me, it's for the best. I don't want anything to happen to you." All she needed was to bring another female, then the Council could demand Ella take her place at Haemon's side. Or worse.

"You're going to make it up to me. And later, you *will* explain to me what you are talking about."

Aria nodded. "I promise, as soon as I can, I will tell you why. But it will have to wait until we get back."

Nodding slowly, Ella relaxed a little. "I'll hold you to that."

Lukas called everyone's attention. "We'll leave tomorrow morning early, so after this evening, any concerns need to be taken up with Aaron. If everything goes as well as we hope, we'll be back in a week or so."

The alternative made Aria cringe.

\*\*\*

"Tell me the truth, both of you. Why have you been calling other packs? And why didn't you tell me?" Aria demanded, once they returned to the study.

Lukas had the grace to look somewhat uncomfortable. Aaron held up his hands, and backed up a step. Lukas was on his own.

"I didn't want to alarm you any more than you already were."

She crossed her arms and tapped one foot. "That's the best you can come up with? Really, I thought you were a little more creative than that."

"Sorry." He winked. "I'll do better next time."

Knowing she wasn't going to get any other answer from Lukas, she turned on Aaron, who tried to slip farther into the room and out of the line of fire. He failed.

Aria glared at the Beta. "And you didn't tell me anything either. By now, you all know I am not a shrinking violet."

When he didn't seem inclined to explain, she took a seat on a chair, propped her legs on the table, and crossed her ankles. "We've got twelve hours, and then eight more in a car. Now spill."

Both men exchanged a glance, and then Lukas dropped into his chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "You remember I told you after you died, I went a little mad?" Aria nodded, and he continued, "Well, when I finally shifted back and decided to be human again, I was still angry. I wanted justice."

“Unfortunately, when I went to the Council, they were already on Haemon’s side, and his influence, and your father’s, was very clear. It made me mad all over, again.”

Aaron snorted. “That’s an understatement. Like saying a flood leaves your house a bit damp.”

“Anyway...” He scowled at Aaron. “I decided it was high time someone did something about the way we always obey the Council. When I started making phone calls, I realized I was not the only one who had issues with the Council. Nothing could be done at the time. People were willing to express their displeasure, but didn’t do anything to move against the Council. Your father had too much influence and power.”

Aria straightened in her seat. “And you called them now because...?”

“I needed to know if their opinions had changed now that things were different.”

“How are things so different, Lukas?” Each pack usually stuck to their own, unless ordered by the Council.

“You’re alive, and together, we’ve got the power to make them listen. Haemon is treading dangerous ground. His attacks are going to make the Council take notice. They can’t side with him forever.”

“You’re hoping my appearance will win us some allies?” She waited for his agreement then rubbed one hand through her hair. “But it hasn’t and now you’re worried about our chances.”

“I’m worried about what will happen even if things do go our way. Haemon isn’t going to quietly accept any decision not in his favor. We have to be prepared for that.”

“And if that means open war?”

Their silence was her answer.

## Chapter 18

Aria woke several hours later to Lukas' gentle shaking. Stretching, she stared out at the two-lane highway. Surrounded by trees, the leaves were only beginning to change. Even though it was October, everything was still green.

"We're in Queen Anne County now. I need you to navigate."

She riffled through the canvas bag tucked under her feet. The directions printed on the crinkled piece of paper guided them to the general vicinity of their destination. The house didn't appear on any maps, but they both remembered the entrance to the house. Aria's nightmares had imprinted the wrought iron lanterns and gate forever.

The roads grew darker and narrower as they continued, passing through the small town at the heart of the county. They passed a grocery store, a bank, a library, several artsy boutiques and a visitor's center. With only a few side streets, there appeared to be a few other stores, including a bar, pizza parlor, and some antique stores. An ideal vacation spot, it was unfortunate, they couldn't take advantage of the small town atmosphere.

They veered onto a winding lane with deep ditches filled with water lining the road. The trees and bushes seemed to bend towards them in an embrace. Whether it was comforting or ominous, Aria couldn't decide.

A low whistle sounded from the back seat as the trees and brush opened up to reveal a large colonial mansion, complete with circular drive and fountain.

A tall, thin man with a shock of white hair, flanked by two large shifters, waited on the porch as their car pulled up. His designer Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts reminded her of the beach, but they were far too expensive to actually be worn ocean-side. A polite, but distant smile did nothing to soften his craggy features. Recognition struck Aria as she undid her seatbelt. Jonas. Her day was not going to get better.

"You remember to stay close to me."



Lukas' fingers wrapped around her hand, squeezing tightly. She stared at him, nodding and mentally preparing herself. Her voice came out in a whisper, without conscious thought. "At least, Haemon isn't here yet. It will give us a little more time."

Lukas pressed a kiss to her palm. "Come on, let's get the show on the road."

They poured out of the car, and she stretched, glad to finally be out of the confined space. As they pulled their luggage from the trunk, the men subtly maneuvered themselves in a tight knot around her. She hadn't really realized they'd done it until they had to part for her to greet their host. Jonas stayed in his position as they approached, and she got the distinct impression he found the entire event distasteful. She couldn't say she didn't feel the same.

The two bodyguards shifted slightly, readying themselves for an attack as she moved closer to Jonas. Did they all really think she and Lukas would be so stupid?

"Welcome to Berkley Hall. My name is Jonas Bontham, Head of the Council."

Ignoring the others, he seized her hand in a vice-like grip, harder than manners deemed polite. His flesh was cool and dry, a stilted smile never reaching his eyes. She squeezed back, matching his strength.

"We know who you are. This"—she motioned to Lukas when Jonas released her—"Is my True Mate, Lukas MacLeod."

"We will hope that remains the case."

She ignored his comment and moved on to introduce the others. After shaking Lukas' hand, Jonas merely gave a curt nod to the others, too far beneath him to warrant a greeting. She supposed it would be too much to ask Jonas to be less of an overbearing ass. He led them into the house.

"These two men will be staying outside your suite and attending to your needs. Their names are Lorenzo and Pax."

"You have a pack guard named Peace?" Thaddeus' comment oozed sarcasm, even with his genuine grin. The tall, dark-headed man in front of him sighed. He'd obviously heard it all before.

Jonas turned in the marble tiled foyer. "They are not pack guards. They are attendants."

"Which is still a fancy name for a jailer," Lukas commented, his voice reflecting mild amusement.

"You may call it what you wish, but it is for your own safety." Jonas' face transformed from boredom to something more sinister. "I might recommend, Aria, you stay in other quarters."

Aria struggled to remain polite. The urge to scream like a mad woman and smack his sly smirk off was strong. Instead, she smiled sweetly and slid her arm into the crook of Lukas' elbow. "You can make any recommendation you want. But we both know exactly what I think you can do with said suggestions."

"Quite." He spun back around, leading them upstairs. The house was a strange mix of colonial and modern furnishings and design.

"Haemon has notified me that he and his party will be arriving late. I expect them sometime in the next hour. When they arrive, we will have dinner downstairs. Pax and Lorenzo will take you to the dining room."

Jonas opened one door, taking in her jeans and T-shirt with disdain. His lip curled. "I would suggest wearing something a little more...flattering."

"Mr. Bontham, we appreciate the accommodations, and will be ready for dinner when you call. Thank you, but we don't want to eat up any more of your valuable time."

Lukas must have lost some tooth enamel grinding out the words. She kept a snicker to herself as they followed Jonas' men upstairs.

They'd been placed in the east wing of the house, in a suite of four rooms surrounding a common living room area. Their "attendants" took position on the outside of the door, and closed it behind them. Thaddeus, Sebastian and Lawrence walked through the other rooms, checking for microphones and the like. They came back, shaking their heads and looked at Lukas expectantly.

His froze briefly, and then shook his head. "Nothing. No spells."

"Did I know you could do that?" Aria asked.

"Probably not." He tossed a suitcase in the corner. "I'm just full of surprises."

“You and your surprises...” Aria’s voice trailed off as she explored the room, noting the expensive, modern furnishings mixed with antiques, laid out like a glamorous magazine photo shoot. The precision of the set-up made her a little afraid to touch things.

“That didn’t go too badly.” Thaddeus dropped to the couch, turning on the TV. He jerked his head in the direction of the door and propped his feet on the table. “Don’t want to make it too easy for Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumb to listen.”

“Was baiting him really necessary? What were you trying to accomplish?” Lukas asked, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. His chin rested on her shoulder. “We’re lucky he didn’t demand you be taken to separate rooms. There’s no guarantee he won’t before the evening is over.”

She leaned into him, absorbing his strength. His scent wrapped around her, calming the kernel of anxiety building in her gut.

“I really dislike Jonas, and when I was here last, I spent my time cowering, as my father expected. I wanted to make sure Jonas understood that things were different.” In a lower voice, she added, “and I’m scared.”

He pressed a kiss to her hair. “I think you definitely got the message across.”

Sebastian draped himself over an armchair, and Lawrence dug through his bag until he found a pack of chips. Despite Lukas’ presence, tension pulled at her shoulders. It amazed her they could be so calm in the midst of the lion’s den.

Lukas pulled her into the nearest bedroom, decorated in pale hues of blue and white, reminding her of a beach cottage. She sank into the down mattress and ran her hands over the duvet cover. “Nice. At least we’ll sleep well. If we can sleep, of course.”

“You have to tone it down, Aria.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your fear is understandable, baby, but you can’t let him see it. Being obnoxious is just as much a dead giveaway as cowering.”

He had a point, even if she wanted to tell him it wasn't true. She turned up her nose and tried to change the subject. "How much do you think he spent destroying the history of this place?"

"Aria, you have to promise me you won't be so flippant to the Council when they have the Meet. If you are, it won't help."

Irritation joined her fear. "I am well aware of that, Lukas. I'm not a child. I grew up on Council politics, remember?"

He sat down next to her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. His chin rubbed against her hair, the motion strangely soothing. "I know. And I can't help it. What I'd really like to do is beat the shit out of them and take you back to the pack like a caveman dragging you to my cave. Since that's out of the question, I'll have to be civilized, and it's really getting under my skin."

She patted his chest. "You're perfectly civilized. Most of the time."

Turning, she slid her hands over his biceps and around his neck. She pulled his head to hers, sucking his bottom lip into her mouth. From the way his hands tightened on her back, she guessed he enjoyed it. Their tongues tangled together, stroking and plundering each other's mouths, until she moved away with a small groan.

"I'd better get change into something a little more fashionable."

"Tease."

She winked and sashayed across the room and out into the living room to get her suitcase. Lawrence munched on a handful of chips and winked at her. Confused, she glanced over her shoulder and realized that she and Lukas' little tryst had been quite visible from the living room.

She ignored him, grabbing the suitcase and returning to the room. The suitcase thudded on the bed next to Lukas' prone form.

"These are going to be very close quarters," Lukas said.

A sly grin flitted over his face and her mouth dropped into an O. Her hand connected with his thigh with a satisfying thwack. "You knew they could see us!"

"Oops?"

## Chapter 19

Ignoring his contagious grin, she opened the suitcase, sorting through the clothes until she found a tea length black sheath dress Ella had leant her for the occasion. It would be a little snug in the chest, but she'd manage.

"Are you going to change?"

Lukas watched her, his grin fading a little. He motioned to the T-shirt and jeans he'd worn on the drive. "You don't think Jonas and Haemon would find this appropriate, huh?"

Jerking the small bag of toiletries from the bottom of the suitcase, she pretended to study him carefully. Heat lit in his gaze, and she flashed a wicked smile. "While I don't mind, I think they'd probably be insulted."

Heading for the bathroom, his voice slid over her skin like a caress. "Want me to help scrub your back?"

For a moment, she considered it. A glance out the open doorway changed her mind. Lawrence, Thaddeus, and Sebastian all sat around the TV, their attention on the doorway rather than the screen.

"I think not."

Thaddeus groaned.

When she'd showered, dried her hair, and slid the dress over her head, she came out of the bathroom to see Lukas napping on the bed. His features were less harsh when he slept, and she stood, watching for a moment. One eyelid cracked open, and he took in her outfit and approved.

"Need some help?"

She turned, scooping her hair over her shoulder to reveal the gaping zipper. "Please."

His hands made quick work of the zipper, though amusement danced around his lips when she turned around. She looked down at her chest and groaned. It was almost obscene. Her chest was poured into the dress, giving her

more cleavage than usual. "I'm not going to need a table. We can probably balance a cup and plate right there."

Lukas slid one finger along her collarbone, catching the chain of her necklace and starting to tug. Her hand slapped over his, a wave of uneasiness washing over her.

"What?"

"When this was given to me, I was warned that Haemon should never see it. I won't leave it here, but I think it's better if it stays where it is."

Lukas shook his head. "If you want, but that just seems uncomfortable."

Winking, she sat down on the bed, twisting her hair behind her head and securing it with a few pins from the nightstand. "I'll let you help massage out the soreness later."

\*\*\*

Aria sat on the couch with the boys, watching mindless television. As Lukas stepped out of the shower, a knock reverberated through the room. She shared a look with Thaddeus before he stood to open the door. Pax announced dinner would be served in thirty minutes and added that Haemon had arrived. The last of his news infiltrated tension into the room like a bullet. Thaddeus closed the door, and Aria released her breath. She resisted the urge to run. In nearly a year she and Haemon hadn't been within miles of each other. Now he was in the same house. Her skin crawled at the thought.

Lukas appeared in the doorway, his white dress-shirt unbuttoned, baring his bronze chest, and became distracted. Aria's mouth watered with the urge to taste the tantalizing skin revealed by the gap in the fabric. She averted her gaze. Now was not the time to be fantasizing about Lukas' body.

*Now is an excellent time.* His voice curled through her head like smoke.

She glared

Lukas laughed, then told Sebastian and Thaddeus to clean up for dinner.

By the time everyone was ready, Pax and Lorenzo were waiting in the doorway, boredom outlining their faces. Dread filled Aria as they left the suite,

her gaze constantly trailing over to Lukas, who looked dark, forbidding, and gorgeous in his black slacks and white silk shirt. Thaddeus walked on her right, while Lukas pulled her hand through the crook of his elbow on the other side. Lawrence and Sebastian took up the rear, followed by Pax.

The house was huge, decorated with an eclectic flair that worked better in some rooms than others. They followed Lorenzo into a large, wood paneled dining room to see Jonas at the head of the table, and Haemon stood on his left, a glass of wine cradled in one hand.

“Welcome again, my dear. I believe you are all acquainted,” Jonas said, as they filed into the room.

Lukas appeared to be the picture of calm and good humor as he nodded to Haemon. Everything Aria was not, but she kept her fear concealed as Lukas said, “We are, yes. Nice to see you again, Haemon.”

Haemon’s blond head inclined as if he were a king. “The pleasure is all mine.”

For once, she didn’t mind being ignored. Her stomach was doing flips, and she wasn’t sure she’d be able to make it through the entire meal. Jonas motioned for them to sit with a gracious sweep of his hand.

“You’ll notice that everyone’s places are marked. I thought it best, under the circumstances.”

Aria faced the table that stretched a good twelve feet. Deep mahogany wood legs carved with acanthus leaves and wolves’ heads peeked out from under the edge of the Battenberg lace table cloth. The carved wolves’ paws clasped wooden balls.

The settings were fine, bone china and silver with delicate crystal wine glasses filled with white wine. A card was placed in a special holder above each setting. With a growing sense of dread, Aria knew without looking which seat was hers. The table, set for ten, only held enough chairs for six more. She watched as Jonas sat down in a heavy carved chair at the head of the table, flanked on the left by Haemon, and his four pack guards. Lukas took his place next to Jonas, but stiffened when she did not follow him up the right side of the table. At least Jonas hadn’t been foolish enough to mix the group. She remained at the opposite end,

starring the card with her name in a flowing script above the single place setting, away from everyone else. From this distance, she might as well be eating alone.

She nudged Thaddeus with her foot. With a forced smile, she nodded towards Lukas. "Go on. Find your place. I'm starved."

Lukas' gaze caught hers, and she could see the anger boiling under the surface. The urge to mind-speak with him hit her hard, but she was not certain if Jonas or one of the strangers in the room would be able to hear such a communication. They'd discussed this in the car, and decided the best idea was to speak aloud or not at all.

She waited for Pax to hold out her chair and sat, smoothing her skirt down as she did. Jonas and Haemon watched her like hawks. She was surprised to find that she actually found it entertaining. "You have a lovely home."

"Thank you. I enjoy it very much." Jonas smiled as the men took their seats, and Aria noted the look of disappointment, probably from the lack of response to the seating arrangements. She calmly took a sip of the wine.

The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife. Thaddeus watched her, his outrage on her behalf clear in his face. Lawrence was sizing up their opponents, one of whom included Otis, who appeared to have lost a few teeth since she'd seen him last. Somehow, she knew Lawrence and Thaddeus were probably responsible. Lukas and his wolves would not have allowed Otis to return to Haemon unscathed. Sebastian avoided everyone's gaze. His sudden bashfulness had Aria's brow furrowing. While he was shy, he was normally far more alert and active than this.

She made a mental note to ask him later. Her thoughts were pulled back to the group when Haemon coughed slightly. "Well, this is rather uncomfortable."

"Funny," she muttered as she took a sip of her wine then propped the hand cupping her wineglass on the arm of the chair. "I thought that was the point."

Jonas frowned. "No, no. That was not my intention at all."

*Yeah, right.*

"I just thought we might take the opportunity to have a lovely dinner together and then a...chat."



*Ah, there it was.* Jonas and Haemon wanted to see if they could talk this over without having a formal Meet, where any and all could come and observe the results. Perhaps the Council was a little more aware of its growing unpopularity than she'd thought.

Lukas stared at her across the table, and she flicked hers to Thaddeus, who had taken a huge gulp of wine, and was struggling to keep his comments to himself. While she would enjoy hearing what his sarcasm came up with, they all knew it would not go over well.

"I'm sure we would all enjoy the chance to talk," Lukas said, diplomatically.

Haemon's smile made her squirm. "As would I. It's been a long time since I've enjoyed the pleasure of Aria's company."

The way his mouth formed the words made them sound obscene. She flickered a glance to Lukas, her attention catching the whiteness of his fingertips, curved around the stem of the wine glass. If he squeezed too hard, he'd break the silly thing in half. As if Haemon knew exactly what she was thinking, he flashed his smile at her. She had to physically bite her tongue to stop from making a snide comment. Oh, but she wanted to rip into him—verbally and physically.

She moved her hands to her lap, allowing one of the two servants to place a bowl of salad in front of her. Everything about this place reeked money and power, which meant this would be the longest meal of her life.

Lukas waited about two seconds for his host to take a dainty forkful of salad, and then stabbed his own fork into the lettuce. The bone china would never be the same by the time he finished.

Between bites of salad, Haemon continued to watch her, until he decided to make conversation. "What have you been doing the last year, Aria?"

Aria stopped and stared at him. His face was the picture of innocence. Being polite was going to kill her. It might be the death of him as well, if she could manage it.

She swallowed her food and patted her lips with the white linen napkin, then laid it neatly across her thighs. The extra time gave her a chance to control

her temper. Smiling sweetly, she batted her lashes. “Why, Haemon, I didn’t realize you didn’t know.”

He adopted a wounded air, his expression a picture of distress. “I only know that you seemed to be running from me.”

She took a delicate sip of wine, setting it down with a sympathetic smile. “I left to... explore my options.”

## Chapter 20

“It’s amazing you people can eat in here. You’ve got to be choking on all the bullshit.”

Aria jerked her gaze away from Haemon’s glare to see Cern. He slid into the chair to her right, and a servant scurried to bring in the necessary tableware to set a place for him.

Haemon’s body tensed and knuckles turn white when he fisted his hand. “It’s so nice of you to join us, Cern.”

Aria noted the displeasure in Haemon’s voice, but Cern didn’t seem concerned.

“Terribly sorry I’m late. You wouldn’t believe the traffic,” Cern replied.

Jonas could not hide his irritation. “What are you doing here?”

Cern swirled the liquid in his glass, then sniffed it delicately. The act seemed laughable considering the cut-off shorts and dark green T-shirt advertising a popular tractor company. “I was invited. The rest of the Council has appointed me to act as mediator should the need arise.”

Haemon and Jonas exchanged a surprised glance. Apparently, they weren’t aware of the latest development. Cern shot Aria a wink over the rim of his glass. Mischief gleamed in his dark brown eyes.

“Why wasn’t I informed of this?” A tic formed in Jonas’ cheek as he glared at Cern.

Cern shrugged, digging into his salad. “I guess they figured I would get here in about the same amount of time it would have taken to call.”

Silence reigned until Cern indicated he was finished with his food, and his plate was whisked away. The next course arrived in silver domes, uncapped on the sideboard and brought to the table. Steaming plates of steak, potatoes au gratin, and asparagus were artfully arranged on their plates.

Lukas tried to start conversation again. “When is the Meet planned?”

“Tomorrow morning, as soon as all the required Council members have arrived.” Jonas answered.

“Required members?” Haemon asked, as he cut through his steak with controlled movements. Aria knew when he finished, the steak would be sliced into tiny squares, all precisely the same size.

Jonas nodded at Haemon. “We think this may be settled without the full Meet. Hopefully after dinner, we will be able to talk things through. If not, the most senior members of the Council will hear the complaints and we will go from there.”

Cern leaned towards her, pitching his voice so that she alone could hear him—a feat in a room full of werewolves. “Sounds like they already know what’s going to happen.”

Aria snorted. “Everyone here knows how this will end. Or at least the general idea. Even you.” She watched him closely, unsure of this latest development. She motioned with her fork, noting that Lawrence and Haemon’s pack guards were watching them intently. “Eat your dinner. I, for one, will be taking advantage of the delicious meal.”

She hadn’t lied. Everything was the finest quality, and had been prepared by someone who probably worked for a five star restaurant in their “real” job. Cern’s appearance, while a surprise, didn’t make her too uncomfortable. He’d been popping in and out of Council politics as long as she could remember. But she didn’t understand his sudden interest in being Haemon’s lap dog. No one ever trusted Cern completely, and he never served a purpose unless it suited him. She would just have to wait and find out.

Haemon, Lukas, and Jonas kept up some sort of mundane conversation about the origin of the beef they ate, while the other six men at the table sized each other up over dinner. In such formal surroundings, they were not required to speak unless spoken to: their main purpose being protection, if needed.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

She sighed heavily and bit off the tip of an asparagus spear with a little more force than necessary. “Uh huh. I know you too well for that. You’ll be blurting them down the table.”

Cern chuckled. "It would liven things up a bit, don't you think?"

"Personally, I don't think it needs any help. This is the calm before the storm, and you and I both know it."

He sat back, patting his stomach. "Oh, I don't know. You are all being excessively polite, but it seems like you can keep it up indefinitely."

"They can perhaps." She nodded towards the other end of the table. "I don't know how much longer I can handle this. When I think too hard about it, I just get angry, and losing my temper right now would *not* be a good idea."

Cern chuckled. "I suppose it wouldn't. You are a little unpredictable, aren't you?"

Something in his voice made her look up, studying his face. Somehow, he knew about her "power surges," even though she'd never told him or had one around him. Unease rose within. He'd already shown up several times just when she needed him. Once could be brushed off as coincidence. Three times? That was something else.

Another servant took their empty plates, forcing her to sit back in her chair and keep her questions to herself.

Dessert was a gloriously decadent dark chocolate cake with ganache icing and a dramatic dusting of confectioner's sugar. Her mouth closed over the spoon, and she couldn't help moaning her approval. It was the most amazing chocolate dessert she'd ever tasted.

She sucked all the chocolate off the spoon, closing her eyes and savoring the flavors melting on her tongue.

"No wonder you all are fighting over her." Cern's voice boiled with laughter.

Every man in the room, servants included, watched her with identical expressions of disbelief. Her skin flushed, but she refused to look away from her dessert. She scooped up another spoonful and raised it as if it were a toast, and winked. "I'm terribly sorry, but really, this is the most amazing thing I've ever had in my mouth."

Cern made a choking noise. Thaddeus coughed into his napkin, his shoulders shaking. He might even have passed money to Lawrence under the edge of the table, but she couldn't be sure.

Mortification froze her to her chair. She hadn't intended for the words to come out dirty, but everyone continued to stare. *Well, hell.* Stuffing the spoon in her mouth, she smiled, then kept her gaze on the plate in front of her. *So much for not causing trouble at the dinner table.*

The rest of the meal was finished in silence.

\*\*\*

Lukas caught Aria's elbow as they followed their host into a smaller parlor. "Remind me to get the recipe for that cake."

A fresh wave of embarrassment surged to her face. "Stop it. I was enjoying myself. It was either that or stand up and start raving like a lunatic."

Lukas laughed, a husky, breathy sound she felt all the way down to her center. "Believe me, baby, I liked your choice. Just not in front of so many witnesses."

She took a seat on a brocade fainting couch, Lukas crowding her towards the angled back. His thigh pressed along her own, and she could feel his heat even through his pants and her dress. His entire body broadcasted possessiveness. Lawrence took a wing chair a few feet away, and Thaddeus stood, casually leaning against the doorjamb.

Haemon sat on another couch, flanked by his guards. They paced, watching their counterparts warily.

Jonas took a chair in front of a large marble fireplace, scooting it so that he could view everyone in the room. When his gaze rested on Lukas and Aria, his lips thinned. Cern crossed his legs, stretching them in front of the desk he occupied. Something strong and amber sparkled in the cut glass decanter at his elbow. It must have been placed there, with cups and a bucket of ice and bottle of soda water for the company to enjoy.

“How about drinks for everyone?” Cern jumped up, pulling the stopper and sniffing at the liquid. A grin broke out over his face. “Why Jonas, I didn’t expect good, old fashioned whiskey!”

The older man’s voice dripped disdain. “What did you expect exactly?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Cern handed a half-full tumbler to Thaddeus, who waited for Lukas’ permission and then grinned. “I sort of expected something stuffy like port or sherry, I guess.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

Cern started to hand a glass to one of Haemon’s pack guards, but the man refused. “I’m sorry, but *my* guards are not allowed alcohol while working.”

Lukas stretched, nodding as Lawrence also asked permission. Only Sebastian refused the offer. “I know my wolves won’t overindulge, and I trust them.”

“Are you implying something?”

Lukas met Haemon’s bristling with a cool stare. “Don’t get so worked up. If I insult you, Haemon, you won’t have to ask. You’ll know.”

Aria sighed, took a large swig of the whiskey and allowed it to burn a clear path down her throat. Haemon’s lips tightened even further with disapproval. She met his gaze and raised an eyebrow, taking another sip. In the past, her act of disobedience would have resulted in Haemon’s physical display of anger. She raised the glass again, enjoying his irritation.

Jonas cleared his throat, leaning forward to rest his arms on his knees. “Listen, the Council does not need to hear this at all. We can come to an arrangement agreeable for all parties.”

Aria cut in. “You mean you’ll allow me to return with Lukas to his pack? Because that would make this party happy.”

“Aria.” Haemon’s voice lost any sense of gentleness or comfort.

“I am not a yippy dog to be heeled, Haemon. Do not treat me like one.” The words hissed through her teeth, and his surprise showed briefly on his face.

“Forgive me. My need to see you safely home is overcoming my better manners.”

Laughter bubbled up in her throat. See her safely home? Who did he think he was kidding? All his pack guards had seen her bleeding under his hands, and he'd killed Lukas before. The pretense made her feel like she was being smothered.

She slid a hand to cover Lukas' where it rested on his thigh. His fingers curled under, pulling hers over his lap. She wasn't even sure he'd realized he'd done it. Haemon's nostrils flared, and she could see his anger rising. Good. He needed to be a little less in control.

"I don't think you understand, Haemon. I am happy right where I am. Although, there is something you could do to make me even happier."

Lukas stiffened, and she squeezed his fingers. Haemon didn't respond, watching her closely.

"This is good!" Jonas seemed genuinely pleased. "What could Haemon do?"

"Leave us in peace." Her gaze never left Haemon's. "Or die. Your choice."



## Chapter 21

The silence in the room swelled, shock etched into everyone's faces. Calmly, as if she'd asked him to switch seats, she sipped at her whiskey.

Jonas cleared his throat. "I don't think you're really getting into the spirit of this negotiation."

"Oh, I think I am. You all want to pass me around like a Council whore, and I won't have it. I've made my choice. Make yours."

"You don't have any idea what you're saying."

Lukas spoke up. "Watch how you speak to *my Mate*."

Haemon's laugh surprised her. He shook his head, brushing a strand of golden hair off his forehead. "I can't believe you all have managed to deceive one another. He isn't your Mate, Aria. I own you, body and soul, and have since your father promised you to me when we were ten." His glare flicked to Lukas, who sat ramrod straight next to her, a growl rumbling in his chest. "Think, Aria. If you truly cared for him, you'd leave him. He managed to escape disaster once. Do you think he could do it, again?"

She shot off the couch, trembling with the need to tear the smug smirk off his lips. He enjoyed her reaction to his thinly veiled threat.

Lukas tugged on her hand, "Aria, baby—"

She shook off his hand. Somehow, watching Haemon's face had triggered something inside her. The last remnants of the naïve, sheltered girl she had been were snuffed out. In their place, a hard, unbending determination remained. Haemon had threatened her family. This time, she would not sit back and allow disaster to strike again.

The room seemed colder, but she brushed it off. She felt icy, from the inside out. Haemon had pushed too far. She moved to stand in front of him, crouching down to his level. Her eyes flicked to the others in the room and a firm smile crossed her mouth. Jonas sat back in his chair, horror etched on his face.

Cern stood, expressionless with Thaddeus, who looked as if he'd swallowed his tongue. Even Haemon seemed less certain than he had before.

"I don't think you are listening to me, Haemon. It's a problem you've always had, actually." Her finger slid along his jaw, her fingernail pushing at his chin until his gaze was locked with hers. She wanted him to see that she meant what she said.

"I am not a toy to fight over, or a brood mare to take home and fuck. When you took Lukas from me the first time, I was too young to really understand. I am not the same girl, and I will not allow you to destroy my world again. I have a family now. You are not included."

She stood slowly and turned to Jonas. "And you are no better. I think it's about time you called the senior members of the Council."

Aria took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Her body shuddered as Lukas' fingers curled around her wrist and gently tugged her to the couch next to him. Ice trickled out of her, and her body slumped. She'd made her point, and exhaustion overcame her. Absently, she touched the necklace hanging under the edge of the dress. The metal burned through the fabric with cold. Funny, but she hadn't noticed it before. Little by little, the metal warmed to her body. Glancing around the room, she became aware that everyone was watching her with strange expressions on their faces.

Jonas muttered something, and Aria glanced back toward Haemon. Instead of cowering his rage burned even brighter, there for all to see. Her stomach turned and dinner crept towards the back of her throat.

"Is this everyone's wish?" Jonas asked, a disapproving frown marring his features.

Lukas's firm voice broke through when no one answered. "Call them, Jonas."

Haemon nodded once, then raised his hand, calling total attention. "I do have one request."

Jonas paused in the process of flipping open his cell phone. "What?"

"As the question of her Mate is still unanswered, I believe she needs to be kept separate from both Lukas and I. It is only fair."

Beside her, Lukas' temper finally caught up with them. The tinkle of breaking glass mixed with his oath. Whirling, she watched as he uncurled his right hand, glass dropping with blood onto the fine Persian carpet. His whiskey tumbler had been no match for the strength of his anger. She got up, gently cradling his hand in her own. Most of the glass had fallen onto the carpet, and she shook her head.

"I take it you object to this arrangement?" Jonas' voice held dry amusement.

"I object, but I can see the sense of it."

He jumped when she pulled out the last piece of glass a little more forcefully than necessary. Already his cuts were knitting themselves closed. A servant appeared at his elbow with a wet cloth and a broom and dustpan, sweeping the mess while Lukas cleaned off his hands.

"Who exactly do you expect me to stay with? I don't think you'll let me stay alone," Aria commented, sitting again and taking the cloth from Lukas. She wiped off the blood from her fingers. She had been expecting something like this all evening, but had hoped it wouldn't happen.

"No, given your history, I don't think that would be wise."

She feigned innocence. "My history?"

Jonas ignored her. "I suppose she will be taken to one of the rooms in my wing and locked in. I don't suppose you will trust me to watch her, and I know she won't."

"*She* is sitting right here." Aria understood their belief that she would run yet again, but it still rubbed her the wrong way. She wasn't a teenager anymore to be bossed around and handed from guardian to guardian.

Cern stepped forward, for once his normal mocking tone gone. "I'll act as her guardian. I am a neutral party."

Aria didn't miss the glance that slid between Haemon and Jonas. Cern wasn't quite as neutral as they'd thought.

He was, however, her best option at the moment.

"Fine." The men turned to her as if she'd just appeared. "Cern can be my guardian."

Jonas looked uneasy. "I'm not sure that—"

"I don't think you understand. Cern gets to do it, or I'm going to disappear and make your lives *really* miserable."

Jonas snorted. "You cannot disappear here."

Aria stood, "Was that a challenge?"

Lukas tugged her hand and she sat back down next to him, pressing herself against his side without trying to be obvious about it. His warmth seeped into her skin and she took a deep breath, memorizing his scent. It took all her control not to say anything else, but she feared what else her anger would draw out of her mouth before she had a chance to think it over.

"Well, are we in agreement?" Cern waited, crossing his arms.

Haemon slowly nodded. "I think that's an acceptable solution if Lukas agrees."

Her Mate nodded once.

Cern held out one hand. "Come on, Aria. I think it's best if we leave now."

She wanted to protest, but she'd had enough. She was bone tired, and drained. Everyone stood as she rose, somehow remembering their manners at the last minute. Tears burned as she looked up at Lukas, cupped his cheeks in her hand and pressed a kiss to his lips. His hands settled briefly over her hips, fisting in the snug fabric. She pulled away before she could spill any tears.

"Lorenzo, take them to the Blue Room." Jonas gave the order, meanwhile, his thumbs worked the cell phone.

Following Lorenzo and Cern into the hall, she heard Jonas sigh from behind her. "It seems we'll need the senior Council tomorrow morning..."

\*\*\*

"That was pretty incredible. Did you have any idea what you were doing?"

Cern's voice held a mixture of admiration and censure. She ignored him, focusing on the throbbing in her temples. She slumped into a blue brocade desk chair and glared at him.

Lawrence appeared in the doorway, flanked by the two guards assigned to watch her new set of rooms. He dragged her small black suitcase in and placed it on the chest at the end of the bed.

“Thanks, Lawrence.”

His eyes slid to Cern and back, questioning her silently.

She shrugged. “Don’t worry. He’s the lesser evil, and for the moment, that’s good enough.”

Lawrence nodded once, resigned, and closed the door softly behind him. Aria turned to Cern, propping her head in one hand. She felt drained. “What did you really come here for, Cern?”

He shook his head. This time it seemed strained. “I asked you a question first.”

“Yes.” She rose, kicking off her heels. “But I don’t intend on answering you.”

Cern stepped in front of her as she headed for the suitcase. “We have to come to some sort of understanding, Aria.”

She stepped away from him, studying him, carefully. Now that she’d seen him interact with Haemon and Jonas first-hand, her internal radar said to be cautious. Something about the whole situation seemed contrived, but she wasn’t sure who it benefited, or who was calling the shots.

“You’ve done me a lot of favors in the past, Cern, and I appreciate it more than I can express. But I don’t understand why you’ve suddenly become so friendly with Haemon and Jonas.”

“It’s complicated.”

“That’s a cop-out. Explain it to me. I’m a smart girl, I can handle it.”

Cern watched her, and his face somehow grew older. Deep shadows formed in the lines around his mouth. It wasn’t like him to be solemn. Aria found it unnerving to get a glimpse of the real Cern. “You have something important in your possession.”

Confusion drew her brows together. “I don’t understand. What has that got to do with anything?”

“Everything and nothing.” He sighed. “Sit down, Aria.”

She moved to the bed. He pulled a chair over to the side of the bed and straddled it. “You understand who I am, or was, don’t you?”

“Yeesss,” she agreed, hesitantly. No one forgets a man who matches all the descriptions for Cernunos, Celtic Lord of the Hunt.

His fingers picked at the brocade threads of the chair cover. “I can’t get into detail while we’re here. It isn’t safe enough for my peace of mind.”

“Putting me off is really annoying. You know that, right?” All the cloak and dagger secrets would drive her mad. Nowhere would ever be safe enough.

“I know. But I need you to trust me one more time. I can promise you that, at least for now, your interests and mine are the same.”

Aria rubbed her fingertips in circles over her temples. Could she really trust him? Did she really have any other choices? She knew the answer, and it made her teeth clench. After a year of only having herself to rely on, it wasn’t easy to hand over her trust.

“All right. For now, we will remain as we are.” She caught and held his gaze. “But when we get through the next few days, *if* we get through them, I think we’re going to have to reevaluate our situation.”

“Agreed.”

She rose, pulling pins from her hair as she went. She slammed them into a neat pile on the nightstand. A whimper moved through her throat as her heavy locks tumbled around her shoulders. Her scalp burned and tingled and the pounding in her head grew worse for a moment, and then eased.

“I have some Tylenol in my room. You want some?”

She nodded. “That would be nice, thanks.”

He left, and she unzipped the suitcase, wriggling in her borrowed dress. The tight fabric added to her feelings of being trapped, and her skin twitched with the need to change into looser, more comfortable clothing. As she flipped up the lid, her gaze fell on a familiar white silk shirt. A note was folded on top, held in place by the elastic straps. She picked up the paper, flicking it open with her thumb.

*Just in case you’re feeling a little lonely.*

Her fingers curled into the cool Material, bringing it to her face. Like a cat scenting catnip, she rubbed her cheeks over the smooth silk, breathing in Lukas' scent. Tears burned the corners of her eyes. She missed him already.

Rummaging through the rest of her clothes, she pulled out the shorts she'd brought to sleep in and a tank top, just in case the shirt proved a little too translucent.

The bathroom was well stocked with white towels that matched the white marble floors and walls. She turned the water on as hot as she could stand it, shimmied out of her clothing, and started to remove the necklace. As her fingers caught at the clasp, she paused. Her gaze strayed to the doorknob, and the flimsy lock separating her from the rest of the world. Despite her relative security, the thought of removing the item made her uneasy. Her hands fell away and she hung a white towel on the hook next to the glass shower door.

The hot water did amazing things for her headache, and she soaped up, using the expensive bottles of shampoo and body wash lined up on the shower ledge. The bathroom smelled of roses and lilacs, and she relaxed a little further. Just as she rinsed the shampoo out of her hair, she turned to reach for conditioner only to catch a shadowy movement on the other side of the steamy, textured glass shower door.

She froze, watching the spot of darkness. When she'd finally decided it had only been her imagination, it moved again, the motion unmistakable.

Someone was pawing through her clothing.

## Chapter 22

She leapt from the shower, her body twisting until it sprouted fangs and claws. Her nose and mouth lengthened, sprouting teeth and a little fur. Her arms and legs grew longer, her hands curving into claw-tipped weapons. Her entire body sported a thin covering of fur. Before the transformation could complete, she halted it. Her body vibrated with the need to continue to one form or the other. Holding this was difficult, and only a few shifters could do so for any length of time. Her entire being rebelled at the grotesque shape she'd taken, but she bent her form to match her will.

Her vision, flickering between the colors of human vision and the black and white crispness of the wolf, targeted Cern crouched in the floor of the bathroom, her black dress clutched in one hand.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was a parody of a human tone.

Cern flinched, dropping the dress as he slowly straightened. "Holy shit, Aria. I've heard rumors, but I've never actually seen a shifter do it. That's amazing."

His gaze moved over her, stopping at her chest. As she watched, his entire demeanor changed, his body seemed to bulk up, and fear ran under the edge of her mind. His voice changed, becoming deeper into a boom off the bathroom walls. "You must give me the necklace."

The need to obey his command trembled through her. One clawed hand wavered, moving towards her neck where the necklace rested, suddenly cold against her lightly furred skin. His stare held her captive, locking her into submission. He took a step closer, his gaze flicking away from hers for an instant as he lunged towards her chest, one hand outstretched.

An instant was all she needed. She felt his fingers brush her breastbone and gain the edge of the necklace. Rage poured through her. Her teeth snapped over his arm, his blood flowing into her mouth. She had enough presence of mind to stop short of breaking his arm, but not much more. His blood moved over her



tongue—spicy and hot, tasting of wildness and old magic. He drew back, crying out. His form was not so big this time, and his voice had lost some of its rich baritone. Pain laced his plea for freedom. His eyes tried to control her, but Aria rebuffed his attempt. She could feel him trying to bend her will to his, but it was like an annoying mosquito—easy to brush off and ignore.

“Release me!” The pain in his voice broke through her angry haze and her jaws reluctantly opened.

She backed away, tracking his movements. His outstretched hand, once again, demanding the necklace.

Her incredulous laugh came out as a snarl. “You’ve got to be joking.”

He wrapped his arm in one of the white towels and watched her carefully. His hands shook, and the floor puddled with his blood. Ella’s dress would never be the same. Without warning, he flung his head back, laughing. “I’ll be damned. Even if you hadn’t tasted my blood, you would have resisted me.” The smile was genuine, and he shook his head. “I’m truly impressed, and I haven’t felt that in centuries.”

“What do you want with the necklace? You gave it to me when my mother died with her letter.” Her vocal chords ground out the words, pain curling along her throat. This form was not meant for conversation.

He couldn’t quite meet her gaze. “I can’t explain it now. You wouldn’t understand.”

Wrong answer. She growled, the sound bouncing around the marble walls until it sounded like the entire bathroom was filled with a pack of wolves.

His tone became cajoling, pleading. “Please, Aria, it’s a matter of life and death.”

“Yes. It is. Get out, Cern. I’ll pretend like you are my guardian, but I will not for one instant trust you again.”

“You can’t be rid of me that easily, my dear. Unfortunately, you and I are still bound by a common desire.” He edged towards the door.

“What would that be?”

“Haemon’s death.”

Aria cocked her head, the link his blood had forged between them throbbed with sincerity. The realization of their connection made her heart pound. This was no mere magician she'd hooked herself to. For a second, her grip on her shape wavered, and her form blurred. Quickly, she clamped down on it, retaining her strange body.

"Amazing. I've never seen such control," Cern whispered, admiration clear.

"You cannot lie to me, can you?"

"Sadly, no." He stepped into the doorway, defeat shown in the fine lines of his face.

Her clawed fingers fumbled with the doorknob. "Good. Now go away. I'll be out in a few minutes."

He nodded, and she shut the door, moving a heavy wooden vanity cabinet across the marble to stand in front of the thin oak paneling. Her form lent her the strength, and her own paranoia the need. The obstacle might not stop Cern, but she'd hear him coming this time. Her form wavered, then changed, and she sagged, naked and shivering against the marble walls.

"Damn." Her reflection was hazy in the still fogged mirror, but clear enough to see blood running from her mouth, over her chest and the necklace. "I'll have to take another shower."

When she finally emerged again from the steamy marble bathroom, she was no longer relaxed. Her fresh clothing had, miraculously, managed to avoid getting soiled in her confrontation with Cern. Slipping into them, she pulled the white silk shirt close to her body, burying her nose in the collar. Lukas' scent clung to the fibers, soothing her nerves. Using what was left of the towels, she soaked up what she could of the bloody water on the floor, and shoved all the soiled laundry in the corner.

Jonas could deal with it later.

Outside her door, she could hear lowered voices. Obviously, her confrontation with Cern hadn't escaped notice. She shifted briefly, pushing the cabinet out of the way, and then placed one hand on the brass doorknob. Buttoning up the shirt so that it covered her necklace, she took a deep breath and opened the door.

The scene wasn't quite what she'd been expecting. Jonas, slightly more rumpled than before, sat in the desk chair watching Cern like a hawk. Distrust echoed in the air around him like a second skin. Haemon paced across the doorway to the bedroom, dressed in designer workout attire. Todd, his second, stood near the doorway, watching everyone else. Cern sat on the bed, the white towel discarded, new white scars in the shape of her teeth contrasted against his dark arm. Lukas leaned against the bottom post of the bed, shirtless in jeans, a breath of fresh air. Thaddeus sat on the edge of the chest next to him.

The moment she stepped into the room, pandemonium broke loose. Everyone started asking questions at the same time until she clapped hands over her ears and yelled, "Quiet, all of you. This is ridiculous."

Lukas' hands ran over her body, checking her for injury. She pressed a kiss to the base of his throat. *I'm fine, Lukas.*

*You could just be saying that. I'd really like to strip you down and check you over thoroughly.* He fingered the edge of the silk shirt. *I see you liked my gift.*

"Enough. Quit pawing Aria and let her answer for this."

Lukas stilled, turning to Haemon with his teeth bared.

"Answer for what?" She smiled, pleased that her words came out only mildly interested.

Lukas tried to tuck her under his arm, but a glance from Jonas had him taking a step away, though his hand remained linked with hers. There was only so much respect that she could give her host. He would not separate her further from her Mate.

"You attacked Cern," Jonas accused.

The man in question raised his hands. "Their words, not mine."

Haemon's brow furrowed. "What else would you call it? There was enough magic bouncing around this room to choke a horse."

"And you automatically assume I attacked him?" Indignant, she took a step towards Haemon. His second immediately took a step in front of his Alpha.

“Well, that’s something at least.” She stood across an entire room, but Todd felt that she was threat enough to move to protect Haemon? Things were beginning to look up.

Haemon gave a disgusted grunt and pushed his second aside. “How do you explain, then, that we found Cern with a bloody towel wrapped around his healing arm?”

“I defended myself.”

It was Lukas’ turn to bristle. “What?”

Aria patted his arm with her free hand. “Don’t worry. There was a...misunderstanding, but Cern and I have worked it out now. I apologize for any inconvenience we might have caused.”

Haemon made a choked noise and turned to Jonas, who ran a hand through his wild white hair. “Aria, I will not be so easily appeased, or dismissed. I want to know what happened here.”

Aria faced Cern, who sat, smiling and watching the argument. “Cern? What did you tell them?”

“Oh, the same as you. A minor spat between friends.”

She waved a hand in his direction, tipping her head towards Jonas. “See? Why are we having this conversation?”

“Because I do not see any possible way you could have accomplished such a feat.”

So much for being afraid of her. Her chin lifted, she crossed her arms and cocked a brow. “You mean you didn’t think I had it in me, don’t you?”

Jonas jerked his head forward. “Yes. The marks don’t match the pattern of a wolf’s jaws.”

“That’s because I wasn’t fully changed when it happened.”

The noise in the room stopped. Even Lukas watched her, pride swelling his chest.

“Dear Lord. You can hold the half-form?” Haemon sounded like someone had just punched him in the gut.

“You may take that however you wish.”

“You really won’t say what happened?” Jonas took two steps towards her, blazing with anger.

“Give the man a prize.” The sarcasm poured off her tongue before she could think better of it.

Jonas stiffened, and whirled around. “Haemon, Lukas, two of each of your pack guards may stay behind and guard the doors.” Pax stood in the doorway, waiting his master’s orders. “Rotate the guard at midnight. There are to be six wolves here at all times.”

“I don’t really think that’s necessary,” Cern taunted politely.

Jonas turned on him, teeth bared. “It is my wish. I do not trust you two. Six guards should be able to deal with whatever you dish out. Please keep in mind that should they even think they sense magic, they have my approval and encouragement to break down these doors and see what’s going on.”

Aria watched Jonas carefully, noting the steel thread that ran through his words. He was truly pissed. Not only had they ruined his well-planned coup this evening, but now she had managed to upset the delicate balance of power he had arranged. With Cern beholden to the Council, he had believed the entire evening was a win-win situation as long as she remained separate from Lukas.

Refraining from the smirk that threatened to slide across her lips, Aria gave a mental shrug. At some point, they needed to see she could fend for herself. If it upset Jonas and Haemon, it was an added bonus.

Across the room, conversing quietly with his pack guards, Haemon caught her eye, smiled, and gave a wink so brief she questioned if it really happened. Her smug pride drained out of her body in an instant, a heavy feeling replacing it. Yet again, she had misjudged Haemon’s self-control.

Lukas tugged on her hand, drawing her inside the circle of his arms. She leaned into his body, allowing his strength to comfort her. Thaddeus, Lawrence and Sebastian appeared at her elbow.

“Did you really do that to him?” Thaddeus glanced back over his shoulder at Cern, who sat, arguing quietly with Jonas.

She sighed, lifting her head from Lukas’ chest to nod at Thaddeus. “I did. I’ll explain it later on the ride home.”

“If you’re allowed to go home.” Sebastian’s voice held a rough, hostile edge. Aria turned, as did Lukas, and the strange glint in the pack guard’s eyes made her shift closer to Lukas. Something wasn’t quite right. Until she proved it wasn’t just nervous paranoia on her part, she couldn’t say anything.

Lukas frowned at his guard. “Come on, Sebastian.”

“It’s all right. He’s got a point.” Aria laughed. “But I’ve been known to do strange and unpredictable things, and I can almost guarantee I will end up at home with you guys, one way or another.”

Lukas pulled her tighter to him, their bodies pressed together from chest to thigh. “Don’t worry. We’ll work something out.”

Jonas strode to them, glowering at Lukas. Her Mate smiled lazily and rubbed small circles over her back.

“It’s time to go, Lukas. Tell Aria goodnight.”

Lukas answered Jonas scathing tone with a cheeky smirk. “As you wish.”

His mouth closed over hers, and her breath caught in her throat. Her fingers curled around his bare shoulders, and she felt his hands settle over her waist, pulling her closer. He pulled her bottom lip into his mouth, sucking and nibbling at it, before releasing her.

Haemon cursed and stormed out of the room. Aria touched a finger to her lips, still feeling the tingling imprint of Lukas’ mouth.

Jonas glared at them both. “That isn’t what I meant, Alpha MacLeod.”

Lukas slowly released her, pushing himself away from her as if it were almost physically impossible. “Next time, Councilor Bontham, you should be more specific.”

Without responding, Jonas jerked his head towards the door and led the way out. Aria followed them to the door, where Lukas pressed a kiss to her palm, his fingers tracing her wedding band. “Sleep well.”

“Get out of here before you piss him off more.”

His laughter followed her back into her room. Outside her door, four different men lounged, some standing, some sitting. Thaddeus had draped himself over an armchair and gave her a wink and wave. “Sweet Dreams, Aria.”

She shook her head, smiling, and locked the door behind her.

“Well, that was quite a scene.”

Aria stiffened. “What are you still doing here, Cern?”

“I wanted to make sure that we are on the same team before I go to bed.”

She turned, watching as he opened the door that connected the two bedrooms. “We are. For now.”

He nodded once and then disappeared. She heard the lock click, but drug the chest from the end of the bed in front of the connecting door anyway. After what happened this evening, she wasn’t taking any chances.

## Chapter 23

Aria stretched, enjoying the soft down mattress that cradled her body, warmed by the sunlight filtering through the lace window panels. Only one thing could have made the experience perfect, but he slept in a different bed.

The vintage clock on the nightstand told her it was barely seven. She frowned, pushing wayward strands of hair behind her ears. Weariness beat at her, making her feel out of sorts.

A soft knock sounded at the door. She groaned, flopping back in the bed, now realizing why she was awake. When the tapping came again, a little louder this time, she flung an arm over her face and resisted the urge to pout.

“Come in already!”

Muffled words on the other side of the door came back, hesitant.

“Ummm...You locked it last night.”

With a dramatic sigh, she swung her legs over the side of bed and shuffled to the door, then flicked the lock open, twisting the handle. Lawrence’s head poked through. A grin lit his features as he took in her appearance.

“Sorry, Aria. But breakfast is being served, and I figured you’d want to be present.”

“All right. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

She dressed quickly, ran a brush through her hair and put the chest back where it belonged. The poor floors wouldn’t be the same, but she felt a perverse satisfaction when she noticed the scratches on the perfect finish. Jonas would be annoyed. That made her happy.

A few moments later, she opened the door and stepped into the hall. Lawrence, Otis, and two other guards waited for her. Aria bit her lip to keep her amusement contained. It took four escorts to watch her sleep and take her to breakfast? *Amazing how much her status had changed since she’d seen the Council last.*



The walk to breakfast was a quiet one. They passed through the banquet room, heading instead to a smaller dining room, with three round tables set for five. The food had been arranged on a huge antique sideboard: eggs, bacon, and oatmeal kept warm in elegant, silver chafing dishes, while a selection of crispy, golden pastries and muffins had been fanned out in several baskets.

Lukas was already there, sitting with Sebastian and Thaddeus. Jonas spoke quietly in the corner with a tall, willowy woman, thin enough that it seemed like a good wind would snap her into two.

Tessa, the Council's Truthsayer. *Great.*

Aria dropped a kiss on Lukas' cheek and took the seat next to him, half her attention trained on the pair in the corner. They'd hardly given her a second glance when she walked in. She wasn't sure whether to be relieved or nervous.

"Relax. He's been chatting her up for a good fifteen minutes," said Thaddeus, who bit into a pastry and sighed. "Heaven in a crust."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Aria scolded, smiling.

Lukas nudged her knee under the table. "Get something to eat. You might as well take advantage of the fine dining while we're here. Once we go home, it's back to hot dogs and mac-n-cheese."

She laughed and rose, collecting a variety of pastries from the sideboard. Calories weren't all that important at the moment. Lawrence followed her, filling his plate with eggs and bacon, topped off with several pastries.

"Geez, Lawrence. Can you really eat all that?"

He grinned. "And more. I never turn away food."

As they walked back to the table, Lawrence glanced over his shoulder at Jonas and Tessa. "I've never seen her before."

They sat, and Aria accepted a glass of water from the servant who appeared at her elbow. She waited till the man returned to his post at the end of the buffet, before she whispered, "She doesn't come often. She gets a little nervous around all of us."

"Why?" Thaddeus was genuinely puzzled. "We aren't *that* motley a crew."

Lukas snorted and bit into a Danish.

"She's the Council Truthsayer, and a werefox."

Thaddeus almost turned in his seat to stare at Tessa, stopping himself at the last moment. His nostrils flared as he took in deep breath. “No wonder I thought she smelled funny.”

Lukas shook his head. “Aria tells you she’s a truthsayer, a werefox, and you focus on her smell? What shall we do with you?”

“Make sure I don’t say anything.” Thaddeus gripped the table, pretending to search for a hiding spot. “I’ll explode if I have to tell the truth all the time.”

His brother snorted and kicked him under the table when Jonas looked their way. “Be glad Ella isn’t here. Then you’d really have something to fear.”

Thaddeus’ shudder turned into a chuckle. “True.”

A shadow fell over the table, long and thin. The scent of jasmine and something inherently earthy washed over Aria. Fabric brushed her arm.

“It’s lovely to see you again, my dear.”

Aria forced a pleasant expression, one hand creeping beneath the tablecloth. It skimmed over Lukas’ thigh and her fingers dug into the muscles there. His hand slid beneath hers, his grip strong and comforting.

“Likewise.”

“Now, that’s not entirely true.” Tessa smiled, and Aria’s stomach cramped. Her face was smooth and pointed, appropriately reminiscent of a fox. Her hazel eyes darted around the table, cataloging information.

“Well, you would know.”

Lukas squeezed her hand under the table. As if she knew, Tessa’s head tilted sideways and she made a brief study of him. Her attention lingered on his mismatched set. “You have seen a great deal of this world and the next.”

“Yes.”

“You must tell me about it sometime.”

“I don’t think so.” Lukas sounded polite, but Aria sensed the underlying tone of loathing and disgust.

She didn’t miss anything. They lingered over Aria’s wedding band as Aria took a sip from her glass. “Did you complete the ceremony, knowing the Council had forbid it?”

“I’m afraid, Tessa, that I refuse to answer any questions before the Meet, and definitely not before I’ve finished breakfast.” Aria forced herself to take another bite, though her stomach churned. Tessa always set her on edge. She had too much influence with the Council to be ignored or dismissed.

“Sidestepping my question will not alter it.”

Aria couldn’t help a small chuckle. “Of course not. But I’ve made a hobby of delaying the inevitable.”

Tessa stayed a moment more, and then walked away without saying anything else. She seemed to float, her feet barely making a whisper on the floor.

“I don’t like her,” Thaddeus proclaimed.

“What is a werefox doing here anyway?” Sebastian, who had remained silent until now, piped up, pushed back his plate, and his gaze followed Tessa’s retreating back. Aria thought she caught a hint of admiration in his question before they returned to the table.

“The Council is a smaller part of a larger group. They govern werewolves. The greater Council governs all shifters.” Aria shrugged, releasing Lukas’ hand under the table. “Tessa is a little like a library book. The Great Council loans her out when she’s needed.”

“That’s not a very complimentary description.” Sebastian glared, his words dripping with disdain.

Aria set down her fork, and stared at him in earnest. She searched his face, doubts about Sebastian’s behavior niggled the back of her mind. Something about Sebastian had changed—was changing. “Have you actually ever dealt with the Council, Sebastian?”

He didn’t answer, cramming food in his mouth and dropping one shoulder casually. His refusal to meet her gaze, stirred her suspicions.

“I have. They are not a fantastic group of people, and Tessa is the worst. To know all the time whether people are lying is a burden, I understand that. But a person can choose to roll with the punches life deals or become bitter over their lot. Tessa took the easy way, and her bitterness eats away at everyone now. She enjoys her job far too much.”

Sebastian stopped eating. “Rather like you enjoy being a martyr? First you play the wounded daughter, then you’re the mistreated outcast, and now you’re going to sacrifice yourself for the pack?”

“That’s enough.” Lukas sliced a hand through the air, glaring at Sebastian. “We’re all stressed. Don’t take it out on each other. Jonas doesn’t need any help trying to break our pack apart.”

Tears burned. She focused on the food on her plate. Is that really how they all saw her?

*Aria, don’t listen to him. He’s been unsettled since he got here.*

Lukas’ eyes were warm, and a small smile lifted his lips. *You can’t look at me like that, Aria. We’ve stretched Jonas as far as his manners will go. I think if I did what I wanted to you right now, he’d probably kill me on the spot.*

She pushed her plate away, swiping at her eyes quickly, hoping no one would notice. Next to her, Thaddeus glared at Sebastian.

For once, Aria was glad to see Haemon. He spared her the scene likely to have happened at their table. He stalked in the room, followed at a distance by his wolves, who watched him, staying several paces behind. Their attention never wavered from his body, and their unease spread around the room.

Haemon stopped just inside the doorway, his spine stiff, fists clenching at his side. His gaze swept the room, wild and bloodshot. Jonas rose from his table, calling a greeting. Haemon didn’t even appear to see him, let alone hear. Brushing past Jonas, he filled a plate with food, and then slammed it down at the last empty table. One jerk of his head allowed his guards to follow suit. They followed suit. Aria wasn’t even sure they knew what they put on their plates. They approached the table and sat slowly, each one of them keeping an eye on their fearless leader. His gaze roved the room until it fell on her, and the force of it knocked the wind out of her.

His hate could have melted the paint off the walls.

Involuntarily, she shuddered. Whatever had happened between last night and this morning, he believed she was the culprit. What she’d done remained to be seen, but whether she’d actually been responsible would be a moot point. When he made up his mind, no one changed it. Searching her memory, she

couldn't come up with anything that would have inspired him to be this wild and out of control. Haemon needed order—he thrived on it. To see him so visibly agitated made her wonder what she'd missed.

*Don't encourage him, Aria. Look away.* Lukas' said as his growl rumbled in his chest. He threw an arm over the back of her chair. The warning had been almost inaudible, but Haemon must have heard it. His entire body tensed, the lines of his body stiff and unbending as iron.

"Jesus. Look at him," Thaddeus mumbled, cleaning his plate. "He's the poster child for 'mad as a hatter'."

When Cern walked into the room, he stopped and surveyed the scene, then chuckled. Haemon jumped from his seat, whirling to face the intruder, his lips curled back, revealing elongated teeth.

Cern didn't say anything. His eyebrows rose, and a smirk formed on his lips. Haemon snarled and lunged, wrapping slender, pale fingers around Cern's brown neck. The contrast was startling. Everything in the room stopped. Cern's expression never changed. A whisper squeezed from his throat, still amused despite the pain he had to have felt. "I told you she'd be more than you could handle."

Haemon gave a short, slightly hysterical bark of laughter. "You must be joking, idiot. No one can match me."

Cern lifted hands to his neck, his short, blunt fingers squeezing Haemon's wrists until his arms shook. Haemon's face registered pain, and his fingers relaxed a little.

"They won't be able to if you get what you want. But right now,"—Cern's eyes flicked to her—"I wouldn't put my money on you."

Haemon's snarl echoed through the room as his fingers renewed their hold on Cern's air supply. Tessa flew forward, placing her hand on Haemon's arm.

"This is getting out of hand, dear. You must release him."

"Back off, Truthsayer. Else, I'll give you a heedful."

This time, she was the one amused. Her eyes grew lighter, almost glowing. "You haven't got anything in you I haven't seen before."

Silence echoed in the room. As if someone had turned a switch off, Haemon's grip fell away from Cern. He tipped his head back, laughing from deep within—loud, rolling belly laughs. Tears tracked down his cheeks, and he ran his hands through his blonde hair. "Oh, Tessa. You still think I'm the small child who marveled at your ability to see in my head?" He shook her off, returning to his chair, suddenly jovial as if all previous depression gone in an instant. "Don't flatter yourself."

The silence continued for a few moments, then Cern looked down at him. "If you've finished manhandling me...?"

Haemon waved him off with another strange smile. Jonas watched both of them from his perch in the corner table, a cup of coffee clutched in one hand. For a brief moment, Aria thought she saw worry linger on his face. Then his craggy features turned to her and all emotion was gone, as if a slate had been wiped clean. It seemed that even the unshakable head Councilor worried about the state of Haemon's mind.

Someone should.

Lukas spoke up, his fingers played with the hem of her shirt, almost unconsciously. "Jonas, when is the Council meeting?"

"When everyone's finished with breakfast, we will commence in the ballroom. I have no desire to drag this out longer than necessary."

Thaddeus mouthed, "Thank God." Jonas didn't seem to notice.

Cern sat with Jonas, nibbling daintily on a slice of bacon. He didn't say a word, just stared at him. After only a few moments, Jonas slammed his coffee cup on the table and stalked from the room with a disgusted snort.

He caught Aria watching and lifted a shoulder. "It's a gift, really."

She had to resist a chuckle. They finished their breakfast, waiting patiently, while Cern slowly made his way through a second helping of bacon, and then patted his stomach with a sigh. "I do love pig."

Haemon stood, leading the way through a set of double doors. "Now that you're done expressing your devotion, can we get started?"

Jonas led the way. Down a short hallway and through a set of plain wooden doors, revealed a huge ballroom with marble floors and mirrors in heavy

gilded frames lining three walls. On one side, solid French doors opened to the garden. In the morning light, the blooms sparkled with dew.

Aria's breath caught. Lukas wrapped an arm around her waist for support. The entire Council had shown up. All ten sat on a raised platform, facing a single chair dead center. Aria thought she'd prepared herself for this. She was wrong. Jonas turned as they walked into the room, a smirk twisting on his lips as he passed her.

"Baby, listen, you have done far more difficult things than this." Lukas' hand rubbed up and down her arm. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She nodded, clearing her throat and forced her shoulders back. Her steps echoed loudly on the marble as she trudged to the chair. One of the guards that lined the walls moved forward, grabbing her free elbow. Lukas' growl stopped him.

With a deep breath, Aria cupped the side of his face and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. Each emotion she felt at the moment, poured in her connection to him. Her love, her fear, and her hope, painful as it felt, squeezed in her chest, fighting for control. "It's okay. I'm fine."

Lukas searched her face for a moment. "If I knew an easier way, baby, I would have taken it."

She chuckled. "Didn't you know? I always do *everything* the hard way."

Lukas ran his hand over her hair, nodding once. Reluctantly, he released her arm. Aria didn't move, tilted her chin and stared at the guard until he removed his hand from her elbow. Then, with measured even steps, she marched to the front of the Council and stood before the chair. She nodded to each of the members. Tessa stood off to the side, her expression strangely pleased.

"We are here today to determine the claims made by Haemon Thessangelos and Lukas MacLeod, both recognized Alphas by this Council of Werewolves. Who stands with Aria Lagreve?" The Head Councilor, a short, round woman named Mira, started the farce of an event.

Cern started forward, but stopped when Aria's hand slashed through the air. "I stand alone, Councilor."

"You will not ask anyone to speak on your defense?"

“I have a voice, ma’am.” Stubborn pride forced her fear back. “And this time, the Council will not prevent me from using it.”



## Chapter 24

Mira's eyes narrowed. "You cannot speak for yourself, young lady. We have been briefed before this, and your current mindset is somewhat...unstable."

Aria whipped a glance at to Jonas, who sat in the center of the table, his face unreadable. "I see. You have been told I'm mentally unable to speak for myself?"

She waited until Mira agreed. In her peripheral vision, she saw Thaddeus speaking quietly with Lukas. They did not appear pleased.

Aria searched for something to help aid her cause. She motioned to Tessa. "Let the Truthsayer ask me."

A woman, a new Council member Aria didn't know, leaned forward. "That won't help. She reads the truth of your words. If you believe you are fine, it is the truth. That doesn't mean it's correct."

"You're splitting hairs, ma'am. The fact remains, I will speak for myself. Others have done my speaking for me long enough."

A pause ensued, and the Councilor looked down the table, gaining nods of approval. She motioned for Aria to proceed. "As you like. Jonas, please continue."

Jonas stood, drawing himself up to his full height. His chest puffed, and he put a pair of tiny, wire-rimmed glasses on the end of his nose. Over the edge of the lenses, he surveyed the room, shaking out a simple, innocuous piece of paper.

When he felt everyone had given their undivided attention, he cleared his throat and began to read off the paper. "Aria Lagreve, female of the Keener Pack—"

"Formerly. I denounced my pack over a year ago," Aria challenged. She would not allow anyone to imply she still claimed any part of her father's former pack.

"*Former* female of the Lagreve Pack, has been claimed as True Mate by two Alphas: Lukas MacLeod and Haemon Thessangelos. Her father, Garrett Lagreve, endorsed the claim of Haemon before his death last year. Aria has

refused to support this claim, instead turning to Lukas MacLeod. Normally, a female's preference would be taken into account. But Aria has spent the last year in places unknown, and her mental stability is of some concern, therefore, the Council has been asked to assist. The Council is asked to decide which of the males present is Aria's True Mate."

*Asked?* A slow burn started in her gut, and she bit her tongue. She continued to remind herself of the more important things at stake than semantics as Jonas continued to read.

"There is also a secondary issue: Aria and Lukas may have completed the Mating Ritual, though they were aware of a Council edict forbidding the ceremony. They were notified of the interdiction, and asked to wait until this Meet occurred. To all appearances, they openly defied Council orders."

"She did not know." Lukas stepped forward, motioning to Aria. "I didn't tell her it had been forbidden until the ritual was over."

All attention turned to Tessa, who glided over the floor. She stopped a few feet from Lukas, their eyes locking. Aria had never seen anything like it. If two people could fight without touching, it would look like that. Both their faces showed signs of strain. When Aria squinted, she could almost see a golden glow moving like a stream of dust motes from Tessa to Lukas. But they never connected. Just short of his nose, the stream stopped, breaking into a fine mist and dissipating.

A crease formed between Tessa's brows, the fine lines around her mouth deepening. She took another step closer, her stare even more intense. They were nearly nose to nose. Lukas cocked an eyebrow, giving her a look Aria had seen him use on one of the teens who got out of line. If he'd been directing it at her, she'd have called it patronizing.

"Well?" Jonas called out, impatient with the delay.

"I cannot make him out—he has crossed over and come back. I cannot see him clearly." Tessa stepped back, still studying Lukas intently as if he were a puzzle specifically built for her.

Jonas stared. "What does she mean?"

Lukas shrugged. "I am not easily read. The night Aria and I first tried to elope, I was killed. Haemon and her father came after us. They were so angry, they hauled Aria out of the room and came after me. I'll spare you the details." Lukas stated, his tone bland as if he discussed the weather, not his own brush with death.

Aria's chest tightened just thinking about it. Her mind replayed the moment over and over, but she stood straighter, facing the Council.

Lukas continued, "Suffice to say, I died, but someone decided life wasn't quite done with me yet."

"Who?" Outrage blazed from Jonas' eyes, but Aria couldn't be sure it was for them or for Lukas' audacity in returning from the dead.

"I do not know. I was in no condition to ask when I woke. I promptly passed out again. I said someone brought me back—not that I was unhurt."

"What about the matter of Haemon's attack?" Aria added. Lukas had enough to worry about without piquing the Council's curiosity about his abilities.

Jonas tapped his lips with one finger, appearing deep in thought. "It is a concern, but what can I do? Lukas cannot clearly remember the entire event. I cannot condemn Haemon on evidence from a man whose memory might not be totally clear."

"When did my word become suspect?" Lukas made the comment in a reasonable tone, but an underlying threat laced his words.

"When you openly admitted to defying a Council mandate."

And there was the fall of their supposed advantage. Aria had hoped they could use Haemon's attack. Now she dreaded the rest of their questions. She would be the one to answer, her responses scrutinized from every angle.

Jonas turned to her, and she felt as if she were sixteen again, in trouble for sneaking out of a Council ballroom. "Well? Did he tell you about the mandate the Council had sent? Did you marry him despite our orders?"

"I did. He tried to keep it from me, but he could not."

Jonas flicked a glance to Tessa, who inclined her head slightly. "Why would you openly defy the Council? You knew that we and your father had discovered your Mate."

“You arranged a marriage without my consent. I know your reasons, but I am loathe to say them openly.” She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from saying more. Anger threatened to loosen her tongue, and that would be dangerous.

“Why? Are you afraid of us?” Tessa asked.

Aria chose her words carefully, aware that the faces of the Council were sharper; paying as much attention to her body language as to what she said. “I am afraid of what you might choose to do if I admit what I know.”

“What do you think you know?” The challenge came from an older man, short and round, with rage etched into his taut face.

“The Council has been working to breed their version of the perfect shifter. I am their last shot,” Aria answered.

“You flatter yourself, child. Even if we wanted to do such a thing, it is impertinent to think *you* are where all our hopes lay.”

Lukas’ growl rumbled through the hall, until Lawrence put a restraining hand on his shoulder, whispering furiously.

“Jonas, Tessa, and my father discussed it in detail,” Aria told the man, stiffening her spine and daring him to call her a liar openly. “They were unaware that I listened outside the window.”

Tessa stepped forward. “I can judge the truth of her statements, if you like, Jonas.”

“Ah, but who will judge the truth of yours?” Aria asked, quietly.

Tessa turned, a hiss escaping her mouth. “Do not dare insult me.”

“I only asked a question. It was not intended to insult you. If you were in my position, you would not want someone you are accusing to vouch for themselves, would you?”

Tessa’s glare grew pointed. Before anything else could be said, Haemon stepped forward, the picture of calm.

“I have something to say.”

Jonas waved a hand to permit Haemon to speak. “I don’t think it’s important any longer who said what. What is important is that *I* made the claim because I have feelings for Aria.” She just barely choked back a comment, but he

continued. “The Council needs to focus on what is happening now and decide how best to deal with this.”

A few of the Council members murmured agreements. Aria wanted to scream like a mad woman. With one simple statement, Haemon had made her appear before the Council like a petulant child seeking to whine about the past. He’d even managed to make Lukas look like her conspirator. Haemon radiated innocence. Paint a halo over his golden locks, and he would have fit into any baroque painting.

“You have an excellent point, Haemon. We have digressed. The matter at hand is a simple one,” Jonas conceded.

Cern moved next to her. “How do you figure that, Jonas?”

She had been fixed on those in front of her, she’d forgotten about him.

Jonas frowned. “You are not a part of these proceedings.”

“Am I not? I was present at Lukas and Aria’s mating.”

“Really? So they did perform the ceremony?”

“They did. And I saw the legend of the True Mate’s glow come to life. It happens from time to time. It isn’t the first I’ve seen—but it was the brightest. The two of them lit up like someone flipped an electric switch.”

“An easy manipulation of the senses. Magicians do it every day.”

“I would know the difference.”

Tessa turned to Jonas. “He does not lie. It is as he says.”

The admission seemed to come reluctantly.

Aria met Lukas’ gaze, hope flaring in her chest. Perhaps things were not quite as horrible as she thought. He gave a slight smile.

“Is what he says true? You have a connection to Lukas, one that allows mind speak and a sharing of emotions?”

Aria nodded. “Yes.”

Jonas’ frown was fierce. Aria surveyed the seats, noting that there appeared to be many who were uncertain of their decisions. When they walked in, the Council had been sure of themselves. Things were not going the way Jonas and Tessa had planned, and it was written in the tense lines of their bodies and the furtive glances they shared when they thought no one was watching.

“Haemon, you also claim to have feelings for Aria. Do you have the ability to mind speak with her?”

Aria watched as Haemon dashed an imaginary tear from his eye. Really, the man should have been an actor. “No, we do not. But I regularly dreamwalk with her.”

The metallic taste of blood filled Aria’s mouth, as she bit down on her tongue to keep her comments to herself. Lukas’ face turned dark as a thundercloud.

Tessa walked next to her. She knew. Oh, yes, she knew and she was enjoying this. “Is what he says true?”

“Yes,” Aria spat out, the admission bringing a bout of nausea.

The Council waited for Tessa’s nod, and then whispered among themselves. There were too many conversations to listen in on any one in particular. Aria stood, her hands clammy and clasped behind her back.

“The Council needs a few moments to speak. Remain where you are. We shall return shortly,” Mira announced.

*That was it?* Aria wanted to demand they stop and come back.

“You’re turning green around the edges, Aria,” Cern teased her.

Aria stiffened. “I can’t help it. This whole thing is ridiculous. They’ve known what they were going to decide since they arrived this morning.”

Cern tapped one finger on his chin. “More than likely, but they had to go through the motions. You never know, you might have turned a few minds to your side.”

“Not likely.” She took a few steps towards Lukas, but stopped when one of the Council guards slid in front of her. His face betrayed his sympathy, but he remained in front of her, shaking his head.

She stepped back, and he retreated to the walls.

The longest ten minutes of her life passed slowly. The silence in the room was hot and oppressive, and she paced, avoiding looking anywhere, but at her toes. She formulated plans of escape, speeches to change their mind, throwing each one out in turn. Finally, she sat on a chair, holding her head in her hands.

*Stop that, Lukas said. I want to come over there, but I don't want to have to do any more rule breaking. Cheer up. It may not end as badly as you think.*

*How can you think that?* Her voice silent, but thick with tears in her mind. She pressed the heel of her hands into her eyes, annoyed that she couldn't keep better control of her emotions.

*I think it because I have to, baby. Otherwise, I'd have to kick some ass, and I can't do that right now. There's about two more than I can handle.*

She stifled an incredulous laugh. There were nearly fifteen Council guards, in addition to Haemon's men. His gentle teasing helped her regain some of her calm. *Yeah, okay, macho man.*

The door opened at the other end, and the Council reentered somberly. Many of them studied her as she rose to her feet. She couldn't decipher their glances.

"Aria Lagreve, are you ready to hear the Council's judgment?"

She sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. "I am."

Jonas held up his paper and slipped on his glasses again. "The Council has decided Haemon Thessangelos' claim is valid. But..."

Her knees went weak, and she gripped the back of the chair for support. A loud snarl echoed from her left, but she couldn't bring herself to look in Lukas' direction. Jonas continued after a brief pause.

"We have also decided Lukas MacLeod's has an equally valid claim."

"But, that means..." Horror clogged her throat.

Jonas removed his glasses. "In three weeks, under the Blood Moon, Lukas and Haemon will resolve this issue by Challenge."

Aria couldn't help a small sound of protest. Jonas continued as if she weren't there. "The requirements are simple. No outside assistance, and the combatants will fight until first blood is drawn, or until death. The issuer of the Challenge will choose."

Closing her eyes, Aria willed a different answer than she knew would come. Tears slid from under her lashes. Beneath her fingertips, the wooden chair began to crack.

“Haemon Thessangelos, as you have the earliest claim, you are considered the Challenger. What result will be satisfactory?”

Her head turned towards Haemon, even though she knew it was a mistake. Her emotions were too close to the surface, moisture tracked down her cheeks, no matter how hard she tried to hold it back. He met her gaze, his hard and icy, gloating at her pain.

Haemon turned his attention back to Jonas, making his decision in a loud, clear voice, “Death.”



## Chapter 25

Wood splintered under her fingertips as she focused on a dark swirl in the marble floor. Under the collar of her shirt, the silver nestled between her breasts grew so cold it burned. Her fingers flexed, tearing off a piece of the chair. Cool wind blew over her face, and the temperature in the room dropped sharply. Frost formed on the edges of the mirrors. The marble beneath Aria's feet could have passed for ice. The Council members began to turn bewildered looks to each other as their whispered concerns left their lips in visible puffs.

Cern gently untangled her hands from the wood she had ripped off, his fingers digging into her elbow. His voice was almost inaudible as he whispered fervently in her ear, "Get control of yourself, Aria. Don't make this more of a victory for them than it already is. They want you broken."

The feeling that she had been kicked in the chest didn't leave, but she took three deep breaths to steady herself. When she opened them again, she had herself mostly under control. Just in case, she did not look left or right, keeping her gaze on a gilded leaf behind Jonas' head. Frost continued to creep over it, rapidly covering the mirror it surrounded. She narrowed her gaze, reeling the power in. It was difficult. The cold made her teeth throb as she pulled at the tendrils freezing the room. Slowly, the frost began to inch back, until it finally retreated to a two-foot circle around Aria.

With one last deep breath, she forced the power back within herself, and the circle faded. The only indication anything had happened was a lingering coolness in the necklace around her neck.

"I don't even want you to explain that right now. We must solve this issue before we deal with any others," Jonas said, shaking his head. Under his breath, in a stage whisper, he added, "Although it becomes more and more obvious you need a keeper."

Anger drove away the last remnants of chill. "As you wish."

He didn't respond to her. "The Challenge, to the death, will be fought under the Blood Moon, at a location to be determined later. We will contact you in a few weeks to tell you where to go."

He laid his glasses aside, his fists braced on the table. "Now there is the matter of you and where you will be staying for the next few weeks."

"What do you mean?" Aria's entire body thrummed with tension. They were not taking her from Lukas. Not a chance.

Tessa spoke this time, adopting one of the most insincere expressions of sympathy Aria had ever seen. "We can't allow you to go home with Lukas. And if we send you home with Haemon, I fear you will disappear. Your past history indicates it is the most likely outcome."

"So, what do you have in mind?" Aria ground out.

Jonas smiled, a little too friendly. "The Council has decided that a mutual friend would be the best choice. Cern, as we all know, acted as your guardian yesterday. It is the Council's wish that he continue in this capacity."

Cern stepped forward. "I gladly accept. I am to keep Aria with me until the Challenge, is this correct?"

"You may take her home with you and keep her with you until called back. Both parties will be allowed to visit with her at your discretion." Tessa said.

Cern's face was serious and composed, but his eyes sparkled with amusement as if something they said had triggered a private joke. He turned to Aria. "Do you accept the terms?"

A wry grin twisted her lips. "Do I really have a choice?"

"Of course. You could stay with me," Tessa answered.

A decision easily made. "I'll stay with Cern."

"As I suspected." Jonas sat, again, and waited for the Council to give him the sign to close the Meet. As each one nodded, Aria felt Cern lean over.

"Don't worry. I've got a plan."

"I'm not sure that makes me feel better, but for now I'll go with it."

Jonas watched each of them, and motioned to the Council guards. "The Meet is closed. In two weeks, each of you will be contacted with directions to the Challenge. Until then, do not attempt to engage one another."

He turned with the other council members and left. Aria stood with Cern, trying to get a grip on her emotions, while Lukas and the guards moved to one side, and Haemon and his lounged on the other. Tessa watched them all closely. She skirted a wide path around Haemon, heading to Aria.

“Until we meet again, my dear, do try to stay out of trouble.” She didn’t wait for a reply, but patted Aria’s cheek softly. Aria and Cern exchanged glances as she flowed to Lukas. He ignored Tessa, starting in their direction.

Tessa’s hand caught his arm. “I’d like the opportunity to speak with you about what you’ve seen.”

He stopped, but his face remained blank. It was as if he stared through her instead of at her. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do.”

His temper began to leak from the edges of his calm demeanor. “Tessa, unless our meeting happens at an official Meet, I have no desire to ever see you again.”

“What could I have done to inspire such hostility?” Her wide eyes and high-pitched voice appeared to indicate genuine surprise.

“You helped to keep me from my Mate. Do not ever appear on my pack’s lands without invitation or official Council cause. You are not welcome.”

Tessa stepped away, one hand pressed to her chest, shock etched into her face. Aria would be willing to bet large quantities of money that no one had ever spoken like that to Tessa. She regained her composure quickly, her body stiffening and the shock fading into something much darker. “You will regret that, Lukas MacLeod.”

He didn’t bother to respond. All his attention was focused on Aria. Haemon approached from the other side just as Lukas pulled her into his arms and seized her mouth. His arms trembled with contained emotion, and when she opened herself to their link, anger and frustration seared down the open pathway.

She softened against him, allowing him to feel her submission. She could sense his need to reclaim her as his Mate—to brand his mark into her until no one dared question it again. His lips moved from hers, skimming her neck to nip at

the fading bruise on her neck. The poor patch of skin was not likely to ever return to its normal color.

“That’s enough, Lukas. I’ve seen enough for one day.” Haemon’s scathing disgust broke through the passion-filled haze. Lukas’ hold tightened around her. “Unless you would like to offer me the same courtesy.”

Abruptly, Lukas released her, and she staggered. The whole Alpha wolf thing could be arousing, but annoying. She couldn’t handle anymore. Cern offered his hand, and she took it.

“That’s enough from all of you.” Cern’s rebuke cracked through the tension between the two shifters.

“What are you up to? And what did they mean when they said meeting with Aria under your approval?” Haemon demanded.

Cern’s smile was less than kind. “It means I have final say over who comes and goes around Aria. I will decide whether or not you will be allowed to see her, and I will not allow you to see her alone. Period. Either of you.”

Lukas and Haemon both started to protest, and Aria whirled on Cern. “What? Neither of them? But Lukas is my Mate!”

Cern shrugged. “Remember, absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Are you three having second thoughts about your decision?” Jonas appeared over Lukas’ shoulder.

“No,” Aria said with a sigh. “We were just discussing the possibilities.”

Lukas and Haemon stared at each other, the air between them charged with static. Her stomach did an uneasy somersault as she looked between them, wondering if they were sharing more than just an angry glance.

“If the two of you are done posturing, it is time for you to pack and leave.” Jonas motioned for them to lead the way from the room.

Lukas offered a tight smile. “Why so eager to be rid of us, Jonas?”

“You are all unpredictable, and I don’t want you under my roof when you decide to do something else stupid.”

\*\*\*

Cern and Aria were the first downstairs. Aria took a seat in the airy foyer and watched Cern pace the marble floor. Until Jonas gave approval, they could not leave.

“What is going through your manipulative little brain, Cern?” she asked. Of her choices, Cern was the least of the evils. But his intentions still confused her, and that made her wary.

He frowned. “Don’t be like that, Aria. I’ve got your best interests at heart.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

“Just trust me.”

She snorted. That ship had sailed.

Jonas emerged from the back of the house and motioned to Cern. Without a second glance to Aria, he followed Jonas through the doorway into a small parlor. The door shut firmly behind them. Aria sighed. So much for listening in.

Fatigue weighed in her body, head falling into her hands. The heat and scent of an unwelcome presence snapped her eyes open. Haemon’s face hovered a hairsbreadth from her own. His wolves carried suitcases outside, leaving the two of them alone in the hall.

“Aria.”

One word and her pulse skyrocketed. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair so tight her palms ached. Haemon laughed, one finger tracing her jaw.

“You aren’t anywhere close to rid of me, Aria. This is merely a temporary setback.” His fingers clamped over hers on the chair, his nails digging into her flesh. “What I really want to know is what you’ve gotten into now. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I haven’t visited your dreams lately. How did you keep me out, Aria? You aren’t strong enough.”

Anger drew a snarl from her lips. She hadn’t realized it, being so focused on Lukas, and the pack. But he hadn’t been in her dreams since that night at the waterfall.

He cocked his head, nostrils flaring as he leaned closer as if to decipher the scents clinging to her skin. “Who protected you? Lukas couldn’t. He was too far away. That only leaves Cern.” His icy eyes seemed to glow, and he laughed, the

smell of his breakfast washing over her face. “Oh, yes. You bit him. It all makes sense now.”

A door opened down the hallway, but neither of them bothered to acknowledge the sound.

“Haemon?” Aria whispered.

“Yes?”

“You have exactly ten seconds before I show you exactly how I injured Cern.”

His grin only widened. Aria wasn’t sure what would have happened, but Cern and Jonas drew closer, and Haemon released her. He stepped back, brushing his hand through his hair as he nodded to the other two men.

“What’s going on?” Cern couldn’t seem to decide which one of them to study.

“We were just expressing our opinions. We’re finished.” Aria glared at Haemon’s mocking façade as she spoke. Hate radiated off her.

Haemon released the handle on the small suitcase resting beside him. “For now.”

With a slight bow, he opened the front door and walked out. A few moments later, a car door slammed and they heard the sound of tires in gravel driving away.

“You are more trouble than you’re worth,” Jonas commented, exhaustion outlining the fine lines of his mouth.

“I do my best,” she replied, with a wide sweep of her arm.

Lukas appeared at the top of the curved staircase. The others followed, tension palpable in the air around them. Thaddeus and Lawrence kept sliding hostile glances at Sebastian. Her curiosity piqued, Aria wondered what she’d missed overnight.

“Aria, I am so glad to see you. This bunch is no fun,” Thaddeus whined. Sebastian stayed several feet away, pretending an intense interest in the view outside the window.

Aria raised her eyebrows and jerked her thumb towards Sebastian. Thaddeus shook his head.

“Later,” Thaddeus mouthed. He elbowed his brother, holding out an open palm.

Lawrence slapped a set of keys in them. He glowered. “I said I’d drive.”

Thaddeus picked up his suitcase with a grunt. “And we’d like to get there in one piece.”

“Don’t listen to him. I’m an excellent driver,” Lawrence told Aria, waving off his brother’s comment.

Cern cupped her elbow, drawing her to Lukas and Jonas. They stood near the doorway, arguing.

“Now what? Really, this is getting old,” Aria interrupted, balling her hands on her hips. “Surprise me and tell me you’re arguing about something other than us.” She’d reached her limit of dumb arguments for the day.

“You’re going home with me,” Lukas stated, without looking at her.

“You can’t, Lukas. You agreed to the terms,” Jonas argued.

Aria pinched the bridge of her nose. “This is stupid.”

All three men turned to her. Lukas and Jonas appeared annoyed. Cern’s perpetually amused smirk was beginning to drive her nuts. She threw her hands in the air. “We don’t have a choice, Jonas. How else do you expect us to get home?”

He opened his mouth and then shut, face glowering.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Cern and I have to ride with them. Technically, it isn’t violating any rule. We’re in the car with them, under Cern’s supervision and with his permission. That upholds all your stipulations.”

“The Council did not have this in mind when it made those rules.” Jonas threw up his hands. “If we’re going on your logic, you could just stay in the MacLeod pack house as long as Cern’s there!”

A slow grin lit Aria’s face, and Cern’s booming laugh echoed through the foyer. “Why, Councilor, that’s the best idea you’ve had in decades.”

Jonas stared at them, his face slowly turning red. Lukas shrugged. “Hey, you’re the one that mentioned it.”

“Get the fuck out of here.” Jonas turned on his heel, muttering obscenities, stalked into a nearby room, and slammed the door hard enough to knock a vase of flowers to the floor.

Her mood lifted, considerably. Aria smiled and looped her arms through Lukas and Cern’s elbow. “Shall we?”



## Chapter 26

“I can drive!” Lawrence argued with Thaddeus, trying to wrench the keys from his hand. Cern closed the door behind them, and Lukas seized Aria’s waist, while one hand plucked the keys from Thaddeus hand and tossed them to Cern.

“Cern can drive.” He slid the door open and released Aria. She started to sit in the first bench of seats, but Lukas shook his head. “You and I are sharing the back seat.”

Thaddeus whistled, and Lukas shoved his shoulder. “Shut up, Thaddeus.”

She crawled into the seat, Lukas quickly following. The space felt cramped with his large frame, but he hauled her against his side, one arm around her. She leaned against him, resting her head on his chest. The muscles around her shook for a moment, and then the tension drained out of them.

“This is going to be a very long two weeks if we can’t be alone.”

She kissed the side of his neck, laughing. “What Cern and the Council don’t know can’t hurt us. I’m sure Ella will help us out.”

Lukas groaned. “One mention and she’ll be turning into our own personal covert ops coordinator.”

Aria giggled, burrowing closer to Lukas. His other arm came around her, and he struggled to turn in the seat, stretching his long legs out and resting back against the window. He pulled her closer, and she curled up on his lap, her head pillowed on his chest.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there last night.”

She didn’t have to ask what he meant. His voice rumbled in his chest, mingling with his heartbeat under her ear. The sounds comforted her in ways she hadn’t even realized she needed.

“And you were supposed to know how? Don’t worry about it, Lukas. I can take care of myself.”

“I know. But I don’t want you to have to.” One large hand stroked her hair.

She couldn't suppress a yawn. The warmth and comfort seeping from his body into hers had her relaxing more than she had in days.

*Sleep, baby. I just need to hold you for awhile.*

She slid her arm around his waist, squeezing him tightly. "No way. You'll think too much."

The car jerked a little, and they were on their way. Thaddeus poked his head over the seat, grinning like an idiot. "Woo! Aren't we cozy. Don't do anything back there or Cern will have to make you pay later."

Aria sent him a pointed glare. "Thaddeus, go away."

"You two need a babysitter."

Lukas deep voice rumbled over her head. "Let me put it this way, turn around or I'll break your nose."

"Geez. A little excitement and you two just get boring." Thaddeus flopped into his seat.

Lukas started laughing first. Before long, Aria shook with her chuckles. Boring. Now there was something she'd love to see.

"Thaddeus, the day my life gets boring, I will sponsor the pub crawl."

His eyes twinkled over the back of the seat. "I'll remember that."

Aria settled back, her body becoming heavy. With the release of her stress, her weariness was almost overwhelming. Lukas hummed softly, his hand stroking her hair and back. Without really meaning to, she finally fell asleep.

When Aria woke, they were nearly home. Her head rested on Lukas' thighs, her forehead nestled against his stomach. His hands were lifting her head when she turned to find a pained expression on his face.

"Sorry to wake you, baby." It sounded like he was gargling rocks.

She sat up, pushing her hair out of her face and blinking. He adjusted his waistband. A slow smile curved her lips and she covered her laugh with one hand. "I guess I caused some problems while I was sleeping."

"I was getting a cramp in my back when I woke up, and I moved you to sit up. Then you started trying to get closer."

She grinned, sheepishly. "I was cold."

He shook his head. "Then we're even. I'm burning up."

She winked at him as the car pulled off the main highway. “I’ll see what Ella and I can cook up tomorrow.”

Sunset colored the horizon outside the tinted windows, and Thaddeus and Lawrence’s heads bobbed with the thumping tempo, pulsing through the speakers.

“Interesting music choice.”

Lukas sighed “You have no idea. He’s been listening to this crap for the last forty minutes.

Cern was surprisingly bright. “Hey, this is the latest and greatest, I’ll have you know. I am keeping up with the times.”

Thaddeus stretched, emitting a loud yawn. “Oh yeah, Cern. You da shit, homie.”

They stopped at a gas station, and everyone unfolded their bodies from the car. After appeasing her body’s need in the bathroom and taking care of everyone’s snack orders, Aria returned. She passed out candy bars, chips, and soda.

“I don’t know how to get to your house from here. Who’s driving?” Cern asked, dangling the keys. Lawrence started for them, but a familiar and unwelcome hand snatched them first.

“I’d love to help out.”

Haemon’s grin widened at the shock on all their faces.

“What the hell...?” Aria trailed off.

Haemon laughed. “I know my main pack house is several hours away, but I decided to get a little closer until the Challenge happens.” His glare flicked to Cern. “After all, Aria, I want my opportunity to spend time with you.”

She took two steps toward him, a growl escaping her throat. Lukas’ hands pulled her back.

Haemon flipped the keys to Thaddeus, who caught them with one hand. “Have a good trip. I’ll see you soon, Aria.”

He sauntered off towards the station, whistling softly.

“Someday, I’m going to kill him.” Aria bit the words out as she watched him open the glass doors and head inside.

Lukas' hand rubbed circles on her back. "Not if I get there first." When she tilted her head up and looked at him, he winked. "If you're really good, I'll save you a piece."

They loaded into the car and made the last thirty minutes of the drive in tense silence. Aria sat next to Lukas, absorbing his warmth and trying to understand what she was going to do about Cern. He had reverted back to his old, jovial self and seemed to have forgotten about their spat the night before. She could not. Something existed between Haemon and Cern—something that not even the Council knew about. It also made her uneasy that he knew about the power surges, which were becoming harder and harder to control. She had never told him, never told anyone before.

When they pulled onto the driveway of the house, she had made up her mind to speak with Cern before they went inside. She needed some answers.

\*\*\*

"Cern, we have to work some things out before we go any farther."

He handed his suitcase to Lukas. She smiled, and pushed at her Mate's shoulder. "Go on. We won't be long."

The others left, and a few curious onlookers crowded the windows of the den. "What is going on between you and Haemon?"

Cern huffed, crossing his arms. "Well, you don't pull any punches, do you?"

It surprised her that he didn't try to deny it. "Tell me. There's enough going on without this."

"He wants your necklace."

Her hand cupped the silver at her neck, hidden safely under her shirt. "Why? It's a family heirloom. My mother left it to me."

Cern shook his head then glanced back towards the windows. "Let's walk a little."

He remained silent as they strolled around the house and out into the meadow. They were not alone, but their chaperones remained at a distance, watching from the edges of the woods.

"I gave your mother that necklace for safekeeping. She was supposed to return it to me. She could not."

"Why not?"

His shoulders lifted. "There were many reasons. Some of them were things I didn't understand at the time. The others were because she knew if she handed it over, I would be forced to give it away."

"You aren't making any sense."

He looked down, scuffing the grass with one foot. "Do you know what the Gundestrop Cauldron is?"

"Yes. It's a silver cauldron, supposedly made by Celts. They say it's the only engraving of Cernunos without a beard."

Cern laughed. "You would remember it."

She shrugged. "I liked art history. What does that have to do with anything?"

"The necklace you wear isn't a necklace. And the Gundestrop Cauldron is not the only artifact with my likeness on it."

She was momentarily stunned. It was the only time she could ever heard him admit his actual name. "If it isn't a necklace—"

"It's the missing panel to a silver chalice used by druids in ceremonies."

She fingered the silver, running her fingers over the ridges and grooves of the carving. "And Haemon has the rest of the chalice, is that it?"

"Yes."

"But what does it do?"

Cern sighed, before he took in a deep breath. "The druids designed it and built it with my blood. The piece you possess also has something else. The horns on the image in your necklace are made from a sliver of my own that were taken while I slept."

She didn't see the significance. What did this have to do with Haemon? With her? "And?"

“Haemon uses what he has of the chalice to exert pressure on me. He cannot control me, but I cannot be too far from the chalice. When it is complete, he believes that should he drink from the chalice, he can take my place. Absorb my power and become Lord of the Hunt.”

The thought froze her heart. “Will it?”

He didn’t meet her eyes. The answer was non-committal. “It might. I am not certain.”

“A chalice was made from your body and blood, and you don’t know what it’s capable of? I fail to believe you didn’t ask.”

When he remained silent, she thought a faint blush stole across his features. A smile flickered over her lips. “A woman. A woman did it, and you didn’t ask.”

“I loved her even though she was a manipulative liar on occasion. When I woke up and discovered what she’d done, I went into a rage.” He glanced up at her, lifting a shoulder. “I don’t have a great temper. When the smoke cleared and I had my head back, I had killed them. And broken the chalice they had made. I gathered the pieces, scattering them.”

“Then how did the legend come into existence? There has to be a legend, or Haemon wouldn’t have found it.”

“She didn’t die. I couldn’t kill her outright. I thought she’d die, that she’d bleed out. I felt betrayed, and I wanted her to suffer. Apparently, she was almost as stubborn as I was. She lived long enough to relate the tale to a small group of villagers. And the legend was born.”

Well, what else could she say to that? The necklace suddenly seemed heavier around her neck. But she had no desire to remove it. A thought struck her, and she tucked the piece under her shirt again. “You gave this piece away when you discovered Haemon had found most of the others.”

Cern agreed. “I can steal or ask for your piece, but I cannot remove it as long as it is on your person.” His lips twisted into a self-depreciating moue. “Especially now that you have a blood-bond with me. You are immune to my persuasions.”

“Haemon was pressuring you about the piece that night. That’s why you came after it.” She slumped against a tree. That would explain his determination to take it from her. They were all in the same place at the same time. It would have given Haemon more power than the Council could have dreamed of. Her fingers touched her necklace again, and a thrill of fear shot through her. When she lost control and the power surged through her, whose was it? Hers? Or Cern’s?

“Yes. He knows that I know where it is. It infuriates him not to get his own way.”

“Everyone knows that.” She snorted. “But Cern, when—”

“What?”

“When the power gets out of control, whose is it? Am I channeling you? Am I going to hurt someone?”

Cern paused. “I am not sure. If you give it to me, I could tell you.”

She glared.

“Ah, well, it was worth a try. Keep the piece safe from him and me. I don’t know how to get the rest away from him. He guards it possessively, and I have never been able to find a time he wasn’t near it, or didn’t have it with him.”

“I will. I’ll see what I can think of to help.”

Cern tilted his head. “And what will that cost me?”

Aria couldn’t help blushing a little. “An evening alone with my Mate.”

“Preferably this evening?” Cern teased.

“This evening would be very nice.”

“Done.” He held up one finger when she turned to leave. “Keep in mind, I did tell the Council you couldn’t be alone with either of them. After this, you’re going to have to follow the rules.”

She winked as she headed towards the house. “At least until I find a way around you.”





## Chapter 27

Aria nodded at a few pack guards as she trudged up the porch stairs to the house.

A hand shot from the shadows of the porch. She fell into Lukas' lap with a surprised gasp. "Please tell me you managed to negotiate an evening alone. I'd hate to have to spill Cern's blood this early in the game."

She adjusted herself, twisting in her body around to face him, wondering how she hadn't noticed in the dark. "I can be very persuasive when I need to be, you know."

Lukas' lips nuzzled her neck, and she tilted her head to the side, giving him better access. "As long as you're not too persuasive. Unless we're talking about persuading me. Then I have no objections to your methods."

She waved at the blankets next to him. "Take me somewhere away from prying eyes."

His arms tightened around her, regret lining his face. "I wanted to be slow and gentle this evening, Aria." His hands slid over her butt as they stood, pressing her close to him. Through his jeans, the length of him was hard and straining against the fabric. "I don't think I'll be able to manage that. I came too close to losing you today."

Aria kissed the hollow of his collarbone. "I will take you any way I can."

"How did you manage to get away from him, anyway?"

Picking up the blankets off the rocker, she pulled him down the steps, out into the yard towards the woods. A shadowy form wound its way through the trees to her left. "You best make sure Aaron keeps his distance."

"Don't put me off, Aria."

*If only she could tell him...* "I can't explain everything now, but it's an even trade. He gives us time alone, and I keep a secret of his."

"Must be a pretty big secret."

“It is. But it can’t be kept forever. I’m hoping to come up with a plan for him in exchange for another night with you.”

Lukas groaned. “I don’t want to encourage a plan that has definite undertones of danger, but you’re making it difficult.”

Aria pouted and walked ahead a few feet, swinging her hips provocatively. “I must not be doing something right if you had to think about that.”

“No, no, you’re doing fine. Any better and I’ll explode right here.”

She tossed the blankets down. “You can get those. I think we need to find somewhere nice and private.”

She shifted, and bounded toward the forest. When they drew close, she veered away from the waterfall, searching for something else, something farther from the house. Tonight there was nothing but her, Lukas, and the stars.

*I can hear that. Would you prefer to run all night, or let me lead?*

*I’d like to find one on my own, but I don’t think you’ll last that long.*

His teeth nipped at her ankles, and the blanket slid off his back. She wheezed, a wolf expression of laughter, when he picked it up between his teeth in a wad, one end trailing the ground.

*You keep in mind, I’m only carting these around to please you.*

Her tongue lolled out, and she swiped it over his nose, almost tripping on a tree branch while her attention was diverted. Lukas’ laughter rolled through her head.

Lukas stretched his legs, moving ahead of her. The urge to race with him and push herself to the limit rose, but she brushed it aside. There would be time for that later.

He wound through thick underbrush, bounding over logs and small trickles of creeks. Finally, after a good run, he slowed, trotting to a dense clump of bushes and pushing through. A small meadow met her view as she broke from the barrier. Autumn flowers bloomed around the edges, and the center was full of soft, lightly waving grass. He shifted, holding out one hand to her.

She followed his act, changing forms, then crouched on the ground, caught at the sight of his nude body in the moonlight. She understood now why ancient

artists had considered the human body the embodiment of nature. Even with the blankets draped over his shoulder, his muscled form glowed.

Her hand fit snugly into his palm, and he drew her up next to him, his other hand resting on the curve of her butt to pull her close to him. A lock of hair fell across his face, and she pushed it behind his ear, barely touching his skin. His eyes closed, and he turned his face into her palm.

“You are so beautiful, Lukas.”

“No. Men are supposed to be handsome, right? Besides”—he caressed her back, lingering over the ridges of the scars—“If you call me beautiful then I have no words left for you.”

His mouth covered hers as he pulled her tight. Her nipples beaded against his chest, and she opened her mouth to his questing tongue, allowing him to draw her deeper into the maelstrom of desire that threatened to rob her of all senses.

Her fingers threaded through his hair, rubbing the silky strands. He pulled away, snapping the blankets out and onto the ground.

“I can’t wait, baby.” He slid his arms under her rear, hefting her up. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and he moaned into her mouth as he lowered them to the ground.

He flicked a nipple with his tongue, suckling until her hands pushed at his shoulders. She was extremely aware of the heat flooding her body and his bare skin rubbing against her own. She sensed the wildness in him and knew tonight would not be a slow showing of affection. The need to dominate and to affirm they were both alive overwhelmed their need for each other. Lukas kissed her again, nipping at the corners of her lips, only to replace his teeth with his tongue. She returned his passion with fervor, never wanting their night to end.

He tore his mouth away, pulling back. Surprised by his distance, she frowned at him and rose on her elbows.

“I had a little something different in mind, baby.” He watched her reaction with a heady mix of lust and love in his gaze. “Get on your hands and knees.”

She obliged, shivering at the feeling of submission. Despite making her extremely vulnerable, she was extremely aroused by his order. She chuckled,

winking at him over her shoulder when she saw his growing erection. “Like the view, do you?”

He flashed a wicked grin as he knelt behind her, his hands smoothing over her rear. One hand reached around to tease her nipples, while the other slid to test her readiness. Fire poured over her body. She moaned, and pushed back against his hands.

“Greedy, aren’t we?”

“Lukas...”

She sucked in a deep breath at the feel of him, rubbing against her opening. His hands moved to her hips to keep her from rushing things. Letting out a frustrated growl, she widened her stance, allowing him a better view of her sex. He was hoarse as he started to move slowly into her. “God, you’re tight. I wanted to be gentle...”

“You can be gentle later, Lukas!”

He surged to the hilt, and she nearly wept with the pleasure of it. She gasped when he pushed a little farther into her.

With a groan, he pulled out and slammed back in, his thrusts hard and deep, driving his heated flesh into hers. Her muscles tightened around him, and he reached around with one hand to knead her breasts. When he tweaked one nipple, an orgasm unlike anything Aria had ever imagined took her by surprise.

Lukas gritted his teeth and slowed his pace as if willing himself to prolong their lovemaking. He moved in long, slow strokes, while he pressed soft kisses to the nape of her neck. It was a slow torment designed to make her aroused all over again, and it worked. Aria felt as though she was caught in a whirlpool of pleasure, and she had no desire to leave. Lukas’ slow thrusts were beginning to drive her crazy.

His breathing hitched, and he stopped suddenly, withdrawing. He chuckled at her whimper.

Unable to withstand his torment, she broke their connection and rolled over onto her back. He slid into her again, and she moaned aloud at his short, hard thrusts. She drew him down and nipped at his lips until he opened his mouth, and poured her love and frustration into him. Her hands slid over his

chest, circling his tiny nipples until he shivered and pulled her ankles to his shoulders, opening her wider to him. The stirrings of another orgasm struck her as his hips swiveled, rocking against her. Aria arched, crying out with pleasure. His movements became wild, and she raked her nails over his back, trying to get closer. She clenched around him as he deepened his thrusts, then Lukas found his release, spilling his seed deep in her womb.

After catching their breaths, Lukas shifted to his side, and she snuggled against his chest. A cool breeze swept over them and Aria shivered, cold after their exertions. Her body protested for a second when Lukas reached over her to shake out the second blanket and covered their bodies.

“Two weeks without this, Lukas. I’m not sure I can handle that.”

His hands rubbed soothing circles on her back.

Aria smiled when he didn’t reply. “Aw. I’ve worn the poor boy out.”

“Most manly men would object to that. Unfortunately, you’ve wrung me out into a limp noodle. I admit it.”

“We just need to work on your stamina.”

His chuckle caught her by surprise. “Well then, you’d best work on finding out what else Cern is willing to barter for a bit of alone time.”

She pressed a kiss to the skin under her mouth. “I’ll work on it.”

\*\*\*

It turned out Cern wasn’t as easy to bribe as she’d thought. For nearly a week, he’d managed to thwart every attempt she and Lukas had made to grab a few moments alone. He’d even gone so far as to recruit the teenagers, who enjoyed the opportunity to amuse themselves by spying on their Alpha pair. Aria decided it might have been worth it, because the kids were getting restless, chained as they were to the grounds.

Aria had been working on a plan she was certain would work when Lukas caught her eating lunch with Thaddeus and Aaron. She had formed a tenuous friendship with Aaron since her return from the Meet. She’d never asked why that

made the difference; she'd just taken it for what it was and ran with it. Things being what they were, she didn't need any more enemies.

When Lukas came out of the study with a concerned look, she jumped at the chance to feed him lunch, pity and love taking over her actions. Over the week, she'd learned that he worked hard at keeping the pack's finances afloat, and often forgot to eat.

"Sit down. I'll make you a sandwich."

When he took a chair without arguing, Aria began to worry. She made a turkey sandwich, asking him what he wanted on it, then slid it onto a plate and placed it in front of him with a drink.

"What's the matter?" Thaddeus asked. Even he looked concerned at Lukas' preoccupied manner.

They waited for him to finish chewing. "I've had some good news about the permits for starting the eco-tourism company." His gaze flicked to hers. "But the downside is that I have to leave for a week to address some of the issues in person. I tried to get them to move the deadlines around, but they've refused. If I don't go, we'll lose the chance, and I'm not sure how many more we'll get."

Aria squeezed his hand. "Then you have to go. You'll be back in time for the Challenge, right?"

"I should be back three days before we have to be there. Wherever that ends up being."

Aaron pushed his plate away. "I'll call as soon as we hear anything."

Rejecting her own sense of impending doom, she smiled brightly. "Then that's settled. You'll go take care of that, and then meet us back here."

Lukas watched her, and she felt him probe her mind. "Are you sure you're all right with this?"

"Lukas, you have to go. I'm fine with it." She watched as his expression faltered. "Just promise to take a pack guard with you. Please."

He nodded. "That's more than a reasonable request. I think Sebastian is the best option." He exchanged a pointed glance with Aaron. Did they have suspicions similar to hers? Sebastian had been sulking around since they returned, and doing only as much as was needed to keep under the radar. She'd

tried to bring it up on several occasions, but Lukas had been so preoccupied, she'd abandoned it to her paranoia.

"I think that would be for the best. He can easily be spared," Aaron confirmed.

Guilt flooded her senses. The pack guards had been busy with triple the amount of work, patrol for Haemon, and watch for Council guards; all on top of their normal duties. No one had complained, and in fact, some had decided it was good to be more useful, but it still bothered her. So much trouble over her.

"When do you leave?" Thaddeus asked.

"This evening."

Thaddeus nearly spit his drink over the table. "How long have you actually known about this?"

Lukas rubbed the back of his neck. "About three days. Aaron and I have spoken about it already. I was trying to exhaust every other option before taking this one."

Cern sauntered in, and they shared the information with him. His face grew serious. "You should know that Haemon has scheduled a meeting with Aria tomorrow afternoon."

Lukas cursed. "Damn it, I can't put this off. I'd appreciate it if you didn't leave them alone."

Cern winked. "Of course. I never allow you and Aria alone time. Why would I allow him?"

Lukas' entire body slumped, relief evident. "Thanks." He turned to Aria, his hand covering hers on the table. "Be careful. I don't know what he wants, but it can't be good."

"Hello. Have you missed out on the last year?" She laughed. "I'll meet him so he can't complain to the council. I don't have to be nice about it. All I have to do is stand there with him."

## Chapter 28

It didn't turn out to be that easy. After a slightly tearful farewell to Lukas, Aria spent the following day alternating between sadness her Mate was gone and anger over Haemon's audacity in forcing a visit.

When Ella came to her room mid morning and told her Haemon was waiting outside on the steps, Aaron had forbidden him entrance into the pack house, and all the children had been confined inside for the day. The grounds were disturbingly empty of anything but sharp-eyed pack guards.

Aria followed Ella outside, where Aaron waited on the porch with Cern. Haemon stood at the bottom of the front steps, a condescending smile hovering around his lips. She headed towards the steps when Aaron's arm snaked out and stopped her.

"You don't have to do this."

Cern didn't back down. "Yes, she does. Rules, Aaron."

Aria patted his hand. "Don't worry."

Her stomach sunk a little lower with each of the five steps she took. Haemon caught her hand, and she inhaled sharply, skin crawling with the need to make him release her.

"Why are you insisting on this, Haemon?"

He pulled her around the driveway, chuckling. "It's lovely to see you as well." When her lips stayed tightly pressed, he laughed. "While watching you get upset is entertaining, I did it because turn about is fair play."

"Since when has fair play ever been important to you?"

He ignored her barb. "The Council is not pleased with Cern at the moment. He found loopholes in their wording and used it. That always gets them hot and bothered."

Haemon spoke of the Council as if he were discussing a misbehaving child. Her heart sped a little. His hand patted hers where it was tucked against his body.



“I can hear that, Aria. Don’t get yourself so worked up over the Council’s opinion. Soon, the only opinion you will worry about is mine.”

“Over my dead body.”

“No. Over Lukas’.”

Aria dug in her heels and stopped. “You’ve outworn your welcome, Haemon.”

She twisted her hand out of his grasp and turned. He caught her sleeve, jerking hard. She twirled, her shirt sliding over one shoulder, the necklace she’d managed to keep hidden for over four years sliding from under the fabric.

Haemon’s eyes went wide and wild. “You have it. Fuck Cern, he gave it to you.”

Her palm slapped over the silver, and she held up a hand. Around them, pack guards drew closer, snarling at one another. “My mother gave me this as part of her will.”

Haemon waved a hand. “Then he gave it to her. I want it. Now. You will give it to me.”

“I will give you a swift kick in the ass if you come any closer.”

He snarled, his body morphing to a half-formed werewolf. He was bigger than her, and stronger, but she was quick, and easily ducked a paw of wickedly curved claws. Haemon’s pack guards were hard pressed to contain the wolves swarming them, attempting to come to her aid. She allowed her own half-change to come over her. Haemon’s claws tore through her stomach before she could back out of the way, the shallow cuts bleeding sluggishly. She circled, waiting until his hand came toward her again, sliding under his arm and snapping her jaws within inches of his fingers. The necklace at her neck grew warm when Lawrence broke through the edges of the circle, throwing himself at Haemon. He was tossed aside, slamming into the side of a car parked in the gravel with enough force to leave a dent.

Anger blazed brightly, and her power surfaced. The necklace burned against her light fur. Frustration added to the sensations and her resolve turned to steel. Control wrapped around her. Before her escape, her power was hard to command. But now...

As Aaron knocked over two wolves to her left, she bent the massive energy surging through her body to her will, honing it to a fine point with her mind. When Haemon's claws started towards her again, she released it like an arrow from a bowstring.

Haemon's form wavered, then shifted until he passed out, bewilderment and madness written on his face. Everything went still, and Aria lost control of her form, slumping naked to the ground. She pulled her legs up, trying to make herself small.

"Remind me never to make you upset," Aaron commented.

Aaron barked out a command, and Haemon's pack guards dragged his body to their car. They were accompanied to the edge of their land by a pack of wolves.

Ella dropped to the ground next to Aria, draping a sheet over her shoulders.

Aaron held out a hand. "Come on. Alec needs to look at those cuts."

Aria struggled with unbidden tears. Her emotions were a storm she couldn't quite get under control. She put a hand in Aaron's, allowing him to help her up and wrapping the sheet around her body with the other one.

Her fingers tightened on his. "Lukas can't know about this, Aaron."

"Aria—"

"He'll come straight back if he finds out. We need this to work. He doesn't have to know until he comes back."

Aaron sighed, pulling her towards the house. "I'll do what I can. But I don't like not telling him."

Aria managed a shaky laugh. "You don't like it? Think about it this way—when he gets back, I'm the one who's going to get their ears blistered."

Alec was waiting for them when they got inside, drawing Aria into the study. Ella started forward, but Aria waved her off. "They're already healing. Don't worry so much."

Ella frowned. "I'll wait right outside the door if you need anything."

Alec closed the door softly behind Ella while Aria collapsed against a leather desk chair. He moved across the room and waited until Aria blinked through the tears that wouldn't stop forming.

"I'm sorry, Alec. I haven't been so emotional in forever."

He bunched the sheet in her lap while she held the top over her breasts. Nudity had never been something she'd been particularly conscious about before, but lately it made her cringe to think anyone else would see her naked.

"Don't worry about it, Aria. It's to be expected."

She didn't know what to make of that cryptic statement. Did he think she was some kind of weakling? He opened the door, sending Ella for a washcloth and bowl of warm water. Lounging against the doorframe, he tried to make small talk.

"You really need to get more sleep, you know."

Aria ignored him, already aware of the bags under her eyes.

Ella returned, thrust a bowl of water and several washcloths through the doorway, and Alec took them, closing the door with one foot.

"Now, let's see how bad the damage is." He wrung out a towel, gently wiping at the blood. The places that had not finished knitting stung a little, but the cuts were already closing, forming into light pink gashes across her stomach.

"It's good you got out of the way when you did. If he'd landed that blow where he wanted, you would both have been in serious trouble."

Aria's brow furrowed. "Both?"

He leaned back on his heels. "You and the baby."

"Baby?" She froze. Her fingers slid over the damp flesh around her navel. "What are you talking about?"

Alec uttered a curse under his breath. "I thought you knew. You're pregnant, Aria."

Her world grew dark around the edges. She couldn't think.

Alec straightened. "Head between your knees. If you faint, Ella will bring the house down around our ears."

Folding forward, she stared at the floor, dumbstruck. Pregnant? Wouldn't she have noticed? Thinking back, it started to make a little more sense. She'd

been unusually tired lately, but she'd attributed it to stress. Her breasts were a little tender, but again, she'd assumed that was because her period was due. Her period. She counted back to the last one and realized she was very overdue.

Joy blossomed in her chest, and she slowly sat back up, catching Alec's hand in hers. Tears made the room hard to see. "How did you know, Alec?"

He shrugged. "I'm a doctor and a healer. When Haemon cut you, I could smell it in your blood."

"Can anyone else smell it?"

He thought for a moment. "You're not far enough along for the change in your scent to be noticeable. So probably not."

"Then we have to keep it that way." Her mind worked overtime. She should be panicked, but instead, warmth spread through her. This child was a new beginning. But if Haemon caught wind of it... She pushed the thought away. He wouldn't. She'd make certain of it.

"What?"

She shook her head, taking a deep, shaky breath. "Go and get Aaron please. And Cern. Please don't say anything to anyone else." The less people who knew, the less chance there was of something happening. Lukas didn't need to know until after the Challenge. She didn't want anything to distract him. Haemon would truly go mad if he found out. But she wasn't an idiot. She needed help to keep this secret, and to keep the child safe.

Alec straightened to his feet. "Are you sure you're all right?"

A wet laugh escaped. "I'm feeling pretty amazing right now, Alec."

He chuckled, leaving the room. She heard Ella's frantic voice, and his deeper one reassuring her. She crept to the door, cracking it open.

"Ella?"

The other's woman's worried face appeared in the crack. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing a little rest won't fix. But I was wondering if I could ask a big favor?"

"Anything."

“I was hoping I could borrow some of that rose bubble bath you swear by. I’m planning on taking a very long soak this afternoon.”

Ella’s relief was palpable. “That’s easy. I’ll be back in a little bit, and I’ll even get the bathroom ready. You could use a little aromatherapy too.”

Aria closed the door after Ella walked off and she tucked the sheet around her again before moving to Lukas’ chair behind the desk. Ella would be ticked that she’d been left out of the loop later, but Aria just didn’t think her friend would be able to keep this one under wraps for that long.

Aaron, Cern, and Alec returned a few moments later, preceded by a perfunctory knock. Aaron’s face showed concern. “What’s wrong, Aria? Alec won’t tell me what’s going on.”

She couldn’t contain her smile, growing so big her cheeks ached. “I’m pregnant.”

Aaron’s mouth dropped open before he collected himself. Cern smiled, but his concern shone through.

“How long have you known?” Aaron asked, suspicion blooming.

She ignored it. “About five minutes. Alec says he can smell it in my blood, and it explains a lot of other things I’ve just been brushing off. The problem is that I don’t want anyone else noticing.”

Aaron took a deep breath, sorting through the scents. “I can’t scent it yet.”

She turned her gaze to Cern. “This is where you come in.”

“Huh?”

“Considering your...past...you have to have some sort of glamour that could mask the change in my scent.”

He stroked his chin. “Interesting. I have done it in the past, but it won’t work forever. I can mask it for a week, maybe a little more, but after that, the difference will be too pronounced.”

“I just need nine days.”

Cern drew closer, catching her gaze. “Do you understand what you’re trying to do?”

“Haemon and the Council don’t need to know until I’m good and ready for them to. I’m prepared to trade something for the help, Cern.”

Aaron's growl was almost inaudible. "Can you do anything, Alec?"

The doctor shook his head. "The best suggestions I can give is heavy perfume. It might give you a few extra days, but only two or three. And everyone would know something is up, because you don't normally wear them."

Aria stood. "Then I need Cern's help. In the end, it helps both of us."

Cern pulled up a chair. "I'm listening."

Alec started toward the door. "This is a conversation I'm assuming I don't need to hear, right?"

Aaron nodded. "Yup. Keep this under wraps, doc. No one needs to know, but the four of us."

"We're not telling Lukas?" Alec's question had everyone turning to Aria.

She couldn't meet their eyes. "You all know how he'd react. He'd never let me go to the Challenge, and I have to. I'll tell him when we're already in the car." She gave Cern a wry smile. "Of course, he'll know the moment he sees me if this doesn't work long enough."

Alec shook his head. "I don't know if you're one of the bravest women I've met, or the stupidest."

Aaron grunted an agreement.

"Well, let's hope it's the former."

Aaron took a seat, and they waited until Alec closed the door again. "All right, Aria. Spill it. What is going on?"

She filled Aaron in on the highlights of the necklace, leaving out the significance of the chalice to Cern, other than to say he was its rightful owner. Aaron wasn't stupid, and she could see the way his gaze assessed Cern that he had a pretty good idea of what it meant.

"I think the best time to steal the chalice is at the Challenge. I can merge the pieces, but I need someone to steal the chalice."

Cern raised a hand. "I can't do it myself, Aria. He's given a command that I cannot steal it, and therefore I can only get close enough to breath on the damn thing, but I cannot actually touch it." He harrumphed and rested his chin on his fist. "You have any idea how frustrating that is?"

Aria frowned. "I can't do it. And the same group of pack guards is going with us—they'll be missed if they leave. Not to mention, they're all huge. Who is left?"

Aaron rubbed a hand over his mouth. "There is someone, but you'll have to talk to her."

Something in his manner screamed reluctance. "Who?"

"Ella. She has an interesting background. You'll have to ask for the more sordid details sometime, but if you need a thief, she's the one I'd ask." He shrugged. "Besides, she's already told me that if she isn't allowed to go to the Challenge as your moral support, she'll stow away in a duffel bag. This is much less cramped."

Aria nodded and rose, clutching the sheet around her tighter. "All right then. Cern, you might as well start now." She hadn't wanted Ella involved, but if all of them were going, and with Council members watching, Ella would be the last one they pay attention to.

Cern nodded, hands outstretched in front of him and his eyes closed—a study in concentration. His glamour settled over her like a wool blanket, uncomfortable, warm, and slightly itchy.

He smiled. "I'll keep tabs on it daily, but it should last about a week. Then you're on your own."

She nodded. "I'll worry about that when I get there. I figure Ella's been upstairs turning my bathroom into a spa and waiting impatiently, so I'm going to take a bath and talk to her."

Cern clapped a hand to her shoulder. "I didn't say it before, but congratulations. And good luck with Ella."

Aaron snorted. "It isn't luck she needs. She's giving Ella a mission. She'll need a leash."

## Chapter 29

“What do you mean he’s disappeared?” Aria groped for a chair, her chest tight. *Lukas was gone.*

She’d just called Lukas’ hotel room after speaking with Jonas about the location of the Challenge, hoping to give Lukas the news herself. She wanted to be the one to tell him, to gauge his reaction.

Instead, she’d gotten a distracted and worried Pack guard on the other end of the line. Sebastian’s voice wavered a little. He withheld something, she knew it. “I’ve searched for him everywhere, Aria. He’s just gone. All of his things are here, even his cell phone. I just went down to grab pizza from the delivery guy. It’s like he vanished into thin air.”

Aaron appeared at her elbow, his face grave. He reached for the phone. She shook a hand at him. “He didn’t take anything? And there were no signs of a struggle?”

“I’m sorry, Aria, but there’s nothing.”

He made it sound as if he thought Lukas was running from her. The insinuation added anger to the emotional maelstrom. “Aaron needs to speak with you, Sebastian.”

She didn’t wait to see if he said anything else. Her stomach churned, and she barely made it to the bathroom before she spilled her lunch. Thaddeus appeared in the doorway, his face carefully neutral.

“It isn’t that bad, Aria.” He handed her a wet washcloth as she flushed the toilet, sitting back on her heels. “Maybe he’s just left to follow a lead and forgot to tell Sebastian.”

“Don’t you dare patronize me,” the words came out hard and clipped. She sighed, wrinkling her nose at the foul taste on her tongue. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bite your head off. The nausea, it’s a side effect of the...” She paused, giving a weak smile. “Nerves. I’ll be fine in a minute.”



Thaddeus nodded, backing out of the bathroom. She silently berated herself for nearly giving the secret away, after all the fuss she made to keep quiet. Slowly, she climbed the stairs and brushed her teeth. Feeling a little better, she returned to the room, fatigue hitting her like a brick wall. Dropping onto the bed, tears threatened to overwhelm her. She reached for a tissue, blowing her nose.

“Calm down, Aria.”

Aaron pushed the door closed. “You really can’t keep this up, you know.”

“I have to.” She ran a hand through her hair, and blotted the tears that escaped. “What do you think happened?”

Aaron sighed. “Do you want me to lie or tell you the truth?”

Her arms crossed over her stomach, and she raised an eyebrow.

“I figured. Haemon has gotten to him.”

“Could it be Sebastian?” She held her breath, waiting for the immediate refusal and defense.

Aaron paused, staring over her head at the wall behind her. “I want to say no, but I’m not sure anymore. He’s been acting strange for a couple months now. I thought it was a woman. That’s what he told me when I asked. But it’s more than that, and has been for a while. I’ve been watching him, but I haven’t seen anything suspicious.”

He patted her hand awkwardly. “If I had, I would never have sent him with Lukas. At the worst, I figured Lukas could easily handle him if Sebastian turned on him. He’s strong, but nowhere close to Lukas.”

Aria’s head dropped. “I don’t think Sebastian did the dirty work, but I think he’s been helping Haemon all along.”

Aaron nodded. “Don’t worry. We’ll find him. We can’t go to the Challenge without him.”

Darkness crept over her heart, a shiver rushed over her. “We have to go, whether he’s here or not.”

“You don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Bitterness laced her words. “Oh yes, I do. And you and I both know there isn’t an option. I’ve accepted this pack as my own and they have taken me in and made me a leader. I have to do what is best for them.”

“If we go, and he isn’t present, Haemon wins by forfeit. Lukas will lose you and the pack.”

“I know. But if I don’t go at all, the pack gets disbanded, and I end up with Haemon anyway.”

Aaron suddenly bowed his head. “I underestimated you when you came, and I’ve continued to keep you at a distance. For that, I’m sorry. You’re a good person, Aria. You’re my Alpha’s Mate, and I’ll stand with you until this is over.”

She shook her head, touched, yet his lagging confidence frightened her. “I’d appreciate the support, Aaron. But you have a prior promise to Lukas and the pack. I’ll either stand with Lukas when this is over, or I’ll stand alone.”

He hesitated, refusal hanging on his lips.

“Please, Aaron.”

He sighed, nodding. “All right. This time, we’ll do it your way.”

They sat in silence, and then she took a deep breath, slapping her hands on her thighs. “Listen to us! You’d think we were already defeated. I have no intention of going so easily. What else did Sebastian tell you?”

“He left Lukas in the room, and when he came back, Lukas was gone. He said nothing was missing, but with our suspicions, I can’t be certain he’s telling the truth. Thaddeus is contacting an old friend to see if he can get the cell phone logs for Lukas’ phone. It’s a long shot, but I’ve also asked him to get the ones for Sebastian’s phone.”

Aria rose. “Well, there’s two days left. I’ll ask Cern and see if he can find anything out, but I doubt it. After using the Council’s edict against them, he’s not particularly popular at the moment. Jonas knows he’s up to something and doesn’t trust him.”

“Do you?”

“For the moment, we have similar goals, and that’s enough. Past that, I don’t trust him any farther than I can throw him.”

“Are you going to tell the others about,”—he motioned to her midriff—“you know...”

She shook her head. “No one knows except you, Alec, and Cern. I need it to stay that way. If we tell Thaddeus and Lawrence, well, I worry how many people

can keep that kind of secret. Besides, Cern says he can't completely cover it anymore. He thinks it will work long enough to get through the Challenge without anyone knowing. But it's a gamble, either way."

"You are taking an awful risk. What if it doesn't last through the Challenge?"

"I'm thinking positive, Aaron. I've got too many other issues to worry about. Quite frankly, once that cat's out of the bag, I can't do anything about it."

She followed him out of the room and downstairs. Ella was in the kitchen, and she ran to Aria, throwing her arms around her friend. "Oh Aria, I'm so sorry. But don't worry. It will all turn out. Maybe it's just a false alarm." Her smile was bright, but forced.

Aria shook her head. "It's okay Ella. I don't need to be coddled, but I appreciate the sentiment. Right now, I need chocolate and a plan."

Thaddeus and Aaron started towards the study. Aria held out one hand. She couldn't talk about Lukas in the office without crying. The room was saturated with Lukas' scent, reminding her of his disappearance. "Can we do this somewhere else? I can't...um..."

Thaddeus picked up on the quiver she tried to hide. He ushered them into the living room. He shoed the teens watching TV out and punched the power button on the remote.

"All right. What do you want to do?" Aaron asked.

Aaron sat on the edge of the coffee table, while Aria, Lawrence and Thaddeus arranged themselves on the couch. "I'd like to send someone out there to see everything first hand, but we can't. We'll just have to wait for Sebastian to get back. Until then, we're going to keep things together and try to keep the pack from panicking." He turned to Aria. "And in two days, all of us will go with Aria to the Challenge."

"You should stay, just in case," Aria protested. "The pack needs a leader."

"But my friend and his wife need the support of their friends, and my Alpha needs a Second."

Aria folded her hands in her lap. She couldn't argue with that. Aaron had been relegated to pack babysitter enough. This time, he was right—they needed all the help they could get, whether Lukas appeared or not.

“What we really need is assurance Lukas is alive. And only you can provide that.”

Aria shuddered. She knew he meant opening herself completely to the link between them. She was never completely closed from it, but she dreaded opening herself to the connection. If Lukas was dying or in pain, she would know. And if he couldn't answer her, she wouldn't be able to help. While she could deal with his pain, she wasn't sure she would be able to handle it if she couldn't help him.

“You can still feel him, can't you?” Thaddeus suddenly looked uncertain.

She nodded. Clearing her throat, she leaned back, letting the sofa cushion her weight. “Just give me a second.”

Closing her eyes, she took several deep breaths and then opened the link between them. Her entire body contorted with pain. It seared through her chest and down one arm. Vaguely, she was aware of crying out, and concerned exclamations around her, but her consciousness was elsewhere.

*Oh God, Lukas. Where are you? What is happening?*

He didn't answer. She got the feeling of love and concern for her, then the connection slammed closed. She couldn't feel him at all. He hadn't died, but he'd effectively cut her off. Tears wound through her lashes and down her face.

“He won't let me in. He's blocked me out so completely, I can't even feel him anymore.”

“Is he dead?” Lawrence asked.

She shook her head, wiping at her tears with a tissue Aaron handed to her. “No, it wasn't death. I could feel his concern and stubborn determination not to share it. I don't know where he is, but he's in pain.”

She rubbed her chest, feeling welts forming. She pulled down the neck of her shirt, revealing angry red marks rising on her pale skin. Tears started again. “They're torturing him.”

The men stared at the marks, incredulous. “I've never actually seen that happen before. I didn't realize the connection could be that strong.”

“Well, it could be worse.” Aaron frowned. “At least we know he’s alive.”

Aria shifted in her seat, straightening her posture. “But we won’t know that for sure. I can’t even find the connection. I don’t know what he did, but when I see him again, I’m going to tell him exactly what I think of that.”

## Chapter 30

The next two days were like wading through molasses. Everything seemed far away and distant. Ella continually followed her around, a self-appointed companion. Aria hadn't minded until the day before the Challenge. It took two hours to get rid of Ella so she could talk to Alec alone.

He checked her over, and declared everything was progressing as it should, but Cern's glamour wouldn't be able to help her any longer. Aria prayed no one would notice the change in her scent until the Challenge was over and Lukas saved. That afternoon, they packed bags and loaded the car.

"Why are we taking bags anyway?" Thaddeus grumbled, as he hauled Ella's enormous duffel into the car. "And why are you taking so much? Matter of fact, why are you even coming?"

Ella poked a finger into his chest. "I am here for moral support. You are here for muscle support. Deal with it. I'm more important, therefore I need more stuff. I had to bring emergency chocolate and relaxation supplies."

Thaddeus just stared. He opened his mouth, an angry response appearing to be on the tip of his tongue. Aria slid between them. "I asked her to come, Thaddeus. And I packed our things in the same bag. Don't freak out. I just needed a little female company this time."

His face darkened, and she leaned a little closer. "Unless you want to be the one holding my hand if things go horribly wrong."

Immediately he back-pedaled. He slung Ella's bag on top of the tents and sleeping bags in the trunk.

Without another word, they all piled into the van. The drive wasn't a long one. Blackwater Falls State Park was only a few hours away.

The silent drive gave everyone a chance to sort out their plans. Aria tried to keep her mind blank. She wasn't particularly successful, and finally had to plug in her iPod and distract herself with a movie.

The state park was nearing closing time, but they passed through the gates, informing the rangers they were camping and just a little late.

It took several minutes to find the right parking area for the trailhead where they were to meet the Council guards. When they pulled in, three large, burly men waited in the shadowy fringe of the woods.

They moved forward as they all exited the van, stretching. The tallest looked them over, then asked, "Aria Lagreve?" When she nodded, he motioned to them. "Follow us. The others will get your things."

Almost as if they'd been cued, two more appeared and gathered their belongings. The others lead the way through the trees. No other words spoken. Aria stared straight ahead, following the movements of the men in front of her, quelling the dread and worry, running rampage through her body as they neared their destination. They left the hiking trail a few hundred yards in, trekking through underbrush and fallen leaves. After about thirty minutes, the woods deepened, then opened into a large clearing. The Council had already set up tents on the far side, and Aria briefly caught a flash of golden hair to her right. Haemon and his guards were setting up their tents.

Cern followed her, pressing a comforting hand to her arm. The Council wolves dropped their things a few yards to the right of where they entered.

"Go set up, and then at sunset, you will be required in the center of the field."

They left, without saying a word.

The silence left behind was awkward. Even Cern seemed uncertain of what to say. Aria shook her head, bending down and grabbing a tent bag.

"Come on, guys. We need to get this stuff together."

She might as well have fired a starting gun. The tension shattered and mood lightened. They all scrambled to set up camp. Thaddeus and Lawrence took charge of their tent, Aaron worked on his own, and she and Ella chose the biggest to put up by themselves.

Cern pressed a hand to her shoulder. "I have to go to the Council. My instructions."

Aria nodded. She patted his shoulder and nodded. "Don't forget the plan."

He did smile that time. "Believe me, I won't forget my cue."

Ella shook out the pieces of their tent and giggled at Thaddeus and Lawrence. They were wandering around the ground, arguing about tent placement.

Ella winked as she pulled out the collapsible poles, tossing Aria a folded square of plastic. "There are bonuses to being two girls on a camping trip."

Aria laid out the tarp. Together, they made quick work of the tent. Lawrence and Thaddeus were still arguing over placement when the women took two sleeping bags and spread them in the tent. Aria had finally gained some semblance of calm when she heard Ella's soft exclamation.

"What?" Aria turned, expecting to find a spider or misplaced bag.

Ella crouched in front of her small overnight bag, staring at Aria. Her pert nose quivered, and her eyes grew shiny.

*Ella knew.* Aria dropped to the sleeping bag, reaching out to squeeze her friend's hands with her own. "You can't tell anyone."

"But, how on earth..."

Aria laughed with genuine amusement. Ella's face colored. "If you don't know, Ella, then I think I need to talk to Thaddeus."

"That isn't what I meant. How did you hide it? It didn't happen just now."

Aria shrugged, sidestepping the answer. "I masked the scent for a few weeks, as long as I could manage. But at this point, it isn't feasible anymore. I'm hoping we can slide under the radar for a little longer." She dropped her head. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone."

"You have to at least tell Aaron."

"He already knows."

Ella searched her face, then tightened her hold on Aria's hands. "You didn't even tell Lukas, did you?"

Words clogged in her throat. She shook her head, untangling her hands and smoothing out the already arranged sleeping bag.

Ella sighed. "When you do something, you don't do it by halves, do you?"

Aria croaked a laugh. "Promise me, Ella."

"I promise."



Aria swiped at her face. "Come on. Let's see if they need any help. Then we can make something to eat. It'll be sunset in a couple hours."

\*\*\*

They were ready when the Council guards came. The bonfire on the Council's side of the field had been lit, and all the members were sitting or standing around it in an arc, talking quietly amongst themselves. No one had failed to notice the missing member of their party.

"Aria Lagreve? Lukas Macleod"

She stood, without answering. They knew Lukas was absent.

"Follow us. Bring only yourselves. Your pack is welcome to follow, but they must maintain their distance."

The walk across the field should have been a simple tramp through high grass. Lukas, striding beside her, would have calmed her nerves and whispered something encouraging. Instead, she walked alone, a little ahead of the others, reaching out to emptiness where her connection to Lukas should have been. It was not the ending she'd dreamed of.

The moon began to rise, wavering in the heat of the bonfire. Haemon approached from her right. Jonas stood from his expensive canvas-folding chair, a smirk firmly in place. "You come alone?"

Aria cleared her throat, shooting a glance at Haemon. A smirk flirted with the edges of his lips. Anger flared in her gut. "I come alone."

"Then Lukas forfeits by absence?" Jonas asked.

"I have not spoken to Lukas over a week." Her gaze flicked to Haemon, again. "He met with foul play, which may have been instigated by Haemon."

She cocked her head at Jonas. "Or perhaps by you. But he would not have willingly missed this."

"Perhaps you have misjudged Lukas. And Haemon. After all, my dear..." His tone became patronizing as he walked around the bonfire to draw closer. "Lukas isn't here now, and Haemon is."

Bile burned the back of her throat. Listening to them made her ill and angry at the same time.

Jonas made a motion with one hand and the Council guards stepped forward. There was a commotion behind her, but she did not turn around.

Aria held her breath, praying harder than she'd ever done in her life. The Council guards flanked Haemon as he approached, she knew when she saw his nostrils flare her secret was out. Inwardly, she cringed. An ancient pack law declared he could demand the death of the child. She frowned at her own thoughts. Of all the things her father had made her study, that *would* be the one she'd remember now.

His hands wrapped around her wrists in a crushing grip. A small cry escaped from her throat as he twisted, lifting her to his eye level. Her feet came up, and she balanced on her toes, trying desperately not to slip and fall. He shook her, the bones in her wrist creaking in protest. "You whore."

He pulled her closer and took a deep breath as if sorting through the scents. He picked up the scent of Lukas on her clothes and started to pull at the jacket of Lukas' she had brought with her.

Rage, hot and all-consuming, filled her body. Her teeth ground together and her canines fought to lengthen. Her fingers sprang claws, and she writhed, catching Haemon's flesh. He cursed, releasing one hand. Trying to control her morph, she swung away from him wildly, her sneakers sweeping through the tall grass and dirt to find solid purchase. The rage sweeping her body did not belong to her. She searched the woods wildly, before Haemon yanked hard on her arm, causing her to lose her balance and drop to one knee, her captive wrist stretched high over her head.

Whipping her head around to look at Haemon, she stopped. Melting out of the shadows, a huge black wolf approached the fire. The fur was matted and his mismatched eyes glowed. As he drew closer, his form wavered, blending with the night before it reformed.

Bloody, bruised, and baring elongated teeth, Lukas moved completely into the circle of flickering light. Even with torn jeans and wild hair, he was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen in her life.

**“Release my Mate.”**

## Chapter 31

Haemon threw her arm away with a snarl. “The proclamation has already been made. You cannot retract it now.”

Lukas turned to Jonas. “You can let me fight a fair Challenge, or you can watch me rip him apart, but I’m not leaving until I’ve tasted his blood.”

Shock registered on Jonas’ face, and through Aria’s body. She’d never heard anyone speak so. Lukas’ entire body trembled with the horrible rage that ran between them through her link to him. Her fingers flexed, claws appearing and reappearing as she fought to control her body’s reaction to his rage.

His gaze caught hers, and immediately the rage lessened. He pulled back from their connection, almost to the point of leaving her out. Aria’s hand stretched toward him, and she whimpered. “Don’t. Please, Lukas, don’t cut me off again.”

He stepped forward, reaching down to scoop her from the grass, his touch incredibly gentle. She buried her face against his neck, hot tears falling onto his skin.

*Why didn’t you tell me?*

She reluctantly pulled away from him. He’d been downwind when he approached. Apparently, she hadn’t been able to hide it all that well. Unless Cern had found him and informed him...she searched the faces around them for Cern. Jonas argued with Tessa and the council members, Haemon stood with his Beta, issuing terse orders, and their own pack watched them closely. Cern was not to be found.

“Bastard. When I get my hands on him...”

“Helping you out with that, was he?” Lukas’ rough voice vibrated through his chest, against her. “You won’t get your hands on him, baby, until he’s good and ready. We’ll discuss the rest of this later.”

He put her down, but she couldn’t quite let go of him, keeping one palm pressed to the warm skin of his back. He didn’t say a word.

“Well, Jonas. What is the verdict?” Lukas asked, stance rigid.

“We didn’t actually finish delivering a verdict,” Haemon seethed as he turned a murderous glare on Jonas. “You will be allowed to complete the Challenge.”

Tessa stepped between them. “Everyone will clear out a space, and another fire will be lit at the other end of the clearing. I will lay a circle, and the combatants must remain within its boundaries. Stepping outside results in a forfeit. As the satisfactory outcome was decided by the Challenger.”—she nodded to Haemon—“to be Death, anyone who forfeits will be executed.”

Aria barely held back a gasp. Lukas wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him. Tessa spared her an annoyed glance and continued, “The Challenge remains in effect until one combatant is dead. Aria may, under the unusual circumstances, remain with the group that escorted her. When the Challenge is complete, she will submit to the Council’s ruling or forfeit her life.”

“We did not agree on that.” Lukas growled, catching Tessa’s arm.

“The Council did. Those are the terms. Take them, or we solve the problem now and kill all of you.”

A neat solution. If they protested, the Council could kill them, and the world would believe they had forced the Council’s hand. Aria sighed and rubbed a cheek against Lukas’ arm. “I accept.”

*Aria, you can’t!*

*I will.* She didn’t have to add anything else. Lukas huffed, but didn’t say anything.

Tessa nodded. “Fine. You may make your goodbyes then the Challengers will meet in the center of the circle. Aria, you and your friends will remain near the Council for the duration.”

A few of the Council members left to help the guards light three more bonfires around the edges of the circle Tessa created. She backed around the field, hands outstretched to the ground. From her palms, glowing gold dust fell, illuminating a perfect circle on the ground. Mixed with moonlight, it shined with a soft blue glow. When she finished, the circle flared briefly and then became a part of the ground itself, mimicking the orb traveling overhead.

“Lukas, you have no idea how glad I am to see you.” Thaddeus clapped a hand on his Alpha’s back.

Aaron approached, and they stared at one another for a moment. “Sebastian?”

Lukas ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. “Haemon had been dream-walking through his head for months. Used his subconscious against us. He set me up. I took care of him before I escaped.”

Aria winced. She didn’t need to hear details to know Sebastian’s death hadn’t been pretty.

“How long have you known about Aria?” Lukas stared at each of them in turn. Thaddeus and Lawrence exchanged a confused glance.

Aaron sighed. “A week.”

Ella fell to his glare, smiling weakly. “About two hours.”

Thaddeus held up his hands. “I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

Lukas cocked an eyebrow. “Really?”

“They don’t know, Lukas. Cern’s been helping me mask the scent for weeks. Until tonight.”

Lawrence moved closer, breathing deeply. His eyes popped open. “Holy shit! I don’t know whether to congratulate you or not.”

Thaddeus did the same and grinned. He moved next to Aria, leaning over to mutter a stage whisper in her ear. “I warned you, Aria. Once you True Mate, you’re pregnant like two seconds later.”

Her laughter came from deep inside, welling up and bubbling over. They still had a horrible ordeal, but for this moment, the people she had come to care about most were around her. Lukas’ arm tightened around hers and he drew her against his chest, burying his face in the crook of her neck.

“I have to go, Aria. I love you.”

He reluctantly drew his arms away, and she cupped his face in her hands, her gaze traveling over the tiny laugh lines at the corners of his amazing eyes, down the scar that lined his face, and back to the soft curves of his lips. She pressed a kiss to them, and then backed away.

The Council members herded them towards the circle. Tessa stood in the center, waiting. Everyone gathered around the edge, waiting. Haemon stripped off his shoes and strode to the center.

Lukas turned to Aria, pulling her close. He kissed her and then kissed his palm, resting it over her belly button. Tears clogged her throat. His lips returned to hers once more, then he walked away.

Ella pressed a handkerchief to her palm, and Aria mopped her face with the square of cloth.

Tessa raised one hand. "When I exit the circle, you may begin. Remember, do not step outside the boundaries before the end."

Backing quietly away, Tessa stepped gingerly over the edge of her marks, muttering something. The circle pulsed and settled. The two men sized each other up. Lukas appeared to have the advantage; he was several inches taller, and broader of chest and muscle. But he'd been hurt, and running for an unknown time. Aria clasped her hands, her arms shaking in an effort to appear nonchalant.

She could not say Haemon was without skill. She'd seen him fight, and despite his smaller size, his muscles were as chiseled as Lukas' and had the advantage of a good meal and entire day's rest.

"How would you prefer to do this, Lukas? As men, as wolves, or both?" Haemon had dropped all pretense of politeness.

Lukas gave a curt nod. "Your choice, *Challenger*."

## Chapter 32

Haemon's body shifted, his face lengthening, canines dropping down under his lips. The sound of ripped clothes struck the air, their ruined garments fell to the ground. Lukas' eyes glowed in the reflected moonlight.

Snarling, Haemon lunged, his jaws snapping dangerously close to Lukas' throat. The Council and pack guards moved closer to the circle. Lukas dug claws into Haemon's arms. First blood. Thaddeus and Lawrence howled their approval next to her.

Aria felt Ella's presence behind her. Uncurling her hands, she fumbled in the darkness, catching Ella's fingertips and squeezing.

Lukas latched onto Haemon's shoulder when he was too slow to spin out of the way.

"Now," Aria whispered, squeezing and releasing Ella's hand. She resisted the urge to turn and watch her retreat into the shadows. She focused again, and lurched when Haemon's paw ripped a line down Lukas' chest.

Lawrence grabbed her elbow. "It's a flesh wound, Aria."

She nodded. His blood seemed too real, too bright in the moonlight. Her toes were at the edge of the ring, and she ached to help. Around the rim of the circle, the others crowded close, focused on the combatants. Lukas and Haemon circled, both bleeding. With a feint and a lunge, Lukas and Haemon crashed to the ground, snarling and snapping, rolling so close, Aria could have touched Lukas' back.

She was so intent on Haemon's claws buried in Lukas' shoulder blade, she missed the glance he sent her way. His large paw flexed, releasing Lukas and slamming into her chest. Blackness cracked the edges of her vision, and she struggled to get her breath back. Blue light flickered on Thaddeus and Lawrence's features where they crouched above her.



She heard Aaron call an end to the Challenge. Lukas roared and surged forward, but stopped from helping her by the group of Council guards that tackled both him and Haemon.

Aria sat up, Lawrence supporting her back. Thaddeus looked around suddenly. "Where is—?"

Aria dug her fingers into Thaddeus' ankle. He glanced down suspiciously. She shook her head, and he swallowed the rest of his statement.

Jonas stepped between the two combatants. Aria knew he would be making the pronouncement of a stalemate and both Haemon and Lukas' deaths. He never got the chance. Haemon's face lit with a mad light. His muscles bunched and moved quickly, tossing the guards around him like sacks of garbage. One swipe of his paw silenced Jonas permanently.

The guards holding Lukas were stunned, they didn't move until it was too late. Haemon sank his teeth into Lukas' neck. Aria screamed, struggling to sit up. Pain lanced through her side, her ribs grinding at the sudden movement. Suddenly, Ella crouched in front of her, pressing a small silver bowl into her hands. One side was missing a piece.

"Help me up." She couldn't help her fury.

Everything around her ran in slow motion. Haemon's jaws relaxed slightly, and he released Lukas, tossing him to the side. His form wavered, and he strode, naked and covered in blood toward her.

She jerked the necklace from her neck, allowing the silver chain to pool uselessly at her feet. Her fingers gripped the piece tightly as Haemon approached, victory lighting his features.

"Give me the chalice, Aria. Only I can make it whole. Only I can control it."

His wildness went beyond mere madness. Aria fingered the cup in her fingers. Moonlight filtered through the crowd gathered, boosting her waning spirits. She could see Lukas' form on the ground over Haemon's shoulder. Her heart ached, unable to make out if Lukas was still breathing.

Terror, sadness and anger caught her by surprise and a sob escaped. She forced herself to look at what she held. The silver necklace had always channeled her power—enhanced it. The bowl in her hands, made of silver, cast with magic,

blood and the body of an ancient god made her power swell. It filled her and momentarily allowed her tight control over her emotions. Her skin glowed in the moonlight.

“Give it to me, Aria.”

She turned the chalice over in her hands. “I don’t think so, Haemon. I want you to watch, to see it when it’s completed. But you won’t touch it.”

“Stupid bitch. You have never been my match.” His muscles bunched as if preparing to spring at her. Aria’s smile made him pause.

“You’re right, you know.” She kept her tone conversational with effort. Her throat ached with the need to scream. “I have never been your equal. You could never match me, Haemon Thessangelos.”

She fitted the missing piece, her fingertips snapping it into the empty groove. Pushing at it with her magic, she waited for the fireworks, flames—anything. Except, nothing happened.

Haemon’s body hunched, and he snarled. He reached for the bowl. Thaddeus and Lawrence shot to her side, hands outstretched to stop Haemon.

Lukas’ fist swiped at him, blood spattering the bowl and Aria. She jerked. Haemon’s body slid to the ground, hands held out to her. A huge gash appeared across his neck and chest, his life slowly leaking to the ground. Lukas swayed behind him. Aria had to blink twice to understand the sight before her. Lukas hadn’t just delivered a killing blow. He’d somehow captured Haemon’s soul. It flickered in the moonlight like an old movie projection, caught in Lukas’ grasp.

A collective hush rose in the air. The spirit attached to Lukas’ hand did not move, but slumped just as his body did. Aria caught his gaze and he lifted his good shoulder. “When you die, you leave a little of yourself on the other side. It gives one unusual abilities.”

“Unusual?” she asked.

Her attention turned to the chalice. The glow surrounding her developed tendrils that swirled around the bowl like mist. She clutched at it, watching the spattered blood and magic soak into the crevices, solidifying the cracks. Soft oaths flew around her, but she watched Lukas. No one else mattered. No one dared come near; no one wanted to touch her. Her skin pulsed with magic,

glowing bright enough to light up the darkness around her. Cern should have been here long ago. She scanned the crowd then stopped at the image that met her eyes.

No one was prepared for the sight of the tall, muscular man, wearing leather pants and sporting a full rack of antlers. He took in the scene, a feral grin lighting his lips. The air around him vibrated with power. Aria's magic was a candle, to Cern's roaring fire.

When he passed by the Council members, Aria saw Tessa shrink into the crowd.

He stopped in front of them. One bare toe nudged Haemon's body, chest still rising and falling weakly. Blood coated the ground around him.

"You have my thanks, Aria."

Cern stretched out one hand. "You must willingly give me the chalice. I cannot take it from you."

Lukas dropped to one knee, a hand pressed to the gaping wound at his shoulder and neck. His body glistened with blood. He released his fist, and Haemon's spirit moved back to his body.

Aria's, tears clogged her throat. "Can you help him? Please?"

Cern shook his head. Aria's heart dropped to her feet, and she thrust the chalice into Cern's hand. Her body protested the quick movements as she hovered over Lukas, pressing her hands to the wound. His eyelids dropped to half-mast.

"You are beautiful in the moonlight," he whispered.

Hot tears coursed down her cheeks. "Don't you dare. I've already lost you once. I won't lose you, again."

Lukas' hand flopped awkwardly on her shoulder. His breath came in shallow, erratic puffs as if death clawed at him to break into his body.

"Please, Cern, there must be some way you can help."

His whisper was kind. "I don't have to. You have the power, and we know you have the will. Make him well."

Her attention returned to Lukas, not comprehending for a moment. The sight of her glowing hands on his body gave her an idea, and she went with it.

Gathering her power, she turned her energy on Lukas. She envisioned the power surrounding him, healing his injuries. He had to live. For a few moments, there was nothing. Then, slowly at first, and then faster, the glow covering her skin moved down Lukas' arm like shards of lightening, encasing both their bodies. He groaned as it struck his wounds. The magic flowed over him, brightening over the cuts and sores on his body. When it faded into his skin, shiny white scars winked at her.

Lukas' eyelids fluttered, and he struggled to sit up. Aria pulled his head to her shoulder, relief replacing the fear. Later she would think through all of this. She'd always assumed the necklace gave her power. Now she wasn't sure. But for the moment, they were both alive, and that was all she wanted. She looked back at Cern. "Thank you, Cern." A tired smile formed. "Or would you prefer Cernunos?"

He shrugged. "Whichever." The chalice shrunk in his large hand, and he dropped it in to a pouch, hanging from his waist. "I appreciate the help. This one"—he bent, locking fingers around Haemon's wrist—"has much to answer for."

Thaddeus, standing next to Haemon's body, was puzzled. "He's dead."

Cern's expression made Aria shiver. He stood up, a filmy image of Haemon in his grip. "Ever heard of the Wild Hunt, Thaddeus?"

Slowly, he nodded. His Adam's apple bobbed twice, and Ella burrowed under his arm. "You're making him a wraith?"

Cern turned to Aria. "What do you think? A fitting punishment?"

Aria tightened her hold on Lukas. A part of her shied in horror at anyone forced to trail along the Wild Hunt's procession of wraiths, phantoms, and hellhounds. The other part of her relished the idea of karma biting Haemon in his narrow spectral ass. "Who am I to argue with the Lord of the Hunt?"

Cern laughed. "You will make an interesting go of life. I will enjoy checking in on you."

"Checking in on me?"

"You and I are blood-bound, Aria. Your offspring will share that bond. I will be watching your family for many years to come."

It was a struggle to keep her expression neutral. She nodded. “Until the next time then.”

Cern tipped her chin up with one finger. “You’ve done me a great service, and I thank you. More than blood-bound, we are friends, Aria. Should you need my help, you have only to call.”

He rose, jerking on Haemon’s spirit until it ripped free of his body. The phantom’s eyes opened, took in Cern, and then noticed his own broken body. Aria wasn’t sure his cries would ever fade from her nightmares.

Lukas’ hand slid over her shoulder to cup her cheek, and she felt the full weight of his gaze on her. His touch made her heart soar. “You are full of surprises, Aria.”

She choked on the bubble of laughter that threatened to break free. “That’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

His mouth captured hers, his teeth nipping at her lower lip until she opened her mouth. His tongue swept inside, replacing her sadness with a smoldering desire that shot straight through her body and left her wanting.

A throat cleared overhead. Aria ignored it, returning Lukas’ kiss with vigor. A hand tapped her shoulder, and she finally moved away from him, glaring into Thaddeus’ amused face. Her scold died on her lips as she realized they sat in a circle of people, including a tall, dark skinned man who flashed Lukas a blinding grin.

Lukas gathered her close, mindful of her healing ribs, and cuddled her close. Tired and sore, she let him. She could be brave and independent some other time.

“Glad you could make it, Kemnebi.” Lukas seemed genuinely glad. Beneath her hands, his body relaxed a tiny bit.

The newcomer cocked his head and looked them over. “Believe me, it was most interesting.”

Aria couldn’t help her fascination. He was tall, maybe even taller than Lukas, and narrowly built. His eyes slanted upwards ever so slightly, and his face was long and finely featured. He brought to mind the image of a great cat—watchful and poised even when relaxed.

*You aren't too far from the truth. Kemnebi is the Head Councilor for the werecat Council. I asked him here to observe.*

Aria frowned. *We really need to work on our communication skills, Lukas.*

His gaze flicked from her stomach back to her face. *You really want me to elaborate on that one?*

She blushed and peeked a glance at Kemnebi. He winked at her. "You two are quite a pair."

Tessa stepped forward, her entire body quivering. Apparently, she did not like being any closer to him than necessary.

"This was a most unorthodox Challenge."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Aria muttered, rolling her eyes.

Tessa ignored her, though her frown deepened. "In light of the circumstances, the Council declares the requirements of the Challenge were met, despite many broken rules. Lukas MacLeod, you are free to True Mate with Aria, and you are both free to leave." She turned to Kemnebi. "Please tell the Great Council we will send a replacement for Jonas as soon as one is voted on."

Tessa fled as fast as her dignified walk would carry her. The other members of the Council, shell shocked, followed. Without even stop to gather their belongings, they quickly ordered the Council guards take charge of breaking down tents and packing.

Haemon's guards lifted his body and started to their own tents, leaving Aria, Lukas, and their pack with Kemnebi.

The larger man crouched, holding out his hands, palm up. "Will you allow me?"

"I would be honored," Lukas told him, gravely.

The other man started to remove Aria's hand from Lukas, and she balked. "What do you think you're doing?"

*He's a healer, Aria. Let him work.*

Kemnebi stopped, amusement curving the corners of his mouth. Aria tilted her chin and gave him her hand. "You'll excuse me, but it's been a very long year."

He laughed, an uplifting sound that made her feel better. Warmth tingled through her body as he went to work.

“She’s a good choice, Lukas.”

Aria sniffed. “*She* is glad you think so and appreciates the help.”

Kemnebi patted her hand and released her. “The babe is fine. Your ribs were nearly healed anyway. Good as new.”

He stood, and Lukas followed suit, helping Aria to her feet. She may have been healed, but she was also tired. Through their restored connection, Aria could sense the same in Lukas. He clasped hands with Kemnebi. “You’ll tell them what happened?”

“I will. It will be interesting to see how they handle things.” He bowed slightly to Aria, and turned. “Until next time, Wolf.” He stepped into the darkness of the woods and melted away.

Lukas tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers caressing her cheek. “How about we go home?”

Home. Her happiness made her cheeks ache. “I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

## **Epilogue**

Cernunos, Lord of the Hunt, Master of Beasts watched as Aria and Lukas walked hand-in-hand through the backyard. Aria glowed, a slender hand absently caressing her protruding belly. Lukas watched her as if the sun shone from her eyes. Maybe in his world it did.

With a sigh, he moved farther into the shade of the forest and drew the silver chalice from the pouch at his waist. He turned it in his hands, admiring the handiwork one last time. It was a shame, really, to destroy such fine work. With a mental shrug, he squeezed his hands around the metal, grinding the bowl to a fine powder. A breeze whipped up the grains in a light swirl and his eyes followed it to the sky.

Finally, one debt paid.



## ***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***

***Ellen Keener is a high school teacher by day and writer by night. She lives in rural Virginia with one cat and enjoys long walks on the beach, good books, and big drinks with little umbrellas.***

**Visit Ellen's website at:  
[www.ellenkeener.wordpress.com](http://www.ellenkeener.wordpress.com)**

# Steamside Chronicles

© 2010 Ciar Cullen

Emily Fenwick, formerly with the NYPD, is now the reluctant defender of 1890 New York. Unfortunately for Emily, who hates "the creepy stuff", she ignored her inner voice, went to a carnival in Central Park, and entered a Victorian tent in hopes a psychic would have some encouraging news about her woefully boring love life. The guarantee she received of meeting a tall, dark, and handsome stranger comes with a huge catch - he lives in an alternate dimension of the past.

Jack Pettigrew leads a quirky band of lost souls in a battle to save New York circa 1890. Nightmares have come alive and threaten to terrorize a fragile era. Jack leads the "punks," who have been sucked back in time through a vortex. Each has a fleeting memory of their own death—or near death—and must determine for themselves why they have been chosen for this mission. Is Steamside their Purgatory? Could an Egyptian obelisk in Central Park be the cause of the time rift, or is Emily herself to blame for the goblins, zombies, and other nightmarish scenes plaguing them?

If the Punks want to return to 2010, they must ensure there's going to be an 1891. If they conclude they're really ghosts, then it might be time to party like it's 1999.

## **Excerpt:**

Since the night I traveled to 1890, I've tried not to obsess over where I might have turned left instead of right, or not opened a door that should have stayed closed. Perhaps if I were a *Sex in the City* kinda girl, things would be different. I can't imagine ever chatting about shoes or my romantic escapades over mojitos. I don't think I've even had an escapade—aside from being thrown back in time. I don't drink mojitos, whatever they are.

It's not that I never had a boyfriend or alcohol, but the guys I met and beer were alike—you knew what you were getting into, and that the effects wouldn't last long. You

were best to combine the two. You could blame the sex on the booze and pretend you didn't care about the guy. A loathsome existence, I know. My theory was, a female cop's odds of meeting a straight, attractive nonfelon in New York were about as good as a large meteor dropping into the Hudson.

I went to Central Park on a hot August Saturday night fantasizing about a Tom Hanks *You've Got Mail* type guy strolling with his dog—not that I ever thought Tom Hanks was hot. Yeah, that's just how it worked out. I met a guy all right, and he's way hotter than Tom Hanks.

A few of my friends were moonlighting as security guards at a festival, so I had a good excuse to wander and mingle. New Yorkers love a feel-good event, especially in a year when a recession has a death grip on everyone's nerves.

I typically avoided festivals, carnivals, and oddities. I hate the stuff—freak shows, clowns, and carousels with their creepy music. The older I got, the worse it got, and I chalked it up to work stress manifesting in a weird way.

This event was full of the creepy stuff, it had an historical theme, a lot of Victorian stuff. I wandered alone for a while away from the crowds, hanging on a bench near the Needle, an Egyptian obelisk, watching the Ferris wheel lights twinkle in and out above the trees.

I finally grew bored and joined the throng. I strolled by one striped tent, intrigued by the vague smells of old lady, old liquor, and recently snuffed candles. Annalise Pettigrew's hand-lettered poster pronounced her purveyor of the finest crushed mummy for both cures and pigments; retrocognition, hypnotism, and séance for enhancing the understanding of the spirit world; proven herbal remedies for all disorders; and finally, soothsaying, with a specialty in questions of a romantic nature. The last one hooked me.

The woman was a hoax, I reminded myself, and wouldn't know anything about my future love life. But I was bored, a little desperate, and there were worse ways to get gypped out of a twenty.

*Ha.*

Expecting an aging New Yorker with the voice of lifetime smoker, I had to force my mouth closed when I saw Miss Pettigrew, or Petti, as I call her these days. She was not only young and not a gypsy, but she looked a lot like an alternative Mary Poppins.

She sported a crisp white shirt and vest, a long black skirt, a pocket watch, and a little top hat. Her short hair stuck out in magenta and black points, like she stepped out of a Japanese cartoon. She smiled and patted the table with her black lace gloves in a merry fashion.

“Huh,” I managed. I surveyed the tent and wares—strange metal loops, dials, and gears soldered in complex configurations. It looked like an antique science lab gone awry.

“Huh, indeed! Are you enjoying the festivities, Miss Fenwick?”

She was good. Better than the chick at Coney Island who told me I’d be married with two kids by twenty-five.

“How’d you get my name?”

“Have a seat.” She pulled off her peculiar little round glasses and tucked them in her vest pocket.

*Here it comes, I thought. Cough up a twenty. Buy a crystal.*

“The name on your badge. That is your badge? Emily Fenwick.”

Miss Pettigrew giggled, dimples popping into life on her rosy cheeks. She was cute, I had to admit. I don’t think I was ever cute, not even as a toddler, so she’d already pissed me off.

“Yeah, it’s my badge. Aren’t you clever?”

“You are ‘moonlighting’, as they say?”

“No, I’m not working tonight. I got the badge so I wouldn’t have to pay to get in.”

“Are you able to use firearms? You can handle yourself in a prickly situation?”

“I’m a cop. How prickly are we talking?” *What the hell?* Perhaps it was the woman’s attempt at sounding mysterious or foreign. Maybe she was a theater student. I wasn’t going to tell her how well I could shoot, that my father had resigned himself to turning his daughter into his son by taking her to the range. No, Detective Fenwick, retired NYPD, never got over having a girl. I probably joined the force as a kind of penance. That my mom nearly died giving me life and couldn’t have more children, cemented the disappointment.

“Shall we get right to it, then? I’ve prepared a few questions to help guide us.” She pulled out a leather bound notebook, flattened it open to a fresh page, and dipped her quill pen in a bronze inkwell.

“How much to get you to predict I’m going to meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger?”  
*Wow.* I generally wasn’t so upfront about my sad personal life. Something about Miss Pettigrew was bringing the pathetic out into the open.

She met my eyes without offering an answer. Her stare chilled me. I was tempted to call off the reading, but didn’t want her to think she intimidated me. The things we do to avoid the judgment of complete strangers. *God, to have that moment back.* Would I do anything differently?

# **Heart's Sentinel**

**© 2010 by PJ Schnyder**

**Born human, Mackenzie never wanted to be a shapeshifter. After a shifter stalks and brutally Changes her, she runs to the jaguars of River Gap pride for protection from the stalker still searching for her, to come to terms with the attack and learn to control her new, powerful cougar body.**

**Adam, a River Gap Sentinel, is assigned as her guard and mentor. Well aware of his strength and how new she is the shapeshifter world, he holds himself back from the flames of primal desire she ignites. But, to survive the stalker, they both need to first battle their pasts and learn what it truly means to be the sentinels of each other's hearts.**

## **Excerpt:**

Adam knew every jaguar in River Gap Pride, and the woman who walked through the door wasn't one of them. He'd have remembered her sweet face framed in shoulder length hair, so dark a brown it shone black indoors. She must be new in town, come to stay in pride territory.

Pausing in the entryway to the dojo, her dark chocolate eyes scanned the foyer. When he approached, she tensed as if poised to bolt, but squared her shoulders and faced him anyway. Used to taming wild things, her response didn't bother him.

He gave her his friendliest smile. "Hi there, here for classes?"

People didn't get wilder than shapeshifters, and a fellow shifter stood before him. His inner beast growled, her scent exciting things deep inside his core. And yet, she had a newness about her, an awkwardness he associated with teens growing into their maturing bodies, even though she moved with more grace than any human.

“Yes.” Her answer came in a quiet, wary voice. “I was interested in beginner martial arts classes.” The melodic timbre sent shivers down his spine. “I spoke to Jacob. He told me my father and I would be expected.”

With those words, Adam knew her. His beast surged inside his skin, drowning him in the need to protect.

And, she needed protection. It was why she’d come to River Gap Pride.

An older man stepped in behind her, bearing a strong family resemblance, his dark skin weathered brown as opposed to her golden tan. His hand, worn with honest work and slightly wrinkled with age, came to rest on her shoulder. He looked around the school, nodding to himself in response to some inner dialogue. The girl remained motionless under the man's touch, watching Adam, and it seemed her dark gaze saw right through to the violence just under his surface.

Adam struggled to control it, knowing she had every right to caution. “Is this your father?”

She gave a slow nod. Adam focused on the way the silken ends of her hair brushed against the corner of her mouth. His beast, redirected, wondered if her hair felt as soft as it looked. He clamped down on his reactions, wondering why meeting one girl could throw his control off so badly. He didn't have time for it. She needed his protection from the bastard who had put the bruised look in her eyes, the reason she’d come here in the first place.

“Nick Sunton.” Her father held out a hand, shifting Adam's attention to him, and Adam shook it without hesitation. For a human, the older man gripped not only firmly, but strong.

He nodded. "I'm Adam, an instructor here at the school."

"You look young to be an instructor." Not a challenge but a straightforward statement of fact.

Adam grinned. He already liked the old man. Nick approached with no nonsense and got direct to the point, dominant for a human. "I grew up in town, taking classes here. It was a natural progression, becoming an instructor. I'm the youngest, but I know everything we have to teach."

Nick grunted. Whether in acceptance or a dismissal, Adam couldn't be sure.

The young woman glanced at her father for a long moment and then introduced herself, her voice still full of caution. "I'm Mackenzie."

She gave him an equally firm handshake, but he couldn't ignore the fine tremor running through her arm as she forced herself to grasp his hand. He released her as soon as she began to withdraw. His inner cat raged, wanting to find the person who'd brutalized her and do the monster mortal damage.

Instead, he forced a cheerful smile, tucking away his ferocity with the ease of long practice. "Why don't we step into the office for more privacy?"

Wariness never left her eyes, but she followed her father into the office at Adam's direction. Adam gave her space as he followed them in, not wanting to make her fight the natural reluctance to let another predator behind her. If she had been born a shapeshifter, and not made, she might not have let him behind her at all.