



TRUSTED BOND

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For Dad.

Everyone should have one like him.

Glossary

Aset	The appointed mate of a semel in the event of the death of their reah. An aset can only be chosen, made, by a reah.
Beset	Companion of a reah
Khatyu	The soldiers of a semel
Maahes	Prince of a tribe, the emissary of the semel
<i>Maat</i>	Balance, harmony, correct action
Phocal	Leader of the Shu cats, an elite group of werepanthers that serve the Priest of Chae Rophon
Reah	True mate of a semel
Semel	Tribe leader
Semel-aten	Tribe leader of the werepanther capital city of Sobek
Semel-re	Tribe leader blessed with a true-mate, a leader who has found his reah
Sheseran	Mate of a sheseru
Sheseru	(Flail) Enforcer of the tribe, guardian of the mate of the semel
Sylvan	(Crook) Teacher of the tribe, counselor to the semel
Taurth	A yareah who has been cast aside because a semel found his true-mate.
Wosret	An unmated reah claimed by the semel-aten as a concubine.
Yareah	The mate of a semel that is chosen, not their true-mate

Chapter One

EVERYBODY has a favorite season. Mine is summer. Certainly our love affair first began when I was a child and three months of vacation with nothing to do but get into trouble was irresistible. But as I grew, I realized that during those long hot days of June, July, and August, there were no expectations of me. There was always time, when summer was over, to get my life in order, prepare for school, the new year, whatever was to come. In summer anything was possible.

Lifting my head, I stopped a minute from crossing the parking lot to savor the warm night breeze as it danced over my skin. The town where I lived, Incline Village, north of Lake Tahoe, was never too hot and just one of the many reasons I loved my home.

Six months ago, I would have never thought that I would be calling any place home ever again, but that was before I met Logan Church. In such a short time I had gone from being an outcast to being the mate of a semel, or tribe leader, and being part of a tribe again.

I was born both a werepanther and a reah. Had I also been born a woman, then my life would have made sense, but as it was, my road had been a rocky one. Reahs only mated with semels, and as semels were only ever male, the only mate I could conceivably have would be a man. While what I was had always made sense to me, as men, not women, had always been what mesmerized me, the tribe I grew up with, as well as my family, had quickly decided that I was an abomination. Having been cast out at sixteen, it had been me and my best friend Crane alone without a place to call home until I had met Logan Church, my mate.

Now, as a recognized reah, my life was no longer simply me and my best friend Crane, but instead about my mate and his family and my new

tribe. I was still reeling, still overwhelmed, buried under a landslide of obligations and protocol and demands on my time. It was daunting and had become even more so in the past week. I had no idea how I was even going to begin to explain events to my mate.

I let the scent of wildflowers, the faint trace of the lake, and the charcoal burning close by distract me from my thoughts. The smells drifted around me as I resumed my walk. Lazy days of summer were aptly named; I wanted to lounge in a hammock somewhere and forget all about the events of the past week. I waved when my name was called by different members of my team yelling goodnight. It was nice that they had all missed just seeing my face. Managing a restaurant was hard work, but what made it worth it was the people, and mine were some of the best. When my phone rang, I debated whether or not to answer it, seeing that the call was from home, but went ahead anyway.

“Hello?”

“Jin.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I stopped walking, frozen there beside my Jeep, just the sound of the man’s voice sending a wall of heat through me.

“Jin?”

“Logan... you’re home.” I exhaled, my voice quavering. “When did you get home?”

“You don’t sound pleased.”

I was and wasn’t all at the same time. “No, I’m glad. I’m just surprised; I thought you said it would be ten days, but it’s only been seven.”

“I can’t come home early?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“So you’re glad I’m home.” He sounded uncertain.

“Of course I am,” I said quickly, “but when did you—”

“Just a few minutes ago. Mikhail and I, we...” He was distracted; something he was looking at was drawing his attention. “Where are you?”

What to say?

“And where is everyone? The house is empty. Mikhail and I get home and there’s nobody around? How is that even possible?”

With twelve people living in one place, eleven now that Simone had officially moved out to get married—mated—the expectation was that at least one person would have been there when the man got home from his weeklong trip to New York. That there had been no one there to greet him had to have been weird.

“I want to see you.”

There was the underlying command in his voice, but he had not phrased it as an order, which, thankfully, allowed me to ignore it. I was relieved, because there was no way I could see him in the state I was in. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I can be home in a couple of days, but—”

“A couple of days?”

“Yeah. You said you were gonna be gone, so I wanted to make sure I was too, and now I’m locked into plans I can’t get out of.”

“Why would you want to leave home? You love being at home.”

And he was right—I did. Having been homeless for so long, outside of work, it was where I could normally be found.

“Jin, what’s going on?”

“With what?” I asked lightly.

“What plans do you have that you can’t change?”

“Logan—”

“Who are you with?”

I cleared my throat. “No one.”

His silence was long, like he was thinking. “Jin.”

I had planned to think up my story that evening; I wasn’t prepared yet. I was toying with telling him that I had to go to Vegas for my boss or something along those lines. The idea of lying to my mate hurt to consider, but the alternative, the truth, was no better.

“Jin?”

“I’m here.”

“What the hell is going on? Where is everybody, and why the hell don’t you want to see me? I’ve been gone for an entire week; didn’t you miss me at all?”

I had missed him way too much, which had basically been the cause of the entire problem, from what Abbot had said.

“Jin... love.” His voice softened, husky with feeling. “Why don’t you want to see me?”

“I do... I so do,” I hedged. What was I supposed to say? “I just don’t want you to see me until I look good.” Which was basically the truth, just not the whole truth.

“You always look good.”

It was nice that he thought so, but I didn’t always look good, and now, even worse, I was battered and bruised and still healing. As I was a werepanther, I strengthened after being hurt much faster than an average person, but there had been a lot of blood and cuts, and I still looked pretty bad. I had told everyone at work that I was in a car accident, and when I had showed up at the restaurant just to post the schedule and pass out paychecks, they were not sure I should have been out of bed. Had I told them the truth, that I was breaking up a fight between two werepanthers, they would have looked at me like I was crazy.

“Are you at work?”

“I’m actually just leaving,” I said, because I was, in fact, going to be driving away from the restaurant where I worked in the next few seconds. “I’m going to my friend Eddie’s to—”

“Jin.” He cut me off. “I—what is going on?”

I was silent, because the conversation was headed in a bad direction. I could not be ordered home.

“Jin?”

Crap. “I thought I had more time.”

“More time for what?”

I couldn’t say that I was trying to save a man’s life.

“Jin?”

I let out a deep breath. “You’re gonna be really pissed.”

"I'm already pissed," he snapped at me, "because you're not talking to me and you're trying to hide things from me. I'll ask again—what the hell is going on?"

"See... it's not Abbot's fault."

"What?"

"I mean it is but—"

"I don't—Abbot George? The sheseru Yuri's training from Kellen's tribe?"

On the request of Kellen Grant, another semel, the leader of a werepanther tribe, Logan had agreed to have his sheseru, his enforcer, Yuri Kosa, mold another. Kellen's sheseru had been killed during a menthuel, or honor challenge, and so his brother, the next in line, became the new tribe enforcer. Abbot George had been with us a month when Logan left to attend Simone's mating ceremony in New York.

"Jin?"

"Sorry, what?"

"Focus."

I was trying to, but it was just hard. I was too worried about what was about to happen, and the man's voice was doing things to my stomach. Fluttery, rolling, twisting things that were not altogether bad. I had missed him like crazy.

"Jin!"

I moaned because he'd yelled and reminded me that he was the dominant in our relationship. He was the semel, leader, and I was his mate. The ache of need pooled in my groin.

"What's wrong? Tell me."

His voice was deep and growly, and my thoughts roamed to the last time I had been in bed with him. He had wanted to tie me down, and I had let him. The bindings had been his silk dress ties, but they had held me because we both allowed them to, both of us wanting the fantasy.

"Jin?"

"Missed you," I whispered.

"Me too." He told me gruffly, his voice deep and low. "Honey, what's going on?"

Lost in the sound of his voice, my body's yearning for him, the craving I felt down deep, I almost tipped my hand. I cleared my throat, pulled myself together. "Logan, I—"

"You're talking about Abbot George, right? The guy Yuri is training?"

Was training.

"Jin?"

"Yeah," I said solemnly.

There was a pause as understanding hit him. "What did he do?"

"It was a mistake."

"What was?"

"Just keep in mind that it was a mistake."

"Jin, so help me if you—"

"I'm fine."

"Why wouldn't you be fine?" His voice hardened. "What are you try—"

"It was a mistake."

"You said that already. What the hell happened? Just tell me."

I winced because I heard how icy his tone was. "Okay, so I guess because I was missing you and because I'm your reah and—"

"Christ, this is like pulling teeth! Just tell me what the fuck happened!"

He wasn't mad at me, and I knew that, but still, he was irritated. "The pheromones," I sighed. "I didn't even realize I was... but Abbot said it was like I was in heat."

"Abbot said." His voice dropped low, going deadly still.

I made a noise in the back of my throat.

There was a shuffling noise, muffled, and then, "Jin."

Mikhail's calm voice washed relief all over me. Him, I could talk to. The sylvan of our tribe, the teacher, the counselor, he was a constant source of sound reason and strength. Confessing to Mikhail was something everyone did, and I was no exception. "Hi." I smiled widely, the deep sigh coming up out of me. "How was your trip?"

There was a deep male grunt. "I will tell you all about New York when I see you, but first I need to know what went on here. My semel demands it, and so do I. Why are you not in your home, my reah, and where is your sheseru?"

I thought a minute about what to say.

"Just tell me."

But it had all happened so fast. One minute I was in the kitchen making spaghetti, and the next I had turned to find Abbot George, the sheseru in training, the panther from Kellen Grant's tribe of Selket, standing in front of me. As the reah of my tribe, the mate of the leader, he should not have been allowed to be alone with me, but in my own home, my rules were lax. If you were in my house, I trusted you.

"Hey." I smiled at him. "How's the training going with Yuri? You think you still wanna be a sheseru, or you gonna give up?"

His eyes narrowed as he closed in on me. "My semel, Kellen Grant, he took for his mate a yareah, a woman he picked himself, not a reah that was destined for him from birth. He does not have a true-mate. He doesn't have a reah."

"Sure," I agreed, tipping my head back at the stove. "The spaghetti's not as good as Logan's mom makes, but it's okay. You want some?"

He didn't answer, instead moving in closer, pressing me back, crowding up against me.

"Abbot?"

"A true sheseru is meant to be the enforcer of the semel and the protector of a reah, is he not?"

"A sheseru does as his semel demands," I clarified for him. "Could you maybe step—"

"I read the law. A sheseru is a reah's champion."

"If the tribe has a reah," I corrected him. "If there is no reah, then—"

"A sheseru is lost without a reah."

"No, they just guard the yareah instead...." I couldn't concentrate; I was wary and on edge. "Could you maybe... could you step back just a little," I suggested, certain that he had no idea how uncomfortable he was making me.

"A sheseru is meant to be the protector of a reah," he said flatly, encroaching further.

“Stop,” I said gently but firmly.

“I thought it was the same,” he said, his voice dropping low, his fingertips grazing the side of my neck. “Reah or yareah... I had no idea there was any difference until I came here.”

“Abbot.” I said his name as two men I had never seen in my life walked into the kitchen.

“What are you—”

“It’s not the same. A reah is... a miracle, and after being here, with you, a true reah, I see and feel the difference. I must remain here, at your side; Logan must accept me and banish Yuri.”

He was out of his mind, and before his hand could close around my throat, I stepped back the final amount of room I had, bumping into the counter behind me. “Yuri is Logan’s sheseru and will be for as long—”

“Since Logan’s been gone, it’s like you’re in heat,” he whispered, and I saw how huge his pupils were, marked the shudder that ran through him. I wondered vaguely where Yuri was. “I think a sheseru cares for their reah in all ways when the semel is gone.”

There was almost no white at all, just big, dilated eyes swallowing me. It was creepy, almost scary, and what the hell did the *all ways* comment mean?

“I think you need me.... Your body cries out for mine.”

Who talked like that? “You should go watch some TV in the living room,” I suggested softly, watching him, the hair on the back of my neck standing up as I glanced at the other two men. “And take your friends with you, unless they want something to eat first.” I was working hard to keep my tone neutral, calm, and upbeat.

“I have never wanted a man before,” he confessed, his voice dropping low. “But neither have I ever seen a man who looked like you, Jin Rayne.”

I went cold. And not because I was scared. I was furious. How dare he treat Logan this way? How dare he violate the sanctity of his home? I was the mate of the semel, completely untouchable, and now this man thought to claim me? My mate was the strongest male panther I had ever come across, and this man thought he could usurp him? Take me? He presumed to think I needed anything more than my mate? It was obscene.

“Get out of my house,” I ordered, my voice cold, hard.

“Reah.” He cut me off before he lunged at me, knocking the plate from my hands as he grabbed my face and yanked me forward. His mouth was on mine, his tongue forced between my lips as he bent me backward over the counter.

I pushed and fought, but he was so much bigger and stronger than me, his hands everywhere as I managed to dislodge his mouth from mine. “Stop,” I rasped out, trying so hard not to yell, terrified for him, for the transgression he was committing. I had gone from anger to fear for his life in seconds. I could have shifted and gotten away easily, but if anyone saw me they would wonder why I needed to be in my panther form in my own home. What would prompt me to shift into my animal? Why would I need to fight? And as soon as the question arose, my sheseru, Yuri Kosa, would kill them. So I didn’t want anyone else to see us or hear us. But the second the others put their hands on me, though, I forgot about their safety.

The kitchen table was cleared and I was slammed down onto it face-first, my arms stretched out, held tight. Strangers held my wrists firmly as Abbot shoved his groin against my tailbone, his hands on my belt buckle, fumbling to get it off. I had originally thought there were only three men, but now, clearly, I realized my error. There were four.

I had no choice. Like liquid I shifted through their fingers, my body transforming in the blink of an eye from man to panther. Gasps filled the room as I rolled to the floor, tangled in my jeans and shirt, freeing myself in seconds, happy that I had been barefoot. I had missed when Abbot’s reverence became obsession, but he had apparently missed my speed. I was so much faster than he thought, as evidenced by the fact that I was across the huge kitchen before any of them could track me with their eyes.

“Reah,” Abbot breathed out even as he began tearing at his clothes in a frenzy to get them off, to shift to his panther form.

“Let’s go,” one of the other men yelled at him as another bolted toward the back door.

It was my speed. It was scary to watch anything change that fast.

“Abbot!”

But he was in the midst of his shift from man to animal.

“You said he wanted it! You never said he would fight you!” the stranger in my kitchen shouted as he abandoned his friend, fleeing fast, disappearing out the back door into the night.

“Jin, where are... you...”

Yuri's appearance in the kitchen stole my choice to flee and left me no option but to run to him, to shield him from the attack he would never have seen coming.

Even though I was twice the distance from Yuri that the other cat was, I made it before Abbot could and slammed him down under me to the floor, preventing Abbot from burying teeth and claws in the chest of my sheseru. But in my hubris at my own speed, I missed his. When he twisted back and buried his fangs in my side, it felt as though I had been punched and stabbed at the exact same time.

Heat spread through my side, and because I was momentarily dazed, the headbutt that followed knocked me back to the floor. Razor-sharp claws tore at my side, and I realized that the spray of blood was mine. I heard Yuri's roar of fury, saw his clothes rain down on me, torn from his body so he could shift.

I was in the middle of their fight, and having lost blood, I was not as strong or fast as I was normally. My body was torn and ripped, tossed between two powerful panthers like a toy, trampled again and again, crushed and mauled before I was finally able to get my bearings enough to bolt free of the lethal tangle.

Looking at the two of them, watching how savage their attacks on each other were, I realized that they would fight to the death unless I parted them. I meant to bolt forward, but strong hands on the nape of my neck kept me from moving.

"Wait," Crane said from above me, my best friend's voice hard as he knelt down beside me. "You're bleeding," he cautioned me. "I think you're really hurt. Shift back so I can see."

But there was no time.

"Let him go, you idiot, before Yuri kills Abbot."

Crane rose beside me in one fluid motion as Markel, another panther, and his rival for the affection of Logan's sister Delphine, appeared on my right.

"Jin's the only one fast enough to get between them without getting hurt."

"He's already hurt!" Crane roared back at him. "And I don't give a shit if Abbot dies. He's dead anyway."

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Markel yelled, shoving Crane hard so his hands were torn from me. “We’re responsible for his safety while he’s here. You think his semel’s just going to accept that he was hurt in Logan’s house? Use your head!”

Crane flew at Markel without answering, and both men went down in a tangle of arms and legs. When they both sprang to their feet seconds later, tearing at their clothes, I shifted back and screamed for them to stop and help me. Or I tried to—what came out was a strangled version of my voice. I had to grab for the counter to keep from dropping to my knees. Turning my head, I saw Crane and Markel fly at each other in their panther forms, meeting in a frenzy of bloodlust, claws, and teeth, both in a murderous rage. It had started out as being about me for Crane, but now he had the chance to slaughter his rival. He would make the best of his opportunity; the animal that lived inside of him demanded it. When my eyes flicked from them back to Yuri, who was being attacked by Abbot and another panther, I saw what my sheseru did not.

Shifting to panther form, I darted around the room and dived onto Yuri’s back, pounding him down hard, flat on the floor under me, shielding him from the attack of the third panther. Teeth were buried in the back of my neck as claws were driven into my side. Sharp, searing heat washed through me as the panther and I rolled off Yuri and I was thrown into the stove. Abbot’s teeth missed my jugular by a fraction, but he was wrenched away before he could complete the second strike. Yuri was there, keeping him off me, even as the other panther hooked his claws deep into my back. The pain was like a pulse of electricity running through me, constant, swelling. The bite into my shoulder, hard and piercing, made me howl in pain.

The shudder tore through me as my head smacked the floor hard, everything swimming around me for a second before the weight lifted and was then gone. Turning my head, I saw a man lying beside me on the floor, his throat torn out. That fast, the moment he died, he had shifted back. In death, the form of the man was revealed.

Yuri was suddenly above me, his gold fur washed with blood. I understood I was looking at my savior even as I panicked. Where was Abbot? Where was the other panther? One had bolted before the fight, one was dead, and that left Abbot and another alive. When Yuri leaped away, I had my answer. I watched two panthers bolt through the swinging kitchen door ahead of him at the same time Crane tossed Markel through the bay

window Logan had put in just a month before. They had fought on, oblivious to my life-and-death struggle, able to help at any time but neither having noticed. Further, they had managed to destroy something Logan Church loved. He had created a place in the kitchen just for him and me, a quiet nook, a refuge for us to have breakfast together, complete with a window to look out onto the woods. I cherished it for the thought that had been put into it, and now it was gone.

Shifting back now that the threat was gone, I found myself alone, naked, and trembling with pain as I struggled to rise. At that moment, I had been terrified. I was bleeding, and my body temperature was dropping fast. In those fleeting seconds, I was afraid I was going to die.

“Wait.”

I wasn’t sure when I had started talking, when me remembering events in my head had translated into a monologue, but from the flat sound of Mikhail’s voice, I understood that I had said far too much.

“Let me understand,” he said, and in his tone was a stillness I had not encountered before. “You were attacked in your home by panthers from the tribe of Selket.”

“Four at first, three in the end, but... yeah,” I sighed.

“Does Kellen know?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“I left it to Logan’s father.”

“Why? You’re the reah.”

What could I say? “I had to... rest.”

“Rest,” he repeated. “You?”

“Yeah.”

“You heal faster than any panther I know.”

“Sure.” I cleared my throat, not wanting to trade specifics with him.

“Is he dead?”

“Who?”

“Abbot, of course.”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“Probably with Avery.”

“Avery? Avery Cadim? Christophe’s sheseru?”

“Yes.”

“Why? What does the tribe of Pakhet have to do with this?”

“Crane said that Abbot and the other guy—I don’t know his name—took refuge with Avery in Reno and asked for sanctuary until their semel arrived. I have no idea where the third one is. He ran away before anything happened.”

“Wait. Kellen Grant is coming here?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t—” He stopped himself abruptly, and I knew the reason was because he didn’t want to yell at me. “Where is Yuri?”

“I sent him up to the mountains with Ivan and the other khatyu to hunt.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want him leading a hunting party onto Christophe’s land.”

“It would be his right as sheseru of this tribe to hunt down and kill the man who dared to put his hands on—”

“I don’t want that.”

“I don’t care. Abbot’s life is forfeit to Logan. Jin, you—”

We both heard the roar at the same time. Without even the benefit of an explanation, I knew that Logan had gone into the kitchen and seen the destruction.

“Mikhail.” I sighed as I got into the Jeep and started it up. “Just tell Logan that I’ll call him in the morning and—”

“Jin—oh, wait...”

I knew better than to wait. I hung up instead. If Logan ordered me home, commanded me as the semel of my tribe to appear before him, then I had no choice but to go. I was his reah, his mate, and his word was law. His dominion over me, over all of us, was absolute. But if I didn’t actually

talk to him, then I didn't have to do what he said. It was cowardly, but it would work.

Six months ago, my world had been turned upside down when I met the leader of the tribe of Mafdet, Logan Church. Panthers, cats, did not mate for life with the exception of the leader of the tribe, and then only if, or when, they found their mate. Their true-mate. Their reah.

The chance of a semel finding his reah was very slight, so slight in fact that perhaps one in a million ever even saw one. I certainly had never thought, when I made the first trip up the mountain from where I worked in Kings Beach to Logan's home in Incline Village, that the second I saw the man my heart would be his. It turned out that everything I had thought about love and commitment and belonging was wrong. Being in love made you strong, not weak, and belonging to one man made me feel like I could fly. But there were problems, differences that needed to be ironed out as well as other situations that came from those around me.

I needed time to figure out what I was going to do about the love triangle in the house. Delphine, Logan's sister, could not seem to decide between my best friend, Crane Adams, and the former sheseru of the tribe of Menhit, Markel Kovac. Delphine needed to choose which man she would accept courtship from, handfast with, and eventually, if they fell in love, mate with. It could not go on as it was, clearly. My home would not survive. Already my bay window was destroyed; I could only imagine what would be next.

Personally, I didn't understand her hesitance to tell Markel that Crane was her choice. There was no comparison between the two men. Markel was brooding and dark, cold and abrupt, Crane the exact opposite, warm, loving, and kind. The man lit up a room just by walking into it. It didn't hurt that Crane was beautiful to look at as well. Markel was smaller with less muscle, leaner. I found nothing appealing about the man at all, but apparently Delphine did. Not that I had bothered to look; I barely even saw him.

When my phone rang as I drove toward my friend Eddie's apartment, I realized that I was looking at Crane's number on my display. I really needed to give everyone a ringtone so I wouldn't need to check anymore, but it was so far down on my to-do list that it was doubtful that I would ever have the time.

“Hey,” I greeted him, uneasy, irritable, wanting more than anything to see Logan, be wrapped in his arms. “I’m so glad you’re finally calling—where are you?”

He ignored my question. “You sound upset.”

“Where are you?” I repeated.

“I’m at home,” he grouched at me, “and you’re not.”

I let out a huff of laughter. I couldn’t help it. “You picked today to show up?”

“Shit.”

“That’s kinda funny,” I grunted. “The timing, I mean.”

“I know what you mean.”

“You leave and blow me off for a week and don’t—”

“I didn’t blow you off! I felt—feel like a fuckin’ idiot. I’m supposed to be your best friend, and even more importantly—I’m your man. I’m beset of a reah, and when it came down to it, did I protect you? Was my concern for you? Fuck no, the only thing I cared about was trying to kill Markel. You could have bled to death on the floor in the kitchen, and I would have never even known. I never even checked on you. If Yuri hadn’t been there... if Russ hadn’t been home to feed you and get the water in you and—”

“It’s fine,” I said, cutting him off. “I don’t care about any of that. I just want you to come home.”

“Wish granted,” he said sarcastically. “I’m home—where the hell are you?”

I chuckled. “You picked a bad day to show up, asshole.”

“Fuck.”

He sounded so miserable, I had to laugh.

“Jesus, I’m so sorry, Jin.” His voice came out as a rasp.

“I know you are, but if you could stop beating yourself up at this point and go back to being my friend, that would help. I need you not to whine like a little girl.”

“I—”

“If you could man up, that’d be good.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

I snorted out another laugh. “Better.”

We shared that comfortable silence that you only have with your best friend, where you never have to worry about talking.

“So, what?” he sighed after several minutes. “Are you on your way?”

“What?”

“Don’t do the ‘what’,” he grouched at me. “Just—are you almost here, yes or no?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Why?”

“I have my reasons.”

There was a longer silence the second time.

“What’s with you?” he asked perceptively. Having grown up with me, he knew me better than anyone, discerning all the different nuances of my voice as well as what my silences meant. “What’s wrong?”

“Logan’s home.”

He sighed heavily. “Yeah, I know that already.”

“He’s three days early.”

“And he’s pissed off. I just got here; Delphine and Markel were right behind me, and the second I set foot in the house, he was all over me. Mikhail’s in there grilling Markel right now.”

“Is Russ back yet?”

“Back from where?” He was confused.

“Never mind.”

“Where did Russ go?”

“LA,” I answered him.

“For what?”

“Job interview.”

“When was—”

“Is Domin there?” I asked, cutting him off.

“Yeah, he’s home from wherever the hell he was.”

I sighed deeply. This was my second concern—whatever was going on between the maahes of the tribe and Logan Church’s younger brother Koren.

Domin had returned from New York three months ago, while Koren had decided to stay there with Simone and be her chaperone until the mating ceremony. Knowing that Koren had never been particularly fond of her, I was surprised when he had offered. I grilled Domin when he arrived home, and before he left again to meet friends in Vegas, he had confessed that he and Koren needed time apart. He would not tell me any more, did not give me the reasoning for the imposed separation, but I could guess. Domin was not a patient man; I was certain that an ultimatum had been issued, and when there had been no instantaneous answer, Domin had gone ahead and jumped to a hasty, angry conclusion. I was certain that he had not even given Koren the benefit of the doubt, instead simply deciding the rest of his life based on Koren's introspection, on him just needing time to think. Silence had been interpreted as rejection instead of the reflection that it probably was. I had tried to get Domin to stay, to just be there and talk to me, but he was having none of it.

"Jin."

"Sorry, I was just thinking about Domin. How is he?"

"He's fine, he's Domin, just—where are you?"

"Logan's gonna be mad about the window," I said, changing the subject again.

"He's way more than mad, he wants Markel and me to pay for a carpenter to come out here and fix it."

"Which only makes sense," I agreed.

"It's a custom-made window, Jin."

"Yeah, I know."

"Whatever," he said, exhaling. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way to Eddie's."

"Eddie," he repeated. "Eddie.... You mean concierge-at-The-Lakehouse-Inn Eddie?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Cause if Logan sees me like—"

"Like what?"

I stopped talking, having forgotten for a minute that he hadn't seen me because I hadn't let him. Seven days ago, we had spoken briefly through a closed bathroom door that I had refused to open.

"Jin?"

I sighed deeply. "I'm a little torn up."

"Whaddya mean?" He yawned.

I tilted my head back and forth, thinking of how I was going to phrase it. "I might have been a little more hurt than I told you on Monday."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Just forget it."

"Jin." His voice was suddenly edged with worry. "How much more hurt?"

I made a small noise in the back of my throat.

"Jin." His voice dropped low.

"I'm fine."

"Shit. I knew I should've made you come out of the bathroom and show me."

"You're not my mother."

"No, I'm better than her," he snapped at me.

I couldn't argue. My mother had turned her back on me when she discovered I was gay; my best friend had not. "I'm fine."

"But I told Russ to call me if—"

"Russ had to go to LA," I explained to Crane. The future of Logan's youngest brother was as much a concern to me as Koren's love life. Both of Logan's brothers were precious to me.

"But he was going to make sure you ate and—"

"Nope," I said, smiling as I turned down another street. "It was just me and Yuri."

"But Ivan and Yuri went hunting. Ivan just got back right before Delphine and I did. He said that Yuri's gonna be back later to... night... to... oh, fuck me." He exhaled long and hard.

"It's fine."

"Oh shit."

I groaned as I parked the car in the lot.

“Lemme get this straight.” His voice was rising. “You sent Russ away to God knows where—”

“I didn’t send him anywhere. He had to go to LA for a job interview like I told you, don’t be so dramatic.”

“Jin!”

My grunt was infused with all the exasperation I felt.

“You sent him away, you fuck!”

“And if I did?”

“You sent Yuri up the mountain to the hunting grounds with Ivan and some of the others; you sent me to Delphine, sent Markel to talk to Christophe with Peter, Logan’s dad, and Domin was gone, and Logan was gone, and Mikhail and Koren were at Simone’s mating ceremony.... Who exactly took care of you? Eva?”

“No, Logan’s mom is still in Pittsburgh visiting her sister.”

“What the fuck,” he breathed out. “Jin, what’d you...? Have you been going to work?”

“Nope, I just checked in tonight. I called and told Ray I was in a car accident.”

His breath came out in small stutters. “You... Jin—”

“He doesn’t expect me back for a month now, since I already had the time off to go with Logan to the feast and—”

“Jin!”

“They all believed me,” I said with a smile. “Owen said I look like I got hit by a truck.”

“Holy shit,” he said, coughing. “Jin, does Yuri know he left you alone?”

“No,” I said as I got out of the car, locking it before heading toward the stairs across the parking lot. “I told Yuri that you were taking care of me.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I told you that Russ would take care of me, and I told Russ that Markel was, and I told Markel that Delphine was.”

“Oh fuck you, Jin! What kinda martyr bullshit is that?”

“It wasn’t like that. I just needed you all to calm down and not be around each other. It was all I could think of.”

“Why lie to Russ, though?”

“Because Russ was supposed to go to that recruiting conference in Los Angeles, and if he was home babysitting me, then he wouldn’t have gone.”

“Christ.”

“He needed to go; I want him to get the job he really wants.”

“Jin, are you... can you—”

“If Logan sees me like this, he might violate the territorial rules and hunt Abbot down on Christophe’s land. I’m not gonna be the cause of a war between two tribes for no reason.”

“How is that no reason? Christophe is responsible for—”

“Christophe was with Logan in New York at Simone’s mating ceremony. He had no idea what his sheseru did or didn’t do. And all Avery did was grant sanctuary to a pair of panthers; he didn’t know what they had done when he took them in. Now that Christophe’s back, once he talks to Avery, he’ll probably turn both panthers over to Logan, but I want him to have the opportunity to make that decision.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“If Logan trespasses on Christophe’s land—”

“No, I know, then he’s the one at fault even though he did nothing wrong.”

“Exactly.”

“But—”

“Logan and Yuri need to stay off Christophe’s land no matter what Avery did.”

“You are the mate of a semel, and you were attacked. I think you’re missing the—”

“But I’m fine. I’m just a little banged up.”

“Simply because you lived does not lessen the offense!” he finally yelled at me. “All of them—Kellen, Avery, Abbot... they have conveniently forgotten that you are the reah of your tribe! By law, Logan can kill them all!”

“You’re forgetting your law,” I sighed. “Only the semel pays for the crimes of his panthers unless there is an actual killing or rape; then and only then is the individual punished or killed.”

“Jin!”

“Crane,” I soothed him. “Abbot was—”

“Wait.”

But I was smarter than that and hung up before Logan’s voice came over the line and ordered me home. Moving fast, realizing that I had told Crane exactly where I was going and not wanting to talk to him, either, I took the stairs fast to Eddie’s apartment to pack my clothes and the few things I had in the bathroom.

Back in my Jeep, I decided to spend the night at a motel I knew in Truckee. I stopped to get some water because my body was still healing and so needed lots of fluids. As I was leaving the store, I was suddenly face-to-face with two of Yuri’s khatyu, his fighters, Isaac and Dmitry.

“My reah,” Isaac greeted me haltingly, his eyes huge.

“Reah.” Dmitry smiled sheepishly. “It’s good to see you.”

Shit.

“And you guys,” I said quickly, stepping around them to walk toward my Jeep.

“Reah!”

I turned and found another of Yuri’s men, Artem Varda, striding toward me. He was tall and muscular with dark brown hair and even darker eyes. He was Yuri’s second, second to the sheseru, and took his job, his position in the tribe, seriously. As he closed in on me, I noted that the facial hair that I was normally not partial to looked good on him. I liked his goatee and mustache; it went with the wavy brown hair that fell to broad shoulders.

I stood my ground as he approached me. There was no one else in the parking lot, or they would have never called me by my title but would have instead used my name.

“My reah,” Artem said reverently, stepping in front of me, taking a deep breath as he did it, inhaling my scent. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” I lied, making a move to walk by him.

He barred my path. “You don’t seem fine.”

My eyes flicked to his.

“You don’t smell fine.”

I forced a smile. “What are you guys even doing here?”

“We stopped for beer. It’s just chance that we ran into you.”

The town was small, I would give him that.

“Perhaps we should follow you home to make sure you’re safe.”

“Reah!”

We both turned at the cry, and Nico, yet another of Yuri’s men, was motioning to me at the same time he was leaning over into the car.

“He’s not breathing!”

I bolted over to him, and there in the backseat was a boy much younger than the rest of Yuri’s khatyu. He was maybe fifteen if he was a day. Bending down close, I inhaled deeply. He was, in fact, breathing, but he was passed out cold.

“Reah, should we—” Artem began.

“Where’s your house?” I asked, cutting him off.

“That’s my little brother, Roc—”

“Where’s your house?” I yelled at him. I hadn’t asked who the boy was.

“Mine is far, but—my mom’s house is right down the street. He lives with her.”

“Let’s go,” I said, getting in beside the unconscious boy.

No one questioned me; all four men just piled into the vehicle. Artem threw the car into reverse the second every door closed, gunned the motor, and peeled out of the parking lot, catapulting us out onto the street.

I didn’t say a word. He was terrified for his brother and didn’t need me yelling at him about how us getting killed was not going to help him. I stayed quiet instead, reassuring him with a squeeze of his shoulder that everything would be all right.

He covered my hand with his and held tight, letting me know that the comfort was both welcome and needed.

Chapter Two

THE Varda house was at the end of a cul-de-sac halfway up on Mount Rose, and people were out strolling, walking their dogs, and I could even smell barbeque as we all got out of the car and charged across the manicured lawn to the front door.

There was a party going on that we basically interrupted as we barged into the house. Artem pushed through the crowd of people, carrying his brother, forging a path for me, and I stayed no more than a step behind him. I took in vaulted ceilings, stairs that led to the second floor, and a sunken living room as we moved through it.

When we reached the bathroom, I had Artem sit down on the toilet with his brother in his arms as I turned on the hot water in the tub.

“Put him in,” I directed.

“But he’ll get burned,” he said, hesitating.

I shook my head. “He won’t. He’s a panther, and his body temperature will rise to match the water. Hurry up, ’cause I need you to get me stuff.”

“His name is Rocco,” he told me. “It’s a bad nickname that stuck.”

“Okay,” I soothed him. “Put Rocco in the tub. Trust me.”

He did as I asked and then left me to get the bottled water and bucket I needed.

“My reah!”

Turning to the door that had been thrown open, I saw a woman staring in at me. There was only one person she could be: mama.

“Close the door, Mrs. Varda,” I directed Artem and Rocco’s mother. “You’re letting the heat out.”

She came in and closed the door behind her, rushing to her son’s side as he slouched in the tub. Her hands were all over him before she looked over her shoulder at me with frightened eyes.

“He has alcohol poisoning,” I told her. “For us, as you know, the balance is even more precarious, because we need the water in our bodies to shift. As soon as his system realized that he couldn’t shift if he needed to, it shut down, and he passed out to conserve energy.”

“I had no idea that panthers could get alcohol poisoning, because normally we metabolize it so fast out of our systems.”

“It takes a lot,” I told her. “He must have just been putting it away all night.”

Her face was pained. “He’ll recover, my reah?”

“As soon as his blood heats,” I told her, “he’ll start throwing up, and he’s gonna be miserable.”

Her face lit. “He’s going to be sick?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling at her. “Very.”

“Oh thank you, my reah,” she breathed out. “Bless you.”

I gave her a reassuring smile as Artem came back into the room. Minutes later, Rocco started first to shake before his eyes sprang open and he leaned sideways and vomited. I had the bucket there ready as he brought up more alcohol than I had seen in quite some time.

He was so sick all he wanted to do was curl up into a ball and sleep, but I made him drink a gallon of water just to start.

“No,” he moaned, shoving Artem and his mother’s hands away. “No, no, no... just lemme sleep. Please, I just—”

“Rocco,” I snapped at him, hot and sweaty from being in the steam-filled bathroom. “Drink the water now.”

He looked up at me, knowing there was someone else there but not sure of my identity. When he realized who I was, who was there with him, his eyes got big and round.

“My reah,” he breathed out, trying to crawl out of the tub to get to his hands and knees. “I didn’t know it was—”

“Drink the water,” I told him. “Do as I say.”

“Yes, my reah.”

As he guzzled more water, Artem and his mother both crawled over in front of me and bowed low.

“If not for you knowing what to do, my reah,” Artem told me, “I would have—”

“It’s okay,” I told them, taking hold of both their arms, urging them to stand. “We just need to educate poor little Rocco here.”

The retching turned all our attention to the young man.

“I just wanna die,” he croaked out before heaving again.

I tried not to smile, but he reminded me of my best friend. How many times over the years had Crane said the same thing to me as I nursed him through alcohol poisoning?

Half an hour later, sitting on a chair beside Rocco’s bed, I passed him another small bottle of water and waited.

“I can’t drink any more water, my reah.”

I pulled my hair back from my face and looked at him.

“You’re hurt,” he said softly. “What happened?”

“Drink the water or I’ll have your sheseru come here and pour it down your throat.”

The threat of seeing Yuri Kosa worked. Rocco drank down the bottle, chugging it down as I watched.

“Reah?”

Looking up, I found Artem’s mother standing in the doorway with a tray of food in her hands.

“You look pale, reah,” she said, coming into the room, putting the tray with a hamburger, salad, and large glass of iced tea down beside me on the nightstand. “You should eat.”

“Thank you,” I said, releasing a deep breath. “What’s your name?”

“Alex,” she said, smiling at me. “Well, Alexandra, but Alex is best.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you again, Alex. I’m starved.”

She checked on her son, sat beside him, and stared into his face as she talked to him. It was nice to watch the parent-child interaction, see how worried she had been, and have it transformed right in front of me into overflowing love.

The conversation slowly broadened to include me, and I was told what an honor it was to have me in their home. In fact, there was an entire houseful of panthers who wanted to come in and see me, if I would allow it. There was no way to say no.

I left Alexandra in the room with her son, as he had to be watched, had to be reminded to keep drinking water until his body regulated itself and he could shift. Until he could, he had more water to drink.

“It has to be just plain old water?” he whined, looking up at me.

“Yep,” I told him, rising up out of my chair, slightly unsteady myself.

Rocco reached up and clutched my hand, and Artem was suddenly there to grasp my arm. I had not heard the large man come in.

“Maybe I should take you home, my reah.”

“No, I’m fine,” I assured him, turning to look down at Rocco and squeeze his hand gently. “You can drink whatever you want whenever you want, but you must always make sure that with any alcohol you drink, you drink the same amount of water. If you throw off the balance, you run the risk of a coma. And if your brother or your Mom has to take you to the doctor to put an IV in you... that sucks, believe me. I watched them do it to my best friend a couple of times and you sit for hours with this big-ass needle in you.”

He nodded, his bottom lip trembling. “Thank you, my reah, for being there to help me.”

I bent over and hugged him, and his skinny arms went around my neck, holding tight. He inhaled my scent and shivered hard.

“Come, my reah,” Artem said when I straightened up. “Let me walk you to the living room.”

I followed him back down the stairs that I had climbed earlier to Rocco’s room and realized that not only were there only panthers at the party, but they were all members of my tribe.

Normally city tribes were much smaller than the more remote locations or country ones. The size of a werepanther tribe was dependant on the semel. If the semel owned a lot of open, undeveloped land that could be hunted on, then the tribe was usually larger, because the land could support it. If there was no land, but the semel was wealthy, like Logan’s friend Justin Cho, then the semel could afford to take the tribe

someplace to shift and hunt on a monthly basis. As he was in San Francisco, Justin didn't have open land at his disposal, but there were a lot of preserves in California and private ranches that he paid handsomely to have for his use. His monthly gatherings were always in different places, and he hired buses for those who couldn't afford the transportation themselves.

The gatherings that Logan had were on his own land, and since his family owned a hundred acres of it above Lake Tahoe, there was more than enough room. The land itself was probably worth millions and had been handed down from generation to generation. It would have cost a fortune to develop, as high up as it was. The lower area, house, and glassworks, were owned solely by Logan himself and me. My name was on everything right next to his. If anything ever happened to him, it was all mine. Not that I cared about wealth. What I cared about was Logan. I needed him; the rest was gravy.

Most of the semels of city tribes would not be able to tell the members of their tribe just by looking. Only the semels of tribes that stayed together, in one place, that were more like extended families, only those could say for certain who belonged and who didn't.

It was funny—Logan Church lived in a small place; he had a small, lucrative business that generated a reliable source of income, enough to support himself, his family and his home. He funneled quite a bit of funds right back into his business and so stayed profitable. He was not a rich man, but neither was he a poor one. Since I had become his reah, more and more people had joined his tribe, settling in Incline Village just to be close to him—and close to me.

Logan should have been a small and insignificant semel of a forgettable lake town tribe, but at last count we had a little over two hundred members. The monthly gatherings and hunts were now run more like festivals, and Logan had just mandated that more khatyu, fighters, be trained to police the events. He had put Markel, Domin Thorne's former sheseru, in charge of the new recruits. I had concerns about the growing numbers of our tribe—I wanted us to stay a large family instead of a group—but as Logan had become semel-re, a semel who had found his reah, his true-mate, and word had spread, there was no way to curb the influx of people. For me, though, as reah of my tribe, it meant that I would need to spend more and more time receiving people and visiting homes if I wanted to remain on a first-name basis with everyone. I had no idea how I

was going to do that unless I quit my day job. Logan had suggested it more than once, and while I protested, the reality of my situation was becoming increasingly apparent.

Music off, there was only silence as I descended the staircase. A path was made for me, and Artem led me to one of the chairs by the couch. I took a seat and a woman stepped in front of me, kneeling down, offering me her hand.

“Good evening, my reah,” she said, beaming at me. “I’m Jennifer Eames. It’s so good to see you.”

I took her hand, covered it with my other, and smiled at her. “And you, Jen. How’s school going?”

Her smile went neon. “Oh, you remember?”

I tried to know everyone in my tribe; it was what you did when you were the mate of the leader. And a reah was made to mother everyone; it didn’t matter that I was a man. I was the same.

“Of course,” I told her.

If it was me, I would not have stood in line just to say hello to my reah. I would have taken the opportunity to get something to eat while everyone else was distracted. But I sat and met everyone in the house, one after another, until I heard a gasp, whispers, and looked up to find Mikhail Gorgerin, the sylvan of my tribe, striding across the room from the front door. Everyone moved for him, parting fast, and he stepped in front of me seconds later.

“Hey,” I said tiredly, caught in his cobalt gaze. “What’re you doing here?”

“Artem Varda called his sheseru to tell him that he was protecting his reah and that Yuri should not worry.”

Shit.

“Artem knows, as does every khatyu, that a reah should never be unattended or unprotected. He was certain that whoever was with you would be missing you, and he didn’t want Yuri, or his semel, to worry.”

“Great.”

“It seems that Artem Varda knows his law better than you.”

“He—”

“And I suspect that the only time I will see you after we return from the feast, my reah, is in your home, as that will be where your semel will have you confined to!”

His voice had jumped in volume, and the room went silent.

“I—”

“No,” he said, cutting me off, thrusting his phone at me.

I had no recourse but to take it. I would not embarrass myself in front of my tribe by having Mikhail grab me, toss me over his shoulder, and carry me out of the house. We were not going to have that scene.

I took the phone and just breathed.

The chilled voice came over the phone. “Jin.”

I was so dead.

“How dare you not answer your phone,” my mate said flatly, his voice deep and husky before it rose sharply. “I am your semel!”

I sat there, in the middle of Alexandra Varda’s living room, and waited.

“You will drive home now! I will see you... now!” There was no warmth in his voice, only ice.

I could hang up and lie, tell him the call was dropped and hide. I could. If I stripped and shifted, there was no way Mikhail would be able to catch me. I was faster than him, faster than every panther in my tribe, but again, it would cause a scene, and besides, I actually wanted to go home. I was just scared to.

“Making me look for you would be a mistake.”

My heart was in my throat. “I’m afraid.”

“Of me?” he growled.

“No, never,” I told him, gazing at Mikhail’s face, seeing the way he was looking at me, his eyes sliding over my face, body, inhaling my scent, knowing I was hurt. He looked physically pained. “You don’t frighten me.”

“Then what?”

“I’m afraid of what you’re gonna do.”

“Why?”

“’Cause you love me.”

"I more than love you."

I swallowed hard. Everything hurt as the feelings swelled inside my chest, my stomach. I had been so alone, so hurt—was still hurt—and he had been gone. My body had been ripped and gouged, was still mottled with contusions; all I had wanted was my mate. The ache was overwhelming, the pull to go to him much more than need.

"Talk to me."

"I don't want you to go kill Abbot or Christophe or the other guy."

There was a long silence on his end.

"Logan?"

"What other guy?"

"Is Yuri there?"

"Yes."

"Just—talk to him and then call me back. I promise to pick up."

"No, you have my summons. You will appear before me now."

"You know I don't have to—"

"Are you confused about the law, that which you know so thoroughly?"

"No."

He cleared his throat. "Just tell me where you are, and I'll come to you." His voice had softened to coaxing. "Or put Mikhail on and he'll tell me."

"No, I'll be right there."

"Answer me this: how badly were you hurt?"

I made a noise in the back of my throat. "Kinda bad."

"Are there marks on you?"

"Yes."

"Marks you haven't been able to heal yet?"

"Logan—"

"Answer me."

"Yes, there are marks I haven't healed yet."

He coughed softly. "You have a half an hour to be in this house, or I will simply go to Christophe and demand that he hand over the panthers to me, beginning with his own sheseru."

"I need to pick up my Jeep. I don't want it to get towed and—"

"Fine, Mikhail will go with you and follow you back."

"You don't trust me," I said flatly.

"I want you home," he said ominously. "I want to look at you. I want to see you and know you're really all right."

"I am."

"Come home and show me."

"I'm coming," I told him, standing up and walking toward the door. "I just need to say goodnight to Artem's mother and check on his brother one last time."

"Fine, I will speak to Yuri while I wait."

"He saved my life," I blurted out, feeling like I needed to defend my sheseru.

"Your life needed saving?"

I talked too much when I was nervous. "No, not exact—"

"In your own home, you were in fear for your life? You didn't just fight; it was a fight for your life?"

There was nothing I could say to make it better. He was going to go ballistic, and there was no way to stop it. All I was doing was postponing the inevitable. I could not even imagine the fallout.

"How many men were in my house, Jin?"

"Counting Abbot, there were four."

"Four?"

"One of them ran. I don't know who he was or where he is."

"Four," he repeated to himself.

"Yuri knows everything."

"Then I'll speak to him while I wait."

"It's nobody's fault."

"Where were Crane and Markel while Yuri was saving your life?"

Shit. "They were there."

"Help me understand how Markel, a former sheseru, Crane, your beset, and my sheseru could not contain four panthers?"

"There were only three. One ran—"

"Even better," he said, cutting me off. "Three panthers against four, if we're counting you. How is it even possible that you got hurt?"

"It's not as simple as that."

"Why not?"

"It's just isn't."

"Who took care of you afterwards, my reah?"

"I... I had to send everyone away."

"You sent my father away?"

"He had to go talk to Avery."

"How did he know the panthers fled to the tribe of Pakhet?"

"Avery called to speak to me, but I wasn't—I couldn't talk."

"Christophe was with me in New York at his sister's mating ceremony—whatever decision Avery made, he made of his own volition."

"I know. He hates me, it makes sense he would give sanctuary to the panthers that attacked me."

"Avery doesn't hate you," he said, exhaling. "Quite the opposite. It's doubtful he knew what they had done when he granted them sanctuary. What's more likely is that they told him they were running from Yuri, and that's what prompted his agreement."

The explanation made sense. Avery and Yuri's bad blood predated my arrival.

"I will call and speak to Christophe."

"Sure."

"While I await your return."

He still wanted me home. "It's late. You've gotta be tired from your—"

"I want you home now."

"Logan."

"Did you hear me?"

I had. No way not to.

"Jin?"

"I heard you."

"Good. Now hurry," he said before he hung up.

I did.

Chapter Three

THERE was nothing to do but think on the way home, and because I would drive myself crazy if I kept obsessing about Logan, I started thinking about my best friend instead.

I was worried that if Crane was not accepted soon by Logan's sister Delphine, he would want to leave. I didn't want him to go anywhere. He was my touchstone. Just looking at him reminded me of who I was and not to take myself too seriously. I was scared of becoming someone else if he wasn't around. Crane had become beset of a reah, or companion of a reah, the minute it was discovered what I was. He had chosen me over his family, our tribe, over his whole life. Ever since I was sixteen, it had been him and me, and the thought that he would, or could, leave was fairly overwhelming to think about.

As lost in my thoughts as I was, it took me a couple of minutes to realize that the front gate of my home was not opening even though I had just swiped the key card across the panel.

"Good evening, my reah."

I turned to the voice and found Ivan Tenchenko and two other men I didn't know on the other side of the gate.

"What are you guys doing out here?"

His smile was trying really hard to stay in place as he nodded to another man and the gate slowly started to open. "Logan wants the grounds guarded now, and I have to say, I agree. Anyone can get in and out of his home, and I for one never thought that was safe."

"It's not a fortress, Vanya." I forced a smile, tired suddenly, using the familiar form of his name. "It's a home, and any member of the tribe should be able to call on us whenever they like. Logan is their leader."

“Agreed, he is their leader, and as such, they should make an appointment if they need to see him. Both of you make yourselves far too accessible, and if this... attack... has taught us anything, it’s that you and Logan need to take your safety much more seriously.”

“Nice that you worry,” I said, rolling the Jeep forward onto the property, stopping because he called out instead of driving on up to the house.

Mikhail, who was behind me in a car with three others, drove past, leaving off tailing me now that I was safely at home. Apparently I could be trusted to make it to the front door alone.

“Jin,” Ivan said, looking in the window at me, “I just want you to know that if I knew you were hurt, I would have never left you.”

“I know,” I sighed. “Sorry if I snapped at you. Hopefully I can talk Logan out of you guys having to be out here all night. It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not, my reah,” he said, reaching for my hand but stopping himself. “It is my honor to protect both you and my semel.”

Just a short time ago, Domin Thorne had been his semel, and he himself had been a sylvan just like Mikhail. After Logan and Domin had met in combat, Domin’s tribe, the tribe of Menhit, had been absorbed into Logan’s, and Domin had stepped down as semel, thus instantly demoting both his sheseru and sylvan to normal tribe members. I had worried that Ivan Tenchenko and Markel Kovac would resent Logan for being the reason that Domin relinquished his birthright, but neither man ever gave any indication that this was the case. In fact, the exact opposite seemed to be true. They both wanted to belong to Logan Church’s tribe, wanted to serve their semel and protect their reah. I found their sincerity strange, as I didn’t think I would be able to switch my loyalties that quickly had I been in their place.

“Jin?”

I reached for Ivan’s hand and squeezed it tight. I watched the relief wash over him as he covered our joined hands with his other.

“Please know that I would protect you with my life, my reah.”

I looked into his eyes but was aware of the other two men closing in on us.

“Could I...,” the taller man said, the muscles in his jaw clenching as his hands fisted at his sides.

Again, this was the part that I didn't get. Everyone, every panther, suddenly had the need to sit with me and talk to me, and mostly, to touch me. Letting Ivan go, I got out of the Jeep.

"Thanks, you guys, for keeping me and Logan safe," I said, gesturing the panther to me, his name coming back to me. "Anthony, right? Anthony Lauria?"

He nodded, unable to speak as he tentatively moved toward me. I shook his hand and then reached for the third man's hand, who was introduced to me as Antoine Palmer. All three just stared at me with wide eyes as though I were the second coming or something. I didn't think I was ever going to get used to it. Not the attention of the men in front of me, not the interest of the people back at the Varda house, no one's. I was just me. I was nothing special, and yet everyone treated me like I was.

Back in the car, I drove slowly up to the house and parked as far away as possible. It would have been different if it were just Logan there, but he wasn't. I would have to see everyone, answer a barrage of questions just to get to my bedroom. But there was no way around the inquisition, so I grabbed my duffel out of the back seat and headed for the porch. The wave of apprehension rolled over and through me, and I stopped as my vision blurred. Standing there in the warm night air, the summer breeze ruffling my hair and shirt, I was freezing.

"Jin."

The voice I knew, his scent, his presence even at a distance making it hard for me to breathe. My body hurt, I was weary, and the man being there was going to make me break down, and they would all see. I wouldn't do that. I couldn't. Lifting my head, I forced a smile, trying to pull myself together. How the hell was I going to get upstairs in one piece instead of falling apart in front of everyone? Maybe if I ran.

"Come to me," came his sharp command.

I took a deep breath that hurt, every drop of strength I had channeled into not breaking down. It was his fault. I could be strong; I could be a rock as long as he wasn't there. But the second I saw him, I had the urge to be comforted, to lean and be cared for. I wanted to surrender.

He came to me instead.

He ran, and even as I saw the porch crowd with people, no one followed him. I swallowed hard, straightened, and waited as he stopped in front of me. Looking up into the honey-colored eyes of my mate made my heart hurt.

“Hi.”

His scowl was dark as he checked me over, finally lifting a hand to my cheek, the touch feather-light, impossibly tender and gentle. “I missed you.”

I nodded, my voice gone, before I leaned into his hand, closing my eyes.

His breath was warm on my face as his lips touched my forehead.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I allowed the man into my home, Jin, not you.”

“You were asked to train him.”

“And now I will kill him.”

My head snapped up, my eyes on his. “Logan, please don’t say—”

“He put his hands on my mate—mine!” he roared. “You belong to me, and he dared to touch you! I will tear him apart!”

I felt the tears on my lashes and tried to blink them away.

“You will not cry for fools, Jin. The choice was their own. Everyone knows you’re mine. Everyone knows that you’re my reah. They chose their fate when they followed Abbot’s direction, and he chose to die when he put his hands on you.”

I shuddered there in front of him.

“Look at me.”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” I said to his wingtips.

“Look... at... me.”

I lifted my eyes back to his, saw the gold flecks in the amber depths.

He growled in frustration before he grabbed me and hauled me up into his arms. “I don’t want to hurt... I can smell the blood and—”

I wrapped my arms and legs around him, burying my face in the side of his neck, breathing him in, knowing I was home and safe and loved.

His hands clutched at me as he turned toward the house.

“Can we just... could it be only you and—”

“Yes,” he assured me, his voice a deep rumble in his chest. “Just us.”

I kept my eyes closed as he walked, heard the wooden planks of the porch creak under his feet, and then smelled something heavenly, some aroma wafting through the house from the kitchen, letting me know I was inside. But no one said my name, the look on Logan’s face, I was sure,

keeping everyone silent. I went boneless in his arms, enjoying being carried up the stairs to our bedroom.

“Here, love.”

Opening my eyes, I saw my room in a blur of warm brown tones as I was gently laid down on my bed. All the familiar sights, the smells, and the gorgeous man towering over me made my heart swell with emotion.

“Show me,” he whispered, and it was easy to see that I was not the only one struggling for control. The muscles working in his jaw, how clouded and dark his eyes were—my mate was a mess, and it was my fault.

“Promise me you won’t do anything tonight. Promise me you’ll stay here with me.”

He nodded, just barely.

I drew the T-shirt over my head with a little difficulty, but he didn’t bend to help. He just watched me. Unbuckling my belt, I unbuttoned my 501s and eased them down so he could see the bruising on my right hip. He was silent as his eyes moved over the still-healing gouges and cuts, the torn flesh, and the red-and-purple blotches that covered my chest and abdomen.

“It’s not so bad anymore.”

He nodded, tipped his head for me to roll over. It was worse on the back. My bruised face with my black eye was already fading, but my sides where claws had sunk into my flesh still looked raw. As my face hit the pillow, I sighed deeply. The bed smelled like Logan, and I inhaled deeply, filling myself with him.

The warm, callused hand slid down my spine, stopping on the small of my back, pressing down gently before making the return trip, settling in my hair, petting me.

“I’m so tired.”

“Then go to sleep.”

“But I don’t want you to leave.” I didn’t trust him not to go kill someone if I wasn’t awake to watch him.

“Love”—his voice dropped low, deep and filled with gravel as he smoothed my hair back from my forehead—“I am not leaving your side.”

“Promise?”

"I promise," he said, and I felt the soft lips pressed between my shoulder blades. "Close your eyes. I can tell that you're barely holding on."

"Could you... just... for a minute."

I heard him moving before the bed dipped behind me, and I rolled to my side so he could spoon around me. The heat rippling off the man made me shiver.

"Cold?"

"No, just... you feel so good."

"You missed me."

"I should have gone like you asked."

"Yes."

"Sorry."

"There were reasons you stayed, and I agreed with all of them at the time, but I think we both understand that your entire life needs to be reevaluated."

I stiffened. "Wait, what does that mean?"

"So stubborn," he breathed down the side of my neck. "I am not telling you not to work or attend to your duties as reah, but there are considerations that will have to be met."

"I don't—"

"Stop," he soothed me, nuzzling my hair away from the back of my neck before he kissed the mark he had put there six months ago, the scar that proclaimed me the mate of a semel. "Rest, just rest. Your body is trying so hard to heal and has not been able to as you have not felt safe enough to truly sleep."

He knew me so well. I didn't feel safe anywhere. I slept in short spurts, always with the light on, afraid that if I let my guard down, someone would be there. If even my sheseru, even scary Yuri Kosa, had been unable to keep me from harm, how could I be safe alone? And even though I knew it was crazy, irrational, I was at the mercy of nightmares that would not let me go.

"I have you," he said, his lips grazing my bare shoulder. "You're mine."

The shiver tore through me as I arched back against him, pressing my ass into his groin.

“Stop,” he said almost sadly, his breath warm on my ear. “Your brain will explode if I do anything right now, so stop teasing.”

“I had a very different homecoming planned,” I whimpered, unable to keep from rubbing up against him, my body in pain but also terribly needy and very hot.

“Christ,” he groaned, gripping my left hip tight to make me stop moving. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“You’ve been gone so long,” I said, wriggling in tighter, trying to seat myself so that I could feel the bulge in his jeans against me.

“Jin.” His whisper was harsh, dangerous, and sent a current of need right to my groin. “I don’t think you realize that you smell like—”

“I’m wounded,” I said softly, my voice deep, “and there’s a part of you... the animal part... that likes that.”

“Stop,” he scolded, burying his face in my hair. “Just let me hold you and look at you. God, I don’t even think I should be this close to you.... I bet you hurt all over.”

And he was right, I was in pain. My body was stiff and sore and tender to the touch, but being close to my mate... it was like being covered with a warm blanket on a cold day. I felt the heat rush through me, and it even reached the cold, hollow pit in my stomach.

“Jin?”

I rolled over, away from him, on my back, and looked up at him as he stared down at me with concern-clouded eyes.

“You’ve got bruises all over you.”

“Then be careful when you fuck me.”

His strangled groan made me smile. He was a beautiful, strong, powerful man, and he wanted me badly. I felt the surge of power ripple through me.

“Hey.”

He looked back at me, and once again I was swallowed in his gold-flecked amber eyes.

I smiled at him, just looking at the man giving me pleasure. “I promise I can take—”

“Look at you,” he said, his head dipping to examine my side, my hip.

"I'm so glad you're home." I swallowed hard, watching him, the way his hair fell forward, a few golden strands tangling in his golden lashes.

"I know," he said, sounding nonchalant even as the smile betrayed him. He was very pleased. "You try and retain you independence from me, but we both know the truth."

"What truth?"

"That you can barely breathe when I'm not around."

It was true but not how he thought.

"You need me."

He was not asking for confirmation, it was simply him making a statement.

"You know you're mine, right?"

I had to concentrate on breathing as his eyes flicked up to mine, locking there.

"And only those who have my permission may even see you."

I stared up into his eyes, and one gorgeous, thick, perfectly shaped gold eyebrow rose daringly. He was waiting to see what brilliant thing I was going to say next.

"I don't know why you...." I trailed off, trying to roll over away from him.

His hand was on my chin as he tenderly but firmly returned my eyes to his amber ones. The man was so much bigger and stronger than me, and even though he wasn't one of those huge body-builder types, he was covered all over in hard, rippling muscle. If he didn't want me to move, I wasn't going anywhere.

"You don't know why I what? Love you?"

"No, I know why you love me." I deflated, my eyes locked on his. "You have to."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm your reah, so you have to love me even though it's crap."

"What are you talking about?"

"Please," I went on, ignoring him. "A semel finds a reah, and they're just magically compatible, everything's perfect from the get-go? You Tarzan, me Jane—it's bullshit, and you know it, and I know it. We could

not be more different, and now that things have settled down, we're really seeing it."

He just stared at me, and after a few long minutes of silence, I got off the bed to stand by the window.

"I wish I smoked," I muttered.

"You don't think we're compatible?"

I turned around to face him, my back against the window glass. "No, I don't."

He sat up in bed, stretching his big, beautiful body before settling with a pillow behind his back.

"I think that—"

"You're being ridiculous," he said flatly.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, irritated.

He shrugged. "You love me, but even scarier for you is that you like me. You never had anybody in your life that was your friend as well as your lover, and it's seriously twisting you up inside. You have no idea how to process what's going on in your mind."

"Aww, that's crap and makes me sound like a fuckin' head case," I groused at him.

"It's the truth as far as I can tell, and I think normally as soon as you start to feel yourself getting attached to someone else besides Crane that you force yourself to let go even when you don't want to so you won't feel any pain when you lose what you love."

"That's just stupid."

The grunt let me know what he thought of my words.

"Logan—"

"You think Crane Adams is your safety net. You're afraid if he leaves and for some reason I tire of you and throw you out that you'll be all alone with no one."

The man knew me really well. It was scary how well.

"That's why you're pushing Delphine so hard to accept Crane's suit even though you know that Markel, for all his flaws, is who her heart wants."

"No."

"Yes," he assured me. "My sister doesn't want your friend, and you're terrified that he's going to leave."

I was. I was so scared.

“You need to understand that I’m your touchstone now. I’m the one who reminds you who you are, because the most important thing you are is my mate.”

“No, I won’t be just your mate—that can’t be all I am.”

“I didn’t say all that you are. I said—”

“Being your mate is just....” I trailed off, looking at him, deep into the golden eyes. “Logan, if I wasn’t your mate, you would have never even looked at me.”

He threw up his hands and rolled up off the bed, crossing his arms, staring over at me like I was a petulant child. “Not this again.”

“It’s true.”

“And what if it is? So what?”

“There’s a difference.” I caught my breath, turning back around to look outside at the lit grounds. It was a pretty night, dark blue, not the black it got in winter. “You love me because I’m your reah, so you have to. All the others love me because I’m your reah. No one has real feelings except Crane.”

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

The dangerous sound of his voice was not lost on me. “Whatever. You wanna stand there and be offended, g’head. You wanna be hurt and fill up with righteous indignation because I said your feelings, that you believe are real, really aren’t—fine.” I sighed deeply before turning around and walking back to sit down on the bed. “But these are the facts, Logan. If I wasn’t your reah, I wouldn’t get to be in your bed. With Crane, whatever I am is whatever I am. His feelings don’t change; he stays the same. All the rest of you... it could all just be a big mistake tomorrow and I’m out on my ass.”

The silence in the room loomed for so long that my adrenaline dissipated and fatigue set in. I didn’t want to look at him; I just wanted to collapse. Crawling up to the pillow, I sank down onto the bed.

“The fact that you still believe that you could lose me is beyond my understanding. You have no faith, and that bugs the shit outta me.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t just agree with me!”

“Why would I argue?”

“Look at me.”

I complied, rolling over on my back to look up at the man hovering above me.

"If you were not my mate, would I feel as I do? I don't know—I don't care. I can't separate the two, but you want to, you still wonder about me because before I met you I was straight. And even though you've accepted your place and taken on the duties of being the semel's mate and even though you love me—because you *do* love me—even with all that, you're still terrified of losing Crane."

"He's my best friend," I said defensively.

"He's a security blanket, and we both know it."

"Logan—"

"I should not be jealous of Crane Adams, and I am. I'm the semel of my tribe, and I'm jealous. Think about what that means."

We were talking when we should not have been, as it had the potential to go very wrong very fast.

"You're right about us... chemistry alone is not going to carry us through. You need to decide if you're going to submit to my rules or if you prefer to live separately."

I couldn't breathe.

"I won't wonder where you are or what you're doing anymore. You keep more from me than you tell, and I'm through with it. I can't continue to live with a mate who doesn't trust me."

"You don't want—"

"I want you!" he yelled at me. "You're mine, and should you choose to live apart from me, you are still my reah and so will conduct yourself in that manner."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that there will only ever be me in your bed."

"That's all you care about—who fucks me?"

"You're an idiot!" he roared. "And you're picking apart what I'm saying instead of listening to me!"

"I'm lis—"

"I'm your mate! There is nothing or no one I care about more than you, but first, before anything, I am semel to your reah. Your semel! If you're hurt, you call me. If you're sad, you call me. If you need protection

or love or... anything—you call me! I am the one you turn to for all things. No one else, only me!”

“Logan, I—”

“You made your choice when you didn’t call the first night you were attacked. You should have told me you were hurt instead of allowing me to stay for Simone’s mating ceremony. You should have needed me.”

“I did, I just—”

“You make me doubt myself, and I can’t have that.”

“This is about me getting hurt, but there was nothing you could have—”

“This is about you getting hurt, but even more, it’s about you not giving me the common courtesy of a call!”

“It was life and death and you’re upset because you didn’t get a call?”

“Yes, Jin,” he yelled at me, the sarcasm dripping from him. “That’s what this is about exactly. It’s about a phone call.”

“Logan—”

“Make it small and petty when we both know that you’re being stupid on purpose because you don’t want to go anywhere near the real issue.”

“What is the real issue?” I snarled at him, pushed to my breaking point, angry, tired, and mean. I knew I was wrong, had known before we started, because he was right. I should have called and confessed to him my absolute, undeniable need. I should have, but I didn’t.

“The second you could, the second the fight was done and you were able to... you should have called me and told me that you needed me, told me to come home, told me that you were hurt, bleeding....” His voice cracked, and I could hear how broken he was inside. “But you just did as you always do... you handled things and worried about what I would do instead of what you had to have.”

I shook my head. Our priorities were so different; they could not be any further apart. He worried about the now and I worried about the future.

“‘Logan, I need you to come home.’ This should have been your call,” he told me.

I felt hot tears fill my eyes.

"You don't need me. I pretend that you do, I say that you do, but it's bullshit, and you don't," he growled, the muscles in his jaw clenching. "Being with you, knowing that our feelings are not the same... knowing that I need you more—want you more... it's killing me. I'd rather live separately than see you every day knowing that you don't want me the same as I want you."

"You're wrong." I sucked in my breath. "I need you."

"You don't show it. I don't see it." His voice was flat, matter-of-fact. "You don't believe in the bond of a reah and a semel, but I do. It has to be all or nothing for me, Jin. I need you in love with me, trusting me, and wanting me all in equal parts."

"You've been thinking about this all for a long time," I said, the truth washing over me.

"Yes."

"Were you gonna tell me?"

"If Crane decides to leave, are you going with him?" he asked, ignoring my question altogether.

"No."

"I hope that's true."

"It doesn't seem like you really care one way or another."

"How the hell do you get that from everything I just said?"

"I—"

"You're fighting with me so hard—you're so stubborn, and it's exhausting."

We were silent for several minutes.

"I'm tired," I announced. "I hurt all over."

"Then sleep," he said flatly, turning for the door.

I buried my face in the pillow so he wouldn't see the tears. I didn't want him to go, but I would die before I asked him to stay.

"Jin." My name came out strangled.

I made a noise so he'd know I heard him.

"I want you to be mine, all mine, and want and need only me."

I had no idea what to say, so it was good that the door clicked shut moments later. Talking had been a mistake, but it was hard to stop once we started. I wished I could have stopped him before words had been spoken that could not be taken back.

I WOKE up because I dreamed that I was in the tribal fighting pit being butchered alive. It was vivid and scary, and I sat up in bed in a cold sweat, panting and shaking. There was no rolling over and going back to sleep; I was too shaken.

Just with an inhalation of breath, I knew that Logan was not in bed, even before I got my bearings and looked around. I didn't go looking for him. Instead, I got up and showered to try and restore a feeling of normalcy. After changing into pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, I left the room, padding quietly down the hall to Crane's room. I knocked gently.

"Yep."

Slipping inside, I found him on his bed in nothing but cargo shorts, a wireless controller in hand, eyes riveted to his TV screen. The PlayStation 3 had been a birthday gift from me, and he had been enjoying it since he got it. "What are you doing?"

"Killing drug cartel assholes," he yawned before putting the game on pause and looking up at me. "What are you doing?"

"I haven't been sleeping all that well lately."

"Yeah, big surprise." The sarcasm was dripping off his words. "I know you like noise, so—c'mon. I got room."

I climbed onto his bed and up to the pillow on the other side of the queen-sized bed. Once I collapsed, he put a hand down between my shoulder blades. "What?"

"I'm gonna go to Vegas and open a new restaurant for Ray."

My first thought was to sit up and yell at him, but he had felt me tense under his palm and so put two hands on me, holding me still, pressing me down into the bed.

"Stop. It's time, Jin. I need to carve out my own place in the world, ya know—without you. And it ain't like I'm moving to fuckin' Outer Mongolia or somethin'; I'll just be in Vegas. We can drive or fly—whichever—and it'll be fine. Think about it. Between all your reah duties and your regular work and Logan and everybody else... we hardly even hang out anymore."

My heart hurt.

His hands started rubbing, soothing me, gentling me. "You have a life here, but I'm just hangin' out, and I don't wanna do that anymore."

So soon after my disagreement with Logan, half of me wanted to just run away with my best friend.

“Say you get it.”

“I get it,” I sighed.

“Good boy.”

“Screw you.”

He chuckled. “What’s with you?”

“Logan’s mad.”

“Oh yeah, I know.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Let’s just say that the only reason I wasn’t banished from the tribe was because he knows it would upset you.”

“That’s crap.”

“Jin, Markel and I could have gotten you killed because we were so stupid. It’s a wonder we got off with what we did.”

I tried to roll over to look at him, but he pinned me under him, pressing me down into the bed. “Crane, what’d he—”

“I don’t get to go with you to Egypt; I have to stay here instead and watch over things with Markel until you get back.”

“No,” I groaned, having counted on having Crane with me during the feast. “That won’t help me at—”

“You’ll be okay. I’m the one who’s missing out, Markel too. Now he won’t be there to watch Delphine. It’s a mess.”

“I don’t understand why he would hurt me by making you stay here.”

“Like I said, Markel and I almost allowed you to be killed. We’re both lucky he’s not having us marked.”

I shivered. The ritual marking of a panther who had angered the leader of their tribe usually resulted in either the loss of an eye or a slash across the bridge of the nose. The scar marked you as *apophi*, a disgrace and a burden to the tribe. Most panthers left the tribe instead of accepting the mark.

“I would have taken it,” he told me. “You know that.”

To remain a member of *my* tribe, I was certain that my best friend would do anything. “Never happen,” I assured him. “Not to you, not while I’m still breathing.”

"I deserve it for putting my fight with Markel before your welfare."

"That's a little dramatic, don't you think?"

"Like I said, I deserve it. But for now, my punishment, along with Markel's, is that we stay here and watch over everything together until you all get back."

I let out a breath, resigned to Logan's decision.

Crane lifted up off me slowly. "What's with you? Why're you even in here when Logan's home? Didn't you miss him?"

"That's not—"

"What's going on with you guys? You were so happy."

"I was happy—I *am* happy, I just... I think it all just sank in. It was fast, so fast. I think we both got caught up in the whole mate thing and didn't even think."

"Are you kidding? All you do is think. You think until you make yourself sick. I bet you went over and over and over it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're exhausting."

"We should have dated... we're nothing alike."

"Yeah, I know," he said, sliding a hand into my hair, gently massaging my scalp. "But that's part of the fun, isn't it? That's part of the whole strong semel and gentle reah, isn't it? The whole yin/yang thing, am I right?"

I groaned.

"You ought to explain it to Domin and Koren."

"What?" I muttered, not lifting my head, content with the heat of his body against my side from shoulder to thigh, feeling like I was slowly sinking down into the bed.

"I think the problem with those guys is that Domin thinks Koren wants to dominate him, and the truth is that Koren wants Domin to tie him up like he did before and fuck him."

Wait. I rolled over on my back and looked up at him. "I'm sorry, what?"

His wicked smile made his sapphire eyes dance. "See, you've been too busy to even dish the dirt with. What the fuck?"

"And what about you and Delphine?" I asked, because that was more important to me.

He grunted before returning to killing people with a machine gun. “She likes the whole poor tortured artist bullshit, and you know that ain’t me. Whatcha see is whatcha get—I ain’t deep, and I make no apologies for that. You, Saint Jin, are deep enough for all of us put—”

“What’d you just—”

His cackle cut me off. “It’s what Domin calls you. That shit is funny.”

“What’re you talking about?”

He laughed at me. “Domin does this killer impression of you”—he furrowed his brows, and when he spoke, his voice was high and whiny—“oh no, Logan I can’t be your reah, what would that do to your life and your tribe?”

I squinted at him.

He waggled his eyebrows.

“What the fuck was that?”

“That was you.” He grinned then shrugged. “Well, Domin’s impression of you.”

“Since when do I have an English accent?”

“It’s funnier that way.”

I could have done without the back of his hand on his forehead and his bated breath. “Fuck you, and fuck Domin Thorne, and fuck—”

“Calm down,” he said, laughing at me again. “It’s funny as hell... Saint Jin. I thought Delphine was gonna pee herself, and Russ fell off the couch. You know Domin is sarcastic as hell and quick—fuck. I thought he was a dick at first when he was trying to kill you and all, but he’s fuckin’ hilarious, and he has you down pat.”

“You’re supposed to defend me.”

“You’re such a douche.”

“So Domin thinks I’m some kinda drama queen?”

“You *are* some kind of drama queen and a douche,” he reminded me, “and pain in the ass, and you wanna have everything be perfect all the damn time.”

“And?”

“And you know the rest,” he said, his eyes on mine. He didn’t have to give me the words; there were too many years between us for me to doubt his feelings. “Between us, you know how it is, right?”

I let out a deep breath. “Yeah, I know.”

“So what’s the truth, Jin?”

I just stared up at his profile now that he had turned back to killing the minions of Columbian drug lords. “I love Logan.”

“I know that.”

“But I worry that he just loves me because I’m his reah.”

After a minute, he looked down at me, and his expression, along with the way he was squinting, made me groan. “Again with this bullshit?”

“C’mon, Crane.”

“‘C’mon, Crane’ nothing—fuck you and fuck this crap.”

“But—”

“He just loves you ’cause you’re his reah?”

I growled at him.

“Why does it matter why he loves you?”

“Crane—”

“I’m serious. Who the fuck cares why he loves you? The important thing is that he does. People get stuck in elevators and fall in love, people work side by side every day and fall in love, people go down on planes together and fall in love, it doesn’t matter what brought you together, now you just gotta see where it goes.”

“He wants me to think of him first when I get hurt or I’m happy or whatever the case may be. He wants to be first on the list.”

“Before me—I get it. If I was him, I’d want the same thing. I wanted it from Delphine, and she wants her person to be Markel. It’s how it is. You’re very lucky to have someone who wants it all from you. I wish I had that.”

“Shit.”

“You’re such an idiot.”

I had no rebuttal.

“And so?”

I yawned loudly. “I’ll think about what you said, but now tell me about Koren and Domin. What the hell are you talking about—who tied who up?”

“What are we, girlfriends?”

“Just tell me.”

“Asshole,” he said with a smile, enjoying being the one who had the dirt. “According to Ivan, who was the man’s sylvan, as you recall, when Domin kidnapped Koren last year, he tied him up and did bad things to him.”

“Bullshit. Koren’s way too strong if it’s one-on-one, him against Domin.”

“Did I say that the things were done without permission?”

It took me a second because I was tired. “Oh shit,” I breathed out.

“‘Oh shit’ is right,” he said, laughing softly. “I guess your boy Domin, for all his big-ass talk, has never actually done anything to anyone without permission. The man likes to be in control, but not without willing participants.”

Which made sense; I could see Domin Thorne getting off on having a big strong man submit to him willingly.

“As you recall, Koren told everyone he was tortured,” Crane reminded me.

“And I bet it was after the fact. Imagine what it must be like in Koren’s head? Here you are, a totally straight, totally alpha-type man, and then along comes this guy who gets in your blood so fast and makes you so hot that you agree to bottom for him? Christ, how do you even attempt to rationalize your feel—”

“Bottom... really?” Crane whined. “You had to go there?”

I snorted out a laugh at the look of pain on the man’s face.

“Seriously—there’s a limit, ya know? Jesus, Jin.”

“I’m just saying—and I’m sorry to have offended your delicate sensibilities, but seriously, I figured Koren for a top.”

“Because Logan is.”

I shot him a look.

“What?”

“That comment right there—that’s why our conversations get weird.”

“Shit, I’m just sayin’—I think that Domin is making a mistake. He thinks that because Koren is Logan’s brother, he didn’t enjoy what was done to him, and so he’s been waitin’ around for Koren to make the first move while the whole time, Koren just wants Domin to take charge again, since he so obviously got off on it the first time.”

“How do you know Koren liked it?”

“Ivan said that the screaming he heard was not the pain kind and that when he finally went into the bedroom, Domin, not his prisoner, was passed out on the bed, and Koren was sittin’ there just pettin’ him.”

“Domin let Koren pet him?”

“Ivan says that Domin was too far gone to allow or not allow anything.”

“Jesus.”

He shrugged broad shoulders. “I think Koren really likes not being the guy in control or in charge and he wants Domin to just be that guy, and instead, for whatever reason, Domin’s waitin’ on Koren to take him. They’re both fucked up.”

“And so what?”

“I think that you, as the reah of the tribe, need to sit them down and fix it up between them. Tell them what’s what.”

“Which I’m sure will go over great with Logan and Koren’s father.”

“Oh, I didn’t even think about that, that is funny,” Crane cracked a wide grin. “Since you became reah of the tribe, not one but *two* of the man’s sons are gay.”

I smirked at him. “Yeah, it’s great.”

He snorted out a laugh. “You can’t make anybody gay, Jin. They either are or they’re not.”

“Oh no? Before Logan met me, he was straight.”

“Maybe, and maybe, like Koren, he just hadn’t found the right guy yet.”

“So it stands to reason that maybe there’s the perfect guy out there for you.”

“Or not.” He scowled at me. “I know you don’t get it, but some guys actually like sleeping with girls.”

I smiled at him.

“Listen, just do what I say and have a talk with Koren and Domin before they do something stupid and one of ’em leaves.”

“Why not you?”

“I ain’t you. Nobody listens to me.”

I was quiet, absorbing everything he’d said.

“I think you tell Domin to jump Koren’s bones and go from there.”

“You’re like an advice column all of a sudden.”

“Screw you; get the hell outta my room.”

But I had no intention of moving. “I should know all this.”

“Yeah, ya should, but you’re so freaked out about being Logan’s reah and what does that mean that you’re missing where you’re actually needed.”

I grunted.

“Saint Jin of Perpetual Sorrow,” he teased me.

“What?”

“It’s what Domin calls you.”

“I hate him,” I sighed.

“I know,” he said, bumping me with his knee.

“I’ll miss seeing you every day.”

He pushed my thick hair out of my face, his fingers threading through the length of it without even realizing what he was doing. It was long, too long, falling now to the middle of my back. I left it alone because of Logan—he liked to bury his face in it, let it slide over his bare skin, tangle his hands in it and pull. I watched Crane twirl it through his fingers over and over.

“Crane?”

“I’ll miss you too, but it’s for the best. I’m going crazy living up here, Jin—I need my own place, my own everything.”

“You must’ve already discussed this with Logan—he knows you’re going?”

“Yeah, he thought it was because of Delphine,” he said, knotting his hand in my hair, and I felt the tug on my scalp.

There was a part of Crane, a very small part, that thought of me as his, and sometimes, in subtle ways that most people missed, he showed it. His hand fisted in my hair, he flexed his grip, and I breathed out my primal response to his dominance. I belonged to my semel, but Crane was my best friend, and so a piece of me would always be his. Every now and then, he reminded me.

When he opened his hand, my hair fell out of his grip, running like water over his palm.

“Logan should talk to the semel in Vegas, whoever that is, and make sure he understands about you living there even though you’re not going to join his tribe.”

He smirked at me. “I am still your beset, idiot. I will never leave your tribe, and I ain’t goin’ anywhere until you get back from the feast. You don’t hafta help me move ’til then.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“You really are stupid.”

“This is not news,” I said as I rolled back over on my stomach.

“Jin,” he began, and I felt his hand slide between my shoulder blades again.

“I don’t want Logan to hurt anyone because of me,” I interrupted him.

“You can’t ask your semel to forgive an attack on his mate,” he said softly. “That’s not right, Jin, and you know it.”

“Is Markel in trouble too, or just you?”

“Oh, we’re both in shit up to our eyeballs. We’re both confined to the grounds except for work until you get back.”

“Which means lots of quality bonding time with Markel.”

“It’ll probably kill me.”

The two of us were silent for long minutes.

“Jin?”

I grunted.

“Can I see?”

“Why?”

“Because I should.”

I shrugged even though I was lying down. Whatever he wanted.

He lifted my shirt, and I sighed as his hands traced all the wounds on my back and sides.

“It’s healing.”

“Yuri’s gonna kill them all.”

“Don’t say shit like that, it doesn’t help.”

He eased my shirt back down, and a minute later I felt him press close as he resumed playing his game.

It was comfortable, and after a week of dealing with being brutalized, no sleep, and, when I did sleep, nightmares, I needed normal and familiar. I fell asleep fast and woke up hours later in the dark.

Crane was passed out beside me on his back, the controller still in his right hand. I moved it out of harm's way, rolled off of his bed, and hit the power button on his game system and the TV as I moved by them.

Slipping into my own bedroom minutes later, I could make out Logan stretched out on his back in only a pair of sleep shorts on his side of the bed. He looked good lying there, and I stood over him, enjoying just seeing the man.

"Where were you?" he asked softly without opening his eyes.

"Go back to sleep," I told him, ready to move away from his side of the bed. "I didn't mean to wake you."

His hand lifted fast, the fingers wrapping tight around my wrist. "Where were you?"

"I had to talk to Crane."

"Of course you did," he said, but he didn't let me go.

"He's moving to Vegas when we come back from the feast."

"What?" His eyes opened and sparkled when they caught the faint trace of light, looking like black pools in the darkness. "He told you?"

"Yeah, he's going away," I sighed, putting my hand over his on my wrist, stroking over his skin lazily. "And it's gonna be all right."

"Is it?"

"Yes, sir." I smiled down at him.

"Jin." He said my name like he was dying.

"Listen," I sighed, bending to rub my chin over his hand before I pulled gently away, walking around the bed to the left side. "I know you think you wanna be my whole life, but do you have any idea how suffocating and smothering that would be?"

"Try me."

I smiled in the dark as he sat up, and I collapsed down onto my side.

"I want to matter most, Jin."

"But you already do."

"Jin—"

"Logan... everyone in my life, Crane, Yuri, Mikhail, Delphine, your folks, even Koren and Domin, offers a piece that I need, but you... you

make all of it work. You're my home, and that's what you're not getting. Without you—nothing works."

He moved closer to me, and I felt the heat rolling off his powerful frame of hard, toned muscle.

"I just—I worry that you'll wake up one morning and realize that I'm not what you want, but every day my trust gets stronger just because of how you are with me. We just need more time to work things out between us," I finished, turning to look at him. "Maybe we should date."

His laughter was deep, rich, and blanketed me in warmth.

"Logan, are you—"

"What'd you do, rehearse that?"

"I'm sorry?"

"What the hell am I gonna do with you?"

"No," I almost whined, tired and hurt and not at all ready to fight with him a second more. "Just lis—"

"Love," he said, exhaling, "we're not gonna date." He chuckled.

"Why?"

"Because you're already my whole life."

"Logan—"

"Can I just tell you that there is no one else in my life that makes me happy just to look at even though you give me so much crap?" he said, his fingers tracing the curve of my face. "I mean, Christ—just you not being here when I got home tonight nearly killed me."

I turned away because I didn't want him to see my tears. But when the light on his nightstand flipped on, I rolled my head back to look at him.

"All my life I'd had everything I wanted, I've had everything my way but you.... I swear to God, fighting with you will keep me young."

What could I say?

"Do you have any idea how frustrating you are?"

He was ignoring the fact that I had tears welling up in my eyes, trying to divert my thoughts to tangling with him instead. It was really very thoughtful.

"You drive me crazy, and everybody I know—my family, all my friends, the whole tribe, for crissakes—everyone thinks that you're the best thing that ever happened to me."

I swallowed hard.

“Because when you’re around, I’m a better man.”

The way he was looking at me, the love I saw there, it was overwhelming.

“And you make everything fun.”

I smiled through my tears.

“Hell, just getting groceries with you is an adventure. I mean—no one needs four kinds of cereal.”

I rolled sideways into him, hooking my right arm around his neck, hugging him tight.

“And don’t gimme that crap that you’re buying it for everyone; you buy it for you.” He snickered, giving me a zerbert on the neck and causing goose bumps.

I squirmed closer, and he clutched me to him, sitting up and then leaning back against the headboard, lifting me into his lap, yanking me forward so I was straddling his thighs. He was so strong, my slight weight was of no consequence to him.

“What?” He smiled warmly, his eyes molten gold.

“I love you so.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, chuckling, “but it doesn’t excuse the cereal.”

I nodded, unable to speak. The man had me speechless over a discussion of Frosted Flakes.

His hands slid up and down my back, sliding over my bare skin. “And all the different kinds of coffee and the damn creamer... who needs that many flavored creamers?”

The man had beautiful lips, and they were there, beckoning, ready to be kissed.

“All the crap you buy.”

“I don’t buy crap,” I sniffled, my voice nasal.

“Okay,” he said, kissing the curve of my shoulder. “Whatever you say, just....” He squeezed me tighter, molding my half-naked body to his. “Could you just please... please let me take care of you, all right?”

And I wanted to, but.... “I don’t need to be saved or rescued—I’m not some damsel in distress. I’m a guy, and I have to be strong on my own.”

His hand slid down over my ass, cupping it before gently pulling me forward which pressed my lengthening cock against his own hardening flesh. The friction felt amazing, and I caught my breath.

“I don’t want to save you—you don’t need saving. You hardly need anything, which is why I’m so crazy about you.” Hands that had been stroking my ass clamped tight, making sure I couldn’t get away, rocking me forward so that his straining cock settled snugly between my ass cheeks. He moved under me, rubbing, grinding, his eyes narrowing to slits, his mouth opening, tasting the air between us. “You’re stubborn and cold sometimes, and you don’t trust me with all your secrets, but when you’re in my arms, I can see in your eyes that there’s nothing or no one you want more than me.”

It was true. Before I met Logan Church, I didn’t know anything about love.

I saw the muscles in his jaw clench and heard the huff of sharply released breath. “God, Jin, you love so hard, it’s assaulting and possessive and downright scary.”

I put my hand down between us, slipping it under the elastic waistband of his pajama bottoms to stroke him. “Yeah, so?”

“Oh God,” he groaned, like he was in real pain.

“Are you complaining?”

“No, baby, I am not complaining,” he assured me. “I love the way you love me. Whatever you want, whatever you want to do to me or whatever you want from me... just ask.”

He had offered up his whole life on a silver platter, whatever I wanted.

“Please, Logan,” I breathed down the side of his throat. “Fuck me.”

He moved fast, pressing me down into the bed, rolling me to my side so he could spoon around me again. “Your head will blow off if I do what I want, and on top of that, you’ll probably pass out.”

“I don’t think—”

“I know you don’t, so that’s why I’m doing it for you.”

I squirmed in his arms. My body needed him. “Please.”

“No.” He nuzzled his face in my hair, moving it out of the way to reach my skin.

“Logan.”

In answer, he tucked me in tighter against his chest and abdomen, his cotton-covered thighs plastered to my ass and his lips open on the nape of my neck. “You have to rest—rest your body, rest your mind... just rest.”

“Please, Logan,” I begged him, my groan needy. “Put my legs over your shoulders—bury yourself in me, do it now.”

“You’re trying to kill me, but it’s not gonna work. I care more about you than I do about what my cock wants.”

Tremors licked through my body.

“So I’m going to hold you while you sleep right here next to my heart, so you’ll know that you’re safe and that I love you more than anything.”

I stopped moving, just stilled completely, my lust drowning in his genuine concern.

“Don’t be scared. Trust me. I’m not going anywhere.”

My throat tightened up, and I couldn’t speak.

“I made my own decision tonight. No matter how long it takes or what I have to do, I will get you to realize that I’m your guy. I will get you to trust me.”

“Logan, I already trust—”

“No, you don’t, but you will.”

“Logan—”

“I’m sorry for what I said before about us living apart—I was mad, and I know you love your home, our home, more than anything, so I went after that. Forgive me.”

I nodded fast, my throat closing up as I swallowed down tears.

He nuzzled my hair aside, kissing the back of my neck. “I will never, ever have you anyplace but with me. Even if we’re not speaking, even if you hate me, I will go to bed every night with you at my side. You have no choice; you’re mine, my reah.”

As the words seeped into me, I realized how exhausted I was.

“We’re different, it’s true, but not enough to matter and never enough to be apart. I don’t need to be everything; I just need to be close to it, because for me... you’re all there is.”

I wanted to say things, to reassure him of his place in my heart, but I also knew that it had to be real for him, and that meant the timing as well.

“Stop thinking; close your eyes and go to sleep. I have you.”

Given the heat from his body and how safe I felt, I surrendered fast, taking one deep breath before I closed my eyes and sank into the bed.

FOR the first time in a week, it was not the pain in my body that consumed me when I woke up. Just breathing in Logan's scent all night as I lay beside him let me sleep better than I had since he left. My body had actually rested, and so the ache I opened my eyes to was completely different.

My mate.

I felt the growl rise up out of me.

Rolling off the bed, I stood, shucked my pajama bottoms and T-shirt, and felt the relief of having my hard, stiff cock bob free. I could feel how fevered my body was, how much I needed my mate.

Back on the bed, crawling across it to Logan, I took in the carved line of the man, the broad shoulders, the rippling muscles in his back, his narrow waist, and the swell of his buttocks that tapered to long, rock-hard legs. Looking at him, watching him, was making my breath hitch with sharp whimpers and whines. My mate was like a work of art beside me, smelling like smoke and sandalwood. I could not resist the urge to bury my face in his hair and inhale his scent. Moving over him, I kissed down his spine, ending at the firm, round ass. I eased the elastic waistband of his sleep shorts down to expose smooth skin. The bite I took was hardly one; it was gentle, teasing.

"What're you doing?" The deep, warm chuckle curled my toes.

"Your skin tastes so good." My voice came out a raspy whisper. "Feels so good... I just... I think I'm gonna lay here."

"What?"

When I stretched out over him, draped the length of my body across his. He understood. I was pressed against him, giving him all my weight, nuzzling my face in the side of his neck.

"Jesus, baby... what do you need?"

I licked the side of his throat before letting my fangs lengthen, top and bottom, wanting to taste him, pierce his flesh and savor his blood on my tongue. "I need you to trust me when I tell you that I want you. Don't think for me. I know what I have to have to heal me and make me whole."

His body convulsed as he leaned into my bite, a hoarse groan torn from his chest. As I swallowed, there was the faint taste of copper in my mouth, and I shuddered hard.

"I want to be gentle with you," he growled, twisting out from under me, dumping me over on my back, one hard, callused hand wrapping around my aching, already dripping shaft.

"No," I gasped, trying to slide in and out of his warm, steely grip. "I just need you, Logan, I don't need gentle. Please, just... fuck me."

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, his thumb rubbing drops of leaking precome over the head of my shaft.

It felt so good, and he bent toward me.

"No, Logan, I need you to fuck me... please. I need to be claimed and... oh."

There was a moment of absolute stillness as he weighed my words against what he thought he knew. And then he moved. Sometimes I forgot the power that lived in my man and waited, watchful and ready for whenever I willingly submitted myself to him.

His low, hoarse growl sent a shiver through me, and I closed my eyes to listen to the sounds of him opening the drawer in the nightstand and the lube being opened. I let the anticipation build before I opened my eyes again, unable not to look, not to see him.

Watching my mate coat his long, hard, thick cock with lube was one of the many gifts of being the only one that slept in the man's bed.

"Gonna go slow," he promised as he tossed the bottle on the bed, bending forward over me as I lifted my ankles to his shoulders, "and gentle. I want to watch you come apart under me."

I shivered as the tops of my thighs were pressed back against my chest and one long slick finger was eased slowly inside of me.

"I don't want you to be hurt anymore."

"You could never hurt me," I whimpered, frustrated and needy. "Just—please!" I almost growled. "I don't need you to do—I'm ready now. I need you now."

"Jin—"

"Logan! What do I hafta do to get you to fuck me?"

I saw the glint in the eyes hovering above me, the heat that filled them, the way they narrowed as he looked at me.

"You say you love me, want me." My voice quavered. "Show me."

“How you’re looking at me now,” he murmured, “I want you looking at me that way all the time.”

“What would people say,” I asked, catching my breath as my body was folded in half, the swollen head of his hard shaft pressing gently at my entrance.

“They would say what a lucky son of a bitch Logan Church is,” he assured me as he eased slowly inside, filling me, stretching me until he was buried to the hilt.

I gasped as he slid out only to pound back into me a second later, hard and deep. “Oh God, Logan, you feel so good.”

“You...,” he said against my skin, my throat, as he bent and licked and kissed, sucking, biting, all the while stroking in and out of me, deeper, shoving harder, and my body tightened around him in response as I arched up, meeting his thrusts with my own.

“I missed you so bad.... It was the first time since....” What was I supposed to say? That I had craved his touch, been restless and miserable without him? My body had yearned for his; not being under him had been a constant, gnawing ache that never left me. And now, now, I finally had him where I wanted him... finally.

“I missed you too,” he said, like I had spoken my thoughts aloud, his voice husky and low, very sexy.

He anchored himself with a hand on my hip, and his right wrapped around my throbbing cock, the rhythmic pumping in sync with the thrusts in my ass, sending shudders of electricity rushing up my spine. My legs held him tight, my heels pressed to his lower back. I wanted him deeper, urging him on as I rocked against him.

My name was yelled in warning.

“You won’t hurt me,” I swore to him, feeling his restraint, how careful he was being. “Just fuck me... please.”

“Jin—”

“Hard, Logan,” I begged him, trying not to whimper. “Please.”

The gel-slicked hand on my shaft tightened, milking me with firm strokes that had my body convulsing in seconds.

“Logan!”

He lifted my hips, changing his angle, and I was impaled so hard, so deep, that just the motion triggered my roaring orgasm. Usually I felt the tell-tale signs, heat built, my balls ached, my body tightened, but all it took

was Logan slamming into me, exercising his power over me, demanding my submission as well as showing me his absolute love, and I came hard and messy, my spend running over his fingers, to his absolute delight.

“Look what I do to you,” he said, and his eyes were sparkling in the darkness.

I moaned out my agreement.

“You feel so good wrapped around my cock.”

I tried to draw him completely inside, under my skin, my arms, my legs tightening, the muscles in my ass clenching, holding him inside my contracting channel.

“Jin.” He gasped my name before his head fell back as he thrust forward, the flood of warmth letting me know, if the shivering did not, that the man had found his release.

“Come here.”

His head lifted, and he was looking at me through clouded eyes.

I held open my arms, and he collapsed down on top of me, cheek to cheek as we rode out the shuddering aftershocks of our orgasms.

As soon as I could get air into my lungs, I turned my head and kissed the stubbled jaw. “You sure you don’t wanna date me? I cook.”

Heavy sigh, warm breath on my face before his lips touched mine. The kiss was rough and hungry, devouring, and burned right through me. No had ever kissed me the way Logan Church did, possessively and tenderly at the same time.

I breathed him in, sinking down into the bed.

“You’re a terrible cook,” he said as he lifted his lips just barely from mine.

“I have other talents.”

A rumble came from deep in his chest, a sound he only ever made when we were alone. “You know you’re mine.”

“Yes, Logan.”

“Then okay,” he said with a chuckle, lifting up, easing slowly out of my body only to collapse at my side. “I’ll date you. You wanna go to Cairo with me?”

The man had obviously missed the part about dinner and a movie.

“We can run under the moon together beside the pyramids,” he said before he wrapped me in his arms, pulling me to his massive frame,

notching my head under his chin as he held me tight to his heart. “Just you and me.”

I would have tried to talk, would have tried to move or breathe or something, but as it was, the man had overwhelmed me, and all I could do was lie there in his arms and let him hold me, marveling at the love that lived in my mate.

Chapter Four

THE heavenly smell of coffee brought me up from the deep recesses of sleep to find that I was once again alone in my bed. I rose after a few minutes, pulling on sweats and a T-shirt, not ready to shower yet, needing caffeine and food first. I went downstairs, yawning the whole way, and almost pushed on the kitchen door but stopped when I heard voices on the other side.

“You should just tie him up and tell him what’s gonna happen,” I heard Mikhail’s deep, smoky voice, still full of gravel; he had not been awake long. “He is your reah, Logan, you’re not his. You make the rules. You tell him what he can do and where he can go and whom he may see. He lives and dies at your command.”

There was a snort of laughter. “Really. Lives and dies, you say.”

“Christ, I knew it was stupid even while I was saying it.”

I heard Logan’s laughter, warm, rich, and just the sound made my pulse go wild.

“We both know he should—”

“I know what he should do, but between that and what he *will* do... there’s no telling.”

“I confess that I don’t understand the tact you take with him. He is, after all, as I’ve said before, *your* reah. You simply need to tell him what to do.”

Deep male grunt that I would know anywhere. “Is that right? Tell Jin, order Jin... that’s gonna work?”

“Logan—”

“You may be the sylvan of this tribe, but you don’t know anything about my reah. If I want to keep him, and I do, then denying him his freedom to make his own choices is the biggest mistake I can make.”

“But you’re the semel of our tribe, Logan. Your word is law.”

“In the short time that Jin has been here, can you think of one instance where he hasn’t supported me?”

There was a long silence before Mikhail’s irritated sigh.

“You see, that’s what I mean; when I allow Jin to choose his own path, he always chooses the correct one.”

“I’m not saying that Jin is not a good reah. You could not be blessed with a mate more schooled in our laws and customs and protocol, but he must submit to your will—he must.”

Heavy sigh from my mate. “He has to choose it, I can’t force him.”

“You’re the semel. You make the laws.”

Quick scoff. “For all but my reah.”

“When the others see Jin not submitting to you, they will question you.”

“But Jin would never humiliate me with a public show of —”

“Then make certain that all your commands for your reah are done in public so he must do as you tell him.”

“And have him figure it out and skip all public appearances with me?”

“He wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh yes, he would. That’s exactly how his mind works.”

And Logan was right, because even after a mere six months, the man knew me well.

Instead of demanding I be happy, my mate let me be sad. He understood that I laughed when I was nervous and coughed to cover the noise. He could follow my very fragmented train of thought, got my jokes, and had an uncanny talent for finishing my sentences. He always knew when I needed to eat even before I did and never made me come up with dinner suggestions. He knew when I wanted to be held and when I wanted to be held down. He brought up random subjects to pull attention from me when I got upset and kissed me, always, like it was both the first and the

last time he would ever see me. He understood when I told him to go away that I meant he should stay and fight, just as he knew that some days I needed to be all by myself. I really was very lucky, and even though I knew it, there was always the nagging doubt in the back of my head that someday everything would simply go up in smoke.

“Jin?”

Startled, embarrassed for being caught eavesdropping, I turned fast to face Domin, who had just come in from outside. He smelled like wind and something else that I couldn’t place.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

I noticed how wrung out he looked. “Domin—”

“You look like crap,” he commented, looking me over. “Should you be up?”

“I’m fine.” I studied him. “You’re the one who—what’s wrong with you?”

Quick head shake, forced smile. “Nothing.”

But even if his words could fool me, there was a weariness radiating off the man that I had never seen in him before, and the usually laughing brown eyes were flat. “That’s bull—”

Shoving me through the door cut me off and killed all the conversation in the room we entered as everyone looked up from the table at the same time. I had thought since I didn’t hear anyone else that Logan and Mikhail were alone, but that was not the case. Crane was missing, and Koren, and Russ, who was still in Los Angeles, and Logan’s mother Eva, who was still in Pittsburgh, but everyone else was there, staring at me. I muffled a groan as mouths fell open, breath was caught, and, in Delphine’s case, tears were quickly swallowed.

“I’m fine,” I assured her.

She nodded fast, her eyes filling.

I looked at Ivan, saw how pained he looked. He had seen me last night outside, but apparently in the light of day I was giving him heart palpitations.

“My reah,” he said, his voice low, subdued.

“I really look like crap, huh?” I tried to tease.

Sharp inhale of breath as Yuri rose and crossed the room to me.

"It's not your fault," I said firmly, wanting him to hear me and believe me.

He stopped inches away, and I had to tilt my head back to look up into his face.

"We both know there was nothing else you could have done."

Slowly, he sank to his knees in front of me.

"We look like twins." I smiled just a little, reaching out, touching his face as I stared at the cut lip, bruised eye, and yellow and purple blotches over his jaw and throat.

He swallowed hard, unable to keep from leaning into my palm, lifting his head so my hand ran the length of his cheek. The others needed to touch and be touched by Logan—it was the pull of his power on regular cats—but Yuri, as a sheseru, craved mine. "I'll kill them all, Jin... I have no choice."

It was funny how his harsh words did not match the tender motion.

"They violated the law."

My eyes flicked to Logan, and I found him and Mikhail walking toward me. "I don't want anyone hurt because of me. Tell him."

"That's not your choice."

"Logan, I—"

"No," he said icily. "Yuri will do as his station demands."

"Logan—"

"No," he said flatly as he reached me, grabbing hold of my arm and yanking me close to him. "You do not have a say here, Jin. You were attacked, and I will kill every man that violated the sanctity of my home. You cannot possibly understand the magnitude of the trespass, but I do, Yuri does, Mikhail, Domin... you're the only one missing it."

I looked around the room at Markel, Delphine, even Logan's father, Peter Church, all of them looking at me with the same look of grim resolve.

"No." I was firm. "It's barbaric. We don't kill people."

Yuri rose to his full, towering height beside me. “Your kindness will be mistaken as your semel being weak because he does not punish those who would harm his reah. Do not ask that of Logan or of me.”

“I—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Domin said, interrupting me. “No one’s gonna be punishing anybody until we get to the feast.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone absorbed his words.

“What are you talking about?” Logan asked irritably.

When I looked back at Domin, I realized suddenly that he was more than just tired or even sad—he was hurt. He looked just as bad as Yuri and me. The left side of his face, which I hadn’t been able to see from my angle in the hall, was covered in marks. His eye would be black and blue, and it was pain I was seeing etched on his face. He was holding himself stiffly, afraid to move too fast, and there was hesitancy in his every step. The man had been wounded.

“Both Abbot George and Ian Lund went to Cairo last night to meet with their semel. They left without gaining Christophe’s permission to leave his land and so have violated the mandate of the sanctuary Avery granted them,” Domin explained, his eyes fluttering for a second when he flexed the muscles in his back. “Christophe is furious.”

“How do you know?” Yuri asked him.

“Because I just came from his home,” he said tiredly, walking over to the kitchen sink.

When he reached it, he let out a deep breath, gripping the counter, and after a moment, he let his head fall forward.

I turned to my mate. “He didn’t go alone, did he?”

Silence.

“You didn’t let him go see Christophe and Avery alone?”

When I saw the uncertainty on Logan’s face, how his eyes were slowly filling with dread, I felt my heart clench.

“Logan?”

“I never... worry,” he said softly, “about him.”

And I understood. None of us ever concerned ourselves with Domin. He was savage and strong and he didn’t walk, he swaggered. I never

thought of him as being vulnerable; none of us did. But seeing how he was standing, leaning, holding on, I was scared.

“Shit,” Yuri said under his breath, moving to go to him.

I put out a restraining hand. “Don’t.”

His eyes were on my face, but not for a moment did he think of disregarding my order.

“He’ll never let you,” I said under my breath. “He’s too proud.”

There was no doubt that I knew what I was talking about. Domin Thorne used to be the semel of his tribe, and now he was Logan’s second. And I knew he liked being a maahes, a prince, more than he like leading his own tribe, but that didn’t make what other people said to him any easier to bear.

I knew from firsthand experience that Christophe and his men never missed an opportunity to rub Domin’s nose in the fact that instead of death he had chosen to willingly submit himself and his people to the rule of Logan Church. Even though it was the best decision for everyone, it didn’t stop the slurs and snide comments. I could only imagine what had happened when he had gone to the tribe of Pakhet to demand that they surrender Abbot George and his cohort to him. He would have had to fight for them to take him seriously, and from the looks of him, that was exactly what he’d done.

“Did they attack you?” I asked gently.

“No, I attacked them.”

“Without provocation?”

“There was enough on all sides so that Logan will not be hearing from Christophe on my behalf.”

I cleared my throat. “Did Avery come after you alone?”

“No,” he sighed. “That’s not his way.”

So Domin had been jumped far enough out of Christophe’s presence that he could claim he didn’t know what was going on.

“Domin,” Logan said gently, “tell me how many of them there—”

“Morning,” Koren announced as he barged into the kitchen, throwing open the swinging door. “Has anyone seen—”

“He’s right there,” I said, cutting him off, pointing over at Domin. I didn’t have to be told who he was looking for. He was always looking for Domin.

Whatever was going on between them, the rest of us could really only guess at. No one knew: we assumed we did; some of us hoped we did; others wondered, speculated; but we didn’t *know*. The truth was between the two of them. I could give voice to my dream, my wish, but even though Crane thought I could influence them, in reality I had no pull over either of them. None of us did, not even Logan.

Koren stopped like he’d suddenly come to the edge of a cliff, and I watched him stare at the long line of the man’s back for a moment before he charged across the room to him.

“Don’t,” Domin warned him, turning his head to the left, away, as Koren moved up on his right.

“Lemme look at you.”

“I’m fine,” he muttered. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

The accusation was there in the wounded tone and the defeated words. Koren had been running, and Domin wanted, needed someone to stay. It was time.

I held my breath.

“I’m where I should be.”

Domin was silent.

“Don’t be an ass.” Koren smiled slightly, leaning into Domin, rubbing his chin on the man’s shoulder and then his nose, smiling slightly as Domin shook his head. The emotion there on display eased the vise on my heart. No one could miss the familiarity between the two men.

“Don’t rub your scent all over me,” Domin grouched at him.

“Why the hell not?” Koren grumbled back, the grin that the other man couldn’t see absolutely wicked. “I like you smelling like me.”

Domin grunted, but I saw the shiver, the first sign of the thaw.

“I want everyone to smell me on you.”

“When did—I...”

I looked back at Logan, arching an eyebrow for him as he grinned sheepishly, rubbing his head. He had been clueless about the whole thing, which showed from his comment.

“Where have I been?”

“Oblivious,” I assured my mate, smiling at him.

He lifted his eyebrows, sighing deeply. “Apparently so.”

Looking back at the two men whose relationship I had been losing sleep over, I saw Koren’s eyes drift closed. Domin’s scent was obviously intoxicating as he breathed the other man in. When Domin lifted his hand and buried it in Koren’s hair, leaning him into the crook of his neck, I felt a wave of relief flood over me.

Domin drove me crazy. He fought me at every turn, and he was a smartass who took great delight in pointing out my flaws for everyone. And I liked him more with each passing day. Something about Domin brought out all my nurturing tendencies to protect and love. I wanted someone else to get it, get that the man was worth having, keeping, and by Koren’s actions, I felt like maybe, finally, he did.

Logan cleared his throat. “Domin, tell me what happened when you went to see Christophe.”

He didn’t turn around, but his voice, when it came, sounded better, stronger. “Christophe told me that Kellen’s panthers ran. Their semel called, and they went. Why Kellen would call for them knowing that both of them, as well as him, have to answer to you for the attack on your reah, Christophe has no idea. Avery didn’t know either. All they did know was that now they too have to challenge Kellen Grant.”

“Because Avery, and so ultimately Christophe, is responsible for both panthers,” Mikhail sighed deeply. “God, what a mess.”

“Why would Kellen call his panthers to him knowing that they should face me?” Logan asked the room in general.

“Isn’t it obvious? He doesn’t want them to face your wrath.” Domin sighed, tipping his head to the right as Koren pressed his lips, again, to the side of his neck.

“Koren,” Peter Church said suddenly, his voice sharp, shrill. “May I—”

“No.” My voice was louder, deeper, with more than a thread of warning in it.

I was aware of the eyes of everyone in the room. Only Domin and Koren weren’t looking at me.

“I mean no disrespect, my reah,” Logan and Koren’s father began, “but he—”

“No.” I shook my head before I turned to lock my gaze with his. “To be named mate of the maahes of any tribe is a great honor. But to be named mate of a maahes who serves a semel-re is a gift.”

“But surely—”

“I know firsthand that not all tribes are like mine,” I told him, “like ours. But as the reah of my tribe, I promise you that should your son choose to be the mate of the maahes that it would be a great honor and no cause for anything but joy when that announcement is made.”

The older man searched my eyes, and after long minutes he looked away, unable to hold my gaze. “As you say.”

“You doubt it?” My voice rose because it felt like he was challenging me, and I couldn’t have that from anyone.

“No.” He shook his head, looking back at me, his expression softening. “I simply deal with change slower than you, my reah.”

I nodded, allowing him to think he had placated me, my eyes flicking back to Koren, who was smiling at Domin in a way that left no doubt about what was between them.

Seeing Domin’s trembling reaction, watching Koren straighten to his full height as Domin’s head sank sideways onto his shoulder, I caught my breath.

Logan coughed, and I looked over at him, finding his discomfort over watching his younger brother finally give in to his desire for the man he loved absolutely endearing.

“Yes?” Domin asked him, finally turning to face Logan, his arm sliding around Koren’s neck, tugging him close. They were so close in height, the two men, Koren only slightly taller, six-three to Domin’s six-two. It was nice that they could take turns leaning, one strong when the other was weak.

“When is Christophe leaving for the feast?”

“He’s leaving tonight; he just had to wait for Evan to get back from visiting his family in Oregon before they left.”

“Of course he had to wait for Evan,” Yuri chimed in, seemingly completely unaffected by Domin and Koren’s display of affection. “No semel wants to be at the feast without his sylvan, someone who knows all the laws. There’s no forgiveness of protocol in front of the semel-aten, Ammon El Masry, or the priest of Chae Rophon and the council of Ennead.”

Logan reached for me, taking my hand, curling his fingers into mine.

“No, there’s not,” Mikhail agreed. “And I heard that the priest, Hamid Shamon, is even harder on breaches of etiquette than his predecessor was.”

“I heard that last year he had a yareah flogged,” Domin said softly.

“A yareah?” Logan asked, clutching my hand. “Why not the semel?”

“The semel did nothing to displease him.”

“But the semel could have taken his mate’s punishment.”

“Only if the priest allows it,” Domin clarified, “and he didn’t.”

“Holy shit.”

“He’s a true priest, Logan; he demands absolute devotion to the law.”

“If that’s true, then why in the world would Kellen take his men there? The priest will insist that he hand them over to me. That’s the law.”

“No,” I corrected him, “the law would be a challenge in the pit in front of the priest, and he’d choose what kind he’d want.”

“Explain that to me,” Logan said, looking down at me, his gold eyes absorbing my face.

“A challenge in front of the priest of Chae Rophon and the council of Ennead is not like a normal challenge in the pit. A challenge there could be one of strength but could just as easily be reciting laws or a test of speed or whatever the priest wants to see exhibited. Sometimes he’ll punish or make odd requests, but usually it won’t be something that’ll kill you. He’ll have to explain to the priest in word and deed why he did what he did, but with you he’s dead. With the priest, it could be a lot of things but not normally death.”

"I heard that once the priest made a semel and his yareah have sex right there in the pit in front of him to prove their desire for one another." Domin sighed, his eyes narrowing in half, the effect of having Koren close to him clearly overwhelming.

"That's profane; the man's just a voyeur."

"I'm sure he had his reasons," I told Logan, "but the point is that if I were Christophe, I'd take my chances with the priest too."

"Why?"

"Because you're scary," I assured him.

"What?"

I glanced at the others for backup.

"It's true," Yuri sighed. "I would not want to ever meet you one-on-one in the pit."

"Me either," Mikhail agreed.

"Yeah, me either," Domin told him, "which was why I put it off for so long when I was faced with that decision. I don't think you realize how frightening you are."

Logan growled his frustration, and I understood. His choices were being taken from him. "Kellen Grant will hand his men over to me because if he doesn't it'll be his head I take."

I shivered.

"It can't be helped, Jin."

"They forfeited their lives the second they put their hands on you," Yuri assured me, his eyes flat, cold, his voice devoid of feeling. "The only end they have is how well they choose to die in the pit."

My mate nodded. "The moment we get to the feast, I will ask for an... audience... with the priest of... what are you doing?" He chuckled suddenly, looking at me.

"What?" I asked, distracted, smiling back. The way he was looking at me, how soft his eyes were, made my stomach flutter.

"Why are you looking around?"

"Don't you smell that?"

"Smell what?"

How could he miss it? I looked at Yuri. "Can you smell it?"

He shook his head. "What should I be smelling?"

"I only smell Domin," Koren chimed in.

I rolled my eyes.

"What is it?" Mikhail asked me. "What do you smell?"

I had no idea how they were missing it. I could taste the smell, it was so strong. "Really? You don't smell that?"

"What is it?" Logan asked, reaching out to touch my hair. He couldn't keep his hands off of me.

"Like eucalyptus," I said slowly, looking around. I knew the scent, but it made no sense in the kitchen, since there were no windows open, and as far as I knew, there were no eucalyptus trees on the entire mountain, much less our property.

"I don't—"

Logan was cut off when there was a slight whistle, and Yuri grunted before he turned to look at me and then sank to his knees, crashing hard to the floor. I went to move, but Peter and Mikhail collapsed around me. Delphine said my name and fell forward onto the table. Markel slumped sideways out of his chair, dropping to the floor. Turning my head, I saw that Koren had collapsed over a prone Domin. Ivan was crumpled beside the table, shattered glass and pooling orange juice around him.

I was going to yell for Crane, to warn him, but Logan shoved me behind him, distracting me. Before I got my hands on him, wanting to touch him, he fell back against me, forcing me to my knees so I could guide him in his slow slide down my body to the tile floor.

I clutched at him as the kitchen filled with eight men, all looking very normal in T-shirts, jeans, army boots, and—the oddity—Kevlar vests. They were all carrying rifles with scopes, and I noticed the darts then, instead of bullets, as one man loaded them. It was surreal, and I was terrified for myself, but even more so for Logan.

"Get out of my house," I ordered them instead of asking what they were doing there. I hardly cared; I just wanted them gone.

"We have come for you, reah," one of them told me.

"Did you"—I had to swallow my fear as my eyes flicked down to Logan—"is it poison?"

“It’s a drug that will wear off,” another man promised me. “Fear not, reah, we were not paid to kill the semel.”

“*My semel*,” I corrected him as the men advanced on me. I put a hand over Logan’s heart, which I could feel beating strong and steady. It comforted me.

“We’re here for you,” he said as he lifted his hand, leveling the gun at me. Trapped under Logan’s massive frame, I could barely move. Any attempt at escape would be futile.

“Why?”

“Laurent Bruyere wants to see you.”

I caught my breath at the mention of the man’s name, a ghost from my past. The sting was only momentary; I felt a wave of heat an instant before my vision blurred and then went black.

Chapter Five

I OPENED my eyes and it was dark. I had no idea where I was, and there wasn't anything around me as far as I could tell. I put my hand up and couldn't see it in front of my face. I waited for my eyes to adjust, but there was nothing to adjust to. When I tried to sit up, it hurt. There were sharp pains shooting down my side. My T-shirt was wet, and it was cold here. Colder than anywhere I was familiar with could have been in the middle of summer. The air smelled like dirt and fresh-cut flowers. My head was pounding, and when I went to touch it, there was a bump over my left eyebrow that hurt even when I merely brushed my fingers over it. I wondered how late it was even as I started to panic about Logan and where and how he was.

"Hello?" I called out, but my voice was gone. I cleared my throat and tried again, but still it was like I had laryngitis or something. "Shit."

I really wanted to get up, but when I tried to move, I could barely breathe. I lay back down and waited. I must have fallen asleep.

When I woke up, I was really thirsty. My body was used to taking in a lot of water, and I never waited until I needed it, I just guzzled it all day long. That I felt like I had to drink was not a good sign. It was still pitch black wherever I was, and the weird smell was still there.

"Jin."

I couldn't see him, but I knew the voice, remembered the voice. I sat up, wincing, and did my best not to make any more noise. "Laurent. What's going on?"

"What do you think?"

"I dunno. You tell me."

“I took you from that semel.”

And I had my mouth open to scream back at him that he had taken me from my mate, had taken me from my home, when I hesitated. Even though the venom was roaring through me, I swallowed it down, the strain making my eyes water. “Do you know Logan Church?” I rasped, my body trembling.

“No, I don’t know him. He’s just another in a long line of conquests, I’m sure. Just another semel enamored with having a reah on his land.”

He had no clue that Logan Church was my mate, and if I told him... it would be a mistake. It was one thing to remove an unmated reah from another’s territory; it was a death sentence to kidnap the mate of a semel. Laurent Bruyere had no idea what he’d done, but he would if I made it out alive. *When....*

“The point is that I found you,” he almost snarled at me. “After searching for more than two years... I finally found you. That stupid aset of Logan Church’s tribe... she was talking about some girl and Crane”—he drew my best friend’s name out—“Crane.... I knew if I found him I’d find you, and I did... I so did.”

I had to be very careful. If he found out that Logan was my mate, I was done. No matter how far gone I thought he was, his survival instinct would kick in. He was an animal, after all. And I had no idea how he had missed my mark, the one that told every other werepanther that I was a mated reah, the scar at the top of my spine, but he had and I was thankful. My hair was thick and long and a lot of it had to be moved aside and it was dark and unless he was looking...but still it was there, Logan’s brand on my flesh. If it stayed my secret I would be thankful.

I cleared my throat. “So what now?”

“I think you know.”

“No. If I did I wouldn’t ask.”

“I want you to come back.”

“Oh.” I coughed because my throat really hurt. It felt bruised, like I had been choked. “What about your yareah?”

“She’s gone.”

“Okay. Where did she—”

“There was an accident. She’s dead.”

But *how*, was the question. Had he done it, killed his own yareah?

“I know she hurt you.”

He had hurt me with his betrayal. Her response was understandable.

Once upon a time, I had thought, even though he was not my mate, that Laurent Bruyere, the semel of the tribe of Dendera, was the man I would spend my life with. But when his yareah had returned home from her summer away and I had learned that everything he had said to me was a lie, my vision of the future had changed.

I had been in bed with the man one moment, flat on my back on the floor a second later. Having had no idea that he was mated, the sense of betrayal had been first, humiliation following, and finally terror as the punishment of the yareah was handed down. I had to prove my claim, confirm to her I was a reah, and she wanted me in werepanther form. She wanted to see what sort of pain could be inflicted on me in that state. And it was her right. I had violated her bond with her mate, and I was not his reah. If I was his true-mate, I would have taken her place at his side, and she would have become his second mate or taurth. But as I was not his mate, she was allowed to make her displeasure known. Only the semel-aten, master of Sobek, could make a reah his consort. Another semel could not. Since I was not Laurent Bruyere's reah and he could not keep me, it was his yareah's right to show me the wages of sin. I had been made to pay.

Forced to strip naked in front of the entire tribe, I had to show them that I could shift from werepanther to panther and back to human, proving my claim of being a reah. Once the humiliation was over, the punishment had begun.

I remembered the flogging that her sylvan gave me after I shifted. I remembered her claws on my skin after I was made to go through it the second time, and I remembered the beating that was ordered and how I was tied down. Had I not been able to shift as fast as I could, then a fate I could not imagine would have been mine. As it was, I had run and never looked back. I had collected my best friend and left town the same day. Never did I see the leader of the tribe of Dendera again. I wondered now what had prompted him to simply take me by force instead of contacting me when he learned where I was. It made no sense.

“Jin? Love.”

The endearment was enough to roll my stomach.

“I'm sorry I hurt you.”

And I wondered if he meant then or now.

"I just... you left without permission and should have been punished. When I saw you, I wasn't able to control myself."

So after two, almost three years of missing me, the second he saw me, he beat me. He and his dead yareah were not as different as he supposed.

"Can you forgive me?"

My side really hurt. "Where am I?"

"In a wine cellar."

"I see. Where is it?"

"On my family's property in Sobek."

Which answered my question as to where I was. Somehow, some way, I had been taken to Egypt. Hearing how far I was away from my mate, my tribe, my home, I felt my heart clench.

"Jin?"

Keeping him talking was the key to my survival. "Oh. You told me once that was a big piece of land. You said there was a beautiful villa."

"There is."

"Okay. You want to let me outta here, Laurent, so we can talk, maybe have some dinner?"

"I bought you a new condo in Dallas; it's just three blocks from where I live."

"Okay."

"I want you to agree to come home with me and live there."

"Whatever you want."

There was a long silence. "Do I believe you?"

"Pardon?"

"Jin, I don't think you'll come with me. I think you think I'm crazy."

"No."

"Yes... you hate me."

"I don't."

"Yes you do," he said, and he shoved a cloth against my face. It smelled bad but just for a second.

I COULDN'T sit up. Everything hurt. It felt like there was no air. I was concentrating on not hyperventilating. I knew days were passing, but it was hard to even judge in the dark. I fell asleep and dreamed about Gatorade.

I WAS thinking about Logan and how great he looked when he got up in the morning with his hair all tousled and his eyes soft. I missed him.

"Who do you miss?"

I guess I was talking out loud. "No one."

"Who, Jin?"

"No one," I insisted.

"Who, Jin?" He got louder. "Who do you miss?"

"Christ, Laurent, give it a rest," I said irritably, trying to act like I always did. Trying not to sound scared. "Can I have some water, please? My body's gonna go into shock."

I felt the bottle in my hand, and it was a gallon jug. I realized that the plastic piece was still around the neck of the bottle. That was good. I hoped that meant he hadn't put anything weird in it. I peeled it off and unscrewed the lid. I drank slowly, but I drank it all.

"Another? I know you need it."

"Please."

When the second bottle was leaned into my hand, I felt his fingers trail through my hair.

"This is so beautiful, Jin. It's like silk."

I didn't answer, just sipped my water.

"You look so good."

How could he tell in the dark? "Please lemme out, Laurent," I said between sips.

"Only one more day, Jin. I'm almost finished. You can get out tomorrow."

"Where am I going?"

“In the ground, Jin. I’m gonna shoot you and put you in the hole I dug.”

I almost threw up. The combination of his matter-of-fact voice and being in the dark made me panic. “Why do you wanna hurt me?”

“‘Cause without you, I’ll be okay. As long as I know nobody else can have you.”

“But you were fine all that time I was gone.”

He laughed loudly and for a long time.

“Laurent.”

“I wasn’t fine! I wasn’t fine—I was never fine! Jesus, Jin, I hired a private detective to find you, but he couldn’t... you and Crane.... I wanted to know everything you did, everywhere you went. I wanted to know, Jin, but I didn’t. I never saw you again.”

There was a strange tone to his voice, and the way he repeated my name made him sound so lost, so sad, and yet so very angry.

“Just thinking about other men touching you and looking at you... I hated it! I would’ve given anything to make it stop. Anything.” His voice went up high, cracking, and it was scary the way it came out of the dark sounding so menacing. “I thought if I could just see you and talk to you, then I could make you understand.”

“Then let’s go somewhere and talk.”

“Why are you hurt? Who did you let hurt you?”

Strange topic change. “I was in a fight; I didn’t let anyone hurt me on purpose. You know that’s not me.”

“Do I? What do I know?”

“Laurent, you—”

He grabbed my hair and yanked my head back hard. I tried to struggle, but between the lack of food and the dehydration, I was weak. And I hurt everywhere. And I was freezing. And I was still healing week-old wounds.

“Let me go!”

“I don’t want to be away from you! I never want to be away from you! I love you!”

“This isn’t love.”

He was on me suddenly, pulling at my clothes, his mouth searching for mine.

“Get off me!” I screamed.

He shoved me down hard, my face smashing against the stone floor.

“Laurent, get the fuck off me!” I screamed.

“I bet I could rape you if I wanted.”

I fought as hard as I could as his hands tore at me. Normally I could shift and slip right through his fingers, but I was just too weak. I couldn’t change my form.

“You’re burning up, Jin. Your skin’s so hot.”

He yanked my T-shirt up and pulled it roughly over my head. I felt his hands sliding over my chest and then digging into skin that until that second I hadn’t known was shredded.

The howl filled my ears, and it took a moment for me to realize that I was listening to my own cry.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he snarled at me. “Nothing hurts you, Jin.”

The pain became everything for long moments before subsiding to a manageable throbbing burn. I felt his claws sinking into me, registered the liquid warmth, and knew I was bleeding. The smell, never to be mistaken for anything else, assaulted me.

“You’re bleeding,” he said nonchalantly as I got lightheaded.

His hand was on my throat, the other in my hair as he snapped my head back. He found my mouth then and kissed me hard. It hurt. He bit my lip, and I tasted blood.

“Open your mouth,” he demanded, and I felt his claws on my face, trying to get me to open my jaws.

I felt his mouth on my neck, and he bit down hard. I yelled and bucked, trying to get him off me, but he wouldn’t budge. He sank his fangs into my shoulder, and I screamed. He bit everywhere he could reach, and it was like being knifed over and over. The pain was searing, and I yelled myself hoarse.

“Goddamnit, Jin,” he roared, kneeling me hard between my legs, and because of the angle, he hit my groin.

I curled up into a ball and rolled over on my side. His hands were on me a second later, trying to yank down my pants. I started to retch, and he

scrambled away from me fast. I got on my hands and knees, trying not to vomit. My stomach was twisted into a knot.

“So what? Just kissing me makes you sick now?”

I couldn’t stop retching, and I was so dizzy. The room felt like it was rocking from side to side. It was like that carnival ride that tips back and forth and finally right over before you hold in limbo upside down, suspended in midair.

He kicked me hard in the ribs, and I fell over on my side as I sucked in breath.

“Fuck you, Jin!” he snarled at me, and then he caught me in the face with the same foot. I felt like my head blew up, and there was only black again.

I TRIED to move. My left hand wouldn’t. It felt like it wasn’t even attached to my body. I hoped it still was. I couldn’t even roll to my side. I felt soggy. I went back to sleep.

I HAD a bad dream, so I got out of bed and walked down the hall to her room. I tiptoed over to my grandmother’s side of the bed. I stood there and waited. After a few moments, one of her eyes opened. I saw her smile in the dark.

“What’s wrong, lovebug?” she sighed, her voice sleepy and soft.

“Cold, Nana,” I said, pointing at her.

She threw back the covers, and I climbed into bed next to her. She wrapped me in the blanket and cuddled me tight. I was so content, so warm, and so safe.

“You all right?”

I turned my head to look at Logan. “Hey,” I said, smiling at him. “I missed you so bad.”

He held me tight, and I was wrapped up in the down comforter, snuggled up into his shoulder in my bed. I sighed deeply, content. I just wanted his skin next to mine.

“Sleep, baby,” he said, his voice like velvet. “I’ve got you. Go to sleep.”

So I did.

IT FELT like a knife that had been set on fire was shoved into my back.

Hard kick in my back.

Punch in my chest.

Vicious strike in my stomach, and then there was weight straddling me, sitting on my groin, hands flat on my abdomen. Laurent.

“Your skin is the problem,” he told me, his voice without a trace of humanity. He sounded robotic. “It’s like it haunts me. I think I’m going to cut it all off.”

“Okay,” I said, my eyes drifting closed.

“Can you feel the knife?”

I could. I could also feel his hands closing around my throat, and then there was nothing again.

MY SHOULDER was throbbing. I groaned and rolled over on my back.

“It’s like if you were dead, it would be okay.”

“Okay,” I agreed.

“I mean I don’t get to go to bed with you anymore. I don’t get to lie beside you and look at you naked and hold you and... I want you to be mine. Do you even get it? Do you...?” He trailed off, and I felt his hands on me, rolling me over on my stomach. “Let’s get these pants off,” he said in a strange, quiet voice.

“Please don’t,” I pleaded, swallowing hard, trying so hard to stay awake.

“I have to, Jin. I have to be inside you.”

I would have begged, bargained, done anything, but my face was pushed down into the dirt on the floor. I couldn’t stay conscious.

I OPENED my eyes because I couldn't breathe. There was something heavy on my back.

"Get off," I managed to get out.

"Oh, sorry," he said, like everything was normal, and he shifted his weight so he was sitting on the small of my back instead of across my shoulder blades. "Do you know what my favorite thing about being with you was?"

I had no idea.

"Sometimes when you were asleep in my bed, I'd just stand there and watch you and I'd think, goddamn, that's mine. He belongs to me...." He let out a deep breath. "I bet you have no idea what it's like to look at someone and have that feeling of ownership just hit you. To be so crazy about another person that they belong to you and you'll do anything to keep it that way. Have you ever felt like that?"

Every single time I looked at Logan Church. I would just see him and think that way, that breath-catching feeling of possessiveness.

"And then it was just over and you were gone. You took the few things that were yours and left. And you know what bugged me at first?" he asked as he ran his hands over my bare back. "That you left nothing behind. There was no toothbrush, no stray T-shirt, no shampoo, nothing even in the refrigerator. You just completely disappeared like you had never been there."

I was silent.

"I just wanted there to be something, but there was nothing. I had no pictures of you, no note. I mean, one day I had everything, and the next you were gone. Do you even care what that did to me?"

I tensed because I knew his questions were always punctuated with violence. He didn't disappoint me. He got up fast, scrambling to his feet, and kicked me hard in the ribs. I passed out in the middle of it.

Chapter Six

I AWOKE to his weight on top of me. He was stretched out above me so that his groin was shoved against my ass. “You said you wanted me to fuck you? Is that what you said?”

I was going to answer, but he put his hand over my mouth.

“Jin, baby, you’re gonna like this. I know I will. I love looking at your ass, now I’m finally gonna have it.”

I wasn’t going to ask why he hadn’t raped me when I was passed out, but the answer was unimportant, only the fact that I had not been violated. I tried to wiggle free, but his fist went hard to my left kidney.

“Why are you fighting me? It’s not like you can anymore.”

He was so heavy I could barely breathe, and the gravel was cutting into my palms.

“And it’s not like you didn’t give yourself to me willingly all those years ago. It will be just like that all over again.”

No, please God, no.

“I will make you feel so good.”

There were spots, and they were getting bigger and brighter. The ringing in my ears became deafening. The darkness was a relief.

THE hand slid over my bare buttocks, and I shuddered.

“I wanted it to just be us, but you’re still strong enough to fight me a little. And I want you to be awake for it; I want you to scream when I fuck you.”

I trembled, bile rising in my throat.

“Can you feel the lube?” he asked, his breath hot and wet in my ear. “I brought it for you.”

Sudden click before my world exploded in glaring light, and I closed my eyes tight so I wouldn’t go blind. I had been in darkness for at least a week, maybe longer; it would take more than just seconds for my eyes to adjust and not burn. The gasp, like many indrawn breaths at once, turned to absolute silence.

“Ohmygod.” One voice rose above the others. “It smells like piss and blood in here.”

There was a good reason for that.

“What the fuck?”

I curled up into a ball because I couldn’t move away, no strength left, no nothing, just trying to protect myself.

“Jesus,” someone else moaned, and it was sharp and loud and pained. It was as though the person had been startled by my presence.

“What?” Laurent asked, and I heard how surprised his tone was. “I don’t think he can do much anymore, but I still want you guys to hold him down while I fuck him, just in case. Put him over the table over—”

“Oh no.... Oh God.” The wail of dismay hurt to hear.

“What’re you...? No, no, no, you don’t have to worry about—”

“Laurent!” His name was yelled. “Are you insane? What the hell have you done?”

“Look at all the blood... have you ever seen so much—”

“He looks like he was attacked by a fuckin’ animal!”

“Wait, that’s not all me, some of that was on him from before. I think he was in a fight.”

“Holy shit... we’re so fuckin’ dead.”

The voices were layering on top of one another, rising, desperate, and frightened.

“Edward,” someone gasped, “what the fuck are we gonna do?”

There were at least four men in the room now besides Laurent.

“There’s someone outside,” another man whispered.

“It’s probably Sean, just let—”

“Why the fuck are you whispering, you stupid shit? There’s only us here.”

Loud bang followed by cursing, and I heard shuffling across what I knew now was an old stone floor covered in dirt.

“Edward!”

“Here,” the call went back, but just barely.

“Edward, goddamnit, it’s like a fuckin’ maze in here, where—”

“Here!” the voice snarled back, louder, mad.

“Fuck!” the newest addition yelled, close now. “Why the fuck am I getting a call the middle of the fucking night to come out to the middle of—Jesus.”

It sounded like he had been sucker-punched in the gut.

“What the hell did you guys do?” His voice caught, broke.

“We didn’t do shit! This is all your semel’s work, Sean—your fuckin’ semel!”

“David. What’re—”

“Because your useless-ass sylvan didn’t know who to call.”

“Call Bobby, for crissakes! He’s the one who—”

“You can’t call fuckin’ Bobby, he’s a sheseru!”

“Yeah? So? That’s who you need to—”

“That is a reah lying there bleeding to death on the fuckin’ floor. Do you know what the first priority of any sheseru is, you stupid fuck?”

“Why are you yell—what?”

“Yeah, reah—you heard me. I remember him; you will too—just give it a second.”

“But reahs are women not—except... except....”

“Oh, he’s got it now, boys.”

“Jesus Christ, Dave, could you both just try and get a—”

“What, Ed? What? What would you like me not to do right now?”

“You’re his brother. You—”

“And he fuckin’ just killed us all with his bullshit.”

I knew who they were. It would have made sense for them to hide their names, but I understood why they hadn’t. They were looking at me

huddled on the floor and talking about me like I was already dead. And maybe I was.

There was a long, low exhale of breath from above me. “What are we gonna do?”

Edward was Laurent Bruyere’s sylvan. David was Laurent’s brother, and Sean was one of Laurent’s oldest friends. The fourth man could have been anyone. I wished it had been his sheseru, Robert Kingman, Bobby, but they were smarter than that. If they invited their sheseru, he would have turned on them in a second. I had never met Bobby—he had been away when I met Laurent—but by all accounts, he was a good man and hardwired the same way every sheseru was, to protect and guard a reah.

“This isn’t just another one? This isn’t just some random guy?”

The fourth man had spoken, and from his tone I understood that the reality of his situation was just, that second, becoming clear for him. I understood too that Laurent Bruyere, who had once upon a time been kind and sweet, had turned into an abomination. I was not the first man he had tortured and planned to rape.

“Who—who is he?”

“Jin Rayne.”

“You—”

“The missing reah?” The fourth man squeaked out. “Ohmygod, Laurent, you kidnapped the reah that everyone’s been—”

“He’s my reah! He belongs to me!”

“Oh fuck me!” David, or Edward, it was hard to tell, cried out.

“You guys don’t need to—”

“Laurent, you stupid son of a bitch! You tortured the reah!”

“He’s my reah! He’s mine to do—”

“You can’t do that to a reah! He’ll be missed and—”

“And Bobby’s not here to clean it up!” David roared, his voice, when he was screaming, clearly recognizable.

“We’ve never asked him to clean anything up—he doesn’t know about what Laurent does, he can never know. He can’t ever find out.”

“He won’t, okay? He’ll never find out, but right now we need to figure out what the fuck we’re gonna do with the re—”

“No!” The word was yelled so loud it hurt my ears. “My reah stays with—”

“He’s not your reah, you fuckin’ psychopath! He’s mated! He has a semel who he belongs to who’s looking for—”

“No!” Laurent screamed again, and it was awful and high-pitched, sounding desperate and terrified.

“Yes! He’s—”

“He’s mated, you idiot!” David roared at him. “Everyone’s talking about it! You kidnapped a mated reah!”

“You’re insane! He can’t be a mated to a semel, he’s a man! Only a—”

“Yes, he can! Yes, he is! You stupid fuck!” David lost it, his voice shaking with fear. “You stole a fuckin’ mated reah! You are so dead, and your tribe... your family... our tribe, my family, all of us, Edward, Sean, Eric, me, your own brother, we’re all fuckin’ dead, because we’re here with you and... oh God.” He whimpered.

There was a thundering silence, and all I could think was that the fourth guy’s name was Eric. Why it was important, I didn’t know, but it was. I wanted to know everyone’s name.

“He’s mine.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“That’s all you have to—”

“Don’t,” Edward said, his voice deeper, harder, and colder. “He’s out of his mind. It’s up to us. Everyone’s dead if we don’t act now... right now.”

“You guys are insane,” Eric said, his voice squeaky. “You don’t just kill a reah. You die for touching a reah... I don’t even know what happens if you kill one.”

I couldn’t have spoken if I wanted to, but I was too scared to ask for help. No one would help, it was past the point of no return—anyone who saw me now and knew Laurent had only one choice. They would have to help shovel the grave. I wasn’t stupid; I knew how things went when people were cornered. Sins were covered up. I would be covered up. Mercifully, the light went off, but the kick to my side made me feel like I had been dropped in hot lava.

“Don’t touch him anymore! For crissakes, Laurent, just leave him the fuck alone!”

“I will do whatever I—”

“Laurent! We need to figure out what to do!”

“What are you—”

“We can’t let anyone find him! We’re all dead if anyone ever finds him!”

Many shoes shuffled across the floor, and then I heard the bang of a heavy door as it was slammed back in place. The quiet after so much noise was comforting. I listened to silence for as long as I could before I passed out.

WARM breeze on my face, scent of dirt and the smell of flowers, but like at a store, that smell of stems and leaves in water, not the decaying smell from the wine cellar. I was outside, and just the fresh air thrilled me. When I opened my eyes, I saw the stars, millions of them glittering all at once, pinpoints in a black curtain.

I was naked, and that more than anything else made me feel vulnerable. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even roll myself over and have some semblance of modesty. Lifting my right hand, I touched the side of a hill that I must have either been thrown down or rolled over. My fingers sank into the cool earth, and I took a deep, settling breath. I had never been so tired, and I had lost too much blood to heal. Normally I would have shifted and restored the blood loss, but I had gone too many days without food and only a quarter of the water I needed.

Hot tears rolled down the sides of my face and slid into my ears. I wanted Logan. In that moment, when there could be anyone, his was the face I saw. He would have been so happy to hear it, that I thought of him first.

When I tried to lean toward the hill, pain exploded in my chest, behind my eyes, ran down my side like a knife carving through my skin. I shuddered and, on instinct, shifted. My body was still trying to mend itself, and apparently I had just enough reserve to pull off one last act of self-preservation. I knew I was a panther for the split second before I was gone.

Chapter Seven

THE sounds of talking stirred me from fragmented nightmares. Nothing made sense until I woke up and realized that I was dozing, fading in and out so fast that it was hard to keep track of where reality ended and the dreams began.

Listening to the voices was soothing, the language beautiful, hypnotic, until there was a grunt of disapproval.

"I can't"—quick growl—"it's too hard, Hashim, I can't keep up. My Arabic's not that good."

"C'mon Chris, you've been doing much better."

"Yeah, but could you just—I wanna know stuff."

"Your father said that he wants you to immerse yourself in the language before school starts. How are you going to follow along if you—"

"Fine, whatever, I'll immerse tomorrow, I swear to God, but right now I wanna know about the panther."

Heavy sigh from Hashim. "Fine, what do you want to know?"

"I want to know how you know that we're looking at a werepanther—one of us—and not a regular cat that belongs in the zoo."

"How old are you?" Hashim asked snidely.

"Why?"

"Just tell me."

"I'm sixteen, why?"

"You have your answer."

"What?" he asked irritably.

Heavy, exasperated sigh. “Sixteen is too young. When you reach maturity at twenty, like me, you’ll be able to immediately sense another of your kind. It comes with age.”

He scoffed. “You’re supposed to be mature?”

“I will kick your ass.”

“Fine.”

“Just think about where you are. This is Sobek. How many panthers have you seen that aren’t werepanthers like us?”

There was a pause. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Foolish.”

“Shut up.”

Another lull.

“So what? Are you gonna tell your dad? We can’t move him by ourselves unless—”

“I sent Ari to get my father; they should be back soon.”

A jolt of fear ran through me before I remembered that I was in my panther form. No one could tell who or what I was.

“Do you think he’s dead?”

“*She*,” Hashim clarified. “Look how small she is.”

“What?”

“Chris, are you looking at her?”

“Yeah, but when I shift I’m small—smaller,” he corrected himself, coughing, “too.”

“Yes, but... there, do you see those teeth? Look where I’m pointing.”

I knew I was taking in air through my mouth, which left my jaw open and my fangs visible.

“You don’t get those until you’re over twenty, until maturity. She’s as big now as she will get and much too small to be anything but female.”

“Yeah, but she smells funny.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean even I should be able to tell she’s a girl, but... she doesn’t smell right. Girls smell more like dirt and flowers or like grass, but this panther... she smells like burning wood.”

I heard Hashim inhale deeply. “Yes... it’s odd.”

“We could look,” Chris suggested.

“Lift another panther’s tail?” Hashim asked and I heard the indignation in his tone. It was certainly a horrible breach of etiquette as normally it simply wasn’t done, or not needed to be. But in this case it would answer the question quite quickly. “Are you kidding?”

“Well I—”

“It’s just not done and besides there’s so much blood that I just don’t think we should move her at all.”

“Yeah, sure but maybe we should tell—”

“Boys!”

I tensed, the yell running through my body, shattering my frayed and raw nerves.

“We didn’t touch her,” Hashim defended himself and his friend Christopher, and I heard him moving, felt the dust rise up and coat my fur as his change of position stirred the dirt. “We just kept watch,” he stammered out.

“Oh crap, look,” Chris said shakily. “That’s your sheseru, right?”

“Yes, I knew he was coming to see my father, I just didn’t remember that he was visiting today.” Hashim took another shaky breath.

Sheseru.

“He scares me.”

There was a sheseru close by.

“He scares everybody, it’s not just you.”

I tried to open my eyes, but there was just no possible way.

“Shit.”

“Dad, she’s here! I—”

“Don’t yell,” another voice commanded softly. “We do not want to scare the poor creature. If she is hurt enough to lie so still, we know her injuries are grave. Let’s try not to frighten or disturb her in any way.”

Before anything else, a sheseru was the guardian of a reah. If the tribe had no reah, a sheseru would protect their yareah, but they would never feel truly fulfilled. All I had to do was let the approaching man know what I was, and he would be inexorably drawn to my side.

“Is that blood?”

Concentrating, I purged every thought in my head but one.

Save me.

I never used my pheromones to draw anyone but Logan. I never filled the air with my scent, never rippled the space around me with heat and need, and never, ever sent out a call for any but my mate. I had never needed to before. Even years ago, when I had been beaten and tortured by my own tribe, even then, as I had been too young, I had not used the power of a reah to serve my own desire. But I wanted to live. I wanted Logan. And that craven hunger translated into an aching, devouring appeal.

His roar tore through me, and I heard everyone yelling at once.

“Roshan, what is it? What’s—”

“Silence!” he hissed, raw with anger.

It felt as though booming thunder rolled through me, and I knew, without benefit of looking, that I was in the presence of the strongest sheseru I had ever met. I felt almost a caress of soothing power, the slide of another animal at my side, silky fur that I would have sworn I could feel under my own pelt, smoothing instead over my bare skin, a cool, gentle touch.

“How can this be?” His voice broke before he caught his breath, his hand running slowly down my back.

I tensed under the tender pressure.

“Oh no,” he panted. “No, no, no... I would never harm you. I would put out my own eyes before I ever caused you even a moment of pain.”

“Bring a blanket!” someone else yelled.

“Hashim Ben-Yossef, you and your friend will be rewarded. You will appear before your semel at his villa in a week’s time.” He took a deep breath. “However did you find her?”

“Who, my sheseru?” the boy asked reverently.

“The reah.”

Quick indrawn breaths from both boys. “This cat is a reah?”

“Indeed she is,” he said, and I heard the deep shiver in his voice. “The second one I have been so blessed to see.”

Everything tilted suddenly, and I was aware of being lifted, wrapped up, and crushed against a wall of solid heat.

“I will never allow anyone to hurt you again, my reah.”

That fast, I was his reah.

I had reached out to him and called. He had succumbed to his basest nature, to the tie that a sheseru and a reah shared, one of warmth and need on the reah’s part, safety and protection on the part of the sheseru. First even before enforcer of his leader, it was a sheseru’s place to be guardian of his lord and master’s greatest prize... his mate. I had simply imbued his instinct with my need.

I was carried in his arms, held close to his heart. “I will find the men responsible for this ruin, my reah, and they will die howling in the pit.”

It was Yuri’s place to punish, not his, but I could not correct him at that moment. I couldn’t even speak.

“How were you allowed to be taken, my reah? Whose failing allowed you to be stolen from the side of your mate?”

I wanted to shift and answer, but I felt weightless suddenly, like I was floating.

“Reah? Shift for me so I may see your form and hear your words.”

Any sound. I even tried to blow out breath and managed nothing.

“I wonder what my semel will say about your mate’s lack of care.”

To defend Logan was paramount, but there was a gentle dip and then blessed quiet.

Chapter Eight

MY EYES hurt, felt as though they were full of gritty, grainy sand. Like when there's an eyelash that you can feel but just can't find no matter how much eye rubbing you do. Slowly, I opened my right and then my left.

"Reah." A gravel-filled voice spoke my title. "Be careful, don't move, you have several IV lines in your back."

I turned my head on my paws, sighed deeply, but did nothing more.

"Rest, reah, the doctor is here. He is giving you the fluid and all the nourishment you need. He says that your heart is strong and that you will recover all your strength. I'm here to protect you; you have all the time you need. I won't leave you; no one will disturb your sleep. Close your eyes."

I did as he told me, grateful for his vigilance.

THERE was the smell of jasmine once, another time a smoky flavor like black tea, and on a different day the aroma of sandalwood and oranges. I stretched and made a sound that was more growl than yawn. I realized I was still a panther and coiled up into a ball and fell back to sleep. I was not ready to change my form. At least there were no needles still in me, which was probably progress.

MEAT.

I smelled food, and my body reacted. My head came up, and when it did I saw the platter of rare, just barely charred steak. It was piled high waiting for me.

Inching forward, I tilted my head, leaned forward, and took a stack that was sliced thin between my jaws. I had it chewed and swallowed seconds later, the meat so tender that it disappeared in my mouth after five bites. When I reached for more, I heard the throat-clearing.

“Do not eat too fast, my reah, you’ll be sick.”

The sheseru was right, even if I didn’t want to hear it. Recoiling, I inhaled the smell of fresh water before my tongue began lapping at the bowl that sat on the bed beside the platter of meat. Never had I tasted anything better.

“Slowly, my reah, be careful.”

I wanted to guzzle it all down, drink until I was sated, but I didn’t dare. The overwhelming tiredness rose up and ambushed me. Never had the simple act of eating nearly put me into a coma. Laying my head on my paws, I closed my eyes and sank back down onto the bed.

IT WAS dark except for the glow of several candles when my eyes fluttered open.

“May I see your true form?”

I lifted my head and turned toward the sound of the voice.

“I am Roshan Tabir, sheseru of the tribe of Rahotep, enforcer of my semel, the semel-aten, master of Sobek, Ammon El Masry.”

Tribe of Rahotep, I remembered. The tribe that called Sobek home. And the man I had seen for several days, for at least a week, who was even now looking at me hopefully, expectantly, flames flickering in eyes filled with absolute adoration, was the sheseru of the strongest semel of all. He had dark eyes, brown, not the black that my gray ones turned in my werepanther form, but close. His face was kind, almost too gentle to be a sheseru, but from his power I knew that maybe he didn’t need to look scary, he simply was when it was necessary.

“Please.”

I owed it to him. He needed to know that I was a man and not a woman, but the fear, so ingrained, slithered through me. I was afraid to see everything in his face change in an instant. And I knew he would look at me differently. No matter what, he would. Whether he would turn that confusion on himself or toward me was the only question. I had asked Yuri about it months ago. His feelings of protectiveness, the need to serve—did he feel strange about those because I was a man? For him, the answer had been no. My sex did not change the pride he felt at being my guardian, my servant, my friend. I wondered if Roshan would feel the same.

“Please.”

The fact was that the man deserved to know who I really was. Rising stiffly, I sat up.

He lifted his hand to stop me from doing anything more, shifting, fretting, and moving. “Let us do this. I must bring you more food, more water. When I return, I beg you to shift so I may see your sweet face. Think on it while I’m gone.”

I watched him rise out of the chair from where he had been keeping his vigil and walk toward the door. Once he was through it, I steeled myself for his reaction when he returned. I shifted at the same moment a door slammed open on the opposite side of the room.

“I knew it! Filthy whore!”

My head swiveled at the noise, my long hair swirling around me, obscuring my face. A woman was striding across the room toward me, six men fanning out around her, moving fast with purpose.

“You think I didn’t know what my mate was doing in here holed up for a week? You think I don’t know his appetite for pretty young girls?” she snarled at me, her voice loud, shrill, and filled with seething anger. “I don’t give a shit what he does elsewhere, but this is my home! Mine! I am mistress here, and my word is law! You dare sleep with my mate here! Touch my mate here! I will have you torn apart, you stupid fucking whore!”

Her intent was murderous; I felt her fury like a whip abrading my skin. It hurt to even hear. I shifted and was on the floor in seconds. Everyone froze, and I knew why. The shift, as always, was fast, scary fast, and even though I was already close to being drained, my adrenaline was pumping. She was going to have me killed, and I wouldn’t even be able to

get out enough words to save myself. She hadn't even noticed that I was a man, seeing only what she wanted to, my long hair and lean frame. And maybe I should have stood up on the bed so she could have really seen me, but between the curses she was hurling and the rage I could feel, she was beyond listening, beyond reason. If what she said was true, she had simmered for over a week in pain and rage and sharp, stinging betrayal. She was incensed, and I was the cause. I would be lucky to escape with my life.

"Lock the door, shift now, and kill her! Kill her! She has violated my home! Violated your sheseran! Kill her!"

The mate of Roshan Tabir, the sheseran, was a fearsome creature. She would eviscerate any who came near her mate. And while I admired her possessiveness, since I had no idea the violence I would be capable of unleashing if any tried to tempt Logan from me, she was still making the biggest mistake of her life.

I bolted toward the window because it was the only escape route I could see. I had no way of knowing how high off the ground it was. I hoped that I was on the first floor but somehow doubted it even as I leaped. There was no other option.

It was dark outside, cool, and I registered that a moment after I crashed through the glass and sailed out into the night. There was only air for seconds and then the inevitable drop, tumbling, falling, twisting in circles before I tore through one canopy, then another and another. Down, down, down, each one slowing me until I hit the last one, bounced, tumbled, rolled, and hit the dirt street with a hard slam.

Winded, lying there under the stars for long moments, it took some time to register that I was looking at people eating. Tilting my head, I looked around and had no possible clue where I could have come from.

A man shuffled toward me, gesturing for me to move. He spoke in rapid Arabic, the same word over and over, trying to shoo me away. I was again reminded that I was in Sobek, between Giza and Cairo. There was one road that led in and out of the town, the only entrance patrolled by heavily armed men. This was private land, deeded to the family of El Masry from the time of the pharaohs. Anyone in the town, living in the town, or visiting the town had to either be a werepanther or bonded to the family of a werepanther. Outsiders were strictly and absolutely forbidden. The punishment for a violation of the law was death.

In Sobek, the tribe of Rahotep, and those who served them, lived and worked. I had never wanted to visit. I felt it was more like an American Indian Reservation, a place forced on people, not a home. Once a year, during the feast, every semel in the world brought a contingent of people with him and visited. It was the only time the town received outsiders.

Due to the fact that I was in Sobek, the man waving me away from his business saw me as merely an annoyance, an irritation to his guests and nothing more. He wanted me to go away so his patrons could get back to ordering food and wine instead of wondering about me.

Slowly, painfully, I rose to my feet and limped across the street, disappearing into the shadows of an alley. From my new vantage point, I could see where I had come from.

I looked up until I saw the broken window, the room now bathed in bright light; across the street was the first canopy.

It had been a nice leap; I had to give myself credit. I had sailed easily across twenty feet before coming up short and hitting the first canopy. From there it had been a hard plunge down from five stories up to the last one with the trampoline action. I had bounced off and sideways, spilling into the street. It had to have been funny to watch.

I was lucky, and I knew it. Lucky that the canopies were there, lucky I was light so I could leap that far, lucky I could extend my body, streamline it, and lucky that all of it combined had slowed my descent until it was a hard, painful jolt instead of a crash. It was one of those freak accidents combined with a gift.

As I turned down the alley, padding away, I promised myself that I would not shift again until I found my mate. I hoped it wouldn't take too long.

Chapter Nine

EVEN as late as it had to be, based on how dark it was, the narrow, cluttered streets were alive with people and lights. All the delicious aromas were swirling together, making me salivate. I realized how hungry I was and wondered how fast I would need to be to steal something to eat. I didn't get the opportunity to even make a plan.

"You... stop!

I froze and turned my head, looking over my shoulder to see who had called. Instantly my eye was drawn across the street, where a man sat at a large table, surrounded by others. He was smiling even as he pointed at me.

"You know the priest's law." He raised his voice so it would carry, wanting to warn me but not offer any menace. He wasn't angry, more scolding, clearly annoyed. "You were advised of it on your way in, friend, no one in their panther form within the city limits."

I was violating a mandate I had no prior knowledge of.

"Shift now and explain yourself or deal with the consequences."

I didn't even breathe.

There was an irritated huff of air from him. "Look, I know you're naked, but deal with it. I'm not the one prowling around where I shouldn't be. We'll grab you some—Taj, go grab a blanket or a table cloth or whatever from any of the—Shah, check with the owner and see if he has anything we borrow to cover up our modest friend here."

When he spoke it was distractedly, absently, like I was bothersome but nothing more. He was only giving me half his attention. Clearly someone in his group had pointed me out, and he, whoever *he* was, could not simply ignore me, could not just give me a pass. Perhaps whomever he

served would have scolded him for not stopping me. It was the same with me where I worked. I managed a restaurant, and when my boss was there, people being untucked or minutes late was a big deal. When I was there alone I forgave small trespasses, choosing to remind instead of punish. I had a feeling if the man were dining alone, he would have simply rolled his eyes at the slight infraction I was committing.

There was the distinct buzz of laughter from the table even though I wasn't close enough to hear the words being spoken. Glasses were raised and filled. They were all having a good time, and my inquisitor, his mouth, curling at the edges, laugh lines crinkling in the corner of his eyes, was enjoying himself as well. He didn't want me there. I was sure he was wishing I had simply taken an alternate route where he would not have been put in the position to question me. He wanted to be having fun with his friends. It was a warm summer night, there was a lazy breeze, he was surrounded by beautiful women, and they were all drinking. I was sure I was the last thing he wanted to be annoyed with.

"Are you deaf?" he called over to me when he checked and found me still in panther form, unmoving.

I remained rooted to the spot.

Heavy, resigned sigh. "Shift now and talk to me before you prompt my anger instead of my curiosity."

I didn't want to fight, and even if I wanted to, I couldn't. I was in no shape to run for any great distance, and without my usual burst of speed, I was in trouble. So I shifted, standing naked in the street. "I beg your forgiveness. My clothes were stolen in Cairo, and I came to Sobek with only the ones I had on my back. If you point me in the direction of the priest's villa, I will go there now and beg his mercy for my crime."

I shifted back to panther form the second I was done speaking and waited.

The absolute stillness was a surprise, as was the silence. After several more minutes of frozen attention from the man, as well as the entire table, I tipped my head in question.

"Holy shit," he finally breathed, rising up out of his chair and crossing the narrow cobblestone road fast, two other men behind him. When he was a few feet from me, he sank down to one knee and stared. "I've never seen... Shah, where the fuck is that blanket?" he barked over his shoulder. "Get him something to cover up with!"

I watched as one of the men moved by me, his hand reaching out to run across my head, letting his fingers gently trace one of my ears. It didn't mean anything but that we were panthers, the touch, the rub, was just a hello. When I turned back to look at the leader, I found that he had moved closer to me.

I panicked, taking a step back.

"No, no"—he forced a sort of half-smile, hands up and open, palms facing me—"don't run. I—we, had no idea you were a victim of a thief. Did you come for the trials of Thoth? Do you hope to join the Shu, become one of our initiates?"

It made sense that he would ask. Because of my controlled shift and the speed with which I'd done it, if I were simply any panther with my abilities, attempting to become a member of the Shu would be the logical conclusion.

"Anyone that can shift as fast as you should participate."

If you were a werepanther, you knew about the Shu. They were guardians, assassins, and enforcers, the personal guard of the priest and his council, disciples of Thoth, learned in the law, religious practices, and killing. If a cat had appealed to his or her *semel* and found no justice, an appeal could be made to the priest of Chae Rophon and the council of Ennead, and if the tribe leader was found to be in the wrong, the priest would dispatch the Shu. They were the strongest and fastest of all werepanthers, and one of the distinctions of their elite status was the ability to change form in the blink of an eye. It was a prerequisite.

"I am Jamal Hassan"—the man smiled warmly at me—"and I am the phocal of the Shu. Tell me... is that why you came here?"

I was looking at the leader of the Shu, the man who reported directly to the Priest of Chae Rophon and the council of Ennead. What were the odds? At that moment, my only thought was that I was so glad Crane wasn't with me; he would have been laughing his ass off. If it wasn't for bad luck, I really would have none at all.

"Jamal."

His name was spoken a second before a blanket was tossed to him. He stood fast, plucking the covering from the air at the same time.

"Shift again," he told me, shaking out the folds, opening the large brown and gray cotton blanket. "This is for you."

Changing fast, I stood naked before him a heartbeat later.

Quickly, he wrapped the blanket around me, not moving back as I clutched it around my shoulders, closing it tight so that it draped around me. Covered from shoulder to ankle, I looked up at the man who towered over me.

His eyes were kind, which comforted me.

“I have never seen anyone shift that fast. Once you’re fed and clothed and rested, I will run you through some drills with my men before the trials so—”

“I’m hurt,” I told him quickly.

“Where?”

Turning my back to him, I loosened the blanket and let it slide off my shoulders, dipping low down until it fell just above the curve of my buttocks.

“Who did this to you?” he breathed out.

I was going to answer, but I felt his fingers trailing down over one of the marks and shivered hard. The touch reminded me that my entire back was mottled with cuts and abrasions and bites. It would all heal given time, but for now, I was nowhere near full strength. I needed to eat and drink and sleep. Going from zero to leaping through glass windows and flying through the air had exhausted me. With the loss of my heart-pounding adrenaline, I was back to feeling like a wrung-out old mop. I was ready to puddle to the ground.

I lifted the blanket back up over my shoulders, and when I did I leaned forward. Just that much change in balance proved to be my undoing. My legs buckled, but instead of falling, I was scooped up by Jamal, held tight in his arms.

I heard shouting even as my vision blurred. I could not remember ever being so tired.

“Tell me your name.”

“Jin,” was the last thing I got out. The darkness had been waiting, and it overwhelmed me a moment later.

I HEARD a clink of glasses, smelled the rich aroma of spices, and was aware of amused laughter floating around me. When my eyes fluttered open, the man who swam into view was reading.

“Where am I?”

“Finally,” a voice grunted, and I turned my head to find Jamal Hassan standing over me. “You were starting to scare me.”

I stared up at him as he walked closer. Black cargo pants were tucked into black military boots, and a heavy zippered gray cardigan was only partially closed, revealing a tight black T-shirt underneath. He looked like all he needed was a rifle and a beret and he could be on the cover of a video game.

“What?”

I shook my head, trying not to smile before looking around the immense room. It reminded me of the common room at my dorm in college. There was a big-screen TV in one corner, a couple of couches, and a dining table and chairs in another corner. I was taking up a small amount of room on a huge sectional with a loveseat to my left and a huge mahogany coffee table beside me. The room was cold, which was why everyone was in the same zippered sweater, and there was a huge fire blazing away in the hearth on the opposite wall. The floor was made of uneven stone that I imagined could be hosed down or swept but not mopped. Even the grout looked like it had sharp pieces of rock in it. I noticed that everyone was in the same heavy-soled boots, no one trusting their feet to the scary-looking floor.

There were several pennants and tapestries on the wall, a glittering award case on the other side of the fireplace, and different animal skins functioning as rugs scattered throughout the room. A pool table was surrounded by five men, and the scent of cloves from their cigarettes wafted over me.

“My friend.”

I looked back up at Jamal.

“Can I offer you a bowl of molokhiyya?”

I had no idea what that was, but neither did I want to appear ungrateful. “Yes, please.”

He nodded, turned, and called over his shoulder in Arabic, and then sat down in front of me on the heavy coffee table.

“Why’s it so cold in here?”

“We’re several stories underground.”

“Okay. Can you tell me where this is?” I asked as I began to sit up.

A heavy hand on my chest kept me anchored back against the pillows. “We had the physician here checking on you, and he says that you are healing injuries that to a weaker panther would have been mortal. Only your innate strength has sustained you.”

I nodded.

“I had you in one of the rooms in the back for two days, but solitude for a panther, as you know, is not healthy. Just the sounds of others are comforting for us.”

Which was strange but true. In the wild, panthers, big cats, were solitary creatures, but werepanthers needed their tribes, needed others. At least, normal panthers did. Crane had always longed for company when we were traveling around from place to place. Semels and reahs were built differently. As the only cats that mated for life, all they needed was each other.

“Do you remember getting up to relieve yourself?”

I didn’t.

He gave me a quick, glowing smile. “You’re lucky I was there or you would have peed in the closet.”

Studying his face, I saw a man who was not traditionally handsome, but the expressive eyebrows, smiling mouth, and velvet sound of his voice made up for it. On the street I wouldn’t have looked at him twice, but his warmth called to me, as did his quiet strength.

“I moved you out here to the couch this morning hoping it would help you to hear others, sense them, and now I see I was right. It is so good to have you looking at me.”

The room felt alive with energy, and that, as much as the sleep, had helped.

“Now to answer your question, you are at Ra-Horakhty in Sobek, the barracks of the Shu.”

I sat up before he could stop me. “Should I be in the barracks before the—”

“Stop,” he said, cutting me off, reaching out to put a hand on my shoulder. “I am the phocal of the Shu, you can’t fool me.”

“I’m sorry?”

He squinted at me. “You are no more a warrior than I am a pupil of a sylvan. You don’t have the look of a fighter, or of a khatyu... there’s

power, but not”—he had to think for a second, searching for the word he wanted—“fierceness. Who are you?”

“Jin Rayne.”

“From where?”

“Nevada.”

His dark brows furrowed. “How did you come to be here in Sobek?”

“I was abducted.”

“Why?”

I had traveled with my best friend across the country, and for the most part we had avoided other werepanther tribes and especially semels. On those few occasions when we had met them, often I had come away bloody and bruised, and sometimes just barely with my life. To try to explain to this man, the head of the Shu, the fiercest of werepanther warriors, that I was both a reah and a man did not seem smart.

“I have no idea,” I lied. “Maybe you can tell me.”

His scowl was dark. “Who took you from your tribe?”

“I don’t know. I woke up in a room and ran. I was running when you saw me.”

“I understand a man taking a woman, but not another man.”

What was I supposed to say?

“Jamal.”

He turned and then lifted his hands to take the tray that was lowered to him. Whatever it was smelled amazing.

“Here, eat this.”

I crossed my legs, tucked the blanket around me so I wouldn’t flash anyone, and took the wooden tray from him. The huge bowl on it held thick, succulent-smelling soup that was a dark forest green color and had some kind of meat cut into chunks mixed into it.

“It’s chicken.”

“I don’t really care, but thanks for telling me.” I smiled at him.

He let out a quick breath, watching me devour my food.

The thick bread was warm and soft, the soup was possibly the best thing I’d ever had in my life, and I couldn’t drink enough glasses of water. Jamal called for a second bowl for me, and I got hummus and pita bread as well as mashed eggplant and tahini to dip it in. When I was stuffed, I was poured a mug of mint tea that actually tasted as good as it smelled.

I had listened to the conversation of the men who had taken seats around us as I ate. They were talking about the feast, how after fifteen days of standing idly by guarding the priest, they were all ready for the games of Thoth to begin. They got to compete to see who the best warrior was within their ranks as well as testing the initiates that wanted to try and join them.

“Jin.”

My eyes flicked back to the face of Jamal Hassan.

“Tell me what tribe you’re from.”

Fifteen days. I had been gone for fifteen days already. I could only imagine Logan’s worry. I needed to get to him as soon as possible.

“Jin?”

“Pakhet,” I lied.

“Pakhet,” another man said quickly, taking a seat beside me on the couch. “Why do I know that tribe?”

“Because Jin’s sheseru was the one shielding those two that attacked Logan Church’s reah,” Jamal told him, locking eyes with me. “Why in the world would your semel allow your sheseru to shield those that attacked another semel’s mate?”

“I have no idea.” I forced a smile.

“What is it with this semel Logan Church and his reah?” another man asked.

“Yes,” someone else chimed in. “Why can’t he keep her safe?”

“I don’t think—” I began.

“If the priest decrees that the reah is not safe with the semel, he’ll remove her,” the man to my left told me. “Did you know that? Did you know that the priest can part a mated pair? It is his right by divine law.”

“Only if the reah seeks sanctuary,” I corrected him. “*That* is the law.”

The men clustered around Jamal and me went silent. Everyone was staring at me.

“And how do you know so much about the law?” the man standing beside Jamal’s chair asked me.

“My father taught me.”

He nodded slowly before leaning forward and offering me his hand. “I am Shahid Alon, second to the phocal along with Taj Chalthoum.”

“Here!”

I turned my head at the smiling man who was striding across the room to join us. He took my hand warmly in his the minute Shahid released me. It was only then, looking at him closely and then glancing around the room, that I noticed that all the men were dressed the same, in uniforms. I was in a barracks, after all.

“So are you one of the khatyu of the tribe of Pakhet?”

“He’s no fighter,” Jamal told Taj. “He can’t be.”

“What then?” Taj was interested to hear my answer, as was Shahid.

“I’m no one, just another panther.”

He nodded. “And where were you taken from?”

“My apartment.”

“But why?” Jamal wanted to know.

I shrugged.

“So.” Jamal squinted at me. “If you’re no one special, are you interested in taking me up on my offer to become a Shu initiate? You should; you shift very fast.”

It was better than “very fast,” and we both knew it. He was testing me to see what I would say. “I’d love to try,” I said, because I had to. I had to reconcile my seamless shift with the passivity of my nature for him, and pretending that I didn’t realize the gift I had would do it. “I just know that my skills are nowhere near the class of a Shu warrior.”

Jamal squinted at me, trying to sense the truth. “We will decide,” he said finally.

I had walked right into the trial without even realizing it. I was tired—it was the only defense I had. I didn’t even know uniforms when I saw them.

“Surely you can shift for us,” he baited me.

It was a test; there was no doubt about it. For me to turn him down when he was my only protection was idiotic. “Of course.”

Jamal surged to his feet, yelling for everyone to come close and show the initiate, the epheboi, what all of them could already do. This was when they were supposed to show me their individual power and skill.

I watched as the men formed a giant circle before starting to strip. As panthers, the idea of being naked was natural to them. I had never shared the ease that others did with being naked in a group. I traced my hesitancy

back to being nearly beaten to death the first time I had shifted in front of others. But now I was expected to strip without a care in front of these men, as this was simply part of the trial. I had no choice.

I watched as one of the men dove into the middle of the floor, and at the last minute before he hit the ground, he rolled over and landed on all four feet, having shifted in mid-leap into a powerful golden panther. He looked more heavily muscled than even my mate. Logan was bigger, closer to saber-toothed tiger size, much larger than a male lion, but all this man, this member of the Shu, did was train and fight, and the toned muscles under golden fur proclaimed that fact. I hoped never to have to fight him or any of the others.

The next man ran forward in a blur of speed, and when he stopped, he was suddenly a panther, his change like the flick of a light. They all took a turn after that, one after another, each one like a bolt of lightning, every one like a jolt or a flash, and there was suddenly a panther where a man had been seconds before. Shahid shifted in the blink of an eye, Taj just as fast, each and every one of the Shu so breathtaking that I was momentarily overwhelmed.

When all the men who were in the room had transformed for me in blurring speed, Jamal came forward to show me the magnitude of his control. With each step, he grew and shrank as he crossed the manmade circle, man to panther over and over again, back and forth with an ease that I had never seen. To see another shifter with that much willpower, that much training and concentrated energy, was overwhelming. I had never seen anything like him.

“Come”—he smiled at me as he stood in the center of clustered panthers one moment and men the next—“show us your gift, Jin Rayne.”

I debated quickly about what to do. Speed would not impress them; they were all fast. Power held no sway, as all of them were stronger cats than me. Only complete mastery of the change would bring forth awe. Suppressing my discomfort at being naked in front of them, I stood up and let the blanket slide off me and fall to a mound at my feet. I moved around the couch, lowering myself to my hands and knees, and then slowly, artfully, I began to crawl the length of the room.

With the slightest movement forward, I let my glossy black fur swim over my body, forward and back, like the push and pull of the tide. I could change any part of me on command. One eye panther, one eye human, half

of my face cat, the other man, the animal in me sliding over my skin, appearing and disappearing at will.

The effect, when I had shown Logan a month ago, had been complete silence as he forgot to breathe. It seemed to have the same effect on the assembled members of the Shu.

It was like being at a dance club when the lights went off and the strobe came on and all you saw were fragments of images, snatches of forms, like a heartbeat, a pulse, barely a flicker. You never saw enough to know if what you were seeing was really there or not. Like a horror movie—the best ones only gave you glimpses of the creature, letting your mind fill in the blanks.

I froze for a moment, moving from man to panther with agonizing slowness and then blurring speed. The alternating focus let them see my absolute mastery of my beast, an illustration of power that I had seen none of them match. When at last I reached the opposite wall from the couch, I turned to face Jamal, head lifted, standing proud in my panther form, meeting his gaze. The look in his eyes comforted me, as they were wide with wonder.

“Who are you?” Taj shouted at me as he closed the distance between us fast. “What the hell are you?”

He wasn’t mad, but he was close.

“You think I’m a fool?” He roared that question as he stopped a foot from me, jabbing at the air with a pointed finger.

“Yes,” Shahid agreed, coming up beside Taj, his eyes locked on mine. “Speak your lineage now, Jin Rayne.”

Hard to be scared of them, as they were both naked, but I knew they could hurt me in either of their forms, and I was feeling the effects of my shifting already. I was not strong enough to have put on such a controlled display of my skill. It had drained me. Again.

“Now!” Jamal commanded me as he joined the other two. “Speak now!”

I took a breath, confident that from where I was, if I had to make a run for it, I could at least make it to the hall. From there I would have to figure out how to get back up to the ground level. There had to be an elevator or something.

“I won’t ask again,” the phocal assured me.

I did as I was asked, shifting back to myself and answering clearly: "I'm a reah."

Jamal Hassan stared deep into my eyes as he advanced on me. "You lie. I have never heard of a male reah."

Only my display moments before saved me from being eviscerated where I stood. Had I tried to tell them first, before exhibiting my power, then I would have been in mortal danger. They were hard men, strong men, and they valued only that which was at their own level of dominance and above. Having witnessed my control, they were ready to at least listen.

"Not many have," I assured him, letting out a deep breath. The fear had dissipated quickly, leaving exhaustion in its place. I was lightheaded, the shifting, my kidnapping and torture, the flight from the murderous sheseran, all of it was suddenly crashing down on me, stealing my adrenaline. When I took a step forward, fighting to remain upright, I had many hands on me at once.

"Whose reah are you?" Shahid asked harshly.

I was freezing suddenly, my teeth chattering too hard for me to even answer him.

"I know who you belong to. You're the reah of the tribe of Mafdet," Jamal said, taking a step toward me. Before I realized, he had me off my feet and tucked against the warmth of his chest. They were all so much bigger than me. "You belong to Logan Church."

Yes, I did.

"Do you deny it?"

I shook my head even as I felt, for a moment, like I was floating.

"Enough of this." Jamal's breath touched my face like a caress as he bent close to look into my eyes. "I want my answers, and only one can give them to us. You are going to see the priest, reah, and he will decide your fate."

I would have begged and pleaded to be taken to my mate instead, but I didn't think I had any sway with any of them. In the end it didn't matter; I couldn't even remain conscious.

Chapter Ten

MY EYES drifted open slowly, and the warm glow of lantern light greeted me. I was outside on a chaise, the warm air fragrant with flowers and food. I smelled jasmine and the succulent aroma of something cooking. There was garlic and meat being roasted or smoked, I wasn't sure, but I couldn't keep myself from inhaling the thick, delicious air. I rolled sideways and accidentally slid to the ground. It hurt, the fall, and it was jarring. I had to brace myself on the marble floor for long minutes until everything stopped spinning. When I could, I rose to my feet and took in the palatial space.

It was like something out of a movie, a private grotto that belonged to a member of the nobility, opulent and stunning, attached to an enormous suite. The freshwater pool had been carved out of preexisting rock, and the vast portico on the other side looked ancient, as though the house had been built around a structure that dated back to the pharaohs. I shivered hard, afraid, almost, to know where I was.

Crossing back through the enormous room, I saw a blue silk robe draped over a chaise. I had missed it at first glance. Pulling it on as I walked to the door, I noted that it smelled like rosewater. The scent was comforting, soothing, calming, so that when I opened the door and found Roshan Tabir, the sheseru of the tribe of Rahotep, I wasn't as terrified as I would have been otherwise. What was he doing there?

"Wait," he said gently before I could slam the door in his face.

I froze, wary, ready to bolt if he even breathed.

His dark brown eyes were locked on mine, and as hard as I looked, all I saw was warmth. The smile he gave me after several minutes made my chest tighten.

He put up both hands to show me he meant me no harm. “I failed you, my reah, and I beg forgiveness for both myself and my mate. As soon as you are well enough, she will come and lay herself at your feet. Should you not forgive her, my semel has ordered her immediate execution in the pit.”

I kept my eyes on his hands.

“Reah?”

“Why am I...?” Where was I? Jamal had said I was going to see the priest. He was the phocal, so the guy he reported to was the priest. But I was looking at the sheseru of the semel-aten. What the fuck? “Where am I?”

“In the home of Ammon El Masry.”

“Why?” That made no sense. After a minute, when there was no answer and I became aware that my question was not being answered, I came out of my daze. “Roshan?”

“Reah.” Roshan’s voice cracked on my title.

It came to me after a second, and I realized that there was only one thing he cared about. “Of course I forgive your sheseran. She’s not gonna die because of me.”

His relief was obvious. “Thank you, my reah.” He took a breath, pointing beside me. “Shall I come in and speak to you about my semel?”

I didn’t crack the door any wider. “I thought I was going to see the priest?”

He gave me an indulgent smile. “The phocal was presumptuous to think that on his own authority you would be taken to see the priest before the master of Sobek, our semel.”

I was in the middle of a pissing contest between Jamal and Ammon, between the phocal and the semel, and because the semel had more pull than the phocal, I was at his house instead of being presented to the priest and the priest’s council of nine, the council of Ennead.

“How did you find out where I was?”

“Sobek is only so big, my reah. Once I made it to the street with my men, it was simple to find out that you were with Jamal and taken to the barracks.”

“Why didn’t I see you there?”

“No one but members, soldiers of the Shu, may enter the barracks. It is strictly forbidden by the priest.”

“But your semel is the master of Sobek.”

“Yes, but the temple of Satis, as well as the barracks of Ra-Horakhty, are under the rule and protection of the priest, and it’s sacrilege to be there without permission.”

“Then how come I got in?”

His brows furrowed. “Jamal told me that you sought sanctuary, is that not so?”

Jamal had been the only good guy in the whole mess. I was not about to screw him over. “No, that’s right,” I said quickly.

He nodded slowly, looking for the lie on me. “Only at my semel’s insistence and the phocal’s acquiescence were you delivered here. Jamal seemed concerned about leaving you even though I explained that you had called me, that I was your sheseru, and that I would protect you from any harm.”

“Even from your own semel?”

His brows furrowed. “Pardon? My semel would never harm a reah... especially not a reah, and especially not one like you.”

“One like me,” I repeated.

“You are the only male reah in existence, truly unique, truly one of a kind.”

Which made me, what, worthy of caring about? Already I had an idea about the semel-aten—he sounded arrogant, like he wanted to help me because of *what* I was, not *who* I was. Not because it was the right thing to do.

“My reah”—Roshan cleared his throat—“may I come in?”

“I’m not your reah,” I snapped at him, watching as his face crumbled.

“But I am you sheseru.”

“You are until I see Yuri Kosa again,” I told him. “Go read your law,” I finished, closing the door in his face.

I didn’t want to talk to him, deal with him; I was sick of the drama my life had become. I wanted it back the way it was. I wanted to be annoyed over scheduling problems at work, about Crane moving to Vegas,

about Logan turning my house into a fortress. More than anything, I craved having a knock-down, drag-out fight with my mate. To hear him growl my name, roll his eyes and lecture me. I missed the normality that marked my day-to-day existence. I just wanted to go home.

“And I want my goddamn clothes!” I yelled at the big, beautiful, ornate area filled with crap that didn’t impress me at all. Marble and gold, the room looked like the summer home of a king, the murals from floor to ceiling depicting scenes right out of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. I saw Anubis; he was the only one I knew on sight, just like most people.

Stalking back out to the pool, I took off the robe and shifted to my panther form. In moments I had scaled the rock wall to the trees and made the short leap to the roof. I was surprised to find a garden. There was a small pond filled with brightly colored fish, stepping stones that one would use to cross it, and finally lilies that were blooming in the dark water. The sounds were comforting; the lazy buzzing of insects, the soft chirping of songbirds, the trickle of a fountain bubbling over polished rocks, and the drifting aroma of quince tea.

Walking to the wall, I was about to leap up when there was gentle throat-clearing. Turning, I saw a man reclining on a chaise, a cup in one hand, saucer in the other.

“I know that you survived a leap of much higher just days ago, reah, but I fear there are no canopies here to slow your fall.”

I studied his face as he stared back at me. His eyes were green, and with how dark his complexion was, I didn’t expect it. But they were the eyes of a cat, that green-gold that was unmistakable and ringed with thick black lashes. Wavy black hair fell over his forehead and down the nape of his neck to a set of broad shoulders. Dark bronze skin made a stunning contrast against the gauzy white cotton button-down, open at the collar with the sleeves rolled up muscular forearms. When he put down his tea, he swung his long legs off the chaise and stood up. The linen drawstring pants were rolled up at the bottom. He looked like he should have been walking the beaches in Jamaica.

“I have heard quite a bit about you, reah.”

I just stood there, frozen, staring at him.

“I’d like us to talk before I figure out what to do with you.”

I bristled at his words.

"I can feel the frustration rolling off you. You must shift so you can speak to me, as I want nothing more than to talk to you."

I would not be naked in front of one more person. I wouldn't.

"I have placed clothes for you in your apartments. Though they are not what you would find yourself wearing at home, I believe they will fit nicely, as I had you measured. My seamstress is excellent."

My head lifted, and I took a step backward.

"I assure you, reah, she was very discreet. She is also close to eighty. Your virtue was not compromised."

Annoying that he felt it necessary to say that to me, like I needed to be soothed like a child.

"There is more than one gallibaya there for you, as well as the abaya, if you want an extra covering," he said gently. His voice was deep and resonant, mellifluous; I felt it almost like a caress. "There are trousers there as well for you to wear underneath it."

I waited.

He smiled at me. "A gallibaya is like a long shirt that falls almost to your feet. It is quite comfortable, I assure you."

I had no idea what to do.

"Why not return to your quarters, where you came from, shower and change, and then we will dine together, you and I. I would very much enjoy that, reah."

I ran.

Any degree of normalcy, just taking a shower, washing my hair, would be heaven. The entire ordeal had taught me a fundamental truth: as much as I prized my freedom, there was nothing—nothing—as important as my mate and my home. As I shifted back to human form, back to me, the room blurred through hot, fresh tears.

The drawers of the antique golf-leaf armoire were filled with clothes, and even though they were not familiar, they were mine. I chuckled when I saw the boxers. I had not worn anything but briefs since I was old enough to choose, but it didn't matter. Just the novelty of having underwear made me so happy I almost broke down. And it was stupid, but I was really close to going right out of my mind.

After I ran from the room back to where I had woken up, I went immediately to the bathroom to shower. I stood under the water until it ran

cold, and when I finally stepped out and wiped away the steam from the mirror, I didn't recognize the person looking back at me. There were dark circles under my eyes, my face was gaunt, my eyes flat, and my throat and collarbone were blotchy with purple and yellow bruises. Farther down were cuts and tears and scrapes. I drew back, not wanting to inspect myself any further.

The amenities on the sink—deodorant, lotion, lip balm—seemed trivial, but to me, after being filthy and covered in blood, they were like the grail. Brushing my hair was a religious experience. Feeling the bristles on my scalp was soothing; I ran the length of it until the silky slide was like water running through my fingers. When I tugged on the light cotton pants, I didn't have to fight them, and once buttoned, they slid down low on my hips. I had lost weight, having moved from lean to just plain skinny. Logan's mother would never stop cooking for me once I got home.

Just from taking a shower, standing for so long, I was tired. After pulling the midnight blue cotton gallibaya over my head, I adjusted the length, making sure it fell properly without bunching, and then finally left the bathroom. I ended up staggering out to the bedroom and flopping down onto the chaise at the end of the enormous bed.

"Reah."

The man from earlier was leaning against the doorframe that led from the bedroom out to the pool. When I had gone into the shower it was dusk, but now it was after twilight, the sky the deep royal blue that it became right before it turned black.

"I had the patio lit so we could dine outdoors."

There were lanterns floating in the pool and many more lit in all corners of the private grotto. They were burning oil instead of kerosene, and the smell reminded me of honey and sandalwood and amber. It was exotic and comforting at the same time.

"Are you ready to eat?"

I was. "Yes, please."

"Follow me."

The table he led me to was small but big enough for the two of us and the trays of shish-kabobs, jasmine rice, and mounds of fruit. He poured ice water into a large goblet for me and smiled as I drank it.

"Do you know who I am?"

Everything was fuzzy for a moment as my stomach rolled with hunger. After seeing Roshan Tabir, there was only one man he could be. “You’re master of Sobek, the semel-aten of the tribe of Rahotep.”

His smile made his eyes glow. “I am, yes. Do you know my name?”

“Ammon El Masry,” I answered.

“Excellent.”

I released a quivering breath as I gently, carefully, so I wouldn’t spill, put down my water goblet. I could feel myself shaking.

“Do you know how many reahs I have met in my lifetime?”

“No.”

“I have met two. One other and you.” He smiled slowly, his eyes never leaving mine.

The smile was not warm. It was predatory and cold.

“Were you aware that the law says that the second you were discovered to be a reah you were supposed to be brought before me?”

I did know. All reahs were to be “presented” to the semel-aten in Sobek, but as the tribe I had belonged to had called for my blood the moment my true nature was revealed, I had not ever had time to ask about it. “I thought I was, but I wasn’t sure.”

He nodded. “Every reah comes to Sobek to see the semel-aten in hopes that they are his mate first.” He clipped his words. “This practice dates back to the time of the pharaohs. Always, without fail, every reah comes to Sobek.”

He sounded annoyed.

“And if the reah is not the mate of the semel-aten then, if the semel-aten wills it, he may decree that the reah in question becomes his wosret.”

Consort. Wosret was consort, and not something I would ever be. “But that would make no sense in my case,” I clarified for both our benefits.

“No, it would not,” he agreed after a moment. “But I understand that your semel, your mate, had never been with a man before meeting you.”

I forced a smile. “Nope. Just goes to show you how strong the bond between true-mates really is.”

After a moment, like he was considering my words, he nodded. “Indeed.”

I inhaled deeply, trying to steady myself.

“Are you afraid of me?”

Without thinking, I scowled.

“No?” He seemed almost annoyed. I could not get a read on the man. Did he want me to fear him or like him?

“Not yet.”

“Good. I don’t want you to be frightened of me, reah.”

But he did, a little. It was there in his tone, the way he looked at me. He was used to people cowering, and he wanted that from me.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you.” I indicated all the food. “I needed to eat.”

“I know you do. I can feel it.”

“Can you?”

“Yes,” he assured me, leaning forward, gazing into my eyes. “In fact, I have felt all that you have since the moment you were brought here to my home.”

“The phocal”—I cleared my throat—“Jamal. He was very kind to me.”

“I care little for the priest’s muscle, but it is good to hear the words from your lips. Was my own sheseru not kind as well?”

“He was,” I told him as I started on one of the shish-kabobs. “I just scared his mate.”

“She turned murderous eyes on you, reah.”

I shrugged. “She didn’t really even look at me.”

“She will now,” he said ominously. “When she begs your forgiveness as she kneels at your feet in two days’ time—she will look at you.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“What’s that?”

“The begging? Can’t we just let it go?”

He tipped his head, smiling at me. “My dear reah, you are quite confused about your place and your worth, and the list of people I blame for this is long.”

“I don’t under—”

He raised his hand, and I went instantly silent. He was not a man to be argued with. "Your life should have been completely different."

I just waited... and ate. I really couldn't just sit there and be respectful and silent. I had to eat. My body needed the protein, plain and simple.

"I blame your father first. As sylvan of your tribe, the moment he knew you were a reah, you should have been brought here to me. Failing that, your semel should have brought you to me when your father did not. Neither of those men followed the law; neither acted honorably toward you. They have broken the law, and I will ask the priest to pass sentence accordingly."

I focused on breathing.

"They tried to kill you instead of bringing you to me when they discovered you were a reah."

I had one shot to save my father. I didn't care what happened to the others, but Mitchell Rayne, him I still loved. "My father thought me an abomination, still does, and as he had only the greatest, deepest respect for you, semel-aten, he never even thought to denigrate you with such as me."

His eyes were locked on mine, searching, looking for the truth.

"If he knew I was with you now, in your presence, he would be sick."

After long moments, he nodded. "I will speak to your father."

I started breathing again.

"I think that everyone is confused and somehow considers that normal rules do not apply to you because you're a man."

"But they don't apply."

"They most certainly do. Even your current tribe does not understand your value. Your semel, Logan Church, even he is blind to the treasure he has."

I wanted to disagree, but I couldn't. You didn't argue with a semel in his own house.

"Laurent Bruyere kidnapped you from your home because after two years of looking, he was accidentally told your whereabouts by the aset of your tribe. He had no idea that you were mated, but that does not excuse him taking you by force and holding you against your will and torturing

you. He and his tribe, I am certain, will answer to the priest for this atrocity.”

“No, please.” I leaned forward, and without thinking, I covered his hand with mine. “Don’t let him do that. Talk to the priest. Laurent’s whole tribe shouldn’t be punished just because he’s a psychopath. Even his sheseru had no idea what Laurent was doing, and neither did anyone else. It’s not fair to make everyone accountable because a few guys screwed up.”

He closed his eyes, and in that second I realized that I was touching him. When I tried to move my hand, he took it, holding tight, keeping me close. I searched his face, saw the muscles working in his clenched jaw and his furrowed brows, like he was working hard to remain in control. Of what, I had no idea.

We sat like that for several minutes before his eyes opened and I was swallowed in spring green. “What do you do, reah? Why try and soften my command when you know it is law?”

“I’m a reah; if Laurent Bruyere’s sheseru had ever been anywhere near me, he would have tried to help. Maybe some of the members in his tribe would have helped me too. You can’t know what is in their hearts; neither can the priest, so he shouldn’t pass judgment on them, and you shouldn’t ask him to. Laurent will get what he deserves from Logan, and so will his brother and his sylvan. But no one else should be held responsible.”

“Your mate will not be the one punishing them, reah. The priest will have the Shu deliver his judgment.”

I shook my head. “That’s not his right.”

He growled and released my hand, getting up and stalking halfway around the pool. I watched him as I continued to eat. I felt like a stray dog wolfing down food in case I didn’t get another meal.

“Reah, the priest of Chae Rophon may—”

“Logan Church is my mate. He’s the only one who defends me and punishes in my name.”

“My sheseru—”

“I have my own sheseru.”

“Roshan told me that you called him, so now he is your sheseru.”

“No.” I shook my head. “In times of distress, another sheseru may be called or asked to champion a reah, but the right returns to the sheseru of the reah’s mate as soon as the danger is past or when the reah is reunited with their sheseru.”

There was a sharp exhalation of breath from him. “You quoted that almost exactly.”

It was what I was hoping for. “My father is a sylvan; I was going to take his place until I didn’t. I would hope his lessons stuck.”

“That was the plan for your life?”

“Yes, it was.” I sighed deeply, watching as he walked back to the table. “Please, when can I see my mate?”

“Soon.”

“When?”

“I want you well and rested before you appear before anyone.”

“My mate is not just anyone. I belong to him.”

“You belong to whom the priest says you belong, and at this moment, he calls you my guest and nothing more.”

I squinted at him.

“Reah—”

“I will heal that much faster if you let me see my mate,” I pleaded, feeling the need well up in me, nearly drowning me. How could I explain to him so that he understood? How did I make an emotion clear? That for me to be me, I had to have Logan’s hands on my skin. If my mate saw me, I would know I was really alive. Everything would be real. I felt strange, detached, like I was living in a dream, almost outside of my body. Logan grounded me like Crane used to. Like Crane always had.

“Oh shit,” I nearly gasped, realizing that just as Logan had wanted, he had replaced my best friend. Logan was my touchstone, he was it. My need to see him was nearly unbearable, whereas it had always before been Crane.

“What’s wrong?” Ammon asked as he was suddenly at my side.

He didn’t need to hear about my epiphany. “I really need my mate.”

“There are other concerns first.”

Which made no sense and didn’t sound good at all.

“I want to see Logan. I—”

“Reah,” he said sharply, “you will see your mate when I allow it, not before. Should you continue with your incessant badgering, I will relegate you to my home in Edfu until you have learned patience and humility.”

A wave of cold hatred washed over me, and any warm feelings I had for the man evaporated. “As you say.” I carefully formed the words, all my attention returning to my plate. I concentrated only on eating and drinking, but I was aware of him watching me intently.

“Tomorrow, if you feel up to it, we will accompany the new yareahs to the museum here in Sobek and have lunch, and then after, perhaps we will all stroll the marketplace.”

Like I was some newly mated blushing bride of a semel that had no prior contact with werepanther heritage or lore, he thought to include me in history tours and planned outings. I didn’t answer him.

“Your civility will bring you that much closer to your mate.”

There was no way for me to refuse. Anything that got me the promise of seeing my mate, I would do. As it was, instead of being allowed to return to Logan, I got to lie in bed, longing for him, knowing he was somewhere on the grounds of the mansion, villa, whatever it was, feeling the same warm night air on his skin, breathing in the same scent of jasmine and wanting me just as desperately as I wanted him.

“Please,” I replied, my voice low and husky.

“Please what?”

“Please, semel-aten, allow me to accompany you to the museum and marketplace.”

“As you wish. You only need to make your requests to me reverently as befits my station. To make demands is a mistake.”

It was, and I had to be smarter, I had to play his game. “You said earlier you had met one other reah, counting me. Who was the reah, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Her name is Amirah, and she was my wosret for a time.”

“What happened to her?”

“Last year at the feast, we were walking together through the roof gardens, and her eyes locked with those of the semel of the tribe of Ariat.”

I looked at him.

“That was all there was, just a single glance. I saw her face, I saw his... had I insisted she stay, I would have had to live with knowing that every moment of every day, she longed for another.”

“So you understand why I need my mate,” I said hopefully, blessing Amirah wherever she was for opening this door for me.

His brows furrowed. “She is a woman, her mate a man; it is a natural state for both to be drawn to one another, and so their stations as *semel* and *reah* are enhanced by their union. The same bond cannot possibly exist between you and your mate. Yours is a perversion of nature and can be seen as nothing else. I do not doubt that you are truly a *reah*, as my own senses tell me it is so, but to say that you need Logan Church as Amirah did Terrance McCord is a gross exaggeration, for it cannot be.”

Because Logan and I were both men we couldn’t possibly love the same as a man and a woman... this was his feeling, his truth. I almost broke down. To have the most powerful *semel* in the werepanther world not believe in the love between me and my mate was overwhelming.

I couldn’t eat anything more. Rising and then falling to one knee, I softly asked his permission to retire for the evening.

His brows furrowed. “I have many questions, *reah*.”

“Oh,” I said innocently, making my eyes big and round. “Of course I will answer any that you have, as my need for sleep pales in comparison to your need for answers.”

His lips pressed together in a hard line. “I will allow you to retire and will have the servant here to summon you to the main dining hall in the morning. I expect you to wear the keffiyeh that was placed in your room for you, as well. It is unseemly for a *reah* to have their head uncovered in any company but their mate’s.”

“Then I will leave you at once and cease to offend,” I said, rising fast, bowing quickly and turning away back toward my room.

“*Reah*.”

I stopped and looked over my shoulder at him.

“The game you find yourself playing will not sway me from my course. I will have you whole and well and have your life illuminated for me before I return you to your mate.”

I stared at him.

“*If* I return you to your mate,” he clarified. “I promise you now, reah, that if your safety cannot be assured, and if your semel is found lacking in the pit, then he cannot claim such a prize as a reah. I would be remiss in my duty to you, as would the priest, to not assure your continued well-being.”

“Only the priest can part a mated pair,” I corrected him as I had Jamal as well. “And only if the reah requests it or seeks sanctuary. You know that.”

“The semel-aten, as the leader of all werepanthers, may change the law as he sees fit.”

It was crap and he couldn’t but getting into a pissing contest with him would get me nowhere.

“And as I said before, your well-being is my only concern.”

My well-being had everything to do with Logan and nothing to do with anything else. He didn’t understand, it was beyond him, and so trying to explain it to him was a waste of time.

“As you say,” I replied, walking without stopping again back to my room. I drew the gauzy curtain behind me so there could be no mistake that he was not welcome to follow.

Collapsing down onto the bed, I felt hot tears of frustration well up in my eyes. If for some reason the priest saw fit not to return me, I wondered how long I could live without Logan before I went mad. Already beyond my ravaged body I felt something deeper, a longing that was trying to claw its way out of me. My first thought was normally never violence, but when the words had come from Ammon that he would decide when or *if* I could see my mate, I had wanted to tear his throat out.

It surprised me that there was no rise of boiling anger but instead just cold, flat, barren hatred. I was changing, twisting, my need eating me up, and I was almost frightened even as I pushed aside the thoughts as simply a normal reaction. Any lovers who were purposely parted would hate and revile the instrument of their separation. What was scary was that there should have been seething rage in me and there was only hate. I had passed anger and fury and gone straight to wanting to have his blood pooled at my feet. It was not like me, and as I pulled the satin sheets over my head, having turned off the lamp on the nightstand, I realized that my teeth were chattering and I felt like I was slowly freezing to death. Something was wrong, really wrong, but what?

Chapter Eleven

I HAD exchanged one cage for another. I was no freer to find Logan or leave where I was put than when Laurent Bruyere imprisoned me. The difference was that before I had harbored hope. Now I found myself with nowhere to turn. The semel-aten could keep me from my mate indefinitely if he wanted. On a whim, *his* whim, my life would either stop or continue on. I had no choice but to wait and see.

The priest of Chae Rophon who was supposed to be my advocate apparently didn't care enough to even check on me. But why would he? I was one of millions.

But not all cats were reahs, and this was the only thread of faith I had left, the only I allowed myself. Perhaps as a curiosity factor the priest would come see me.

I appeared when I was summoned to the main hall in the morning. I wore the keffiyeh as I had been instructed, and it was held in place with the agal on my head. Like a small turban, it covered all of my hair, and the only part of my face that was visible was my eyes. The women at the long table, the yareahs, were all dressed the same, the difference being that their keffiyehs were made of sheer, iridescent material in different shades of red. Mine was black like my clothes and the sandals that I had been given.

It was interesting that the custom seemed like those of women in Middle Eastern countries, the way their heads, and in some places, their entire bodies had to be covered in the presence of any other man but their husband. Where the difference was for me was that as the mate of a semel, even though I was a man, the custom was extended to me. Had Delphine been in the room, she would not have had to be covered any more than the

semel-aten was, but I had to be cloaked, as did all the yareahs. And I knew that most of the laws had been in effect since ancient times, laws that kept other men alive, as they could not see the mate of a semel and so were not able to lust after them and incur the semel's wrath. The laws were there to protect others so a semel didn't rip them to pieces.

As I sat at the other end of the long table from the semel-aten, I greeted the women that spoke to me. Only the new yareahs were there. Vaguely, I wondered where Simone was before I remembered. Logan had told me that as the mating fell so close to the feast that neither she nor Ethan would be there. His maahes would attend in his stead, as a honeymoon in Sobek was not on the agenda for the semel of the tribe of Tefnut and his new yareah.

I would have to call her when I got home. I wanted her to know that I didn't blame her for talking to Laurent Bruyere and telling him my whereabouts. She had no idea that the man was going to hurt me, no idea he was a psychopath and wanted to take me from my mate.

My true-mate.

Logan.

I wanted to see him so desperately. Wanted to kiss him, hold him, and be wrapped in his arms. Thinking about his hands, his tongue, his lips, I felt quick heat rush to my groin.

I wanted to be under him.

Have him inside me, filling me.

The ache was raw, and I didn't suppress it, didn't fight it, instead letting it roll through me unchecked and surrendered.

The screams wrenched me from my thoughts.

"Reah!"

I looked up at the semel as he stood at the end of the table, hands fisted at his sides, staring daggers at me.

"If you cannot contain yourself, I will have you sequestered in another part of the estate."

What the hell was he was talking about? Contain myself how? Not feel? Not think? I wasn't doing anything different from what I normally did, but apparently what was going on inside of me was affecting others. But I couldn't stop that, change that. There were times when I was with Crane when he said that he could feel when I was happy. Other people seemed to be able to sense it too. But only ever a small group, one, two,

even three at most, but never an entire room and never to a point where they were overwhelmed. I didn't have that kind of power. I was just a panther. I was a reah, yes, but not something magical with supernatural gifts. It was ridiculous, and having him blame me was crazy.

My eyes flicked to his.

He swallowed hard. "I feel every emotion you have, but I am strong and able to withstand the onslaught. Others"—he gestured at the table full of panting, whimpering yareahs—"are not as strong. Either control yourself or I will do it for you."

I loved how I was never Jin, only "reah." I knew exactly what I was to him. I was a freak-show curiosity and nothing more.

"Reah!"

"I beg forgiveness," I said icily, my eyes locked on his.

The muscles in his jaw clenched. "I would like nothing more than to tame this stubborn streak of yours, but this is not my place."

It was only Logan's place.

After several heartbeats of strained, tense silence, he looked away.

"Come, everyone, finish your meal."

I wolfed down the rest of my food, speaking to no one, but I noticed when I looked up that every eye looked away. Clearly they were frightened of me.

When the meal was concluded and the servants were removing the dishes, I saw Roshan Tabir and two other men I had never seen before crossing into the hall from the opposite side of the room from where I had entered. They had come from outside and brought the scent of the outdoors with them. For whatever reason, my sense of smell was heightened, and I noted the aromas of sweat and leather and amber oil.

Roshan turned after saying something to Ammon, but before he could start for me, cross the room to my side, his semel called him back.

"I will have Sabrey accompany us to the museum. Roshan, you may take your leave, as I know you have much to do with securing all the matches for both the trials of Thoth for the Shu and the honor challenges between tribes and within houses."

His eyes flicked to me, but he only nodded to his semel before he left. No matter how badly he might have wanted to talk to me or check on me, he was not about to defy his semel to do it.

I should have cared that he left—he was, after all, the man I had called, the only sheseru there—but I didn't feel like he was mine, not part of my tribe, so watching him leave was fine. Minutes later, a woman walked into the room with a child attached to each hand. She was elegant and tall, not beautiful but striking nonetheless with her dark hair, bronze complexion, and almond-shaped brown eyes.

"Everyone, come meet my yareah, Ebere El Masry, mistress of Sobek."

All the yareahs rose at once and flocked to her; I rose after a moment but froze as a little girl barred my path, peering up at me, studying my face.

"Yes?" I asked, since I didn't do that well with kids. I had a hard time remembering being one, and as a rule I bored them or made them cry.

"You're a boy."

I squinted down at the dark cherub. "Yeah... and?"

She shrugged. "I dunno, you don't hafta be such a grouch."

I knelt down so that we were eye to eye. "I'm Jin."

"Jim?"

I sounded it out for her. "Jh-in."

"Jin," she repeated, smiling. "I'm Femi."

"I like your name."

Her smile got huge, all toothy. "How come you hafta wear a keffiyeh if you're a boy?"

"I don't know," I sighed, because I didn't want to get into it. "Are you going to the museum too?"

She made a noise like she was dying. "Yes, my mother says I hafta go again. I hate the museum so much. I could watch movies or ride Pitch or play with Brownie."

"Pitch is a horse?"

"Yeah."

"And Brownie is a dog or a cat?"

She giggled. "Brownie's my ferret."

"I wouldn't have guessed ferret."

"He's cute, you wanna see?"

"Maybe after the museum."

"Okay." Her face fell as she slipped her little hand into mine.

"How old are you?" I asked as I rose over her.

"Seven, but I'll be eight in March. Do you know when March is?"

"You've got awhile." I sympathized, since it was summer.

"I know." She sighed deeply.

"Hello."

I looked up, and Ebere El Masry was standing before me hand in hand with her other, older, daughter.

"You're the reah."

"Yes."

"You need to bow before me, reah; I'm mistress here, not you."

It was really annoying that I brought such bitchiness out of every yareah I ever met. But it was the whole reah-trumps-yareah thing, and even as I understood, it was tiring. It was like they were all afraid for a second, afraid that I was actually their semel's true-mate, and then the second the danger passed, the minute they knew I wasn't a threat, I got paid back for making them worry in the first place. I wondered vaguely how she and Amirah had done. Ammon had said that he and Amirah had been strolling when she found her true-mate, not him and Amirah and Ebere. I was betting I was about to be paid back for Amirah's sins as well.

I went down on one knee and bent my head.

"We're gonna walk to the museum together, Mama."

There was a long silence.

"Rise, reah."

I stood up and realized that the little girl was still holding my hand.

"My husband says you are dangerous, reah. Are you?"

I shook my head.

"Walk by me," she ordered as she took the long piece of beautiful maroon silk from one of the serving women. She wrapped it intricately around her head and face until she was just as covered as the rest of us.

The child, Femi, was a blessing. Her sister, Catava, was a pain. She was as cold as her mother and just as humorless. But Femi was cute and funny and so unlike either of her parents. I wondered vaguely who had raised her.

"I was living with my grandmother in Cairo until last month, but now Mama says that I have to come here and learn about being a panther."

It all became clear. Obviously this little girl's grandmother and mine had been cut from the same cloth. As we walked, she chatted, telling me

absolutely every thought that came into her head. I was very thankful for the distraction.

The museum was bigger than I expected and reminded me of every natural history museum I had ever been in. There were lots of dead animals stuffed in uncharacteristic “attack” poses, armor, pottery, statues, and paintings. The exhibits were extensive: history of the railway, irrigation, and life along the Nile. The gem room was pretty, the mummification room creepy, and the history of werepanthers, shown in large, detailed frescoes, enough to bore me right out of my mind. I wasn’t surprised to see Femi’s eyes rolling back in her head. She would be in a coma in no time.

“What’s that?” Femi pointed, dragging me across the room to an enormous mural on the far wall.

As I had seen the same scene presented a million different times in a million different ways over the course of my life, I knew what I was looking at. “Sweetheart, that’s the history of how werepanthers came to be.” I smiled down at her.

“Tell me.”

“You know this,” I assured her. “You tell me instead.”

“I promise I don’t.”

I groaned under my breath.

“C’mon,” she insisted, squeezing my hand.

“Fine.” I pointed at the reliefs. “Thousands of years ago, there were wild panthers in Egypt”—I gestured toward the group of cats toward the middle of the wall picture—“that eventually bred with African wildcats to create you and me and every werepanther that lives today.”

“Why did they want to be together, the panthers and the wildcats?”

“Well, a lot of old books tell us that the panthers were being hunted and killed, and the wildcats, which were self-domesticating—”

“What is self... whatever you said?”

I liked her. She wasn’t afraid to speak up and ask questions, and that was normally missing in kids I met. She had her own mind, fostered, I was certain, by her grandmother.

“Jin?”

“Sorry,” I said, smiling at her. “It’s like the wildcats chose to live with people.”

“How come?”

“Probably because the people fed them.”

“Oh, okay.”

“All right, so the cats, this new panther-wildcat mix, they found that not only did they want to live with people, they wanted to *be* people,” I said, pointing at another relief. “So one day one of them shifted and became the first werepanther.”

“Who was it?”

I pointed at a statue across the room. “That is Sened, one of the rulers during the Second Dynasty, and he took for his wife”—I pointed to the statue to the left—“Nashwa, who was, supposedly, the first of us who could shift.”

She walked over and looked at up at the sandstone statue. “She’s really pretty.”

“No man could resist her,” I said with a wink. “Certainly not Sened, who built her a great mortuary temple when she died.”

“What’s a mortuary temple?”

“It’s like a huge mausoleum, kind of.”

She looked confused.

“Like a crypt.”

Now she looked worried.

“It’s not creepy,” I assured her.

She didn’t look convinced. “So Nashwa was the first real werepanther?”

There would obviously be no more talk of mortuary temples. “Yes.”

“How come she could shift?”

“I dunno, maybe she was a mutant.”

“Like Wolverine?”

“No, Nashwa was more like Mystique or one of them that can turn into an animal.” I had to use examples she could understand.

“Come look at this.”

I let her tug me after her across the room to another statue. We were apparently done with caring about Nashwa.

“Who’s that?” She pointed up at a statue of a man that everyone knew.

“Osiris,” I answered her.

“Why is he in the museum? What’d he do?”

“Lots of stuff.” I pointed through the glass at his hands. “But for you, he’s mostly important because of the tribal system he created.”

“You lost me,” she deadpanned.

I let out a snort of laughter; really, her grandmother had to be just as sarcastic as mine was. This one was something else. “Okay, do you see what he’s holding?”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“A big hook and a pom-pom.”

I smiled at her. “It’s not a pom-pom, it’s a flail, which is like a whip. And the hook is actually called a crook. Osiris is like a semel, all powerful, all knowing, and those two items were what he always carried and what he used when he ruled. Those things reminded him to always make the right choices for his people.”

She looked skeptical.

“See those things in his hands, the crook and the flail, they were like his advisors, so if you think of it like that, what do you think we call them?”

“I dunno.”

“Think now,” I told her, kneeling down in front of her so we were eye to eye. “What does a sheseru do? What does Roshan, your Daddy’s sheseru, do?”

“He hurts you if you’re bad.”

“Sort of, but yeah, he’s an enforcer, right? So of those two things that Osiris has in his hands, which one would he be?”

She tilted her head, looking up at Osiris.

“What’s a whip for, or a flail?”

“To hit you when you’re—oh!” she cried out, squeezing my hand tight. “Roshan is like the flail.”

“That’s right, the flail. And the other thing, the crook, who would that be?”

“The sylvan?”

“That’s right, because the crook is what a shepherd uses when he gathers his flock of sheep to keep them safe and teach them.”

“So the crook is for teaching stuff and the flail is for hurting you when you’re bad.”

It was as close as we were going to get. “Yes.”

“Just like a sylvan and a sheseru.”

“You got it.”

Her big eyes glittered, and I knew it was because she had not only learned something but she understood it as well. When things made sense, I myself usually retained them more easily. “Who’s that?” she asked, pointing at another statue.

For hours, she pointed and I gave her a history lesson: Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh; Ramses, whom she knew because he and Moses used to be brothers; and Akhenaten, the heretic. She wanted to hear about them all.

At lunchtime, she and I sat under an acacia tree in the garden and had our lunch. When her mother walked over and sat down, Femi explained all the new information she had absorbed like a sponge. After a good half hour, her mother turned to look at me.

“It seems you have a vast storehouse of knowledge, reah. I appreciate you bestowing that gift on my child. She is behind culturally, as my husband’s mother indulged her continuously. Only this year were my wishes complied with and she was returned home to us here in Sobek. She needs to catch up before school begins in a few weeks.”

“She’s curious; you just need to find her a tutor who will answer questions instead of lecturing. Let her decide what she wants to learn.”

Her eyes softened for the first time. “I agree.”

I bowed my head slightly, and she mirrored my movement.

After lunch, I walked with the little girl through the gardens, pointing out statues of pharaohs and priests, explaining more history, not enough to bore her, hitting the high points. My student hung on my every word, and it was nice, and novel, to be listened to.

WALKING the marketplace, it was obvious that the shopkeepers were ready to receive visitors for the feast. Every store and restaurant was open, the streets alive, even so early in the day, with raucous laughter, thick crowds, and drinking. I heard music both familiar and exotic and asked and learned the names of instruments like the bouzouki, hurdy-gurdy, and oud. Femi decided, after inhaling the intoxicating scents of different foods cooking and blending together, that she needed something more to eat.

Street vendors sold sweet cakes and roasted meat on wooden

skewers. There was mint tea, iced and hot, bread that had been fried crisp and then dipped in honey, and vegetables roasted on skewers. We stopped and watched a woman pound bread out flat and then throw it into a large pan filled with sweet oil to cook. Between Femi's mesmerized attention and mine, we were irresistible. We both thanked the woman profusely when she gifted us each with a fried dough pouch filled with lamb.

We ducked into one of the tents to watch some wrestling and boxing, but I didn't think it was the place for a little girl and dragged her out minutes later. The fencing tent was more agreeable, as the sword points were covered for safety. Later, we stopped to watch a play, but since I was not in the mood for a tragedy, we moved on. The puppet tent was fun, and I spent more time enjoying Femi's reactions than anything else.

"Let's go," Femi ordered when she got bored, grabbing my hand and tugging me after her. "I'm hungry."

More rich aromas drew her to yet another street cart that sold dried meat and soft glazed dough filled with jellied fruit. It turned out the scamp had money, passing it over so the two of us could both have a snack.

"You should have money too," Femi observed, and I agreed. I should have had a lot of things—my mate and my freedom, for starters.

As we made our way down streets that narrowed and narrowed, twisting and turning back on themselves, the going proved difficult without running into jugglers, strolling musicians, and tumblers, all begging and performing for coin.

"Femi!"

We both turned to see her father stalking toward us. He looked angry, and I was confused, though I stood my ground even when he closed the distance between us and backhanded me sharply across the face.

I absorbed the blow for Femi, not crying out, bracing my legs apart to remain on my feet.

"How dare you take my child without my per—"

"No!" Femi shrieked, hurling herself at my side, clutching tight, her face buried in my abdomen. "Mama said Jin could be with me!"

"Ammon!"

We all turned to Ebere as she stalked across the street, stepping between me and her husband, shielding her daughter from her husband and, inadvertently, me as well.

"Are you mad?"

His head jerked up as he looked at her face. "How dare—"

"You cannot strike another semel's mate. Only the priest may cross that boundary."

"I thought he had taken Femi to try and make me change my mind about him being returned to his mate. I was terrified for my child."

I was aware of a crowd slowly gathering to see the display of the semel-aten and his yareah having a scene in the street.

"You wanted only an excuse to exercise your control over the reah," she spat back, grabbing her daughter's hand and snapping at me, "Come, we will all return to the villa before we create more of a spectacle."

Having been struck through the cloth of the keffiyeh, the blow didn't sting, as it had not made contact with my skin, but it hurt nonetheless.

Femi was sobbing, and as I listened, Ebere comforted her daughter, assuring her that it was not her fault, finally stopping and sinking to her knees before her in the street. I had misjudged Ebere. I thought she was a cold, distant woman, and that was not the case at all.

"You know, you're making a mistake," I said after we were all three walking again, Femi between us, holding onto both of our hands.

"What are you talking about?" she asked me.

"This kid of yours is pretty great, and she's warm and sweet. Your mother-in-law must be kinda great too. I don't think she wanted to keep your daughter from you; she just loves her and wants to be with her. Maybe you invite her here and see if she'll come. Then you've got her here to babysit, and maybe she can thaw out your other kid."

She tuned to look at me, scowling.

I shrugged. "It's just a thought."

We were silent as we walked back to the semel's villa.

THAT evening, I got to eat alone with Femi and her mother and her sister. It turned out that Catava was worried that I was her father's mate. She was scared of what that would mean for her mother, as well as for her and Femi. She and her mother's time spent with Amirah, even after the discovery that she was not Ammon's mate, had been hard. Apparently even though Amirah had been kind, Ammon's preferential treatment of his wosret had been hard to watch.

Listening to Eberé, I realized that I had never given any thought to the children of a displaced yareah. I tended to look at the romantic side of a semel finding his true-mate and didn't consider the feelings of the yareah who had loved faithfully and long, only to be brushed aside at a moment's notice when eyes met eyes and given the new title of taurth, second-mate. After I explained to Catava about my semel, my true-mate, told her all about Logan Church, her relief was apparent. Eberé was shaken, having had no clue that her daughter harbored such concerns.

When I was finally allowed to leave, to find my bed, I ran down the hall to my room and locked the door behind me. Not wanting to be disturbed, I stripped, shifted to panther form, and went outside through the gauzy curtain that led out onto the patio and beyond that to the yard. I slept on the grass beside the large acacia tree. It was dark there, and as I was black, it was impossible to see me. In the middle of the night, when I was awoken with noises coming from my room, I knew I had made the right choice.

After several minutes, Ammon walked to the open doorway and stared out across the yard.

"Come, reah."

Like I was a dog.

He waited, and I just stared. Without a light, without being in his shifted form, there was no way for the man to see me.

"I sense your presence, reah."

I was silent and still.

"You will answer for this disobedience, reah."

But how could he make me? Would he report to the others that I had not been in my room when he snuck into it in the middle of the night to accost me? And what reason would he give for being there? I had him; there was nothing he could do.

"How long can you go without seeing your mate, reah? Even now your mind frays. I know it does, I feel it."

I swallowed down the desire to streak across the lawn and eviscerate him, to gut him like a fish and watch his entrails spill out. The animal in me wanted that badly.

"I don't want your heart, reah; I simply want to taste you. I have never been with a man, though I have harbored the desire, but you... as you are a man but also a reah... you have only to submit, and your freedom is yours. You will be allowed to return to your mate. Is your body

so sacred that one night would matter? Have there not been others but your mate?"

There had been others before Logan Church, but there would never be another after him. The man was my mate. I wanted only him.

"I don't want to claim you, reah. I will place no mark on you. I just want to fuck you," he said, chuckling smugly. He got off on the idea of exercising his power over me, and I hated him for it. "And I can keep you here behind these walls until you comply."

He could keep me from Logan forever.

I felt every beat of my heart.

"And don't think to speak to my sympathetic yareah or my children or my sheseru. They are all off-limits to you as of now. You will see only those I deem appropriate. You are mine to do with as I will, reah, until such time as you willingly submit."

I heard his sharp exhale of breath.

"I will take you in your bed on your hands and knees."

I shivered with revulsion.

"Think on your choices, reah, for they are few."

He turned and walked back into the dark cavern of the room. He did not reappear, and when I was certain he was gone, I put my head down between my paws and went to sleep. I needed to rest, because I knew I would need every drop of strength I possessed.

Chapter Twelve

THE following morning, all the yareahs and I were again called to the dining room to have breakfast with the semel-aten. I was last in and immediately dressed-down for my tardiness. Sympathetic glances, instead of frightened ones, were tossed my way.

After we ate, I was sitting, waiting, not knowing what was on the agenda for the day, when the door opened and Jamal, along with other members of the Shu, walked in. I watched intently as he spoke briefly to the semel.

“Reah!” Ammon called for me seconds later, and I moved quickly, crossing the room to him. Stopping a few feet away, I bowed as I had seen the other women do the day before, as well as that morning when they were escorted in. He seemed pleasantly surprised by my show of deference; his brows lifted, his face relaxed, and he gave me a slight bow in return.

“Jin,” Jamal addressed me, stepping in front of me. “I bring you news.”

I waited.

“The priest has been informed that you were kidnapped from your home by Laurent Bruyere’s men. Your beset Crane Adams was in the house when you were taken, but the men apparently did not realize he was there. They were merely khatyu, not a powerful cat among them, and so did not discover his whereabouts.”

I was glad; I had been worried about Crane. I knew he had either been found or rendered unconscious by the same darts that had been used on Logan and the others. The fact that he had figured out who took me

was a miracle, or perhaps Crane had simply overheard people talking. Whatever the case, he had told Logan that Laurent had me. I was so grateful.

“The priest wants you removed from the semel’s home and brought to the temple of Satis.”

“What did you say?” Ammon snapped at him.

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up with the reaction of the semel-aten.

“Jamal?”

“The priest wants the reah taken to his temple.”

I looked back and forth between the semel and the phocal. Of the two places, I would rather be with the priest, safely away from Ammon El Masry.

“It’s only until he gets there,” Jamal soothed me. “He just wants to make sure you’re safe.”

But a bolt of fear shot through me as I was certain the semel would never allow me to leave. My head filled with pain a second before there was screaming.

“Reah, enough!”

But there was nothing I could do.

“Come with me,” Jamal ordered, gesturing me forward.

“No.” Ammon’s voice rose over the cacophony of the swooning yareahs. “I forbid it! You will not take the reah from my home!”

Jamal was stunned; it was all over his face. He exchanged looks with the others with him, and they looked as confused as he did.

“Get out!” Ammon commanded him, dismissing him with a sweep of his hand.

“I am the phocal of the priest of Chae Rophon,” Jamal shouted back at him, the anger suddenly rolling off him. “How dare you think to dismiss me?”

“You will—”

“No,” Jamal said, cutting him off. “You will surrender the reah now.”

Ammon turned to look over his shoulder at one of the servants standing close by. "Call Roshan Tabir to me and have him summon the khatyu."

"You dare refuse a direct order from the priest of Chae Rophon and the council of Ennead! He has sent me to bring him the reah! You have no choice but to obey!"

"You forget whose land you're on, phocal," Ammon said coldly as the door opened, and Roshan Tabir was there. They had to have been just outside in the courtyard.

"Secure the reah!" Jamal shouted the order to his men.

"Guard the reah!" Ammon yelled over him.

I was a thing, not a man; no one said my name at any time. I was never Jin. I hated them all. And in the chaos, I was sure something would go wrong. I was sure I was going to be killed. Accidentally or on purpose, someone would end my life either in trying to protect me or on the order of the suddenly deranged semel-aten. There was no recourse but to run.

I ran.

I tore the keffiyeh from my head, kicked off the slippers, ducked under the table, the cries of the terrified yareahs deafening around me, and tore off the gallibaya. I was a panther by the time I shot out the other end.

As I gathered myself for the race, I took inventory of my body. The two previous dinners, the gorging I had done at every sitting since I woke up in the semel's home, as well as that which I had just finished, would sustain me. I was steady on my feet, I wasn't lightheaded, and I felt power rolling through me. It wasn't my normal surge of speed waiting for me to call upon it; something was different, changed, twisted. I was not myself.

My vision was higher, like I had grown, like I was larger. I was not at all the panther I normally was. The fact that I was at eye-level with the men, and they were all over six feet, was momentarily disconcerting. The bolting of the doors as they were secured snapped me from my daze. I rushed forward.

Usually I would have looked for another way out, seeing the locked exit, but I was focused on that escape route and had the sudden urge to charge the door. I always weighed my choices when I was in my panther form. Most cats did not, could not, completely a slave to their animal nature, but being a reah, I was never without the full use of all my

faculties. The confidence was what swayed me; there was no voice, in that split-second timing, that said no. I lowered my head and rammed it.

There should have been a moment of terror that a ten-foot hand-carved wooden door easily two feet thick succumbed to my weight, falling forward into the yard. I tried to think, but my brain just filled with screaming, roaring joy that drowned everything else.

I was free.

I flew out into the courtyard, and when I saw the stone wall, I gathered and leaped. It was an ambitious jump for anyone, but I felt my body sort of still, enfold on itself, and then explode outward. The speed went from almost a slow-motion stilling, the top of the roller-coaster, to the slow tip over, the hurtling downward roar.

I saw the others surround me, the Shu cats, and wondered at Jamal's motives. I did not wonder at those of the semel. I knew that Ammon had ordered his men to catch me, trap me, and put me in another dark place. Why he hated me or feared me, I had no idea. And for the first time in as long as I could remember, I didn't care. There was only the joy of my own power.

Worrying about others was what I did. Never, ever, did I think of myself first. I was made to put the needs of everyone before my own. It was hard-wired into a reah. But my mate had been purposely kept from me, my tribe was an ocean away, and everyone I loved or wanted or cared about was missing. All I had was speed and my power, and for once, I let it be all there was. I focused only on the damage I could inflict.

My mind drifted. What did I smell like? Logan had said once that I smelled like fire and rain, burning wood on a crisp autumn night and the air when it was so pure after a storm that you could taste it when you breathed it in. I thought of his words, what they meant to him, the home and warmth and love that I alone represented. And then I released that feeling out.

Panthers fell around me. I had been racing with no less than twenty across the field that lay beyond the wall of the semel's villa. But when I turned my head, I saw some of them collapse, others flying forward headfirst into the ground, dropping as though they had been blown down by a heavy wind. The pheromones overwhelmed many, but others, like Jamal, kept pace with me, ran on, fought to remain at my side. When I doubled back, he had to scramble to keep pace, running by me for several

yards, the whiplash turn hard to maneuver. I was back on the streets faster than I thought possible.

I didn't return to the villa but instead charged down one of the cobblestone roads. The streets were narrow, crowded with shops and restaurants, and beyond that was the marketplace I had visited the day before. A panther charged in front of me, trying to turn me, herd me in another direction. But I stopped, changed direction, and ran on. It was a move worthy of an NFL running back, that ability to make everyone trying to tackle you stumble or run by as you simply stopped on a dime for a second in order to change course. I was exhausting them, and I was surprised. Not that I couldn't normally outrun and outdistance any cat I came across, but they were Shu panthers and so should have been up to the challenge. I was even more shocked that there was no hint that I was tiring or that my adrenaline was waning. I felt like I could have run on forever.

For a moment I stumbled, over-thinking. If birds ever questioned why they could fly, they never would. The flood of uncertainty made me falter, but even then, I pulled up and threw my head back so the cats that caught up with me blew by without touching me. The dead stop I came to was too fast, too sudden, and the few that had tailed me were gone from sight, the slowing down and stopping taking them halfway down the street. Something sharp came to my nostrils, and when I turned, I saw claws and fangs filling my vision.

Without thinking, I batted at the panther. I didn't even extend my claws, just wanted him away from me. No one was more startled than me when the cat was hurled through a window across the street, the glass almost exploding as it shattered into millions of pieces.

"Jin!"

My head swiveled around, and looking back at the others, I saw that Jamal had shifted back to himself, to his human form, having changed fast because he could. The Shu were chosen because of their ability to morph from man to animal and back again with blurring speed and Jamal was the leader, the strongest, the fastest. It made sense that he was there to intercept me.

"Stay where you are!"

Jamal had commanded me, and as I watched, he raised his hand, striding toward me. How a man could be so damn comfortable in the

middle of the marketplace naked as the day he was born was beyond me. I did not have that kind of self-confidence. If I could have, I would have smiled; as I was a panther, I sat down and tipped my head.

The motion froze him where he stood. To show him I wanted to be friends, I reached out a paw to him.

“Look.” He tipped his head in my direction, wanting me to look at myself.

I was stunned. The paw I had raised was twice the size it normally was. I almost leaped back from him.

“Wait.” He lifted both hands as two of the Shu warriors, both in uniform, hurried into the street. One slid a robe onto him; the other cinched it tight at his waist. They stayed right beside him, and I realized I was looking at Shahid and Taj. Unlike the others, they had not been chasing me, instead staying behind, perhaps awaiting our return. “Jin, please... come with me to see the priest. He summons you.”

Was he to be trusted?

“Jin.” Jamal took a step forward, reaching out both hands to me. “Please, I will take you to the temple; I will present you to the priest of Chae Rophon, his grace Hamid Shamon.”

Was it strange that the priest wanted to see me after so many days?

“He was delayed making his way here from the coast, but he wants to see you. He’s at his temple, at his home here in Sobek.”

I wanted to trust him. I desperately wanted to see the priest, to have him override Ammon’s commandment and return me to Logan Church. He was the only one who could.

“You have been summoned before the priest of Chae Rophon. You must come with me.”

Looking around, I saw the crowd of people. Everyone was speaking at once, pointing, gasping, if anyone had a cell phone or a camera, I was certain many pictures of me would be taken, but as all electronic devices were strictly forbidden in Sobek, as well as cameras of any kind, they all had to imprint my image on their minds.

“Come with me and I will take you to the man who will allow you to see your mate.”

Logan.

I rose to follow him, and there was rustling to my left.

“No!” Jamal shouted, ordered, to no avail.

They were not his men there; they were Ammon’s. If they had been the Shu, I would never have seen them until it was too late.

My head turned, and I saw the net. Leaping forward, I had thought I would accidentally trample Jamal, but instead I found myself on the low-hanging roof of the restaurant across the street. Flipping around, I looked at a terrace back across the street another three stories up. I coiled and sprang and vaulted up over it easily. When I arrived, with so little effort exerted, I was stunned.

After a minute, there were shouts from below, but I didn’t look over, instead waiting as the volley of darts flew passed the terrace, arched high in the sky, and then fell like rain back to the ground. They were small, but I noticed them distinctly against the blue sky. They were the same darts that Laurent Bruyere’s men had used, and I wondered if every semel had access to them. Maybe Logan’s khatyu had them as well. Maybe Yuri had rifles loaded in an armory somewhere that I was not aware of. The thought was sobering.

I realized that I had no idea what went on in my own tribe as far as defense. What Logan did or did not do to protect his tribe, as far as weapons beyond tooth and claw, I was clueless about. I hoped I was uninformed because there was nothing I had not been told.

“Reah, come down!”

I ignored the order even though the sheseru who yelled it out should have been my savior. Roshan Tabir could rot for all I cared, and his damned semel with him. If they wanted to fight, I could and would.

I wanted my mate.

Coming to terms with my decision, sitting on the cool patio, feeling the breeze, I calmed. Whatever it took to find my mate, to get to my mate, was what I would do.

“Reah!” The semel-aten roared instead of his sheseru. “Come now!”

I was not stupid enough to look over the side, not after the barrage of darts, and not after his men, those who reported to Roshan, had tried to net me like a dog. I would not go to Ammon El Masry or his sheseru. I hoped he screamed himself hoarse.

“Jin Rayne!”

Different voice, one I had never heard before.

“Please.”

I was a sucker for “please.”

Rising, I walked forward and peered over the railing.

Jamal was there on the ground, and with him were Ammon El Masry and Roshan Tabir and another man I didn’t know.

“Reah,” the stranger called up to me. “Come to me.”

He was the owner of the voice, the deep, resonant baritone that soothed me.

“Come, reah,” Roshan seconded. He and the other men were separated from the rest of the crowd, but altogether there were at least two hundred people there cluttering the street. Where had they all come from?

My eyes took in everything, and I had the urge to leap down to the stranger, but I didn’t want to be captured.

“Reah.” The man beside Roshan spoke low, but it still carried. The timbre of his voice was powerful, deep, and flooded me with calm. “I am Hamid Shamon, priest of Chae Rophon, master of Satis. Come to me. None shall harm you, none shall have you—I know not why you were kept from your mate,” he said, and there was an edge as he turned to the semel-aten, who did not give him a drop of his attention, instead gazing up at me. “But,” he said, lifting his eyes back to me, “I will return you to him, as that is where you belong, at the side of your semel, Logan Church. He is semel-re, and you are his reah. Hear my words and judge by them.”

He knew the magic word. Logan.

I leaped over the railing and fell down two stories to the cobblestone street below me. I landed like a spring and was on my feet looking at them seconds later. It should have taken effort. The fact that it didn’t was wrong. That I was eye-to-eye with them was also very wrong. My size was dangerous for reasons I was unsure of.

Hamid Shamon took a step forward, no one else moving. I took one back.

“No,” he commanded, reaching out a hand to me. “Reah, come to me. I swear on all that I am that no one shall touch you again without your permission.”

The urge to run was choking me.

“Please, reah.” His voice was deep and rich and rolled right through me, calming me and my flight reflex. The intense warmth of the light

brown eyes, the laugh lines in the corners of them, the way he was purposely trying to seem non-threatening... I appreciated it all. "Come closer, come to me."

I shivered hard and stepped forward.

As his hands sank into my fur, he leaned into my side before burying his face in my neck. The relief that flooded me made me gasp. I had thought the semel-aten was all-powerful, but the energy that was rolling off the priest made me sway for a second on my feet. His strength reached out and wrapped around me, and I pressed my jaws together tight so I wouldn't cry out, howl like a banshee. Others were not so fortunate, crumpling to their knees with desperate, breathless howls. I had forgotten who the true master of Sobek truly was. There was no one werepanther as strong, as feared and forceful as the priest of Chae Rophon.

My teeth would have chattered if I hadn't held my jaw shut tight. He was flooding us all with his power, showing me, showing everyone, and it was hard to withstand.

"Reah," Ammon said from the ground, the wave of crushing strength having driven even the semel-aten down to one knee.

"No," Hamid cut him off. "Your dominion over the reah ends now. He's mine."

"With your permission," Roshan spoke up, he too on his knees on the cobblestones, "this is a reah, and as such the semel-aten—"

"First," Hamid said, clipping his words, "you forget yourself, sheseru. You do not speak to me. Only a semel may address me unless I invite otherwise."

I watched Roshan swallow down the rebuke.

"Second," Hamid almost hissed the word, "this is not simply a reah, as his size alone gives testament to. We must ascertain his true nature, but it is certain that the semel-aten has no claim on him, as he is a mated reah. He should have been returned to his semel the moment it was learned to whom he belonged. You do not keep a mated reah from his mate! Look what you've done with this decision!"

"Your grace," Ammon began, "I—"

"You have withheld the reah's mate, and see now what you have wrought in fear and desperation. Jin Rayne has changed in response to this

forced separation, and we are now left with”—he gestured at me—“a creature I will have to decide if I can allow to leave.”

Allow to leave? I felt a knot of fear twist in the pit of my stomach.

“No,” he said gently, warm brown eyes back on me. “Wait, reah, wait and see before you grow cold with dread.”

But I was already terrified. This was it, this man—the end. If *he* said I was confined to Sobek, there was no one else to appeal to.

“Calm yourself, reah,” he soothed me, his hand on the back of my neck, his fingers digging into the muscles there, his scent, the strength that flowed off him, all of it blanketing me in peace. There was no confusing Ammon’s power with Hamid’s; the priest’s power trumped all others. “I mean you no harm.”

But he could take away everything from me.

“I will prove to you my word and take you now to your mate.”

Logan.

“If you change back for him, return to your true form, you are his to take from Sobek.”

Joy, hope, love... I was flooded with it and was undone. If I had been human I would have broken down sobbing, I was so happy. As it was, I stood in front of him trembling like a leaf in a stiff breeze.

“Oh, reah.” Hamid clutched at me, his knees buckling out from under him, only his hold on me keeping him upright.

I was confused. Was my power a match for the priest of Chae Rophon? Was mine washing over him, driving through him, making him hold tight to me so he wouldn’t drop to his knees? Surely not. There had to be some other explanation.

“I feel your joy.”

Everyone did, apparently.

There were sounds from everywhere in the courtyard at once, laughing, giggling, gasps, squeals of delight, that welling up of feeling when your bottom lip quivers because you’re filled with such trembling, overwhelming happiness. No one was unaffected.

“Reah,” the priest said as his eyes glistened with tears. “You have no idea of your power, and I cannot say if you will ever return to your former self.”

I had to, or I couldn't be with the man I loved.

"Now come, let us go and see Logan Church," he announced shakily, dismissing everyone who stood near with a trembling wave of his hand. "I find myself burning with curiosity to lay eyes on the man who has such a mate as you. Clear a path!"

The only men strong enough to walk with me were Hamid and Ammon, the priest and the semel.

"Come, Jin," Hamid said, using my name, directing me.

I wasn't fooled—I was a reah first and a man second, just as I was to Ammon. They both saw me as a thing, not a man, but for the priest, it was reverent. I was sacred.

As we slowly made our way from the marketplace, he spoke gently, kindly, his voice low.

"You have shown yourself, by this transformation, to be more than a reah, Jin Rayne, and I do not believe that you will be able to change back into human form. This much power, I believe, would need to be burned off, used, before it could be directed, focused on bending to your will. You cannot channel it at the height it is now. You will have to calm before it's useful."

He thought I was some mindless brute in the form I was now and that I would need to do something, fight, perform a task, to drain off the power so then, and only then, could I shift back to my true form, my human one.

"If you cannot shift back, you must remain here in Sobek, at the temple of Satis with me and the other priests, the council of Ennead. Your life will not be as you expected but fulfilling nonetheless. You must not be consumed with fear and hate if you are unable to be with your mate. There will still be happiness for you, reah."

I would change back to me and show him I could and make him stop talking about the life I could live without Logan Church.

"This new form, though frightening, you will learn respect for, and in time, perhaps even enjoy. The power in you will perhaps serve another purpose with time. None of us can know our true destiny until it presents itself to us."

It was crap. My destiny was to be reah of the tribe of Mafdet and the mate of Logan Church. I shifted to show him I could.

“Reah?”

Nothing happened.

Normally I simply thought of being a panther and instantly became one. All it took was my decision and it was done. It was the first time in my entire life that my body did not conform to my will. It was terrifying.

“Give me a sign, reah, that you understand my words.”

I would have to make some kind of sound, as I was still in my panther form. I froze, and Hamid moved from where he was at my right to step in front of me.

“Calm yourself, reah. As I said, you cannot shift back. You are truly a beast, and I fear that you will never be a man again. Look at your paws. I have no idea what you are, but even to say you are a panther does not ring true.”

My paws were three-toed appendages that reminded me of skin-covered talons. I felt as though I could straighten up and tried. It was like being in my werepanther form but to a freakish degree. On two legs, I was twice the priest’s size, looking down at him from a new height where I had never been before. It was terrifying.

“Jin Rayne”—Hamid’s voice splintered through me—“you must control your thoughts and feelings, because when they are good, it is as addictive as a drug, but when there is anger or fear... you must contain your power. You must!”

But I had no idea how to do that.

“I do not want to shut you away. Do not force my hand.”

The priest was trying so hard not to react to me the way everyone else had. He didn’t want to hurt me.

“Walk with me back to the villa of the semel-aten, as that is where your mate is.”

It took everything in me not to let the rage well up inside and turn and slaughter Ammon El Masry where he stood. I had been so much closer to Logan the night before than I could have ever imagined. We were housed in the same structure. And while it was huge, still, he had been right there.

The villa I had begun my run from was at the end of the next street. I had left from the side that faced the fields. I was returning on the side where the main street ended, just as I had the day before when I left and

returned with Femi and her mother, sister, and the other yareahs. There were inns and galleries and shops and then a huge park and then the villa of the semel-aten.

An enormous wrought-iron gate faced us as we approached. To the right and left, on either side, were guardhouses for sentries. The gate opened at our approach, and at the top of the stairs, across the courtyard, standing beside an enormous pillar, I saw a familiar head of gold hair.

There was no time for words. I wasn't sure if Hamid said anything to me; I was no longer beside him to hear them if he did.

How fast I moved, the ease with which I did it—both should have terrified me. There wasn't even a second of thought. I flew forward with a burst of speed that took me instantly to the bottom of the stairs.

Logan ran.

He took the steps in threes. I took them faster.

We met in the center, and he flung himself at me. His arms wrapped around my neck, his beloved face buried in the side of my neck, and he breathed me in, squeezing tight. I whimpered and whined, straightening suddenly, back on my haunches, wrapping my arms around him, crushing him to my heart.

Never had I thought to lift Logan Church; it was a new and wholly satisfying experience.

His laughter was deep and husky and rumbled up from his chest. "Holy shit... only you, I swear to God. Jesus, you make life interesting."

His words, his simple words, put everything back in perspective. It was like I had fallen out of heaven. From some high, exalted perch where everyone was terrified of me and in awe of me, I was suddenly back on earth with my mate, to whom I was just Jin, just a giant pain in the ass.

I sucked in my breath, so much more than happy. Happy didn't begin to do the feeling singing through me justice.

I wanted to devour him, eat him up, kiss him and hold him, and have him buried inside me hard and deep. Never in my life had I needed anything as painfully much as Logan Church.

"Hold me tighter," he murmured, rubbing his cheek on my nose, chuckling as he clutched at me. "I won't break. Let me feel your heart."

Mine overflowed.

Logan... even though I drove him batshit crazy, he loved me, faults and all. The man was made for me in every way, and all I wanted was to be what he needed, what he had to have, just be his.

“Jin.” He gasped my name as I was suddenly against him, arms and legs wrapped around him, pushing, pressing, trying to get closer. “Love!”

That fast, blink-of-an-eye fast, I was me and hard and needy, and my cock was leaking against his T-shirt, rubbing and leaving wet spots on his abdomen. I felt like I was in heat.

He held onto me as I writhed against him, holding on as he pulled off the short-sleeved shirt he was wearing over the T-shirt and covered my naked backside.

There was yelling, gasps, and questions volleyed fast.

“How?” I heard Hamid yell as he closed on us, his voice rising above the others.

This was the priest of Chae Rophon speaking to my mate, and so, ever dutiful, he struggled, with me trying to burrow inside his skin, to kneel.

“No, no.” Hamid stopped him, the tone sharp, commanding. “I just—”

“Your grace, I beg—” Logan started to respond.

“No, I know, I see,” he cut off my mate. “Maybe this is how he—you will appear before me the moment he calms and can speak. Do you understand?”

“Yes, your grace,” Logan told him, turning and taking the stairs in twos.

I opened my mouth on the side of his neck, and as he carried me into the cool interior of the villa, his step faltered.

“There is so much I want to know, and... but if I don’t... don’t claim.... I think... I can’t even think straight anymore. I think I went mad.”

“No,” I assured him, licking the salt from his skin, trailing my tongue from shoulder to behind his ear, raising goose bumps on his hot, flushed, smooth skin. I had never tasted anything better. “You have to have me with you. I’m your mate, Logan Church, and I am necessary.”

“More than that,” he groaned deep in the back of his throat, dropping to one knee, unable to take even one more step. “You’re it, you’re all there is.”

I had no idea where his room was, but wherever it was, was too far. Scrambling out of his arms, I saw a door to the left and bolted for it.

Logan was not more than an arm’s length away. I reached the door, opened it, and found myself in a sitting room or some kind of receiving room. It hardly mattered. It was small, only one window, books in cases that reached from floor to ceiling on every side. Only one way in and out, and the door had a lock.

My mate kicked it shut when he followed me in, turned and locked it before he lunged at me. I was naked in his arms as he went down on his knees, folding them under him, pulling me into his lap. One hand anchored me, fingers splayed on the small of my back; the other fisted my engorged, leaking shaft. I thrust up into his hand and let my head fall back on my shoulders.

“I don’t have—we need—”

“No,” I nearly screamed at him, pulling back just enough to get at his belt, tug it loose, and start on his jeans.

“Jin—”

“No!” I growled at him, nearly out of my mind with wanting him, needing him, the end of all of it finally within my grasp. He was not getting out of the room without claiming me.

His clothes cooperated, and I had the snap undone, the zipper down, and the briefs moved so that his long, hard beautiful cock bobbed free.

“Look how much you want me.”

“Are you kidding? Just looking at you does this to me. Just your eyes, the smell of your hair.... Jin, I... oh God, stop or I’ll come all over you.”

Like that could ever be bad.

“Am I awake?”

He thought he was dreaming too. What a pair we made.

I moaned before I rocked forward and sealed my mouth over his. He parted his lips and I surged inside, kissing, sucking, biting, reacquainting myself with his taste, with Logan, the feel of his teeth, the roof of his mouth, and his tongue, his talented, amazing, dominating tongue.

He broke the kiss, bathed his own fingers with saliva, coating them, and seconds later, they slid between my ass cheeks and pressed gently against my entrance. He bent and recaptured my mouth as he pushed one finger inside of me, slowly, gently, out and in, until he got the whimper he was after. His fingers were removed, he licked again until they were dripping, and the absence of them inside of me, the fact that his mouth was not pressed to mine, brought a growl from me.

“Impatient?” He grinned at me.

“Logan, please.”

He leaned forward and I met his mouth, his kiss, moaning with the renewed contact. There was a slight burn when his finger eased inside of me, but not enough to stop, even when he added the second, the pain heightening the sensation until my muscles remembered, sorting pleasure from pain. He scissored the two in my ass before working the third inside, pushing in deeper, over and over, as he mauled my mouth, devouring me, and taking over the kiss like he always did, his touch making me buck and squirm in his lap.

In moments I was pushing up and down on his long, probing fingers, trying to feel more, have more. He tore his mouth from mine before my head exploded from lack of air, and as I looked at him, I saw how clouded his eyes were, narrowed in half, his lips swollen and wet. He was breathtaking.

“Logan,” I panted in protest as he withdrew the delicious pressure from my ass, one hand on my hip, lifting as he used the other to position himself under me. He lined up his cock with my fluttering hole, and I felt the engorged head throbbing against my entrance.

“Jin.” My name from his throat was barely human.

My orgasm was dangerously close just from his hand stroking and pulling on my shaft and the fingers that had been pushed in and out of me.

He spit in his hand and coated the end of his shaft, the pearly beads of precome and saliva all there was. The bedroom eyes met mine.

“Please.” My request was guttural, choking.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

But that was ridiculous. Every time, for a second, for a heartbeat, there was pain. It was part of it, part of loving him, and it was as welcome

as the rest. Making the decision for him, my eyes locked on his, I slowly, steadily, impaled myself on the long, hard length of him.

And it hurt. The man was huge, and my tight muscles resisted the intrusion even though he had taken his time opening me up. But the second his hand returned to my cock, I felt the leap in my pulse, the quickening of blood, and I was able to lever down deeper onto him, rise up and then lower again a moment later.

“I dreamed this.” His voice was shaky with emotion.

The man’s eyes were so full of me, I could barely breathe.

“I’m the only one who ever gets to see you like this.”

Yes, he was.

“And you’re so beautiful.” He took a deep breath, fisting his hand in my hair, yanking my head back as he pushed up hard, his thighs against my ass, fully seated inside me. “When you’re riding my cock, you’re so fucking beautiful.”

I felt my muscles squeezing around him, the throbbing, gripping pressure building within me. I was so full, stuffed and stretched, and then he hit the spot inside me that would have made me scream if I hadn’t swallowed it down.

“No, I want to hear you,” he commanded, leaning into me, capturing my mouth, the kiss rough and hungry and brutal. “Scream my name.”

I moaned instead, my hands on his face, holding him still as I sank my tongue into the wet heat of his mouth, tasting him, my tongue tangled with his.

“Jin.”

I lifted up only to drive back down hard.

“Fuck!”

“Logan,” I whined out his name. “I can’t... I need... deeper.”

He rolled me onto my back in a seamless motion, my mate looming over me, my knees draped over his wide, muscular shoulders as he buried himself inside me.

I shuddered with happiness, my body convulsing as I pushed up against him. He pulled out of me in a long, slow slide only to plunge back down as hard as he could. His name was all there was.

“I can feel your heart.”

I was sure he could.

He pounded in and out of me, all the time milking my cock, keeping pace with his thrusts until between the look in his eyes, his weight, his power, how deep inside he was, and his absolute dominance, I came so hard I thought for a second I died. I roared out my orgasm, coating his stomach with cum, seeing it causing a gut-wrenching reaction. My mate... only I could mark him like that, the golden skin dripping with semen.

Logan slid his hand over his rippling abdomen, coating it before he pulled out of me.

"No," I gasped, not ready to be done. I wanted to be filled with Logan Church.

He flipped me over fast, onto my hands and knees, and I felt him swipe over my hole, using my own cum as lube before he rammed back inside me so hard that I caught my breath.

"Mine," he growled against my ear, and I felt his mouth on the back of my neck.

Dear God, he was going to mark me again. He was about to put his teeth into me, drive through bone and tissue and muscle and reopen the wound he had made six months before. I shivered with anticipation.

"Say yes to me!"

"Oh yes," I whispered, "please, yes."

But his fangs did not reopen the wound; instead, he bit down hard into my shoulder where it joined my neck, his cock pushing deep inside me. His claws pierced my skin as he grasped my hips, and I knew I would come again from the feel of him, from him claiming me in every way.

He was in a mindless frenzy, and when he bent over and wrapped his arms around me, yanking me backward and up, straightening me, impaling me on the hot, rigid length of him, I couldn't stifle my howl of pleasure. My orgasm gutted me; it was sensory overload as the room went bright white for seconds before I was aware of his roar.

Liquid warmth flooded my ass, spilled and ran down the back of my thighs, and still he pushed in and out of me, burying himself deeper with each new thrust. With him wrapped around me, plastered on like a second skin, I couldn't breathe, but it was a small consideration.

I had my mate back.

Hand cupping my face, my head was wrenched sharply sideways, over my shoulder, as he claimed my mouth in a brutal kiss. He sucked hard on my tongue, and his fangs grazed my lips.

I pulled back minutes later for air. “Why not put your teeth in me?” I asked breathlessly.

“It’s already done.” His voice was a raspy whisper. “My mark, it’s there forever.”

“But—”

“Just that you wanted it, just that you’d let me bleed you... again... it’s enough.”

He didn’t want to hurt me, but he could, whatever he wanted. I belonged to him, was his to do with as he pleased.

“Only me,” he said hoarsely. “My mate... claimed, fucked... marked as mine.”

“Yes.”

“Mine!”

It needed to be yelled just as it was. He needed to say it; I needed to hear it, to know it was there between us, the irrevocable, unbreakable bond.

He slid slowly from my body, in no hurry, not really wanting to free himself. I twisted around and grabbed at him, clutching tight, my arms wrapped around his neck, squeezing.

“I want to hear every detail, you understand? No matter what. No matter how hor—”

“He didn’t rape me,” I told him, burying my face in the side of his neck. “He didn’t.”

The shudder that tore through him was very telling.

“He was going to, but the others wouldn’t help him hold me down.”

“Others?”

I nuzzled my face under his chin. “I’ll tell you everything, I swear, but right now I just wanna go to your room. I just want to lie in bed with you.”

He was holding me so tight.

“You’re my touchstone now,” I whispered. “I wanted to tell you. I love you, I need you... I believe in the bond of a semel and a reah. You

can count on me. I won't fail you, Logan Church... my mate... my semel."

He pressed hot, fervent kisses to the side of my throat as he squeezed me even tighter.

"I trust you... I really do."

The growl in the back of his throat thrilled me.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, love." His voice cracked. "I heard."

"Logan, I—"

"I love you." His breath hitched as he again took possession of my mouth.

He loved me, and the kiss as well as the words told me. When I could, when he let me, I unsealed our lips and stared into the molten gold eyes.

"And you're mine."

My heart swelled in my chest as I put my head down on his shoulder. Standing easily, even with me holding on, he had me on my feet in front of him. He stripped off the T-shirt he had been wearing under his dress shirt and pulled it over my head. With his button-down tied around my waist and his T-shirt hanging on me like a nightshirt, I was sure I looked like an orphan in the oversized clothes. But for Logan, the important part was that I was covered, only my arms and legs visible.

"The semel-aten said I had to cover my head." I told him.

"We'll run," he told me.

The way his eyes glinted when he looked at me, I couldn't ever remember being so content.

"I have good news for you."

I waited.

"I left Domin and Koren home. They needed time together, and after you were taken... I think Crane would have jumped on a plane himself if I hadn't let him come."

Crane was there? The surge of happiness ran right through me.

He cupped my face in his hands, drew me forward, and tipped my chin up so he could look down into my eyes.

“There’s not a mark on you anywhere as far as I can see. Tell me how that happened?”

With my last shift, I had healed every wound on me. “I think whatever it was I turned into, I guess it’s more powerful than my regular panther form.”

“You guess?” He chuckled. “Jin, I have never seen anything like that. If I didn’t know that was you running toward me outside, I would have hauled ass away. Do you get how big you were? I mean, just your claws and fangs... it was terrifying.”

I swallowed hard. “Logan, what if I change again and can’t shift back?”

“That won’t happen.”

“But what if it does?”

“Love,” he said softly, his voice like a caress, “it won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Why did you change out there on the steps?”

I stared up into amber eyes that had chips of gold and brown in them. “I wanted you to hold me; I wanted to be in your arms.”

“And it was that simple. You wanted it, and so you did it. I think, without sounding overly conceited, that because you love me and because you want me, you’re never going to turn into anything scary. It’s not you and it’s definitely not you when you’re with me.”

“Logan—”

“Jin, honey, even if you don’t want to admit it, your heart knows that first, before anything else that you are my reah.”

I nodded, suddenly unable to speak.

“The love in you, your innate compassion, all of it makes it impossible for you to shift into a monster. To protect me, to protect those you love, I have no doubt, for a time, you could be frightening but not for long. It will never last. Like I said, you’re my reah and besides, you can’t stand at my side if you’re bigger than me.”

I stared at him as his face lit up in a huge smile.

His laughter, the rakish waggle of his eyebrows, brought a surge of feeling through me and with it quick tears. He knew me so well, knew what to say and when. I loved him so.

“But I’ve been feeling really strange the last few days,” I said, my breath catching as I calmed, settling in my skin.

“Just like me,” he murmured, easing me into his arms, wrapping me up, rubbing his chin on the top of my head. “I don’t seem to be calm anymore. I’m angry all the time, it’s just—it was like I wasn’t myself. I didn’t feel like me.”

“Me either,” I sighed, leaning against him, squeezing and rubbing my thighs together.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, his voice husky with laughter. “You gotta pee?”

“No,” I groused at him, shoving his shirt that was tied around my waist between my thighs for a second before pulling it free. “I have stuff running down the inside of my thighs.”

His laughter was loud, and I tried really hard not to smile.

“You’re an ass.”

“Absolutely,” he agreed, still chuckling. “Hey.”

I tilted my head so I could see him, and he bent and kissed me hard, making sure he missed nothing as he inventoried my mouth with his tongue and lips.

I leaned with him, not wanting to break the kiss, but he was taller, so I couldn’t keep the contact when he straightened to his towering height.

“I feel good,” he announced after a minute of staring into my eyes.

“What?”

“I feel like me now. I didn’t know who I was this morning, I felt strange in my own skin, but now... I feel like there’s a weight lifted off my chest. Just holding you, I can breathe.”

I felt the same, exactly the same.

“Now, c’mon, don’t you wanna shower and put on your own clothes?”

I shivered in anticipation.

He bent and buried his face in my hair. “God, I missed your smell.”

I felt like warmth and heat and happiness was radiating off me. I wondered if I was glowing.

“Look at me.”

When I tilted my head back, he bent and captured my lips with his hot, wet mouth yet again. The kiss was slow and sensual, deep and possessive, because I belonged to him and he was letting me know it, feel it. The second he tried to ease back, to break another kiss, I caught his bottom lip with a tender bite to keep his mouth on mine. My arms, which were wrapped around his neck, tightened, and his that held me close did the same. The noise in the back of his throat, the deep, sexy growl, made me smile.

“C’mon,” he rasped, chuckling against my lips. “Let’s go to the room.”

The way he opened the door and peeked out, checking both ways, reminded me of a little kid sneaking around. He was adorable, and when he tugged my hand, ready to run, I smiled at him.

“What?”

“I bet you were the cutest little boy ever,” I sighed, uncaring that I sounded like I was drunk just looking at him.

He scowled at me before he yanked me forward.

We raced up staircases, through enormous rooms, down dimly lit halls that smelled of scented jasmine oil from countless lamps. I heard the footfalls of guards and servants that we never saw, heard voices close and far away, echoing in the halls as we ran down winding narrow stairs and long corridors. We flew by carved statues of gods and goddesses and ran over richly dyed carpets. There was armor and weapons displayed on walls, and then we were suddenly outside in a lush garden. We didn’t break stride to gaze at the enormous moss-covered fountain or peer into the many small reflecting pools but sped by, down stone steps to an archway that led back indoors.

Finally, we arrived at the suite of rooms that quartered Logan and his family, and I was shoved through a door and heard it bolted behind me. Walking around, I surveyed his accommodations. The room was richly furnished with ornately carved chairs with deep crimson cushions, a multicolored carpet embroidered in intricate designs, and a mahogany canopy bed draped in mosquito netting.

I was going to say something, make a comment about how much better I felt in his room than I had in mine, but I didn’t get a chance. Logan grabbed me and yanked me into his arms. He held me so tight, so still, his face pressed down into my shoulder.

“Logan—”

“Shut up.”

I smiled as I twisted my arms free of his viselike embrace and wrapped them around his neck.

“Just let me hold you,” he sighed, and I felt his warm breath on my face. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in years.”

“I tried so hard to get to you,” I barely got out, my voice cracking, breaking.

“I know you did,” he told me, stroking my hair over and over, lulling every little last bit of fear out of me. “Let’s get you in the shower.”

The bathroom was enormous, the shower so big that it needed no doors; the drain, in the center, built at a slight dip, did not allow the water to ever pool. All the shower jets were removable, so they could be positioned anywhere or held in your hand. Logan turned them all on us gently and then held one in his hand to wash me. He shampooed my hair, massaged my scalp, and after he rinsed it, combed conditioner back through with his fingers. My eyes were closed as I enjoyed being taken care of, loving the feeling minutes later of being scrubbed from head to toe with a lathered bath sponge.

“You know you can’t actually wash everything away, right?” I teased him, my eyes drifting open.

“Yes, I can,” he assured me, sliding the sponge across my collarbone, my chest, down my abdomen and lower until it gently glided over my shaft. “Clean you up, take you back to bed... make you forget we were ever apart.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh yes,” he said, pulling on my arm to turn me around, my face in the spray. “I’m going to make you forget that I couldn’t protect you.”

“No,” I sighed, turning back around to face him, my hands going to his face. “You don’t have to ever worry about that. I never feel safer than when you’re with me. Never.”

The pain was suddenly there, visible and heartwrenching, on his face.

“Logan,” I said, smiling, leaning my head on the muscular chest. “You’re all I need.”

“Turn around,” he ordered gruffly.

I closed my eyes and did as he instructed, the water running all over me as he soaped my back, ran his hands down my ass, my thighs, to my feet.

“Face me.”

I did, and my back was shoved up against the cold tiles as he pinned me there, staring down at me, his eyes full of need.

“I missed you,” he said, his voice cracking.

And I was going to say something, but I forgot what that could be when he bent and took possession of my lips with his hot mouth. I was excited, exhilarated, and calm and relaxed all at the same time. I reached up, burying my fingers in his wet, heavy hair, loving the hard, bruising kiss that was more bite than anything else. When he lifted me, I wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck as he encircled me, crushing me to his chest.

“God,” he groaned, his face down in my shoulder. “Jin....”

“I know,” I soothed him. “Same here.”

He sighed deeply as he held me, content to have me close, savoring the feel of my bare skin plastered to his. “Hold tight.”

“You mean don’t let go.” I smiled into his hair, as his face was buried in the side of my neck. His mouth opened on my collarbone, and he sucked hard.

“Yeah, don’t let go. Don’t ever let go.”

And I wouldn’t, because the man was mine.

Chapter Thirteen

I WASN'T sure what I had expected when Logan and I finally emerged from the shower, but us just talking was a revelation. That it could just be filling him in, explaining what had happened without the drama of tears and a big gut-wrenching cathartic scene felt so much more than right. I just wanted my life back. I wanted to be me, Jin, the guy who worried about laundry and bills and putting gas in the car and when the best time would be to talk about kids with the guy I wanted to have them with. I needed my time with my mate to be like coming home, and that was exactly how he made it.

He asked questions, but he didn't press. He listened intently when I answered, but he waited while I formed my thoughts. In turn, because I was unhurried and he didn't judge me, I was able to relate my whole journey, and I calmed even more because I was talking to him like I normally did, going over the events of my day.

He had carried me from the shower and put me in his lap as he gently towel-dried my hair. Once that was done, he tenderly brushed it. I closed my eyes, loving the feel of the tug of the bristles, the slide over my scalp, his hands on me.

"I love to do this," he confessed, pressing a kiss to the spot where my neck and shoulder met. "I love it when you let me."

"I'm not an invalid."

"I know that."

I leaned my head back. "Forgive me."

"For what?"

"Being stubborn and—" My throat closed up.

“All that fight you’ve got in you, that kept you alive while we were apart,” he said, his voice hoarse. “And besides, I like you giving me crap. Arguing with you is some of the most fun I have.”

I nodded, and his lips sealed over mine. I wanted him, desired him, and had to absolutely drown myself in him. When his tongue slid over the seam of my lips, I parted them instantly. His mouth slanted down over mine, and he buried his tongue in my throat. My arms wrapped around his neck as he hugged me tight, pressing me against his heart.

“Oh, I wish,” he groaned, the agony and wanting there in his voice.

“Why not?” I breathed the question against his mouth.

“Because we have to appear in the hall before the priest,” he told me.

My eyes drifted open and I saw the dark-gold eyes looking at me like I was everything. I felt my stomach twist.

“You have to change and come sit beside me and finally be presented as my mate and my reah,” he said, kissing me softly, quickly. “I want everyone to see who you belong to.”

“The semel-aten said that if you couldn’t assure my safety that he—”

“Love,” he stopped me, his fingers sliding through my hair, “we both know that any threat of his is just that, a threat and nothing else. No one can take you away from me but the priest and only at your request.”

And logically I knew that but everything had been so strange for so long and I was so close to being able to go home that I was scared for no reason and paranoid.

“The bond is sacred, everyone knows that. And we both know that I can take care of you but if anyone doubts me, if anyone wants to test my ability to protect you then they can meet me in the pit and I will educate them. My mate will never be taken from me again; I will kill anyone that tries.”

The last was spoken with icy assurance. “I don’t doubt you, you know that.”

“I do.”

I cleared my throat. “Because I’m yours.”

His crooked grin, the one that made his eyes melt. “Yes, you are.”

I leaned into him, wrapping my arms back around his neck, kissing him in that ravenous way he loved. I felt him smile against my mouth, and he held me tight, his arms so strong.

“We’re never gonna get out of here, and we should, we don’t wanna piss off the priest.”

“He said when I calmed we would see him... *when*.”

“When,” he agreed.

I tried to move, but he tightened his grip, leaning down and biting the curve of my shoulder before licking his way back up the side of my neck to my jaw. When I turned into him, he kissed me again. The second kiss was wetter, with more tongue than the first, and when he pulled back, lips hovering just over mine, I called his name, arching up into him.

“My mate,” he growled, his lips on my throat seconds before his teeth. “You will carry marks on you, but only mine, only ever mine.”

It was all I wanted.

I KEPT calling it a villa, but really, it was more of a palace. There were different sections of it that were basically connected by walkways and bridges, covered archways, and terraces. The main hall was in what Logan called the palace proper, or the oldest part of the structure.

Logan led me into an enormous area filled with people sitting on the floor. It was like a giant living room with area rugs and throw pillows and low tables with groups of men and women clustered around them. The space was cool, open on all four sides so the wind could blow through, and servers moved through the crowd, putting trays of food down on the short, large coffee tables, filling goblets with ice water, and pouring glasses of tea and wine. There was a constant buzz of conversation and beautiful music lilting in the background. The musicians in one corner of the vast room drew my attention, and my gaze swept over the harp, cello, violin, and the lyre. As Logan led me through the maze of tables, snaking behind people sitting, I was pleased by not even being given a second look.

“Logan Church!”

And just like that, I felt every eye on us. I made a noise in the back of my throat.

“It’s okay,” he soothed me under his breath, turning his head to look toward the front of the room, toward the dais. “Your grace,” he answered, his deep, gravelly voice carrying.

“Come.”

Logan changed direction, tugging me after him, his fingers laced with mine, and I was careful where I stepped, not wanting to accidentally trip and fall into someone's lap or take a header down into their food.

"Here you are," the priest sighed, rising as we reached the edge of the dais that he and many others were gathered on. There was a large table there, built, as were the others, low to the ground, but long so that many could sit around it comfortably. At the center was now what looked like the carcass of a goat, people leaning in at intervals to break pieces off of it and eat it.

Logan sank down onto one knee, and I mirrored the movement, in perfect sync with my mate.

"Come," the priest said, using his hands to gesture for room to be made on his right. Clearly he wanted Logan and me there.

I watched as his phocal, Jamal Hassan, rose to create space for us. Everyone had to slide down, the strangers I didn't know, so that Logan and I could sit. The semel-aten and his yareah were on the priest's left, but then he didn't ask to move.

When Logan and I were close enough, we both sank to our knees again.

"Logan Church," Hamid Shamon greeted him, "please, rise and present your reah."

After a moment, Logan rose, and the instant he did, amazingly, the hall went still and silent. I inched closer, feeling vulnerable, wanting to lean into him but holding myself in check.

"I am Logan Church, semel-re of the tribe of Mafdet," he said, his voice rising, lifting as he stepped sideways so everyone could see me there beside him on the platform, his hand on my back, "and this is my reah, my mate, Jin Rayne."

There was thunderous applause as I lifted my hand and waved.

After several minutes, Logan led me around the table, and we took our seats on the pillows beside the priest. His smile lit up his face.

"I am so pleased that you have both attended me," he told Logan before his eyes were on my face. "Jin, I had not thought it possible that you could shift back into your true form, but your power is truly great, as I saw the metamorphosis myself."

I thanked him and then asked if I could speak to Jamal.

“There is no need for you to ask permission for anything, reah,” he said, smiling at me. “At my table all are free to do as they see fit. If I invite you, consider all privileges granted.”

I nodded and turned to face Jamal, who was at my right. “Thank you.”

He sighed heavily, his eyes soft. “Reah, it was my great honor to have had a hand in helping you in any small way. I only wish that I had not ever turned you over to the semel-aten. That was my failing. Forgive me.”

“You overstep your bounds, phocal,” Ammon snapped from the other side of the priest. “All reahs are the concern of the semel-aten. You have no right, as your master will tell you, to keep any reah from my—from me.”

I felt Logan tense beside me, and I leaned my chin against his shoulder, rubbing, so he could feel me.

“This man is no mere reah,” the priest said gently but forcefully. “Had I known that you were being kept from your mate, I would have left my home earlier. I apologize for my tardiness, my dear reah.”

I leaned forward and sideways across my mate to take the hand of the priest of Chae Rophon. I smiled at his amazed expression even as his other hand covered mine, his two enveloping mine.

He looked past me at Logan. “Your mate is a jewel.”

“I know,” he said, drawing me back when the priest released my hand to move me into his lap, between his crossed legs. “And as I have told the semel-aten”—Logan’s voice dropped to a steely thread as he turned to Ammon—“I will meet him or anyone else in the pit to prove that I can keep my mate safe.”

“You keep him safe?” the priest scoffed as all eyes turned to him. “Logan Church, from what I saw today, Jin Rayne no longer needs protection from anyone. The question is instead who can bring him back from that horrifying transformation.”

The table was silent, and I felt all eyes on me.

“Had I not witnessed the change with my own eyes, I would have not thought it possible. With all of us”—he indicated himself and Ammon and Jamal—“he was a horror. I consulted my texts, and I believe he transformed into a nekhene, hawk-cat, those that our ancestors thought

flew and gave rise to the legends of griffins and other winged beasts. The flight was never proven, but the speed... I think our ancestors believed it to be flight, as they could not track it with their eyes. I have much research to do, but as I saw Jin shift, instantly, at your bidding, your dominion over him is absolute. There is no doubt in my mind, or in the in the minds of my Shu warriors who were present, that for Jin, he is your reah first before all else. He changed for you, and only you." His voice rose. "And for that you have my leave, in front of all these witnesses, to take him from Sobek at the conclusion of the trials that you have requested." He looked back at Logan. "He is your reah, and the bond is true and absolute."

"Thank you," Logan said as he exhaled, clutching me tight, his chin on the top of the keffiyeh.

"Do you require no more proof of the bond between the semel and his reah?" Ammon barked out, his irritation easy to discern.

Hamid Shamon turned slowly to look at the semel-aten. "I saw the reah change for his mate, after such a display I require no more proof of the sacred bond." He turned then to look at Logan. "If you want to perform the mating ritual, I would be blessed to preside over the ceremony for you."

I heard Logan catch his breath. "I would be honored for you to bless our union, your grace."

He nodded. "On the last day of the feast, then, it will be done."

"Two men?" Ammon argued, looking at the priest. "How can you bless such?"

The priest gestured at Logan and me. "I see only a semel and his reah."

It was obvious that the semel-aten was not happy, but he went silent as more food was delivered to the table.

After awhile, I twisted around so I could see Logan's face. "Where are Yuri and Mikhail and Crane?"

"Only semels and their mates and the Phocal of the Shu were invited to dinner tonight. That's why the crowd is so small."

Jesus, this was small? I couldn't even imagine how many people would be there when those that each semel had brought were convened as well.

I moved off Logan's lap but stayed leaning against him throughout the meal. Once it was over, the priest excused the room and bid them to adjourn to the vast patio. As I rose beside Logan, Hamid was suddenly in front of me.

"Your grace?"

"Tomorrow, Jin, the honor trials begin. You will sit at my right and speak the atrocities that were forced on you by Laurent Bruyere. It will be a long, hard day, and then, after the hearing, there will be the pit. Should you lose your mate in the challenge, the semel-aten will probably want to claim you as his wosret, and if not, many other semels will, I'm certain, want to grant you sanctuary. Now Jamal has spoken to me of you," he said as the Phocal stepped in beside him, "and after what I witnessed today, should you want to join the Shu instead, you need only speak the word to me. Do you understand?"

If my mate died, I could be a warrior or another man's whore. I got it. "Why wouldn't I just go home?" I asked them.

The priest sighed, smiling at me. "Jin, you are a reah. Your life will never be your own."

I nodded, squinting to make sure I didn't shed a tear as my eyes filled. I was really much too emotionally raw to be doing anything but lying in bed with my mate.

The priest squeezed my shoulder before pressing his warm, soft hand to my cheek only for a moment. Jamal's smile was warm, his eyes absorbing my face before they both turned away. I was glad that Hamid had a man like Jamal watching his back; it would have been scary if Jamal belonged to Ammon.

Logan called me over to him minutes later, and I was introduced to two of his oldest friends.

The semel of the tribe of Sokar, Martine Soto, was a big, burly man with a quick smile, dark, warm brown eyes, and thick, wavy black hair dusted with silver. He invited me to Miami with or without Logan. The wink, the mellifluous Spanish accent, and the sincerity in his face all touched me deeply. I was always impressed by loyalty, and his to Logan, by all accounts, was boundless.

Justin Cho, the semel of the tribe of Qebui, was taller than both Logan and Martine, but leaner, with long, sinewy muscles. His hair wasn't as long as mine, falling to his shoulders, but there were crimson streaks in

it that somehow managed not to detract from the seriousness of his face. His eyes were black, the lashes that framed them long and thick, his features carved and sharp. He was not handsome, he was beautiful, and as I looked at him, the dark orbs heated.

“Watch yourself,” Logan said, bumping Justin with his shoulder. “Your smell is changing.”

“I can’t help that,” he said, smiling as he stepped in close to me, offering me his hand. “It is my great honor to meet the mate of my dear friend. Please consider me your servant, my reah.”

His hand closed around mine, and he eased me forward, closer to him. I was looking up at his handsome face, and he was staring down at me. We were frozen.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Logan growled, stepping between us, hand on my elbow, pulling me up against him, tucking me into his side.

“Possessive much?” I said under my breath.

The hand cupping my ass shut me up as Justin chuckled over his friend’s seeming insecurity.

I was introduced to so many people, an endless stream of semels and yareahs, that it was nice when I could take a minute to extricate myself and have a moment of quiet. I walked to the edge of the elevated platform, waiting for Logan to join me. Everyone else was clustered together, talking, so it was not surprising that I was the only one to see the shadow moving to the left by the wall.

It was like the man stepped out of the shadows, and his hand moved with the slightest motion, signaling. I looked around and saw a woman, one of the many swivel-hipped dancers who had poured into the room to draw the crowd outside to the vast patio strung with lanterns, where wine and Zibib flowed freely. This one woman, though, her scent was different. She didn’t smell like scented oil. She was not dusted in glitter and decorated with henna. She walked slower, and then I saw the flash of metal.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I registered the deadly intent. And it was strange, but I saw and tracked only the woman and the man directing her in the sea of people.

Falling to the ground, I tore off the keffiyeh and was out of my dress pants and linen shirt in seconds. I thought, *Snake*—I had no idea why—and felt myself glide over the ground, so much faster than possible, and

making no sound, not wanting to alert the assassin in case she turned and rushed Logan instead of following through with the stealthy attack that was planned.

“By Ra,” Ammon shouted, turning to look for me and finding me in my panther form.

“Jin.” Logan was alarmed, turning to face me, and missed the knife driven forward toward his abdomen.

I roared, flinging myself forward with a bolt of speed, intercepting the assassin, driving her down to the floor, her knife buried in my chest.

Her scream died in her throat as I crushed it with my jaws. The shouting, the yelling, began instantly.

“Jin!”

I lifted my head, felt the blood dripping off me as I saw the man. And then the other. It was chaos then, as the throwing blades came whistling through the air. I leaped away, back, snaking around bodies to leap at Logan, hurling him down to the polished wood under my paws. His hands clutched at my fur.

“Stay,” he ordered, and I felt the power in his hands as he began his shift to his werepanther form. Once he had shifted, he would be even more powerful than I was in that form, but in this instant, speed, not strength, was the key. “Jin,” he growled, his voice bottoming out.

I was distracted by the glint of thread, like fishing line in the air, and watched as people were cut to shreds around me. The wire, when wrapped and pulled, was razor sharp, and there was blood everywhere.

Charging forward, I ran, stopped, froze as the wire slithered by me, and then rushed forward, following the first man up the wall, closing my jaws on his ankle and just going limp, letting my weight slam us down hard to the floor now easily twenty feet below.

He rolled free and faced me, arms moving in the air, making circles. It would have looked ridiculous if I couldn’t see the traces of wire in the light. Others charged forward, unseeing, and with just a flick, they were bleeding, cut quickly, gashes crisscrossing their faces, slicing through clothes to the vulnerable skin underneath. I coiled and leaped, I felt myself entangled, felt the wire yanked so that it cut deep, but it was too late, he had let me too close, not thinking I was as dangerous as I was. He missed his jeopardy. I tore out his jugular and left him choking to death in his own blood. Someone had sent assassins for my mate, and I would kill them all.

The third man ran. I saw his foot for a second at the edge of the ceiling. I flew forward, claws in the wood as I went up, wrapping around the pillar, scaling it fast, and was on the roof seconds behind him. He was running for his life, scuttling away, shedding clothes, but he wouldn't make it. We were running out of tiles, nearing the edge. The leap would need to be made in panther form from one rooftop to the next. A man would not make it. I pounced, soaring further than I thought I could from so short a distance, and the man slammed down under my paws, my jaws snapping shut inches from his cheek. My breath was hot and wet; there was blood on my whiskers, on my muzzle. The smell made him choke.

"Ammon El Masry wants your semel dead," the man confessed breathlessly.

I moved sideways to look at him, and the second the pressure was gone, he scrambled out from under me and hurled himself from the roof. I heard the fall, the crash, and didn't have to look to know he was dead. Either way, though, the moment I had caught him, he was gone. An assassin who failed never lived.

I stood still, listening, breathing, and feeling the hot wind on my face. After a moment, I sank down. The fear and panic was gone, the bloodlust finished, the rage dissipated, and all that was left was the loss of blood and the stinging pain. Like that first bite of water on a razor cut, it took my breath away.

The weight on me pressed down hard so I couldn't bolt. When my head snapped up, the pheromones hit me so hard I almost swooned.

My mate.

He was there, had come after me, and I was certain had heard the confession from the assassin. He knew as well as I did who wanted him dead.

He curled around me, his larger frame dwarfing mine. I was sleek and lithe in comparison to the muscular cat that he was. I ran my nose up under his throat, nuzzling, pressing against him, freezing suddenly, wanting to be closer. He licked my ear, the side of my face, licked the blood off me, cleaned me up, and then tenderly bit the nape of my neck. He inhaled my scent, checking me over, using all his senses to determine if I was well. Satisfied that I was, he bumped me with his nose, rubbing against me, stroking his chin over the top of my head, and just the lingering closeness let me stand, rise beside him, and follow him down off

the roof.

There were enormous basins of water in the room we reentered. It was empty now but for the priest, Jamal, and the many of the Shu. It felt like lockdown, like the area was secured.

It made sense that meat and water had been fetched so quickly. We were with our own kind; they knew exactly what to get.

“Logan Church, your mate is a ferocious creature, and I pity any who try and take you from him.”

Logan shifted. In the moonlight, he rose from his panther form like some primordial god rendered in gold. I drank my fill of him.

“Is your mate well?”

“He is,” Logan answered, his eyes sliding over me before returning to the priest.

“Had all my warriors been here with me, we might have been able to take the assassins alive. As it was, Jamal’s first instinct was to protect me even though you were the target.”

“Jamal did exactly what he should have.”

“Did the assassins speak to you? Did you learn who sent them?”

He nodded slowly.

“Speak the name of the traitor?”

“Surely your grace can guess.”

Their eyes locked.

“Are you certain?”

“I am.”

“Will you challenge him?”

“He wants my mate,” Logan growled. “Hopefully the pain he caused others this night will make him rethink his present course.”

“Only the assassins died, but others were injured. Had Jin not interfered, only you would have died and no one else would have been hurt, but in their zeal to defend themselves from your mate, the assassins hurt a great many.”

“Now that the semel-aten has seen Jin’s true power, hopefully he will let us be. I can’t prove it was him, but he knows what he tried, and he knows that he failed. I hope he’s scared. I really want him to be scared.”

Hamid sighed deeply. “He has always been a tyrant, but I never thought he was capable of murder. I never thought he would go so far to have your reah for his own.”

“He’s had a reah before,” Logan reminded him, “and lost her. He knows what it is to have a reah. He just wants Jin because he’s something different, something more.”

“Yes,” he agreed, reaching for Logan’s shoulder, squeezing it gently. “I will offer what protection I can. For now, your rooms are secured; I have Jamal and his men there with your family and the other members of your tribe. No one can breach them. Go when you are ready.”

Logan put his hand over that of the priest’s that gripped his shoulder.

“If you challenge the semel-aten in the pit and kill him, you will be semel-aten, Logan Church. Perhaps it is time for you to decide if Sobek is to be blessed with a new semel-aten.”

The priest was suggesting that my mate kill Ammon El Masry in the pit and replace his bloodline. It was a scary conversation for them to be having.

“Perhaps,” Logan said.

They stared at each other, and no one moved. It was strange. The priest was dressed in robes of silk and gold and Logan was naked, but still it was my mate whose bearing seemed more regal, like he was a king. I could imagine others worshipping him; he would embody all that the semel-aten should be.

“I will expect you in my chambers at dawn, Logan Church.”

He nodded, saying nothing more to the priest.

Moments later we were alone, and he turned to me.

“Jin,” he rasped, his voice gravelly and deep, “you scared the shit out of me.”

I had to protect him. There had been no other choice.

He cleared his throat, squatting down so he was eye level with me. “You changed into... something I have never... it wasn’t a snake, but it moved like one. You had the head of panther, but the rest was almost like a dragon, or, Christ,”—he raked his fingers through his thick hair—“baby, no one’s ever seen anything like you, and they’re terrified.”

I lifted up from my crouch and took a step back from him.

“No.” His voice was hard, firm. “Not me. Never me. I didn’t say I

was afraid. I felt your power, felt all that force directed at others because you were protecting me. Everyone was scared except me. You don't frighten me at all."

I stared at him. I was turning into a monster.

"Shift," he commanded softly. "I want to look in your eyes."

The second I was me, he reached out and grabbed my wrist, yanking me forward and into his arms. I was crushed tight to his chest.

"You gotta stop just rushing in. I can't lose you because you—you have to be more careful," he insisted, his fingers brushing over the healing wound just below my collarbone. "This could have been fatal if she knew where to drive the knife. She aimed for the panther's heart, not the man's. A better-trained assassin doesn't make that mistake."

His skin was hot next to mine, fevered, and his scent filled my nostrils. Between the sweat and the blood and the pheromones, my body was starting to throb.

"No," he growled in my ear, kissing the side of my neck before he let me go and took several steps away. Then his fur rolled slowly over him and he was an enormous golden panther. He was beautiful, but when I reached for him, he bounded away.

"Wait," I said, following.

He crouched down, then lifted up, raised his head, tasting the air, and then bolted a short distance before he came loping back. It was like he wanted to play.

I had to smile; there was no way I couldn't. "Christ, we're both nuts," I breathed out. "Honey, Ammon El Masry wants you dead, and Laurent wants me dead, and Abbot and... shit. We need to get the fuck out of here and run home."

He rolled over on his back and looked up at me.

"What the hell are you doing?" I chuckled, not wanting to. "This is life-and-death, idiot. Do you get that at all? Is this whole thing gettin' to be a little too much for you?"

The purring was loud, and I threw up my hands in disgust before it hit me. "Holy shit."

He rolled over fast, looking at me upside down, letting his paws fall limp like he was a huge overgrown tabby cat lying there waiting to have his belly rubbed.

I did this—I got all in my head and missed facts and planning and just simple basics. Domin was right: I was a drama queen. There, in the huge room, in the middle of the night, I calmed, took a breath, and looked at my mate as he shifted back to the gorgeous man he was and grinned at me like I was stupid.

Which I was.

“Tomorrow you will tell everyone at the hearing what that fuck Laurent Bruyere did to you, after which I will kill him in the pit.”

The way he said it, so matter of fact, left no doubt in his mind that he would.

“After that, Yuri will kill, or punish, Abbot George and his friend Ian, who attacked you in the kitchen of our home. It’s your sheseru’s right, as well as his choice, and I won’t take that away from him. Before any of that, tomorrow morning I will take Mikhail and Yuri with me, and we will go and see Ammon El Masry.”

“No, Logan, you—”

“He needs to know that I know he tried to kill me.”

“Logan—”

“He won’t try again,” he said, gently silencing me. “And even though I get that, I still need to see him.”

“Why won’t he try again?” I asked, my breath catching.

“Because you scared the crap out of him.”

“What’re you—”

“Jin, he’s scared to death of you. Before tonight, he was thinking it would be nice to be in control of all your power, break you, be the man who could tame a nekhene cat, be the man who takes you to bed”—he smiled slowly, wickedly—“but when he saw what you became to protect me, saw how big and scary you were, how deadly and unrestrained, he nearly crapped himself right there. I don’t think you understand how frightening you truly are.”

“But you’re not scared,” I said for my benefit as well as his.

“No,” he agreed, “but that’s because you’re mine. There’s untapped power in you, and I don’t know where the end is. I don’t know how fast you’ll get, how big, how strong, how... whatever. Your limits may be endless, or you’re as strong now as you will ever be. But everyone else, they look at you, and just for a second, they’re terrified.”

I studied his face, looking for a hint of fear.

He arched an eyebrow for me.

“You know, you could be serious for, like, a second here.”

The shit-eating grin was back. “I could do that, but then you’d dissolve.”

And he was right, I would. I was waiting to lose it. I’d killed two people. Yes, they were trying to kill my mate, but still, they were dead, and I was the one who had ended their lives. I was responsible. The third knew he couldn’t escape me and so had decided to end his own life. It was me; I was the one who had put all the events in motion that killed two men and one woman.

“You reacted, Jin,” Logan said like he was reading my mind. “You didn’t send people to kill me; you protected me as the mate of a semel does.”

I shivered hard.

“You saved my life,” he told me. “And when you defended me before, you didn’t kill anyone, but this time you had no choice. Just like tomorrow, in the pit, I won’t have a choice.”

My eyes locked on his.

“Sometimes the choices others make take ours from us. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

“Are you sure?”

I did. The assassins had come for my mate, and I had defended him. Men had violated Logan’s home, and I had been hurt by some, kidnapped by others; they had to pay.

“Jin?”

“I understand.”

“Good.” His voice dropped low and husky. “Let’s sleep under the stars.”

He always knew what I needed.

I dropped to my knees, shifted, and ran. He had promised to run with me over the sand beside the pyramids. And while I could not hold him to that promise, it felt good to run without cause. I was safe because of me and because of him. He could protect me, and I could do the same for him.

I felt the surge of joy roll through me.

We ran over the grounds and out through the gate into the night. It wasn't fast, just easy, me following after him until I increased my speed to move in beside him. When Logan nipped at my shoulder, herding me up toward the rocks and a small stream, I bolted ahead of him.

He tackled me, and we rolled together, finally coming to a stop in a warm pile of fur. As he had done earlier on the roof, he curled his bigger, muscular body around mine, and I purred deeply, contentedly, as he rested his head on my back, marking me with his scent. I never felt as safe as I did when my mate was wrapped around me. I was asleep in minutes.

Chapter Fourteen

HE WAS quiet over breakfast the following morning.

“What’s wrong?”

Quick head shake. Whatever it was, he wasn’t quite ready to say.

I had to eat, my body needing the protein, so I did. After a while, I noticed Logan looking at me instead of reading the newspaper.

“I had no idea you could read Arabic,” I said to make conversation, and plus it was kind of interesting. All these things I didn’t know about him.

He lifted the paper so I could read the words *Wall Street Journal*.
“Oh.”

His chuckle was deep. “Crap. Prepare yourself.”

“For what?”

“Have you lost your fucking mind?”

I stood up fast, banging the table, jostling the things on it, smiling so wide my face hurt. As I turned, I saw Crane striding across the room toward me. He was mad, furious, and as always happened, his normally deep blue eyes darkened to sapphire.

“You fuck! How do you not come see me the second your ass gets back?”

I had a moment to brace for it before arms were around me, clutching me so tight I was sure he snapped ribs.

“For fuck’s sake, Jin!”

I held on, my fingers digging into his back, my face in his shoulder as it had been so many times over the years, breathing him in, his anger

soothing me for reasons I never understood.

The hug was hard, brutal, and I understood, like always, because it was Crane who knew all about my soul, that I was loved.

“Jin,” he said, and I felt the shudder run through him. “Don’t ever fuckin’ do that to me again.”

Like I had been given a say in any of it. “No,” I promised, easing back, looking at his face. The normally laughing blue eyes I knew looked so hurt, and I felt like crap even though it wasn’t my fault. I wanted to see the lopsided grin, but he was biting his upper lip instead.

“What’d you do to your hair?”

His wild, unruly, dirty-blond waves had been shorn into a military-style buzz cut.

“Never mind,” he snapped at me.

My eyes narrowed, but when he stepped sideways and I was faced with Yuri on his knees, patiently waiting for my attention, I saw that he too had the same haircut.

“What the fuck?”

“It’s part of the cleansing ritual to enter the pit,” Crane told me.

I caught my breath. “What?”

“My reah,” Yuri gasped, almost a whine, wanting, needing, my attention.

I knelt down and sprang at him, arms wrapped tight around his thick neck. As I held him, I heard Logan clear his throat. When I looked up at him, his eyes were narrowed slits.

“Roshan Tabir reported that you had called him to you.”

“Only for a second,” I said, leaning back, looking into Yuri’s eyes. “I called him because he was the only one around. You are my sheseru now and always. You can never be replaced.”

He released a shaky breath and clutched me tight.

“Why would you even worry?” I grunted, pulling back, scowling at him as the door opened and Delphine and Markel and Mikhail came through. As Yuri rose, still holding me, putting me down gently on my feet, I had enough time to release him before Delphine was in my arms.

I had no idea that Mikhail would want to hug me. We didn’t hug as a rule, but he reached for me, and even though it was just a brief clench, a

guy hug, it was more than I ever expected. And Markel, another revelation, lunged at me, hugging me so tight that his lips even grazed the side of my neck before he let go.

When Delphine was back in my arms, she started crying. She confessed that she had been so close to telling Logan our secret, the one only she and I knew about, the one we had kept from everyone, just to give him some comfort. But in the end, she had decided to wait because she knew it was what I would have wanted.

“Thank you,” I told her, rubbing circles on her back.

“He was having a hard time, and I just wanted him to know that he would, you know, always have you,” she told me, leaning heavily, stray tears rolling down her cheeks. “I wanted him to know that some part of you would be with him.”

“I know,” I said, kissing her forehead. “Go wash your face, you look like a raccoon.”

She nodded before heading for the open door of the bathroom. I was going to say something but let it go in favor of interrogating Crane. Now that everyone was satisfied that I was well, I rounded on my best friend.

“Why did you have to cut your hair?”

Logan stepped in beside me. “Only a semel is allowed to challenge more than one in the pit, and even then not simultaneously or even consecutively. I fight Laurent today and Kellen two days from now. Apparently he’s fighting Christophe tomorrow. Yuri will fight Abbot today, and afterwards Crane will face the other man who attacked you in our home, Ian Lund.”

I looked at Logan. “I don’t want Crane in the pit.”

“Jin, it’s not your—” my best friend began.

“Come here,” Logan said, grabbing my arm, pulling me after him out onto the patio. Once there, he swung me around to face him. “Listen to me. You cannot—”

“He’s not like you,” I told him. “He’s not like Yuri. He’s not big and scary and—”

“Stop,” he ordered me quietly. “Crane is carrying around a lot of crap right now. He was upstairs when you were kidnapped, and by the time he got downstairs he had just enough time to hear who had taken you before they were gone. He didn’t get the opportunity to fight. He didn’t

have that option. When he should have been defending you the first time, he was tangling with Markel instead.” His eyes searched mine. “Do you understand how much he needs to do this?”

“But I know he’s brave,” I told Logan. “I don’t need him to prove it to me. And Crane’s never killed anybody, and when you’re in the pit you run the risk of—”

“I spoke to the priest this morning; he says that normally only challenges between semels end in bloodshed.”

“That’s very comforting.” My breath was shaky. “When did you see the priest?”

“He wanted me there at dawn. He said so last night; you were there.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I woke up early and went to see him,” he said, looking suddenly pensive.

“What’s wrong?”

“My father was there,” he said slowly, brows furrowed.

“Doing what?”

“Speaking to the priest.”

“About what?”

His eyes locked on mine. “It’s Koren.”

My heart was in my throat. “What?”

“No, not like he’s hurt,” he said, exhaling sharply. “Koren, like... since I found you and accepted you as my reah, all my father’s dreams for grandchildren, for an heir, moved to Koren. And he’s been supportive in public and even told your father that he was sure everything would work out, but in the back of his mind, he always had his safety net.”

“Koren.”

“Yes.”

“But now that Koren chose Domin...,” I sighed. “Now your father wants an absolute.”

“Yes.”

“And he wants the child to be yours.”

“He’s demanding it,” Logan said, combing the hair back from my face with his fingers. “And as guardian of the line until he dies—”

“He can make you take a yareah to your bed.”

“No.” His voice rose ominously. “He can petition the priest to—”

“I understand,” I said, cutting him off.

He took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry, baby.” He eased me into his arms, tucking my head under his chin. “But I swear to you that I will never be in bed with anyone but you ever.”

“Unless I die,” I breathed over his skin. “Then—”

“Never,” he promised, clutching me tight.

I thought Logan’s father and I were past him not believing that I really did want what was best for my mate, his family, and his tribe, since everything that was his was mine as well.

“You can’t blame him for how he feels, Logan,” I told him, listening to his heart, feeling the warmth through the dress shirt he was wearing. “I do understand, and I get why he’s not here to see me now. I was wondering.”

“I told him not to come; I told him I didn’t want you to see him.”

“You should lift your ban.” I smiled, moving my head off his chest to look up into his eyes before I yelled, “Delphine!”

I startled the hell out of my mate, which was funny. He let me go, and I was laughing when his sister appeared on the balcony.

“What the fuck?” Logan barked at me.

He was funny, all flustered, and I started laughing.

Delphine looked back and forth between the two of us. “What’s going on?”

“I have no fuckin’ clue,” Logan growled at her. “One second I’m telling him about the damn yareah and—”

“But I’m the damn yareah,” she told him.

His eyes got huge, and he went white, and it was hysterical. I put my head back and howled.

“Jin!”

Christ, it felt good to laugh. Really, really good. The relief, the calm that washed over me, I lost myself in the feeling of utter joy. And when everybody came bolting out onto the patio from the room while Logan stood there sputtering, I dissolved into tears. I was wheezing, not even able to breathe, I was laughing so hard.

“What the hell are you talking about?” my mate roared at his sister.

“God, you’re loud,” she said with a chuckle, patting his arm.

My sides hurt.

“D!” he snapped at her.

“Okay, okay, so listen, Jin asked me to be his yareah,” she told her brother. “Not yours.” She gave him a smile like he was slow. “His. Not yours, his.” She giggled as she repeated it. “Did you hear me, semel-re?”

He just stood there staring at her, mouth open.

“His”—she did it again—“not yours, because that would just be eww.”

He looked like he wanted to say something but was at a complete loss.

She placed her hand on his chest, over his heart, and looked up into his eyes. “My dear sweet brother, Jin and I, we went about a month ago and froze some of my eggs and some of his little swimmers, and when you guys are ready, we’ll mix ’em all up in a margarita shaker and make a really cute baby.”

The room went silent except for me trying to catch my breath.

“The baby will be half you, you through me, and half Jin. He will be your child because it’s your bloodline, and Jin’s because, well, it’s obvious.”

Logan was stunned, looking at his sister and me and then again at his sister.

“Jin asked me to do it, asked me for my eggs, and I said yes, because Jin deserves to be a father, to pass on all his brooding and passive-aggressiveness and his gorgeous hair. And you”—she smiled at her brother—“are pretty great too.”

He swallowed hard, the muscles in his throat constricting, those in his jaw clenching, and he took a deep breath through his nose. He was holding it together but just barely.

“You deserve to be a father, Logan Church.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat and then grabbed her. He hugged her so tight she squeaked and then started laughing just like I had.

“Love you,” he told her.

“And I love you back,” she said fiercely, her face in his shoulder, her

feet off the ground as he squeezed her. "And when you're ready, I have the perfect woman to carry the child for you."

He put her down, easing her out to arm's length as he listened.

"Markel and I discussed it, and we'll rent an apartment for the nine months so that we can live with her and help her, and then once the baby's born, we'll move back up to the house with you and Jin. I mean the house is huge, Logan, and once you have your child, or children, as the case may be, and once I have mine, we all need to be together. The house was made to house many families; you were planning on that, weren't you? Always having us with you?"

He looked up at me and then around at everyone. Often he said he wanted it to be just us alone, but we had huge rooms upstairs if we really wanted to be alone. There was a bedroom and a living room and a den. He didn't need a big empty house as well. He needed a house full of people who all drove each other nuts but who loved each other like crazy.

"You're gonna do that?" he asked, looking back at his sister.

"Of course." She made a face. "But it was Markel's idea that we should move out and then in. He didn't think that the surrogate should be ensconced in your home with you and Jin."

All eyes were at once on lean, dark, tall Markel Kovac, and I finally really looked at him. I was surprised at what I saw.

Markel had big, dark blue eyes, wavy black hair that fell in two layers to his shoulders, and flawless olive skin. When I had first met him, back when Domin had challenged Logan, he had reminded me of a beautiful piece of anime, like he shouldn't be real. When the tribes had merged, I had forgotten him, convinced that he had no concern for me at all. But now, suddenly, I realized that I could not have been more wrong.

"Logan, your surrogate shouldn't live with you," Markel told his semel before tipping his head toward me. "And Jin shouldn't have to deal with her at all except to thank her when it's over and write her a check. Delphine and I will watch over your unborn child for you. We want to, let us."

Logan was having a hell of a morning. First he had gone to see the priest and had ended up fighting with his father, and second he'd had to deliver what he thought was horrible news to his mate.

"You did this," he said, moving fast, looming over me, hands on my arms as he stared down into my eyes. "Why?"

"I asked Delphine to be my yareah because I want to have children with you," I told him. "I don't know that we're there yet, but I wanted you to know that I was ready when you were."

His eyes were filling, and seeing that touched me greatly.

"I didn't anticipate Markel and Delphine, though," I said, looking over at them. "That's quite a sacrifice."

"It's not!" Markel was loud for a second before Delphine slipped her hand into his. I watched him take a breath, calming, just her touch allowing him to regain his lost composure. He shivered for a second, and I looked at him like I had never done. There was vulnerability in him that I had missed up until that very second. "It would be my privilege to care for the life of your child," he said softly.

"You don't have to do that to secure your place in the tribe," Logan told him. "You have a place, Markel. You're part of my family."

I watched him absorb Logan's words, and I saw the shudder that ran through him. In that moment, I realized that the things I had missed in my own home were monumental. I had nearly missed Koren and Domin; I had missed when Delphine fell in love with Markel, and even more, I had missed when he fell in love with her and her family and his new life. The man had been a sheseru himself. And only at that second did I get why Domin would ever have chosen him. It was his heart that I had never even looked at before. Who knew that Domin Thorne, who had been a terrible semel, was such an excellent judge of men?

"Did you hear me?" Logan asked him.

Markel nodded as Logan left my side to face him. I turned and walked further out on the balcony, leaning my face into the breeze.

"You wanted her for me, that's why."

I turned my head and found Crane.

"That's why you missed her falling in love with Markel; you were focused solely on what you wanted."

"I've been so stupid."

He shrugged before he took up his spot beside me, shoulder to shoulder with me, the way we normally stood.

"I didn't know Markel was a good guy."

"Like I said"—Crane gave me the grin I was missing earlier—"he's an artist, and she likes that. They'll be mated soon, I'm sure."

“And you really don’t care?”

“My heart was never in it,” he said as he leaned against me. “My heart’s never been in anything yet but this.”

And by “this” he meant me and him.

“I don’t want you in the pit,” I said, exhaling, turning to study his profile.

“But I gotta be,” he told me, giving me a trace of the lopsided grin I loved. “I get a second chance, Jin, how many people ever get one? I fucked up and let you get hurt, but now I can hurt one of the men that hurt you. It’s like Christmas came early this year.”

I took a deep breath.

“Jin.”

I looked over my shoulder at Logan.

“I’m taking Markel and Delphine with me to talk to my father.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Would you like to come?”

“No,” I said, turning back to the view of the courtyard. “I’m gonna stay here with Crane and Yuri.”

“Okay.”

“Just make sure you tell the priest as soon as you’re done.”

“I’ll take my father with me.”

“Good,” I breathed out, my mind spinning with the day ahead and with what I now knew about my own house.

“Jin,” he whispered, suddenly beside me, hand fisted in my hair, staring down into my eyes. “You think you don’t take care of me or any of the rest of them, but it’s all you do, my reah.”

I gazed up into the honey-colored eyes of my mate and breathed.

“You have given me everything I could ever want,” Logan told me.

Our eyes stayed locked for long minutes.

“The challenges don’t start until noon. Mine is the first of the day. I’ll be back before then for you, my reah.”

I nodded.

He bent and dropped a kiss on my forehead before he left with Delphine and Markel. As soon as he moved, Yuri took up position on the

other side of me. I was sandwiched between him and Crane.

“You will be careful,” I said, my blanket statement to both men.

I felt Crane lean more heavily against my shoulder and heard Yuri’s deep sigh in answer.

EVERYONE had drifted off to do something, Crane to run, Yuri to walk by himself, and Logan had yet to return with Markel and Delphine. I was alone except for Mikhail. He thought I should eat something. Logan and the others were skipping lunch, as they would be fighting in the pit. I needed to keep my strength up, and I agreed. So I was following my sylvan, right beside him, ready to make our way to the banquet room with its never-ending supply of prepared and displayed food, when he opened the door and there were strangers there.

Two men I had never seen before were staring at us. Lately I was wary of strangers, and so I was watchful and ready. The first said my name, and the second nearly spoke over him, saying that their need to speak to me was urgent. My sylvan shoved me behind him and faced them. Both men fell to their knees, and as they did, I stepped around Mikhail.

“My reah,” he snapped at me, trying to wedge me back behind him without looking like he was.

“For crissakes, Mikhail,” I groused at him. The second they had knelt, I had known I was in no danger. He needed to understand that as well.

“You need to be—”

“Stop,” I grumbled at him, moving so I was facing the two kneeling men. “I’m Jin Rayne.”

“Reah,” the first man breathed out, lifting his hand toward me.

I took it even though Mikhail growled under his breath, and the moment our skin touched, I knew I was looking down at a sheseru. There was a time not too long ago, even when I had first met Yuri, that I couldn’t tell what kind of cat I was looking at. But suddenly it was getting a lot easier for me to tell.

“Who are you?” I asked him.

“Robert Kingman of the tribe of Dendera,” he said softly, reverently.

“I am—*was*—Laurent Bruyere’s sheseru. I will soon be Adam Bruyere’s sheseru, as he is next in line after Laurent’s brother David, and as he took part in your torture with his absence of aid, he has forfeited his place in the tribe.”

I stood there letting the sheseru hold my hand and look up into my face.

“I never would have let—”

“I know that,” I assured him, squeezing his hand tight before I let it go. Mikhail was much more comfortable the moment I released him, changing his stance so that he was sort of turned into me. The man was very protective, and it was endearing because if we were in a real fight, I would be the one taking care of him.

“Reah,” the other man began.

“It’s Adam, right?”

“Yes.”

“Stand up, both of you.”

They both gave me ghosts of smiles as they stood.

“What do you want?” I asked pointedly.

Adam cleared his throat. “Before Laurent had you kidnapped, he... there was....”

“Just ask for what you need,” Mikhail said sharply, uncomfortable, his hand on the small of my back. He didn’t normally touch me at all, but now he was in protector mode. It was nice, as my anxiety level over what Adam was going to ask was starting to rise.

“Okay,” he said, and Mikhail moved his hand to the side of my neck, reminding me to breathe.

“The man that Laurent kidnapped and beat and raped and killed, he....” Adam took a breath, and I saw his eyes start to water, redden. “I’m so sorry, this is so—”

Robert cut him off. “The man, his name was Emilio Fiori. He was an artist,” Robert explained. “His family... we need you to meet with Laurent.”

“No,” Mikhail said flatly, firmly. “Absolutely not.”

“Wait,” I said, hand on Mikhail’s chest as I looked at Robert. “Tell me why.”

“Because Laurent buried the boy somewhere, and his family wants the body as well as the portfolio of his work that was taken. If you cooperate and go see him, Laurent promised that he would tell us where both are.”

I crossed my arms because I was suddenly freezing. “Tell me about the portfolio.” I couldn’t ask about the body, I just couldn’t. It was too final.

“It was... it...” Robert raked his fingers through his hair, obviously anxious. “Emilio’s work was just recently accepted into an art gallery in Dallas, and now that he’s gone, the gallery still wants to have the opening.”

“The portfolio is important because the gallery wants to publish the book to accompany the opening,” Adam told me. “His mate, she found pictures of the artwork, of the paintings and sculptures, but Emilio’s notes... all handwritten... those are only in the portfolio. She wants it.”

Of course she did. It was a piece of him. She could read the words and know they were his words. Run her fingers over the ink on the paper and know he had put it there. In her place, I would have done anything for the portfolio.

“Reah?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Yeah, so they’ve been looking for his portfolio, and his mate realized that the reason she couldn’t find it anywhere was because he must have taken it with him the night he went to see his semel alone in his home.”

“All right.”

“So when Adam asked Laurent if he knew where it was, he said he had buried it with the body,” Robert said, his eyes locked on my face, searching. “Laurent said that ‘if Jin comes and asks me’, he’ll tell him where both are.”

I nodded, and my eyes flicked back to Mikhail. “So of course I hafta go.”

He let out a deep breath. “No.”

“Mikhail.”

“No.”

“I should, for Emilio’s family,” I told my sylvan. “For his mate.”

His face was pained, brows furrowed, muscles in his jaw working.

"I should."

"Yes," he finally agreed. "For his mate... yes."

Now that we were in agreement, I felt better. "I think just you and me go, all right?"

"You're nuts if you think I would let you go without alerting your semel."

"But before the challenge?" I looked at him.

"Yes," he assured me. "Especially before the challenge."

I was concerned with telling Logan, not wanting to shift his focus from anything but his upcoming challenge in the pit, but Mikhail was not about to listen to me. He firmly believed that telling Logan, informing him immediately, was the only course of action open to us. In the end, there was no argument to be made.

WHEN I arrived at the suite of rooms where Laurent Bruyere was being held under house arrest, there was no one there. Mikhail made me stand against the wall, and he stood close to me, keeping everyone else away, pacing restlessly. Others joined us piece by piece. I was glad when I finally saw Logan striding down the hall toward me with everyone else walking fast to keep pace with him. I darted over to him, and when I was close, he reached out, grabbed my elbow, and drew me up against the solid wall of muscle that he was. I wrapped my arms around him fast, burying my face in the crook of his neck. He smelled like him, like heat and musk and rain, and it was so much more than comforting.

"I hate this," he growled into my hair.

But he didn't forbid me from going into the room.

"It's for his family," I told my mate. "The guy's family."

"Yeah, I get that," Logan grunted, "but that doesn't excuse the fact that I never, ever wanted you anywhere near Laurent Bruyere again."

I could only nod.

He left me with my back against the wall, Crane on one side of me, Mikhail on the other, Markel and Delphine close by, everyone tense and worried. I noticed the semel-aten then and saw how furious he looked. The

priest of Chae Rophon appeared seconds later with Jamal and others. He walked over to talk to me, to make sure I was up to going in the room.

“Yes, your grace,” I assured him with much more conviction than I felt.

He nodded and left me after placing a gentle hand on my cheek.

“Jin.” Logan said my name softly as he stepped back in front of me. “Yuri’s going in the room with you. I told them that without your sheseru you did nothing.”

I glanced up into my sheseru’s eyes. “I’m glad.”

He scowled at me. “I will never allow you from my sight again, my reah.”

And even though he was growly about it, I smiled at him.

“Jin.” Logan said my name, returning my attention to him. “If for any reason you feel weird, you just say, okay?” he said as a very elegant-looking woman in a gray suit joined us.

“Jin Rayne.” She extended her hand to me. “Georgia Manning.”

“Oh,” I said, grasping the offered hand. “Who are—”

“This is the sister of Laurent’s yareah,” Logan told me. “She was killed in a skiing accident two years ago.”

“I’m so sorry,” I told her.

“And she was always sorry for attacking you, reah,” she told me, squeezing my hand for emphasis before she let it go.

I didn’t believe her for a second. Laurent Bruyere’s yareah had wanted me dead.

“I could never prove that he hurt her,” she said, sucking in her breath. “And perhaps... if you ask him now... perhaps he’ll tell you.”

“I’ll try,” I promised.

“Thank you, reah.” She exhaled deeply.

As she was still holding my hand, Adam Bruyere joined us.

“I appreciate the horror of this for you,” he told me, “and can only offer my sincerest thanks for the family of the murdered boy.”

I felt Logan’s hand fist in my hair.

“And you, semel-re,” he said, looking at Logan, “thank you for allowing your reah to be here.”

“My sheseru will tear his throat out if he comes near Jin. Do you understand?”

“I do. Emilio’s family needs the portfolio,” he told me, and his voice was deep and clear. “They need Laurent to not to be able to take anything more from him. He promised to tell us all we want to know... you just need to go in there, Jin.”

I nodded.

“Listen,” he said quickly, and I looked up into his dark blue eyes. “After this there’s nothing, no reason for you to ever lay eyes on him again until you watch him die in the pit.”

Even Laurent’s cousin knew that my mate would not leave the man who attacked me alive.

“Enough already,” I said, taking a step sideways into Logan, turning so I could reach up and put an arm around his neck and pull him down close. He buried his face in my shoulder, and I tried not to shake.

“Listen to me,” he said gently, one hand on the back of my head, the other on the small of my back, holding me to him. “No matter what happens in there, you get to sleep in bed with me tonight.”

I nodded.

“Okay? I’m not leaving here without you.”

He could not have known how comforting his simple words were. “Yes.” I pulled back, taking a quick breath before turning around to face Adam. “Sorry. I’m not usually so—”

“No, reah, you’re extraordinary,” he said, interrupting me. “Try and remember that.”

I glanced at Crane before I went toward the door.

“Jin.”

I turned and saw Georgia.

“Thank you so much.”

She just wanted to remind me of what I promised her to ask.

I reached for the doorknob and heard my name. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Yuri.

“Me before you,” he told me.

I stopped and waited, stepping back so he opened the door instead of me.

“Stay close to me.”

“Yuri, he’s just one—”

“They told me that he’ll be sitting at a table. He better not fuckin’ move, Jin. I will bleed him if he even tries to stand,” Yuri promised, his voice low, so hard, so cold, and so full of seething, icy rage.

I was going to say something more to him, but he opened the door and stepped inside the room. I followed right behind him, closing the door behind me; Logan’s golden eyes were my very last image.

“Jin.”

I looked up, and there was Laurent. He was sitting at the table in the kitchen area, and there were only the two of us and Yuri in the room. He was wearing all white, and it looked bad on him. It was washing him out.

“What?” he asked after a minute.

“White’s not your color, huh.”

“No,” he said, chuckling. “I don’t think so.”

I nodded, crossing the room to the table with Yuri, my shadow, behind me. There was another chair there, and I turned it around and sat, leaning my right arm on the back. I stared at him and was amazed at how normal he looked. I had no idea what I’d been expecting, but Laurent all calm and collected wasn’t it.

“How come there are no marks on you?” he asked me.

“I shifted.”

“One shift wouldn’t fix all the damage I gave you.”

I cleared my throat, feeling Yuri’s anger jump behind me. “I shifted into something different last time.”

“Why last time?”

“Not sure.”

“Why not with me? If you could shift into something powerful... in fact, you didn’t shift at all. How come?”

“You were smart,” I told him. “You kept me weak. No food, barely any water. A panther can’t shift if the body’s depleted.”

“That’s true,” he said, nodding.

“Course. You made sure.”

He sighed deeply. “I’m so sorry for everything, honey.”

I nodded, pushed my hair back. “So do you wanna tell me where Emilio is?”

“I will, I swear I will.”

“Okay. Is the portfolio with him?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you take that?” I asked, and I tried to keep the judgment out of my voice.

“I didn’t take it. He thought I gave a shit about what he did, so he wanted me to look at it. I mean, all I wanted was his ass, and he thought.... He was so stupid, Jin. So stupid.”

I took a breath.

He swallowed hard. “I don’t suppose you would consider moving any closer to me, would you?”

“No.” I shook my head. “My skin’s crawling from even this close.”

“Your skin’s crawling?”

“Yeah, Laurent. You really hurt me. Do you get that? You physically hurt me.”

“I thought you liked it rough.”

And the absurdity of that statement caught me off guard. I laughed hard. “Not that rough. Jesus.”

“God.” He trembled, and I saw his jaw clench hard. “You sound so fuckin’ good.”

I just stared at him.

“You know, I thought about blinding you.”

What is the correct response to that? “Huh.”

“But your eyes are too beautiful to ever hurt.”

I stayed quiet.

“Your face too. I didn’t want to break anything.”

“Thanks.”

“Was the cut bad?”

“What cut?”

“The long one I made on your side. Remember I said I was going to cut off all your skin?”

I concentrated on taking a breath because it felt like there was no air in the room. "I remember that."

"It's harder to do than you think."

"I've never actually contemplated it, but it makes sense."

He stared at me, and I thought for the first time, *There's something missing there*. Like his eyes were vacant. I couldn't see Laurent there anymore.

"You know why I didn't rape you?"

"No. Why?"

"Cause I knew you'd hate me if I did."

"You're right."

"Cause I know you—even now, you don't hate me."

Hate was such a strong word, and it took so much energy to hate. I couldn't remember hating anyone ever. If I didn't like someone, I went away, I disappeared, and if I couldn't leave, I turned that person into an inanimate object in my head, something that could be ignored. But hate was so time-consuming; you had to feed hate, and I was the reah of my tribe. I had better things to do. "You're right."

"You feel sorry for me."

"I do."

"That's why I beat Emilio, you know."

"Why?"

"Because he didn't feel bad for me, he was just scared and whining and begging. I told him that it was hurting me to hurt him, but he didn't care."

I was back to staring at him.

"He just couldn't stop crying. I mean, I know it hurt, there was a lot of blood, but c'mon... you never cried. You felt bad for me, I know you did."

He was so far gone. I'd had no idea how deranged he truly was.

"You know why I kept hitting him?"

"Why?"

"He dared me to. At the end, he said that I wouldn't dare kill him, he said that I couldn't. He said that someone would stop me... but I showed

him. I tried to tell him, ‘I’m the semel of my tribe—there’s no one stronger.’ I showed him.”

Yuri leaned into me, his hip gently bumping my arm. Nice of him to remind me that he was there.

“Can I say something and you not get mad?”

“Sure.”

“I liked hurting you.”

“I know that,” I assured him, letting out a deep breath.

“Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“Scared of me?”

“Not anymore.”

“What did you shift into?”

I rubbed my eyes. It was so different from how I thought it was going to be. He was talking so casually, no emotion there at all. Just like we were discussing the weather or current events, it was so weird.

“Jin?”

“Sorry,” I sighed, looking back at him. “Not sure what I shifted into.”

“So if you’d been stronger, you think you would have shifted into whatever new thing you changed into when you were with me?”

“Maybe.”

“Huh. You know what I miss most?”

He was so fractured, his mind running all over the place. “No.”

“Sleeping with you. And I don’t just mean fucking you, because I miss that, but even more... I miss just laying in bed beside you. I used to love to watch you sleep. You looked so peaceful, and it made me feel the same.”

I nodded.

“When I get out of here I’m gonna come see you.”

“Oh.”

“Uh-huh. Maybe we can have a place in the mountains. You’d like that because you always said how much you liked quiet.”

“I think maybe you like the quiet, huh?”

He thought a minute. “That’s right, that’s right, that’s me not you. I get us confused sometimes.”

“Okay.”

“Do you love Logan?”

“I don’t wanna talk about Logan, okay?”

“He’s really your mate, huh? True-mate? Your semel?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know when I took you that—I didn’t know.”

“I know.”

“You love him?”

“I—”

“Sorry.” He stopped himself. “But so you know, I never loved Lisette.”

“Your yareah,” I said.

“Yeah. She was mean to you.”

“She had good cause.”

“She got hurt, and I left her. She was bleeding... blood is dark in the snow, Jin.”

Which answered Georgia’s question about her sister. Laurent had not killed her, but he had left her bleeding out in the snow. She had died alone, scared and freezing. My heart hurt.

“Please come closer.”

“No, Laurent.”

He sighed. “You know, my mom has these special orchids that she cross-pollinated. She made a new strain. She got to name it.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. She named it after me because I used to spend so much time with her in the greenhouse. That was before my dad said it wasn’t something boys should do. He never let me go near the flowers after I turned ten. Didn’t want me to be soft.”

“I’m sorry; it sounds like that was your special time with her.”

“Yeah, it was.”

And I was almost going to share something about my grandmother, but then I realized I was talking to Laurent and not a friend, and I was silent.

“You know, the day after you left, I sat in my room all day and cried.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I never wanted to be away from you.”

I took a deep breath. It was hard to maintain a degree of normalcy when I wanted to throw up.

He smiled at me, and I saw his eyes tear up. “You wanna sit by me?”

“No.”

“Do you sleep with Logan?”

“I don’t wanna talk—”

“About Logan, I know—I know. Why not?”

“Because it’s none of your business.”

He nodded. “I just want you to understand something.”

“What’s that?”

“I love you.”

“Okay.”

“Are you pissed at me because I killed Emilio?”

“Pissed is not the word, Laurent.” I trembled.

“What word would you use?”

I raked my fingers through my hair and took another deep breath before I got up and walked over to the wall. I couldn’t just sit there; it felt like I was suffocating.

“Jin,” he said, looking at me. “Do you love Logan?”

“I don’t—”

“Okay, fine.”

I leaned back against the wall and stared down at my sneakers.

“Look at me.”

He shivered when our eyes locked. “I never wanted anyone like I wanted you, Jin.”

My eyes went back to my shoes.

“Are you sure you can’t come closer?”

“I’m sure.”

“You know, when I had you in the wine cellar, I slept on the floor by you one time.”

I was silent.

“It was really cold.”

“Yeah, it was,” I agreed, my voice sounding flat.

“And your skin was cold too. That was the first time it was ever cold.”

I nodded.

“Still good, though, touching your skin.”

I twisted my head back and forth. I so wanted out of that room.

“I’m so sorry I hurt you. I just wanted you back so bad, and I knew you wouldn’t come if I asked, and I realized if I couldn’t have you, then no one could.”

I noticed that my right shoe was scuffed; the left one wasn’t.

“Look at me.”

I returned my eyes to his.

“I’m so sorry, baby.”

There was a long silence.

“If there had been no yareah, if—”

“Laurent, I—”

“Would you have stayed with me? Did you love me?”

“It wasn’t love.”

“But it would’ve been.”

“I dunno.”

“I know. The way you were, it would’ve been. You fall fast.”

That was true.

“I wanna kiss you so bad.”

I was silent.

“And even more than that... I want you to kiss me.”

I wanted to run out of the room and never look back.

“I want you to want to kiss me... like you used to.”

I returned to the table, taking my place across from him again.

“Did Logan come with you?”

I just looked at him.

“Is it raining outside?”

“No, it’s not.”

“You love the rain.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You kissed me the first time in the rain.”

I remembered how he had invited me to the pool house to have dinner with him, just the two of us. How uncertain he had been, turning around to look at me, and I had reached for him, pulled him close and kissed him. I had been so careful, asked over and over if he wanted me to stop. The kiss was slow and deep, my hands light on his face, allowing him to step away at any time, his decision moments later to take my hand and lead me inside.

“I didn’t know guys could kiss other guys like that.”

I shrugged. “They do.”

“I know you do, Jin.”

“Laurent, where’s the portfolio?” I asked, staring at him instead of asking where Emilio’s body was.

“In the greenhouse, by my mom’s Laurent’s Kiss Alabaster orchids,” he sighed.

“And Emilio’s there too?”

“Yes, honey,” he sighed heavily.

I nodded, looked toward the door.

“Jin, does Logan get to watch you sleep?”

In answer, I should have told him again that it was none of his business or said nothing at all. But I was tired and annoyed that everyone was outside, that everyone was there to listen to me be humiliated. Most of all, I figured I was walking out of there in a second, anyway, so why not just tell the truth? “He does whatever he wants with me, Laurent.”

He nodded, and because I could read him, I pushed back from the table before he could grab me. It was fast. The table got sent flying up against the wall because he was strong—he was a *semel* after all—at the same time Yuri landed all over him as Laurent screamed.

The room filled with people, and Laurent howled for me as Yuri was pulled off him. He was hauled to his feet by members of the *semel-aten's* *khatyu* as I closed my eyes a second.

"Jin," Logan yelled, and I opened my eyes as he stepped in front of me.

He grabbed me hard, wrapping me in his arms.

Everyone was yelling. Georgia Manning was in tears on the floor in the doorway, and Adam Bruyere was throwing up in another corner of the room. Markel, Mikhail, and Crane were clustered around Logan and me.

"Make Yuri come to you," I told my mate. "He's going to kill Laurent if they let him near him."

"Jin, could you just—"

"Logan," my voice cracked. "Call him!"

He lifted his cheek from where it was pressed to mine, turned, and yelled for his *sheseru*.

Yuri let out a roar of frustration before he was there beside his *semel*. I reached for him, grabbing hold of his shirt, tugging on him.

"I won't move," he snapped at me.

"Yuri." I whispered his name.

He growled but stepped closer so my hand could fist on the collar and hold tight.

I tugged on him, trying to get him closer, tightening my grip.

"I'll kill him!"

"No," my mate, my *semel*, said flatly. "*I will kill him.*"

Held in Logan's arms with everyone else close and safe, I finally felt like I could breathe.

"That enough fuckin' closure for you?" Crane glowered at me.

Leave it to my best friend to put everything in perspective.

Chapter Fifteen

IT WAS huge. The pit in Sobek was built like a coliseum, as they all were to some extent, with terraced stone seating and steep stairs that went from the floor to the top tier. But whereas other fighting pits I had seen, even the one on Logan's land, were the size of a large amphitheater on a college campus somewhere, the one that sat on the land of the semel-aten reminded me more of a football stadium. The structure I was looking at could easily hold seventy thousand people. And while it was nowhere near as large as the Roman Coliseum, it was still the largest fighting arena I had ever been in.

I was in awe. I had walked with Logan through the underground tunnels and the maze of rooms where the combatants were housed and so had emerged from the shaded exterior into the bright light of day. I had wanted to stay with him until he was called, but he had insisted that I be seated before the challenge began. He wanted me to watch. He needed to know that my eyes were on him.

The feast had been going on for two full weeks while I had been taken, and as such, many of the challenges had already been fought and decided. Normally the challenges of semels would have been concluded by now, as they were the first ones to duel, but as my whereabouts could not be proven nor the responsible party confirmed, Logan's challenge, as well as those of his house, had to wait. But now, as I had finally been able to give my account, Logan's, as well as Yuri's and Crane's, were the first challenges of the day.

Sitting with Delphine on my right and Mikhail on my left, I tried to keep breathing for their sake as the large wooden doors swung open to reveal my mate.

Logan strode forward across the dirt floor to stand at the center of the fighting field. Laurent Bruyere had entered from the opposite direction. As the two panthers squared off, no one could miss the difference in their sizes.

It was unlawful to fight in any form but panther in the pit. There were no weapons allowed, and sometimes, as semels had to face others who could not shift into the true werepanther form, half-man, half-beast, standing on two legs, only the shape that every cat had was allowed. When Domin had been fighting me in the pit and had shifted into his werepanther form, at that point the challenge would have been forfeit if his tribe had not cheated. In the pit, the only competitors anyone was ever supposed to see were panthers.

Compared to Logan Church, Laurent Bruyere looked like a malnourished mountain lion. He was small; there was no breadth of shoulder or chest, no sleek bulging muscles rippling under golden fur. He was out-muscled, out-sized, and out-classed. He was dead, and everyone knew it. I had a moment of sympathy a second before the priest began reading the reasons for the menthuel, or honor challenge.

I had been granted the choice of telling my story to the priest in private or to all the assembled spectators in the coliseum. I had chosen to list the grievances to just the priest, the two of us meeting in the roof garden alone with only a scribe there with us after I had finished seeing Laurent earlier in the day. I spoke flatly without any emotion, as it seemed, still, like it had almost happened to someone else. I knew I was in denial, knew that the trauma was going to visit me again, but at present, I was sort of numb to the entire horror. The priest's face showed that he was not. Now, under the scorching afternoon sun, as he recited Laurent Bruyere's crimes for everyone, the murmurs and cries of outrage made me wonder how traumatized I was actually going to be. When Delphine grabbed my hand and clutched it tightly, I squeezed it back.

"I'm here," I told her. "I'm fine."

Her shaky breath as she nodded made me glance at her before Markel's quick pat on my knee turned my eyes to him.

"Look at Logan; he needs to know you're watching."

I looked back at my mate to see his chest swell before his ears flattened and the blood-curdling snarl was released. The sound sent a shiver down my spine. He was going to kill the man who had hurt his mate; it was the only truth he knew in that moment. I was his, and the

panther before him had tried to take me. It was all there was.

As the priest announced to the assembled audience that the challenge between Logan Church and Laurent Bruyere was one of blood, he also stated that once it began, he would not interfere until it was done and only one challenger was left standing. This was not a challenge that would end in a marking or exile or a draw—it would end in death.

Hamid named Koren as the next in line to the tribe of Mafdet should Logan fall and Laurent's cousin Adam as the successor to him. Laurent's brother David could not succeed him as he, and all the others who had helped him and not me when I was beaten and bleeding, had been sentenced to become khatyu of the semel-aten. They would never leave Sobek, having sacrificed their entire lives for their crime. Their mates and families were allowed to choose whether to relocate to Egypt or to say goodbye. I was glad they were given the choice. I would have wanted one if Logan's judgment were ever faulty enough that his rank was stripped from him.

In his sick quest to have me and hurt me, Laurent had ruined many lives beyond his own. He had requested another, final, last-minute audience with me that Logan had strictly forbidden. I wasn't sure why he wanted to see me—everything, I felt, had already been said—but before the trial began, the priest had pulled me aside and told me that Laurent Bruyere was in no way repentant for any of his sins against me.

"He's a madman, reah, and I see now that you are lucky to have escaped with your life. Any cat without your reservoir of strength would not have survived." His eyes darkened suddenly as he looked at me, and his breath, when he inhaled, shook. "I spared your mate the horror of the retelling of the atrocities committed. Listening to the semel's brother and friends, I thought I would be ill. It was only their honesty, however, which made them khatyu and saved them from execution."

I understood then that the priest of Chae Rophon would watch Logan take Laurent Bruyere apart without a flicker of remorse. It was not as easy for me.

Even as I remembered every bite, cut, and beating that Laurent had delivered, it was hard to watch Logan attack him. Mercifully, it was over quickly. Logan, who had told me that he would make the man writhe and suffer, did nothing of the kind. Once the priest yelled for the challenge to begin, they flew forward, meeting at the center of the arena in a flurry of teeth and claws. Seconds later, Logan's enormous jaw clamped down on

Laurent's throat and twisted. There wasn't even any blood, the killing stroke delivered with a quick snap of bone, Laurent Bruyere's neck broken and his life extinguished. He crumpled in a heap, returning instantly to human form, lifeless and ruined. Logan dipped his head to the priest, turned, and walked back the way he had come. The priest called over to Adam Bruyere, had him stand and join him in his box. He received the tribe of Dendera as his, the new semel. He was asked to speak, and when he did, I was surprised that I was addressed.

"Jin Rayne," his voice echoed through the coliseum, "accept the apology of the tribe of Dendera, and know that myself, as well as my sheseru and every other man, woman, and child bear you only gratitude for your survival so that we would know the true horror that was in our midst, poisoning our very survival."

They had known, they had all known, that Laurent was a psychopath, but righteous indignation would help nothing. When I rose and bowed there was thunderous applause. His bow in return brought a smile to the face of the priest.

I wanted to see Logan and hoped he shifted, showered, and changed quickly. I sent Markel to check on him but stayed in my seat, as I had Yuri and Crane's matches to watch.

The moment Yuri crossed the arena floor to the center, there were gasps and murmurs from the crowd. Abbot George had entered first, and watching Yuri join him, his size almost double, had stunned the assembled throng. I watched Abbot tremble and would have stood and gone to the priest if he had not lifted his hand and called for the smaller panther's immediate submission. It was not surprising that he rolled over on his back instantly, prepared to accept whatever punishment Yuri saw fit to deliver.

I was surprised when Yuri pinned him to the dirt, shoving his face down hard, his jaws locked around the smaller panther's throat. He held him there for long minutes and neither moved and everyone was surprised except me. Yuri's size, his strength, made people think he was a brute but I knew better. The man always knew exactly what he was doing except when he was drunk as he'd been at our very first meeting. Sober, Yuri knew what he was all about, and in that moment he would show the smaller, weaker man his true power. Originally he had wanted to eviscerate Abbot George but now he wanted him terrified instead. Now he wanted him cowering in fear in front of every werepanther in attendance.

He wanted to strip away his dignity and his pride and all semblance of self-worth. As Abbot's bladder betrayed him and he spilled onto the sand below him, there was no doubt to everyone watching, that the man was terrified.

The priest called for Abbot's immediate submission. I watched, everyone watched, as Yuri shifted back into his human form and bent and spoke to the smaller man. I could guess what was said, the threat, the warning, the absolute truth of the bond between a sheseru and his reah. If Yuri ever saw him again, found him on his land or anywhere near me, he was dead. It was a promise that he made.

Yuri was declared champion moments later and cheering followed. My sheseru stood with Abbot still frozen on the ground and bowed low. He then shifted back to panther form and stalked from the arena.

"Look at him strut." Delphine smiled at me, releasing a deep breath.

I let mine go as well. I hated challenges, all of them, no matter how well they turned out.

The priest allowed Abbot to be returned to his semel and therefore to his tribe, reminding Kellen Grant in the process that he was to meet Logan in the pit the following day.

"God, what's taking Markel so long," Delphine complained, fanning herself as she looked around the arena for him. "How hard is it to check on Logan and come back?"

I watched her try and cool herself with the leaf-shaped bamboo fan for a moment before the priest called for the next two challengers.

Crane was a handsome man, at least I thought so, and if the number of women that fell into his bed was any sort of gauge, then it was a reasonable conclusion to be drawn. The only form that was more beautiful than his human one was him in his golden panther glory. He was sleek and muscular and moved fluidly, not with the swagger that he had when he was a man. Everyone could see how full of joy he was, and while it was out of place in his present circumstance, I couldn't help but smile.

"Oh for crissakes, Jin, does the idiot know he's about to fight?" Delphine snapped.

He did, and he was damn happy to be there.

"Where's your father?" I asked absently, not taking my eyes off my best friend.

“Logan sent him home after we all saw the priest together. He was escorted out of Sobek. You won’t see him until we get home.”

“I’m sorry Logan’s so mad,” I told her.

She scoffed. “Oh, that’s gonna be nothing compared to how angry my mother’s going to be.”

I looked at her. “You told your mom about our plan, didn’t you?”

She scowled at me. “Yeah, and she told me you already told her.”

I groaned. “I had to.”

“So did I, she’s my mom.”

“And I knew she’d be so happy knowing that she would for sure have grandkids from her oldest child.”

“You see”—she rolled her eyes—“we’re both worthless when it comes to Eva Church.”

We all were. Making Logan’s mother happy was an affliction we all suffered from.

“When she finds out that my dad went to the priest... ohmygod, dead man walking. I mean even if she didn’t know, she’s so crazy about you, Jin... when she finds out that we let her stay with Aunt June all this time and didn’t tell her anything about you being kidnapped or—”

“You guys didn’t tell her?” I was stunned.

“No, Logan said not to.”

I chuckled. “He’s toast too, ya know?”

“Oh, I know. And I’m glad you think it’s so frickin’ funny, ’cause I’m gonna be in the doghouse along with everyone else! Mikhail and Yuri and... Koren... we’re all in such deep shit, and where the hell is Markel?” she finished with a yell.

I laughed at her, turning back to the pit in time to see Ian Lund, Abbot George’s friend who had attacked me that night in my kitchen, fly into the center of the arena. He charged over to Crane in a snarling flurry of teeth and claws, and Crane, with a minimal amount of energy, put him on the ground a second later. He then let the panther free and put him down again. It was like when you were little and trying to sit up and your brother pushes you back down on the bed. He does it over and over until you’re breathless with frustration and so pissed off that you can’t even see straight, and then when you finally lunge at him with every bit of strength and anger you have in you, all that happens is he sidesteps you and you fly head-over-heels to the floor.

Watching Crane toy with the other panther, humiliate him, hurl him down again and again, pin him and let him up, over and over, like a cat batting around a mouse, was hard to watch. And every time Crane put him down, the *down* got that much harder and that much meaner until there was a cloud of dust the last time. Bones would break soon, and then there would be blood.

As Ian panted in the dirt, exhausted but needing to try again, the priest called for his submission. He shook his head, and Crane grabbed him around the neck, flung him up, lifted, turned, and slammed him back down onto the dirt again like he was a big stuffed doll instead of a fully grown, muscular panther. The moan was loud and broken and echoed throughout the coliseum.

When the priest declared Crane the champion, the crowd gave a deafening roar of approval. I watched my friend bound from the arena amid waves of cheering.

“God, he’s happy,” Delphine sighed, her face soft as she looked at me.

“You like him.”

“I do, Jin, so much,” she told me, taking hold of my hand. “Just not how you want. Can you forgive me?”

“Nothing to forgive,” I assured her, squeezing her hand.

We sat there a minute before I mentioned to her that we should go look for Logan and Markel.

“I know, right?” Her brows furrowed. “They missed everything.”

They had, and that was strange.

“Come on, let’s go find them.”

It took several minutes for us to make our way down the row of people to reach the end so we could descend the stairs. Halfway down, I saw Mikhail coming up.

“Did I miss all the challenges?” he asked, reaching us. “Are we leaving?”

“Where were you?” Delphine asked him.

“I had to meet with the other sylvans at the... where’s Logan?” he asked, looking around, distracted. “Where’s Yuri?”

“They’re all still changing, I guess.” I shrugged. “Delphine and I are going to find them.”

“Good.” Mikhail nodded slowly. “Let’s find them so we can all eat. I’m starving.”

“Me too,” Delphine echoed him.

“Where’s Markel?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she snorted. “Maybe he and Logan got lost.”

But that wasn’t likely. And now that my worry over Yuri and Crane was over, I had a weird, fluttery feeling in the pit of my stomach. Logan would have wanted to see his sheseru and the beset of his reah fight in the pit. He wouldn’t have wanted to miss it. Where the hell was he?

MIKHAIL tried to argue with me, but he and I had different people to find, so he lost the discussion to remain with me. Delphine and I had to locate Logan and Markel, and Mikhail had to figure out where in the hell Yuri and Crane were. We split up, as my sylvan had a pretty good idea where he was going, and I was fairly certain that I had left Logan on the opposite side of the arena. Since, in theory, Markel was wherever Logan was, Delphine stayed with me.

It was harder to navigate the tunnels than I would have thought, and I got lost almost instantly. The crowd didn’t help with how many people there were, pushing and shoving, constantly moving, and there were no signs anywhere.

“Reah.”

Looking sideways, I saw Roshan Tabir. He looked confused.

“I got turned around in here,” I told him. “I need to find Logan.”

“I know where he is,” he said, smiling at me before turning to look at Logan’s sister.

I made hurried introductions, and Delphine took the offered hand, pleased to meet the sheseru of the tribe of Rahotep.

“Thank you for helping Jin,” she told him.

“The pleasure was mine,” he told her sincerely, squeezing her hand for a moment before he released it to put an arm around my shoulders. “Both of you come with me.”

He led us through the crowd, which was easier with him as a plow, the crowd breaking around him, giving us a clear path to walk. When we

reached the entrance to a long tunnel, I remembered it, the heavy grate that could be lowered jogging my memory.

"I smell Markel," Delphine gasped, moving fast, rushing by us to a large door several feet away. She tried to open it, but it was locked.

We all heard the yelling at the same time.

"What is that?" Roshan snapped, brushing her aside, trying the handle himself only to confirm that it was locked.

"Logan!" I yelled, rushing up between them, banging on the door.

There was only a muffled cry in return.

"Markel!" Delphine screamed, and I heard the panic in her voice, the terror.

"Open it!" I ordered, and Roshan put his shoulder to the old wood, and the door buckled forward under his weight.

Inside there were easily ten men, four of which held Logan pinned to the far wall with a fifth strangling him with a piece of what looked like silver wire. The man was wearing gloves to protect himself.

Markel, in his panther form, was doubled over in the opposite corner, coughing up blood. His fur was shredded, ear torn, his body crisscrossed with bloody wounds. He had put up a hell of a fight.

Roshan barked out names, and I registered that he must have known them to be able to do that, but the implications were lost on me. They were trying to kill my mate.

As I charged into the room, I felt a flush of heat tear through me, heard my pounding heart like a train and had an instant change in perspective as my eye-level rose until I was looking down on the men. And then the screaming began.

I swatted men away from my mate, turning to put myself between them and him. I heard my name called, but it was from a distance, so I ignored it. I knew I had shifted, felt cramped in the small room; it was hard to turn and maneuver. Normally I made a conscious decision to shift, but this time there was danger and it was done. The implications of that were disturbing, but even as I wondered what I had morphed into, I suddenly had trouble seeing.

The room did not darken; everything just began to quickly fade. I saw colors one moment, washes, and shadows, but then, even as I squinted, trying to focus my vision, my eyes betrayed me and I was blind. I panicked; I needed to see the threat to Logan and, beyond that, Markel. I

had to protect Delphine, and I couldn't see. It was like being in a hot shower when the glass steams over, except I could not wipe the glass and see my own reflection. Fear tore through me at the same moment my other senses overwhelmed me.

I heard every sound. The heavy breathing of the men, Logan grunting with the strain of fighting, the curses hurled at me, Delphine's sobbing. And then I was assaulted by the smell.

It was horrible, the stench like old blood, before I was struck hard in the side. There was weight on me, and pressure, and I understood, even without benefit of my eyes, that I was being attacked. Men or panthers were on me, pounding against me, trying to force me down and scrambling to rip at me with teeth and claws. I felt edges scraping at me, digging for purchase, but it was like I had a shell. I could feel the battering but not the pain. Nothing dug into me. I was not gouged, no flesh or muscle was torn into. It was as though I was insulated, armored.

I inhaled, searching for my mate, but there was only the scent of blood, and then something darted, seeking escape. There was no thought, only movement. It was caught, and the odor changed, went from panic to hysteria in a heartbeat. I had sensed fear in the past but never inhaled dread before, never categorized it as tears and blood and sweat. Reahs didn't hunt, so I didn't have that experience of trapping a life. Now I did and understood the allure. The surge of power was a rush.

I had a moment of clarity and understood that it was the men, turned to panthers, that I was dismembering in the room. And it occurred to me for a second that they could have run. They should have run. Sane creatures would have run. That they did not, their intent solely directed on murdering my mate, took choices from me. And then, that fast, my logic drowned.

Normally I ruled the animal that lived in me, but my control had succumbed to cold terror. If I could see the threat, my brain worked; I could plan an attack and remain in command. But simply faced with a threat, to go from calm to alarm in seconds, there was no time to think and process, so I didn't, I couldn't. My beast came rushing out of me ready to defend and attack.

Instinctively, I flexed my claws, closing my killing grip. A shriek blasted through me, and then there was silence once more. Something else moved, and I pounced, again and again until nothing else stirred in the room. And then there was a sound and a trace of fresh air for a moment

before wet earth and blood once more. The smell was moving, and I followed after it. I hunted it like the predator I was, like it was prey.

I kept pace with my quarry, and when it leaped, I was a second behind, the smell so strong, like a rare steak that you wanted to bite and chew, grind between your teeth. But I didn't want to eat it. I wanted to kill it. The thing, creature, panther, man, wanted to kill my mate, had tried to take my mate from and leave me barren, without life or love or hope. I would slaughter every panther that tried to take Logan Church from me; I would leave none alive.

I couldn't see; there was only heat, red splotches in the sea of cloudy white that I was trying to look through. I was struck, rammed; panthers collided with my legs, but I was too big to knock down. Teeth found no hold, claws could not hook, ineffectual, causing only a moment of confusion before I found my bearings again. A volley of something pelted my face and body, sharp as they struck me and bounced off. Perhaps they were the darts I had experienced before, but they did not embed in fur and skin, as I suddenly had neither. I couldn't see what covered me, still blind, but as I collided with walls, I knew my body was hard, had a shell, and that I was moving on more than four legs. I was scrambling, scuttling, like an insect or a spider. I was not in possession of my usual seamless speed; there was a jerking, darting quality to my advance.

I was blasted with the rank smell of bile and rotting meat, and I sprang forward, catching my prey, the odor or decay telling me I had come to the end of the trail. I felt my talons sink through flesh and hit bone. There was screaming, a high-pitched wailing, ear-piercing screeching, squealing, yelling from everywhere at once. I couldn't siphon the sound; it was endless and loud. The surge of adrenaline tore through me, and I lifted up, prepared to tear apart what was under my claws.

Rain.

I smelled rain.

I stopped, took a deep breath in. I wanted the smell in my lungs, filling me.

I loved rain. Loved to be inside on wet, cold days, loved to sit in front of the fire and read or sleep or lay beside my mate.

Rain was soothing, calming. I felt myself still as I waited.

Moments passed, and the scent heated.

Fire on a crisp fall day, wood burning outside. I tingled with the new scents and inhaled deeply, filling my lungs. I froze and breathed, in and then out, slowly, rhythmically, feeling my pulse decelerate, the vise on my heart ease, the panic and fear subside.

The scent changed again, became freshly cut grass and clothes dried in the sun. I took in sea air, tasted salt on my tongue, salt from sweat, salt on... skin, hot, sweaty skin, golden, sleek skin I wanted to lick, touch, press against, rub against, feel along mine, feel all over mine, rolling over mine, all of it because it was... Logan.

My mate.

The throbbing, aching need in me for my mate, and I was hot and ready for him. I wanted him to fuck me and hold me down. Where was he?

My eyes opened or cleared or un-fogged, unclouded, I didn't know, didn't care, I just suddenly saw him.

There.

"Jin," he breathed out, and I realized I was above him, looking down at him, and he was covered in blood.

I tensed, jolted, and his hands were flat on my face as cries filled the air.

"No, no, no," he soothed me, swallowing hard, shivering, his eyes pleading. "Love, it's not my blood, it's the blood of Ammon's khatyu, it's all their blood."

I stared into his golden eyes.

"Just look at me," he said softly, gently.

His eyes were warm, locked on mine, concerned, filled with love, filled with me. I let out a deep breath, feeling my body start to relax.

"You see, love," he said, smiling up at me, rubbing circles on my muzzle, stroking under my chin, letting me breathe him in, his delicious, soothing scent. "I'm fine, I'm safe."

Yes.

"Look at me."

He was all I saw.

"Now," he breathed out, "can you move your paw for me?"

I looked down, and caught under me, under one of my claws, talons, pinning him to the chaise, was Ammon El Masry. He was shivering with

pain, and when I tried to retract and couldn't, I yanked back hard instinctively, the way a cat does when it's stuck. There is no finesse to the motion, simply an animal reaction to being caught, the tug to get loose.

He cried out in pain and there was a spray of blood, the hole in his shoulder gaping, but no more than he could realistically heal. I could heal it, and he was stronger than me. Supposedly stronger. Logan had grabbed his shoulders so he wouldn't come forward into me, caught on my claw. I retreated several steps, hitting the canopy, startling myself, frightened, not sure what or where I was at that moment.

"Love."

But was I his love or something that could possibly hurt him? I made a whimpering noise that was involuntary.

"Breathe me in," he commanded me, lifting his hands back toward me.

I shivered, inching away.

"No." His voice was caressing, deep and husky. "Just breathe."

His smell was intoxicating, and I knew he had hit me hard with his pheromones, using them to stop me, but I also knew in my weakened state that the pull to seek shelter, find safety, was nearly overwhelming. I wanted him; I needed him, and the reah that I was responded to his strength and dominance. Whatever I was, I was still servant to the master that he was. My need to submit was pulsing within me.

"Come closer."

I wanted to wrap myself around him, savor the heat that I could feel rippling off the man even from a distance.

"My reah," he pleaded, "come closer."

But I was afraid suddenly for what I had done and whom I had done it to. What would be my punishment, and would Logan share it?

"It's all right; it's just us, Jin, me, you, and Ammon."

But I took in many other faces, among them Jamal. Taj was there, as well, and Shahid. As I cataloged the men I was looking at, I realized they were all members of the Shu, no one else there. Logan, me, Ammon, and the men who belonged to the priest. We were alone in the private spectator box of the semel-aten. I had seen it from below, seen how high above the others it was. It had reminded me of those of Roman Caesars.

"He's going to promise now, Jin, in front of these witnesses, to never try and hurt either of us again," Logan said slowly, his voice going hard

and cold. “Or I’m going to let you rip him in half. I don’t expect anyone would stop you.”

Silence greeted Logan’s statement. The Shu were neutral, but in this case, I was betting, if it came down to it, that they would let me end the *semel-aten* without much protest.

“You mistake my motivation, *semel-re*,” Ammon gasped, slowly lifting up on the chaise, holding his wadded-up shirt to the already closing hole in his left shoulder.

As I suspected, the *semel-aten* was a fast healer. He would need to eat and drink and rest, just like any of us, but by the following day, the wound would be half the size it was.

“Last night I tried to kill you,” Ammon said as he exhaled, sitting back, resting, and gathering his strength. “But today I merely wanted to keep you isolated in the room until your *reah* came looking for you, and then I would take him and shut him away in the temple of Seshat in the Western Desert.”

Our eyes locked, and I understood that he was terrified of me.

“You, *reah*, are much too powerful to be allowed to return to your home. You will shift in a time of distress and make us known to outsiders. I fear for all werepanthers, not simply myself. You’re an abomination, a corruption of our breed, and as such should be killed or locked away safely until you die.”

He didn’t want me, he wanted to execute me or imprison me, and these were the only two options he could see.

“The priest doesn’t see the threat,” Logan told him.

“He’s an old man entranced with mythology and history. He sees Jin as a link to the past, not as the threat to our future that he is.” He looked at my mate. “You think I’m a monster, but my concern is for all tribes, Logan Church. You think only of your own tribe, not the global community.”

“And how was killing me going to help?” Logan asked sarcastically. “Because if your concern is truly for all tribes, then mine cannot be excluded.”

“Yesterday I thought if you were dead that Jin would willingly submit to imprisonment.”

“And you,” Logan said coldly. “Willingly submit to you.”

He shook his head. "No. I will admit to wanting to taste your reah, semel-re, but that was before I saw the horror that lives in him. You don't fear him, but you should. When he takes your life, I myself will lead the hunt to claim his head."

Logan's eyes were flat. "You will tell everyone that men disguised as your khatyu tried to kill me, forcing my mate to save me yet again."

"And if I don't?"

His eyes swept over the assembled Shu warriors. "I have these men to bear witness with me, as well as the fact that the dead men were your khatyu following your orders. How hard will that be to prove?"

He growled in the back of his throat, standing, moving the shirt he'd been holding against his wound, hurling it to the ground in frustration. He wasn't bleeding anymore, and neither did he appear weakened.

"You make things right with Jin saving my life and—"

"I was not trying to—"

"You're a fucking liar, and we both know it!" Logan roared at him, stalking over to the semel-aten and fisting his hand in his gallibaya. "You tried to kill me last night, and you tried to do it again today. I never fuckin' thought you'd be so stupid as to try it again with my reah watching over me. You sacrificed good men to a selfish cause, and you can stand there and try and defend it for the disgraceful act that it was. You wanted my reah, and when you couldn't have him, then I couldn't either. Since you can't kill me, your next thought is to lock him up," he finished, slapping Ammon across the face hard. "Fuck you and fuck this place!"

The man made a move like he was going to strike Logan, but my low snarl froze him where he stood.

"You think you can get to me before he gets to you?" Logan asked him.

He took a step back, wary eyes on me.

"I was thinking about challenging you, semel-aten," Logan said flatly.

Ammon's eyes were locked on his.

"But I don't want any of this; I just want to go home."

"You think you could take—"

"Oh yes," Logan assured him. "I could take everything from you."

Long, scary silence as the two men stared at each other.

“Let there be peace between us for the remainder of the feast, *semel-aten*,” Logan said softly. “Stop the bloodshed between our houses.”

“Only my men are dead, *semel-re*.” He shivered hard, and I was certain that at least some of it was relief.

“On your command, they attacked me and my *reah*; you alone sent them to their death. Your own greed killed them, nothing else.”

After a minute, he nodded.

“Will you call a truce?”

“I have no choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

“Yes, there is,” He agreed before sighing deeply. “Let us call a truce.”

Logan cleared his throat. “I need you to make the announcement that commends the action of my *reah* and will confirm his innocence.”

“Agreed.”

“Good,” Logan said, offering the *semel-aten* his suddenly shifted hand, claws where fingers should have been. “We are agreed, and this is *maat*.”

“This is *maat*,” Ammon echoed, grasping Logan’s wrist, his too shifted, the claws of each man buried in the other’s forearm, drawing quick blood.

When they pulled back, each drank the mingled blood, sealing their bond. Ammon cast one last look at me before he turned quickly and descended the stairs from his private box into the coliseum.

I was shaking with the release of tension and then felt hands on my face. When I looked down, my eyes met Logan’s beautiful gold ones.

“Leave us,” he commanded the Shu.

I didn’t hear them go, but a quick glance around confirmed that they had gone. They moved as their name implied, like the wind.

“And now, love,” he said, smiling up at me, stroking under my chin. “Shift for me.”

The trembling was involuntary, but I was scared that I couldn’t, scared that this time I was too far gone.

“Love.” The sultry voice, the hooded eyes, and the lift in the corner of his mouth was too much for me. He made me breathless.

I was unsteady on my feet for a moment before I found myself looking up into his eyes.

"There you are," he said with a smile before he bent and kissed me.

It was so tender, so gentle, I was lightheaded. His scent, the sound of him... how had I ever thought that I could be without my mate?

"Come here," he said, taking my hand, releasing a deep breath as he walked backward for a moment before sitting down on one of the cushioned empire chairs.

He pulled me down into his lap, and I straddled his thighs.

"Better," he said, letting out a deep breath. "Just us."

I stroked my hands through his hair, over his face, traced his eyebrows with my fingertips. "I was scared."

"So was I," he said, chuckling, moving me forward, trapping my hardening cock between us, running his hands over the tops of my thighs.

"But everything's okay."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, releasing a deep sigh.

I studied him. "You're hurt." I passed judgment, looking at the dried blood on his collar, the scrapes over his jaw, the red blotches that might turn into bruises on his throat and collar bone. "You—"

"One shift and it's gone," he assured me. "You know that."

I nodded.

"Jin, I—"

"Yes, my semel."

"Christ," he groaned, "how do you know that I—"

"I shifted back for you," I told him, sliding off his lap to the floor. "And now you want more, you want to feel my submission, taste it."

His growl of agreement was very sexy.

I pushed his shirt up his body, over the rippling abs, and leaned in to kiss his hard, sweaty stomach.

"Your lips are so soft," he said, his breath hitching.

I smiled against his skin, fiddling with his belt before unzipping his fly, parting the folds and reaching underneath for the elastic waistband of his briefs. He lifted up, knowing the dance, and I eased the pants, as well as his briefs, down over his hips, releasing his beautiful, stiff cock, allowing it to bob free. Bending forward, I swept my tongue slowly over the end of the swollen, leaking head.

“Fuck!”

I was the servant in the present scenario, but I seemed to be the one with all the power.

“Jin,” he panted, “please.”

I groaned and leaned forward to take him into my mouth, down my throat, but instead of swallowing him fast, I lowered my mouth with deliberate slowness until he was writhing underneath me. He tried to buck up into me, bury himself in my throat, without success. I was drawing out the pleasure, making him conform to my pace. I was merciless in my desire to make him scream my name.

“Jin,” he roared, clutching my hair, holding me tight. “Your mouth is so hot—so wet.... I’m gonna come.... God, what are you doing with your tongue?”

I sucked and licked over every inch of his long, thick cock, into the slit, around the crown, down the prominent vein that ran along the side, and back up underneath with teasing pressure that made him groan loudly and arch up against me.

“Baby,” he said, his voice only a raspy whisper. “My baby....”

He was so beautiful, head back, eyes closed as he squirmed under me, gasping my name, his cock like hot swollen steel in my mouth. He was lost in the exquisite sensations pulsing through his body, and I was the reason for his rapture. It was amazing because he was so strong, so full of heat and power, and yet I was the one he was begging, I was the one making him burn. He relinquished all his control to me.

“Tell me what you want,” I said, laving his cock, nuzzling his balls, making everything slick and wet with saliva before again sinking my mouth down over his impressive length.

“Stop torturing me and suck my dick... hard. Suck it hard.”

It was not a request, and the command in his voice made me whimper with my own need.

“Jesus, the sounds you make... you’re killin’ me.”

I swallowed his shaft down my throat, my face buried in his groin.

“Look at you,” he moaned.

As I deep-throated his erection, making the suction strong and fast, the head of his cock bumping against the back of my throat, I felt him swell even larger in my mouth, heard my name roared as he came, and my

hair was gripped painfully so I couldn't move, couldn't pull away. I swallowed hard as hot semen coated and filled my throat.

"Take it all," he ordered, holding me against him as his body shuddered with his climax.

I held him in my mouth until he went limp, then licked him clean, finally leaning back and letting my body sink down onto the cushions on the floor. It was soothing, relaxing: the breeze, the fact that we were alone, that we would not be disturbed. Even out in the open, we were up so high no one could see, no one could reach us without us hearing. It was sublime.

"Come here."

I lifted my head to look at him, and he patted his thighs.

"There's no way," I said, laughing at him. "You can't possibly."

"No." He laughed with me. "But I need to take care of you."

"I'm good," I sighed, realizing that I was. I was wrung out from the shift. I had wanted to give him pleasure, let him exercise his power over me, give him that gift, but my body was drained, sated with doing for him.

"Come here. I wanna touch you... kiss you, taste me in your mouth."

I grinned and climbed up into his lap, straddling his hips, my ass immediately pulled forward until I was seated over his groin. When I leaned toward him, he opened his mouth to receive my tongue, sucking it lightly, gently, stroking his over mine, and building new heat in me almost instantly.

"When we get home, I'm gonna keep you in bed with me for a week."

"That sounds great," I said, closing my eyes, leaning into him, hugging him tight.

He held me, content to do nothing more.

Chapter Sixteen

THERE were people who wanted to see Logan, friends he had known for years, acquaintances as well, and so our suite was open as he entertained visitors. Normally I would have been at his side, but I found that I was uncomfortable. The more people that filled the rooms, the smaller they seemed. I was on the patio, having excused myself from speaking to another semel and his yareah and his children, when Delphine brought me a glass of ice water.

"You need more fluids," she told me, taking my hand, "but you know that."

I nodded.

When she turned to leave me, I kept her hand so she couldn't walk away.

She turned and looked at me. "What?"

I swallowed hard. "I dunno."

She squeezed my hand before dropping it, stepping close again, both her hands going to the sides of my face. "What do you need me to do?" she asked gently, under her breath so no one could hear but me.

I felt a wave of panic roll through me, and I shivered.

"Maybe you should lie down."

"Maybe."

She chewed her bottom lip. "Should I get Logan?"

"No." I shook my head. "He's gotta—he needs to do this, it's important for him to keep his circle strong."

"Maybe someone should lay down with you. Maybe Crane."

My eyes flicked to hers.

“Just to hold you.”

I took a deep breath. “No.”

“You’re sure?”

I was having trouble breathing. “I’m sure, it’s okay.”

She walked away, and I was alone for a few minutes before Yuri joined me, stepping in close, protectively.

“You’re hovering.”

“It’s what a sheseru does over his reah.”

I nodded.

“Come into the bedroom and talk to me.”

“Delphine told you I should lie down,” I concluded, knowing that he was not this perceptive.

“She said you were tired, and I agree. What you did today—you should be in a coma. I think you should eat again, have some more water, and go to bed.”

“Maybe I’ll just go in there where it’s quiet.”

“Good idea,” he agreed, his hand between my shoulder blades, easing me forward.

He walked me into my room and took a seat in the overstuffed empire chair while I sat down on the bed.

“You just gonna stare at me?”

“Why don’t you lie down?”

I swallowed hard.

“You look like you’re gonna cry, Jin. You want me to get Logan?”

“Why would I cry?” I asked breathlessly, wiping my tears.

“I think all of this, everything, is finally catching up to you, and I think you’re gonna fuckin’ lose it.”

“I never lose it.”

“Until now.”

“No. I’ll be all right. Go check on Logan, make sure he’s fine. There are a lot of people out there.”

He nodded, rising up out of the chair. He had to go look, check. Once I put the idea that Logan could be vulnerable in his head, he had to go see and make sure.

My vision blurred, and a second later I felt an arm around my shoulders, a head leaning against me.

"I'm fine," I told Delphine.

"I don't think so."

"I am," I said, putting my arm around her, pulling her close, kissing her temple before I got up. I felt like I was going to be sick. It was too much activity, too many people, too much noise, too much conversation, too much everything. I craved solitude. "I promise."

"What can I get you?"

I had the urge to bolt out of there. It came on fast, the feeling that there was no air in the room. "Nothing, I'm fine," I lied. "Listen, I'll be right back, sweetheart," I told her, trying so hard to smile.

"Okay," I heard her say to my back as I left the room.

I looked around but didn't see Logan anywhere. I walked through the suite, weaving through the crowd, smiling, moving faster and faster to the door. I couldn't breathe, and by the time I heard Crane call over to me, I was closing the door behind me. I heard Mikhail's voice above me on the stairs as I went down. I called up to him that I would be right back, just needed some air. He told me to wait, that he would come with me.

When I was outside in the courtyard, I took a deep breath. I didn't feel like I was going to hyperventilate anymore. I closed my eyes a minute. The waves of panic were just washing over me. I was walking toward the center of town before I even realized I was moving. As I looked up and down the street, I swallowed hard so I wouldn't throw up. My breathing was shallow, and my hands were clammy as I pressed them together. The flight reflex was choking me. I was shaking with it. I had to keep moving away from the noise.

I wanted to run. I ran every other day when I wasn't beaten and held down and put in dark places where I couldn't breathe. It was enough, though, to be outside. It was good just to breathe, to feel the breeze on my face, not to have the walls closing in on me.

I walked fast, turning the corner at the end of the street and heading toward the park that I knew was there. I told myself I would stop and sit at the park. I had seen a table there, imagined how peaceful it would be to just sit and be alone. But when I got there, I just kept going, through the park to the center of town. My route was not a straight line; it went down alleys, behind buildings, through empty lots and across streets. And even

though I was thirsty, I kept going. I felt better than I had all day. To be outside was bliss. I took more deep breaths and walked on.

IT WAS dark outside, and the suite was empty when I got back, not a soul around. Everyone was probably out looking for me, and I was there. I would go look for them after my shower. I felt gritty, and I was covered in dust and sweat.

I was exhausted afterward and went to the fully stocked kitchen and grabbed six bottles of water before staggering back to the bedroom. I had pulled on pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, and after guzzling down the fourth bottle, crawled into bed. I told myself I didn't need to go looking for anyone; they would find their way back eventually. I had to lie down.

I was just about to close my eyes when I heard the door open and then my name called in the way he always did.

"Jin?"

"In here," I yelled back to Crane.

He appeared in the doorway seconds later. His eyes locked on mine, inspecting me the same as always, taking inventory of my features to see if I was all right. There was no lying to my best friend; I had been under his scrutiny my whole life. Other panthers would worry when he looked at them like that; they would confuse the steady gaze for menace and the threat of violence. But I knew Crane Adams, and I had cataloged all his looks years ago. All I saw was uncertainty and worry.

I smiled at him, making my voice soothing. "I'm not dead."

"I can see that," he said, crossing the floor to the chair beside the bed.

I watched him sit down, dragging the chair closer. "I'm sorry."

He nodded and leaned forward to touch me, a hand on my cheek. "Nothing to be sorry for."

I stared at him, into his eyes.

"You scared the crap outta me," he growled, his hand moving to my hair, massaging my scalp. "Again."

"I scared me too," I told him, wanting to sit up but unable to lift my head off the pillow to save my life. "Shit—what time is it? Was I gone a long time?"

“Who cares? You feel all right?”

I swallowed hard. “I’m so sorry; I just had to get outta here. I couldn’t breathe. I thought I was going to suffocate or—”

“You had a panic attack.”

“That doesn’t sound like me. Does that sound like me?”

He shook his head. “For fuck’s sake, Jin, you just get back and you don’t rest and recover, you just push yourself like you always do, and then what you did today—”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine!” he barked at me. “You’re not fine! What you went though—you should be a basket case!”

“Don’t have an aneurysm,” I snapped at him.

“Jin!”

I groaned.

“You need peace and quiet, that’s what you need. There were too many people here.”

“That’s what I thought,” I sighed, “but I don’t think so now. I think... I dunno what I think.”

“Okay, listen to me, all right? You need to give yourself more time. I mean, I know you don’t wanna think about what that fuck did to you, but you gotta.”

“But what’d he do really? He... he beat me up a little and kept me in a dark place. Abused kids get worse than that every day.”

“Jin, are you kidding?” he asked me gently, his hand on my chest, over my heart. “He beat you, he cut you with a knife, and he made you think he was going to kill you and threatened you with rape. It was bad, okay? It was really, really bad. It’s a testament to how healthy you are that nobody can tell that you’re really going through something. But it’s a lot. I promise you it’s a lot.”

I was silent.

“I see you trying to act like you always have, like nothing’s different and you’re fine,” he sighed. “But you were made into a victim, and you gotta deal with that.”

I just concentrated on breathing.

"If you were a girl and all that happened to you, everyone would be worried, but you're a guy, so you're supposed to just suck it up and get over it," he said gently. "You gotta realize it's not that simple."

"I'm having trouble sleeping."

"I bet."

"I keep thinkin' that I'm dreaming all this and I'm gonna wake back up in the wine cellar. I really... really don't wanna go back. I—"

"Jin, you're not going back there ever."

I let out a deep breath. "I'm so thirsty."

"I'll get you some more water, hold on."

"Where's Logan?"

"I'm sure he's on his way back by now. He was with Yuri and Mikhail looking for you."

"Sorry I ruined the party or whatever it was."

"Who gives a shit? Nobody cares, Jin. The only thing everybody wants is to see you and be with you. We'd all sit on the floor in here just to be close to you if you needed anything."

I smiled at him. "I need more water."

"Comin' up," he said before he left the room. I wasn't awake when he got back.

MY BODY felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. I couldn't lift my head; I could only open my eyes. I saw Crane sitting in the wingback chair, reading, white socks on the edge of my bed.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey." He smiled at me, moving his feet, leaning forward. His hand went in my hair, and he was gentle like he never was, petting me. "How ya doin'?"

"Where's Logan?" I asked against the pillow. At some point I had rolled over on my stomach.

"They're not back yet, but it's only been like a half an hour."

"Oh, okay. Are you mad at me?"

"No, honey, why would I be mad?"

He hadn't called me "honey" in years. "Is Logan mad?"

“Logan’s not here, but I doubt he’s mad. You scared the shit out of everybody, that’s all.”

“That’s all? That’s bad.”

“It’s fine. You’re forgiven. Close your eyes.”

“I’m thirsty.”

“I knew you would be.”

I smiled at him as he got the large glass of ice water off the nightstand and angled the straw toward my mouth. It tasted so good.

“Close your eyes,” he instructed, leaning back when I had enough.

“Wait, when are you leaving?” I asked, because I was thinking about it and worrying.

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean, are you gonna leave as soon as we get home or a couple days after that or—”

“Jin,” he soothed me, “take a breath, okay. Just relax; I won’t go anywhere until you’re ready.”

“Oh no, that’s not fair. I—”

“Stop,” he ordered me. “Go back to sleep already.”

And I rolled over and did.

WHEN I woke up again, Crane was still there, keeping his vigil.

“What’re you reading?” I yawned, smelling something good. “And what is that?”

“I’m reading one of Delphine’s romance novels, and I think Justin’s sheseru, I think he’s making gumbo or something.”

“Really?”

“I think so, yeah.”

I looked at him. “You’re not pissed at me?”

“No. Close your eyes.”

“I want Logan.”

“Okay, I’ll go get him. Don’t move.”

Logan climbed onto the bed a few minutes later. He lay down close to me, crossing his arms under him to prop himself up. “You should go back to sleep.”

“What time is it?”

“I dunno, like one in the morning or something.”

“Shit,” I said, looking at him, into the dark-gold eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head. “It’s okay.”

“I just... I couldn’t... I had to leave.”

“And you didn’t see me”—he smiled at me—“or you wouldn’t have left.”

I thought about that a second. “No, I wouldn’t have.”

He nodded.

“Why aren’t you yelling at me?”

“Because that’s exactly what you don’t need,” he said softly. “I love you, and you scared me, and I’m so pissed at myself for....” He took a deep breath. “You need me and Crane and your family, and that’s it. I think of you as so strong, and you are—you really are—but, love, you need rest. You need time to work through everything, and if you need to talk to someone else besides me, we can—”

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to do that.”

“Okay. You lemme know if you change your mind.”

I felt my eyes fill, and he reached out and smoothed his thumb over my cheek.

“Don’t cry, baby.”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“No, baby, you’re just pushing yourself like you always do, and you need to realize that your body needs rest and so does your mind.”

“You’re worried I’m gonna flip out.”

He chuckled, leaning forward, brushing his lips over mine. “No, honey.”

“Did I scare you?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Did that freak you out?”

“Little bit,” he confessed.

“But you’re not gonna lock me up or something?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You need more rest, and I’m sorry I missed that.”

I stared up into his dark-gold eyes. “Crane thinks I had a panic attack.”

“Me too.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No. Why don’t you try and sleep some more?”

“I should go out there and see everybody.”

“When you wake up.”

“I don’t need your permission,” I said, trying to lift myself up.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” he teased me, leaning forward to give me a quick kiss.

I caught his bottom lip, sucking it inside my mouth.

“Jin,” he groaned, getting closer to me so I could reach him better. I ran my tongue over his, sliding it back and forth, sucking, licking his lips, biting gently, deepening the kiss until he pulled back. “Go to sleep. Stop trying to get me in trouble.”

I smiled at him. “Get you in trouble?”

“Yeah. How insensitive do I look to everyone if they come in here and I’m all over you?”

“Be all over me, please.”

“God, you sound good, all hoarse and sexy.”

I reached for him, but he was off the bed really fast. I motioned him back.

“Knock it off. Go to sleep.”

“I slept enough.”

I saw his jaw clench.

“You didn’t sign on for all this,” I told him. “Are you sure you wanna keep—”

“You’re mine,” he said, his brows furrowing. “Just stop talking. Christ, you love to talk.”

I just looked at him. “Come kiss me again. I promise not to shove my tongue down your throat.”

He got back on the bed and moved over to me. I reached out and got my hand behind his neck, pulling him closer to me, my mouth opening under his, drawing him down, deep inside. He chuckled against my mouth before he pulled back to look down at me. “You’re such a liar.”

“It’s ’cause I missed you. I just want you all the time.”

He slowly got off the bed. "Sleep some more and I'll check on you, and next time you wake up, we'll talk about you maybe getting out of bed."

"Okay."

"Okay." He bent over and kissed my temple, and I smiled and closed my eyes. Instantly I saw a hand, and a cloth covered my mouth. I jerked hard.

"Jin?"

I looked up, and there was Delphine hovering over me.

"Hi, sweetie," she whispered, leaning over to touch my hair. "Logan's just talking to Martine Soto, he came by to see you, and... so Logan told me to come in here and take care of you while he got everybody settled down to a very, very late dinner."

I just stared at her. I'd fallen asleep that fast and had a nightmare just as quickly. It was a little spooky.

"What can I get you?"

I shook my head. My heart was pumping and I was shaking. Instant terror, and it was hard to get my body to realize I didn't need to run. It was fight or flight, and I was a runner.

"Here," she said, walking around the bed to get in from Logan's side, crawling over to me. She lay down in front of me, curling her body into mine, her back pressed to my chest. "Hold me, you'll feel better."

Panthers craved touch, it was soothing, and me holding her was better than her holding me, because I could move if I wanted to. I wouldn't feel trapped. I spooned her, putting my left arm gently around her waist, my face in her hair, my head down on my curled right arm. She was warm, and she smelled like honey and vanilla. I inhaled her. I felt her tremble in my arms, saw the goose bumps rise on her skin. I pulled her tighter, but I couldn't relax.

"I gotta get up," I told her, rolling over onto my back. "I can't sleep anymore, anyway."

"Okay." She rolled her head so she could look into my face. "I'll help you."

"Could you go get Logan?"

She couldn't hide her disappointment. "Of course."

I didn't have the energy to console her. I just wanted my mate. "Thanks."

She left and my eyes drifted closed. In seconds, it seemed, I had a hand on my chest. I opened my eyes and he was standing above me.

“I need to get up,” I almost cried.

“You need to sleep,” Logan said. “Can I hold you, or is that not okay right now?”

I swallowed hard. “No... that’s always okay.”

He got on the bed, crawled over to me, and laid down behind me. “Are you sure this is all right?” His breath was warm on the side of my neck.

My whimper was low, husky.

“I see,” he said, grabbing me tight, wrapping me in his arms and tucking me against his chest. He nuzzled his face into the back of my neck and inhaled deeply.

It was instant. As soon as he touched me, I settled, relaxed, and felt my body get heavy. And I loved Delphine so much, she was the sister I never had and always wanted, but the difference was like night and day. Like crawling under warm blankets on a cold night, he just soothed me so I could breathe. I couldn’t press my body back close enough to his.

“Go to sleep.”

“Logan,” I sighed, twisting around in his arms, turning so I was facing him, staring into his beautiful topaz eyes.

His hand slipped down to the small of my back so he could press me forward against him. “Take me with you from now on, okay? Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” I whispered.

“Okay.” He let out a deep breath.

Lying there in bed, looking at the man I loved, I felt better than I had all day.

Chapter Seventeen

I WAS supposed to be resting again. Even after eating and drinking, even after a shower and a long nap, Logan had ordered me to stay in the suite and just lay around. I was allowed to do nothing more strenuous than lounge in the hammock outside on the veranda.

As it was the following night, the night of the heru-ur, I had no company. Everyone else was gone.

“What is the heru-ur exactly?” Delphine had asked me as she eyed Yuri, Mikhail, and Crane. They were obviously restless waiting for Logan, chomping at the bit to go.

“It’s a big orgy,” I told her.

Her eyes got huge.

I smirked at her.

She gestured with the tray of meat she was taking to Markel. “And so they’re all gonna do what?”

“Fuck anything that moves,” I told her.

“Eww.”

“Tell me about it,” I chuckled before noticing that she looked stunned all of a sudden. “What?”

“Markel wanted to go.”

“He probably wanted to take you.” I snorted out a laugh. “Being in a big room with everyone fucking in every direction is like doing it in the middle of a porno.”

“Jin!”

“So I understand.” I laughed at her. “Plus the opium mixed with wine.”

“The what?”

I dismissed her with a wave of my hand. “Go take care of your man. The doctor said that as long as he eats and drinks he’ll be good by morning.”

“He was whining about missing the heru-ur,” she snapped at me.

“He just wanted to get his kink on with you.” I waggled my eyebrows at her.

“Jin!”

“Go,” I groaned, walking away from her.

A half an hour later, I was alone. Logan had to go, as did all the semels, and sit through the meal and entertainment before the bacchanal began. As far as I could tell, after a feast and pageantry that was right out of *The Ten Commandments* or *Cleopatra*, big-budget costumes, hundreds of dancers, the show turned into an orgy. It began at sundown and went until the following morning and was held in the main hall and spilled into the private baths.

As a reah, I was strictly forbidden from attending. In fact, no yareahs were allowed, either, but every semel was. The double standard was not lost on me, but I hardly cared. Logan had to attend up until the dancers started writhing on the floor, inviting people from the audience to come up and claim them. As soon as the sex began, he could, and would, excuse himself. I told him that he could stay and watch—men liked to watch, and I was no exception; it was like porn—but Logan had given me a pained look and said that he would rather come back and get in bed with me. Much rather. And the way the heat in his eyes flared to life left no doubt that the idea of him and me alone in our room was absolutely the hottest thing he could think of.

So I was awaiting his return, relaxing in the huge hammock, when I fell asleep. It was dark when I woke up, only the moon illuminating the room. As I walked around flipping on lights, I wondered where Logan was. Thinking about the man made me smile, and as I ran down the possible reasons for his absence, my smile got bigger. Just imagining how annoyed he was at that moment was fun. He was probably growly and grouchy because he was missing me and....

I froze in the middle of the floor, the truth hitting me like a landslide.

I wasn't worried that he had found someone he liked better. I wasn't scared that he was fucking some nameless woman on the floor of the hall. I wasn't concerned at all. I trusted the man implicitly, and I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that I was the only one he wanted.

I didn't second-guess him anymore. I didn't think about him being straight or gay, I thought of him simply as Logan, my mate and the man I loved. There was only me for him, and I got that, finally, because of how I submitted to him. If he didn't love me, didn't truly, deeply, completely love me, then there would not be, in me, the willingness and want to succumb to him. He was my mate and my friend and my love. I was very lucky.

"Jin!"

And he was suddenly out in the hall.

As I turned, the door flew open to reveal the love of my life filling the doorway. He gripped the frame hard, his knuckles white as he stared in at me.

"Semel-re," I greeted him with a wicked smile, seeing how unsteady he was on his own feet. "How was the wine?"

"Fuckin' Kellen Grant."

"What?" I chuckled.

"Fuckin' Kellen fuckin' Grant," he grumbled. "He fuckin' went whining to the priest and begged him to be released from fighting me in the pit."

I was thrilled. "Oh?"

"Yeah," he said thickly. "Fuck. He's gonna do it like they... he's offering tribute, *menat*, instead of fighting me, like this is fuckin' Rome or some shit. He's transferring funds and—and I told the priest, but he... and Kellen said he was sorry like a million times, and he said he'd mark Abbot and Ian and that he'd find Sean Baker, the fourth guy who attacked you, but—"

"He's afraid to meet you in the pit," I told him.

"No," he bellowed, "he's afraid of you! Everyone's fuckin' afraid of you; it's all anyone's talking about."

If my metamorphosis kept my mate from the pit, it was fine with me. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," he said as he calmed.

“But not you.” I arched a brow for him. “The semel-re is not afraid.”

“Fuck no.”

Looking at him, rumpled, his eyes glazed, sweaty, with his dress shirt sticking to his beautiful chest, his golden skin visible at his throat, the collar open, my mouth went dry.

“Not scared of you,” he repeated, slurring his words.

“Show me.”

He gave a low, very male grunt as he slammed the door behind him before stalking across the room to me, yanking me forward into his arms the minute he reached me.

I lifted my head to speak, and his mouth came down roughly over mine in a claiming, demanding, devouring kiss. His tongue pushed between my lips, sweeping inside, tangling with mine. He tasted like wine, it was there on his lips, in his mouth, and his hands were all over me, strong and insistent, tugging, pulling, and I was shoved down under him onto the couch, my legs wedged apart as he settled between my thighs.

I laughed into his mouth, wiggling under him, trying to improve my angle, pushing up against him and rocking forward, trying to breathe at the same time. Finally wrenching my lips from his, I gasped for air even as he tried to recapture my mouth.

“Logan!” I squealed happily, loving him like this, the heat, his undeniable need.

“Need you,” he rasped, grabbing my thighs, wrapping them around his hips. “Wanna be buried in you as deep as I can, Jin... my reah... mine.”

“You’re not gonna make it,” I teased him, my hand on the bulge of his jeans, kneading, groping.

“Fuck!”

I breathed him in, his delicious scent.

“Jin,” he whimpered, twisting, pressing, shoving the hard bulge in his jeans against my crease, dragging himself over me, back and forth, up and down. “I need... I wanna fuck you hard and long and deep... I wanna be inside you.”

And the words, dripping with heat, made me shiver, and I clutched him tight, holding on, tightening my legs around his narrow hips, increasing the pressure.

His breath hissed out. “Jin!”

I bent my head and bit down hard on the side of his neck as his breath became labored, panting as he pushed against me, rubbing, grinding, the friction needed, wanted, craved.

“Jin!” He growled out my name, the sound guttural, thrusting his hips forward, finding his rhythm, needing the friction on his throbbing cock. I bit down harder on the smooth flesh of his throat and felt him jolt in my arms. “Fuck, baby, I’m gonna come!”

I held him as he convulsed around me, squeezing me so tight that there was no air. I knew I could hold on until the viselike grip lessened, and I lifted my teeth from him, licking and bathing the bite I made, sucking it gently as he shuddered in my arms.

We laid together in silence for long minutes as I felt his heart hammering next to mine.

“What the fuck was that?”

“That was you drinking too much opium-spiked wine,” I teased him.

“But I didn’t, I mean—I drank wine, but it wasn’t spiked... I would never drink that.”

“Just me then, I guess.” I smiled into his hair, rubbing my chin in it. “Or you watching everyone get it on and getting all hot for me.”

“Christ,” he grumbled when he finally found his voice, face buried in my shoulder. “I haven’t come in my jeans since I was fuckin’ sixteen years old.”

I took a deep breath in and smiled wide. “Look at me.”

He groaned. “Do I have to?”

I chuckled into his hair. “Yes.”

He lifted his head, and I got a sheepish, lopsided grin. Clear, gleaming eyes greeted me. Whatever had been rushing through his system had been flushed out with endorphins and adrenaline and good old-fashioned orgasm. Sticky jeans equaled a clear-headed Logan Church.

I arched an eyebrow at him.

He moaned and let his head fall back down on my chest. “Shit.”

“Can you get off me?” I teased him. “‘Cause you weigh a fuckin’ ton.”

With another moan of embarrassment, he lifted up off me. “I gotta wash off,” he muttered as he got up, squirming as he stood up before turning and walking like John Wayne toward the bedroom with its adjoining bathroom.

He was absolutely adorable.

I smiled after him, and when he stopped at the door to look at me over his shoulder, I sighed deeply.

“I wanna fuck you up against the wall of the shower.”

“Is that an invitation or a promise?”

“That’s a promise if you get your ass over here.”

I ran.

Chapter Eighteen

I WAS having the best night. Crane had come back an hour and a half after Logan and had walked through the main room on his way to the shower, announcing that he was never having sex again.

“You?” Logan teased, calling after him. “You’re not gonna have sex?”

It seemed slightly inconceivable, like if he’d said he wasn’t going to breathe anymore.

“Nope,” he groaned, slamming the door behind him.

When he joined us on the veranda, flopping down into the hammock, he had changed his mind. He maybe would have sex again. Possibly.

I rolled my eyes, and Logan grinned at me.

“We need food,” he told me. “Call room service and get some, okay?”

The villa was the *semel-aten*’s home, but it was also run like a huge hotel during the feast. The phone rang from room-to-room and to the maids’ quarters and the kitchen, but not out of the house. People were staffed in both places twenty-four hours a day during the feast, and there were hundreds of them.

I called down and ordered up meat and cheese and whatever fruit they had. I also asked for mint iced tea and sparkling cider. When I walked back to the patio, I saw that Markel and Delphine were there. Markel looked much better, and Crane told him all about the *heru-ur* and how many women he’d nailed.

“Nailed.” I winced, pained at his wording.

“Charming.” Delphine rolled her eyes.

Yuri walked in next, followed by Mikhail, who, unlike both Yuri and Crane, did not look mauled or debauched in any way. He wasn’t even rumpled.

“What?” he asked me.

“You still look....” I looked over at Delphine for help.

“Pressed,” she supplied.

“Yeah? So?”

Logan chuckled, getting comfortable on the chaise so that his head was in my lap. He wanted attention, wanted my hands stroking his hair. We were joined shortly by Justin Cho, his sheseru and sylvan flanking him as he came into the room and joined us on the patio. I was surprised—all these men had more interest in sitting around talking, laughing, than being at a Roman orgy.

“I’d rather see my friend,” Justin told me, tipping his head at Logan. “And these two”—he smiled, glancing at his crook and flail—“they’re just not party animals.”

Desmond Kaufman, his sheseru, just glared at him, and his sylvan, Sean Li, scowled.

I enjoyed listening to Logan and Justin swap stories about each other from college, which was apparently where they had met, and about their tribes. Justin had us all in stitches about two families that lived next door to each other in San Jose who were fighting over a peach tree. Apparently they felt that their *semel* was the one to decide what should be done. He just looked at us like it was the most ridiculous thing ever.

“Yeah, but that Mrs. Nguyen is scary as hell,” Desmond assured us. “She’s, like, ninety and just mean.”

“Yeah, she is mean,” Sean agreed. “And she has these little pinchy fingers.”

When he shivered, we all laughed.

The night wore on, and when Crane got up to answer the door, he returned with Christophe Danvers and his sheseru, Avery Cadim.

“To what do we owe this pleasure?” Logan asked, standing, facing a battered-looking Christophe. He had met Kellen Grant in the pit the day before, and by all accounts it had been a pretty evenly matched fight until

the end. Christophe had won by decision of the priest; there had been no clear winner before he rendered his verdict. Logan and I had not attended.

I was surprised when my mate turned to look at Avery, and he immediately went to his knees.

“Forgive me, semel-re, for granting sanctuary to the cats of the tribe of Selket. I truly did not know they were running from your land when they first spoke to me, and afterwards... when I called your reah and then when Domin came—”

“Get up,” Logan ordered him.

The second he did, Logan took a step forward into Avery’s personal space, way in, so they were almost nose-to-nose. “I expect you to respect the fact that my tribe and yours have a covenant bond at all times. The sister of your semel is the aset of my tribe. If Simone was here, she—”

“I know.” He winced like Logan had hit him. “She called and... I heard it.”

Logan moved back beside me, his hand sliding up under my T-shirt, his fingers splayed over the small of my back, stroking my bare skin. “She wants us all to be one family.”

“I know.” Christophe looked pained, chiming in, drawing both Logan’s attention and mine from Avery. “Simone had a lot to say about what I should have done and didn’t do, and now she’s not only my sister but the aset of your tribe and the yareah of a very powerful semel, and she’s just... fuck.”

“And her mate—he loves her like crazy.” Logan waggled his eyebrows at him.

“Fuck you, Logan,” Christophe growled. “He dotes on her and indulges her and... you introduced them, and now I’ve got this man in my business making suggestions because Simone thinks he should call me and... this thing with us.... Shit. Avery made a mistake, we’re both sorry, is that enough or not?”

It wasn’t much of an apology, more of a demand.

“I’m being punished,” Avery grumbled. “Simone requested that Ethan’s sheseru and I trade places for a month.”

I didn’t smile, and I was really proud of myself.

When I had called Simone the day before, catching her up on everything, listening to her talk about her mating ceremony and

honeymoon, we had chatted about her brother and Avery Cadim. Simone had asked Christophe to send Avery to her so she could “remind” him about who his friends were. I actually felt bad for him. Simone could be a real ball-buster when she tried to be, and she really wanted to pound the idea of friends and family into Avery Cadim so he knew the difference.

“So you’re going to New York, huh?” Crane cackled. “Sucks to be you, man. I bet you do a lot of fuckin’ shopping and talking about your feelings.”

Avery shot Crane a look that should have killed him right then and there. I watched my best friend wink at him.

“I’m going to kill your beset, reah,” Avery told me.

“You can try,” Yuri told him.

“Let’s not do the pissing match thing,” Christophe groaned, looking at Logan before he took a tentative step forward. “When we get back, I want us to bring the tribes together. Let’s pick a weekend and do it.”

“Agreed,” Logan told him, “and I want Domin off limits, or the next time I even suspect that someone hurt him, I will send Yuri to your door.”

“Fine, yes,” Christophe agreed.

“Please don’t make me embarrass you in front of your tribe again.”

Six months ago, Christophe had “borrowed” me from Logan’s land. He had wanted to talk to me, see if he could convince me to be his reah even after I had told him no. The only thing that saved him from being killed for kidnapping another semel’s mate was that at the time he had taken me, it had not been announced that I was indeed Logan Church’s reah. He, like Laurent Bruyere, had not known I was the man’s true-mate. The difference was that Laurent had tortured me and Christophe couldn’t even keep me in the room where he put me.

“Are we in agreement?” Logan asked him.

“Is Avery forgiven?” Christophe swallowed hard.

“For the sanctuary, yes,” Logan said before he moved fast, grabbing Avery by the throat and yanking him forward to look at him. “But if you ever put tooth or claw or hand on Domin Thorne again, you will answer to me, sheseru of the tribe of Pakhet.”

“Yes,” Avery gasped, his hand on Logan’s wrist because it needed to be.

I understood his desire; he wanted to submit to Logan's will. Dominance was something all cats of lesser station than a semel craved from their leaders.

Christophe was a nice man, a good man, but he was not a leader. He should have been born a regular cat or maybe a sylvan, not a semel. In contrast, Logan was a born leader—he was strong and nurturing, but above all he knew he was supposed to be in charge. He had absolute belief in his own abilities and strengths. Christophe second-guessed himself; Logan did not. Logan made you submit to him. Christophe invited you to, hoped you would. Logan's power flowed off him in waves, and Avery, who was much too strong to submit to Christophe, wanted to yield to Logan. It wasn't sexual, but the hunger was there, the need, the desire, in the way he trembled. He wanted a semel he could respect and follow, and he did not have that in Christophe Danvers.

And there were different kinds of strength other than raw, physical power, but Logan was not some brainless brute, either. He was cut from the same mold as Justin Cho. They were smart, they listened, and they truly cared about every man, woman, and child in their tribes. Both would give their lives for the people they led. Avery would have been a better sheseru for either Logan or Justin, but fate had dealt him the card of becoming Christophe's. It didn't mean that when he was faced with what he needed he didn't crave it. The way he was looking at Logan, into his eyes, left no doubt that he would become my semel's sheseru without a moment's hesitation if he were ever asked.

"I will leave your maahes alone, and so will my men, semel-re," he promised, unable to keep from tipping his head in Logan's grip and rubbing his cheek over the man's hand.

Logan let him go and put his hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "This is a promise between us, then."

Avery nodded, unable to speak.

The silence was broken by another knock on the door.

Crane moved fast, darting across the room.

I watched Logan's hand slide off Avery's shoulder, and I was going to say something when I heard Crane yell. I moved to bolt out into the other room, but Logan stepped in front of me, barring my way, gesturing for Yuri to go first.

"Logan," I yelled, needing to get to Crane.

“No,” he commanded, pushing me back behind him when I tried to get by.

“Semel-re!”

Only then did Logan allow me to move, and only at his side, at pace with him, not moving by him, not in front.

I did not expect to see the priest of Chae Rophon, Archer Pike, the current semel of my former tribe, the tribe of Anuket; his sheseru, Crane’s father, Nelson Adams; or my father, Mitchell Rayne. I was frozen where I stood, having just stepped into the room with Logan.

All the men went to their knees except the priest. My eyes flicked to Crane, and I saw that he had his hands fisted at his sides and his jaw was tight. He was furious, and it was all over him.

“Semel-re,” the priest called for the second time, as he had the first. “I bring you the kith and kin of your reah to hear my words to you.”

Logan moved further into the room.

“I had wondered at what Jin had reported to me, that when he was discovered to be a reah that he was almost killed and then cast from his tribe. I wondered at that reaction as a reah, in any form, has always been none other than a gift.” He smiled over at me. “A reah is, as you all know, the only true-mate of a semel, but even more so, a reah is the heart of a tribe, as they exude warmth, safety, and peace. A reah’s presence ensures that a tribe will prosper and grow as other cats are drawn to a tribe with the power of a semel and the nurturing of a reah. A semel’s strength is increased tenfold with his reah at his side, and any tribe gifted with the birth of a reah is considered to be blessed by Ra.”

No one said a word.

“I have wondered, since I spoke with Jin, why, if the tribe of Anuket did not want him, why then did they not send him here to Sobek, to the semel-aten?”

I didn’t think anyone was going to offer an explanation, confess to hatred, so I was not surprised when the room remained silent.

“I believe,” the priest sighed, “as it is in all things tribal, that the attitude of the semel directs that of the entire clan. So that had Gabriel Pike, the semel of the tribe of Anuket when Jin was revealed, accepted him, then so would have the tribe, even if his own father had offered his objection.” The priest’s eyes returned to Logan’s from glancing around the

room. "As Gabriel Pike stepped down as semel, relinquishing his birthright to his brother, I can only give the balance of my anger to the new semel of the tribe of Anuket and ask for the punishment of his sylvan and his sheseru."

"May I speak first, before you pass sentence on them?" Logan asked softly.

"Yes, semel-re."

He cleared his throat. "I want no punishment for the past injustices done to my reah or the beset of my reah; I want only for all members of the tribe of Anuket, as I expressed to the semel of their tribe on his last visit to my home, to neither speak to nor see my mate or my kinsman. All else is settled between the tribe of Mafdet and the tribe of Anuket."

"Are you certain?"

"I am. We want nothing at all to do with them; my tribe is *khet*, separated by fire from them."

Logan had told the priest that the two tribes, separated, as our ancestors would have said, by fire, were dead to each other. There would never be any contact. It was forever.

"This is your final word."

"It is."

"Then this is *maat*," the priest said as he turned to look at Archer, my father, and Crane's father. "You have the semel-re's leave to go, but before you do, I will make my announcement to all of you."

I gestured for Crane to come to me.

He crossed to me fast, and I grabbed his arm. "One moment please, your grace."

"Of course, my reah."

My eyes flicked to my father, because I knew if it had been anyone but the priest, he would have said something about me being his reah. To my father, I was filth and nothing more. As predicted, I saw the seething rage on his face. He was furious for being called before the priest for what he felt was justifiable treatment of me. He wanted me dead. The dark-blue eyes that had once warmed when he looked at me were cold and hard.

Crane's father, an older version of him, same hair, same eyes, just weathered with streaks of gray, had the same icy resolve on his carved

features. Neither my father nor my best friend's wanted me anything but dead.

I walked Crane a few feet away and then turned and pulled him in close to me.

"What?"

"That's your father standing there," I said under my breath. "If you want to talk to him or see him or your fam—"

He cut me off with a sharp whisper. "You're my family, you stupid son of a bitch. How many times do I gotta fuckin' say that to you?"

He was furious, and I could hear it in his barely controlled voice, see it in his eyes. He was so close to me I could feel his breath on my face. "Crane—"

"No," he said, cutting me off, ready to walk away.

I stopped him from moving, my hand on his bicep. "Listen, it's—"

"Shut up," he ordered, so I did. "I—you were on the ground."

I stared into his eyes, saw that they had filled, watched him squint to keep the tears from falling, felt the muscles in his jaw clench when I put my hand on his cheek to settle him.

"He... my father, he... he broke your arm with the bat. Do you remember?"

I nodded fast.

His breath caught. "I can't... it hurts to see him," he told me, and his bottom lip quivered as he swallowed hard. "Your father—I watched what he did, and I never expected it, and it was horrible, but he was still *your* father, and so I was surprised, but it didn't change everything for me, it didn't end who I was. But watching my own father, seeing him do what he did... he was mine, ya know? He was the one I loved, the one who loved me."

My hand slid from his cheek down to his heart.

"He hit you over and over. I mean, after he broke your arm, he kept hitting you until my screaming pissed him off."

"Shit."

"You don't know, 'cause you were out, but he beat me. Not like you, but hard... called me things, said there was only one reason a man chose someone else over his family... only one."

The reason seemed obvious, but it wasn't. Crane and I had never been lovers, only ever friends, though the word didn't seem to be enough. More like brothers, the only one I still had.

"And so?"

"So I chose, and we both know why."

I knew, I always knew.

"So just—don't think for me, okay?" he growled, hand in my hair, yanking my head back, manhandling me like he never did. "I'm good with how things are."

"Okay," I said, easing free, leaning forward and wrapping my arms around his neck, molding my body to his.

"Jin," he croaked out, not hugging me back. "You have to believe me."

"You better fuckin' hug me, you shit." I laughed into the side of his neck, unhinged suddenly, sounding strange, manic.

He grabbed me, clutching me tight, and I felt the tremor that ran through him. "Jin. Say it. Say you believe me; tell me you'll let it go."

"But—"

"Jin!"

"All right," I promised him. "If you're really okay with how things are, then I'll be okay with them for you and not try and fix shit that ain't broken."

He nodded before he took a step back out of my arms. "That'd be a nice change."

I flipped him off and he arched a wicked eyebrow for me.

We rejoined Logan, and he eyed us both. "Are you two all right?"

"Yep." Crane grinned at him.

"Aces." I gave him the thumbs-up.

His smile made his eyes glow gold fire. It was breathtaking before he turned to face the kneeling men. "Give us your news, your grace," he prompted the priest as he reached for my shoulder and drew me in close to him.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, holding tight as I too faced the priest.

“From this day forward,” he told Logan, “you will no longer be semel-re, for I have confirmed Jin’s existence as a nekhene cat with the council of the Ennead, and we are all in unanimous agreement. Your reah, who is your true-mate, is also one of the most powerful panthers we have ever seen, and so therefore you will be known from this day forward as semel-netjer. We will make the announcement together, all of us, tomorrow at—”

Logan interrupted. “No, please, your grace,” he said, clutching me tight to him. “If I may speak?”

“Of course.”

“I would prefer to remain as I am, semel-re, if it would please you, as I wish to be first identified as the semel who has found his reah.”

The priest regarded Logan. “On your own land, semel-netjer, you may refer to yourself as you see fit, but here, as well as in all matters that concern your tribe’s interaction with others, the title will be semel-netjer. Surely you understand, as a nekhene cat is much more rare than even a reah. This too answers the question for everyone as to why Jin is male and not female,” he said, smiling. “Nekhene cats are only ever male, and so as he was born nekhene first, reah second, the more powerful trumps the weaker. A nekhene cat is far more precious, and—”

“To you,” Logan assured him, “but I can promise you that to me, after having to endure a forced separation, that I would only ever be semel-re, even though I am one of two, I understand.”

The priest looked confused. “You are the only semel-re I know of, Logan Church.”

“But I thought—the semel-aten told my mate that his wosret, Amirah Fehr, found her mate in—”

“Oh.” His voice lowered. “No.” He turned to look at all the kneeling men. “You are all excused. Return to your suite or the heru-ur, you’re dismissed.”

My father looked at me, the hatred there clear as day, and Crane’s father was the same. Only Archer, their semel, looked like he wanted to speak to me.

“You’re dismissed,” the priest repeated loudly.

The men left under the watchful eye of Jamal Hassan. They moved quickly, no one wanting to tangle with the phocal of the Shu. Once they

were gone, the priest turned to look at the room. Everyone had packed in close to listen.

He cleared his throat. "It seemed that Amirah Fehr wanted away from the semel-aten more than anything, and so when she saw Terrance McCord, she used all her power, her pheromones, her beauty to entice him. He thought she was his reah, she made him believe it, and so he claimed her as such."

"What happened?" Logan asked him.

"Six months ago, I received word that the semel had killed his reah and his sheseru as he had found them in his bed together." The priest took a breath. "The bond between the semel and his reah was a lie, but that between a sheseru and a reah never is."

"When he found them," I sighed, "he must have been devastated."

"Yes, reah, as he knew in that instant that the bond had never been real."

"How?" Delphine asked.

"A reah truly mated," Logan told her, "would never sleep with another; they only ever hunger for their mate."

"He killed them both?" Christophe asked.

"Yes."

"I thought no one was allowed to hurt a reah."

"Except their semel," Logan told him. "A reah can be put to death by their mate."

Christophe shivered. "I feel for Amirah and her sheseru, but I feel for her semel as well." He looked at the priest. "He killed himself too, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

"Three lives destroyed by one act of infidelity," Justin sighed. "If the pull is really that strong, I don't know if I ever want to find my reah."

"You do," Logan assured him, his fingers tangled in my hair. "Believe me, you do."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Your grace," I said quietly to the priest, "would you bless our union now?"

The room went as silent as a tomb.

“But my reah, you—”

“Please,” I told him, “right here, right now—all the people I care about except Logan’s mother are here. We don’t have rings, can’t have them because of the shift, so... please, your grace.”

He looked at me, deeply into my eyes, before looking at Logan. “It is by your word, semel-net—semel-re, if you would have this so.”

“Please,” Logan sighed, “I would have it so. Only my reah wants to be mated on the night of a giant orgy.”

The priest laughed, and so did everyone else.

Twenty minutes later, Logan and I were on our knees in front of the priest. Justin was beside Logan as his khonsu, second, and Crane was next to me as mine. Hamid used one of his own sashes from his robes and wrapped our hands, speaking the words in Egyptian, ancient Greek, and finally English that would seal us together, bind us, until death. As I looked into Logan’s eyes, he blurred, and I felt my tears seconds later.

“My mate,” he said, reaching up, cupping my cheek, his thumb wiping away the salty drops. “I have never loved anyone or anything as I do you. If I hadn’t found you... if you were... it would have been the end of me.”

I nodded. “Same.”

“Okay.” He smiled, leaning in, tipping my chin up as he sealed his mouth down over mine.

I parted my lips and sucked his tongue inside, kissing him ravenously, letting him feel my need, the heat, the hunger.

The growl in the back of his throat made me smile against this mouth.

“Ass,” he growled, pulling back, shoving me off him

I arched an eyebrow for him and turned to look up at the priest.

He was amused. “You are delightful, reah, playful and frightening all at once.”

I had never been considered scary before. It was sobering.

“The sash is my gift. Keep it as a token of your bond and the blessing I bestow on you”—he turned to Logan—“semel-netjer, semel-re, and on you”—his eyes returned to mine—“my reah.”

I would have it framed when I got home. As male werepanthers, we wore no jewelry, as we were supposed to be able to shift at any time. If you shifted with a ring on, you could lose a knuckle when the blood flow was constricted so suddenly. I would have wanted to wear a ring, to show the world I was mated, married, but as fast as I shifted, it was dangerous. The sash was a testament to the bond that I shared with Logan Church.

We all stood, and as Logan turned to accept congratulations from Justin and the others, Crane turned me around to face him.

“I’m happy for you.”

“I’m happy for me too,” I told him, bumping him with my shoulder. “Thank you for being my khonsu.”

“Who else but me?” He scowled. “God, you’re such a douche.”

I looked over at Jamal, who was apparently very startled by Crane’s lack of respect.

“What?” Crane almost snarled at him.

Jamal looked at me.

“My tribe is kinda different,” I told him.

“Yes, Jin Rayne, it is.”

And I liked it just the way it was.

Chapter Nineteen

ON THE last night of the feast, all the mates of the semels were allowed to attend the evening meal uncovered but in traditional dress. When I walked out of the bathroom dressed in the ceremonial robes, Logan caught his breath.

“What?”

He rose up off the bed, and I watched the muscles in his jaw clench, saw him lick his lips.

My eyes narrowed. “This can’t be hot, Church.” I smiled at him. “I’m all covered up,” I said, smoothing my hands down the front of the gold-and-white high-collared robe that was closed with toggle-clasps down the entire front to my waist and then fell in to the floor in a drape of heavy white-lined silk. “If I were dressed like a slave boy, I’d get it.”

He moved forward slowly, coming to a stop in front of me, hands on my shoulders as he looked me up and down.

“Oh, I see.” I grinned up at him. “You like me all pristine in public and hot in your bed.”

He only nodded.

I stepped forward, lifting up on my toes to reach him, pressing a kiss to the wildly beating pulse in his throat.

“It’s nice to know that I can still cause this sort of reaction in you.”

“Still”—he coughed, his hands sliding down to my biceps, his fingers tightening—“always.”

I stepped closer, pressing against him, rubbing.

“No,” he croaked out, moving me back out to arm’s length. “We hafta go.”

I had no intention of going anywhere.

But duty prevailed, and Logan and I together embarked on the final evening of the feast. It was unbearable. What made it excruciating was the proximity of my mate coupled with the knowledge that it would be hours before I could have him. My body was tense and aching, I was desperate to get the man alone; it was all I wanted, all I could think about, and the event, the people, made it impossible. I was nice, polite, engaging. I put on my public face, but just beneath the surface, my stomach was in an anxious knot, my heart was racing, my skin flushed, and I could, at any moment, become breathless with anticipation. Logically, I knew that the pheromones in the room coupled with my constant craving of my mate had created a ravenous need in me, but even being aware of it did nothing to dissipate my hunger.

Drinks were served before the parade of food began, and then the endless mingling commenced. The faces became a blur, the conversations blending together, and the second I could, I fled to a dark alcove I had noticed earlier, where I could see out but no one would notice me. I waited for Logan to realize I was missing, staring at the broad shoulders and long, muscular lines of my mate. I loved looking at him, seeing the power and beauty of him, the ease of his smile and the way the lines in the corners of his eyes crinkled. It warmed my heart to watch him become aware that I was missing, lift his head, and sweep those golden eyes around the room. I saw him take a breath, *that breath*, the one you draw in right before you start to worry, and it was then that I leaned out, waved so he’d know where I was and quickly hid myself again. He was there blocking my view of everything but him minutes later.

“What’re you doing?” He grinned at me because I was dear. All the love was there shining in his eyes, and I shivered just a little.

“Meet me in the room in five minutes,” I said, trying, and failing, to sound playful, the flutter in my chest just standing so close to him making it hard to breathe.

“No, no, no.” He shook his head, scolding me. “We can’t just—”

“We can,” my voice hitched, “and after you fuck me and I can think again, we can come right back down here and mingle.”

“Honey—”

“But if you don’t come with me....” What could I say that wouldn’t sound like a threat, not be like a demand? “You’ll be sorry.”

He squinted at me. “Why would I be sorry?”

“Because I’ll start without you,” I assured him.

“Start without... what?” He was confused.

I slipped around him and dashed for the door. As people called my name, I explained that I would be right back even as I didn’t stop moving. I never once slowed down until I was back in our suite.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The fact that he had stayed right behind me, never losing sight of me, was very telling. I heard the door close and lock, and I smiled as I faced the balcony, the curtains open to reveal the starry night sky. We were too far up for anyone to see into the bedroom, and I liked that. Making love in bed with the evening breeze on my skin would be heaven.

“Did you hear me?”

I nodded, turning to walk to the edge of the patio. “You g’head and go back if you want. I just need to release some tension before I go.”

“But I... want... us....”

I had reached into the folds of the robe and slid my hand down under the elastic waistband of my briefs and freed my hard, throbbing cock. Just being with Logan Church all evening, watching him, seeing him smile, noting the play of muscles under his clothes, had me dripping, and I used the leaking precome to coat my shaft and slide my fingers over my sensitized flesh. It felt more than good, and I groaned low in my throat. I let my head fall back as I increased the friction.

“Jin.” I heard the growl behind me.

“Just....” I trailed off, slowly unfastening the toggle clasps one by one, still fondling my heavy cock, feeling how tight my balls were. When the robe fell open, my chest and abdomen bared, I slipped two fingers into my mouth. I licked them until they were dripping with saliva and then bent forward just a little, reaching around behind me. “I just need to come, and then we can... go.”

“Oh yeah?” he said, having moved really fast, his breath down the side of my neck making me break out in goose bumps. “Is that all you need?” The back of the robe was suddenly lifted and my briefs tugged to my knees.

“Logan,” I moaned.

Hand on my back and I was shoved forward, my head on the window, my fingers splayed on the glass on either side. When his tongue slid between my cheeks, I yelled his name.

“I don’t think you have any idea what you fuckin’ need,” he said, his voice husky and low as he spread the globes of my ass, sliding his tongue in deeper, in and out of my tight, fluttering channel. He licked and sucked, and when a finger replaced his tongue, pressing, swirling, I begged for another. “Oh please.”

“Please what?”

“Please, *semel-re*.”

The second finger slid inside me, and the two together were scissored in and out, opening me up, stretching me, making me ready for him.

“Logan!”

“Fuck, Jin, the way your ass swallows my fingers, you need more?”

“Oh God, yes.”

The third finger burned, but his tongue made everything wet around them, and I shoved back against him, wanting the pressure, needing it.

“Logan, please... fuck me, I wanna feel you deep inside, as deep as I can take it.”

I heard the low snarl, and then I was suddenly picked up and launched toward the bed. I came down with a bounce on my back, laughing hard.

“Jesus, you’re a fuckin’ brat,” he said hoarsely, yanking the robe fully open, lifting the draped skirt of it, taking hold of my dripping cock, fisting it in his hand.

“But I’m *your* fuckin’ brat.”

“Yes, only mine.”

“Oh God.” I bucked up into his hand, pushing in and out of his callused grip. “Logan.”

He bent over and took my cock down his throat from head to base, swallowing around it as I came undone. The man had no gag reflex at all, because, as a werepanther, he was used to biting off large chunks of meat

without chewing. While I didn't want him biting anything off me, my shaft was no cause for choking.

As he made everything slick and wet and hot, I whimpered and writhed under him.

"Logan!"

He lifted up to look at me. "You're a fuckin' tease, ya know that?"

"I need to come."

In answer, he stretched out, pulling the lube out from under his pillow where it had been stashed the night before. I watched him flip open the cap, squeezing some of the slippery gel into his palm before he tossed it away. I gasped when two icy cold fingers slid inside my quivering hole.

"Mine," he growled before he grabbed hold of my thighs, folded me in half, and buried the long, hard length of him inside me.

I howled my pleasure.

"Now you can come," he rasped, pulling out only to plunge back into me as deep as he could, buried to his balls in my ass.

He rammed in and pulled out of me, pushing in deeper with each stroke.

"You feel so good inside; you're squeezing me so tight," he said, increasing his rhythm, the force he was exerting. "Fuck, Jin, you feel so good!"

He was the one who felt good, the pressure inside, the way the second he shifted his angle, I was hit by a wave of pleasure as he slid over my prostate.

"Oh, I felt your muscles clench around me," he said, his voice so sexy. "My reah... you're not even gonna be able to walk."

I shivered with the promise as he leaned forward; lifting my legs over his broad, muscular shoulders, he sheathed himself inside me, squeezing my cock at the same time and taking desperate, hungry possession of my lips. I bucked up off the bed, shuddering with my release as I came so hard I thought for a second I passed out.

My orgasm was endless. I felt myself coming, semen spurting over the hand, wrist, and sculpted abs of my mate. His smile was like he was drugged, dazed, as his head fell back, and I felt the flood of hot come in my ass.

“Being buried inside you, feeling your heartbeat when I’m this deep....” His head rolled forward as he looked down into my eyes. “Jin, I know you’re mine. Even if you weren’t my mate, I would have seen you, I would have needed you, had to have you. I know you think it’s bullshit, but... feel me inside and tell me it’s not the truth.”

No one ever demanded my submission, was possessive of me, and yet let me stand on my own like Logan Church.

“Tell me,” he said, bending forward, still buried to the hilt in me. “Say it.”

I reached up, my hands on his face as I eased him down to me. “You love me not because of what I am but who I am.”

“Yes,” he said, our breath mingling before his mouth took possession of mine.

And I finally, really, believed it.

Chapter Twenty

THEY were all looking at me. I had a roomful of people hovering around instead of packing themselves, and what had started as my retreat to the bedroom alone had become a visit. I didn't want to talk; I just wanted to concentrate on getting ready to leave after what I had just done.

"What?"

Logan was dumbfounded.

"What?"

Mikhail cleared his throat. "If I may, my reah, I think perhaps the fact that you just said yes to everyone that came to see you over the last half an hour is where the looks of distress are stemming from."

I scowled at him. "Why?"

"Why?" Logan growled at me, pointing at the door. "Jin, the semel of the tribe of Opet just invited you to their next tribal meeting, and you said yes, before I could even—"

"Crane's gonna be living on his land," I reminded my mate as I packed my clothes. "He's the semel in Vegas. I just want us all to be friends."

"Jin, you—"

"He said Yuri could come."

He growled at me. "And then you told Ebere El Masry—"

"Ammon's yareah asked me last night at the concluding rites if she could bring her daughters for a visit. I see no problem with that."

“My reah!” Mikhail shouted at me. “You cannot have the mate and children of the semel-aten on your land. What if something were to hap—”

“What could happen?”

“Oh God, you did not just tempt fate like that,” Delphine moaned from where she was sitting on the corner of my bed.

They should have all been packing, in my opinion, instead of watching me do mine.

“What you promised the priest is the worst,” Yuri told me. “When he asked you if it was all right, you should’ve been honest.”

I shrugged. “I was honest, if the priest of Chae Rophon wants a member of the Shu to be with us, watching me, making sure I don’t turn into a monster and reveal us to the whole wide world, I say okay. It eases the mind of the priest, calms the semel-aten, and proves to the council of Ennead that I have nothing to hide. And besides, I like Shahid Alon, he’s quiet and he smiles a lot and he’s scary fast. This way, I finally have someone to run with.”

“You only run with me,” Logan assured me, stepping in close, hand in my hair, tugging gently until I looked up at him.

All I saw was gold, his eyes, his lashes, his thick brows, his skin.

“Yes?”

I nodded. “Yes, only with you.”

He exhaled sharply. “You do realize that I’m taking a member of the Shu home with me, to my house, to live with us?”

I shrugged.

“And that tiny little girl, Femi, who has you wrapped around her finger, just so happens to be the daughter of the man who tried to kill me.”

“True.”

“And you agreed to attend a tribal gathering of a tribe that’s not yours.”

“No, I know.”

“Jin!” He was exasperated.

“But the good news is I had a really nice talk with your father on the phone,” I soothed him.

He made a noise in his chest.

“And Simone and Ethan are coming to visit.”

“Yeah, super.”

“They’ll be there in time for the gathering that you and Christophe are having together.”

“Jin—”

“Did you know your guy Shahid knows Domin?” Crane chimed in, waggling his eyebrows at me.

“Like, knows how?” I asked suspiciously.

“Jin.”

“Like, how you’re thinking.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Jin.”

Crane shook his head.

“Well shit, then Shahid can’t come home with us. I gotta go talk to Jamal; I need to take Taj instead.”

“Jin!”

I looked at my mate. “What?”

“You’re ignoring me.”

“No, I heard you.”

“Could you maybe acknowledge me, then?”

“But I’m concerned about this Shahid thing.”

“And that’s why you should ask questions before you just agree,” Markel said, yawning.

“Shut the hell up,” I snapped at him. “Who asked you?”

He chuckled at me as I looked around the room full of lounging people.

“Can you guys all go pack already? We’re leaving in three hours.”

“Yeah, but—” Yuri began.

“Now!”

There was groaning and complaining as everyone filed out.

“Logan, I—”

“Just... stop,” he ordered me. “I’ll talk to the priest or Jamal or whatever. I promise not to take home anyone that will put the moves on Domin and piss off Koren.”

“The moves?” I teased him.

“Christ, you’re a wiseass.”

I waggled my eyebrows at him.

“I want them to be happy too,” he assured me.

“Domin deserves it.”

He grunted, leaning in to kiss my jaw, nibble on it until I let my head fall back, giving him access to my throat.

The purr could not be helped.

“You’re like putty in my hand.”

There was no argument to be made. I belonged to the man body and soul.

“I promise to fix it.”

“Why?”

“Mostly because it will make you happy.”

“And you like making me happy?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

I lifted up, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him down into a quick kiss that became long and wet and hot in seconds. My tongue tangled with his, and the whimper that came up out of me was pained and full of yearning.

“Christ,” he groaned, lifting his lips from mine moments later, panting from lack of air. “You know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

I knew that. The man loved me, after all.

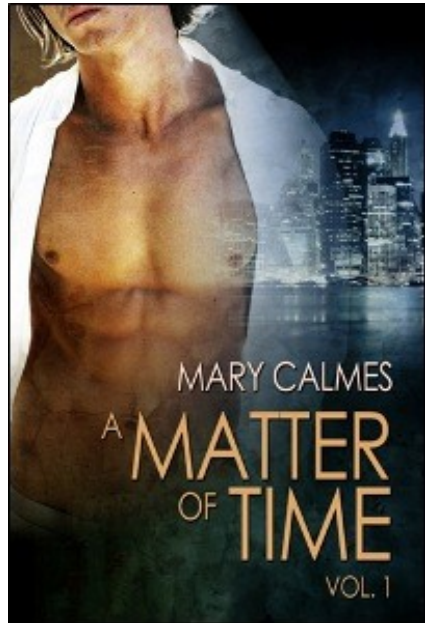
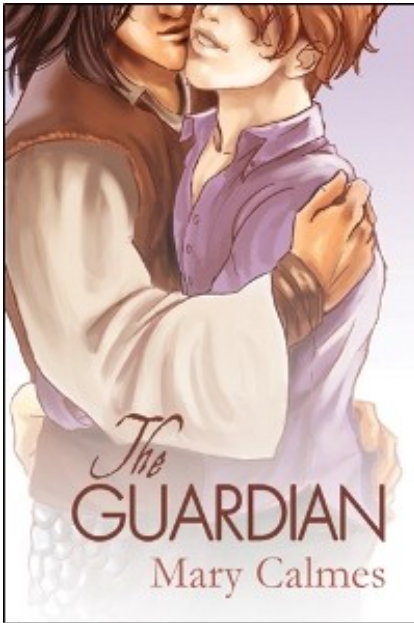
MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.

Read how Jin and Logan's story started



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The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of two men's faces in profile, facing each other in a romantic, intimate pose. In the upper left corner, there is a white diamond-shaped logo containing a black spiral design.

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