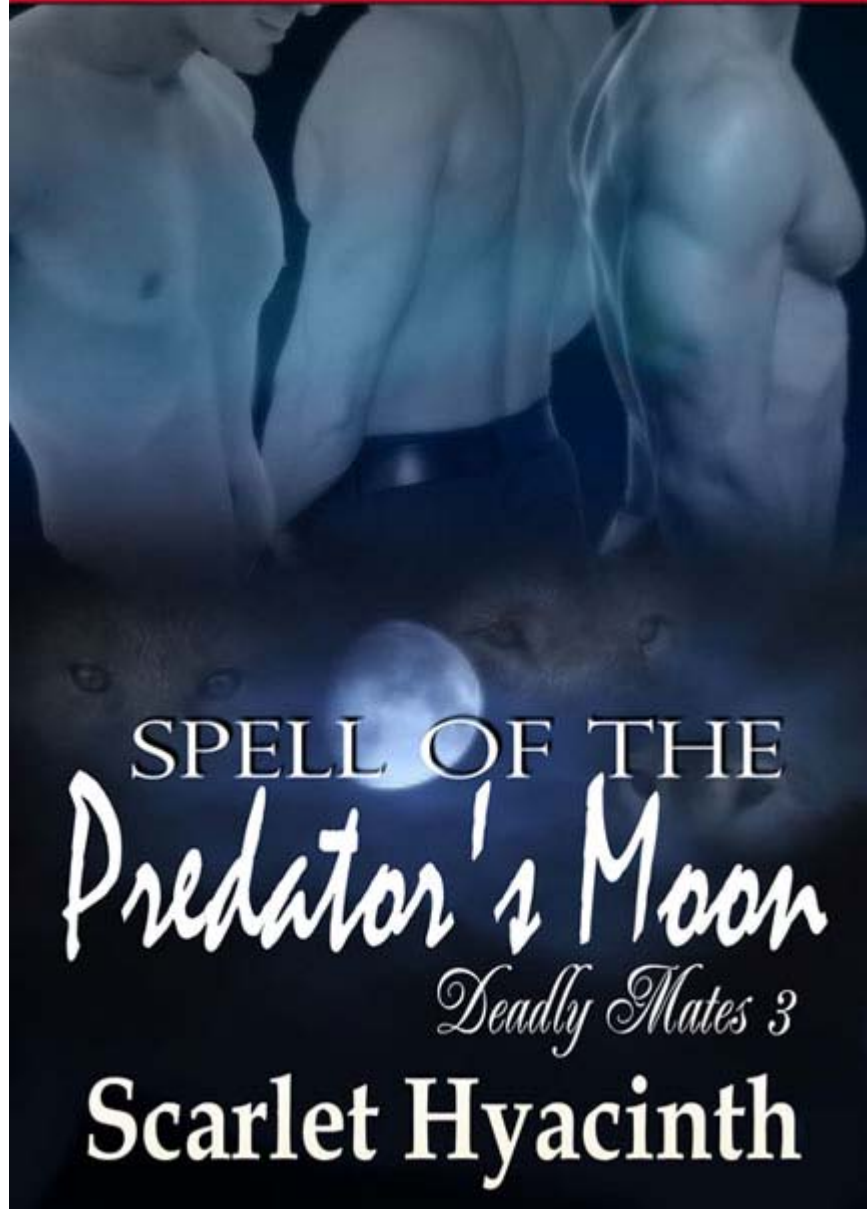


Siren Publishing

Ménage Amour



SPELL OF THE
Predator's Moon
Deadly Mates 3
Scarlet Hyacinth

Deadly Mates 3

Spell of the Predator's Moon

After Loren is rescued from certain death, he expects his savior to come and claim him. But three months pass with no sign from the other man, and Loren is tortured by confusing dreams and emotions. Unbeknownst to him, his mate, Tavon, has another lover, Yoshi, and Yoshi isn't happy about Loren's intrusion into their life.

In fact, Yoshi secretly harbors the same feelings for Loren, and he feels he is betraying Tavon in the process. None of them expect or understand a three-way relationship. True matings happen in pairs, and the confusion creates an abyss between the three.

With the threat of a dangerous conspiracy looming over them, Tavon, Yoshi and Loren find themselves swept away by forces more powerful than their own wills. Facing impossible odds, will they find a way to accept their feelings and be together before their enemies destroy them all?

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Paranormal

Length: 33,878 words

SPELL OF THE PREDATOR'S MOON

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Scarlet Hyacinth

MENAGE AMOUR



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Letter from Scarlet Hyacinth

Regarding E-book Piracy

Dear Readers,

Your support and opinion always mean a lot to me. I was a reader before I was writer, and as such, knowing that people enjoy my stories gives me tremendous happiness and satisfaction. Some of you may know that I originally started writing on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction. It was because of the many friends I made there and through their constant support that I persevered in writing.

However, I have to point out that, unlike stories on FictionPress and AdultFanFiction, my published books are intellectual property and are not free. The amount of time and effort authors, editors, and cover artists put into each and every one of these books is astonishing. I spent one month polishing *Enraptured* for my readers to offer them the best experience when reading my work. It hurts me, emotionally and financially, that before I could earn anything from my book, it was pirated and distributed illegally.

I sometimes can't help but wonder if all the effort is worth it. Writing is my passion, but writing for publishing is very different than posting free stories online. As much as I hate to admit it, taking into account all the work I put into these books and the poor financial profit, it somehow seems I'm wasting my time.

Maybe many of you think that being a writer instantly translates into thousands of dollars. Well, it doesn't. Many authors cannot support themselves with their writing, especially in the e-publishing industry. They have to hold day jobs while they write in the evenings and on weekends. For my part, I started writing as a student, sneaking in writing between studying for exams and trips to the library. It wasn't easy then, and it isn't easy now.

Please do not pirate my books. If you have downloaded this copy illegally, know that every reader is important and your support would mean the world to me.

I hope you enjoy the story. Please e-mail me your thoughts and comments at scarlet.hyacinth@gmail.com.

With love,
Scarlet Hyacinth

DEDICATION

For two very special people who got me hooked on Japanese mythology. Yoshi would never have existed without you.

SPELL OF THE PREDATOR'S MOON

Deadly Mates 3

SCARLET HYACINTH
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Chapter One

Tavon rubbed his eyes tiredly as he stared at the map. He took another sip of his coffee and considered his options. According to the information they'd gathered, two werewolf bloodline heirs had ended up together in the area of Rook Valley in the United States. Tavon needed to get to them as soon as possible.

That was, of course, easier said than done. Rook Valley didn't have a large population, and Tavon could find the local shifter pack with ease. However, complications had emerged that Tavon had not expected. At some point, the werewolf bloodline heirs had been joined by another, a snake shifter of all things. So far, he'd found at least three bloodline heirs in the area—Viktor Petrovic, the Alpha of the local werewolf pack; Kaiden Hearne, snake shifter and mate to Petrovic; and Loren Grayson, a younger member of Petrovic's pack.

All the while, he still needed to scout a large portion of Asia. He intended to find the dragons and request their aid, but while he'd partially succeeded in that task, he still couldn't get through to them. The dragons were among the most uncertain and dangerous variables in this entire thing. They were reclusive and kept away from other shifters, and Tavon worried that this attitude would compromise their

very existence. He'd also received some reports of unusual activity in the harpy community, so he needed to get back to Greece to check that out as well.

Tavon therefore, decided to send Kayla, a distant cousin, to Rook Valley as a scout. Unlike Tavon, she didn't carry the ancient bloodlines, so she wouldn't be in danger of being kidnapped or detected through it. She was, however, very stealthy and knew her way around the Americans. Tavon hoped to find the dragons soon so that he could join her in Rook Valley.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew him out of his musings. "Stop frowning so," a soft, seductive voice said. Tavon lifted his eyes and saw Yoshi saunter in. "You'll get wrinkles."

Tavon wanted to get pissed off, but he never could hold on to his anger when Yoshi was concerned. The other man awoke mixed feelings inside him, from desire to gratitude. Tavon's gaze was inexorably drawn to the sway of those slim hips, the beautiful glide of the silvery-gray hair, the naughty glint in those dark black eyes. Inside him, the lion stirred, aching to possess, to exorcise his frustrations through the sheer eroticism of sex.

He shook himself, knowing he didn't have time for such things. He had a duty to uphold and some bloodline heirs to find. "Not now, Yoshi, please."

Yoshi tsked. "All work and no play makes Tavon a dull, dull boy."

Tavon gritted his teeth, trying to control his arousal. Having a kitsune as a mate could become quite taxing. He couldn't deny that he felt attracted to Yoshi and always enjoyed the sex immensely. Still, like all those of his kind, Yoshi was demanding and often unreasonable. Tavon blamed it at least partially on Yoshi's need to feed on Tavon's spirit. Tavon had long ago gotten used to this since it made their relationship even more passionate. Besides, he wouldn't give up Yoshi for the world. The other man anchored him, understood

him, supported him through all the blood and gore in his life. Even though he never said it, Tavon loved Yoshi with all his heart and soul.

Tavon's mouth went dry as Yoshi walked around him and stared at the map over his shoulder. Yoshi hummed thoughtfully although it became quite obvious that geography was the least of his concerns. He wrapped his arms around Tavon's naked torso, reaching to pinch his nipples. His body rubbed against Tavon's wantonly, and Tavon groaned at the feel of a hard cock against his ass.

The animal inside Tavon broke loose. In a few swift motions, he swept the papers off the table, broke free of Yoshi's hold, turned and pushed his lover face down on the desk. "You want this, little slut? You want me to fuck you?"

Yoshi arched against him and moaned. "Yes, yes. Do it. Fuck me."

Tavon tore Yoshi's clothes off, exposing his lover's skin to his greedy gaze. Gods, Yoshi looked amazing, spread out and waiting for his invasion. Tavon opened a drawer and rummaged through it, coming up with a tube of lubricant. Moving as quickly as possible, he poured a generous amount of the fluid over his fingers and rubbed it around Yoshi's hole. His lover thrust his ass up, wriggling against Tavon. "Please, Tav..."

Growling, Tavon thrust two fingers inside his mate. Yoshi let out a gasp of pleasure, and Tavon hissed as his lover's ass swallowed his fingers. Gods, he ached to just thrust inside that sweet ass, to take what was his. He unzipped his jeans, jacking his cock with his other hand as he finger-fucked his lover. It was hard to hold back, but a life of discipline gave him the strength to do so, to take his time to prepare his lover for their coupling.

Even with the arousal brewing inside, he couldn't help a chuckle when Yoshi's fox tail emerged, brushing against Tavon's chest. Through Yoshi's hair, fox ears peaked up naughtily. "Oh, Yosh, you need to do something about this."

Yoshi trembled beneath him and lifted his tail. "Tav..."

The urgency in Yoshi's voice tipped Tavon over. He removed his fingers and positioned his dick at Yoshi's opening. Just as he was about to thrust inside, a shrill noise echoed in the room. It took a few seconds for Tavon's brain to process it, but he then realized the phone was ringing. Reality swamped over him, reminding him of what needed to be done. "Ah, fuck..."

Cursing, he tucked himself back and tried to zip up his jeans. Tavon's dick demanded release, though, preferably inside Yoshi's body. The fact that he was well-endowed didn't help, so in the end, he gave up. After all, what did it matter? He had more important things to think about.

As he rushed to the phone, he didn't apologize or say anything to Yoshi. His lover should have never pushed things in the first place. Yoshi knew better than that. After all, they'd been together for many, many years.

Tavon had been born with a deeper connection to the Nemean lion than anyone before him. His parents had been frightened by his power and had abandoned him in the African wild. To this day, Tavon didn't know who they'd been, not that he cared. The old man who'd found him had taught him to respect his heritage and assume the responsibilities that came with it. Tavon understood. It was his self-assigned task and destiny to find all the other bloodline heirs and make sure they understood it as well. He knew Yoshi respected that wish, but sometimes Yoshi's nature got the better of him. If he wanted to be honest, Tavon would have liked to let go, to allow himself to just build a life at Yoshi's side. But he couldn't afford that—not yet, at least.

Oblivious to Tavon's thoughts, Yoshi groaned. "You have got to be kidding me."

Tavon sighed as his lover started picking up the tattered remains of his clothing. Looking away from Yoshi's naked body, he picked up the phone. "Yeah?"

"Tavon, it's me."

Tavon's heart thundered at the sound of the familiar voice. "Kayla?"

Yoshi stopped grumbling and made his way to Tavon's side. Tavon appreciated the support. He kissed Yoshi's hand as the other man joined him and then focused on the phone call. Kayla's call meant something terrible was going on. "Tavon," Kayla said, "there's no time to explain. Things are really bad here. You have to come."

"Why? What happened?"

Kayla didn't get a chance to reply. The phone went dead. Tavon didn't even pay it any heed. He was already focusing on something else. He felt several presences approaching. Even from the distance, he could almost smell their anger, their hostility, their desire for power. Tavon concentrated his senses, trying to find out how many they were. The lion inside him stirred, the ancient power responding to his call. Fuck. There were over forty people, all shifters, closing in on them fast.

Their hideout was a small house in the Shiretoko National Park in the Japanese district of Hokkaido. Yoshi had arranged for them to have a short stay here through some human contacts—or, rather, through the use of his significant powers of seduction. Tavon had scouted the area and declared it safe. Apparently, he'd been mistaken.

On cue, screams started sounding outside. Tavon had taken precautions, and his traps were well disguised in the grass. Still, he couldn't expect them to keep the assassins back for a long time.

Yoshi's eyes went wide. "How did they know to find us here?" Yoshi asked, voice trembling.

Tavon didn't have an answer. He crossed the room and sneaked a peak outside the window. The muted sound of a gunshot followed, and Tavon retreated. The projectile shattered the window mere seconds later, sweeping by the spot where his throat had been.

Yoshi cursed, and Tavon turned toward him. Everything he felt for the other man turned into one single priority. Yoshi needed to stay safe.

Tavon crossed the distance between them and pressed a kiss to Yoshi's lips. "Get to Rook Valley. Help Kayla. We can't let the bloodlines emerge."

Yoshi's eyes filled with tears, and he shook his head. "No, Tavon. I can't leave you."

"You can, and you will. You're stealthier than I, and faster. You know your way around the traps, so you'll be able to escape."

Yoshi opened his mouth to protest, but Tavon silenced him with another kiss. "Promise me," Tavon murmured. "Promise me you'll go and do what's right for all of us."

His heart turned to ice in his chest even as he spoke the words. He knew he was being unfair and cruel. Kitsunes respected promises above all else. Forcing Yoshi into such a thing felt like disrespecting their relationship.

Then again, Tavon and Yoshi had never really been all that compatible. Tavon was too forceful, serious, and sworn to duty and didn't like Yoshi's seductive ways. Yoshi was playful, emotional to the extreme, and passionate, but many times, destructive and mean. Tavon swallowed around the knot in his throat. He would have liked to find a middle ground, to find their way in the labyrinth of their destinies. It seemed they wouldn't get the chance.

Predictably, Yoshi's expression darkened. "Fine. I promise."

Without another word, Yoshi's form went blurry until it disappeared entirely. Tavon felt his lover leave the room through the shattered window and sent a mental prayer to the gods to protect Yoshi.

Taking a deep breath, Tavon allowed his animal to come forward. He felt his bones shift, and then he was on four paws, the instincts of the hunt awakening. Sensing his prey approach, the lion charged.

From there on, everything became a blur. Tavon went through the assassin shifters like a knife cutting through butter. He ruthlessly tore throats apart, roaring as he tasted the blood of his enemies in his

mouth. The men tried to fight back, but courtesy of his Nemean blood, Tavon's fur protected him from bullets and knives.

Unfortunately, neither his fur nor his claws and fangs could oppose magic. Distracted and surrounded, he only felt it when it was too late. He tried to retreat, but a beam of light hit him, preventing him from making his escape. He collapsed on the floor, unable to move a muscle.

The remaining assassins backed off, leaving the way clear for another man to come forth. Smirking, the new arrival retrieved a green amulet from his pocket. "You've been a bad kitty, haven't you?" he said mockingly.

Tavon attempted to fight the spell, furious with himself for missing the greatest threat to him. He should have known the assassins had been just a way to keep him busy, distracted, and vulnerable to the magic. Now he'd been caught. He didn't have a chance. The man laughed once more, and the amulet sent another ray straight toward Tavon. It was the last thing Tavon saw before everything went black.

* * * *

Darkness surrounded Tavon when he awoke. His head throbbed, and he groaned, reaching up to massage his temples. As he did so, flashes of his capture passed through his mind. The assassins, then the man with the amulet trapping him. Tavon experimentally moved his hands and legs and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized he was no longer under the mysterious spell.

It didn't take long for him to understand that, even free of the enchantment, he still found himself in quite a predicament. His feline eyes took in his surroundings, and he identified it as a cage of sorts. He detected some immobile forms in the room, bodies of other prisoners similarly trapped. He could tell they were all alive although they seemed unconscious.

A peculiar pull drew his attention to his right. There, in a small cage, a beautiful young man lay draped over the bottom of the atrocious thing in an uncomfortable position. Blood matted his honeyed brown hair, and his arm seemed to be stuck in an awkward, unnatural angle.

Tavon avidly took in every detail of the young man's face and body. He was naked, save for a small blanket across his groin. His athletic body showed distinct signs of bruising although they seemed to be fading. The lion stirred inside Tavon once more, and he reached out with his senses, trying to find out the identity the beautiful stranger.

Even with so many confusing scents in the air, Tavon deduced the other man was a werewolf. Normally, cat shifters didn't like werewolves much, and Tavon waited for the disgust to come. It didn't. Instead, anger and realization flowed through him at the knowledge that this was one of the Rook Valley shifters, and he'd been hurt because of Tavon's inability to get his priorities right.

The werewolf briefly cracked his eyes open, and their gazes met. Tavon was struck speechless when, in spite of everything, the young man offered him a small smile. The stranger's expression turned more serious, realization and dark fear making him pale. He let out a choked sound and tried to reach for Tavon. Of course, it was useless. They were both caged and injured. The werewolf hissed as his motions jostled his wounded arm.

"You shouldn't be moving around," Tavon whispered. "They did quite a number on you."

The werewolf shook his head. He clung to the bars in an obvious attempt to pry them open but recoiled seconds later, cursing. "Fuck. It's silver."

That didn't surprise Tavon one bit. "Yeah. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"I suppose," the young man absently replied. He chewed on his lip and moved his neck from side to side. "What are we going to do?"

“They have to come take us out of here sooner or later. We’ll escape then.” With the young werewolf awake, he could break them both out.

The werewolf blinked at him dazedly. “Oh. I...” He paused, lowering himself back on the bottom of the cage. “Please,” the werewolf murmured. “Help them. Help my family.”

The promise slipped from his lips before Tavon could stop it. “I will,” Tavon said. He didn’t even know if he could keep it. He didn’t know how he’d identify the werewolf’s kin, and he didn’t like the hopelessness in the other man’s voice.

Unfortunately, he didn’t get the chance to find out more about the handsome stranger. The werewolf stilled on the floor of the cage, unconscious once again. Damn it. Tavon had hoped to be able to get them both out of here, but with the young man out of it, he didn’t have a chance.

Tavon cursed to himself and looked away from the beautiful werewolf. He shouldn’t even be worrying about that. He was trapped in this place, not knowing how to stop the assassins. He didn’t even know if Yoshi had managed to leave Sapporo in one piece. He wanted to kick himself for even looking at another man with his lover out there in danger or even dead. Not that the young werewolf was in a good condition. Fuck.

Tavon took a deep breath. He needed a clear head to get out of here. Ignoring the desire to glance back toward the young man’s cage, Tavon tested the bars of his own tiny prison with a claw. Because of his Nemean heritage, he could probably break through them, even if they were silver. However, that would cause quite a racket, alert the assassins, and therefore defeat the entire purpose of such an attempt. The man with the amulet was most likely here. Getting out of the cage would be useless if he ended up trapped by a spell once again.

As Tavon contemplated possible ways to escape, footsteps sounded somewhere outside the room. He moved to the middle of the cage and closed his eyes, pretending to be unconscious. Tavon

watched through cracked eyelids as men filled the room, surrounding them and then opening the various cages. A few assassins retrieved a large white wolf and a russet snake, shifters who'd been severely injured. Two women received the same treatment. One of them hissed at the assassins as they reached for her, earning herself several hits for her trouble. She fought them and scratched at their faces, but the men were relentless. They trapped her as well and took her out.

Others grabbed the beautiful youth and another who seemed to resemble Tavon's werewolf. Gods, Tavon really needed to stop thinking about the young man as his. There were more important issues to solve—such as the men now surrounding his cage.

Tavon continued to play dead and allowed the men to get him out of the cage, not protesting in the slightest, even when they touched the most intimate parts of his body. "Be careful with that one," someone said. "I heard he killed twenty of us in Hokkaido."

"Fucker," another grumbled. The man's hands tightened painfully around Tavon's arm. "I can't wait to watch you die."

Tavon couldn't wait any longer. If he wanted to make his escape, it would have to be now. The assassin group was divided among all the prisoners and not paying any real attention to him.

With a mere thought, Tavon shifted into his animal form, knocking his guards down with his weight. Before the men could even realize what was going on, he slashed through their flesh, giving them no time to recover. Shouts and curses sounded around him, assassins gathering to stop him. And again Tavon felt the approaching magic, threatening to catch him here.

An angry howl molded with the assassins' cries, and Tavon turned, only to realize the young man had at some point recovered and shifted into a gray wolf. He fought back the snake shifters with surprising skill and strength. But there were too many of the accursed serpents, and the man with the amulet was coming closer and closer.

He could almost hear the werewolf speak to him, urging him to go. Tavon fled. What else could he do? He'd have to find and destroy

that amulet, but until then, staying to fight was out of the question. He passed through a countless number of guards, killing some, injuring others. He didn't know the way out, but he followed his instincts, and they served him well. Soon, he came to a door shrouded in darkness, and he burst outside, assassins still hot on his heels.

The place that served as his prison seemed to be some sort of warehouse built in the mountains. The moon shone lonesome on the night sky, sending cool rays of light over the cliffs. He'd never been one to suffer from the call of the moon, but on this particular night, he followed its beams. He soon found a way down, climbing across the rocks and down the steep mountainside.

The damned assassins followed, always on his trail. He was forced to go farther and farther down, the threat of the magic making him tense and frustrated. Everything inside him screamed to go back, but Tavon leashed his animal part and pushed forward. Being captured once again would help no one.

By the time he left his pursuers behind, Tavon felt exhausted. Every muscle of his body hurt. Even if his fur acted like a sort of bulletproof vest, the impact of the projectiles and the force behind each blow had still left him bruised and battered. Worse, using the power of the bloodlines always drained him. His body could not withstand the pressure of being so abused. He felt dizzy, and he feared that he would collapse right then and there. Gods, he couldn't give up. He needed to get his act straight, recover, then go back to defeat the snake shifters and free his werewolf.

In this form, he could see, feel, and acknowledge the reality of his bond with the young man even more clearly. The heavy weight of human remorse didn't leave him for one moment, though. The lion ached for Yoshi, but at the same time wanted to claim the werewolf. It was so difficult, and Tavon couldn't help an undignified whimper at the thought of both his mates injured, missing, or worse.

Feeling weak and pathetic, Tavon collapsed on the hard, cold ground. Minutes passed, although to Tavon, they seemed like hours.

He heard water running nearby, and he got up, making his way in the direction of the sound on wobbly paws. He finally found a small stream and went to lap a bit of water.

The liquid almost seemed magical, dulling his pains and strengthening his body. Tavon looked up from the stream and prepared himself to go back up the cliffs. He'd wasted enough time. He couldn't wait anymore.

The feel of a familiar presence froze him in his tracks. "Tav? Tav, is that you?"

Under Tavon's shocked eyes, Yoshi's slender form emerged from the bushes. Yoshi quickly made his way to Tavon and knelt by his side, burying his face in Tavon's mane. "Gods, Tav, I thought I'd lost you."

Tavon immediately shifted and wrapped his arms around Yoshi. "Yosh...I was so worried."

Yoshi sniffed a little then broke away from the embrace, wiping his eyes. "I can't believe this. What happened?"

"The assassins trapped me using magic," Tavon replied. "There are other people up there in the base—prisoners."

His cousin joined them by the stream, but Tavon didn't look away from Yoshi. "We know," Kayla said. "We followed them here from Rook Valley. We had no idea they'd taken you here as well."

Tavon nodded and got up. Yoshi's presence gave him strength. "We have to go back and save them."

"It might be too late," Kayla said glumly.

"It won't," Tavon replied. He refused to believe that. He wouldn't let it happen.

* * * *

Yoshi followed behind Tavon as they moved up the mountain, heading toward the assassins' base. Something was off about Tavon. Yoshi couldn't quite put his finger on it. He worried his lip as he

watched Tavon climb back onto the cliff and cursed to himself. Had the damn snakes hurt him so badly? Yoshi would give them a lesson they'd never forget.

Yoshi fingered the strap of the bag he carried. Ironically, the assassin base was very close to Rook Valley and when Kayla had found it, he'd come here prepared for revenge. The knapsack was full of explosives, and Yoshi planned to make this mountain blow up and collapse over the damned snakes. They'd pay for hurting Tavon.

Tavon led them up on a path that held absolutely no resemblance to an actual trail. They didn't have any real trouble, but it was quite a climb. Tavon explained that the snakes had followed him a long way down, and they'd given up maybe a half hour before he'd crossed paths with Yoshi and Kayla. Still, that made for half an hour's head start. Many things could happen in that time frame.

As if confirming Yoshi's doubt, a loud roar suddenly sounded just as they reached the warehouse. Yoshi shared a knowing look with Kayla. They were, indeed, too late.

Cursing, Tavon charged forward, and Yoshi followed, not understanding his lover's behavior. The way was clear, the corridor littered with bodies, evidence of Tavon's escape. Even in these circumstances, Yoshi couldn't help but feel proud of Tavon's strength.

Not that he could focus too much on that. The building started to shake, deafening screeches and howls echoing through the hallways. They used the atrocious sounds as guides and soon reached their destination, a large, cavernous chamber dominated by four monstrous figures. Even from his hidden spot in the corridor, Yoshi recognized them with ease. The Hydra, the huge spider Arachnae, the monstrous canines Orthrus and Cerberus. Above them, two harpies were flying.

Yoshi tasted fear in his mouth. This was what they'd been trying to avoid all this time. The mythological beings now in front of them were the ancestors of the now-existing races of shifters, and their latent power passed down to certain families each generation, the so-

called bloodline heirs. As long as this power remained dormant, it wouldn't be a problem, but too many tried to harness and contain it for their own goals. It seemed like the snake assassins had finally succeeded.

"Gods..." Tavon murmured. He was looking straight at Orthrus, his body as tense as a bowstring. Seconds later, he seemed to make a decision. He abandoned the corridor and rushed straight toward the room. Yoshi lunged after Tavon and forcibly held him back. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you want to get yourself killed?"

"We have to stop this," Tavon replied, eyes blazing with anger and pain. Yoshi wondered about that last emotion but guessed it could have something to do with Tavon failing in his duty. The man had such a severe sense of justice and responsibility it amazed Yoshi.

"You can't stop it, Tav," Yoshi said. "They're gone." Yoshi understood how the magical worked and knew that no mortal mind could withstand the assault of something so powerful. The beasts possessing the bodies of the bloodline heirs had consumed them whole.

"He can't be gone," Tavon snapped back. "We have to save him."

The reply confused the hell out of Yoshi. Save whom? What was Tavon talking about?

"Tavon, we have to blow this place up," Kayla whispered. "We can't let these things survive."

For a second, Tavon remained silent. Then he took a deep breath and looked back toward the room. "Go," he said almost inaudibly. "Set the explosives, and detonate them as soon as you get out. I'll follow you as soon as I can."

Yoshi gaped at him. "Tavon, you can't be serious."

"I assure you I'm not joking," Tavon answered.

"But Tav, this is suicidal. I'm not leaving you behind again. Don't make me do it. I beg of you."

Tavon turned to look at him. Their eyes met, and this time the sorrow in that blue gaze hit Yoshi hard. "Please, Yosh," Tavon murmured. "For me."

Yoshi couldn't find it in himself to protest. He didn't understand anything anymore. Half of him just wanted to knock Tavon out, but his heart clenched at the mere thought of doing so. Gods, he was so useless.

"I promise you I'll get out of here alive."

Taking a deep breath, Yoshi nodded. Tavon knew how much a promise meant to the kitsune. He would keep his word.

Thankfully, the creatures seemed too busy with slaughtering the assassins to notice them and missed their little debate. Focusing his powers, Yoshi rolled a few bombs inside the room, disguising them with a carefully engineered illusion. With a final glance toward Tavon, he made his way back the way they'd come, occasionally abandoning some bombs on other corridors.

Finally, he exited the warehouse, Kayla right behind him. His hand trembled as he retrieved the detonator. "Do you want me to do it?" Kayla murmured.

Yoshi shook his head. "He'll get out. He promised."

With no further hesitation, Yoshi pressed the button on the detonator and watched as explosions shook the warehouse.

* * * *

Tavon hated himself for yet again pushing Yoshi away. He leaned against the wall, his heart torn apart. He'd immediately known the beautiful young man from before had now turned into Orthrus. It hurt him deep inside. He remembered the sound of that sweet voice, the way those eyes briefly held his, the trust in those final words. He'd let his werewolf down.

Yoshi had a point. With the werewolf morphing into Orthrus, it was unlikely that he could be saved. The monstrous hellhound had

taken over, pushing back the soul and mind of its host. Something inside of Tavon didn't let him give up, though. It was as if a mysterious bond called out to him, keeping him rooted in place. He couldn't leave again. He'd fled like a coward once. He refused to do so now.

The creatures inside seemed to be having the time of their lives slaying the assassins. Tavon began to lose hope, but then, all of a sudden, a loud screech sounded above him. The beasts froze in place, and the air started to clear. Tavon tried to figure out what was going on. He watched with shocked eyes as the harpies attacked the man with the amulet, tearing him apart with their sharp talons. Finally, after tossing their victim's heart to Cerberus, they abandoned the ravaged body and flew to the other side of the room, landing in front a tall, dark-skinned man. Tavon had caught brief glances of the man before, but he couldn't be sure as to his identity. The man started speaking to the harpies, and even from the distance, Tavon managed to catch a few words.

"How is this possible?" the stranger asked.

"Did you think the connection of the bloodlines didn't have any effect on the actual heirs?" a female voice—probably one of the harpies—replied. "We can speak to each other, even to our more beastly siblings."

"What do you mean? They'll obey you?"

"They have their own minds and wills, so it's not about obeying. Rather, it's more about reaching out to the reasonable part of them," the woman said. "Not to worry. You'll find out our reasons soon enough. For now, it's sufficient to say that we still have use for you. Destroying the bodies and minds of our hosts would be counterproductive in the long run."

The beasts melted into people once again, and Tavon's eyes widened as he watched the two-headed canine monster shift into his werewolf. As each of the creatures morphed into a human form once

again, they fell to the ground. They looked weak, but otherwise alright.

Joy and relief swamped Tavon's soul, only to be replaced by terror. He'd told Yoshi to bring down the assassins' base. Fuck. This was all wrong. He needed to stop Yoshi from detonating the bombs.

Just as he thought this, a powerful shock wave swept through the building, tens of blasts threatening to bring it down. One of the bombs had somehow reached the ritual pool, and when it went off, hot, bright fire started engulfing the room, swallowing every inch of space at an unnatural pace.

Tavon immediately knew what he had to do. He shifted into lion form and slipped inside the room, heading straight for his werewolf. Around him, the walls began to crumble, and the survivors of the ordeal made a run for it. A couple of snake shifters took a corridor to the other side of the room. One harpy flew away, taking an unconscious woman with her. The man who'd spoken before shifted into a large, black wolf, most likely intending to attempt a rescue. The young man was farthest away, though. They'd never get to him in time. It would be up to Tavon.

As if confirming Tavon's thoughts, an avalanche of rock engulfed the beautiful youth and then the black wolf. The fire seemed to move faster and faster. Tavon bounded through the room, ignoring the heat. He slipped through the flames just in time before an impenetrable wall of blaze separated this side of the room from the other.

Tavon started digging through the rocks, acutely aware of every passing second. As he pushed the rubble out of the way, he shifted into human form. His hand touched soft fur, and he rushed to remove the rest of the stones until finally he pulled out the familiar gray wolf. It worried Tavon that the young man had shifted. It meant that he'd been injured quite severely, maybe even that his life was at risk.

Sheltering the wolf against his chest, Tavon hastened out, taking the same corridor the assassins had used earlier. Behind him, fire engulfed the entire room, wiping away all traces of the demonic ritual

that had taken place. It seemed to take forever, but he found his way out, exiting the warehouse through a side door he hadn't originally seen.

Sniffing the air, Tavon focused on finding Yoshi. Both his lover and Kayla had amazing stealth abilities, and oftentimes, Yoshi stalked Tavon, trying to take him by surprise. It never worked. Even if Yoshi attempted to disguise his scent, Tavon would know it anywhere—just like he'd know the little werewolf. Gods, this was so confusing.

He followed his nose to a rocky outcropping that seemed perfectly innocent. As he approached, the façade melted, revealing Yoshi standing by Kayla's side. "You kept your promise," Yoshi said. Belying his matter-of-fact tone, Yoshi's eyes shone with tears.

Tavon couldn't help a smile. "Of course I did, Yosh. Of course I did."

* * * *

As Tavon approached, Yoshi buried his nails in his palms and took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. The relief that swamped him at seeing Tavon out of the building almost brought him to his knees. With Tavon, he could allow himself to be weak, but not in front of Kayla.

His senses were suddenly assaulted by a passion like no other. He wanted to jump his lover right then and there, to ask Tavon to take him. His entire body burned with lust. He wanted to fuck and be fucked, preferably at the same time.

Kitsunes were, by nature, sensual and passionate creatures. In consequence, Yoshi always had an insatiable libido. Still, this felt unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Yoshi wanted to blame it on the near-death situation, but somehow, he knew there was more to it than that.

Just as he thought this, Yoshi realized Tavon carried something large in his arms, something that looked suspiciously like a gray wolf.

He recoiled, the sight of the wolf making his instincts rouse and hiss angrily. "What are you doing with that dog?" he snarled at Tavon.

"He's not a dog," Tavon replied calmly. "He's a werewolf."

A werewolf? What the hell? "That's even worse. Was he one of the bloodline heirs?"

Tavon remained silent, but that in itself constituted a reply. "You can't be serious," he growled. "Which one?"

"Orthrus," Tavon said in a barely audible tone. He set the wolf down, passing his hand though the gray coat.

Yoshi opened his mouth to say something else but found that he could not. He forgot what he'd wanted to say, wondering if that fur was as soft as it looked. As his mind processed the thought, he cursed and took a step back. What the hell?

He watched in stricken silence as the gray wolf shifted into a beautiful young man. Yoshi's gaze swept over the youth's naked body. He caught himself and looked away, anger warring with arousal inside him. He would never be aroused by a filthy werewolf mongrel. Yoshi took in Tavon's expression and found the answer to his dilemma. Tavon seemed to be completely entranced with the werewolf. He went so far as to caress the mongrel's cheek. "So beautiful," Tavon murmured. "So very beautiful."

Of course! Yoshi's body was reacting to Tavon's arousal. It made so much sense now. A sense of betrayal invaded Yoshi's body, and he felt his claws emerge. In a fair physical fight, he didn't have a chance against Tavon, but he had many tricks up his sleeve. He didn't appreciate being pushed aside for one accursed werewolf.

As if guessing Yoshi's thoughts, Tavon glanced up toward him. "Yosh," Tavon murmured softly. "I...don't understand."

Yoshi's anger flared at the tormented look in his lover's eyes. Damn werewolf. This was his fault. "We should get him to his family," he replied, unable to keep the chill from his voice.

Kayla cleared her throat. "You might want to put something on first."

Tavon nodded and got up with a sigh. Kayla offered him a pair of track pants, Yoshi's own clothes. On Tavon, they looked obscenely tight, but they did cover Tavon's enticing nakedness. Of course, given that they molded against Tavon's body like a second skin, it wasn't that big of a change.

Yoshi took advantage of Tavon's absence and knelt next to the naked werewolf. As he took in those beautiful features, their differences became unimportant. Yoshi passed a finger over the werewolf's lips, marveling at how soft they were. Somehow, the young man must have felt Yoshi, because he cracked his eyes open. A small smile graced his lips, and a pink tongue flicked at Yoshi's thumb.

Yoshi's heart pounded, and he forgot about his every concern and question. "It's okay," he whispered softly. "You don't need to be afraid anymore."

The young man gasped and reached out to him. Yoshi went to him, a force more powerful than his own will urging him forward. He pressed his mouth to the werewolf's, and those warm lips yielded to his domination. Yoshi's soul called out to the other man's spirit, and in a peculiar way, both of them seemed to strengthen. Yoshi broke the kiss and took in the decadent sight of the young man's swollen lips. The words slipped out of Yoshi's mouth before he could stop them. "I want to consume you."

It was only then that Yoshi realized the irrationality of his actions. He felt Tavon's eyes watching him and his shock at Yoshi's behavior. Frustratingly, he could also sense Tavon's arousal. Yoshi pushed the werewolf away, his thoughts a blur of fear, desire, and confusion.

If this had happened in different circumstances, Yoshi wouldn't have hesitated to claim the young man. Not even the young man's nature could deter Yoshi, not with such a powerful pull. But kitsunes dedicated their entire existence to one mate, and Yoshi had always known that Tavon was *it* for him. He'd promised himself to Tavon—and now he betrayed Tavon with this stranger.

No. That couldn't be it. It was the mongrel, trying to separate him from Tavon. Well, he wouldn't succeed.

Turning to Tavon, Yoshi gave his lover a cold look. "Take him. I don't want to see him ever again."

Thankfully, Tavon didn't comment. He lifted the werewolf's body and held the young man against his chest. Tavon walked away, and Yoshi felt a pang of regret at losing sight of the two of them. Immediately, it turned to pain, and he collapsed to his knees on the cold rock.

Yoshi buried his face in his hands and suppressed a whimper. Regret was deadly for a kitsune but also very rare. Tavon would soon return. That much Yoshi knew. Then why did Yoshi's heart hurt like this? How could he feel so much for someone who wasn't his Tavon?

Chapter Two

Three months later

Lions are the only cats that live in groups, which are called prides. Prides are family units that may include up to three males, a dozen or so females, and their young. All of a pride's lionesses are related, and female cubs typically stay with the group as they age. Young males eventually leave and establish their own prides by taking over a group headed by another male.

Only male lions boast manes, the impressive fringe of long hair that encircles their heads. Males defend the pride's territory, which may include some 100 square miles (259 square kilometers) of grasslands, scrub, or open woodlands. These intimidating animals mark the area with urine, roar menacingly to warn intruders, and chase off animals that encroach on their turf.

Loren blindly stared at the screen, his ears hearing the information but his mind not processing it. In all actuality, he could only focus on the image of the magnificent African lion, on the deadly grace of its motions. It was the one thing that connected him to the distant recollection of the man he'd met that fateful night a few months back, other than a couple of confusing dreams.

He'd had such high hopes for the future. When he'd come of age the autumn past, he'd submitted a request to leave Rook Valley to study at a preeminent human university, along with his littermates, Jared and Maya. Sasha Petrovic, the previous Alpha, had kept the

pups of the pack from leaving the Valley, but their new leader, Viktor, had agreed to let them go.

Loren had hoped to find his mate there, away from the often-frustrating Rook Valley. At school, he'd been too afraid of his pack to explore his sexuality. He hadn't been sure what he wanted because he seemed to be attracted to both males and females. How would he ever find that one person meant for him?

And then it happened, the kidnapping and the awakening of the beast inside him. After that, Viktor understandably forbade them to leave. Loren didn't mind. After all, he'd seen his mate there. It would be just a matter of time until the man returned. Or so he'd thought. After three months, it looked as if he'd been seriously wrong.

Loren rubbed his chest, wishing the motion would ease the acute pain in his heart. It seemed to him that the only way to find one's mate was by either growing up together—like some people in the pack—or becoming involved in an attack—like Flame and Viktor. They'd found their respective mates, Lysander and Kaiden, in the most peculiar way.

A knock at the door startled him from his musings. Loren jumped, turned to the door, and dropped the book that had been on his lap. He cursed, now remembering he was supposed to be doing research on their "beastly" problem.

Muttering imprecations under his breath, Loren padded to the door. He already knew the identity of his visitors. He could sense his littermates waiting impatiently outside his room. Loren sighed in irritation. They meant well, of course, but sometimes, he just needed to be alone.

Loren cracked the door open, unwilling to let his siblings inside. "Yes?"

"Hey, bro," Jared greeted him. "Are you done with the book? We were thinking of going for a run."

Maya nodded enthusiastically. "We all need some fresh air. Flame is coming, too. What do you say?"

Loren hesitated. He wanted to go with his brothers, but when he shifted, he felt the uncertainty and the pain more acutely than ever. “Another time, maybe,” he replied.

Anger flashed in Jared’s eyes. Before Loren knew it, Jared had forced the door open, pushing him back. Maya followed and slipped inside the room. Loren felt himself flush as his sister grimaced. His room was a mess. Usually, he kept everything in perfect order, but with so much on his mind, he’d slacked off. Papers and books littered the floor, and the laptop was running, a research document on Greek mythology popping up on the screen as it went out of standby. The voice of the narrator in the lion documentary filled the room with a dramatic account of the magnificent animal’s attributes.

“Dude, when was the last time you let some air inside this place?” Jared snapped.

Maya retrieved the remote control and turned off the television. “This is unhealthy. You can’t go on like this.”

Loren crossed his arms against his chest and glared. Fury clouded his mind, the exhaustion, impotence, and self-loathing too much for him to bear. “I can do whatever I damn well please. Don’t think you understand me, because you don’t.”

Maya winced but didn’t back down. “You’ve been like this since that time on the mountain. We know it was traumatic, but you have to let us help.”

Loren deflated at the affection in her tone. “You can’t help me. No one can.”

How could he explain what he knew for a fact? All his life he’d dreamt about the day when he’d find his mate. That day had come and gone, and his mate had abandoned him. Loren was cursed, and the other half of his soul, the beautiful lion who’d saved him, knew it.

Loren shook his head at his brother and sister. “Please, just...leave me alone. I need to be alone.”

Maya and Jared glanced at each other, obviously reluctant to leave. “Alright,” Maya said. “But we’re here for you.”

Jared squeezed his shoulder. "Whenever you're ready, brother, you come to us."

Loren nodded and ushered them out the door. He had no intention of taking them up on their offer. He loved his family, but with this, they could not help.

He retrieved the remote control and turned the television on once again. The National Geographic documentary continued to explain facts about lions in the wild. Loren looked at the images until he couldn't do so anymore. They seemed to shift, melting in front of his eyes, the silhouettes of the lions turning into something else. He was losing his mind.

Everything confused him so much. He couldn't sleep at night, restless dreams torturing his tired mind. Every time, he saw a magnificent lion coming toward him, large paws hitting the ground silently, fangs glinting in the moonlight. He stared at the beautiful mane that seemed to boast thousand of nuances of gold and brown until, as if by magic, it vanished. The lion's body disappeared, replaced by the naked form of a blond man, just as handsome and amazing as the powerful feline. The man would come to Loren and wrap his arms around him, whispering softly in Loren's ear, "You're so beautiful."

Their lips would meet, but when the kiss broke, Loren's lion was no longer there. A slim, sensual youth licked his lips, giving Loren a predatory look. The man would flip long, silvery-gray hair over his shoulder and say, "I want to consume you."

Then the mysterious stranger would disappear and Loren would wake up, as frustrated and desperate as usual. The youth's words should have scared him, but they didn't. Every time, they left him hard, aching for release. He'd take himself in hand and give his dick a few tugs. Seconds later, he would find unsatisfying release, always feeling cheap, lonely, and lost.

Loren couldn't take it anymore. The remote control burned in his hand, and he tossed it straight at the television. It connected with the

LCD screen, effectively eliminating the images of the proud lions that tortured Loren so.

He heard footsteps rush over the stairs and knew his siblings had heard him destroy the television. Worse, he thought he even heard Viktor's powerful voice ask something. The last thing Loren needed right now was nagging and preaching.

Cursing under his breath, he grabbed his sneakers and a put on a T-shirt. He couldn't face them, but he did admit that Maya was right. He needed to clear his head a bit, distance himself from this tortured mess he called a life.

In a few efficient motions, he saved his progress on the laptop and shut it down. Then he went to the window, opened it, and jumped outside. He landed on his feet in their backyard and rushed to the front of the house. He didn't have a lot of time to make his escape.

Predictably, Viktor had parked his trademark bike next to their garage. In spite of being the bookish one in the family, Loren held a secret admiration for motorcycles. He'd even managed to get Jared to teach him how to ride one. It would be very disrespectful to steal the Alpha's bike, but he didn't have time to get Jared's. Even outside, he felt as if he couldn't get enough air. He itched to run away, to be alone, to find some sort of solution, to understand, or at least to forget.

Renewed decision burning through him, Loren made his way to Viktor's bike. He'd get in trouble, he just knew it, but right then and there, he couldn't care less. The keys weren't in the ignition, but Loren didn't have too much trouble hotwiring the vehicle. It was amazing what one could learn from random Googling.

Still, by the time he started the bike, Viktor, Jared, Maya, and Flame were already out of the house and closing in fast. Looking away from his family, Loren started the bike and drove away in a whirlwind of dust.

It was still early morning, and Saturday kept traffic clear and people at home in their beds and next to their loved ones. Memories flooded Loren as he drove. They'd chosen this exact same road a

month back, fleeing their home after the assassins broke in. He saw the turn to Viktor's house straight ahead but didn't take it. Instead, he continued onward, on the path toward the forest.

Lost in his thoughts, he made good time and reached his destination faster than he'd expected. He abandoned the bike behind a tall birch tree and slipped inside the silent wood. The air smelled like autumn, the rustling of the leaves reminding him that soon their birthday would come. Another year passed him by, only this one seemed destined to curse him, doom him to lifelong loneliness. He walked through the familiar bushes, onto the unmarked trail that led to the caves. From there, he walked up to the mountain. The flashes of recollection came clearer now. He remembered fighting by his brother's side, being immobilized and trapped in an SUV, then losing consciousness and waking up in a high-security base.

Loren bit his lip, considering the benefits of going up the mountain. He'd been retracing his steps back here for a month now. Paradoxically, the traumatic memories of turning into Orthrus mingled with those of meeting his mate. Loren hated the assassins for polluting their first encounter. He didn't think he could stomach reliving it.

Loren sat on the grass, his legs feeling unstable. His body ached to shift into a wolf, but he knew it would hurt too much. God, he just wanted answers. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, to just enjoy the feel of the wind sweeping through his hair. It didn't work, not that he expected it to. He almost couldn't remember when he'd last been carefree, when he'd genuinely smiled.

Loren felt tears burn at the edges of his eyes and hated himself for falling into self-pity. No wonder his mate didn't want him. He was a werewolf. He should have been strong, not a wimp who cried himself to sleep every night. Fuck.

As Loren fumed, a sudden feeling of being watched invaded him. The forest stopped seeming so silent and empty. A low giggle sounded to his right. Loren lifted his head and looked around, but

nothing was there. Whispers surrounded him, and he shot to his feet, alarmed.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

He received no reply. As the wind blew, a familiar scent invaded Loren’s nostrils. Loren froze, instantly identifying it as the distinctive feel of his mate. And yet, something wasn’t quite right. First of all, this didn’t feel like the same scent Loren remembered from his brief moments with the lion, back when they’d been trapped together in the assassins’ cages. He did recognize it, and the voice from his dream echoed through his mind. “I want to consume you.” What in the world?

The peculiarity of the situation made Loren even more distressed. To complicate things further, a growl replaced the giggling—vicious, full of malice. Suddenly, the two-headed beast that inhabited Loren’s nightmares stepped into the light.

Orthrus looked as hideous as Loren remembered. Of course, Loren had never seen himself as the monstrous canine, but he’d faced it in the realm of his mind when it had imprisoned him and taken over his body. Loren froze, terror rendering his every muscle immobile. This couldn’t be happening. It had to be another nightmare.

Before Loren could even try to figure out what was going on, the hell-hound charged. Loren didn’t move, hypnotized by Orthrus’s ferocious gaze. It bounded toward Loren like a flash of burning darkness, and in that moment, Loren would have liked nothing more than to let it devour his flesh.

For the first time in many weeks, Loren’s human body yielded to the wolf. Loren landed on all fours on the grass and stared at his opponent. He took a step forward, and Orthrus stopped running. The terror inside Loren melted, and he no longer felt hostility come from the canine. Loren saw his chance and attacked.

It was nothing like the night Orthrus had awoken inside him. This beast seemed different, hesitant. And then Loren’s eyes cleared, and the illusion of the hell-hound vanished, and a fox appeared in its

stead. *Mine*, Loren's wolf growled. He increased his speed and pounced, pushing the fox down with his weight. It—no, he—let out a whimpering sound and tilted his head in submission.

Loren had never been particularly dominant, but he found that the fox's behavior awoke latent instincts inside him. He bared his fangs, holding his fox captive under his larger bulk. His mate would never leave him again. He'd make sure of it.

A low curse drew his attention from his fox. Loren lifted his eyes to see the familiar form of a tall, blond man coming toward him. The lion. His lion. The wolf felt suddenly pulled in two directions, and his human mind struggled to understand. Confusion and uncertainty slammed his possessiveness back, and Loren faltered. His hesitation broke his hold over the fox, and sharply-clawed paws pushed him away with surprising determination.

As Loren stood there, frozen, the fox shifted into a naked man, the same one Loren kept seeing in his dream. Loren couldn't hold on to his wolf and changed forms as well. "What's going on?" he asked, glancing at the fox shifter.

"You tell me," the other man snapped. "You have to undo it. Undo the spell."

"Spell?" Loren repeated in confusion. "What spell?"

"What you did to me and Tavon. There's no other explanation."

The lion—Tavon, apparently—walked to them and took off his jacket, then wrapped it around the fox shifter's shoulders. The tenderness of the gesture just about broke Loren's heart. "Yosh, I told you to calm down," Tavon whispered.

"Calm down? How can I calm down? This mongrel is doing something to you, to me. He's trying to break us apart."

Loren felt like he'd been slapped. Mongrel? How could his mate say that? Mates were supposed to be loving, caring to each other. And what the hell was Loren thinking? The lion was his mate, right?

"Please," he said, hating the choked tone in his voice. "Tell me what's happening to me."

Tavon turned to him and sighed. “Hello, Loren. We’ve never been officially introduced. I’m Tavon, and this is Yoshi.”

“His lover,” the fox shifter helpfully supplied.

Loren felt himself pale. He remembered Tavon’s soft caresses and gentle words from that accursed night. It hadn’t been all a dream—of that he could be certain. No wonder Yoshi wanted revenge. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, not knowing what else to say. “I didn’t know.”

He felt cold inside, his heart broken into pieces and scattered in the autumn wind. The pull of the two men was so strong, but neither of them wanted him. Tavon kept his distance, while Yoshi just seemed outright hostile. How could he possibly have two mates and still be alone?

“We’ve been trying to figure out the source of this attraction and maybe find out if it had anything to do with Ian Montgomery’s plan,” Tavon explained. “We have nothing. We had to come find you and ask.”

Loren almost burst into tears at the thought that this whole thing could be just another of Montgomery’s tricks. He wanted to revive the damn snake shifter just to kill him once again. It made sense, though. He’d never heard of anyone having two mates—and Orthrus did have two heads. Tavon had been imprisoned as well, so he must have the same cursed family tree as Loren. He didn’t know about Yoshi, but given the display of power from before, he would bet money that Yoshi also had some of that mystical blood in his veins.

“I’ve done some research as well,” he answered weakly, “but I haven’t found anything that would even hint at this. Thinking back, Echidna, the mother of all monsters, had one mate, Typhon. Other sources do claim some of her offspring come from coupling with Orthrus, so maybe it could originate from there.”

The idea made him sick. He almost threw up thinking that his ancestry polluted not only his blood, but his mating as well.

“So it’s true, then?” Yoshi asked. “You put a spell on us.”

Just like that, Loren gave up. The two men couldn't care less about him. Well, fuck them. He hadn't asked for this. For three months, he'd waited and struggled with emotions he didn't understand. He didn't deserve these accusations. "What? No! I don't know what you're talking about."

He got up and glared at Tavon and Yoshi. "Just leave me alone. Go back to your lives, and I'll go back to mine. I have a family, people who care about me. I don't need you, and I don't care what you do."

Tavon opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Instead, the lion shifter tensed, and he gave Loren a chastising look. "Who followed you here?"

Loren shrugged. "I don't know," he replied, meeting the man's eyes dead on. After all, what did it matter? All this time, he'd been trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. All the while, his mates had been together, sleeping in the same bed, fucking, and trying to find a way to keep him from their lives. Wasn't that just great?

To top things off, Kaiden emerged from the bushes. "What do you think you're doing, Loren?"

* * * *

Yoshi watched as the slender, athletic redhead talked to Loren, completely ignoring them. "Do you have any idea how worried we've been?" the man said. "Come home this instant."

"I'm not a child, Kaiden," Loren shot back. "You can't order me around."

Yoshi remembered reading from Tavon's files that Kaiden Hearne was a snake shifter and former assassin, the bloodline heir of the Lernaean Hydra. If Tavon was to be believed—and Yoshi had no reason to doubt him—the monstrous serpent monster had awoken inside Kaiden. Yoshi cursed. He couldn't stop Kaiden from taking

Loren if the man so desired. The power of the Hydra would prevent him.

In the end, what did he care? Yoshi should just leave Rook Valley with Tavon. Loren didn't seem to know anything about the mysterious attraction. In the end, Yoshi and Tavon didn't need the werewolf. They'd been together for so long, just the two of them, for better and for worse. And yet...why couldn't he make himself believe that?

"If you don't want to be treated like a child, don't act like one," Kaiden said coolly. "You can't just run away from your problems."

"I'm not," Loren replied, now sounding strangely calm. "They're right here."

At Loren's reply, Kaiden turned peculiar, golden-black eyes toward them. Yoshi held the man's eerie gaze, suppressing a shudder. "And who are you?" Kaiden asked.

"I'm Tavon Diya, and this is Yoshi Kurosawa," Tavon said. "We're shifters and bloodline heirs like you and Loren."

Kaiden didn't look satisfied. "Uh-huh. I remember you, Diya. You were there that night. Tell me, what business do you have with Loren?"

"It's nothing, Kaiden," Loren replied with a sad smile. "We have things all sorted out. Come on. Let's go home."

"Wait," Yoshi heard himself say. "You can't just leave."

Loren sighed. "Why can't I leave?" he said. "You hate me. What's the point of staying?"

Yoshi struggled to find some sort of answer. He rubbed his temples, his ever-present migraine pounding hard against his skull. Over the past two months, Yoshi had struggled with his and Tavon's attraction to the mysterious werewolf. Their relationship had deteriorated significantly, to the point that they didn't even share a bed anymore by Yoshi's own choice.

Yoshi hadn't fed in a long time, and the hunger for emotion made him more unreasonable than ever. He'd kept it from Tavon since he

didn't want his lover to know the true extent of his addiction. Tavon knew about his spirit feeding, of course, but he didn't realize that their connection went much further than that. Without Tavon, Yoshi would slowly fade away and die. But Yoshi couldn't make himself accept Tavon's comfort, not when he'd broken the most important promise in his life—to love Tavon forever.

His strength had waned with every day that passed until he was forced to use an illusion to mask his increasingly pale complexion. The pain had faded when Loren had touched him in shifted form, asserting his dominance. But now that Loren threatened to walk away, everything returned with a vengeance. Yoshi welcomed it. He was betraying Tavon, and he deserved every ounce of that agony.

And yet, beyond that remorse, a new wave of guilt emerged. He felt Loren's sorrow as if it were his own, and his heart constricted at the knowledge that he'd been the one to cause it. He didn't know what to do, how to act around Loren and Tavon. Everything that he did or said seemed wrong.

At least Loren didn't look like he genuinely wanted to leave. In fact, his eyes had turned hopeful, shining with a bright, new light. Yoshi's stomach did a little flip. Perhaps if he got to know Loren a little better, he'd find the reason behind all this. And after all, did it matter that kitsunes only mated in pairs? There was always a first for everything.

He wanted to apologize, to admit his attraction to Loren, but something entirely different came out. "We can help," he said. "We have information on Montgomery and his plans."

Loren visibly deflated, and Yoshi's heart fell. Why the hell couldn't he get his act together? At this rate, he'd push both Tavon and Loren away.

"Oh..." Loren said. "I suppose that would be useful."

"Well, if you do have information, you have to come with us," Kaiden said, his entire demeanor screaming suspicion. "The others will want to hear about it as well."

Tavon nodded. "We'll come with you."

Kaiden gestured them back the way he'd come. "I trust you know the way through the forest."

Yoshi couldn't suppress a sigh. Yes, they knew the way. They'd been here two times now, so they'd gotten used to Rook Valley. Since that night, they'd gathered all the information available on the shifters living here and on the snake assassins who'd attacked them.

Given what he knew now, Yoshi didn't particularly like Kaiden's suggestion. Obviously, the snake shifter didn't trust them. Not that Yoshi blamed him. He didn't trust easily, either—and he felt uncomfortable with a snake walking behind him. But what could he do? He'd already fucked up enough today. He'd play by the rules and keep his mouth shut if it killed him.

By the time they reached the edge of the forest, more cars were parking next to Loren's bike. Flame, Loren's brother, got out from his Lexus and headed toward them, fuming. "I should have known you had a hand in this," he spat at Tavon. He hugged Loren closely and pulled him away. "Are you alright, little brother?"

Yoshi felt a surge of annoyance at the man's behavior, but he pushed it down, carefully keeping a straight face.

"I'm just fine," Loren replied. Breaking away from Flame, he turned toward them. "This is Tavon Diya and Yoshi Kurosawa. They said they could help with our quest."

Flame didn't look impressed, and Yoshi thought the man would refuse their offer. Thankfully, Flame's mate, Lysander, came up from behind him. "Oh? Please do tell us more."

Chapter Three

Viktor's house reminded Tavon of his own residence. It was obviously decorated for a man, but it didn't lack those homey touches that usually appeared in the homes of married couples—a pillow there, a vase here, the lived-in look. In a perverse way, the lube bottle Tavon detected amidst the couch pillows made him feel even more comfortable. At least he had something in common with these people.

Then again, given his problem with Yoshi and Loren, Tavon doubted this little thing would help him in any way. He mentally sighed. Yoshi's behavior confused him, and his attraction to Loren increased with each passing second. How could he focus on the assassins' plan with his personal life in such a state?

For some reason, once Loren started explaining his theories, those doubts faded. "I agree that someone else is behind this awakening and that someone must have known controlling the creatures would be too dangerous. I think that the goal isn't to turn us into some sort of ultimate army, but something entirely different. I just can't see what that purpose is."

"When I was captured," Tavon began, "Montgomery used a sort of amulet on me. Because of my heritage, blades and bullets affect me less, so he resorted to magic. I suspect this whole thing is connected to that amulet."

"Hmmm...I knew there was magic involved, but I never could figure out to what extent." Loren gave him a thoughtful look. "What did the amulet look like?"

"It was green, engraved with black threads, and it had several gems embedded, forming the shape of a circle," Tavon replied.

Loren followed his indications and drew a sketch of the magical item. Tavon couldn't help but feel pride swell inside him at the faithful rendering of the amulet on paper. Loren even had drawing talent. "That's very good," he said.

Loren flushed bright red at the praise. "It's nothing."

Yoshi cleared his throat and snatched the paper. "We need someone to help us with this, an expert, so to say. We think that the dragons could help us out, but we've been trying to get them to listen to us for years with no success."

"Maybe my mother would have more luck," Lysander suggested. "After all, she is a queen."

Tavon didn't know if dragons could be so easily impressed, but it was worth a try. He nodded. "Can you send word? Harpies haven't been very nice, either."

Lysander chuckled. "I imagine not, if you tried to talk to them yourself."

"As a matter of fact, I sent my cousin, but they still didn't help us out."

"Your female cousin, I take it," Lysander said. When Tavon nodded, Lysander just shrugged. "I suppose they'd know that she was an underling. They don't take kindly to that, and they don't like lions much, either."

Tavon rubbed his temples. It would seem that no one liked lions lately. "Okay, then. Contact your mother and try to get her to arrange a meeting. We can no longer afford delays."

Lysander nodded and left the room. As soon as his mate went to make the call, Flame turned angry eyes toward Tavon. "Right. Now that we have that out of the way, can you tell me what the hell you're trying to do with my brother?"

"Flame, stop this." Loren sounded tired. "Yoshi, Tavon, and I have discussed it already, and I understand the problem. As far as we can tell, it's a side effect of what happened that night."

Maya, Loren's sister, spoke for the first time, "Are you mad? How can you call your mate a side effect?"

By her words, Tavon surmised Loren hadn't told them about Yoshi. Then again, was there even something to tell? After all, Tavon had stopped them from killing each other earlier in the day. Or had he? Gods, he didn't know anymore.

"He isn't my mate," Loren replied. His voice turned clear and calm, and shockingly, it hurt more than Tavon had expected. "Neither of them is. It was all in my head." He laughed a little and rubbed his nape self-deprecatingly. "Sorry about giving you a hard time. I mean, after all, how could a werewolf be mate to a lion and a fox?"

How, indeed? Tavon had asked himself that exact same question many, many times these past months, and he'd been unable to come up with a satisfying reply. He'd thrown his doubts in Loren's face, and this was the result.

At this point, he could hardly protest Loren's words and the decision behind them. He remained straight-faced and silent, even if his insides were screaming to stop this, to apologize to Loren, to make things right.

To Tavon's surprise, it was Yoshi who vocalized his emotions. "You mean you don't want us?"

Yoshi sounded distraught, not at all like himself, and Tavon became alarmed. His lover's image seemed to flicker, and Tavon gasped, realizing he could now see through an illusion. What the fuck?

For the first time, Tavon understood Yoshi felt the loss of their relationship even more acutely than he. In Yoshi's no-longer-hooded eyes, he read the despair and grief of one who'd lost everything. He opened his mouth, trying to stop Loren from saying anything that would make things worse.

Unfortunately, Loren didn't turn to look at them. "I thought we already made that clear," he replied.

Just like that, the last of Yoshi's strength seemed to fade. Under Tavon's horrified gaze, his lover collapsed.

* * * *

Yoshi swayed, Loren's image blurring in front of him. He'd hoped that today, he would figure things out, that maybe he'd fix things with Tavon and he'd be able to survive. Who was he kidding? He didn't have any solutions. Tavon didn't love him anymore, and Loren... Yoshi had only fucked things up further with his stupidity.

Sometimes, it sucked to be a kitsune.

His knees turned to jelly, and he clutched his stomach, too exhausted to even think. Tavon cursed and caught him just before he hit the ground. Every illusion faded, even the charm that had kept him looking healthy all these weeks.

"Yosh? Gods, what are you doing to yourself?"

"I'm sorry, Tav," Yoshi murmured. "I didn't want you to know. I didn't want to use you."

He heard footsteps approach, and then Loren knelt at his side. "What's wrong with him?"

"Spirit feeding," Yoshi replied in Tavon's stead. It wasn't exactly true. More than his feeding needs, regret and remorse were killing Yoshi. He could feel them like a poison spreading through his body, and he could do nothing to stop it. He hated himself so much. Perhaps the best thing to do was to just give up and allow Tavon to live happily at Loren's side. After all, Tavon deserved someone better than a self-destructive spirit vampire.

"Fuck, Yosh, how can you keep something like this from me?"

Loren's voice trembled as he spoke. "Tavon?"

"I didn't know." Tavon sounded like he was about to cry. "I thought you were fine. How could I have missed it?"

Yoshi somehow managed to laugh. "You forget, Tav, I'm a trickster. I lie. That's my specialty."

He felt more people approach, and his brave front slipped away. He couldn't face others, not looking like this. He clung to Loren's hand, gasping, "Make them go away, Loren." He may not have had much strength left, but he still had his dignity.

To Yoshi's relief, Loren complied. "Everyone, stay back."

"But Loren, he needs help," Maya protested.

"Yes, he does," Tavon said, "and we'll give it to him."

"We should take him someplace quiet to rest," Loren said.

"Take my room," Flame offered. It distantly surprised Yoshi that the other man would consider being so helpful, taking into account the way he'd behaved toward Loren.

"Thanks, Flame. Come on, this way."

Yoshi felt himself being lifted in Tavon's strong arms. He wanted to tell his lover to just let him go, but Tavon's proximity soothed him, easing the hellish fire that coursed through him.

A warm, gentle hand caressed his cheek. "It's okay, Yoshi," Loren said. "You'll be fine." Soft lips pressed against his own. "Will you let a mongrel take care of you?"

It became very important to let Loren know how he really felt. "I didn't mean that," he whispered brokenly.

"I know, Yoshi. I know."

That was the last thing Yoshi heard before he surrendered to the darkness.

* * * *

Loren led Tavon through Viktor's house. By now, he knew his Alpha's home almost as if it were his own. In a peculiar development, Lysander had befriended Kaiden, and more often than not, they were together. Of course, wherever Lysander went, Flame followed, and sometimes, his brother dragged him, Maya, and Jared along as well.

He opened the door to Flame's room and gestured to the large bed. Usually, being here made him feel uncomfortable, if only

because he knew Flame and Lysander spent some nights here. In his darkest hours, he'd begrudged both his Alpha and his brother for finding the happiness he'd been denied. Now, though, he couldn't care less. His mind could focus only on finding a way to cure this peculiar disease that had befallen Yoshi.

"All right, start speaking, Tavon. How do we help him?"

Tavon passed a hand through his hair in agitation. "Kitsunes feed from their lovers' emotions, mostly during sex. It alimnts their power and fuels their magic."

"A lot like mythological kitsunes."

Tavon nodded. "But we haven't been together in over a month now," he continued. "After we met you, we just..." He paused, as if not finding his words. "We distanced."

Loren's breath caught. "So it's my fault."

"There isn't a guilty party here. Yoshi hid his needs from me, something he's never done before." Tavon seemed to be struggling to speak now. "I suspect there's more to it than what he told us. He kissed you that night when we first met. He's attracted to you, I know that for a fact. But he and I are bonded, promised to each other."

Loren's eyes widened as understanding struck. "That's why he acted like that. He feels guilty. He regrets. Oh, God, Tavon. This can kill him."

Tavon caressed Yoshi's pale cheek, voice trembling. "And he pushed me away. I couldn't do anything to help him."

Fear molded with anger inside Loren. "Don't talk like he's already dead," he snarled.

Tavon looked up at him, blue eyes wide and startled. He looked lost, as if he truly didn't know what to do. Loren wondered how two people so brave and powerful could be subdued by their emotions like this.

In that moment, Loren finally understood. That was the key. They all needed to accept their emotions and stop overanalyzing things.

With a smile, Loren joined Tavon next to the bed. “What are you doing?” Tavon asked.

“What we should have done from the very beginning,” Loren replied. “Loving Yoshi. Loving you.”

He removed his T-shirt, somehow managing to control the trembling of his hands. He needed to be calm and strong for his two mates—because, yes, they were both his mates—but he still felt apprehensive. If he failed at this, Yoshi could even die.

Thankfully, Tavon snapped out of his shock and smiled back at him. “You’re right. We can take care of him.”

The lion shifter followed Loren’s example and proceeded to remove his own clothes. Even in his nervous state, Loren couldn’t help but admire Tavon’s magnificent nudity. The only time he’d seen Tavon like this, he’d been too busy hurting to appreciate it. He felt awed that such a magnificent specimen of masculinity had been chosen as his mate.

Shaking himself, Loren joined Tavon on the bed. With loving hands, they undressed Yoshi. With every second that passed, Loren acknowledged the importance of their bond more and more. Yoshi felt cool to the touch, and Loren knew that in this situation, failure wasn’t an option.

Once they were all nude, Tavon and Loren engulfed Yoshi in a double embrace, with Tavon spooning Yoshi from behind and Loren hugging him from the front. Loren pressed tiny kisses on every inch of skin he could reach. Their cocks touched, and that simple intimacy made Loren feel powerful. They could do this. They wouldn’t let Yoshi die.

He allowed his hands to roam over Yoshi, marveling at the feel of the soft skin under his fingertips. Slowly, the kitsune responded, and Loren breathed a sigh of relief as Yoshi’s body regained its warmth. Even unconscious, Yoshi seemed drawn to them. He leaned against Tavon’s shoulder while pulling Loren closer. Loren gladly obeyed the silent request, never once stopping his gentle touches.

And then Yoshi opened his eyes. At first, he seemed confused but relaxed. Once his gaze started becoming more focused, he tensed and tried to pull away. Immediately, Loren felt the chill invade Yoshi once again.

He wrapped his arms around his fox mate, doing his best to soothe Yoshi. "Shhh...Don't be afraid. We'll take care of you."

"Loren," Yoshi whispered. "I can't do this. I promised."

"The circumstances were different," Loren said soothingly. "You didn't know me then. Wanting me doesn't mean that you don't want Tavon anymore. You can love Tavon and love me as well." Or at least that's what Loren hoped.

"But...it's all wrong." Yoshi sounded so torn, so desperate, that Loren's heart hurt.

"It's not wrong, Yosh," Tavon said. "We all want this. Why should we deny it?"

"I know you're confused." Loren tried again. "I am, too. Werewolves only have one mate, and having two is unheard of. But Yoshi, sometimes things happen that don't really make sense. The world doesn't always abide by the rules, and nature is known for being fickle. Why fight it?"

"In your heart, you know it's true," Tavon offered. "I've never said it before, Yosh, but I'll say it now. You're my mate, and so is Loren. We're meant to be."

Yoshi burst into tears. "Please tell me you're not lying to just make me feel better."

Loren licked the tears off Yoshi's cheeks, finding their taste addicting. "I think you'd know if we were lying. After all, you're the trickster."

The tiny, lame joke worked like a charm. Yoshi stopped crying, and he met Loren's eyes as if trying to see into his soul. Loren held Yoshi's gaze fearlessly. After all, Yoshi had only love and desire to find.

All of a sudden, Yoshi's lips spread into a wicked grin. "I think we've had something pending for two months now."

Loren surmised that Yoshi had understood and accepted their words. His joy was overcome by arousal when Yoshi sneaked away from their embrace and straddled Loren's lap. Yoshi's ass rubbed against Loren's naked cock, and Loren couldn't suppress a moan. "Fuck me, Loren," he murmured seductively. "I want your cock in my ass."

Loren's wolf surged, the same possessiveness taking over his senses. He pressed his mouth to Yoshi's, stopping the other man from saying anything else. God, to think he'd have what he'd wanted for so long...it was too much.

A low growl sounded behind them, and Loren broke the kiss to glance over Yoshi's shoulder. Tavon gave him a predatory look, his blue eyes burning with lust. Even if his body demanded release, Loren's wolf backed down, waiting for the command of the more powerful male. "Tav," Yoshi cried. "I need you."

Tavon ignored Yoshi. Instead, he stared at Loren as he leaned against the headboard and jacked his cock. "Do it, Loren. Give him what he wants."

Loren nodded. He couldn't have spoken if he'd wanted to. He flipped Yoshi on the bed, pushing his fox on all fours. Just seeing the twin globes of Yoshi's ass nearly had him coming on the spot. Tavon chuckled. "Wait until you're inside him. He's always so tight and hot inside. Aren't you, Yosh?"

Yoshi moaned in reply, the sound sending shockwaves of pleasure through Tavon. Fuck, no wonder kitsunes were said to drive men out of their minds. Loren didn't know how Tavon kept his cool, but then again, the lion probably had the advantage of experience.

"Tav...I want to suck you. I want to taste you."

The illusion of calm vanished, and Tavon pounced toward them. Feeling an urgency he'd never once experienced, Loren swept through the nightstand. He knew he should be bothered by the fact

that he was basically fucking in his brother's bed, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He felt too satisfied with finding a half-empty tube of lubricant to even consider that tiny fact.

Squeezing a generous amount of liquid on his fingers, he returned to the bed. Tavon was already feeding his dick to Yoshi, and they both looked so beautiful in their pleasure that Loren hesitated. Did he really have a place by their side?

As if guessing his thoughts, Tavon turned toward him. Even as he fucked Yoshi's mouth, he growled at Loren. "Come on. What's taking you so long?" The words would have sounded rough, but the look in Tavon's eyes told Loren his lion mate felt his hesitation.

On cue, Yoshi wiggled his ass, obviously demanding attention. How could Loren resist such an invitation?

He crawled back behind Yoshi and took a deep breath. He didn't know much about this since he'd only ever slept with women. Yoshi and Tavon seemed experienced, though, and they'd tell him if he did anything wrong. Tavon gave him an encouraging look. "Go on. He can take it."

Loren nodded. With no warning, he pushed two fingers inside Yoshi's ass. He almost thought he'd been too rough but was proven differently by his mate's reaction. Yoshi went wild. His body seemed to try to suck Loren's fingers right in, and Loren got a brief understanding of what Tavon meant by his words. He wanted to take Yoshi right then and there, but he took his time to prepare him. He'd read all about this, curious about how gay sex worked, and for once, he felt thankful for his curiosity. He finger-fucked Yoshi, doing his best to find the spot that could have his mate begging for more. He felt an absurd amount of satisfaction when he succeeded and started rubbing his mate's prostate mercilessly. Yoshi sobbed, moaning around Tavon's cock. "That's my little slut," Tavon said. "Take it. Take my cock. His fingers feel good, don't they?"

Loren was surprised to realize that Tavon's dirty words aroused him. An intense blaze took hold of him, and every molecule of his body ached for his mates. "Now, Loren," Tavon purred. "Fuck him."

Tavon's words broke through the remnants of Loren's control. Cursing to himself, he removed his fingers and hastily slicked his cock. In mere instants, he impaled Yoshi in one single, powerful thrust.

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Yoshi's eyes widened as the length of Loren's cock penetrated him. It should have hurt, but it didn't. If he'd had any doubt that Loren was his mate, the feel of the werewolf's dick inside him dispelled it completely. Loren's dick filled him, stretching him, burning him just the way he liked it. He'd experienced this sensation with one lover alone—Tavon. That single thrust sufficed to push Yoshi over. He exploded, crying out as he found his peak.

He felt Loren's claws tighten around his hips and Tavon holding his head still while Yoshi rode the afterglow. His two mates were obviously attempting to hold back, to keep their own orgasms in check. Yoshi appreciated it greatly. After months of fasting, his body was greedy for their touch and responded to his lovers' every motion. His cock didn't even go limp for one second. He moaned and wiggled, trying to get his mates to understand his desires.

His tactics worked wonders. Tavon and Loren lost it and simply let go. Their thrusts increased in speed and strength as they claimed Yoshi, branding him with their passion. Raw and primal, it held nothing of the gentleness Yoshi had felt in Loren and Tavon's caresses. It was love taken at an instinctual level, the two of them possessing him, pushing away all his doubts. Yoshi felt more than convinced. In fact, with Tavon fucking his mouth and Loren taking his ass, he thought he was in kitsune heaven.

They rode him hard, using him, making it clear that he belonged to them, that he would never be allowed to deceive them again. Yoshi surrendered himself to the sensation, becoming a vessel of ecstasy. His powers surged through him, and his two lovers faltered as they felt each other's pleasure. Through Yoshi, the fiery passion that engulfed them all burned even brighter, impossibly so, until it became so hot Yoshi himself couldn't believe it.

Yoshi knew his tail had emerged but found it hard to focus to keep it up. His soul was already feeding on the passion among them, fueling his magic and their pleasure at the same time. By this point, Tavon's cursing had dissolved into unintelligible growls and snarls, and Loren seemed to be in a similar situation. And then Loren thrust his dick inside Yoshi *hard*. The pleasure turned so intense Yoshi choked and lost his rhythm. He thought it couldn't get any better, but he was proven wrong when Loren buried his fangs in his throat.

Just like that, Yoshi came again, and this time, it went on and on until he lost his very sense of self. The flow of energy echoed inside his mates, and they exploded, finding their peak simultaneously. Tavon's cum hit Yoshi's taste buds, and Loren's marked Yoshi's insides with scorching heat. It prolonged Yoshi's own climax, waves and waves of pleasure driving him crazy.

He only came down from his high when Tavon's dick left his mouth and Loren abandoned his ass. He felt strangely bereft, but Loren anchored him, keeping him in place. Tavon's fangs took hold of the other side of his neck, and Yoshi felt at peace.

How could he have doubted it? Since meeting Tavon, Yoshi had loved his lion, but he'd always felt like something was missing. Tavon didn't seem to share his feelings and always pushed him away when anything remotely important popped up. Yoshi had known it was his fault for being too demanding, and he'd done his best to aid and not hinder Tavon. And yet, they'd never been able to be completely open to each other.

Now, for the first time, Yoshi could feel Tavon's mind with no barriers. Their desires, thoughts, and emotions mingled. Flashes of memory passed through his mind, some Tavon's, some Loren's. It should have been confusing, maddening, but it just flowed, so right and perfect. Yoshi's fears vanished as if they'd never been.

They collapsed on top of each other in a sweaty mass of limbs. The sheets were full of their combined juices, and Yoshi had the strange desire to roll through them, to rub them in his flesh. He refrained from doing so since in the end, he didn't need to. He could still taste Tavon's essence in his mouth, and he could feel Loren's cum leaking out of his ass. It made him feel safe.

A purring sound reached Yoshi's ears, and he nearly chuckled as he realized it came from Tavon. As a rule, lions didn't purr, at least not like housecats did. On occasion, though, Yoshi had heard the rumbling sound come from his mate, signaling utter contentment and relaxation.

Tavon played with Yoshi's tail, and shockingly, Yoshi's cock twitched at the touch. Yoshi smiled and closed his eyes. He didn't have enough energy for another round, and in truth, he just wanted to cuddle, to feel his mates' warmth. The world would soon return to encroach on their happiness.

As gloomy thoughts started to fill Yoshi's mind, Loren suddenly sighed. "My brother is going to kill me," he muttered.

He sounded so simply disgruntled that Yoshi couldn't help but burst into laughter. "No worries," he said, his heart clear of doubts and fears. "We'll protect you."

"Besides," Tavon added, "it was worth it."

When Loren replied, Yoshi could hear the grin in his mate's voice. "Indeed."

Chapter Four

Tavon smiled to himself as his two lovers surrendered to slumber. He still couldn't believe it. Who would've thought a day would come when he'd find a lover to complete him and Yoshi so perfectly?

He'd had so many doubts, and he'd berated himself so much for desiring Loren with such intensity. Sure, he'd admired the occasional nice ass before, but his feelings for Loren went beyond that. He'd been so desperate and uncertain, and all the while, the answer had been within their reach. How stupid and ridiculous that it had taken Yoshi's near death for them to realize it.

Tavon pushed away that thought from his mind, the fear of losing his mate still making him cold inside. He held Yoshi's nude form in his arms, and his lover was just as alive and beautiful as ever. As he brought their bodies closer and closer, his arm touched Loren's waist, making the other man moan quietly in his sleep.

His happiness turned into apprehension when he felt a familiar sizzle sweep over the room. The air became charged with electricity, and Tavon could almost smell the foul stench of magic.

A growl escaped his throat, and instantly, his lovers awoke. Their bodies tensed, as if in echo of Tavon's own fury and fear.

"Someone's coming," Loren said, pointing to a small ball of energy that began to form in the center of the bedroom.

"Or something," Yoshi finished glumly.

Tavon jumped off the bed, shifting mid-leap. With the corner of his eye, he saw his mates following his example. He wanted to push his mates back, but as he turned to growl at them, the look in Yoshi's dark eyes told him it would be pointless.

They found cover behind tables, chairs, and the bed and waited, watching as the energy ball turned into a peculiar portal. Tavon prepared himself to pounce. He well remembered his last encounter with magic. This time, he wouldn't give the damn assassins enough time to bewitch him. Whoever was coming here would die as soon as they stepped foot inside the room.

Finally, the magic portal extended into the clear image of twin red doors. They opened with an actual groan, like real doors that protested under the weight of rust and time. Tavon expected an army of snake shifters to descend upon them from the portal. He expected other creatures sent by the assassins to hunt him and his mates. He was prepared for anything—except for what actually happened.

As the doors opened, a bag flew outside, crashing into the wardrobe. That wasn't what surprised Tavon, though. A baby komodo dragon exited the portal as violently as the bag, falling to the floor with a thump. It managed to stumble forward just enough to clear the way for the doors to close. Tavon waited for the other shoe to drop—for someone else to come, for the vicious attack to begin. Instead, the portal vanished, and the creature hesitated, seeming confused.

Tavon told himself not to be fooled by appearances. He sniffed the air, trying to detect the true identity of the creature. He knew better than to trust his eyes when magic was concerned. If being by Yoshi's side taught him something, it was that illusions could deceive his vision, but not his trusty nose.

And yet, Tavon found no suspicious scent coming from the small animal. True, the taint of magic remained, but that was to be expected given the manner of its arrival.

Tavon left his hiding spot and, together with his mates, closed in on the tiny dragon. Still in shifted form, Loren padded to its side, growling lowly at Yoshi. Tavon understood the message and fully agreed with Loren. Yoshi had been sick just hours before, and if this turned out to be a plan to hurt them, he needed to stay put.

Yoshi let out a fox-like huff but obeyed. Slowly, Tavon moved toward the animal while Loren advanced on it from behind. A forked tongue slipped out the komodo's mouth, and the tiny animal tensed. It seemed to consider trying to get away. Tavon snarled, and it froze. For a few moments, it seemed to brace itself until its image blurred and changed, leaving behind a small, naked boy.

In human form, the komodo looked as tiny and nonthreatening as in his shifted one. He seemed just a child, and his small body trembled like a leaf in the wind. The color and shape of his eyes and his dark hair proclaimed him to be of Asian descent. Tavon shifted, still suspicious, but feeling strangely distressed by the boy's obvious fear. His mates followed his example and turned into their human form, as well.

"Please," the boy said, "don't hurt me. I do not mean you any harm."

"Who are you?" Tavon asked, his voice coming out rougher than he intended. He suppressed a wince when his tone made the youth cower.

Loren chose this exact moment to take over the conversation. "It's okay," Loren said. "Don't be frightened. You're safe here."

The boy didn't seem convinced. If anything, Loren's attempt to pacify him seemed to make him even more fearful and confused.

Yoshi sighed in obvious irritation. "Let me through," he grumbled to Tavon.

Tavon allowed his mate to pass and walk toward the boy. As he moved, Yoshi started speaking lowly in Mandarin. Tavon caught a few words, but he didn't know the language as well as Yoshi did. The sway of the vocals and consonants seemed accented, mesmerizing. A dialect, perhaps?

Yoshi's plan proved to be quite useful. The boy nodded occasionally, and his stance relaxed. He gave Tavon a sheepish look. "My apologies. I did not mean to intrude like this."

“That’s all right,” Tavon replied, keeping his tone low and calm. “Can you please answer me now?”

The boy looked startled again, and Tavon mentally cursed his poor people skills. “Yes, of course. I am Xiao Shen Long.”

“And what are you doing here?” Loren asked.

Just as the boy opened his mouth to reply, the door burst open. People flooded the room as Petrovic and Hearne ran inside, followed by Loren’s family.

“What is this?” Petrovic growled, his ice-blue gaze fixed on Xiao Shen. “What have you brought in my house?”

The boy let out a whimpering noise and hid behind Yoshi. Tavon forced himself to maintain his cool. For some reason, he found that he trusted the youth, but he could be wrong. Still, he wouldn’t allow Viktor to hurt Xiao Shen. After all, Xiao Shen was only a child.

“He’s explaining that to us now, Alpha,” Loren replied.

Viktor didn’t say anything else, and the boy must have taken that as a sign he could speak without risking disembowelment. “Yes. My name is Xiao Shen Long. I came here looking for Yoshi Kurosawa.”

Tavon arched a brow at Xiao Shen. “What business do you have with Yoshi?”

“Mr. Kurosawa is in danger,” Xiao Shen replied. “You all are.”

Hearne snorted. “How is that in any way newsworthy? We’ve known this for three months.”

“You don’t know everything,” the boy replied. “I come from...”

His voice trailed off, and he choked, as if unable to speak. He swooned and would have fallen if not for Yoshi catching him. Tavon rushed to Yoshi’s and Xiao Shen’s sides. “What’s wrong, boy? Are you injured?”

Loren joined them, and together, they protected the boy from sight. Loren sniffed discreetly and whispered, “I can’t smell sickness in his blood, just magic.”

Xiao Shen's human form vanished, turning into a tiny komodo once again. Yoshi caught the small animal and sighed. "It's exhaustion. The use of magic can be very taxing on the body."

He turned toward the others. "We have to let him rest. He's not telling us anything in this state."

"Fine," Petrovic replied after a small pause. He shared a look with his mate and then continued. "Kai will keep watch."

Tavon shot the snake shifter a glare. He didn't trust assassins. It was their fault this had happened in the first place. In his opinion, Hearne could very well be the wolf in sheep's clothing. "Thank you," he replied, "but I'd rather do it myself."

At that, Flame spoke for the first time. "Actually, we still have some issues to discuss." The werewolf's dark gaze went to the messy bed and then returned to the three of them. "I won't have you playing with my brother."

"You did enough of that already," Jared said. His angry gaze seemed to spear right through Tavon.

"Flame is right," Petrovic said. "I wouldn't normally get involved, but I've seen Loren these past months. What you're doing to him isn't healthy."

Tavon knew Flame and Jared's disapproval was completely justified. He and Yoshi had, indeed, left Loren all alone, confused and feeling forgotten. But Tavon intended to make it up to Loren, and he'd start by clarifying things with Loren's family.

"Alpha, with all due respect, I can take care of myself," Loren replied between gritted teeth.

Petrovic's gaze softened as he looked at Loren, and Tavon suppressed a growl of possessiveness. The typical feline-canine hostility seemed to dwindle just in Loren's case. He wanted to snarl at Petrovic, to shout "mine," but animalistic behavior wouldn't help.

"We do need to talk," he managed to say, surprising himself with how calm he sounded.

"I'll stay with the boy," Maya offered. "It's not like he can do anything right now."

Hearne's eyes shot daggers at Tavon, but he didn't protest.

"All right," Petrovic said. "Take him to the guestroom. If anything happens, call us."

Maya nodded and made her way to Yoshi. Grimacing in obvious reluctance, Yoshi handed the baby komodo to her. "Don't worry," she said with a smile. "I'll take care of him."

"Thanks, sis," Loren replied. He obviously trusted Maya—and in a weird way, it made Tavon trust her as well.

As she left the room, the tension seemed to escalate. It didn't help that Tavon still felt the lingering trace of magic from the portal.

"Okay, no more bullshit this time," Petrovic said. "The bloodlines aside, what do you want with Loren?"

"Loren is our mate," Yoshi replied bluntly. "Tavon's and mine as well."

"You're kidding," Jared replied. "That's not possible. Werewolves have one destined mate, one fated person for the rest of their lives. It's a logical fallacy, like saying there can be three halves of a whole."

"Things don't always make sense, Jared," Loren replied. "I'm sure some sort of explanation exists, and we will eventually find it. Until then, I'm sick of suffering, torn because of stupid preconceived notions."

"It's why we left," Yoshi said softly. "Tavon and I had been together before, and we couldn't deal with our attraction to Loren. Or rather, *I* couldn't deal with it. That's why I collapsed."

"What a load of bullshit," Jared said with a glare. "You're telling me that you got so emotional over not having two men to fuck that you fainted?"

Fury flared inside Tavon at the implication of Jared's words, but before he could say anything, Loren growled and took a step forward.

“Jared, you’re my brother, and I love you. But say anything bad of Yoshi—ever again—and I *will* hurt you.”

“Enough,” Petrovic barked. Tavon felt the flare of power of the Alpha’s voice and saw Loren fight its hold. “We’re not hurting each other over this.”

“Can I say something?” Lysander spoke. He’d been so quiet throughout the entire thing that Tavon had nearly forgotten the other man was there. Everyone turned toward the harpy, and Lysander cleared his throat. “Loren is right. We are hiding behind preconceived notions. After all, who’d have said the Alpha of a werewolf pack would mate a snake shifter? Who’d have thought a harpy and a werewolf could have a family together? And yet, it happened. In spite of everything, and in spite of being all men, we’re together.”

“It’s not the same, babe,” Flame replied. “We’re true mates—two people united as one.”

“But who says three can’t have the same right?” Lysander said. “Who are we to deny them that?”

No one replied. Finally, Hearne crossed his arms over his chest and let out a sigh of disgust and exasperation. “This is a waste of time. What Loren does in his own time is his business.”

“Kai, you’re not saying you actually believe him?” Petrovic said.

“Viktor, I’m not one for judging without proof. Lysander is right. In this world, anything is possible.” He paused and swept his cool, golden eyes over the three of them. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“I suppose that’s reasonable,” Flame said after a pause. “But if I find out you hurt Loren again, you’ll die. Slowly and painfully.”

Tavon doubted the fact that Flame would be able to defeat him and Yoshi, but that wasn’t the point. “You won’t have to,” he said.

“And on that disturbing note,” Jared said, “we should leave you guys alone. I have a feeling you might want to get dressed for our next meeting with the little dragon.”

As Jared reminded him of their other problems, Tavon saw it—the bag that had been tossed out of the portal before the tiny dragon. His

anger and frustration started to clear, and he realized the trail of magic that remained came not only from the center of the room, but also from Xiao Shen's pack.

"There's something there," he growled.

Yoshi followed his gaze and tensed as he identified the source of the problem. "Let me. In case there's a magical trap, I can handle it better."

"No," Loren said. "We're not risking you."

Before Tavon could say anything or eliminate the threat himself, Loren went and picked up the bag. Yoshi let out a small sound of distress, but Tavon stopped him before he could go after Loren. They needed to trust each other if this was going to work.

Loren emptied the pack on the floor. Two books fell out with a thump, as well as a few items of clothing and a small box. "That's it," Yoshi said. "The box."

Loren nodded and picked up the box. Everyone held their breaths as Loren opened it. A peculiar light shone out, painting the walls in deep shades of red. Other than that, it didn't seem to have any detrimental effect, but Tavon could still feel the magic pulsing from it.

"What is it?" Lysander asked.

"A gemstone," Loren replied, sounding mesmerized. "It's beautiful."

Tavon didn't like the reverent note in Loren's voice. "Loren. Close the box. Now."

For a few moments, Loren ignored him. "Loren," Tavon said more forcefully. "I said close the box."

This time, Loren's eyes snapped to Tavon. "Right. Sorry." He closed the box, but his hand trembled slightly when he put it back down.

Tavon rushed to Loren's side and started putting all of Xiao Shen's things back in the bag, with the box at the bottom. His hand twitched and burned as he touched the box, but he didn't falter. Loren

waited there, watching frozen as it disappeared into the pack. “Damn magic,” Tavon muttered. He pulled Loren up and pressed his lips to his mate’s, taking Loren’s mouth in a hard, punishing kiss. At first, Loren stayed passive, but soon, he started to respond, and their tongues entangled in the dance of passion. All the ugliness around them ceased to matter, and Tavon needed only one thing to make things perfect—Yoshi’s touch.

They broke apart to breathe, and Tavon realized that by now they’d acquired quite an audience. Lysander, Viktor, and Kaiden were staring at them with interest, and Tavon thought he could even see a small smirk on Hearne’s lips. Flame and Jared watched Yoshi in silence, as if waiting for a bomb to blow up.

“Fight fire with fire, I always say,” Yoshi said, ignoring the onlookers.

Tavon nodded. “The magic of love wins over the magic of the gods any day.”

“Oh, God, that was so corny,” Loren moaned.

“But nevertheless true.”

A small, sharp cry interrupted the conversation. A jumble of words followed, then Maya’s panicked voice. “Flame!”

In an instant, everyone rushed out into the hallway and ran toward the bedroom. Tavon cursed to himself. This was his fault. He should have never trusted Xiao Shen. He should have allowed Hearne to go. If something happened to Loren’s sister, he would never forgive himself.

The sight that met his eyes in the guest room surprised him. At some point, Xiao Shen had shifted into human form. He now seemed to be trying to get up, but sweat beaded his brow, and his hands were bloody where his nails had torn into the skin. Maya was desperately trying to calm him down, but nothing she did had any effect.

As they entered, the boy’s wild eyes turned to them. “You must not touch it,” Xiao Shen cried, falling back on the bed. “You must not touch the stone.”

Upon seeing Xiao Shen, Petrovic froze, and with him, everyone else stopped. How could they not? It was heart-wrenching to set eyes on a child so young in such pain. Xiao Shen did represent a danger, but only to himself.

"It's okay, Xiao Shen," Yoshi said. "We didn't touch it."

"That can't be right," Xiao Shen sobbed. "I felt the flare of power."

Loren took a small step forward, advancing slowly so as not to frighten the boy. "I opened the box, but I never held the thing."

At that, Xiao Shen turned hopeful eyes toward them. "Really?"

Loren nodded. "We felt the magic as well."

Xiao Shen breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank the gods. You must not touch it. Ever."

"Mr. Long," Hearne began in a calm voice, "I know that you've been through a very tiresome and strenuous few hours, but it is of utmost important to explain exactly why you came. What is that stone? What is going on?"

Tavon bristled. Xiao Shen couldn't possibly answer all their questions in his state. Why didn't the damn snake see that?

"Now wait just a minute," he snapped. "He'll explain everything once we bandage those wounds."

"He's a reptile, Mr. Diya. We're resilient, and we heal fast."

Xiao Shen gaped at Hearne, his dark eyes wide and tearful. Tavon expected the boy to cower once more, but instead, Xiao Shen gave the snake shifter a grateful look. "Thank you. That's the first time anyone's given me any credit."

Tavon huffed. Here he was, trying to protect the boy, and the snake got all the credit. Children these days didn't appreciate the right things in life.

Hearne's only acknowledgement of the boy's words was a nod. Xiao Shen hastened to continue. "I come from the ruling family of the Dragons of China. I'm very young and my status very low, but when one lives with the emperors, he hears things. The most important

thing is that you cannot count on my people for help during this war. They are your enemies. They have been so for quite a while now.”

Tavon cursed to himself. He’d been a fool to push for the dragons’ help so many times. They must have been the ones who’d facilitated his capture in Japan.

“To be honest, I don’t know who all of you are. I can only guess that you are bloodline heirs and that you’ll know what to do with the information I bring. That stone and its six companions are the key to all of this.”

Petrovic opened his mouth to speak, but Xiao Shen gave the werewolf a pleading look. “Please, let me explain. What you found in the box is The Eye of Typhon. It’s a priceless gem that, when used appropriately, can claim control of and enchant all of Typhon’s descendents. It is also a part of the most powerful weapon on Earth, The Spirit of Gaia. As you probably know, she is one of the ancient deities that stand at the very core of creation. The problem with The Spirit is that it cannot reach full power until it is completed. For that, it needs Seven Jewels—The Eye of Typhon, The Breast of Echidna, The Tear of Thaumas, The Tail of Skorprios, The Breath of Drakon, The Mouth of Kharybdis, and The Heart of Kronos. Each has a different power in and by itself.”

“So, jewels that represent seven of Gaia’s offspring?” Loren asked, sounding both fascinated and distressed. “But Gaia had many more children. Why these particular ones? Why not the others?”

“Because they were the ones who reproduced and formed the shifter races. Typhon and Echidna birthed most of them—the Hydra, Cerberus, and others. Thaumas, also Gaia’s son, fathered the harpies. Kharybdis, the horrific sea monster, mothered most of the sea shifters that inhabit the murky depths of the oceans. And the list goes on and on.”

A cold suspicion niggled at Tavon’s brain. “This Spirit doesn’t happen to be a large green amulet?”

Xiao Shen nodded glumly. “That’s right. It’s currently in the Assassins’ Guild’s possession.

“Thankfully, The Mouth has proven to be out of reach for the Guild. Sea-creature shifters—the keepers of The Mouth—don’t seem very cooperative with the Assassins’ Guild.”

Petrovic gave Xiao Shen a doubtful look. “Okay. Assuming I understand this—which I don’t—why is Kurosawa in danger? In the big picture, why him?”

“I don’t know. I never got a chance to find out. They caught me snooping around, and it was get out or get killed.” He let out a low chuckle. “They tried to stop me using The Eye, but they failed, and I took it.”

Hearne let out a thoughtful sound. “So The Eye would work on us, but not on you because you are not a descendant of Typhon.”

“Precisely,” Xiao Shen replied.

“It wouldn’t work on me, either,” Lysander said. “They’d need to use that Tear thing.”

Flame sighed. “I’m guessing they already have it, given what happened back then.”

“They are only missing The Mouth and now The Eye,” Xiao Shen confirmed.

“Why didn’t we know of this?” Loren asked in obvious dismay. “I’ve never been told of any jewels or gems. I’ve never found anything like it in my research.”

“You wouldn’t,” Xiao Shen replied. “It’s well-protected knowledge. My kind has seen to that.”

“Question—what happens when they find everything?” Maya said.

“Gaia’s power will resurface, of course,” Xiao Shen answered.

“And what does that mean?” Jared asked. “Why do we even care? What do they want with us?”

“Jared, it means they’ll destroy the whole world as we know it,” Loren said.

Xiao Shen looked pale now, but Tavon also saw satisfaction and a touch of uncertain relief in his eyes. Hearne was right. Xiao Shen just needed someone to trust in him. How peculiar that it had been the snake shifter to offer him that trust.

“Thank you, Xiao Shen,” Hearne said. “You can go ahead and rest now.”

Xiao Shen nodded. In an instant, his body shifted into the small komodo. Tavon counted this as the third time the boy had changed while here. Was that even normal?

Hearne seemed to guess his words. “He’ll be fine. He just needs a lot of sleep and nourishment.”

“How do you know so much about dragons, anyway?” Yoshi snapped.

“Like I said, we’re both reptiles. The birds of a feather thing applies to us as well. I suppose that’s why they allied themselves with the Guild.”

“So you think he’s telling the truth, pretty?” Viktor asked.

Hearne nodded. “He is. I could see it in his eyes.”

Tavon tried to come up with a plan, anything to flush out the dragons and confront them. He knew their general location, but he couldn’t walk inside their stronghold guns blazing, so to speak—not even with the help of the other shifters. They needed to sneak inside.

Suddenly, Lysander let out a low curse. “Oh, shit! I told my mother to contact the dragons on our behalf.”

Tavon felt blood drain out of his face. That meant the dragons knew they were here. His mates were in danger.

“I told her to be discreet and not reveal our location, but I can’t be sure what she said.”

“Call her,” Flame said. “Find out. Perhaps this is a good thing. If the dragons agree to a meeting, we’ll have a way to detect them and steal the gems.”

“I doubt that very much,” Yoshi replied. He looked toward the small baby dragon who lay asleep on the bed. “He found us somehow,

and I have a feeling it has something to do with that stone he stole. Lysander, you have to remember that if Xiao Shen is to be believed, they still have The Tear. They still have influence over you.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Flame snarled. “I’m not letting him go anywhere without me.”

“Technically speaking,” Loren piped in, “they also have The Breast—so the fact that they’re missing The Eye doesn’t matter for those of us who are heirs of both Echidna and Typhon.”

“So...if I’m getting this right, the only one who’d be free of detection is Yoshi?” Maya asked.

Tavon froze at that. Did that mean that their presence at Yoshi’s side was endangering Yoshi? Gods...He would have to let Yoshi go. How would he ever live without his mate? And now, of all times, when they were finally together, the three of them.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Yoshi said, “but I’m not abandoning you. I don’t care what happens. My place is by my mates’ sides.”

Petrovic lifted his hand in a pacifying but authoritative gesture. “No one’s abandoning anyone. Besides, this isn’t only about us. We have the pack to think about, and if the child is right, the world.”

“Gee, talk about no pressure,” Jared muttered.

“At this point, there’s not much we can do,” Petrovic said with a sigh. “We have to keep the pack out of this, so maybe it would be best to consider relocation.” He seemed to be talking more to himself than to them, thinking out loud in a sense.

“They’d never agree,” Flame replied. “We’d have to give them a reason, and the end of the world is a bit far-fetched.”

“If you mention the Assassins’ Guild, they’ll just blame it on Kai,” Lysander continued. “Then we’ll have another problem on our hands.”

“So we’ll just have to blame the dragons,” Jared suggested. “We need to hurry. I have a feeling it won’t take too long for them to make their move.”

Chapter Five

Loren had always liked mythology and magic. To him, the gods and goddesses of ancient times represented something beautiful, almost like an ideal to attain. Who'd have thought that, one day, talking about them would give him such a headache? He'd never considered that the same beasts he'd studied with fascination would come back from the proverbial grave to haunt them.

Now it was getting worse. He'd been upset and, admittedly, terrified when they'd been the only ones targeted, but the whole world? Who in their right mind would try to destroy it, and why?

This sucked. Why couldn't he have a couple of moments alone with his mates? He had enough on his plate with two mates instead of one. Not that he minded, of course. He accepted that things didn't have to make sense to be real. But Tavon's and Yoshi's words from before still bothered him. Could it be that this bond had somehow been influenced by the magic of the gems?

Yoshi's concerned voice snapped him out of his daze. "Loren? Are you okay?"

Loren rubbed his temples and struggled to offer his mate a smile. "Fine."

Yoshi nodded and wrapped his arm around Loren's shoulder. It was only then that Loren realized they were both still naked, and Tavon as well. Right—they'd wanted to put their clothes on, but had never gotten to because Maya had called them here.

He suddenly felt the acute need to be close to his mates, even if only to hold them in his arms. They'd been thrust into this horrifying thing before they'd even managed to come down from the afterglow.

Hell, Loren hadn't even gotten the chance to have Tavon's cock in his ass.

Much to Loren's dismay, his cock responded to the passing thought. Loren pushed his arousal back, the recollection of Xiao Shen's words a reminder of the seriousness of the situation. He mentally berated himself for his wantonness and stupidity. This wasn't the time to think about that.

Apparently, Yoshi detected his predicament. He moved to stand in front of Loren, shielding him with his own body. By doing so, Yoshi was practically mooning Viktor and the others, but he didn't seem to care. "It's okay," he whispered in Loren's ear. "You don't have to be ashamed of your reactions. It's entirely normal."

"Go," Viktor said with an exasperated huff. "The best thing we can do right now is spend time with our mates."

Loren understood the words that remained untold. With the way things were progressing, he might not have the chance to be with his mates for too long. For all he knew, the world would end tomorrow, and there was nothing they could do about it—yet.

Flame sighed. He wrapped his arm around Lysander's waist and pulled his mate toward him. "So true."

Kaiden hummed thoughtfully. "But first, you need to leave the house. It's not safe here."

Loren agreed with the snake shifter, but as Kaiden's words fully registered in his mind, he almost let out a gasp of panic. "What do you mean?" he asked. "You're coming along, aren't you?"

"We have to stay and organize the pack," Viktor replied.

"I'm staying with you, Alpha," Flame said. "You will—"

"No," Viktor interrupted. "The others will need you more than I. Kai and I can handle ourselves."

Loren would've felt offended by the implication that he couldn't contribute in a battle, but thinking logically, he understood what Viktor meant. They did need to ensure the pack's safety, and for that, Viktor was necessary. On the other hand, the dragons seemed to be

after Yoshi. If they wanted to stay alive, Loren and his mates needed all the help they could get.

“Maya and Jared will join you,” Viktor continued, “and you’ll take the boy with you. We don’t have time to worry about him here.”

“But where can we go?” Maya asked. “We don’t have much time.”

“The mountain,” Tavon suggested, as if in reply to Loren’s thoughts. “We can find shelter there. I know the way.”

Fifteen minutes later, they left Viktor’s home, each carrying bags full of supplies, equipment, food, or even weapons. Xiao Shen remained in shifted form, so he was easy to transport. Loren followed Tavon’s suggestions in silence, never once objecting, even if in all reality, he wanted to scream. How could Tavon even think of returning to the mountain, back where the Assassins’ base had been?

According to Tavon, new caves had emerged after the blast, hidden on the other side of the cliff. Loren felt surprised, but he supposed it made sense. He didn’t remember much, but he did know the explosion had been very powerful. It was entirely possible that it had left traces on the mountainside.

As they trekked, Loren wondered how it had come to this. Everything in his life was upside down. He just wanted to be with Yoshi and Tavon, but it would seem that he’d never get the chance.

Finally, they found the area Tavon had mentioned. In this particular spot, the rock cracked, revealing a sort of cavern hidden deep beneath the surface. Using strong ropes, they descended through the opening, lower and lower, until they hit solid ground. The light coming through the crack above was dim, but his acute senses allowed him to take everything in with ease. Loren marveled at the sight that surrounded him. Stalactites and stalagmites adorned the beautiful cave, the occasional flutter of wings proclaiming the presence of bats. Somewhere to his right, Loren caught the slight shine of something that looked like precious stones. There was even

an underground stream that flowed over the wall of the cave and lost itself in the depths of the earth.

Tavon didn't allow them a moment's rest. He found a small depression in the rock and dumped the packs in the driest visible spot. After the others followed his example, Tavon pointed to the other end of the cavern. "There's another exit. It's difficult to find if you don't know it's there. You come out toward the other side of the mountain. Come on, let me show you."

Loren obeyed his mate in silence, and everyone else followed them. They sank deeper and deeper into the darkness of the mountain, walking through a narrow, dank tunnel that seemed to shrink with every step. It gave Loren a claustrophobic feel, and he felt thankful when they found the exit. Tavon was right. It cut through the mountain and opened into the valley at the middle—the actual valley after which their town had been named.

As they made their way back to the cavern, Loren found with surprise that only a few hours had passed. He collapsed next to their packs, feeling tired for no particular reason. It occurred to him that they might not even survive for much longer. His mind whirled with chaotic thoughts. He wondered if they should trust Xiao Shen so much, if they should drop everything for the words of one boy. It was too late to say anything now, but he couldn't help but doubt. What if they'd left Viktor and Kaiden behind for nothing?

"Okay," Tavon said. "At this point, there's nothing to do but wait. If someone does find us, the space is narrow enough so that dragons won't be able to fly too high. We'll be able to make our way out through the passageway if need be."

"Tav," Loren called out. "Do you really think the dragons will come?"

"Are you doubting the boy?" Tavon asked.

Loren nodded. Xiao Shen seemed genuine, and Loren had liked him on sight, but what if it was all for show? His mates were more

important to him than anything. He felt uncertain, and their rushed decisions scared him.

Tavon knelt by his side and took his hand. "Love, I've been trying to contact the dragons for years now. I hoped to get help from them, and I was betrayed."

"You think the assassins knew how to find us because of them," Yoshi said.

Tavon nodded. "Back in Japan, before I met you, Yoshi and I were taken by surprise by a group of assassins. I never told the dragons where we were, but if they have these stones Xiao Shen mentioned, it makes sense." He sighed heavily. "I wish I'd figured it out before."

Loren wrapped his arms around Tavon. "It's okay. No one's perfect."

"Besides, if you hadn't been captured, Loren might not be alive now," Yoshi pointed out.

Yoshi's remark startled Loren, but he realized it was true. Their lives took them on weird paths. Bad things like Tavon's capture could lead to amazing results. Loren wished he could see the big picture of all of this. Maybe he could then understand its purpose and find a solution.

"That's true," Tavon said. "Come on. Let's get a move on. Night will fall soon, and it will be even colder."

They managed to lay their sleeping bags in the tiny depression, hoping to keep the humidity and chill of the cave away. The others were arranging their own shelters, preparing for a rough night on the mountain.

Flame knocked on the rock by their beds just as Loren and his mates were getting settled in. "Hey."

"Hey," Loren said back.

Flame shifted awkwardly on his feet and rubbed his nape. It was weird for Loren to see his strong brother look so uncertain. "I just wanted to say...sorry about earlier. If you're happy with them, I'm all

for it.” He glanced toward Yoshi and Tavon. “You take care of him, okay? He’s my little brother—but it’s your turn to love him now.”

“Thanks,” Tavon said. “We’ll do that.”

Loren just nodded. He knew his brother had trouble dealing with his new three-way relationship, and he appreciated the effort. Wordlessly, he hugged his brother, smiling when Flame patted him on the back. “All right. All right,” Flame said as they broke the embrace. “I’m going.”

With another glance toward Tavon and Yoshi, Flame headed back toward Lysander, leaving Loren alone with his mates.

“That was nice of him,” Yoshi said. “He has no reason to trust us.”

Loren turned toward his mate and grinned. “Of course he does. Because I trust you.”

Tavon and Yoshi gave him twin wide-eyed looks. “I don’t understand you,” Tavon said.

Tavon’s puzzled words made Loren falter for a second, but he pushed his hesitation back. “You do. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here now. Together.”

“I think he needs to be convinced,” Yoshi said with a chuckle. It turned into a disgruntled groan as the temperature in the cave began to drop even further.

Tavon laughed. “Let’s get warm, and then we’ll think about sex when we’re not freezing our dicks off.”

Loren eagerly complied. They rushed to take their clothes off and hastened to the sleeping bags. They put three bags together, and although it was tricky to get through all the zippers and reach for each other, somehow they managed to make it work. They ended up cuddled together with Tavon in the middle. Tavon’s hard cock nestled against Loren’s ass, and Loren wiggled against his mate, laughing quietly when he heard the distinctive sound of Tavon’s groan. “You know, it won’t be easy to fuck here.”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way,” Yoshi whispered in a barely audible tone.

Loren heard Tavon spit in his hand, and then Tavon’s big hands landed on his hips and slowly caressed his skin. Tavon separated Loren’s legs and slipped his cock between them. Without appropriate lubrication and in such weather conditions, they couldn’t do much else, but it didn’t matter. As they rocked against each other gently, Loren forgot all about where they were. Tavon’s dick rubbed against Loren’s testicles, and Loren moaned, leaning against his lion mate.

Tavon tensed, and his breath became harsher, more erratic. He thrust between Loren’s legs and pushed himself back toward Yoshi, and Loren distantly realized Yoshi must be playing with Tavon’s hole. God, how he wanted to see that, to watch Yoshi’s slender finger slip in and out of Tavon’s body.

“Fuck this,” Tavon snarled as he pushed the covers off them. “I want you. I want you both.”

“We’ll get cold,” Yoshi singsonged. Loren would have laughed at Yoshi’s obvious enjoyment, but his mind short-circuited at the first sight of Tavon’s naked body.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tavon growled. “We’re warm enough.”

Loren agreed wholeheartedly. Tavon and Yoshi emanated enough heat to melt the icecaps of the North Pole. He nodded and licked his lips, struggling to maintain a modicum of reason. After all, they were, for all accounts, in public. His brother and sister were sleeping a few feet away. “As quietly as possible, though.”

He shouldn’t have worried. As Tavon positioned him on all fours, Loren heard a noise. At first, he thought it could be an enemy, but in mere seconds, he realized that wasn’t the case. Silent moans started to come from their right, manly grunts of pleasure and names gasped in breathless voices.

It should have made Loren feel uncomfortable. After all, his brother was out there as well, fucking Lysander. Even if as a shifter, he had no problem with nudity, intimacy was an entirely different

issue. Even so, he now realized that Yoshi had a point. They didn't have anything to be ashamed of. This was as normal and right as breathing.

A rustling noise made him turn his head, and he saw Yoshi rummage through his pack. He retrieved a familiar-looking tube and tossed it to Tavon. "Thank the Gods for me. I packed the lubricant, too."

"Yosh, you amaze me sometimes," Tavon said in a husky tone.

"I know, I'm too incredible for words," Yoshi said, grinning. "Now get a move on. We're wasting time. I want inside you."

Loren groaned and looked away from his mates, pressing his face into the sleeping bag. If he kept his eyes on them, he'd come without even being touched. He didn't want that. He ached to feel Tavon inside him, to be united with his mates in the most intimate way three men could be. The thought that Yoshi would be fucking Tavon while Tavon fucked him made Loren's breath catch. "Hurry," he said, wiggling his ass. "Fuck me."

Tavon didn't delay in complying. Two slick fingers invaded Loren's body, and Loren bit his lip to prevent himself from crying out. The digits were thicker than he'd expected, and his hole burned at the sudden sensation. If two fingers were so hard to take, how would Tavon's cock be? How did other people do this? How had Yoshi managed to enjoy it?

"Easy," Tavon soothed him. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you. You've never done this before, have you?"

Loren shook his head, feeling young and stupid. Being the one doing the fucking had been so much easier, not so foreign and not much different from fucking a woman in the ass. The actual sensations couldn't even be compared, the sheer pleasure of being with Yoshi and Tavon redefining Loren's previous concept of ecstasy. Still, Loren hadn't felt quite so out of his depth then. Taking it would be so much different. He'd played with himself, sure, but even his most daring attempts hadn't prepared him for something like this.

“Looks like we’re cradle robbers, Tav,” Yoshi said jokingly. It could have been mocking, but instead, it filled Loren with renewed certainty of his decision. He was an adult, a werewolf with two gorgeous, amazing mates. How could he ever doubt that Tavon would give him pleasure?

“I can take you,” he said in a steady voice. “I want this.”

Tavon didn’t say anything. Instead, his hand swept over Loren’s spine, slow and gentle, in a soft, unrushed caress. The almost innocent touch felt intoxicating when combined with the sensation of Tavon’s fingers still in Loren’s ass. Warm lips pressed against Loren’s nape in a brush of a kiss. Tavon went slow, not asking out loud, letting Loren decide. Loren would have smiled, but he found he had tears in his eyes instead. They’d been together for just a day, and they already meant so much to Loren. How could Tavon and Yoshi understand him so completely?

Tavon must have sensed his mood, because he stopped touching Loren. “Okay? We can do something else if you like.”

Loren turned his head, struggling to meet Tavon’s gaze. It was awkward but well worth it. Tavon’s eyes literally shone in the darkness, the sight mesmerizing in its own right. “I want this,” Loren repeated. “Please.”

Tavon nodded and went back to preparing Loren’s hole. He let out a low hiss, and Loren realized Yoshi was doing his own exploring once again.

One more finger joined the digits already in his ass, and Tavon changed the angle of the motions. Pleasure exploded inside Loren as his mate rubbed against his sensitive spot. He’d never really managed to get it right when he’d touched himself. If only he’d known what he was missing, he might have tried harder.

His thoughts scrambled when Tavon mercilessly rubbed his gland, sending bolts of pleasure through his body. Loren pushed his ass back against his mate’s fingers, his fears forgotten. He needed more. He wanted to be one with his mates now.

As it turned out, Tavon seemed to share the sentiment. “Sorry, love,” Tavon muttered. “Have to be inside you now.”

The blunt head of Tavon’s dick nudged at Loren’s hole, and then Tavon pushed forward, penetrating Loren’s body in one smooth move. The invasion took Loren by surprise. Sure, the fingers had prepared him somewhat, but compared to Tavon’s dick, they were nothing. Loren bit his lip to smother a cry. Tavon felt huge inside him, and he hadn’t even fully thrust inside. It hurt so badly—and Loren almost thought he’d be split into two.

A comforting caress snapped him out of his daze, and Loren realized that, at some point, Yoshi had come to sit in front of them. “Shhh,” Yoshi murmured. “Don’t tense up. I know it hurts, but you need to relax.”

Loren nodded and fought to obey. Yoshi’s talented hands cupped his cheeks, and a wicked tongue licked Loren’s tears away. “We can still stop if you want to,” Tavon said in a strained voice. He’d stilled completely, but Loren felt his mate’s need, the desire to possess, to rut. Tavon’s cock still stretched and burned him, but suddenly, Loren didn’t want to give that up. As he relaxed, he realized that he was actually afraid to do so. “No. Give me more.”

“Love,” Tavon whispered, “don’t tempt me. I can’t control myself for much longer.”

“You don’t have to. Go on. I’m okay.”

Tavon hesitated but then slowly pushed forward. This time, Loren’s body accepted his mate, and all the tension drained out of him. When Tavon’s balls rested against the cheeks of Loren’s ass, Loren felt complete.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” Yoshi whispered conspiratorially. “Stretching you to your limit, burning you inside.”

Loren nodded, and a small whimper escaped his lips. Yoshi brushed his thumb over Loren’s lips, and on impulse, Loren flicked his tongue over it. The light touch made Yoshi groan, and he gave Loren a hungry look. “Next time, I’ll have you suck me.”

“Can’t wait,” Loren choked out. “But not now.”

With one final kiss, Yoshi departed. Seconds later, a powerful thrust and a loud groan signaled Yoshi had been good on his word. Through Tavon’s body, they would be one.

* * * *

Tavon grunted as Yoshi penetrated his passage. It had been a while since they’d been together like this, but if he wanted to be honest, Tavon had missed it. He’d missed the feel of Yoshi’s cock in his ass, filling him, hurting him, and at the same time comforting him. His lover never held anything back. Every time, he drove Tavon wild with passion.

Tonight, in this cold, fucked-up place, Tavon felt happier than he’d ever been. Balls deep inside Loren and with Yoshi’s dick fucking his ass, he couldn’t think of anything that could go wrong. He forced himself to calm down his ardor, knowing Loren was still new at this. A pang of distress shot to him at the knowledge that he had hurt his mate. No matter how much he needed this, he needed to go slow.

Tavon let Yoshi set the rhythm, pushing into Loren as Yoshi thrust into his own ass. Sweat beaded his brow as he struggled against the beast that wanted out, to be released and to brand his mates with the marks of his possession. It was so hard. Loren’s body squeezed him so perfectly in a tight, velvet hold. That hot channel drew him in almost greedily, as if reluctant to let him go. Whenever he retreated, Loren let out small gasps of protest, which turned into silenced moans of pleasure when Tavon pushed back inside. All the while, Yoshi rode him, that amazing dick hitting Tavon’s prostate with unnatural precision.

As much as he tried, he couldn’t hold himself back. He felt his claws emerge and his body turn furrier. Loren’s skin seemed rougher as well, coarse hairs covering the previously smooth skin. A soft tail

brushed against his feet, ticklish yet pleasurable, reminding Tavon of Yoshi's animalistic nature.

Yoshi's movements sped up, and Tavon felt the kitsune magic flow over him, intensifying their connection, making the bond even stronger. His mind stopped working right. Surrendering to instinct, he began plowing Loren's ass with everything he had. Beneath him, he caught sight of Loren burying his face in the sleeping bag and smothering his cries into the material.

He would have thought Loren was in pain, but their connection flowed between them, crystal clear, until Tavon felt everything his mates did. Taking and being taken, giving and receiving, he fell into a whole different world where only the three of them existed. Yoshi's magic swirled around them, pure but intense. Their bodies moved in perfect synchrony, and the heat increased to nearly unbearable levels. Tavon's blood boiled in his veins, and every molecule in his body burned with the fire of passion.

He desperately wanted to come, but at the same time, he didn't want to let this go. He kept the pleasure in check as long as he could, but his entire being screamed to claim Loren, and he couldn't wait any longer.

His fangs already lowered, he struck, driving them deep in Loren's neck. As his mate's blood filled his mouth, Loren's ass tightened around him. Tavon tasted the rush of endorphins inside Loren's sweet blood, and the remnants of his control snapped. Burying himself one more time inside Loren's passage, he exploded, marking Loren with his seed. He felt heat fill his ass as Yoshi followed them and found his peak as well.

They collapsed on top of each other, a panting, sweaty heap, their bodies hot and painted with their combined juices. Tavon inhaled deeply, loving that scent, loving the way it clung to his mates. He closed his eyes and buried his face in Loren's shoulder, just enjoying the tingles of the afterglow and his mates' presence by his side.

It soon became apparent, however, that the chill of the cave didn't work well with their moist bodies. Loren grunted and got up, turning to face them. "Oh, God. Now we're going to be all gross."

Tavon wholeheartedly agreed, but he couldn't make himself move. "We have the stream over there. We'll wash in the morning."

Loren glanced toward the other side of the cave and shrugged. "I guess."

He pecked Tavon's lips then Yoshi's and turned his attention to the sleeping bags. "I'm not sleeping in the wet spot, though."

Tavon was about to reply when someone else called out from the darkness. "Hey," Jared's frustrated voice said, "tone it down. We're trying to sleep here."

Even in the gloom of the cavern, Tavon caught Loren flush. He would have laughed, but he realized he could hear pants and grunts coming from the right. Right. Lysander and Flame.

"A moment," Lysander replied breathlessly. "Oh, fuck...Yes. Gods, Flame!"

"Well...Flame seems to have quite the stamina," Yoshi pointed out.

"Shut up," Tavon replied morosely. He had two mates, damn it! Of course he came faster.

Yoshi chuckled and pressed a kiss to Tavon's shoulder while Loren just stared at them in disbelief. With an angry huff, he crawled into the sleeping bag. "I'm going to sleep."

Tavon couldn't help a small smile. His mate was so cute when he was embarrassed. Still grinning, he cuddled by Loren's side, carefully avoiding the wet area. That left Yoshi in a bit of a tight spot—literally. In the end, Yoshi squeezed between them, and they fell asleep, warm and more comfortable than Tavon had ever thought possible.

Chapter Six

Yoshi woke up to the sound of Tavon's relaxed purring. He was still cuddled with his mates, and in spite of everything, he felt optimistic. Okay, so it wasn't the cleanest place to be, not after their energetic sex fest. Still, Yoshi didn't mind. In fact, if he could, he'd be purring as well.

Reluctant to leave Tavon and Loren's side, he just lay there, eyes cracked open just a little, pretending to be asleep. The others didn't seem to be awake, either, but for all Yoshi knew, they could be faking as well.

Alas, Maya broke their little illusion of peace. She stalked out of the little nook where she'd slept, pulling a confused-looking Xiao Shen along. Yoshi took advantage of the moment to analyze the boy once again. He could detect a liar a mile away, and he didn't think Xiao Shen deceived them. But there were many things about the boy that remained unexplained. Why had he even come to warn them? Why had he risked his life attempting a difficult spell of gateway traveling? Granted, the end of the world was an excellent reason, but given his position with the dragons, Xiao Shen would have been protected if something happened. Was it really selflessness that pushed him into such a radical decision or something else?

From the way Xiao Shen spoke Mandarin, Yoshi could tell the boy didn't live in any metropolitan area. He tended to fall into old patterns of speech, and since dragons aged differently than other species, Yoshi couldn't help but wonder how old Xiao Shen actually was.

It amused him somewhat that the boy seemed to have awoken motherly instincts inside Maya. She fussed around Xiao Shen, offering the boy a meal, speaking to him in a soft, gentle voice. When Xiao Shen expressed his desire to talk to the others, Maya proceeded to wake them all. She gave Yoshi the evil eye, and Yoshi suppressed a chuckle as he realized his ploy had been discovered.

Loren and Tavon seemed a little more disgruntled. Since they'd fallen asleep without washing, the cum had dried on their skin. Yoshi would have accepted the discomfort if only he'd been allowed to lounge at his mates' side more. He knew that wouldn't be possible, though. He resigned himself to the inevitable and retrieved an older shirt from his bag. Yelping as his bare feet hit cold stone, he hastened across the cave to the stream and cleaned up in a nanosecond. He wet the T-shirt and brought it back to Loren and Tavon.

"There you go, lazies. The water's freezing, so it's better like this."

"Thanks, Yosh," Tavon said, rubbing his eyes.

Yoshi couldn't help but steal a kiss from his two mates, laughing when they both gave him surprised looks. "You're in a weird mood," Loren said.

"It sometimes happens," Tavon explained, "after incredible sex. I find it inexplicable."

Loren gave them both a blank look, but Yoshi could already hear the wheels of Loren's mind processing the information and twisting it around. By now, Loren probably felt bad that he hadn't known that about Yoshi.

"You think too much," Yoshi whispered.

"You'll come to know everything about us in time," Tavon finished. Apparently, Tavon had also guessed Loren's little problem.

Loren's eyes widened. "How did you—?"

Yoshi silenced Loren with another peck. "We're your mates. Of course we know how you feel."

“You’re young still, Loren,” Tavon said. “You’ll get used to it in time.”

“Do you know, Loren, that kitsunes always keep their promises?” Yoshi asked. When Loren nodded, he continued, “I want to promise you something. Starting now, we’ll always be together—the three of us. We’ll never be apart again.”

Loren took his hand and squeezed it. “Never again.”

He smiled at them, his eyes shining with what looked like unshed tears. In that moment, he looked innocent, almost childlike, which was weird, given that he surpassed Yoshi in build and height. Yoshi wanted to hug him, and he would have loved for a repeat of the night before, but real life intruded once again.

“Hey,” Maya called out. “Get a move on, or you’ll lose breakfast.”

Sighing, Loren went to his own bag. “Come on. Delaying it won’t help us any.”

They pulled on their clothes and made their way to Maya and Xiao Shen. “Hey, there, kiddo,” Loren greeted. “You look better this morning.”

Xiao Shen waved shyly. “Hi.”

“I think we didn’t get to introduce ourselves yesterday,” Yoshi began. “I’m Yoshi, and these are my mates, Tavon and Loren.”

Xiao Shen gaped at him. “You have two mates?”

“Yeah. Lucky, huh?”

“Yes...lucky,” Xiao Shen replied absently. Before Yoshi could figure out what was going on, the young dragon scrambled away from them and back to his pack. Yoshi watched in confusion as the boy retrieved a thick book from inside. “Aha!” Xiao Shen said victoriously. “Found it.”

“Found what?” Tavon asked.

“The reason why they’re after Yoshi.”

* * * *

Xiao Shen thumbed through the pages until he finally found the right one. As the boy started reading aloud, Loren felt himself drawn to the words like a moth to the flame.

There will come a time when death will turn into love. Claws will clash, blood will flow, and fangs will tear apart living flesh to reveal a common heart. Souls of three halves, lovers bound together, will find each other across the land. Do not fear the poison, for it marks the beginning of the end. Do not fear the pain, as it brings your destiny. The age of the deadly mates.

The age of the deadly mates. It sounded fascinating, yet scary somehow.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Jared asked, startling Loren.

“It says souls. Does that mean there are others like us?”

“Maybe,” Xiao Shen replied. “We can’t be sure. Old Mandarin isn’t very clear, especially in its draconic form.”

“What else does it say?” Maya asked. “Why do you think it’s connected to Yoshi?”

“Right. It goes on to explain more about the three sides of each couple, and then it says this. *Two anchors for one magical being, protection from the forces of evil. In the heart of magic lies hidden power to awaken the gods. Magic can surpass all bridges and rules and awaken the dark stones. Only love can protect you from its power.*”

Loren felt an impending sense of doom at Xiao Shen’s words. Surely Xiao Shen didn’t mean what Loren thought he did.

Tavon arched a brow at the boy. “Okay...Translate?”

“Basically, the gems I mentioned before need to be activated to be used. That can only be done with the blood of the heirs of each line. However, the Kronos heirs are still missing—and that has been a problem. According to what it says here, Yoshi’s heart would activate the gem, regardless of the fact that he is not an heir of Kronos.”

“Because I’m the magical part of our little trio,” Yoshi said.

“Yes,” Xiao Shen replied, “and your magic is much stronger than that of other kitsunes as an heir of the original Teumessian fox.”

Fucking perfect. Loren had been right in his assumption. “We’re not letting anyone touch Yoshi,” he said in a whisper.

“This is crap,” Jared snarled. “I don’t believe you. Why should we even care about some fucked-up prophecy in a dusty old book?”

Jared had a point. Perhaps it really was a random thing, and it didn’t apply to them at all.

“It fits us,” Flame offered. At one point, he’d joined them as well, probably drawn by all the commotion. When everybody turned toward him, he shrugged. “Come on, guys. Didn’t you ever think it was weird that Lysander and I hooked up the same way Kaiden and Viktor did?”

Loren gave his brother a blank look. Sure, they all knew the story. Kaiden had been hired by Sasha Petrovic to kill Viktor but had refused to complete his task. Lysander had met Flame while on a quest to kill Kaiden and had joined their family shortly after. Loren supposed the meetings did have something in common, but surely, blood flowing and fangs tearing into flesh was a bit much.

“Yeah, but it’s not like you guys ever hurt each other, right?”

At first, Flame didn’t reply, but then he gave Loren a tight smile. “Of course not.”

Loren saw right through that and frowned at his brother. Turning toward Lysander, he realized the other man was pale and liked it even less. “Flame? Lysander?”

Lysander looked away, as if unable to meet Loren’s eyes. “It’s okay,” Flame said. “We just had a small accident.”

“A small accident?” Lysander cried. “I almost killed you.”

Loren gaped in disbelief. Why hadn’t he known this? What else had Flame kept from them? “Lysander did what?” Jared asked in a low growl.

“He stabbed me that day when we were alone together,” Flame snapped back. “Like I said, it was an accident.” His voice turned gentle as he hugged his mate. “We’ve talked about this, babe. Stop berating yourself for nothing.”

Loren wanted to ask, to find out more about what had actually happened, but he didn’t have the heart to interrupt the tender moment. Xiao Shen didn’t seem concerned about that. “Errr...I’m sorry, but maybe you should leave this for another time,” he suddenly said.

It was only as the boy spoke that Loren felt it, the approaching presence of malice.

“They’re coming,” Tavon whispered.

They ducked behind rocky outcroppings and retrieved their weapons, waiting for the dragons to appear. Loren had the time to steal one more kiss from each of his mates before the world turned into chaos.

* * * *

When Tavon first decided to look for the dragons, he’d known they would be strong allies. He realized now they would be powerful enemies as well.

They entered the cavern using the same power Xiao Shen had used the day before. A portal appeared, and the red doors opened once again. This time, however, it wasn’t a tiny komodo that came out, but tens of majestic, magical beasts. Some came flying, others charging forward on large, tiger-like paws. Their roars shook the entire mountain, threatening to bring it down and bury them all in a grave of heavy rock.

And yet, Tavon wasn’t frightened. If anything, the sight of them made him feel he had a purpose. No matter what happened, he would protect his mates. Nothing, not even the power of the gods, would stand in his way.

Thankfully, Tavon had been right about the cavern. It was, indeed, too small for the dragons to have room to expand. The flying dragons were forced to land and shift into their human forms. Some of the wingless ones changed as well since they didn't have room to remain in their dragon forms.

Tavon grinned as he watched the largest of the dragons turn into a tall, handsome man. "Surrender, creatures, and give me my nephew and the fox," he boomed. "Perhaps I will even let you live if you obey."

Yeah, right. Like that was ever going to happen. Yoshi handed him a crossbow, and Tavon aimed at the group. The iron-tipped arrow flew straight at the dragon leader. Somewhere to his right, Tavon heard Jared gasp, and Xiao Shen let out a short cry. "Uncle!"

Tavon didn't know if the man had heard Xiao Shen's warning. Generally, dragons didn't hear too well. Either way, the man caught the arrow before it could connect, his instincts too astute for the weapon to reach him. "This is your answer, then," he said as he crushed the arrow in his fist. "Kill them all. Leave my nephew and the fox to me."

The dragons immediately attacked. They advanced toward Tavon and their friends from every direction. Tavon armed the crossbow again and fired shot after shot at the approaching enemies. The dragons dodged most of the approaching projectiles, but those that did connect thinned out the wave of attackers.

Even so, the dragons kept on coming until Tavon and his mates were completely surrounded. "Let me try something," Yoshi whispered.

All of a sudden, the rock inside the cavern started to get a metallic sheen. Tavon kicked the wall with as much strength as he could muster, and bits of stone came crashing down. The dragons faltered, halting their attacks. "Good idea," Loren said. "But even if they are afraid of iron, this won't hold them back for long."

Tavon nodded. "Come on."

He pulled his mates away from their hiding spot, holding Loren and Yoshi's hands tightly, trusting that Yoshi could maintain the illusion and keep them invisible. They reached Jared, Flame, and the others just as the dragon leader shouted, "It's just an illusion. Don't pay it any heed."

The man's voice seemed to have a magical effect. The dragons snapped out of their trance and attacked once more. They moved so swiftly that Tavon was forced to abandon his ranged attack approach and shift into lion form.

Behind him, his mates shifted as well, preparing themselves for battle. As the dragons descended upon them, Tavon surrendered to instinct. He tore at the men's throats and attacked with the relentlessness born from his desire to protect his loved ones. He didn't know how many died—he didn't care much, really. He just knew he needed to keep Yoshi and Loren safe.

The shifted dragons were harder to deal with. Their claws had no effect on his hide, but their size gave them a significant advantage. A powerful tail hit him in the side, and he crashed to the floor, dizzy with the pain. He landed on four paws, but it took him a few seconds to recover. He had time to catch sight of Loren and Yoshi holding their own against their attackers. Loren had changed into a beautiful gray wolf, but his size amazed Tavon. He guessed that Loren must be channeling the power of his bloodline somehow. Lysander had also shifted into harpy form—the third form, half man, half eagle, confirming Tavon's suspicion. Unlike the dragons, Lysander had plenty of space to maneuver, and he attacked their enemies at an astonishing speed. All the while, Yoshi stealthily dodged his attackers, enveloping them in magic, confusing them and rendering them unconscious. In wolf form, Flame and Maya tore into the group of dragons, guarding each other's backs.

Tavon launched himself at the large shifted beast, landing on its back. He scratched at the scaled skin savagely, making the dragon roar in pain. Bloodlust and satisfaction filled him, and he prepared

himself to deliver the finishing blow. But then a blast of magic hit him hard, pushing him away from his prey and sending him flying across the cavern.

It was the leader of the group. His eyes glowed with red fire, angry and hateful. "You will die, creature."

Tavon tried to get up, but his muscles didn't obey. His ribs had cracked upon impact with the rock, and it would take him a while for them to mend. Whenever he attempted to take a step away and recover, the dragon leader sent another fiery bolt at him. His fur could withstand many things, but a magic bolt of flame wasn't one of them.

"Beg for your life, creature. I want to hear you scream."

Even as his vision dimmed, Tavon snarled at the man. He heard his mates cry out in dismay, pleading with the dragon to stop. He heard Yoshi say he would give himself up if only the dragon would let Tavon live. The dragon paid their pleas no heed. It was almost as if Tavon's pain hypnotized him, blinding him to everything else.

And then the strangest, most unexpected thing happened. A large, gray wolf stepped in front of Tavon, blocking the dragon's approach. He shifted into a nude Jared. "He will not die," Jared growled. "I won't let you."

The dragon seemed to freeze in his tracks. His voice sounded confused when he spoke again. "You...what?"

"I won't let you hurt my family. I will kill you if I have to, even if you are my mate."

Tavon would have gaped if he hadn't been a lion and in deep pain. As it were, he took advantage of the dragon's distraction and struggled to heal his injured body. He didn't have magic of his own, but his shifter nature gave him advanced healing abilities. As he recovered, he managed to push himself back into his human form, setting the bones back in place in the process. It hurt like hell and left him weak, but in a few minutes, he'd be back on track.

By the time Tavon recovered, the most amazing thing had happened. The fight was somehow on hold, the dragons too busy

staring at their leader to continue the attack. Unfortunately, their position blocked the second way out, so Tavon couldn't use it to get his friends out. Still, the unexpected situation could be very helpful.

Tavon got up and looked at the dragon leader, attempting to estimate the man's real thoughts. Shock coursed through him as he met the man's gaze once again. The anger and hate had disappeared, leaving behind only agony and uncertainty. "I don't understand," the dragon whispered in Mandarin.

Unexpectedly, Xiao Shen ran toward them and pounced on the other man. "Uncle! Uncle, are you okay?"

The dragon leader turned toward Xiao Shen, blinking at him blearily. "Xiao Shen...child, what is this? What have I done?"

As the other dragons started to whisper amongst each other, Tavon finally understood. They had been enchanted as well, forced to aid the assassins in this mad quest. He hoped he hadn't killed too many of them. After all, they weren't to blame for this insanity.

"We need to check on the injured," he offered, hoping it wouldn't send the dragons into another frenzy.

The leader's eyes shot back at Tavon then swept over the cavern. "Gods..."

Tavon suppressed a sigh of relief. The spell seemed to have been broken. The prophecy had been correct. The bond between mates really was stronger than any magic. Maybe they could try for a truce and escape the reach of the assassins.

Before Tavon could attempt to go through with his plan, the mountain shook, and a black portal appeared in the center of the cavern. As the doors were opening, Tavon knew he couldn't stay to attempt diplomacy. "We have to get out of here," he told Jared. "Come on."

Jared looked torn. "I can't just leave," he whispered. His tormented gaze went to the dragon leader, who stood there, tense, surveying the destruction, his body as taut as a bowstring.

"Jared, Tav, come on," Loren called out. "It's the assassins."

Jared shook his head. "Go on ahead without me."

Tavon cursed under his breath. "We can't do that, damn it."

Yoshi made his way toward them, carefully avoiding every dragon in his path. "Tav? What's going on?"

"This guy is Jared's mate. Now Jared doesn't want to leave."

Tavon understood Jared perfectly. He didn't blame the other man for not leaving, especially in such a difficult situation. Unfortunately, their hesitation cost them. The portal doors opened, and streams of assassins poured out, outnumbering them all.

"What's going on here?" a soft but malicious voice said. "I thought I told you to bring the fox back. We can't afford a delay."

Tavon identified the source of the voice as a dark-haired man who headed the assassin group. Black clothes hugged his muscled body like a second skin, and eerie, golden eyes swept over the room in amusement. He would have been handsome if not for the evil that radiated from him.

"What are you doing here, Tynan?" the dragon leader asked. "We can handle this."

Tynan snorted. "I decided to join the party. After all, I do have a little quarrel with the handsome shifters of Rook Valley."

A feeling of familiarity passed over Tavon as he stared at the man. Where had he seen Tynan before? Those peculiar eyes reminded him of someone, but who?

"Hey. Doesn't he look a bit familiar to you?" he whispered in Jared's ear.

Jared nodded. "Fuck. He looks like Kaiden."

Of course! Tynan Hearne, the leader of the Assassins' Guild and Kaiden's father. "I thought he'd died," Yoshi muttered.

"I am not so easily eliminated, Mr. Kurosawa. My son was an idiot for thinking that. Then again, he never had much inclination for the family business." He grimaced, as if remembering something unpleasant. "I don't know how I could've spawned such a weakling."

As the duo talked, Tavon considered the possibility of getting the dragons to fight against his new enemies and decided the chance was very low. The leader might agree if he wanted to protect Jared, but the fucking snake still owned the amulet.

Decision made, he grabbed Jared and Yoshi and pulled them toward the passageway. Jared started to protest, digging his heels into the ground, but Tavon silenced him with a gaze. “We don’t have time for this.”

Jared obeyed, and Tavon tried to sneak out from under the snake’s scrutiny. The odds were against him, but he had to try.

The snake detected him just as he reached Loren’s side. “No, you don’t. You’re not going anywhere.”

Tynan retrieved the amulet and pointed it at Tavon. Just like that, Tavon’s muscles froze. It was even more powerful than before, and Tavon could almost feel his will fade away completely. As Tynan did the same thing with the dragons, Tavon distantly registered the mighty beings fall, like puppets having their drawstrings cut. Fucking bastard was playing with them. No wonder he’d sent the dragons first. He’d wanted to prolong the pain, to kill just for the enjoyment.

He did realize, though, that Yoshi was still unaffected by the magic. Right—Xiao Shen had stolen The Eye, the one gem that could have given the snake power over Yoshi.

Somehow, Tavon managed to make his vocal cords work. “Go, Yosh. Take Loren and save yourself. I—”

A sharp bark of laughter interrupted him. “I think not.”

Suddenly, Tavon felt energy flow through his veins. His bones shifted, and he found himself on all fours once again, the beast still aching for battle. Tavon tried to reign himself in, but it seemed like someone else controlled him. He saw himself snarl at Yoshi, sniffing as he detected the prey. *No, no, no, no.* This wasn’t happening. *Run, Yoshi, run!*

Yoshi’s eyes widened, and he took a step back. “Tav? What are you doing?”

The soft, beautiful whisper of Yoshi's voice somehow sounded twisted in Tavon's ears, like nails on a blackboard, infuriating him. He pounced, not giving Yoshi a chance to escape. All the while, he was screaming inside, trying to stop himself but failing.

And then his mate's scent invaded his nostrils, and his head cleared. How could he let the damn snake control him, push him into hurting Yoshi? His muscles ached, but his mind was free, and he rolled himself off his mate, shifting back to human form. "You'll never make me hurt Yoshi."

He almost smirked when he saw the shock and anger in Tynan's eyes. "I'm going to kill you all," the assassin snarled. He pointed The Spirit at him, but Tavon didn't look away. Even if he was going to die, he wouldn't let the man defeat him.

"No!" Yoshi cried, lunging toward Tynan.

At the same time, a large snake landed on top of Tynan, and the man collapsed under the weight of the heavy reptile. Taken by surprise, Tynan dropped the amulet. Tynan's accomplices tried to reach for it, but it seemed to dodge them like it had a life of its own. Tavon watched in awe as Gaia's Spirit slipped through the crowd, finally stopping at Yoshi's feet.

Chapter Seven

Yoshi couldn't believe his eyes. Seconds ago, he'd thought the snake would surely kill Tavon. By some sort of miracle, the amulet had left its previous master and come to Yoshi.

In a daze, he picked up the magical item. The second his hand made contact with the amulet, white-green light filled his vision, a sense of tremendous power surging through his body. Energy buzzed all around him, his every nerve awakening in a mix of pleasure and pain.

The shock amazed him so much he nearly dropped the priceless amulet. But another hand closed in on his fist, securing The Spirit within his grasp. "It wants to be with you," Loren whispered.

His mate's voice dissipated the peculiar mist that covered his eyes. With the amulet no longer in Tynan's possession, the dragons recovered and were pushing back the group of assassins. Farther away, Yoshi saw two large snakes entangled around each other. Loren recognized one as being Kaiden although now he was much larger than usual. He must have summoned the power of the Hydra. To their right, a huge white wolf stood his ground, keeping the assassins away from the battle between the two Hearnese. Viktor.

Unsurprisingly, Tynan lost, unable to withstand Kaiden's assault. Kaiden dug his fangs in his father's scaly skin and held on even as the other snake tried to dislodge him. The battle didn't take long. In mere instants, Tynan's reptilian body lay motionless on the cave floor. The entire thing made Yoshi shudder, more so when he realized the true extent of Kaiden's abilities.

The death of their leader didn't sway the rest of the snakes, though. If anything, they became even more savage. Yoshi saw Maya, Jared, and Flame fighting side by side and knew he had to do something.

And then Yoshi realized it was, indeed, in his power to stop all this. He lifted the hand holding the amulet and pointed it in the general direction of the assassins. He didn't know how this worked, so he just willed the fight to stop and the snakes to surrender.

A bright light emerged from the amulet, and the assassins stopped their assault, freezing in their tracks. In the process, a couple of them died, their heads severed by a dragon's attack they could no longer dodge.

"Stop," Yoshi whispered. "They're powerless now."

This time, the amulet just buzzed, and Yoshi guessed it was in some weird way conveying the message. Indeed, after a few moments, the dragons stopped, backing off and leaving the assassins be.

Silence fell over the cavern, occasionally broken by the moans of the injured. The air was saturated with the scent of blood and death. Yoshi desperately looked around, ensuring that his friends were all safe. He let out a sigh of relief when he realized Tavon was injured but alive, and the others had escaped with minor injuries.

Even so, it hurt Yoshi to see so much needless destruction. The dragons had been under a spell, and they'd died fighting for something they hadn't really believed in. Tears sprung in his eyes at the thought.

"*My power does not have to kill, child,*" a voice whispered in his head. "*It can heal as well.*"

Yoshi let out a gasp, clutching the amulet harder in his fist. "What? Who are you?"

"*That is of no import. Trust me. Trust yourself. Give these men what was stolen from them.*"

Nodding, Yoshi pointed the amulet at a nearby wounded dragon. It was dying, its neck shredded by feline fangs. Yoshi bit his lip in hesitation. He wasn't sure he knew how to use The Spirit, and he didn't want to risk the amulet's power on his loved ones. Still, the thought that he could kill someone through its power scared him to death.

Taking a deep breath, Yoshi forced himself to get a grip. If this worked, he'd be saving the dragon. If it didn't...Yoshi would have to live with that. In the end, the beast would die if Yoshi didn't attempt to use the power of the amulet.

He needn't have feared. The Spirit glowed an iridescent blue, showering the dragon's form with light. Just like that, the injured beast shifted back into the form of a man. The now-healed dragon reached for his neck and gave Yoshi a wide-eyed look. It had worked.

Immediately, Yoshi turned to Tavon. He found his mate leaning against Loren, weak but standing on his own two feet. Smiling, he focused the healing light over the two men he loved more than anything in the world. He saw the strain in Tavon's features vanish and his pale face regain color once again. Every wound vanished as if it had never been.

Slowly but surely, he progressed through the entire cavern, healing the worst of the injuries first, bringing back people from the brink of death. It felt so amazing. He had these men's lives in his own hands. He could crush them or bring them back, renewed, brighter and stronger than ever. Every time, he chose the second option, the amulet's magic entwining with his own, obeying his every thought.

Finally, his job was over. He'd managed to keep the fatalities to a minimum. None of the dragons had been beyond help, and Yoshi had even healed the snake shifters. His friends showed surprised dismay, but Yoshi had a feeling the Spirit would want things to be this way. The assassins had suffered a few casualties, but Yoshi couldn't do anything about that. The power of The Spirit could most likely

transcend death, but Yoshi sensed the warning in his heart and mind. No mortal, no matter how powerful, should attempt such a thing.

As he finished, the same voice appeared in his mind. *"Now let it go. You know what to do."*

Yoshi understood what those words meant. The amulet was too dangerous to be left whole. It needed to be destroyed. But with that sort of power, he could protect his mates, make the world safe for all of them. Wasn't that a good enough reason for it to survive?

The voice didn't give him an answer. Yoshi stared at the amulet in his hand, the artifact that had given him the ability to save them all. He remembered how it had felt to stop the fight, to control the assassins, and most of all, to heal all those people. Could he really let it go?

The temptation tore through him, so powerful, so intense, that Yoshi found it almost impossible to resist. But then powerful arms hugged him from behind, and soft lips pressed against his own. "Let's go home," Loren whispered.

In that moment, Yoshi knew. The purpose of his life, the meaning of his existence, his entire self, everything that he was and would ever be, belonged to his mates. The amulet meant nothing to him. It was just a trinket, useless now that it had served its purpose.

"Just a second," he replied. "One more thing to do."

Breaking away from his mates, he focused on his magic, took a deep breath, and with no hesitation, smashed The Spirit against the rocky ground. It shattered into clear, distinct pieces, each of them flying toward different people. "It was what The Spirit wanted," Yoshi explained. He picked up the center of the amulet, the one piece that remained in front of him. Two jewels remained embedded in the stone, no longer lit with the magic of the ancestors. "They've chosen you to be their keepers."

Viktor, Xiao Shen, and Jared picked up the other pieces and with them, the weight of a responsibility that would follow them for the rest of their lives. And yet, Yoshi found that he didn't mind. As long

as he had his mates by his side, there was nothing he couldn't accomplish.

* * * *

In the end, Yoshi decreed that the assassins should be released with the warning that next time, they wouldn't be so lenient. Tavon secretly wished Yoshi had at least waited a bit before breaking the amulet, but he kept his mouth shut and counted his blessings. After all, it could have turned out much, much worse.

The dragons had profusely apologized for everything and sworn to make up for their disrespect and the pain they'd caused. Unfortunately, that implied two unpleasant things. The first was Xiao Shen's departure. Tavon liked the little brat and would have enjoyed seeing him grow up into a man. In many ways, Xiao Shen was still a mystery. He'd never told them why he'd come to warn them, why he'd risked defying his people for Yoshi's sake. Perhaps one day they would find out.

By far, though, the most painful thing had been the goodbye between the two newfound mates. The dragon leader, Zongxian Long, took responsibility for the entire situation and, as such, couldn't stay to be with Jared.

The duo had spoken, but Tavon stayed out of it and didn't know what was said. In the end, Zongxian left, and the gods only knew when—and if—he'd return.

Of common accord, everyone stayed quiet during the return to Rook Valley. Tavon had a lot on his mind, and he understood Jared's pain better than most. After all, his relationship had passed through the same thing. It would seem that Loren's brother would also be destined to wait and suffer until Zongxian made up his mind.

Now Jared walked in front of them, sometimes toying with his piece of the amulet. Tavon mentally sighed. The dragon better take

his head out of his ass soon. He would save both himself and Jared from a world of hurt.

It seemed peculiar, though, to think that his worst problem was not even his own. The day before, he'd thought they would die at the assassins' hands. There had simply seemed no way out, not when the Guild had so much power. Now, with Hearne dead, the Guild was at least temporarily dismantled. It would take the snakes a while to reorganize, and then they'd have too many problems to worry about ancient amulets and destroying the world.

Smiling to himself, Tavon pulled his mates to a halt. Loren arched a brow at him. "What?"

Tavon wrapped his arms around Loren and pulled him close. "Nothing. Just wanted to tell you I loved you. And you, too, Yosh. Come here."

Yoshi obeyed, letting out a sigh of contentment as he sank in Tavon's embrace. "And it couldn't wait until we got home?" Loren protested. In spite of his words, he didn't try to get away. In fact, he beamed—that bright, beautiful smile that Tavon loved so much.

"Nope," Tavon answered. "It couldn't wait a single second more."

Yoshi snorted, but it just made Loren smile wider.

Maya's voice broke the moment, and Tavon realized they were standing there, in the middle at the trail, staring at each other like idiots. The others were already farther down the path, snickering amongst themselves. "Guys?" Maya called out. "You coming?"

"You go on ahead," Yoshi replied in Tavon's stead. "We'll be there in a bit."

Maya gave them a concerned look. "You sure? There could be assassins in the area still."

"Nah," Yoshi answered. "They've gone."

"We'd be able to feel them if they showed up," Tavon pointed out. "Remember, the nose knows."

"Just leave them be, sis," Jared said. "They obviously want to be alone." He sounded quite upbeat, as if the sight of them kissing made

the situation less glum. Maybe it did. In the end, they'd been parted for quite a while before getting together. It was probably just a matter of time until Jared's mate came to claim him.

Maya let out a small laugh. "Okay. Suit yourselves. See you back at the house."

"Have fun," Kaiden said, waving. For someone who'd just killed his father, he seemed in a very good mood.

Tavon watched as Kaiden and the others started walking down the trail once again. As soon as they disappeared into the forest, he pressed his lips to Loren's, taking possession of the other man's mouth.

Their tongues tangled in a dance of passion, battling for dominance. Tavon bit Loren's lower lip, marking his mate, greedily taking in the decadent taste that was so uniquely Loren's. Loren moaned, rubbing against him, and their cocks came into contact through the denim of their jeans. Why had they put their clothes on again? Tavon couldn't remember. He needed them off, as soon as possible, and he needed his mates. Now.

With a great deal of regret, Tavon broke the kiss, smiling when Loren reached for him in protest. "Now, now. Don't be impatient. We have all the time in the world."

He hoisted Loren up on his shoulder and started walking away from the trail, caressing the twin globes of Loren's ass as he advanced. His other hand reached for Yoshi's, and they walked side by side, making their way through the greenery. "You know what, Loren?"

"What?" Loren replied breathlessly.

"It's your turn to be in the middle," Tavon replied. Loren groaned, his hard-on throbbing against Tavon's shoulder.

Yoshi chuckled. "Ohh...That sounds promising." Tavon turned his head to look at Yoshi, and his mate licked his lips. Gods, that sight never ceased to arouse him.

“Careful, Tav,” Yoshi whispered seductively, “or you’ll fall and break our mate.”

“Right. Patience.”

As it turned out, he ran out of patience just as he said the word. An adequately placed branch drew his attention, conjuring intoxicating images and possibilities in Tavon’s mind.

Satisfied with the idea, he rushed to the spot and carefully lowered his mate over the branch, unwilling to hurt him—or to break their potential fucking spot, for that matter.

“I like the way you think, Tav,” Yoshi murmured. He went around the branch to stand in front of Loren. The sound of a zipper and Loren’s gasp let Tavon know that Yoshi was as eager and impatient as he.

“Playing without me, loves?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Yoshi replied with a smile.

Grinning, Tavon helped Yoshi push down Loren’s jeans. He didn’t bother with saving the shirt, tearing it right through the middle instead. Loren was left naked on the tree branch, his body at Tavon and Yoshi’s mercy. The position allowed easy access both to Loren’s cock and to his ass. Loren gasped their names as he eagerly pushed his ass up. “Please. I need you.”

“Don’t worry, Loren,” Tavon purred. “We’ll give you what you want, and this time, we won’t be interrupted.”

Yoshi offered Loren a wicked grin. “But first, you’ll get to watch me suck Tav’s brains through his dick. Would you like that, Loren?”

Loren whimpered and nodded frantically. Tavon agreed with that assessment. The idea of Loren watching as Tavon fucked Yoshi’s mouth excited him beyond belief. In fact, Yoshi knew him well. He was already close to coming, the adrenaline of the day combining intoxicatingly with the lust he felt for his mates. He didn’t think he could last too long if he took Loren’s ass now.

He joined Yoshi at the other side of the branch, admiring the sinful display Loren made. “Beautiful, isn’t he?” Yoshi said.

“Very,” Tavon replied. “You both are.”

Yoshi beamed at him, a contented smile strangely at odds with his lustful gaze. Tavon understood it, though. For the first time, no threat loomed above them, no peril threatening to part them. It made Tavon so happy he felt like he could fly.

The only thing that grounded him was his unsatisfied lust. His cock throbbed in his pants, aching for release. “Go on, Yosh,” Tavon growled. “Take what you want.”

Yoshi bit his lip and took a deep breath, as if fighting for control. He knelt at Tavon’s feet and worked Tavon’s fly open. Tavon groaned as his mate released his dick from its denim confines. Yoshi’s hand tightened around him, and the grip of those slender fingers felt both familiar and exhilarating.

As always, Yoshi took his time torturing Tavon. He massaged Tavon’s hard cock, squeezing him just right, rubbing his thumb across the tip and teasing the tiny slit. “Don’t tease, Yosh. Suck me now.”

Yoshi didn’t reply. Tavon almost thought his mate would continue his little game, but he was proven wrong. Instants later, wet heat engulfed him as Yoshi took his cock to the hilt. Tavon had no clue how Yoshi did it without choking, but he always managed, just like he always managed to blow Tavon’s mind.

“God, you two are...you look so amazing.” Loren’s voice sounded strangled, almost worshipful.

Tavon had no doubt his mate’s words were true. The sight of Yoshi’s swollen lips wrapped around his dick turned his knees to jelly. He was forced to lean against the tree lest he collapse on top of Yoshi and make a fool out of himself.

At first, he tried to keep a leash on his beast, pushing it back and allowing Yoshi to do what he wanted. Yoshi let out a hum of satisfaction, signaling his approval, and bobbed his head up and down Tavon’s shaft. Yoshi’s fingers played with Tavon’s balls, rolling them, rubbing at the wrinkled sac.

By now, Loren was panting, making small, needy noises that drove Tavon wild. Tavon's gaze went to Loren, and he growled in need and desire when he saw the other man clinging to the tree branch with clawed fingers. Loren's honey-brown eyes were practically crazed with lust, darkened to a near-black with the occasional red sheen. His entire being screamed its yearning to be possessed, begging to be taken, marked by Tavon.

The lion broke free, and Tavon could no longer hold himself back. He fucked Yoshi's mouth with abandon, thrusting in and out of the wet cavern. Yoshi accepted it, moaning in obvious arousal as Tavon asserted his possessiveness and let his instincts take over. Tavon felt Yoshi's magic tingle over his nerves, promising even greater pleasures, tantalizing but still kept in check.

He buried his fingers in Yoshi's long hair, using the strands to bury himself deeper. He knew his mate enjoyed the rough treatment, the unleashed, raw passion born out of the love of bonded mates. Now, scenting Loren's arousal in the air, feeling Yoshi's desire and lust, Tavon felt overwhelmed. He released Yoshi from his hold and surrendered to the onslaught of sensation. As he peaked, his roar echoed through the silent forest and sent birds flying toward the sky.

He stared up at the greenery as he tried to catch his breath. He realized some of his semen had landed on Yoshi's face and Yoshi was now scooping it up on his fingers. Yoshi hadn't come, but he looked unconcerned. Instead, he left Tavon's side and sat down behind Loren. Loren gasped, and Tavon let out a groan of his own as he watched one of his mates finger the other.

His cock, which hadn't really softened even with the explosive climax, answered to Yoshi's siren call. He shot to his feet and in mere instants pulled Yoshi away from Loren, taking possession of the other man's mouth. He tasted himself on Yoshi's lips, and his beast growled in approval.

Loren let out a whimpering moan, urging them to hurry. "I'm so close," he pleaded. "I need you now."

Tavon couldn't agree more. The night before had been amazing, and he couldn't wait to be inside Loren once again. As Yoshi broke away from him, he leaned over Loren and whispered, "We wouldn't leave you like this, love. Besides, I'm not done with you two yet."

Yoshi had the audacity to wink at Tavon. "I questioned his masculinity yesterday, and now he feels the need to prove himself."

Loren stared at Yoshi, his body flushed with arousal. "I'd love it if he proved himself on my ass," he growled. "And now."

Tavon couldn't help a small chuckle. "Ohh...Demanding, are you?"

He finished taking off his clothes and thrust a finger inside Loren's body. Loren's flesh yielded to him with ease, and Tavon noticed with approval that Yoshi had prepared their mate quite thoroughly. He removed his finger when Yoshi disappeared under Loren. As the familiar suction sound filled his ears, Tavon pushed inside his mate's welcoming passage.

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Loren's entire body was ablaze. Simply seeing his mates together had him on the brink of coming, the erotic sight branded in his mind forever as wet dream material. Of course, everything his mates did qualified for that particular position.

When Tavon penetrated his anus, Loren squealed. He would have been embarrassed at his behavior, but there was no shame in needing his mates' touch. Not when Tavon's cock felt so good, so perfect inside him. It filled him to the brink, burning from the inside out. Loren even welcomed the slight pain. It made the whole thing seem more real, anchored him, letting him know that this wasn't just a fantasy.

At first, Tavon kept a slow, almost punishing rhythm, teasing him, brushing Loren's prostate from time to time. As if by agreement with Tavon, Yoshi worked Loren's cock the same way, licking and nipping

but never quite sucking him down. Every motion drove Loren closer and closer to the peak but at the same time kept him from reaching it.

Loren cried out, pleading, aching for more. His nipples rubbed against the tree branch through the remnants of his shirt, adding another edge of sensation. His cock throbbed, aching, demanding release.

Finally, Tavon sped up his motions, and Loren howled as his body swallowed Tavon's dick over and over. His mate held him down with one clawed hand, using Loren's opening as his own personal fuck hole. Just when Loren thought it couldn't get any better, Yoshi's mouth enveloped Loren's cock. Yoshi greedily sucked on Loren's dick, devouring it like a starving man would a feast.

At the same time, Tavon pushed harder into Loren's ass, that amazing dick hitting Loren's prostate over and over. Loren felt his orgasm approach with every stroke, with every suckling motion.

It swept over him like a tidal wave, so swift and amazing that everything seemed brighter, sweeter. Just as Loren thought he would shoot, his imminent climax stopped. Yoshi kept a tight hold on Loren's shaft and testicles, preventing him from coming. Loren cried out in protest. He couldn't—he just couldn't take it any longer.

Tears started flowing down Loren's cheeks, the need to come too great for his body to contain. But Yoshi was relentless. His hold on Loren never faltered. Over and over, he took Loren's dick in his mouth, swallowing around the head, creating new depths of sensation Loren had never thought possible.

Tavon's shaft and Yoshi's mouth drove Loren wild. As never before, his wolf broke loose completely, taking in the dominance of his mates with greed. Loren allowed it to come, embraced it, and he simply let go.

And then Yoshi's magic swept over him, so deep and powerful it reached Loren's very core. Loren gasped, his mouth invaded with the combined taste of Tavon's essence and his own pre-cum. He felt Tavon in his mind, felt the way his body squeezed Tavon's shaft,

needy, desperate, passionate. The kitsune magic reached through their mate bond until the golden thread that tied them together seemed visible—even through Loren’s monochrome eyes.

He could sense their passion feeding Yoshi and Yoshi fueling it further. It went on and on until finally, it became too much. Yoshi was the first one to surrender, crying out his orgasm around Loren’s dick. In the process, he let go of Loren’s shaft, and the contained climax burst through Loren, more powerful than anything Loren had ever felt.

Tavon’s fangs penetrated his neck, sending a new burst of pleasure through Loren’s body, prolonging the orgasm. As his lion mate filled his passage with hot cum, Loren felt Yoshi’s fangs pierce the skin of his shoulder, completing the claim. He thought that he lost consciousness for a second, the ecstasy too much for his mind to process.

As he started to come back from his haze, he found himself overwhelmed with emotion. The light filtering through the leaves hypnotized him for a moment, giving him a surreal feeling. He almost feared that this was, indeed, a dream, but the slight soreness in his ass and the tickling throb in his neck were very genuine. How could he have gotten so lucky?

Mind whirling, Loren let Tavon lift him off the branch, boneless. They sat on the ground, cuddled against each other, breathing hard.

“That was amazing,” Loren managed to say. “When can we do it again?”

Tavon and Yoshi burst into laughter. “Don’t worry,” Yoshi said. “We have time. All our lives, to be more exact.”

Loren couldn’t help a smile. He buried his face in Tavon’s chest and closed his eyes. Yoshi was right. Finally, they were together, and nothing could ever part them again.

Epilogue

One month later

Loren stood in the courtyard of his home, taking in the sight one last time. Today, he'd be leaving Rook Valley with Yoshi and Tavon. He didn't know when he'd get to see it or his family again.

"We can stay for a while longer if you like," Yoshi whispered in his ear.

Loren shook his head. "We're not exactly anonymous here, and you said it yourself. It's not wise to keep so many parts of the amulet in the same place."

"That's true." Yoshi sighed. "I wish we could do things differently, but our work isn't done yet. The assassins are bound to try again—if not now, then in the near future. We need to be ready."

Loren nodded. During the past month, everyone had been arduously working to enforce safety measures and ensure a permanent solution for the werewolves of Rook Valley. Seeing this combined effort had really driven the point home. Even with Tynan dead, they weren't out of the woods yet.

Thankfully, the pack trusted Viktor to protect them and had been quite helpful when it counted. Loren knew Viktor considered expanding his inner circle in the future. That would come in time, though, when the situation wasn't so uncertain.

The door to the house opened, and Tavon walked out, carrying the rest of their bags. Behind him, their family and friends followed. The sight of them sent butterflies fluttering through Loren's stomach. Today, he would really become an adult. He'd take his rightful place

by his mates' side and aid them in shouldering their new responsibilities. Unfortunately, that meant he'd also have to leave his brothers and sister behind.

Tavon must have seen the turmoil in Loren's heart. He dropped the bags and came charging down the stairs, reaching them in the flash of an eye. He wrapped his arms around Loren in a fierce embrace and said, "If you've changed your mind, love..."

"Thank you, Tav, but no. It's the right thing to do."

The others joined them in the courtyard, giving them a brief moment to compose themselves. "You'll always have a place in this pack," Viktor said in a solemn voice.

Taking a step away from his mates, Loren bowed his head in respect. "I know, Alpha. I'll still belong to it wherever I may be."

Kaiden stepped in front of Viktor and frowned. Loren almost thought the snake shifter would punch him, but something entirely different happened. To Loren's shock, the snake shifter hugged him, his slender but strong arms gripping Loren's torso in an unbreakable hold. "Take care of yourself, all right?"

In all the time he'd known Kaiden, the other man had never touched him or shown affection in such an open way. It floored Loren to know that he would be missed so much. His eyes filled with tears, and he hugged Kaiden back. "Thank you. You, too. Watch over that mate of yours. He sometimes has too much on his plate."

"Will do."

As Kaiden stepped away and cleared his throat, Flame took his place. The familiar comfort of his brother's embrace made Loren feel safe and warm inside. He was going to miss this. "You call us if you need anything," Flame whispered.

Loren nodded against Flame's chest, the words dying in his throat. "Don't worry about it," Yoshi offered. "We'll take good care of your brother."

"I'm sure." For once, Flame didn't sound skeptical or sarcastic. In fact, he smiled at them, an open, clear beam that made him look younger, and his eyes were suspiciously bright.

Lysander pecked Flame's cheek and then stepped forward to squeeze Loren's shoulder. "Come back and visit."

Things were still slightly awkward between them after the revelation in the cavern. Loren wasn't sure how he felt about Lysander, but he did know the other man loved Flame. It would work out in the end. Smiling, he nodded. "I will."

And then two bodies pounced on him, and Loren fell to the ground, Jared and Maya on top of him. His littermates held him down, as if unwilling to let him go. "You bet your ass," Jared growled. "Otherwise, we'll be very pissed."

Dark rings shrouded his once-happy face, and Loren cursed himself for leaving when his sibling needed him. Jared punched him in the chest. "Don't even think about it. Staying won't help. Besides, I don't intend to linger here much longer, either."

Maya nodded. "We're going back to our initial plan. We're leaving Rook Valley next year to study."

Once, Loren would have done anything to join them. Once, he'd have loved to bury himself in books, to read all about the culture of the old ages. He realized now that he didn't need human universities to do that. He had his mates right there, ready to teach him all about magic and about his past. He'd found his path.

As Jared and Maya got off him, Loren grinned at them. "The humans won't know what hit them."

"Of course, we'll be there to celebrate your first day of school," Tavon said.

As everyone exchanged handshakes with Tavon and Yoshi, Loren shouldered the last of the bags. They needed to go, or else he'd lose his nerve.

Exiting the yard, he took the bags to the car and placed them in the trunk. The others followed in silence, seeing Loren and his mates

off. With a final nod to Viktor and Flame, Tavon and Yoshi entered the vehicle.

“Well, that’s goodbye, then,” Loren said.

“Nah,” Jared replied. “It’s see you soon.”

Loren couldn’t suppress the desire to hug his siblings one last time. “Take care, okay?” he whispered in Jared’s ear. “Don’t worry. Your mate will come.”

Jared nodded, and Loren forced himself to break away from them. With a final look behind, he opened the car door and got in. “Go,” he told Tavon.

Without a word, Tavon started the vehicle. As they drove off, Loren watched his brothers and sister through the rear mirror. They got smaller and smaller until, finally, they disappeared altogether. “We’ll come back soon,” Yoshi soothed him. “We won’t let you lose contact with your family.”

“I *am* with my family,” Loren replied. He’d always miss his siblings, but Tavon and Yoshi were his future, just like Lysander was for Flame. He had no doubt that Jared and Zongxian would find that out as well, and very soon. Even with all the uncertainty that surrounded them, one thing remained true. Mates were supposed to be together. Even if Jared and Zongxian were now parted, their bond would forever remain in place, and nothing could ever change that. Loren only hoped that the world would stop getting in their way and, for once, allow his family to find happiness and tranquility.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native Romanian, Scarlet was born in 1986 and grew up an avid fan of Karl May and Jules Verne, reading fantasy stories and adventure. Later, when she was out of fantasy stories to read, she delved into her mother's collection of book and, of course, stumbled onto romance.

As a writer though, Scarlet Hyacinth was born one sunny summer day, when a dear friend of hers—the same friend who introduced her to GLBT fiction—proposed they start writing a story of their own. As it turns out, the two friends never did finish that particular story, but Scarlet discovered she had a knack for writing and ended up starting to write individually. And so, between working on her dissertation, studying for exams, and reading yaoi manga, she started writing the Kaldor Saga. Along the way, Scarlet met a lot of wonderful people who supported her, and in the end, she found her story a home and, in the process, fulfilled a beautiful dream.

Also by Scarlet Hyacinth

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Siren Classic: Kaldor Saga 2: *Over the Edge*

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