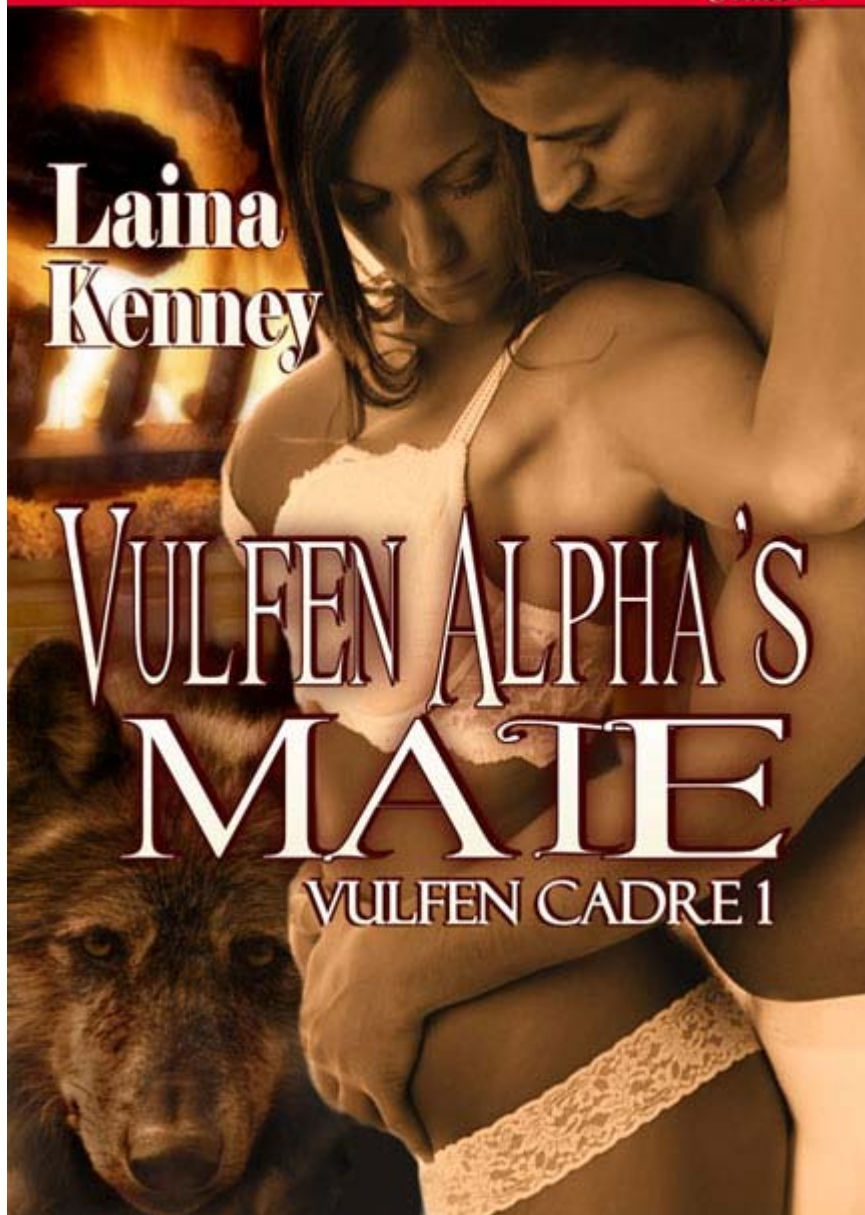


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Laina
Kenney

VULFEN ALPHA'S MATE

VULFEN CADRE 1



Vulfen Cadre 1

Vulfen Alpha's Mate

After a disastrous blind date, Ellie Bradley enjoys dessert and hot kisses with a mysterious waiter, who turns out to be wealthy Russian businessman Rylek Sidarov.

Rylek, Alpha of three vulfen clans, was waiting tables as a favor to his chef uncle. He never thought he would find his fated mate in the human world, but there is no mistaking Ellie's intoxicating scent. At the end of a blazing encounter, danger looms and Rylek goes against his strong vulfen instinct to send Ellie away unclaimed for her own safety. Unable to give her up, Rylek offers Ellie a choice to accept him and be his beloved mate—or never see him again.

Discovering a mate is a gift for Ellie and Rylek both, but human hunters, a vulfen traitor and the complications of navigating a new culture all conspire to threaten their new mating bond and their lives.

Genre: Contemporary, Paranormal, Vampires/Werewolves

Length: 33,701 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

VULFEN ALPHA'S MATE

Copyright © 2011 by Laina Kenney

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-437-5

First E-book Publication: May 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

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DEDICATION

For Sue and Mike. Your friendship and your unfailing support is much appreciated.

VULFEN ALPHA'S MATE

Vulfen Cadre 1

LAINA KENNEY

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Chapter 1

Ellie suppressed a sigh and sipped her wine. The restaurant, Sidarova, was beautifully appointed, the waiter polite and attentive, the dinner perfect. Even her hair was perfect for once, the thick black curls settling into the elaborate updo with no trouble. Her makeup was subtle, just enough to set off her clear blue eyes. With strappy heels and a new black silk cocktail dress, Ellie had been pleased by the woman in the mirror.

The only thing wrong was her date.

It could hardly get worse, she reflected. She wanted to trade in her date for the waiter. She would be willing to bet money that the gorgeous, broad-shouldered waiter never droned on and on about his healthy bank account and his vintage silver corvette. Dear Lord, with a body like a medieval warrior, hair and eyes as dark as midnight, the waiter wouldn't have to speak at all for women to fall all over themselves trying to attract his attention. But when he did speak, that hint of a Russian accent would drive any woman wild.

“—and then I had her reupholstered. All genuine leather,” Henry said proudly. “Dark red leather, and with the silver exterior, she’s a real showpiece—”

His high, nasal voice seemed to fade into the background again as

Ellie spied their waiter coming toward them.

The waiter's long, straight black hair was loose, and he had removed his tie at some point and left the top button undone, she noticed. His crisp white shirt was rolled up at the sleeves now to expose tanned forearms dusted with black hair. There was the tiniest hint of dark hair visible at his throat, and Ellie shivered at the thought of her large breasts with their sensitive nipples nestling in his chest hair. She did love a man with a hairy chest. There was just something so deliciously primitive about it.

She glanced across at Henry, still happily talking about his car. He didn't even seem to notice that her attention had wandered. Nope, not the slightest hint of chest hair on Henry. His suit was perfectly tailored and obviously expensive, as befitted a junior account executive, but his shoulders could definitely not be called broad, and his forehead was becoming rather too prominent.

She looked back at the waiter and sighed longingly. She wanted a man like that to notice her for once. Thirty years of life, and the past fifteen spent with boring clones of Henry on boring dates like this one. She was more than ready to take a walk on the wild side.

Seeming to feel her appreciative regard, the waiter looked intently into her eyes as he walked smoothly up to their table. He moved with a kind of animal elegance, and she could easily imagine him stalking prey in the deep boreal forests of Russia. Holding her still with the power of his dark gaze, he smiled slowly. Ellie could feel her heart flutter at the palpable promise in that intimate smile. The sensation was breathtaking.

"The dessert I recommend for you this evening is a dark chocolate mousse, a specialty of the chef, accompanied by a Russian coffee," the waiter intoned in his deep, warm voice. His slight accent gave his words a darker resonance. He leaned a little closer to Ellie as he said, "The mousse is luscious and creamy with a hint of spice, and melts on the tongue." His eyes never left hers as he spoke, and it seemed to Ellie as if he was delivering a deeper message. Her heart thudded

once and her pussy clenched deliciously.

“Ellie doesn’t need dessert. She’s probably on a diet.” Henry’s nasal tone intruded, breaking the waiter’s spell.

Ellie gaped at him, shocked by his rudeness. It was true that her curves were generous. She would never be a size six in this lifetime, but she certainly wasn’t fat! She had an hourglass shape with a tiny waistline. How dare he simply assume that because she wasn’t a stick-thin model she should be on a diet?

Before Ellie could gather her thoughts for a suitably sharp reply to put him in his place, the waiter spoke again.

“That would be a shame,” he said gallantly, reaching down to take Ellie’s small hand in his large one. “Are you sure I cannot change your mind? A beautiful woman should never be denied food or pleasure.” His eyes lingered for a moment over her abundant curves clad in black silk, and his admiration was obvious. Her nipples beaded in reaction, and she was forced to stifle a moan.

Henry bristled at the attention his date was receiving from the bold waiter. “No more pleasure tonight or she’ll burst the seams of her dress. It’s tight already,” he said. “I’ll take the check now. Come on, Ellie.” He made a grab for her hand.

Ellie gasped, her eyes closing in horror and humiliation.

The waiter pulled Ellie behind his broad back immediately and bared his gleaming white teeth as a vicious snarl burst from deep in his throat. His eyes were fierce, his posture menacing and blatantly aggressive. The air around him crackled with live energy. Henry shrank back in his seat, clearly ill-prepared for this uncivilized reaction.

As if summoned, two large men appeared out of nowhere, one dark and one blond, and more men could be seen converging on their location. “You must leave,” the blond man said urgently to Henry. “Leave now.” He hustled a startled Henry out of his chair and ushered him toward the door while several of the others surrounded the waiter and tried to steer him toward the kitchen.

The waiter, still growling ferociously, retained possession of Ellie's hand, pulling her along with the group.

"Why should I be forced to leave?" Henry protested as he was pushed along. "No waiter is going to have me thrown out," Henry stated importantly, stopping and puffing out his skinny chest. "I am a regular at this restaurant, and I want to speak to the maître d'. I know him personally. He's a client of mine."

"It would be in your best interest to leave, sir, if you value your safety," the blond man said, glancing apprehensively back in the direction of the growl, still moving Henry quickly in the direction of the door.

"That waiter is making me look bad so he can steal my date." Henry's indignant whining was getting louder now.

Ellie was beyond embarrassed at her date's behavior, but she didn't want the waiter to lose his job. She tried to reclaim her hand from him, intending to go speak to Henry and try to smooth things over.

Her waiter would not release her. Instead, he wrapped his other brawny arm around her waist to ensure that she stayed with him.

When she finally stopped struggling and moved with him and his large entourage toward the back of the main dining room, his growling ceased, but he never let go of her hand. He didn't remove his arm from her waist even when they reached the back wall by the kitchen door. The men with them shared significant glances but didn't try to separate her from the waiter's grasp.

Ellie watched her captor closely. He was grimacing and breathing deeply, and it was obvious that he was still struggling for control of his raging temper, but she didn't worry for her safety. The men with them spoke quietly, seemingly careful not to disturb him any further.

The maître d', a distinguished gentleman in his late fifties or early sixties, was now following Henry to the door. Ellie couldn't hear their conversation, but when Henry finally left the restaurant, the maître d' turned and hurried toward her, frowning.

“Sir,” she said hastily, “please take into consideration that my date was being unpleasant. The waiter was just trying to make up for his bad manners, and I don’t want him to get into any trouble for sticking up for me—”

“My apologies, dear lady,” the maître d' said with a little bow. “You are not in any way responsible for the behavior of your companion. Please step into the kitchen and we will deal with this... unusual situation.”

Ellie was not reassured by his comment. “I want your assurance, sir, that the waiter will not be fired for this. Please,” she entreated softly as they all moved into the kitchen, “don’t punish him.”

The maître d' smiled kindly and one of the men who had helped to restrain her waiter from attacking Henry laughed.

“Madam, I give you my assurance, I will not be firing the owner of this restaurant, and my own Alpha—that is, my superior,” the maître d' said complacently.

Ellie looked in surprise at the man who was still holding her hand. Her waiter was the boss? The owner of Sidarova was said to be a reclusive Russian nobleman, with business interests up and down the Eastern seaboard. Waiting tables and openly flirting in the middle of a busy restaurant, he didn’t fit the term “recluse” in Ellie’s mind, but with his proud bearing, incredible accent and melting dark eyes he could definitely pass for a Russian nobleman.

Holding her eyes with his, he nodded slowly, and the men still surrounding them backed up several paces.

“Rylek Sidarov,” he said, bowing deeply over her hand. “I am indeed the owner, but my uncle Vasily is the chef and the day-to-day boss of Sidarova. I was in town visiting him and the restaurant was short-staffed this evening, so I offered my services.” He shrugged his brawny shoulders, for the first time looking awkward. “I have done many things, but I have not waited tables before. Perhaps I do not have the correct temperament.”

Ellie felt strangely compelled to reassure him. “You were

wonderful," she said, squeezing his fingers a little. "I appreciated your courtesy to me."

"And did you appreciate it when he frightened your date away?" The blond man who had removed Henry from the restaurant asked pointedly, walking in behind them.

Ellie looked down, uncomfortable. She wasn't sure how to formulate an answer that would hide her wicked attraction to Rylek Sidarov, or her immediate preference for him over the man she had arrived with, so she stayed silent.

Rylek, however, had no such difficulty. "The man was unworthy of such a woman," he stated. "He wanted to deny her food."

This was said as if it was offensive in the extreme to suggest that a healthy, undeniably curvaceous woman should be prevented from enjoying one evening's dessert.

Ellie was surprised when his embarrassing statement was greeted with gasps of outrage from the roomful of men working in the kitchen. Several of them growled briefly, before seeming to catch themselves and stopping abruptly at a look from Vasily.

"You see now why he had to be challenged," Rylek asserted, his accent quite pronounced.

"Of course, you could never leave this beauty in the hands of such a man." The older man who came forward was obviously the chef, and therefore, Rylek's uncle. He turned and rattled off a series of instructions in his native Russian, snapping his fingers at one of the sous-chefs. There was a sudden flurry of activity in the kitchen.

Rylek laughed briefly and guided Ellie to a small table in a private alcove to one side of the kitchen where they were sheltered from the busyness. The nameplate on the door by the little table proclaimed "Manager," but the door was closed.

"My uncle says you are to have a glass of chocolate mousse, a tray of rich pastries and chocolate desserts to sample with dark Russian coffee to break the sweetness," he said, bowing from the waist. "Exactly as I recommended for you, if you recall. The dark

sweetness suits you, I think.”

She nodded her head, but then his words sank in, and she protested. “I don’t really need a tray of desserts,” she said. “I’m very grateful to you, but I really should be going and—”

“I would be a poor host if I let you leave without seeing to your every need,” Rylek said deeply. His resonant tone, combined with the thought of this man tending to her every need, caused a series of luscious shivers to run up and down Ellie’s spine.

He seated her gracefully at the tiny table. He pulled a small white tablecloth from a nearby drawer and snapped it in place over the table with a flourish, then sat across from her and claimed her hands in his again. He seemed enthralled with her small hands, stroking her skin and playing with her fingers. It seemed he could not stop touching her.

“Rylek,” she said. “I—” She stopped, unsure what she wanted to say to this glorious male. She was by no means a young, inexperienced girl, but just the touch of his hands made her feel breathless, almost shy.

“Ah, perhaps you will favor me with your full name?” He breathed the words into her sensitive palms, and she quivered in reaction.

“Elizabeth Ann Bradley,” she said apologetically, sorry that her name was so ordinary in light of his own exotic name. “Ellie is what everyone calls me.”

“Elizabeth,” he said, and his accent made her name sound beautiful. “Ellie. It is a name as beautiful and feminine as your scent.” He inhaled, nuzzling his face into her cupped hands. His tongue darted out to lick the beating pulse at her wrist, and he groaned softly, closing his eyes briefly as if overcome.

Ellie could feel her heart pick up speed. The man was a living, breathing picture of sex. Visions of this man tasting other, more feminine parts of her body took over her mind, and her entire nervous system went up in flames. It was all she could do to keep from

rubbing her thighs together under her silky skirt.

He seemed to know it, damn him, because his eyes locked on hers and he leaned forward across the small table. His decadent mouth settled over hers, and once again he tasted her, moving his lips and tongue across her lips and teasing her to open for him.

Ellie's lips opened on a shaky sigh which he drank into his own mouth before sealing it over hers and gently stealing every thought from her head. He curled one strong hand behind her head and held her in place for long, heated moments, while he used his skillful mouth to lead her to a level of pleasure that was shocking and unfamiliar.

When Rylek finally drew back to look at her, Ellie found that her hands were pressed firmly to the hot, damp silk of his shirt, and his heartbeat was pounding like her own.

"Rylek?" she whispered questioningly, her voice high and breathless. It was nothing less than an invitation.

The sound seemed to inflame him. His dark eyes blazed with intensity. He leaned toward her again, his eyes fixed upon her kiss-swollen mouth, but suddenly a tray of sweets came between them.

Rylek bared his teeth at the audacity, his roped muscles tensed and ready, but he reluctantly moved back so that the tray could be placed on the tiny table. The handsome blond man, who had escorted her date from the restaurant so efficiently, added small cups of dark coffee to the feast of desserts before them.

The man smiled. "Perhaps you wonder how I can get away with interrupting Rylek when he is so captivated by his chosen companion?" He obviously addressed Ellie. "But you see, I am Beta to his Alpha, one of his seconds you might say in America. And a cousin also. Valeri Sidarov, always at your service." He bowed from the waist and disappeared quickly around the corner as the chef, who was obviously his father, came and shooed him away, muttering darkly in Russian.

Rylek seemed to relax again when Valeri left.

“Please, try some of the chocolate mousse at least. My uncle is a very talented chef, and this recipe is his own. He is justifiably quite proud of this masterpiece. It is a favorite indulgence of many beautiful ladies.” His smile was slow and blatantly sexual, as if remembering all the ways in which he had personally indulged beautiful women.

Ellie felt a flush of wild heat inspired by that smile, but instead of climbing across the table into his lap, she took her self-control firmly in hand and turned to the dessert. She scooped some of the dark mousse onto the spoon and tried a tiny bite. Her eyes nearly rolled back in her head as the incredible taste exploded in her senses. Dark and velvety smooth with just a hint of...cinnamon spice? It was nothing short of decadent.

Ellie moaned softly, and scooped up another bite, this time letting it melt and slide down her throat. Her eyelashes fluttered and drooped until only a sliver of blue shone through. She dug in to the rich dessert with enthusiasm, moaning her enjoyment until finally the small crystal dish was empty.

Surfacing at last from her absorption with the chocolate treat, Ellie looked up into black eyes blazing like an inferno.

Chapter 2

As Rylek watched Ellie enjoy the delicate dessert, his hands clenched on the edges of the little table to keep from grabbing her. He wanted to pull her curvaceous body onto the tabletop and devour her in a few intense, delicious bites. Her scent, spiced with the delicate arousal that had beckoned him closer all evening, was somehow both familiar and, at the same time, irresistibly mysterious to him, though he was certain they had never met before.

If she were a vulfen female, he would have called her his mate and spent the next several hours claiming her body in every possible way, but it was unheard of for an Alpha to mate a full human. How could a human female, even one as undeniably robust and healthy as the beautiful Ellie, survive a full vulfen mating with a powerful Alpha? No, it could not be.

Her stunning blue eyes slid to half-mast as she licked a smear of chocolate from her lips, and his cock throbbed in answer, aching like an open wound. His mind might question, but his hungry erection had no doubts whatsoever about her suitability as a partner. His cock had responded with pounding fullness hours earlier to the first sight of her sweet curves, the first brief inhalation of her womanly scent, and had remained stubbornly hard and ready ever since.

And now it was all he could do to keep his fangs from dropping as he watched her eat, another unconscious sign of his body's approval of this unlikely human woman. He wanted so badly to sink his fangs into the tender nape of her neck and mark her permanently as he shafted her deeply from behind. It wasn't helping his tenuous control that he had to watch her sensuous reactions while consuming food he

had provided for her.

In the vulfen world, providing food for the females and young was both a duty and a privilege for the male. It was a matter of honor to the male that his female was fed first, and as such, it had become a firm part of the ritual of first mating. Young male wolves in the grip of the first change fantasized about feeding and fucking their chosen female. A female enjoying her food was as much a sexual symbol to them as bared breasts and a soft pink pussy, and just as deeply appreciated by the males.

In contrast, a male who denied food to a female while eating it himself was reviled by all vulfen, instantly challenged for his female and often killed outright. Such a thing had never been heard of in any of the Russian Clans he ruled, in his lifetime or his father's, but he knew of a distant clan where it had happened.

The puny human man who had accompanied the beautiful Ellie Bradley to Sidarova and then refused to provide her the proper finish for her meal was only lucky that the other vulfen males present had been ignorant of the reason for Rylek's challenge at the time. Had they known of it, the human might not have escaped him so easily with the aid of his Cadre of vulfen warriors in the restaurant that night.

A soft moan escaped from Ellie's pink lips as she consumed the last bite, and Rylek's stiff cock flexed in response. He wanted to be inside her when she made that sound more than he wanted his next breath. He wanted to sample the chocolate mousse from her nipples and the soft skin of her belly, let it melt into the hot folds between her thighs and then drink it from her body, mixed with her own creamy essence. He wanted to spend days and nights with his face, his fingers or his cock buried in her fragrant female warmth. He stifled a groan and gripped the table edge, praying that he could keep from grinding it to powder.

At that moment, Ellie looked up into his eyes, and his breath stopped in his throat at the arresting sight of the pleasure in her soft

blue gaze. She looked like a deeply satisfied woman, and that quickly, his legendary Alpha control disintegrated.

He reached out, dragged her across the table, and held her against his hot body, fastening his desperate mouth on hers. He couldn't hold back a tiny growl when the taste of elusive chocolate blended with her unique flavor, and at that vibrant sound, she shuddered and whimpered in his arms. Her responsiveness to his voice and his hands only led him further along a path which was dangerous to tread, drawing him down into raging heat and hunger and toward the shattering intensity of first mating.

He knew he must not take a fragile, delicate, *delicious* human for his mate. Her life would immediately be in danger, both from vulfen anger at his rejection of their traditions and from the small group of humans who knew of the existence of his people and hunted them. It was utter madness, but the idea of mating her was taking root in his conscious mind, the ripe seductive taste of her luring him to commit himself, his body and soul, to her alone.

Rylek tried to pull himself back from the dangerous precipice, but Ellie had her slender fingers twined in his hair. His hands explored with a will of their own. Her body was wrapped around his equally as much as his was trying to sink into hers. With an effort, he wrenched his mouth from hers on a heartfelt groan.

The sight that greeted him was electrifying. Her beautiful face was turned up to his, ruby lips slightly opened and blindly seeking his mouth again. The skin he had bared gleamed with the subtle iridescence of a perfect pearl. Her heaving breaths pressed her repeatedly against his chest, and cradled in one big clawed hand, he held a soft rosy-peaked breast.

Damn, his claws were out.

As he watched, riveted, his hand flexed on her supple white flesh and she moaned sweetly, head falling back to expose her throat to him. Rylek launched himself to his feet in a frenzy of lust with Ellie clutched to his chest, and whirled them around the corner into the

manager's office.

"Out," he rumbled, and there was a flurry of movement as his seconds, Valeri and Miros, took one look at his claws and changed eyes and vacated the room, closing the door behind them.

Rylek placed his willing captive on the long couch and followed her down, ending up between her pale spread thighs. Exactly where he had wanted to be from the moment he had first seen her. The position made him thrust once involuntarily, and he cursed, his clawed hands still fumbling with her clothes and his.

* * * *

Ellie felt the world shift on its axis, and when it stopped spinning she was on her back with Rylek above her, the ridge of his huge penis pressing hard against her burning, needy core. She was dimly aware that he was cursing steadily as he unwrapped her body from her dress and tore her lacy under things away. She couldn't help him—she could only writhe, only moan and beg him for anything he would give.

"Please, please," she chanted breathlessly, and then his name, "Rylek."

His face was blank, fierce, absorbed, as he took a moment when they were both naked to gaze at her, lying there with her body open and vulnerable to him. And then he was back, his hard chest rasping deliciously against her breasts, his breath hot in her ear, as he pushed his big cock against her wetness and inside.

The feel of him squeezing inside her firmly, slowly stretching her open, had Ellie hovering on the point between pleasure and pain. She panted and squirmed, trying to accommodate his granite hardness, his incredible size. He eased back for a moment. Then he pushed in again, further, to the full extent of her and held himself strong and deep.

At the rolling wave of sensation, Ellie wailed his name, and his

control seemed to snap. He thrust hard again and again, his big body lunging and bucking, setting up a furious rhythm that rocked her body and his. In her ear, he whispered reverent praise for her lush breasts, her generous wetness and her tight clasp. He called her beautiful over and over, and his voice was so deep and rasping it sounded almost inhuman.

"Come," he demanded. "Come for me."

He licked and then nipped the delicate skin just below her ear, and Ellie went flying over the edge into a screaming, crushing abyss. Her body rippled and clutched at his, and Rylek followed her over with a deep roar, pumping his hot seed inside her in long, desperate bursts before collapsing with his face buried against her neck.

His hot breaths gusted heavily in her ear, and his weight pushed her down into the sofa cushions, but Ellie didn't care. She never wanted to move. She never wanted *him* to move.

She ran one hand lazily through his hair over and over as tiny spasms continued to roll through her body, content to enjoy this quiet moment with him while they both tried to get their breathing under control.

"Ellie. Beautiful Ellie," he muttered, and pressed his lips to her throat.

She responded by moving her head slightly to give him better access. He kissed her again, and pulled his body away from hers in a gush of fluids, giving an audible gasp as he looked down at her body.

"I have injured you," he said urgently, smoothing his hand over two long red scratches on her hip.

"Rylek, it's nothing," she assured him warmly.

She stretched and arched her back a little. She had never felt better in her life. He must just need to clip his nails. It wasn't a big deal.

He paid no attention to her words, quickly examining the rest of her. He was gentle but thorough, using only one finger to touch a small red mark on her breast and one high on her thigh. He touched the scratches again and then turned away from her.

He pulled her dress off the back of the sofa and draped it over her body.

“You were all I could have wished for.” His words were a wonderful compliment, but they came out sounding like an apology. Something in his voice warned Ellie that reality was crashing in to derail her little fantasy of happily-ever-after.

Rylek stood and ran his hands through his hair then pulled on his clothes. In moments, he was presentable once more, though his mouth was swollen and his eyes were heavy-lidded. He looked like a powerful medieval conqueror in modern dress, and she couldn’t look away from him.

“Rylek,” she tried, but he silenced her with a gentle kiss.

He pressed his lips to her hand gallantly. “Take as much time as you need to get ready,” he said. “Valeri will drive you to your home.”

With those polite, depressing words, he turned and left the office, shutting the door softly behind him.

She sighed, fighting tears, and rose to gather her scattered clothing. She had caromed from total bliss to total rejection in less than two minutes. That was a record, even for her pitiful love life.

Well, the handsome prince never went home with the slightly overweight average character in the fairy tales, she reasoned. It was always a beautiful slender princess who the prince spoiled and adored.

The thought did nothing to improve her mood.

Chapter 3

Valeri was a careful driver and a considerate companion, Ellie thought. He had escorted her to his car, quietly taken her address, and spoken of nothing important after that. He never once mentioned that he knew of her passionate encounter with his boss in the little restaurant office, even though she was quite sure he must know.

She was quite sure everyone must know.

She had tried to repair some of the damage before she left the office, but she couldn't magically get the wrinkles out of her dress any more than she could instantly redo her earlier elaborate hairstyle. She had settled for a quick braiding of her hair and then pulled her shawl around her before she had forced herself to leave the safety of the office. She had hoped to minimize the appearance of sexual excess.

"Miss Bradley," Valeri said, his tone clearly indicating that he had said it before.

She managed a wan smile. "Sorry," she said. "Please call me Ellie."

He darted a quick glance her way, then focused his attention on the highway.

"Ellie, our Alpha is the center of our many businesses and has many demands on his time," Valeri began.

Ellie suddenly had a very bad feeling. It sounded like the self-proclaimed "second" was going to apologize for his boss' behavior toward her. She was holding it together, but if he started talking about Rylek having sex with her and then immediately walking away, she wouldn't be able to keep from crying.

“Please, don’t,” she said, and was aware of the tremor in her own voice.

“He likes you very much,” Valeri pressed on determinedly. “I have never seen him so instantly drawn to a female. I, and many others in the family, have noticed that he has been pulling away from all of the eligible females recently. It has been a great concern to us.”

Ellie prayed that he would drive faster. They were almost at her apartment, and she wouldn’t have to listen to any more about all the “eligible females” that wanted Rylek. She wanted him, but he didn’t see her as eligible, obviously, since he had no difficulty sending her away. He didn’t even want to look at her. She just wanted to curl up in her bed for a week and bawl her eyes out over another rejection.

“Rylek Sidarov is a man much in demand in his businesses,” Valeri repeated, “so you must not take it personally that he had to leave you before he could completely satisfy your needs.”

Ellie almost groaned at the humiliation. Just when she thought it couldn’t get any worse. Apparently, Valeri had some mistaken belief that Rylek had been interrupted before anything happened.

“I know that he will explain himself, of course,” he continued, “but you must know that—”

“What I know is that Rylek got what he wanted from me and I got what I wanted from him,” Ellie lied shakily.

Valeri started to speak, but she talked over him. She couldn’t hold it together much longer.

“Turn here, please. This is my building,” she said quickly. “Thanks for the lift. It was certainly better than having to call a taxi. I really appreciate it.”

She jumped out of the car almost before it stopped rolling, bolted to the door of her building and ran right past the startled doorman before he could even blurt out his customary greeting.

Chapter 4

Rylek looked up, startled, as his second burst into the office and threw the car keys on the desk with a great clatter.

"You hurt that lovely human female," Valeri accused.

Rylek groaned and dropped his head back in his hands.

"Yes," he said, thinking of the scratches and bright love marks his claws and fangs had left all over her soft pale flesh. His vulfen side had come to the fore in that joining, very nearly starting the first mating ritual. It had been all he could do to keep from flipping her over on her stomach and giving her the mating bite. As it was, he had nipped her sensitive throat at least once in his dominance. It was a wonder that she hadn't run straight from his arms to scream for the human police to come and arrest him.

Valeri sighed. "When she came in here tonight, Alpha, her scent was already lovely, but when she saw you, her scent became hopeful, beautiful. And all your people became hopeful. It was more than obvious that you were drawn to her as well. But when I escorted her to the car," Valeri went on in a hard tone, "her scent was sad, and by the time we reached her apartment, she was so humiliated she was almost shaking." His voice was loud now, on the verge of shouting with his irritation. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Valeri," Rylek said, not defending his actions, but wanting his second to understand, "I did not humiliate her. You must be wrong about that. I know that I hurt her, bruised her, and scraped her delicate human flesh with my claws and my fangs. She was so delicious I very nearly devoured her, but—"

Valeri snorted loudly. "Alpha, please. I'm not saying you hurt her

physically. What I'm saying is that your rejection of her has hurt her."

He flung himself into a chair and continued with his lecture.

"Since when does any vulfen male lucky enough to be granted a mate, and such a beautiful mate, send her away? I'll tell you when — never. We all know there is no guarantee. It doesn't always happen. Not every warrior is granted a mate. Not even every Alpha," he said pointedly.

"I didn't mate her," Rylek said softly. "I had enough control to keep from giving her the mating bite, although I came very close to it."

Valeri made a face. "Yes, you are universally respected for your iron control of your vulfen side. And what do you use this fabled control for? Denying a gift from the goddess! Denying a mate!" Valeri was clearly disgusted.

Many seconds would never speak so frankly to their Alphas, but Rylek had always encouraged his seconds and the warriors in his Cadre, his elite group of twelve, to openly share their opinions. He was strong enough to listen to other ideas, and to take criticism, if it came to that. Valeri was within his rights.

"Valeri, she would not have thanked me for dragging her into our world, a world she does not even know exists, a world where she would be in danger every moment. It is unfair to her. You know we are hunted."

Rylek didn't know if he was trying to convince Valeri or himself. Sending Ellie away unmated was excruciating. He could hardly concentrate on his second's words. He couldn't help but smell her incredible scent all over the office and all over him, and it was driving him mad with the need to follow her and finish the claiming. Claw tips still protruded from his fingers, and his fangs refused to fully retract. The pleasure she had given him!

"We guard every mate," Valeri said, and his voice made it a pledge. "You cannot doubt that we will guard the Alpha's mate. She represents hope for all of us."

"Not all would accept a human as the Alpha's mate. She is so soft and fragile compared to our females. She would be in danger every moment." Rylek's tone was tortured.

"No one will challenge you or the mating. My father is an Elder. Miros, the entire Cadre, everyone who saw her tonight and saw your reaction to her, will support you. She is human, yes. And she reacted strongly to you, proving she is not fragile. She was devastated to be sent away from you. It is a true mating. We all saw it."

With those words from his second, Rylek felt his heart lift. It was not common for him to be burdened with self-doubt. He could not think of another time when such a thing had happened to him. He was born to be the Alpha, and had always been acknowledged as such within the three clans. His birth, along with the combined strength of his mother's status and his father's diplomacy, had reunited the three clans, even before his father had been killed. After that, Rylek challenged and ascended to the position of Alpha before the Council of Elders.

There would be difficulties with this mating, not the least of which would be apologizing to his mate. Revealing his true nature and convincing her to mate with him in truth. Forever.

Rylek cast aside his doubts and pushed to his feet suddenly. Valeri rose as well.

"I must finish the mating," he said in a deep grating rumble, her scent beckoning more strongly to him, as if the decision to accept her had released his stranglehold on his vulfen senses.

"Yes, Alpha," Valeri responded with satisfaction.

"My seconds will accompany me and stand guard, as is proper."

"Yes, Alpha."

Knowing that his seconds would be right behind, Rylek ran out the side door, his limbs elongating as fur and muscle shifted effortlessly into the form of a large black wolf. The strength and freedom of the form was incredible.

His Uncle Vasily shook his head fondly as Rylek passed, and the

Cadre warriors raised their fists in the air and roared their support.

In this elemental form, Ellie's delicious scent sang in his nostrils, pulling him onward, leading him unerringly in the direction of his beautiful human mate.

Chapter 5

Ellie stood in her tiny bedroom and gazed uneasily in the mirror. Her lovely, alarmingly expensive dress had four long slices along one side. Her pale skin was clearly visible through the torn black silk, and she stared at the rents, frowning as she turned one way and then the other. The light scratches on her hip corresponded exactly with two of the tears.

She could not come up with an explanation, at least, not one that belonged in the real world. Her thoughts raced along lines that could only be described as fantastical.

She shook her head finally, and turned away from the mirror to remove her ruined dress.

The door buzzer shrilled loudly and Ellie started. She didn't often have outside visitors, since her best friend lived in the same building. In point of fact, she couldn't think of a single person who would visit at this time of night. The doorman must have hit the wrong button by accident.

Calming her sudden sense of unease with that thought, she pulled her dress off and shrugged into her white silk robe. She always dressed very conservatively at the office, but when she was on her own time she loved the feel of silk against her skin.

The buzzer rang again, and Ellie walked slowly out to her living room to answer it.

"Yes, Fred?"

"Miss Bradley, I apologize," Fred's tinny voice came through the speaker. "I couldn't stop him. I didn't dare. He just looked at me and it was impossible to refuse."

Fred's voice was drowned out by a firm knocking on Ellie's door.

"Thank you, Fred," she said. Fred was always very conscientious to the point of obsession about his job as the first point of building security. It would take something, or someone, truly extraordinary to make him change his usual careful guardianship of the tenants' privacy.

Her heart thumped. Suddenly, she knew who was at the door.

Ellie hesitated for a moment, and then looked out the peephole. The hallway light was dim, but even through the distortion of the glass there was no mistaking the large form of Rylek Sidarov standing outside her door. Her emotions surged at the sight of him, and she honestly couldn't say if she wanted to invite him in or send him away.

She stood, undecided, with her hand on the doorknob.

At her lack of response the knock came again, only a little louder this time.

"Ellie," Rylek's gorgeous voice said. "Please let me in so I can apologize to you in person."

"Apologize?" Her response was suspicious. "I'm not hurt. The scratches are nothing, so if that's what this is about, you don't need to say anything else."

She could hear him groan through the closed door.

"Ellie, please, I wish to tell you that I am sorry. Please." The voice had a distinct bite to it, and she suddenly had an image of sharp white teeth snapping.

Ellie almost smiled in spite of her anger as she put her eye up to the peephole once more.

His words were a plea, but his tone was one of command and his posture was straight and proud. Rylek probably believed he was begging. The thought amused her. He was such a powerful man. He wouldn't even realize that this was not the way in which most people pleaded for an audience, but perhaps that was appropriate for him. Certainly, the mere fact that he was willing to apologize and take responsibility for his own behavior already made him superior to

every other man she had met in her life.

Ellie took a bracing breath and opened the door.

His hand was raised in a loose fist, and it was clear that he had intended to knock again. He moved forward immediately, coming inside and closing the door behind him, as if he feared that she would change her mind about admitting him.

Rylek took her hand in his and brought it to his lips.

"Forgive me, Ellie," he said, his warm breath rasping across the back of her hand and causing corresponding shivers up her spine. "I want you to understand, I was not rejecting you when I sent you away. I am sorry. Of course that would be your thought. In my defense, I would say that my life is dangerous, and your life is so fragile. *I* am dangerous, but I never want to be the one to cause you harm."

"Rylek, you didn't hurt me," Ellie began. "I loved every moment of what we—"

His finger across her lips gently asked for her silence.

"Ellie, I was fast, you cannot deny. For that also, I apologize. The first mating between us should have been slow, if it could not be gentle." He smiled ruefully. "I fear that you inspired such heat within me that true gentleness was far beyond my reach."

That incredible statement soothed some of her anger. The idea that a decidedly average woman could "inspire heat" in a man like Rylek Sidarov—it was flattering to say the least.

His hand caressed her cheek and she couldn't keep herself from leaning into the warmth of his touch. His magnetism was such a potent force. He had given her such incredible pleasure that her body was still heavy with satisfaction. In one encounter, he had already trained her nerve endings to respond to his strokes, sending tingles of delight up and down her spine.

He took her hands in his and led her to an overstuffed chair. When she was seated, he knelt in front of her.

"Please say that you can forgive me."

"Yes, of course," she answered immediately. In her heart, she had

already forgiven him. Perhaps the handsome prince might choose the ordinary, average woman at least once in a while, she thought happily.

He smiled at her, but he stayed on his knees, and to Ellie he still looked tense.

“You are as gracious as you are beautiful,” Rylek said fervently.

Ellie put her hand on his head, running her fingers through his black hair, sifting the thick, silky stuff over and over.

He allowed the familiarity, but didn’t relax into it as she had expected. He took a deep breath.

“I came here with a specific desire,” he said, “but now I find I cannot go through with it.”

Ellie stopped petting him. Was he going to reject her again now? What game was he playing?

Before she could question him or become angry, he was speaking again.

“I want you for my mate, to live with me always, to bear my young. I feel it is destined, but there is something you must know before you decide. It is perhaps unfair to be so hasty in this, but I must have a true answer.” Rylek stood. “If you decide against me, it must be while I still have the strength to leave you.”

The air around his big body seemed to shimmer with an almost imperceptible iridescence, and in that moment, Rylek was gone and in his place sat a huge black wolf. Ellie shrieked and threw her arms out protectively then sat frozen, fearful, and disbelieving. She was afraid to move, afraid to breathe, and when the wolf made a hesitant move toward her, she shrank back in her chair, keeping her eyes fixed on him.

“Stay,” she said shrilly, pointing at the creature, trying to sound firm though her heart was pounding in her chest. The wolf stepped back again.

“This can’t be real. You just cannot be real,” she muttered. She laughed a bit hysterically when the wolf went down on his belly and began edging closer. His pink tongue came out and washed over her

bare toes, causing her to shriek again and pull her feet up into the chair.

"I do *not* believe you're real," she said warningly, but her voice wasn't as strong as she wanted it to be.

The wolf whined and sat up, cocking his head to one side and studying her. He was a big animal, but he didn't seem inclined to attack her right away.

The two sat for a moment, just looking at one another, and then Ellie carefully stretched out her arm, letting just the tips of her fingers stroke his massive head. His fur was thick and shiny, black as midnight just like Rylek's hair. He butted her hand gently with his massive head, pushing against her touch. He seemed to be encouraging her to stroke him with a firm pressure.

She looked into the wolf's intelligent black eyes, and her heart missed a beat.

"Rylek," she said. Her voice shook. "I need you to not be a wolf right now. Please."

Her words sounded impossibly bizarre to her own ears, but for the second time the air began to faintly shimmer, and then Rylek the man sat before her on the carpet. Her fingers just barely touched the top of his dark head.

"Oh!" The room revolved slowly. She slumped forward until her head touched her knees. She concentrated on just breathing.

She definitely did *not* want to pass out with a werewolf in the room.

Chapter 6

Ellie didn't know how much time had passed when she finally was able to calm her breathing. It slowly entered her awareness that Rylek was stroking her hair gently and murmuring softly to her. She could barely understand half of what he said and gradually realized he was speaking in another language with only the occasional phrase in English.

"Ellie, beautiful one, I am sorry," he said finally, when her breathing took on a more normal rhythm. "Please know that I would not rush your understanding, but my seconds will have felt the pull of my change, and I feel sure they will arrive soon. They are very serious in their duties and will want to be certain there is no danger to us."

With one last pass of his hand over her hair, Rylek rose and moved to the door. He opened it, and Ellie was grateful for his warning, as it was clear that the two men skidding to a stop in the hallway were expecting to find a battle in progress. It took a moment for her to recognize Valeri, since the last time she had seen him, he hadn't had fangs or claws.

Valeri and the man beside him both seemed larger than they had been earlier in the evening, with eyes that glowed in the dim light of the hall.

Ellie dropped her head back into her lap with a muffled groan.

Rylek ushered the men into the room quickly and locked the door. "There is no danger here. I chose the path of honesty with my mate. I showed her my true nature and gave her a choice."

He indicated Ellie, and all three men looked at her. She kept her cheek pressed against her knees and concentrated on breathing.

"The little human female looks to be in distress," the third man said carefully. "You showed her the change. Is she able to speak yet?"

"She has spoken, yes," Rylek said, sounding almost proud. "She told me to stop being a wolf right now."

"Good advice, Alpha," Valeri said dryly.

Alpha, Ellie thought. Of course. It explained so much, his snarling reaction to Henry, the slices in her dress, and the two long scratches on her body.

Suddenly, another thought struck her, and she lifted her head to glare at Valeri.

"Are you a werewolf, too?" she demanded.

Valeri bowed from the waist. "We are vulfen," he stated with some superiority. "We do not use the term of werewolf, as that is a word invented by superstitious humans trying to explain something they do not understand. We are vulfen, blessed by the goddess with dual natures. I am a man, as you see, but I am equally a wolf. It is a gift we have been given."

Ellie felt ridiculously like apologizing. He acted as if being called a werewolf was almost an insult. She certainly didn't want to insult three werewolves—no, *vulfen*—in her own living room. Lord knows what damage they could do with tooth and claw.

But, really, they seemed quite civilized, all standing and waiting for her to respond, not acting beastly at all.

"Are there many...vulfen?"

Valeri looked to Rylek, who inclined his head.

"Yes," Valeri said, "there are three Russian Clans, and around the world there are many more clans."

Ellie cleared her throat, not sure how to word her next question.

"Will you show me your wolf?" she asked Valeri.

Rylek made a brief, arrested movement, and then was still.

Valeri came forward slowly and transformed himself. Ellie was surprised to note that his wolf was also somewhat stocky and a bit smaller than Rylek in that form, as was the man. He was a dark

golden color, very unusual for a true wolf, she thought. It would be easy to tell the difference between Valeri and Rylek, even in these furry bodies. He barked once, making her jump, and waved his bushy tail before changing back into Valeri.

Ellie licked her dry lips.

“You both came back wearing clothes,” she said, confused. “Is that normal?”

Rylek spoke up. “If we are overcome by emotion, or injury, we may sometimes change too quickly, and the clothing shreds. However, under normal conditions, clothing is not destroyed by the change so long as it is made of a natural fiber.”

“How can that be? Why should it matter what the clothing is made of?” she asked curiously.

The men exchanged glances, and their shrugs to one another made Ellie think that none of them could or would answer that question.

“The change is a natural process and does not destroy things belonging in nature. Or some clans simply say, the goddess wills it so,” Rylek said. It was clear, for him, that was answer enough.

“Won’t you sit down,” she said politely after a moment and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry when all three men sat.

At least they were well-behaved legendary beasts, she thought a little wildly. And Valeri didn’t have fangs anymore, so perhaps they would calm down now and allow her to convince herself that she had been experiencing some strange hallucination. After a lifetime of good sense, it really was too much to ask that she just suddenly start believing in creatures from a fairy tale.

Even seated, the three broad-shouldered men made her extra long sofa look like a child’s miniature. She was not a small woman, but they made her feel positively tiny in comparison.

She was beginning to relax in their presence, but even so, she couldn’t take her eyes off them. Under her scrutiny, the third man moved uncomfortably, jostling Valeri and earning himself a quelling glance from Rylek.

“Ellie, I would like to formally introduce my seconds to you,” Rylek said carefully. “Valeri Sidarov you know already, and Miros Reith, both trusted warriors, charged with the safety of all within my rule. They will be trusted also with the protection of my mate should I fail.”

Unspoken was the thought that if Rylek failed, it would have to be in the most extreme circumstances. A man like this, a leader and an Alpha, would never leave one of his own undefended. He would fight to the death for those he loved.

Both seconds stood again, and went down to one knee before her, bowing their heads. They didn't rise again immediately, and Ellie had the strange feeling that they were waiting for her to do something. She looked at Rylek helplessly.

“They offer their lives for yours,” he said softly, and it came to her mind that he had done the same for her only moments ago. “It would be acceptable for you to touch their heads briefly, or even to kiss their foreheads, to acknowledge that gift.”

Ellie was hesitant, but leaned forward a little and touched each man in turn on the back of his bent head. At the brush of her hand upon him, Valeri raised his head and gave her an impudent grin before resuming his seat on the sofa.

Miros was slower to get up. He was huge, tall and broad, even bigger than Rylek. His face could never be described as handsome, rough and scarred as it was, but his expression was almost gentle, and he moved in a careful way. It seemed that he was unwilling to frighten the “little human female” any further.

“Since there is no immediate danger, Alpha, perhaps we should go back outside?” Miros asked politely, indicating himself and Valeri.

“Yes, my thanks,” Rylek responded formally, and the two vulfen warriors wasted no time in leaving.

Ellie sighed quietly in relief. Three large men in her small apartment, civilized or otherwise, took up altogether too much physical space.

“Ellie, are you well?” Rylek asked after a moment. “Your cheeks have some color now. Perhaps you are ready to believe I am real?” His voice was hopeful. “You told me I could not be real.”

Ellie considered that she might be getting used to the idea of Rylek as a wolf, or, a vulfen. She nodded.

“Maybe,” she allowed.

“Then, are you recovering from your shock?” he pressed.

Ellie gave him a withering glance.

“There must have been a better way to tell me. You were trying to be as frightening as possible,” she accused.

“No, beautiful one, I want many things with you, but I do not want you to fear me,” he said quietly. “But there is the problem of my people’s need for secrecy. We have done such a good job of making ourselves into a legend, I think, that it becomes difficult to convince someone with whom we want to share this knowledge.

“There are not many humans who know of us. Very few human females would be strong enough for a full vulfen mating, and so our males do not even look among you.”

Something in his tone alerted her and she asked, “If you mated me, would that cause a problem with your people?”

Rylek stood up and began to pace back and forth in her living room. There was something predatory in the way he moved. She had noticed the quality back at the restaurant and marked the differences between Rylek and all the other men of her admittedly limited acquaintance, but she could never have guessed that there was such a fantastical explanation. She had chalked it up to pure sex appeal, that irresistible magnetism that some males had for females, and he certainly had that in abundance.

“There are those, even among my people, who will judge you as too weak to be an Alpha’s mate, simply because you are human,” he said. “I resisted you for so long because of that.”

Ellie was startled. “Resisted me for so long? But we only met tonight!”

Rylek had the grace to look sheepish. "Yes, we met tonight. But I wanted you when I first saw you, and the hours moved too slowly. Hours! With a vulfen female, things would move much more quickly. It became torture to scent you near me, to serve your meal and watch you eat for someone else."

He knelt and looked into her eyes.

"A beautiful woman eating is...part of the first mating ritual of my people. Deeply arousing to all males," he said, his voice a deep masculine rumble. "Even more so to me because you are my mate, and your scent captivates me, intoxicates me. It is like suddenly drinking strong vodka when you have tasted only water, but the effect is many times more powerful than the best vodka. Truly, it is almost impossible to resist. I restrained myself, tried to deny that you could be mine, because you were fully human."

"And because I was with a date," Ellie added.

"No," Rylek said immediately, "that is a human reaction. A vulfen would always take his mate from a lesser male. That human male you were with," and here his voice dropped, as if he could barely restrain his growl, "could never stand against me in challenge. Indeed, the moment I moved to take you from him, he was easily persuaded to leave you to save his own life."

Rylek bared his teeth. "I would never leave you for another male to take. Never. I would answer any challenge for you, keep you with me, and protect you at the cost of my own life. My precious Ellie, you must have no doubt of that!

"However, I had doubts about taking you because you are so deliciously human. And then later I was more certain of our compatibility together, and of your strength, but still I was determined not to drag you into my world. In the end, despite my best intentions to save you from the dangers of sharing my life, I could not let you leave with the human male. You are mine."

His eyes were direct, intense, and Ellie shivered involuntarily.

"I will tell you now, the only thing that can save you from me is if

you choose at this moment to be set free. I have not given you the mating bite, and if you tell me to leave you, I will. But you must tell me to go now... while I can."

Ellie pondered that for a moment.

"I have questions first," she said carefully.

Her heart rate was rock-steady now, but her mind was a jumble of whirling thoughts.

"You are very attracted to me, this I know. There is a burning heat between us. We could melt the polar ice cap."

His dark, slow smile flustered her, and she blew out a shaky breath.

"Yes, I am attracted to you," she said, frowning to show him how serious she was about this. "But I need to know about this bite. I'm sure it will be painful, but will it make me a wolf?"

"No," Rylek said, surprised. "Well, yes it will hurt at first, but it will not truly injure you, and later, the bite will bring pleasure to us both. It will make you stronger, your eyesight and stamina will be better, things of that nature, but to become the wolf? It has not happened with the other human mates."

"There are other human mates? Why didn't you tell me that right away? How many others are there?" Ellie was very excited by this information. There were other human mates. She wouldn't be the only one. It shouldn't make a difference, but somehow it did.

"I do not know how many there are worldwide," he said honestly, "but in the Russian Clans, fewer than half a dozen. There are none currently in Sidarov Clan, but Petrov has two, both older women who have borne vulfen young to their mates. I have seen them, of course, and they are involved in their communities. But they do not run with the hunt in the form of the wolf."

She latched on to the most alarming piece of information first. "My babies," she gulped, "would be wolves?"

Chapter 7

“Vulfen children cannot change from birth. First Change is at puberty, of course, which is somewhat later for us than it is for humans. Fourteen or fifteen is usual, even as late as seventeen for First Change would not be cause for alarm. And our lifespan is correspondingly longer than a human’s would be.” His tone was cool, and she perceived that he was annoyed with her.

“Well, I don’t know any of this,” she said defensively. “An hour ago, I didn’t believe in werewolves—sorry, vulfen—or vampires, or ghosts, or any other mythical beasts!”

She stopped, took a breath, hesitated. Rylek took her hands in his and held them.

“I apologize. Of course you want to learn. You may ask me anything,” he said magnanimously.

Any other time his lord-and-master tone would have aggravated her, pushed her into a sharp retort, but at this point, she was still too unsettled to quibble. She needed to know.

“Rylek...are there vampires and ghosts, and mermaids, and unicorns and—”

His deep laughter interrupted her rushing words, and he squeezed her hands.

“Ellie, I know most about my own people. Ask me about them. I do know there are vampires in the world, but they are not as you have seen them in films. They do not bathe in blood, or murder every human they meet for food or pleasure, and they keep very much to themselves, as we do also. As for other ‘mythical beasts’ as you called us—” He nipped her knuckles with his sharp white teeth, grinning at

her alarmed squeak. "I have not seen any. Perhaps they live in the world with us, perhaps not."

"Well, you exist, so I wanted to know."

"Ah, so now I exist. I am gratified to hear it."

Ellie took exception to that note of dark amusement, and tried to pull away from him. He easily mastered her brief struggle and retained possession of her small hands in his large ones.

"Ellie, can you not give me an answer?" He was serious now. "Can you not accept me? I pledge that I will be a good mate to you. I will give all of my soul, my blood, and my body, freely for your happiness and satisfaction. I will give my strength for your protection. I will hunt for you and feed you from my hand."

His words were unusual, but they almost had the sound of ritual, and Ellie wondered if a vulfen female might expect those very words from a male who was seeking her acceptance.

He waited for her answer, his expression open, his beautiful black eyes gleaming with hope.

Could she accept him? She wanted him, no question. The heat between them was intense. Maybe he wasn't human, but he was still one of the best men she had ever met. He had already spoken for her and defended her, in a situation where her date was behaving very badly.

She considered. He had the respect of the men who followed him. He was strong and handsome, and so compelling to her that her gaze was drawn to him constantly. He said his life was dangerous, and even though he was surrounded by loyal warriors, he worried for her safety. Her life before today, before *him* was undeniably boring, but was that enough? She was half in love with him already. Could she take the risk?

"Yes," she said simply, and then squealed when he lifted her into his arms and fastened his mouth to hers. He whirled her around and around, until she didn't know whether her dizziness was from the spinning or his hot kisses stealing her wits.

She pulled her mouth away and buried her face in his throat.

"Rylek, stop," she begged. "You have to stop."

He slowed and stopped their wild revolutions, but when he sat down on the sofa, he kept her firmly in his arms.

Her own arms were clasped tightly around his neck, her legs on either side of his hips, knees pressed into the back cushions as he cuddled her to his broad chest.

"Ellie, my beautiful one," he murmured, pressing fervent kisses over her upturned face. "Ellie."

"Does this mean we're getting married?"

He stilled, his lips pressed to her vulnerable throat.

"A vulfen mating is more binding than a human marriage." His voice rumbled against her pulse, and it responded by picking up speed.

Ellie wasn't sure what he meant by that. Did she need to buy a white gown, book a church, what? Would he want to have a priest or would even suggesting that be insulting? Did the vulfen people have a functionary whose position was equivalent to a priest? She knew nothing about his culture.

"Is there a ceremony?" she asked.

"There is the mating between us," he said deeply, "and the bite I will give you, but that is private. It is not a wedding as you know it, since the joining will already be accomplished. Then, you will be presented to the three clans, and they will accept you as my mate, my other soul, and their Alpha female. They will all come before you and offer their good wishes, seek your acceptance in turn as their leader's mate. Of course, I will be beside you, but I cannot be seen to tell you how to respond. You must respond from your heart."

It did sound intense.

"Are you sure that these clans will accept me?" Ellie worried.

Rylek smiled against her skin. "They will accept my mate," he declared arrogantly, "and their allegiance is forever."

"No divorce, then?"

His expression when he pulled back from her was blank, so why did she get the impression that he was hurt?

“Never.” The word was firm, short. “You would never be permitted to leave me. I could not continue to live with half my soul torn away. I would come after you always.” His eyes were changing, glowing fiercely. “Ellie, we are not yet fully mated. I can still leave you tonight, give you your freedom, and it will be forever. I can give you that gift.”

He grasped her hips and began to push her away.

“Wait, no! I don’t want that,” she protested, clinging stubbornly to his shoulders as he tried to put her aside. “I want you. I want us! I’m not saying no to you. I’m just trying to understand all of this.”

“You are uncertain of me.”

“Well, it is a bit of a shock!”

Rylek sighed. “Yes, it is a shock for me as well.”

His tone was wry, and he was no longer trying to lift her off his body where she was holding him strongly. Ellie began to relax.

“Ellie, you must know that I did not expect to find you. Not tonight, certainly, but truthfully—not ever. I had become...resigned to living without a mate of my own. When I first scented you, I doubted the magnitude of the gift that was being offered to me.”

His quiet statement had Ellie wrapping her arms more tightly around his brawny neck, offering the physical comfort of her body to assuage the terrible loneliness laid bare by his revelation.

“This choice you say you’re giving me, it means you’ll leave me tonight if I choose to be free?”

When he nodded, she continued, “Would you offer me freedom if I were a vulfen female whose scent appealed to you? If I were a vulfen female who was your mate?”

“No,” he said flatly, his eyes suddenly fierce and hot, burning into hers. “I would seduce you and give you the mating bite immediately, so no other warrior could steal you from me. I would leave my scent all over you, inside you, as a warning to all other males to keep their

hands off the treasure that is mine alone—if they want to live.”

Ellie shivered as his words sank in.

Rylek’s glowing eyes were locked on hers. “So the other males would know who will kill them if they fail to resist your dangerous beauty.”

Dangerous beauty indeed. She almost laughed. Her mirror showed all her faults quite plainly, but if this amazing male wanted to call her beautiful, she certainly didn’t intend to argue the point.

Ellie smiled softly. “Seduce me then,” she sighed in an open invitation. “Be my mate.”

“Ellie! Yes, my beautiful mate.”

The last word was almost inhumanly deep. He wasted no time. His hands roved over her body with devastating precision. His mouth began to taste her skin, openly savoring her essence.

The touch of his lips on her skin was mesmerizing, and she sank into the simple pleasure he offered. She let her eyes close and basked in his focused attention. When he finally took her lips with his, she was smiling, languid and aching to experience the tumultuous power of his kiss.

As their mouths fused, her fingers moved down the buttons of his white shirt, unfastening each one and pushing the shirt off his massive shoulders. She ran her fingers appreciatively through his dark chest hair, exploring his tight male nipples.

His own hands were busy divesting her of her silk robe, turning her so that she was lying on the sofa, stopping only when she was completely bared to his smoky gaze. His eyes were heavy-lidded as they moved down her body, lingering in intense male fascination on her most feminine places until she moaned softly and quivered in his arms. She felt the weight of his gaze like a physical caress. She curled her body against him in a plea he read immediately.

“Your body is begging me,” he said sensuously, and Ellie had no answer except the uncontrollable and deeply luxurious arching of her body.

She watched his hard, hot hands move over her skin, caressing and claiming, molding and squeezing her soft breasts. Her breathing became labored. She couldn't help but sigh at the arousing sight.

He spent long minutes stroking her, pleasing himself and learning the mysteries of her female response, teaching her nerve endings to leap in anticipation of his touch. Driving her higher and higher while his eyes glowed with an unholy fire, and his face became taut with his own pounding need.

She tried to move, to turn into that masculine body, but his hands held her flat, pressing on her lower belly and causing her body to throb. Her own emptiness was torturing her, weeping and rippling, wanting his heat and power deep inside.

"Please," she murmured, twisting slowly, voluptuously under his hands. "*Please.*"

"Ah," he answered her, "you are ready, beautiful one? You are inviting me in?"

He smoothed his hand down her body, and delved into her swollen folds, rubbing his rough fingertips over her tender clit. The sensation was almost unbearably intense, and she arched then fell back against the sofa cushions with a loud gasp.

"Yes, my Ellie. Yes, whisper to me." His voice was lower, darker, his accent more pronounced as he stood and removed his trousers, dropping them to the floor.

The first sight of his honed body, muscular and lightly dusted with black hair, was enough to make Ellie's mouth water. But when her eyes landed on his powerful erection, jutting proudly from its nest of black hair, she was mesmerized. She couldn't look away, and when she reached out a hand, he threw his head back. He trembled but stayed still, muscles tensed, letting her examine his thick penis with its wet plum tip, his furred balls hanging heavy below. She weighed the twin globes, rolling them in her cool palm, and murmured in awe.

"Ellie," he grated.

Her name was a plea more than an order, but she reacted to his

desperate tone, leaning slowly forward and gently kissing his cock, sipping at the salty drop of his essence that emerged to greet her exploration. Her curious tongue swirled and dipped into the tiny eye, gathering more of his taste. Her eyes slid shut for a moment, and she hummed her approval of this unfamiliar, profoundly intimate act.

He groaned and shuddered, snapping his eyes back to hers and burying his hands in her hair, but his control held.

Ellie slid her lips over the flared tip, taking the whole head in her mouth and holding it, pressing her tongue to the small indent on the bottom of the crown. She had heard from her laughing girlfriends that it was a sensitive spot, and his involuntary thrust proved it. Caught up in the heat and musky taste of him, she repeated the subtle movements until his hips rocked incessantly and his powerful legs spread and flexed to hold him up.

His lungs worked with loud gasps, his hands clenching rhythmically in her now loose curls. He finally pulled her clinging mouth away with a muttered curse.

She reclined luxuriously back against the sofa and placed her arms above her head, sliding her legs smoothly just a little further apart, letting him see her arousal. Moving her hips enticingly from side to side as his glowing eyes homed in on her gleaming wet folds. Inviting him. Enflaming him.

And then he was over her, pressing her down into the sofa cushions with the weight of his big body, covering her mouth with his, and driving his tongue in deep. His fingers were busy, pinching her stiff nipples, teasing her distended clit, and then pushing inside to test her warm welcome.

When two large fingers pressed in deep and curved, she rocked on his hand, breathless, begging for more, begging to be filled with him, but he only continued to kiss her and toy with her. Moaning in frustration, she wrapped her legs around his grinding hips and pulled at him. It was like trying to move a mountain. She broke away from his mouth and whispered in his ear, "Rylek, I feel empty. Hurry."

Her words set off a frenzy, and he reared back to position himself. He shoved his massive erection inside her with passionate force. The physical shock of his entry triggered a sharp climax, and she gasped, pulsing around him and driving them both higher.

He pummeled her hot, gripping pussy, the fiery friction pushing her into a second fierce orgasm just as he sank his elongated fangs deep into the muscle where her throat met her shoulder. He threw back his head and roared his pleasure. She could see her crimson blood on his fangs. His cock grew even larger inside her until the force of his volcanic release jetting against the mouth of her womb pushed her into a third violent spasm.

And the world went black.

Chapter 8

Ellie stretched luxuriously against the cool silken sheets, smiling before she even opened her eyes. The morning sun shone in the window and warmed her bare skin.

No blankets over her, no pillow under her head. Those had been consigned to the floor early in the night and had never made it back onto the bed in the long hours of passionate exploration that followed. And that was after they had finally made it down the hall and into the bedroom.

What a glorious night!

She could feel the echoes of last night's incredible excitement in her flesh this morning, the slight twinges in her thigh muscles and deep thrilling ache inside telling her that she had shared her body with a virile partner.

Rylek was astonishing, she thought with a smug smile, her eyes still closed. Whether by his vulfen nature, or just his own hunger for her, he had demonstrated a surprising creativity and a stamina that delighted and exhausted her. This morning, she was having a hard time deciding to wake up. She usually hopped out of bed with an excellent energy level. She blamed Rylek, and the fact that she was sure she hadn't slept more than twenty minutes the whole night.

She rolled to her side slowly with her arms stretched over her head and her body arched, basking like a cat in the delicious warmth of the sun. She could feel, in every movement, the resonance of his physical possession. She had such a wonderful sense of wellbeing. It was amazing the difference one night could make.

A soft appreciative growl sounded in the room, and finally Ellie's

eyes fluttered open.

Rylek stood in the doorway wearing his black dress pants and nothing else. The sight of his glorious muscular chest with its triangle of crisp hair made her nipples peak in remembrance. He held a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. His black eyes devoured her nudity, and she shuddered in reaction even as she reached for the coffee he handed to her.

"I can't possibly," she moaned half laughing, feeling the clenching ripple of her body as it dampened for him.

His nostrils flared as if he could scent her ungovernable response, and his eyes began to glow. "To my regret, my heart, neither can I at this moment. I have been put to hard use through the night by my beautiful new mate." She swatted him half-heartedly and he pretended to stagger. His wry smile warmed her and he waggled his eyebrows in an exaggerated leer. "Perhaps after breakfast?"

Ellie could feel the heat in her cheeks.

Rylek handed her the cup, careful to make sure she had a good hold before he let go. Ellie sipped the scalding brew.

"You make wonderful coffee," she sighed in appreciation.

"Valeri made the coffee," he said, then caught the cup as it wobbled in her hand.

"Valeri is here? Who else is here?" Ellie scrambled from the bed and grabbed for one of the sheets from the floor. "For heaven's sake, where's my robe?"

"My seconds are here with several of the Cadre warriors. I gathered all our clothes and dropped them in here when I felt the warriors arriving." He indicated the jumbled pile just inside her bedroom door.

Ellie breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

He sketched an elaborate bow, his eyes twinkling. "Anything for you, my lady."

Ellie grinned. She loved his teasing. He always seemed so serious in nature it was nice to see him relaxed. She didn't understand the ins

and outs of his culture, but she was sure that an Alpha wolf would have a great deal of responsibility and very little time to play. She thought that providing some playtime for him could become an important part of her role as his mate.

She really had to make it a priority to talk to those other human women who had become mates. Maybe they could give her some good tips.

“Rylek, I need to meet the other humans who have mated into your—uh—clans.” She rubbed her neck, catching the bite mark from last night. She scratched it lightly, easing the itch.

“You will meet all my people soon.”

How many people would she be meeting? No, better not ask that question just now. There would be plenty of time to panic after she had a chance to finish her coffee. It was very good coffee.

Ellie made a face. “I should have a shower,” she said.

Rylek’s head snapped up. “No.” His face flushed at her incredulous look. “Please, Ellie, the Cadre must know that you are mine. I know this is not the way of humans, but the vulfen culture is very different, as you will learn. The scent is to tell others who your protector is. The warriors will be able to sense that I have marked you. My scent is on you, inside you. Please do not shower this morning before you meet the Cadre.”

Ellie could feel her face heating. It would take some getting used to, but if she was honest with herself, she didn’t want to wash him off either. She nodded slowly and was gratified to see his smile.

“Valeri informs me that breakfast will be ready in moments. But we will be in a room filled with warriors, so you must dress. I would regret having to kill a member of my own guard for admiring your beautiful skin. It is still so early in the day.” He popped his claws out and retracted them idly, sliding his tongue around one elongated fang.

The sight of her lover with claws and fangs was such a turn-on. She had come a long way in one night, for a “little human female.”

Ellie suppressed a grin and began to dress, settling on a flirty royal

blue skirt and a simple white silk blouse. She was beginning to understand his dry sense of humor. Though she had no doubt that he would kill for her at the first sign of danger, she didn't think he would feel threatened by another male just looking at her. Not after last night when she had eagerly welcomed him time after time.

Ellie shivered just thinking about last night. And this morning. Would Rylek want her like that every night? Or would the heat between them eventually fade until they were making excuses to avoid each other like some human couples did?

"Your scent has a trace of sadness at this moment, Ellie." Rylek's dark eyes were concerned. "Will you tell me your thoughts?"

She shook her head. It was a silly thing to be worried about the physical side of love when she knew that the soul connection between them was strong.

"Please, Ellie. I cannot stand your discomfort. Are you upset about meeting the warriors, meeting my people? I assure you they will love you as I do."

She shook her head again. "I wasn't thinking about that. I was wondering if the...um...attraction between us will cool off at all now that we've mated." She tried to keep her voice even, but she could tell by the change in his expression that she wasn't fooling him.

"My heart, we will burn down the world. I will love you every night and most days." He moved closer to her. His warm arms came around her and his whispered words vibrated against her sensitive throat. "This feeling will only grow stronger as time goes on, and we will forever be sneaking away to have time alone. No doubt we will embarrass our grandchildren with our antics as my own grandparents did me from time to time."

She could feel his slow smile as he nuzzled against her skin.

"Rylek," she sighed, and the need for him was throbbing in her voice.

"My heart, if you want breakfast before we must call it lunch, you have to run now," he said tenderly, licking along the line of her jaw.

“Run, Ellie.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t.” It came out not as a protest, but as an invitation.

He growled softly with his mouth on the thin silk covering the swell of her breast. She moaned as he pressed her body against his rapidly stiffening cock.

“You inspire me.”

She giggled and squirmed as his hot tongue slid between the buttons on her blouse to find warm skin.

“Run.”

She leaned down and whispered in his ear, knowing what his reaction to her confession would be. Knowing how much he loved to explore the incredible effect he had on her body. “I can’t run away from you. You make my heart melt and my knees weak.”

Rylek’s response was a wordless rumble against her soft flesh. He rubbed his face back and forth, and seemed to be savoring her scent.

There was a sharp knock on the door, just one. Rylek whipped his head around and snarled toward the door in warning.

After a moment, the single knock came again.

He sighed and pressed a lingering kiss to her breast, his arms tightening around her.

“The knock is Valeri’s signal. The warriors are waiting for us. It is time.” His words were slow, his tone distracted.

Ellie pushed out of his arms. She straightened her blouse and smoothed her skirt with nervous hands as she slipped on a pair of sandals.

“What does my hair look like?” She saw the admiring look on his face and smiled because his hands had been in her hair half the night. “No, don’t say beautiful. I know it must be a mess.”

Rylek smiled at that, and pointed to the mirror.

Ellie was almost afraid to look at first, but her hair wasn’t bad, actually. She combed it out quickly and gathered it into a high ponytail. *No, maybe not.* Deciding against the upsweep, she let it fall

down her back au naturel. It was a mass of wild black curls, as usual, but the frizz was minimal. It would have to do.

Rylek watched her the whole time, seemingly fascinated by her every move.

“Okay,” she said after brushing her teeth and checking the mirror one last time. “It’s just a room full of wolves. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” She turned to Rylek. “We’ll walk out there together. Uh, you go first.”

Rylek grabbed her hand and pulled her giggling out the door.

She let him enter the tiny living room first, but when he stopped just inside the doorway, his muscular back was so wide that she couldn’t see around him.

The air was heavy with the scents of coffee and bacon, and she could hear several male voices talking. Many of them weren’t speaking English, but she could tell from the tone that they were taunting and teasing one another. One slightly louder voice sounded like it was bragging, drawing laughing protests from several others.

Then, all the voices fell silent at once.

Rylek stepped into the room and pulled her up beside him. This was her first look at the vulfen warriors. They were staring right back at her. They were...big. Their broad shoulders and large frames filled her small apartment to bursting.

She saw Miros at once. Valeri had his back to her for a moment while he worked at the kitchen counter. He winked when he turned and caught sight of her. A number of the others seemed familiar to her also. Perhaps she had seen them at the restaurant. She couldn’t be sure.

One by one, they all started sniffing and their eyes began to glow fiercely. Claws and fangs appeared with startling speed. They moved toward her, a crowd of massive bodies, and Ellie became alarmed. Rylek kept a firm grip on her hand, holding her there by his side when she tried to pull back. Just when she was sure she would scream from the building tension, the warriors dropped to their knees with a loud

thud and bowed their heads. They leaned so low that the backs of their necks were bared to her.

They were offering their lives to keep her safe, offering to die for her. Remembering the meeting with Miros and Valeri the night before, Ellie looked at Rylek for guidance. He met her gaze and nodded, but said nothing. Well, no help there. She was on her own.

She placed one hand on the top of the shaggy gray head of the warrior nearest her and spoke. "I thank you for your protection," she said formally.

The Cadre warriors fixed eyes on her face. They all slashed the claws of one hand across the opposite forearm, causing blood to flow. Ellie gasped.

In tandem all the vulfen warriors surged to their feet with both arms raised, blood dripping from wounds and claws, and roared at full volume. The wall of sound shocked her eardrums and made the dishes in her china cabinet rattle.

When the sound stopped, it took a moment for her to realize it because her ears were still ringing. She stepped back and put her arms around Rylek's waist. Her hands were shaking and she steadied them by gripping her mate.

Valeri came in from the kitchen with huge platters of bacon and pancakes, and winked at her again. The side table was already laden with plates, napkins, and cutlery. He quickly served heaping breakfast plates to Ellie and then Rylek. He saw to it that they were seated together on the couch before he gave a signal for the Cadre warriors to serve themselves. It was all very informal as they shared a meal.

After a moment, the warriors began talking quietly, jockeying for position as they filled their plates and found places to sit on her living room floor. They still stole glances at her as they ate, but the intensity of the moment before was lessened considerably. Some of the warriors were still bleeding from the cuts on their arms. No one mentioned the blood, so Ellie didn't ask about it. She'd corner Rylek later and ask a hundred more questions.

She had survived the first meeting. If Rylek wanted any more than that from her, he should have given her a handbook. Really, would it have killed him to just throw out a hint or two?

Something of her thoughts must have shown on her face, because Rylek leaned close and whispered, “Well done, my queen.”

Queen? Oh, shit.

Chapter 9

“Queen?” Ellie yelped. “Does that mean you’re a king?”

Conversations stopped. All eyes were on her again.

Rylek cleared his throat. “No. When the Alpha is leader of more than one clan and there is an Alpha mate she is called the queen of all vulfen, but I am not called the king. I am the Alpha.”

Ellie didn’t know what to think. He was the ruler of three clans, the Alpha. His wife was called a queen. If you sat on a throne and your wife was a queen, wouldn’t that make you a king?

“Do you sit on a throne?” she asked suspiciously.

Rylek frowned. “It is not a throne.”

Valeri shook his head and laughed. “Ellie, don’t let him get away with that. It’s a throne.”

“Is it a big throne?” She was getting upset.

“It is a huge throne, hand-carved by a fine vulfen craftsman,” Valeri said.

Rylek frowned at his second. “Stop helping. You are frightening my mate.”

“You’ll be a queen, but don’t worry too much about it, Ellie,” Valeri said. His eyes twinkled. “You will be our first-ever human queen, so you can make new rules. All the warriors will stand on their heads for an hour every day if you say it’s a good idea. You’ll be great.”

Valeri was still smiling, but Ellie didn’t see anything funny about it. She looked at Rylek. He said nothing, but the power in his black eyes made her insides quiver.

“I can’t believe it,” she said. “I don’t know the first thing about

being a queen. Really, I don't even want to be one."

"It is a responsibility and a privilege," Rylek said stiffly. "A queen will stand as a role model for my people."

Was he disappointed in her? Ellie felt his displeasure and wanted to take back her words, but she was a regular, average woman. No silver spoon, no special training, nothing to set her apart from anyone else. She couldn't even balance her checkbook and went over-budget every time her favorite clothing store had a sale. No one in his right mind would make her queen of anything.

"I can't be a queen." She wanted to go back into the bedroom and hide. She wanted Rylek to hold her. Even knowing that he was a vulfen male, not human, she wanted to be his wife, his mate, but she didn't want this. "Don't make me a queen."

"It is much too late for that," Rylek stated and his voice reverberated with authority. "The Alpha has mated you. The Cadre has honored you with a blood salute. Elizabeth Ann Bradley Sidarova, you are already a Queen."

Ellie looked at the harsh beauty of his face and wanted to cry. There was no way she could live up to his expectations. This was a disaster. They had been mated for one day and he was already disappointed in her.

"I don't know how to be a queen. I don't know your world at all, how can I be a role model for anyone?" Her voice was rising in panic.

"You will be a wonderful queen. You will make me proud," Rylek said with finality. "All my people will help you."

There was no point arguing with Rylek, he was a force of nature but she couldn't seem to help it. She was gathering her thoughts for another salvo when Rylek turned to converse with a tall, white-haired warrior who was seeking his attention.

Ellie waited impatiently for her turn. Her mind was whirling. She was uncertain of the wisdom of accepting the role of queen and wanted Rylek to acknowledge her feelings. She was human and knew virtually nothing about his culture. Yesterday at this time, she hadn't

even believed in the existence of werewolves—no, vulfen. He said she would make him proud but there was no way she could succeed.

She looked over at Valeri, who was frowning at Rylek and the other warrior.

Rylek looked at her and spoke. "I must go with my Cadre to deal with a territorial issue. We leave at once. You will stay with Valeri and Miros. They will protect you in my absence. We will talk more about your concerns when I return." His eyes gleamed. "I will do my best to convince you that I am worth all the difficulties of being called a queen."

He brushed his lips over hers and raised his head, then settled in for a more leisurely exploration, taking and keeping possession of her mouth until she was breathless and trembling in his arms. One of the Cadre warriors moved restlessly near the door. When Rylek pulled back, she clung to his shoulders. Her legs were weak, and she needed the support.

He steadied her, stroking her back until she stood on her own. She was glad to see that his eyes glowed faintly, the only outward sign of the strain on his control. It seemed only fair that he should be affected too, since he destroyed her control so easily. He was too potent, too male, and her response to him was total. When she was in his arms, nothing else mattered.

Their eyes met and they shared an intimate look. He leaned in closer as if magnetized and a warrior cleared his throat in the background.

Rylek groaned under his breath and touched his forehead to hers for a moment before he straightened with visible reluctance. He followed the white-haired warrior out the door and several others walked out after them.

Soon, only Ellie, Valeri, and Miros remained. Miros moved around the apartment gathering empty plates and taking them to the kitchen.

She looked at Valeri and put her hands on her hips. "So, who is

that white-haired man, and what's going on?"

Valeri and Miros exchanged glances, but it was Miros who spoke. "That warrior is Matsij Gabrov. He is from a revered lineage. They are white wolves, marked by their white hair in human form as well. Each generation of the Gabrov family has had a son in the Alpha's Cadre as far back as our scrolls can tell. Over a thousand years. No other family can boast of that. He was my Cadre sponsor and later my trainer."

Ellie nodded. It sounded like an impressive pedigree, even to her. "Are all Cadre members from such powerful families?"

Valeri laughed. "No, the family is not as important as the man himself. Some members of the Cadre, the Alpha's personal guard, are first generation, like Miros here. He and both of his brothers were chosen for Rylek's Cadre. The Reitn family has always produced warriors, but Miros was the first in his family to serve the Alpha."

Ellie smiled at Miros. "You were the first ever? Your family must be so proud."

Miros bowed low in front of her. His scarred visage looked almost happy when he rose. He clicked his heels together and inclined his head to her, before going back to the kitchen with a spring in his step. He was still the biggest man she had ever seen and one of the most dangerous, but the pleased expression on his face now made him appear almost handsome.

Valeri shook his head and laughed. "Ellie, you will be a great queen. Miros will be your most faithful guard now. You relate very well to people. That is not a common gift."

She grimaced. "You'll forgive me if I admit that I'm still feeling anxious about this queen thing."

"Queen is ultimately just a word. Concentrate on being Rylek's mate, and don't worry about anything else. The crowning ceremony is just a formality. I will introduce you to my mother, Mura. She'll help you with everything you need to know. She is a vulfen historian and teacher for the clan children." The pride in his voice was obvious.

Ellie felt a rush of relief. "Thanks so much. I'd love to meet your mom. I know nothing, so she'll have a lot to teach," she said. A thought struck her. "Valeri, did I see a female warrior come in with Matsij Gabrov?"

"Yes, the only female member of the Cadre, my older sister Eva Sidarova. There are few female warriors, but Eva trained hard and proved herself to Rylek and to us all. She is vicious in combat."

Ellie was intrigued. "I want to meet her."

Valeri groaned. "I just said the woman is vicious. Of course you would want to meet her. If you decide you want to be a warrior, Rylek will know who to blame. He will kill me."

Ellie laughed at his silliness, but quickly sobered. "Valeri, there are so many things I need to know about being Rylek's mate. I have so many questions I don't even know where to start."

He smiled kindly. "Make sure you stand up to Rylek every now and then. His confidence can be a bit too much at times. You may not know that he was forced to be Alpha at a very young age when his parents died. He was always very strong, but he never let himself feel fear. He couldn't allow fear because all vulfen would be able to smell it. His control over his vulfen side was, and is, incredible. It gave him the self-assurance he needed to reunite and lead the three clans. It has made him a great Alpha."

Valeri leaned in closer. "You are a strong woman. You will need to be strong to live among us. We respect strength, so feel free to beat your mate over the head to make him understand you. He wants your happiness above his own, so, if you need something, anything at all, tell him." He winked at her, and then moved off to help Miros.

So much had happened in the past twenty-four hours. Her head was spinning. Ellie walked down the hall to run a bath. She needed a good soak. She had a lot to think about.

Chapter 10

Ellie stepped into the steaming tub, sinking to her chin in fragrant bubbles with a heartfelt sigh.

She needed this time to think. Her life had changed so quickly. She felt amazed at the existence of magic in the world and, at the same time, weighed down with questions that had no answers. She scratched her neck where Rylek's bite itched like an insect sting. Could she be allergic to the bite, or was it supposed to react this way? There was so much she didn't know about the world she was entering.

She sank beneath the bubbles and held her breath for as long as she could before rising, reveling in the silky feel of the hot water. It helped to relax her body and calm her mind after the unbelievable events of the past twenty-four hours.

Still, she wasn't the type to wallow in self-pity or try to deny the truth. If she was going to stay with the wolf of her dreams and be Rylek's queen, she would have to get some answers and fast.

A loud crash echoed from the living room. Ellie froze. She knew the men were in the kitchen, but that didn't sound like just a dropped dish. She leaped from the tub and grabbed for her silk robe as Rylek rushed through the bathroom door on silent feet. She almost screamed, but he put a hand to her lips to let her know she must be quiet.

"Ellie, be quick," he whispered. He bundled her into the robe, tied it quickly, and dragged her across the hall and into her bedroom. Valeri was there. Sounds of smashing glass and splintering wood followed them. Someone cursed, a male voice yelled in pain and Valeri chose that moment to shove the window open.

Rylek pushed her outside onto the rickety fire escape, following her and jerking the curtain closed behind them. Harrying her down the metal steps, Rylek kept close behind her. Just as they reached the bottom stair, still about twelve feet from the cement of the back street, a shout came from above.

Pushing past her, Rylek dropped down to the pavement. A shot rang out and he staggered. Ellie bit her tongue hard, trying not to scream. Had Rylek been shot?

Behind her, Valeri cursed.

“Jump, Ellie. Now,” Rylek called. He stood directly below her and beckoned. Another shot rang out from the window, but he didn’t flinch this time. “I’ll catch you.”

He held out his arms to her, but it was a long way down. She hated heights. Her stomach lurched and she hesitated. She cringed back against the cold metal railing.

Valeri was just above her, looking up the way they had come.

A clang echoed and the fire escape swayed under the added weight of another body. Feet thundered down the steps.

“Now, Ellie!”

Ellie jumped. Rylek caught her in his strong arms and started running with Ellie clutched to his chest, her wet robe flying out behind them.

Valeri followed. As they pounded around the corner and down the side of the building, they heard footsteps running behind them. Another man was coming from the side, shining a spotlight straight at them. Were they being targeted by more shooters?

An older car swerved to a stop on the grassy expanse just ahead of them. Ellie held on. Rylek tried to check his speed, but the door popped open and Miros shouted, “Get in!”

Still moving fast, Rylek shoved Ellie in the front and climbed in after her. With a squeal of tires, they sped away. Valeri pulled the back door shut behind him.

“Nice car,” Valeri said, and Miros made a rude gesture.

She was wedged in the front seat of a battered dark sedan between two panting wolves in human form with another in the back, and she felt terrified, bewildered, but protected.

She tried to speak, but no sound came out. She cleared her throat with a tight, painful sound.

Rylek winced. "Ellie," he said, but his voice trailed off.

Miros had his foot to the floor. He was driving through the city streets with no headlights at a shocking rate of speed. She hoped his vulfen night vision was as good as he seemed to think it was. It was pitch black and overcast, no moon, no stars, and many of the streetlights did not work in this part of the city.

"Please tell me what happened," she said. She was working very hard to keep her breathing under control, but her fright made it a losing battle. "Please."

"In the midst of the territory report, the Cadre was warned of an attack, but it was repelled easily. I left the warriors to handle it and came back to be with you," Rylek said. "As I approached, I saw there were human hunters on your street and in your building. Miros held them while Valeri and I ran for you."

"Why? What did they want?" Ellie could hear her heart beating hard. She pressed her hand over her chest, feeling the thumping and trying to calm it.

Miros spoke. "There were five humans, but they knew they were fighting a vulfen warrior. They know what we are. I called for our cleanup team."

"Before or after you stole the car?" Valeri asked politely.

Ellie gasped at the thought that he had stolen someone's car, but Miros ignored it. "Rylek, one of the humans got past me into the hallway."

"Yes, that human shot the Alpha." Valeri sounded grim.

"He shot you? I knew it. We have to get you to a hospital!" Ellie's words were all jumbled together and her hands raced over her mate searching for the wounds. He stilled her hands and pulled her into his

sheltering arms.

"No, Ellie. I cannot go to a human hospital," Rylek said. "Besides, they used bullets meant for humans."

Miros snorted at that.

Ellie didn't see any humor in knowing Rylek had been wounded. She glared at Miros. "Your Alpha has been shot. Stop laughing and concentrate on driving this rocket," she said.

Miros turned his attention to driving.

Rylek looked at her in surprise. "Are you sure you do not wish to be a queen, Ellie? You sound very much like a queen."

She saw that he was trying to distract her from the seriousness of the situation, but she couldn't allow herself to relax yet. She would fall apart.

Valeri leaned in from the back seat and explained. "Human bullets are too small and too soft. If they want to do any real damage, they need to start using an elephant gun. If the bullet does go through the top layer of muscle but exits without touching an organ, the wound will heal overnight. It's a few hours of pain, a minor annoyance, nothing more."

A bullet wound was a minor annoyance to these warriors. Of course.

Rylek rolled his broad shoulders and made a face. "In this case, however, I am sure the bullet did not go right through. I can still feel something in there. I think Miros may have to pick the bullet out of my back."

Miros looked over quickly and grimaced. Apparently, that didn't sound any better to him than it did to Ellie.

"What about the Cadre? Are they safe?" Ellie's voice was shaking as badly as her hands.

She had directed her question to Rylek, but it was Valeri who answered. "We are meeting the Cadre at the Alpha's estate outside the city. We'll be there in a few minutes. It is well guarded, and you'll be quite safe there."

Ellie didn't like how Valeri had skimmed over her inquiry. If he thought that simple answer was good enough, he was about to find out the opposite. She wasn't going to be placated. She wanted real information.

She grabbed on to the feeling of irritation with gratitude. It was much better than the shock and chilling terror of a few moments ago.

"I'm not worried about me right now. Rylek has been shot, and he won't go to the hospital. I want to know if anyone else is hurt besides Super-Alpha?" she persisted.

Valeri grinned at her. He seemed to enjoy her impertinence.

"I will pick out the bullet, and Rylek will be well by tomorrow. From the initial report, the Alpha's wound is the most serious, and in vulfen terms, it is not serious at all," Miros said. "Do not fret, little queen."

She settled back against Rylek, mollified. Miros turned onto the highway, and they left the city behind.

When they pulled into a long driveway lined with heavy woods, Ellie felt her heart rhythm begin to settle. What was wrong with her? She was a city girl born and raised. She should be running for the nearest police station, not feeling grateful to be moving at top speed out of the city.

She needed to see Rylek's wound, needed to know he was all right. She needed to feel his arms around her and know that he wasn't suffering. She had to know they were safe.

Miros slowed down and stopped in front of a large manor house. The windows were brightly lit and the welcoming sight perversely made Ellie shake.

Matsij bounded down the wide steps and tore the door open. Valeri exited and Rylek pulled Ellie out, hauling her into his arms. She threw her arms around him in a desperate embrace.

"Hold me," she said around her chattering teeth. "Hold me tight. I feel like I'm going to shake apart."

His arms tightened around her, but the wild quaking of her limbs

only intensified.

"You are frozen, an ice cube. You're going into shock," Rylek said. He picked her up and carried her inside.

He passed several vulfen warriors in the hall before he reached a large well-lit room. There were more warriors in it. He tried to put Ellie down on the sofa, but she couldn't let him go. She needed to be with him. Giving up, he sat down with her on his lap. Her robe gaped open to expose the curve of her breasts.

"Ellie, it is no wonder you are freezing, your robe is soaking wet."

Several pairs of interested male eyes fastened on them. Rylek bared his fangs and the glances quickly shifted away. Ellie tried to pull her lapels closed with one hand but her efforts were ineffectual. The muscles in her hands were twitching, and she couldn't seem to grip the slippery fabric.

Rylek reached out and dragged a heavy, hand-woven woolen throw around their bodies. He tucked it around Ellie so that she was trapped against his wide chest in a cocoon of delicious heat. Her muscles began to quiver and loosen as the warmth seeped in. She tucked her cold nose under his ear, causing him to jump a little.

With Ellie on his lap, Rylek edged to the front of the sofa and Miros went to stand behind him with a towel and a thin steel implement. Ellie knew that Miros was taking care of the bullet. She felt a terrible apprehension when Rylek's muscles tensed, but in a moment, he relaxed again. Miros wiped something off on a towel and came around to hand a small disc of metal to Rylek.

"Alpha, the wound was already healing," Miros said, bowing. "The bullet would have risen to the surface and dropped out itself in a few hours. It didn't even bleed when I picked it out."

Rylek rolled his shoulders and laughed. "Much better, I thank you," he said.

Ellie's anxiety settled. She snuggled up close against his chest, content to be with him.

As she started to warm up, she drifted, only half listening to the

conversation flowing around her. Rylek cradled her against him while he heard the reports of his warriors. She learned that the bodies of four human males had been removed from her apartment and most of the blood had been cleaned up. There were bullets lodged in her great-grandmother's old side table that had held their breakfast just this morning. Her china cabinet was all but destroyed.

The warmth and Rylek's presence had relaxed her, and she was almost asleep when Valeri came in.

"Miros, can you add anything to our information?"

Rylek's chest rumbled when he spoke, and Ellie rubbed her cheek against him.

"Alpha, I killed four humans tonight in the little queen's apartment. The building is not secure, and one human male escaped me to shoot you. I thought I detected a trace of vulfen scent," Miros added.

Rylek stiffened under her body, his arms bands of steel around her back. She squeaked in surprise, and his arms loosened marginally.

"You are certain?" Rylek asked in a hard voice. "This is a serious charge."

"It is. The scent was not strong enough for me to identify the individual, but it was there. There were five humans who carried a faint vulfen scent and knew of our existence. When I shifted, they did not scream, they continued fighting."

"Five humans who knew of our queen," Valeri said.

A low murmur ran through the crowd of assembled warriors.

Valeri continued, "Rylek and I had Ellie with us and they pursued us as we ran. The human who escaped Miros and the one left outside the building were targeting Ellie after Rylek was shot."

The blanket tightened around her as Rylek surged to his feet with Ellie still clasped in his arms. She wound her legs around his waist to stay on, hoping that her bare bottom was covered by the soft wool, since she had nothing on under her robe. His claws pricked the skin of her back as he began to pace back and forth. She was careful not to

move too much.

A loud thump reverberated through the room.

Ellie raised her head cautiously to find that all the warriors in the room had dropped to their knees. The blaze of Rylek's anger was warping energy through the room.

"The queen was not injured in this attack. The only blood on her is mine. I can still smell it," Rylek said through his teeth. "But she was targeted by our enemies and that is unacceptable to me."

"Yes, Alpha." Valeri was on his knees, too, but he kept his head up and his eyes on Rylek. "Though she was afraid, the queen followed instructions and ran with us down the fire escape. Miros stole a car and we came here to the estate. The car has been returned by the cleanup team and Miros has removed the bullet from your back. All is well."

Rylek placed Ellie carefully on the sofa and wrapped her more securely in the woolen blanket. She hugged it close to her face and listened carefully.

"Warriors, there may be a spy, a traitor among us," Rylek said.

The warriors stood.

"I hope that it will be proven this spy is not a vulfen warrior. That would be a blow to me as your Alpha and as a warrior who has fought beside each of you. In any case, this person is a traitor to our blood queen. I will not tolerate any danger to Ellie. The crowning ceremony will be held in three days time on the night of the full moon. I want this traitor found and dealt with by then. I have found my queen, and I will not have her crowning day marred by fear. Warriors, you have your orders."

Ellie pulled the blanket closer around her to combat a sudden chill. She knew what that meant.

The warriors exited the huge room, leaving only Rylek, Ellie, and Valeri.

Rylek wanted this vulfen spy caught and killed, and he wanted it done in three days. He was not a man to wait for another attack. He

would never stand by and allow such a threat to stand. He would go hunting. He was going to do what his Alpha character dictated by removing any danger to her.

Permanently.

Chapter 11

“Valeri, I need you to stay here on the estate and help guard my mate. Miros and Matsij, as well as any others you may need. The rest of the Cadre will hunt with the warriors.”

“I would add one name to your list, Alpha,” Valeri said.

“Of course, you may have whoever you need.”

“Eva Sidarova. She is a strong and loyal protector and is thrilled that we now have a queen. She and Mother have talked of nothing else since father told them. The fact that our queen is human never crossed her mind.”

Rylek nodded once. “I like your choice.”

Valeri bowed low and left the room.

Rylek knew his face was stern, his tone grim. He had faced enemies many times, and clan challenges where he stood alone before all to prove his strength. But he had never known betrayal by one of his own people. The Alpha was always up for challenge, but the thought that one of his clan members had deliberately given information to humans who wanted to slay the un-crowned queen was a burning pain in his chest.

The traitor would die. There could be no justification that would save the vulfen from a sentence of death. Rylek's blood was up. He wanted to be out hunting himself, to eliminate the threat with his teeth in the throat of the betrayer. But there was Ellie to consider.

His little human queen needed his care now.

Ellie was still huddled in the corner of the couch, her beautiful blue eyes wide and dark. He knelt on the floor before her and took her hands.

“Ellie, I have put your life in danger.”

“Rylek, no,” she protested.

He shook his head.

“You cannot deny that my love has made you a target. A week ago no one was trying to harm you. You were living your human life and did not even know of us. I accept the blame and take on the responsibility of ensuring your safety. I will prove my love for you by putting your safety above my own.”

“You proved it to me already by getting shot. Miros had to pull a bullet out of your back!”

He could feel her distress. It was intolerable to him.

“Ah. That is your human upbringing speaking,” Rylek said, stroking a hand down her silken cheek. “A vulfen male gladly sheds his blood or gives his life to keep his family secure. You would have preferred I say the word ‘love’ in the human way, with roses and candlelight, I think. I can give you that as well.”

Ellie tried to smile, but it wobbled at the edges. The sight squeezed his heart.

“My beautiful one, I am sorry this had to start so soon. I do not dodge bullets on a daily basis. It has happened, but not often.”

“You didn’t dodge at all. You just stood there.” Ellie’s eyes locked on his. He could see the realization as it hit and he regretted the necessity. “You deliberately made yourself the biggest target!”

She pulled back her arm and punched him in the chest. Her frown was formidable. He caught her hand after a brief struggle and pressed a soothing kiss on her knuckles.

“You are angry? Of course I wanted to make myself the mark to aim for. There is no question. The danger to you was real. My fear for you was real. I have seen what bullets do to human flesh. I will not see you torn and bloodied. Not while I live.” It was a vow, nothing less. His heart thudded as the picture of Ellie injured, in pain, lifeless got to him.

“Rylek, you need to be more careful. You brought me into this

world you live in. You can't leave me alone now. That's the price. You have to live."

She was sincere, worried, her eyes wide and very blue as she tried to convince him to put himself ahead of her. He could tell her it was never going to happen, but he chose to remain silent. She would learn about him in time.

Her life was too important for him to risk. She came first. It was his privilege and his pleasure to offer his life for hers.

He drew her down onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her. She curled herself around him with a sigh and tucked her face under his jaw. Her trust humbled him, made his eyes sting.

He had mated her, true. But they had not been given the chance to deepen their bond. He had been called away from her, leaving at a moment when she was feeling anxious and uncertain about her role in this unfamiliar world. He had returned as quickly as he could, only to find his new mate in danger from human assassins, betrayed by one of his own people.

He understood that she didn't know him well. His mate wouldn't fully recognize that he was a creature of instinct, a strong male animal. She didn't realize that without her presence in the danger zone to consider, he would have annihilated the threat without relying on his Cadre. He would have enjoyed the challenge as Miros had.

She would learn soon enough that the main complaint of his Cadre members was that he didn't wait for them before seeing to a security problem. He took care of it himself, taking the fight to the throat of his enemy.

Ellie didn't realize yet that her very existence changed him. Her protection was everything. At the apartment, he turned his back on his enemy for the first time and ran with the most important person in his world wrapped in his arms, trusting his seconds to fight the battle. She was essential to his life.

It was unprecedented. The enemy had inside information and would now know exactly how to get to him. They would see the

change in behavior and the fact that some of their number survived would spread the news of his weakness that much more quickly.

It made his hackles rise in alarm. He needed to make sure that this threat was answered with lethal force, and as soon as possible.

His warriors were hunting a traitor. And if they found nothing, he would go on the hunt himself. Nothing Ellie could say would stop him. He was a powerful killing machine and the danger to his mate would be eliminated in the fastest, most efficient way possible. He would not feel a moment of regret for seeing to her safety. It was his duty and his right as her mate, and it would ease his unfamiliar sense of fear at the thought of losing her.

But for now, he cradled his mate in his lap and acknowledged that his hold on her was fragile, too new. His instincts told him that he needed to cement that connection, find a way to make her want to stay with him beyond the ties uniting their souls as mates and in spite of the danger. In spite of the many hardships they would face leading a people whose survival depended on secrecy in a world of cameras on every corner.

His heart beat for her alone. He knew it had not occurred to her if something happened to take her from this world, he would follow. He would leave the clans in Valeri's capable hands. Valeri had the strength and the bloodline to rule. Valeri might have to answer challenge, but the Cadre would serve him, and the vulfen people would accept him.

He pushed his nose against her neck and breathed her in. There was still fear and a lingering anxiety in her scent, but she was always beautiful to him. He would follow where she lead and be grateful for the gift that she represented. And if they had young someday, he would cherish those children with his whole heart, whether they were vulfen or human. Teach them how to live in a difficult world.

He smoothed his hand along her belly and smiled at her telltale tremor. His mate needed rest, but perhaps he could offer her a release from her tension first.

"Ellie, I have a surprise for you," he said, and rose to stand with her still clasped to his chest.

She gasped. "I can't believe that you could just stand up like that holding me! I'm not exactly a small woman."

He bounced her in his arms until she shrieked.

"Light as a feather," he proclaimed, and carried her through the halls at a run while she giggled and clutched his neck. The happy sound echoed through his home, and the old mansion brightened. He could feel the difference, and blessed the sweet chance that had brought her into his restaurant on such a difficult night. She was already so precious to him. No doubt in the coming years together, she would have him wrapped around her finger. He looked forward to it.

On the lower level, he set her on her feet and opened an ornate black oak door that had been carved in the eighteenth century and brought from one of the summer houses in the Sidarov Clan's Russian territory north of Moscow.

When Ellie saw the large sunken pool tiled with Russian marble in an ancient pattern of greens and creams, she sighed dreamily. The steam rose in gentle curls around them as Rylek followed his mate into the bathing room and closed the door.

As she walked to the wide steps, Ellie let the torn silken robe fall to the tiles. She sank into the water with another soft sigh and Rylek's body hardened. He tried to quell his demanding erection, but it would not subside in the presence of his alluring female. He was trying to be a sensitive male taking care of his traumatized mate, damn it. But his rampant penis insisted on being difficult.

He would ignore it as best he could.

Ellie's curly head broke the surface of the heated pool, her long hair floating out behind her in dark waves. She watched him discard his ruined shirt and unzip his trousers. The heat in her eyes made his engorged cock throb as it was exposed to her interested gaze.

"Come here, mate," she invited, swirling her hands in the water.

Her creamy breasts bobbed temptingly. He could see her pink nipples, still soft and unaware, just beneath the surface. "I need to see your wound."

He descended the wide steps as if pulled by a magnetic force. He wanted to tell her that he didn't feel pain any longer from the bullet hole. His cock was aching far more than the tiny wound, but he let her turn him around and see the healing site for herself.

She raised her hands and poured hot water over his back. She was washing away the residue of blood. Taking care of him.

"You are healing at an amazing speed," she said, sounding pleased. She pressed her lips to the skin just above his injury. "I don't think you'll need any further attention."

He turned and settled his hands at her nipped-in waist, finding her mouth with his in a long, tumultuous kiss.

"I need your attention, mate," he said against her lips and nudged her velvet belly with his heavy erection to let her know he meant it. He was on fire for his curvaceous human queen.

She smiled, sliding one small hand down his chest and stomach. Her appreciative moan when she tested his washboard abdominals with her fingernails made him feel proud of his body for the first time. He understood his own strength and had offered his body for a female's pleasure many times, but Ellie was the first woman he cared to impress. His soul and body were made for her alone.

She ran teasing fingers lightly over his cock and tapped out a fascinating rhythm on the sensitive head.

His hips surged forward just as her hand moved away.

"Ellie, touch me." He meant for it to be an order, but it came out as a blatant plea. He craved her gentleness with an urgent hunger he didn't recognize. It was a catch in his throat, a fierce throb in his chest, and a rising burn in his rock-hard cock.

He thought she would take him in hand, but she slid down in the water with a sensuous purr and took him deep into her mouth. The blood rushed through his veins and pounded in his thick shaft. The

sight of her red lips stretched around him sprung his claws and threatened to blow the top of his head off. His vision narrowed, and he had to dig his claws into his palms to keep his knees from buckling under him.

His breath rushed in and out of his lungs. Her tantalizing mouth and cool, clever fingers reduced him to his essential animal nature. The man was struggling desperately for control. He was holding on by a thread.

In just a few long strokes, she had him sweating and straining to hold back a potent release. One hard jolt of semen escaped, and she drank it down with a quiet murmur. He had no choice but to pull away, ignoring her quiet murmur of protest.

He was trying to take care of her and was in serious danger of losing it. He had overheard an unflattering term applied to men once by some of the females and didn't want his mate to think that he was a "minute man."

Lifting her in his arms, he laid her body on the cool tiles at the edge of the pool. Her pale skin glowed in the soft light with the iridescence of the finest pearl.

She gasped as her back came in contact with the chill of the tiles, and again when he stroked his hand between her rounded thighs. She was slick with welcome to his questing fingers, and her feminine scent lured him in.

He was hungry, starving for the taste of her. He bent his head to her pink entrance and lapped through the soft glistening folds, searching out her spicy flavor. Pink would soon be his favorite color.

His mate was intoxicating. Her scent, her delicious taste, her feminine desire for him, all contributed to his excitement. His cock was jumping with every beat of his pulse. He took a long, savoring lick and the muscles in her stomach bunched. He plucked with his lips and swirled his tongue inside to steal her cream.

Her tiny cries inflamed him, made him harder and thicker than he had ever been, made him feel masculine, powerful. He wanted her

love, her adoration, her acceptance of his wild vulfen nature. But he didn't want to take. He wanted her to offer herself to him. He wanted to be everything to her.

She was his own personal playground, laid out for his enjoyment. He watched her beautiful face as he flicked his tongue over her tiny button.

Her eyelids fluttered and her red lips opened on a sigh. He redoubled his illicit caresses, speeding up and slowing down, torturing her with contrasting sensations. Her hips began to rock subtly.

He fitted his mouth to her feminine flesh and sucked, using lips, tongue, and teeth to bring her to a new and greater level of arousal. With a subtle nip, he pushed her over the precipice and started the climb again.

* * * *

Ellie whimpered and twisted against his carnal mouth. He teased and tasted until she wanted to scream, but she couldn't find the breath for it. He was dragging her higher and higher into a dazzling world of bold excitement. He stole her sense of self and made her a creature enslaved by his hands and his mouth. She would do anything for him. She was his for the taking, but he wanted to give.

It was blowing her mind.

Ellie gasped as he plunged his stiff tongue inside over and over. Her pussy clung to every silken blow. He praised her with a deep edge of awe in his voice. The vibrations against her soaked flesh flung her up and over for the second time. She squealed at the fiery intensity of the orgasm as it blasted through her system. Her legs trembled uncontrollably, and she curled her fingers in his hair to pull his greedy mouth away from her core.

"Rylek," she panted. "Please, I need you. Don't tease me."

It was too much and never enough. He was holding back from her. She was ravenous. If he continued playing with her body like this, she

would go mad. She needed more of what he was giving. She needed everything she knew he could give.

With a final feathery kiss on her swollen folds, Rylek rose from the water to stand between her thighs. Little runnels streamed down his wide chest, drawing her appreciative gaze. His roped muscles rippled and shone with wetness in the dim light. Her pussy cramped and spasmed around its own emptiness.

He tugged her into the water to press her against his chest. Holding her eyes with the strength of his gaze, he settled the broad wet head of his cock at her pulsing gate and waited until she was writhing and trying to capture him. He lowered her weight and impaled her on his hard penis in one mind-stealing slow-motion plunge. Her inner muscles twitched and rippled as her body struggled to accommodate his size. Ellie screamed once and then again, clutching his shoulders for support as he set up a brutal surging rhythm.

He was burning her, searing his presence into her soul. He built the urgency between them until they were both striving for the same goal, until she couldn't tell his desperate need from her own.

The force of his thrusts made her breasts bounce and rub against his hairy chest, tormenting her sensitive nipples unbearably. The water rocked around them. Waves splashed and sloshed against the sides of the pool and all the while he held her captive with his glowing regard. He was nothing human, but he was hers in a way that no one ever had been.

He increased the tempo, slamming into her with shattering force. Her tight muscles clamped around him, and he snarled. His gleaming fangs descended and he pulled out.

Ellie cried out at the loss and fought to recapture him, but he turned her in his arms and bent her over the side of the pool. Her fevered cheek pressed against the cool marble tiles and heavy curls fell over her gasping mouth.

He pushed into her in a firm slide, his thick cock rasping over

tender tissues with every savage penetration. He hit spots no one had touched inside her. His chest rubbed all along her back. The level of sensation was devastating.

The pounding friction of his driving body tore through her like lightning, and when she felt his fangs sink into the nape of her neck and hold there, she screamed out her orgasm and thrashed in his arms. She stiffened then collapsed over the cool tile rim.

Her pussy was pulsing around his thickness. With a few more vicious jabs, he joined her, pumping his blazing semen against the mouth of her womb. Every muscle in his body contracted. The shocks of his release went on and on, until his deep voice broke on a stifled yell. He gasped out her name before he fell to lie on her back.

She couldn't move. Breathing was an effort. Her muscles had the strength of wilted flowers. She felt limp with pleasure.

An eternity passed, or perhaps it was only a few minutes before Rylek pulled out with a grumble. He somehow got them both out of the pool, but they only made it as far as the cushioned bench along the far wall. He fell more than sat and lay back with Ellie on his chest. She was draped over him like a blanket and content to stay there. The steamy heat in the bathing room made it very comfortable to be naked.

Rylek rested his hands on her back and nuzzled her wild curls with his chin.

"I love your hair," he said in a quiet voice. "You were so beautiful sitting in my restaurant, so poised with your hair pinned up, but I could see curls escaping. I knew even then that there was a wild side to you. Your scent and that hint of wildness lured me in a way I could not deny."

She ran a string of kisses along his neck and shoulder.

"There's nothing wild about me. I'm an average woman."

Ellie giggled and held on to her living mattress as Rylek laughed.

"Ellie, you do not see yourself as I see you. You have a rare tolerance for those different from you. You have a curious mind. You

accepted a man turning into a wolf in your apartment. You stood up for your opinion against that man whom you knew to be something other than human. And moments after you were attacked and shot at, your reaction was to give one of my seconds a hard time about his alarming driving habits. You are courageous and passionate. Not average at all.”

She shook her head but she was smiling. His view of her was prejudiced, but she didn't feel like arguing. She liked the way he saw her. She cuddled against her vulfen mate, just breathing in his wonderful scent until she drifted into sleep.

Chapter 12

Ellie stopped halfway down the long winding staircase and looked around. The huge atrium was lit by tall stained glass windows that captured the light of the setting sun.

She and Rylek had napped and loved the afternoon away. Before coming downstairs they had shared a leisurely meal. She ate more red meat in one sitting than she had eaten in the previous month. She had almost seemed to crave it.

Ellie was trying very hard not to think too much, since these people could smell fear, but her nerves were jangling. She took a deep breath and blew it out. It was time for her to meet the vulfen people.

“My heart, there is no need for this terrible anxiety. My people will love you.” Rylek spoke softly in her ear. “At the first hint of a harsh word being spoken to you, I will put on my most forbidding expression and frighten the offending person away. I will bare my fangs at them and growl.”

He teased her by growling softly into her hair until she squirmed away.

He reached out, and she took his hand. He let her set the pace as they descended the stairs.

When they were at the bottom, she stopped again.

“Rylek—” She felt frustrated with herself. She didn’t know if she wanted to make a statement or ask a question.

He seemed to understand her inner turmoil.

“Ellie, I stepped forward as Alpha at a very young age, only months after my First Change. Some said I was too young, and in retrospect, they may have been right. There has always been an Alpha

in the Russian clans, but not every Alpha has had a queen. My father was Alpha, and my mother was queen, but their reign was short and decades ago. My father lost his will and died shortly after my mother was murdered. I was young, but I challenged the council and became Alpha. Some members of my father's Cadre supported me. Believe me when I tell you, the people will be happy to have a queen again."

Ellie heard more than the words. Rylek spoke of the death of his parents and of his own struggles to fulfill his obligations in such a matter of fact way. He had obviously worked to come to terms with the tragedy in his life. She already knew Rylek was not a man to sit around whining about his misfortunes. He was a man of action.

Ellie was amazed at his strength of character. Wrapping her arms around him, she held on hard.

He brushed a kiss on her forehead, trying to smooth away the frown lines she knew were there. She let him hold her and rub her back. It was a surprisingly good feeling and it took several minutes before she was ready to pull back.

There was a tall, striking woman waiting for them a few steps away with the white-haired warrior Ellie recognized as Matsij Gabrov.

"Ellie, here is Eva Sidarova, a Cadre member and my cousin, and Matsij Gabrov. They were unavoidably absent for the Cadre presentation earlier."

Ellie started to greet them when they stepped forward and went down on their knees. They bared the backs of their necks to her.

Ellie sighed. Really, these warriors were too much.

With a sideways glance at Rylek, she walked up and touched the tops of their heads. "I thank you for your protection," she said. The simple statement had worked before.

She didn't even flinch when they jumped to their feet, slashed claws across their forearms and roared. Her first thought was that the sound was much more manageable with a smaller group in a much larger room. The blood salute didn't startle her. It was nothing new.

Maybe she could get the hang of this queen business.

“Thank you,” she said, and they bowed.

“My queen,” Eva said. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. Please call me Ellie.”

Eva’s eyes widened. She looked so shocked Ellie almost giggled.

Okay, so maybe that wouldn’t happen right away, but Ellie was determined. She would stand with Rylek and be his mate and even perform the duties of queen, but she didn’t have to be called queen every five minutes. She was sure that with enough persistence she could get some of these people to call her by her name.

Matsij inclined his head. “I regret that we missed the initial Cadre presentation, my queen. My team was hunting.”

Eva stepped forward eagerly. “My queen, if you decide to recreate the Queen’s Guard, I would petition to be considered for membership. I will fulfill any challenge you require of me,” she offered.

Matsij stilled. “Eva, you are a chosen member of the Alpha’s Cadre. Do you so easily renounce your vow to your Alpha?”

Eva dropped her eyes and moved back.

From Eva’s reaction, that remark was as bad as a slap. Ellie didn’t understand all the ins and outs of vulfen politics, but she wasn’t going to allow any bullying or intimidation. She straightened her spine and drew herself up to her full height.

“Rylek, I would like to speak to you later about borrowing a member of your Cadre to be a Queen’s Guard,” she said in her best imitation of a queen’s voice. She tilted her chin and glared up at the white-haired warrior. “For now, though, we have a presentation to attend.”

Eva stood tall again, a wondering expression on her face.

Matsij looked startled by Ellie’s ferocious glower.

Good.

Rylek failed to conceal his smile. He offered Ellie his arm with a flourish, and she took it.

“Of course, you may have your pick of my best warriors,” he said.

"But keep in mind the Alpha will always be the first warrior in the Queen's Guard. It is my honor to protect my mate."

She smiled up at him. Vulfen or not, he was the original alpha male. He really was too predictable.

"Are you ready now to meet your people?" Rylek asked.

"Yes, I am," she said and found that it was true.

Her nervousness had disappeared in the first flash of aggravation at Matsij's comment. These warriors had everything their own way. It was time for a shakeup and Ellie decided she was just the person to do it.

She let Rylek lead her into the crowded ballroom with her head high and a determined smile on her face.

"I think your expression would strike fear in the hearts of my Cadre warriors if they even suspected what you might be thinking. As they are carrying out their duties in the normal way, I am certain they have no idea," Rylek murmured as they walked through the center of the crowd and toward the dais where Valeri and Miros stood waiting.

"I'm going to be your queen, Rylek. And my first act as queen will be to drag these warriors into the twenty-first century. I hope you're ready for this, because I'm sure the Cadre will be surprised to learn how far behind the times they really are."

He chuckled under his breath and raised her hand to press a tender kiss on her fingers. "Ellie, I can hardly wait."

They reached Valeri and Miros, who bowed and moved to the sides so that Rylek and Ellie could stand center stage and face the gathered people.

There were a lot of people. Ellie was surprised at how normal, how human they all looked. Well, of course, they had to know how to blend in to keep their furry secret, but she couldn't detect a single thing to pinpoint the difference.

The Cadre members moved into position in a semi-circle behind them. Rylek bowed to Ellie before turning to the audience.

"My people, I present to you my mate and the vulfen queen,

Elizabeth Sidarova.”

Her name sounded so beautiful, so exotic when he said it with such pride. It sounded like a queen’s name.

He raised their joined hands high, and when he lowered them, the people knelt.

Ellie noticed that even though everyone went to their knees, some were slow to do so. She wondered if Rylek observed the discrepancy and made a mental note to ask him about it. Did some of his people object to a human queen? Did they feel that she was inferior and resent having to kneel to her?

One of the last couples to kneel was a lean white-haired man and his companion near the back of the room. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, but he wasn’t part of the Cadre. Those warriors she had already met.

The vulfen people rose to their feet and one by one, they filed past the low stage where Ellie and Rylek stood.

Ellie liked this part of the presentation much better. The people introduced themselves, and some stopped to talk briefly with Rylek. Some of the women talked to her directly, but many just smiled. One or two of the younger females seemed cool toward her, but most of the vulfen people were very kind. She met so many people, the faces and names started to blur after a time.

One older woman who bore a startling resemblance to Eva took Ellie’s hands in hers.

“My queen,” she said, and kissed Ellie’s cheeks. Ellie could almost feel the warmth radiating from her gentle face. The woman sniffed discretely. “I congratulate you, Rylek, on your excellent choice. Your mate is healthy and your scents blend well.”

Rylek bowed from the waist, honoring the woman.

“I am Mura Sidarova. Rylek is my nephew, and my two children are in the Cadre.” She glanced sideways at Rylek with a wink and said, “But if the rumors are true, perhaps I will have a son in the Cadre and a daughter in the Queen’s Guard?”

Ellie couldn't hide her surprise.

"How did you know?" she asked.

Rylek laughed. "Do not ask how Mura knows anything. She knew whenever we were up to something as youngsters. Valeri and I did not get away with anything. We all believe she has eyes in the back of her head."

Mura raised her eyebrows. "I'm sure those boys did get away with one or two things I didn't find out about, but assuredly not many."

Rylek nodded. "It is true. Mura is still in charge of training our young. She has many contacts among our people and always knows the very best gossip."

Mura patted his arm. "I promise you, I never pass on gossip," she said. "But I do enjoy hearing it."

Rylek and the Cadre warriors near them chuckled at that, and Ellie laughed with them.

The night wore on. When the individual introductions were over, one man pulled out a hand-held drum, someone else produced a curious stringed instrument with a mellow tone and they began to play music. Some of the vulfen people danced, in couples or in larger circles, but many just talked in small groups.

Valeri grabbed Ellie's hand and pulled her into the group of dancers. He whirled her around to the energetic beat until she was shrieking with laughter at his antics.

Her laughter died in her throat when Rylek appeared over Valeri's shoulder. With his black hair loose around his shoulders and his gaze warm and intense, he took her breath away. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen, and he was hers.

"I would like to dance with my mate," he said. His eyes were a brilliant black, not glowing yet, but close to it. His possessiveness in claiming her was clear for all to see.

Valeri stepped back.

Ellie walked into Rylek's arms as if mesmerized and the music slowed to a beautiful waltz. He led her around the floor with smooth

control. She found that in his arms she was a better dancer. Perhaps it was his warrior training that made him so light on his feet, or just the man himself, but he was an artist on the dance floor. Ellie enjoyed every moment of their dance.

When the music ended, he leaned in for a slow brush of lips. The people stomped their feet in rhythm with each other. The sound was loud and somehow exuberant.

Ellie wondered if that was the vulfen version of clapping, but she didn't get the chance to ask. Rylek kept her in his arms and dancing until the wee hours of the morning.

Chapter 13

"I'll never be able to remember all of this by the ceremony tonight," Ellie complained. Her bite mark felt swollen and itchy, and she could feel a headache starting behind her eyes. She rubbed her temples and tried not to squint at Mura.

The brilliant afternoon light shone in the wide windows of the west parlor where they had spent hours reading from a dusty old scroll. Well, Mura was translating and reading it aloud to her, since the scroll was written in Russian.

They had spent most of the previous day doing the same until Rylek had stolen his mate away for some "quality time" in the bathing room, claiming he could feel her need and couldn't stay away. Built to take advantage of a natural spring, the dim, cozy bathing chamber was quickly becoming one of Ellie's favorite rooms in the house.

Mura laughed. The sound was like tinkling bells. She poured Ellie a fresh cup of tea and passed it to her before pouring for herself.

"Of course you'll remember, Ellie. And if your mind goes blank during the ceremony itself, please remember that most members of the vulfen community have never seen a crowning ceremony. It has been quite some time, nearly sixty years now, since Rylek's mother was crowned. You can make up some of it if necessary. The only one who will know is Rylek."

Ellie didn't know if that was reassuring or not. As she sipped her tea, a frightening thought occurred to her.

"Mura, is the ceremony in Russian?"

"Goodness, no. We live in America, now. The crowning ceremony will be in English, of course, just as we have practiced it."

Well, that was a relief.

“Rylek has given me permission to steal Eva from his Cadre to recreate the Queen’s Guard. Mura, do you know anything about the Guard? Is there some procedure I need to follow, or a certain number of people I need?”

“I have heard this news. My daughter has spoken to me of her excitement. She is honored.” Mura smiled. “Although, she is young and in her words, excited came out as ‘blown away.’ As a mother who wants her daughter to be happy, I have learned to appreciate these terms.”

Both women laughed.

Ellie was happy to find one person at least who would call her by name. She thought with enough time in her company, the daughter might be persuaded to shed some of the protocol as well. At least, she hoped so. Rylek was wonderful, but she needed some female friends in this new world.

Mura leaned her hip against the long table.

“Ellie, my dear, the Alpha’s Cadre is twelve warriors, as you know. They are the first line of defense, and stand for the Alpha if he is wounded outside of a formal challenge. In ancient times, the Queen’s Guard was one female warrior. But that gradually changed. Rylek’s mother had six, with five of them females. In the case of several of the members, it was a ceremonial position, not necessarily granted because of excellence in combat. But my daughter, Eva, is a warrior. She would be an exceptional Queen’s Guard.”

“Valeri said Eva is merciless when she’s training with the men,” Ellie said, and Mura’s smile was luminous. It was obvious she was very proud of her warrior daughter and son.

“The last Guard all died at the hands of human assassins in defense of Rylek’s mother. My sister was in the Queen’s Guard. The last queen was killed as well that day. It was many years ago.”

Mura wiped away a tear, and Ellie winced in sympathy.

Ellie’s head was throbbing, but she never got headaches. Surely

the pain would pass. She tried to concentrate on what Mura was telling her.

"I am sorry. The queen was my sister-in-law and my dear friend, and I lost my sister that same day. I was the only woman left in my family. As soon as we got the news, Vasily went to get Rylek, and he came to live with us. Rylek was sixteen and had just made it through his First Change. He was proclaimed Alpha of the three clans within weeks. Even then, no one could stand against him."

Ellie hugged her. Mura returned the gentle hug.

There was a knock on the door, and the young blonde woman who had brought their tea tray stuck her head in.

"The queen is summoned to the kitchens. The chef is looking for her opinion about the midnight buffet."

Mura straightened and ushered Ellie to the door.

"You must go with Nasja. Don't keep my Vasily waiting," she said with a wink.

Ellie nodded. She knew Vasily from the restaurant.

"Yes, I remember Vasily and his mouth-watering chocolate mousse. Yum," she said, trying to ignore the rolling of her stomach.

"Yes, his ambition in life is to make women swoon and crave his chocolate desserts." But the older woman's smile was intimate, and Ellie understood that Mura was very much in love with her mate.

Mura waved as Ellie followed the young woman from the room. They walked through the atrium before they descended a staircase and turned down a dark inner hall.

"Is the kitchen this way? I must be turned around. I thought this was the way to the bathing room," Ellie said. She was paying attention to their route. The house was large and had several wings. She wanted to be able to find her way around eventually without needing an escort.

"Yes, it is this way."

They turned again. This hallway was in an older part of the house. It was narrower, and the walls were bare stone.

Ellie was beginning to feel ill. She needed to lie down. She was about to make some excuse when Nasja stopped and withdrew a large old-fashioned key from her pocket.

“You keep the kitchen locked?” Ellie asked, feeling perspiration break out on her forehead. She was going to be sick. She started to back away from Nasja, but when she turned, she ran into a large form.

It was the white-haired man who had been so slow to kneel at the presentation. He grabbed her arms and pinned them to her sides, preventing her from getting away. She writhed in his hold and fought to get away, but her struggles were ineffectual. Her head bobbed and she felt as if she was looking at the world through a long tunnel.

“Who are you? What do you think you’re doing?” Ellie asked in her best queen’s voice. “Let go of me.”

His face twisted into a sneer. “Ah, but letting go would defeat the purpose of bringing you down here. Nasja, hurry up and open the door,” he barked.

“Who are you?”

The man didn’t answer. He was glaring over her shoulder at his companion.

Ellie heard a clatter behind her and a nervous apology from Nasja. It sounded as though she had dropped the big key. After a moment, the old hinges creaked and then White Hair shoved her backwards through the door and into what looked like a long storage room. The floor was stone, and there were several dusty barrels in one corner.

White Hair gave Ellie a shove, and she stumbled further into the room.

She caught her balance with an effort and studied her captor.

“Rylek will hunt you down if you kill me,” she said, and she knew it was true. “You won’t escape him.”

White Hair smiled and it was an ugly expression. “No, no, you will not be killed by me, human. When you appear at the crowning ceremony covered in another male’s scent the Alpha will kill you by his own hand. When he knows that you have betrayed him with

another, his Alpha nature will demand immediate retribution.”

A shiver of fear ran up her spine as she watched his face. His voice was dripping with false sweetness, but his eyes were alive with a malicious excitement. He wanted her to smell like another male. Did this man mean to rape her?

“Rylek will never believe it. He knows I would never cheat on him.” She put every ounce of defiance she could muster into that statement. It still came out sounding small and scared.

“Of course he will believe it. I am known as a lover. I have a well-deserved reputation for seducing faithless women, even those who are unwilling at first,” White Hair said, and his cruel smile sent a ripple of terror through Ellie.

“I’ll fight back,” Ellie said flatly. “You picked the wrong woman. I won’t just lie back and...let you...hurt me.”

Nasja sounded almost sympathetic when she replied, “It won’t hurt. You won’t even be aware.”

Ellie tried to focus her eyes on the woman, but the face wavered and blurred. There was a feeling of wetness on her chin and her lips were cold and numb. Understanding was slow in coming.

“The tea...drugged.” She was having trouble putting her thoughts together. “Mura?”

Nasja pushed the long curls out of Ellie’s face. “You are concerned for Mura? She will be fine, though she may have a headache. We obtained a human drug.”

“Shut up,” White Hair said and backhanded Nasja away from Ellie. Nasja slammed against the wall with a cry and slumped to the floor. “Humans do have their uses. But we do not need to justify our actions to a human.”

Humans had their uses? Ellie’s thoughts were fuzzy, but that statement made her pause.

Was this the vulfen male who had given information to the humans who attacked them at her apartment? Miros had smelled a faint vulfen scent on those humans. She felt a rush of anger at the

thought that this man had caused her mate to be shot.

“Are you the man...betrayed your Alpha...and Cadre...to humans?” Ellie managed.

A flash of triumph crossed his face before he schooled his expression. But in that moment she had seen.

“Coward!” She tried to spit in his face, but it fell short. She couldn’t seem to control her movements. Her limbs were filled with a strange tension, and she couldn’t make them obey.

White Hair pushed her and her neck snapped back. Her head felt like it would explode, but she managed to stay on her feet.

Behind White Hair, Nasja rose from the floor unsteadily. She looked at him with horror.

“Roga, is it true?” Nasja asked. “You acted against the Alpha?”

He barely spared his companion a glance. “The human would say anything when she is scared,” he said. “Humans can’t be trusted.”

Ellie was weaving on her feet, fighting to stay upright, but she wasn’t going to give up. If she could get them fighting with each other, maybe she would have a chance to get away. But she was so weak.

“Nasja...it’s true.” Ellie could barely get the words out. “Can’t you...smell his lie?” She didn’t know if ordinary vulfen people could smell lies or truth, but she hoped so.

Nasja looked at her companion in panic and ran out the door.

Roga grinned and grabbed Ellie again. He pulled her up against his body.

“Alone at last,” he said, and licked Ellie’s cheek in lewd mockery of lover’s a caress.

She swung at him and the hit connected, but it barely made an impact. He was still holding her much too close.

Her heart was pounding and sweat was pouring off her. The room was too hot and too cold at the same time, and her insides were twisting themselves into knots. She felt so dizzy.

Her knees gave out, and Roga let go of her as she dropped to the

floor. She landed with her arms braced in front of her. Her stomach heaved and she gagged, but nothing came up. Her limbs were twitching and she couldn't keep her balance. With a groan, she toppled over sideways, falling to the cold floor.

Roga straddled her prone form and lowered his weight to sit on her aching stomach. He grabbed her breasts and squeezed hard. She almost passed out with the wave of pain and revulsion. His head was coming closer and his eyes were on her mouth. It was disgusting.

Rylek was her mate. The thought of submitting to this male made her ill. She renewed her struggles, twisting her torso and shoving against his chest. She forced her aching body to battle against his depraved attack.

She would never let this creature have her.

"Never!" The sound reverberated in the room and in her head. Ellie screamed and there was a flash of light in the dim room.

Her vision became painfully clear, every detail of her attacker standing out in sharp relief. She saw the shock on his face as she pulled her arm back, but when she lunged upward to hit him, savage claws tore across his face and blood sprayed into the air.

Chapter 14

Rylek sat at the big central table in the kitchen discussing the Cadre reports with Vasily and Valeri. Vasily kept looking at Rylek's hands, and he realized he'd been drumming his fingers on the tabletop. He stopped the loud tapping, but the desire for action didn't subside. It was all he could do to stay in the kitchen and away from his alluring mate.

He pulled his attention back to the reports with some effort.

The investigation was well under way, but the vulfen traitor had not been located and the crowning ceremony would begin in a few short hours. Rylek was adamant they find the traitor before the ceremony.

When Mura walked in carrying a tea service on a large tray, he looked up expectantly, but Ellie wasn't with her.

"Mura, how is Ellie feeling about the crowning ceremony?"

Mura tilted her head and looked at him. "You should ask her. She came to the kitchen with Nasja Dobren when Vasily sent for her. You haven't seen her?"

Rylek was on his feet. "When?" he asked at the same time Vasily said, "I did not send for her."

Mura frowned. "It was ten minutes ago, or fifteen. No more. Where could they be?"

Rylek and Valeri shared a look.

"Valeri, send warriors to hunt Nasja. I will track Ellie's scent. Follow me when you are able."

"Mura, did you or Ellie drink any of this tea?" Vasily asked. He had picked up the teapot and frowned down into it.

Rylek was halfway out the door, but Vasily's question stopped him at once. Was something wrong with the tea?

"Ellie drank more tea than I did. She was nervous, I think, and it gave her something to do with her hands."

Rylek grabbed the teacup and sniffed, recoiling in disgust.

"Drugged," he snarled and his claws sprang in anger. "Valeri, call the Cadre. Forget everything else. Find the queen."

Still in human form, Rylek raced from the room following his mate's sweet scent, howling his hunting song, with Valeri on his heels. Cadre members answered the blood-chilling call and poured out of doors and hallways to follow their Alpha.

One by one they fell in behind their leader as he tracked his mate. Even in their wolf forms, the elite warriors were hard pressed to keep up with Rylek, and he refused to slow his punishing pace.

His mate was drugged and in the hands of a traitor to their people. Every second was vital.

She was a strong, brave woman, Rylek thought grimly, but even the bravest person would be terrified in this circumstance.

Rylek was going to get his mate back. And if the queen had been harmed, someone would die an ugly death.

* * * *

Ellie rolled to her hands and knees, but something was very wrong. Her balance was off and she stumbled to the side.

Roga was bleeding from four deep slashes across his face, and the expression on his face was twisted. He scrambled to his feet and reeled against the wall. Staring, keeping his eyes on her the whole time, he backed out of the room.

When he made it out into the hallway, he locked the door and left her alone in the dark.

Ellie could hear his footsteps echoing on the stone as he ran. She didn't understand what had happened to derail his plan and change his

mind. Or perhaps he thought enough of his scent was on her already to cause Rylek to go mad. No matter the reason, she was glad for the reprieve.

She struggled and finally crawled to the door, but her legs gave out halfway and she collapsed.

“Rylek,” she whispered, holding his name like a talisman against the darkness as it swept up to claim her.

* * * *

Rylek rounded a corner at a dead run and smashed into another man, knocking the man back several feet. The man hit the wall and bounced back at Rylek swinging his fists.

The man smelled of Ellie and blood, and Rylek was on him in seconds. Rylek dragged the man to him and shook him like a rag doll, roaring in his startled face. The Cadre rounded the corner behind him, but they didn’t make a sound. No one dared to speak.

“Where is Ellie?” Rylek snarled. “Where is my queen?”

The man continued to struggle, trying to shift forms. Rylek slammed the sneering man hard into the stone wall and let his Alpha power flow. Dominant wrath snapped and seethed in the contained space. The stone hallway echoed with a deafening boom like overhead thunder and the man yowled and writhed in agony.

Rylek heard someone gasp behind him, but he didn’t look around to see who it was. The Alpha was dealing with a traitor. The punishment for betrayal was harsh, but no one in the Cadre would interfere.

When Rylek dropped him in contempt, the man slid to the floor in a cowering heap, his shifting ability forcibly stripped from him by his furious Alpha while the Cadre looked on.

The man would be helpless, his vulfen strength gone forever. In this state, he would be weaker than the average human male.

The man’s head fell back to rest against the wall. It was Roga

Gabrov, the son of a clan Elder and brother of Cadre member Matsij Gabrov. He was hard to recognize with one side of his face in shreds. Four bloody gouges marked him.

Rylek wanted to tear out the betrayer's throat, but he wanted to find Ellie more. His power swelled until the air in the hallway warped with the elemental force of his anger.

"Where is my Queen?"

Rylek could feel his rumbling Alpha command sink into Roga's brain, forcing him to answer, conquering his will.

"The queen—" Roga visibly struggled, blood trickling from his nose and ears, but he could not refuse the Alpha's authority. "The queen is in the lower storage room." He bowed his head and curled into a ball.

"Does she live?"

"She lives."

The urge to destroy the pathetic man was eating at Rylek. He had never suffered from the burden of bloodlust as some of his people did, but he wanted this man's blood with a desire that nearly overwhelmed his control.

Rylek pulled the broken spy off the floor. At the Alpha's touch, Roga convulsed. Rylek shoved him at Valeri and Eva.

Beside the two warrior siblings stood Matsij Gabrov, the older brother of the traitor. Matsij's face was cold until he met his Alpha's gaze. Then emotion swam in his eyes. After a moment, he looked away from Rylek.

Rylek rested his hand on Matsij's shoulder and squeezed in silent sympathy. But when he spoke, his words were hard.

"He is a traitor to our blood queen. His death is mine."

Eva nodded, helping Valeri to support a twitching Roga.

"Yes, Alpha," they said in unison.

Rylek turned and ran to find his mate.

* * * *

A noise on the other side of the door woke Ellie from her stupor. For a moment, she didn't remember where she was, but as soon as she tried to move, pain rolled through her head like a tidal wave and she whimpered.

A hard hand pounded on the door.

"Ellie!" Rylek shouted. "Ellie!"

A loud strike against the door made the old wood shudder in its frame. Her ears protested at the harsh sound.

One more earsplitting thud and the door cracked down the middle, one half smashing to the floor right beside Ellie. She barely had time to flinch before she was lifted into Rylek's arms and carried through the halls at a dizzying pace.

Her eyes wouldn't focus properly because of the jolting. She saw such pain on his face. She tried to touch his cheek to reassure him, but her fingernail left a tiny scratch beside his eye.

"I'm sorry," she said, but only a soft whine came out.

"Ellie, my heart, I never expected this." Rylek was still running, turning into the atrium and taking the stairs two at a time. "I know you're scared. I would have warned you, taught you. It is my failing, not yours."

She couldn't follow the conversation. Rylek wasn't making sense. People were calling back and forth in the background, a man's voice was screaming.

Then all sound mercifully quieted as Rylek raced into their suite. Mura was already there, standing by the wide bed beside Vasily and an elderly man she didn't know.

"A human doctor," Mura said, bowing. "But I see that his services will not be required. I will arrange for him to be escorted home."

Ellie wanted to protest when Mura sent the doctor out with Vasily. She felt so sick. She really wanted a doctor. Her limbs spasmed and she gasped for air. Her objection was a high-pitched howl that made Rylek wince.

He laid her down on their bed and sat on the edge.

Valeri skidded to a halt just inside the room. He looked at Ellie for a long moment.

“Well, now we know how Roga got clawed up so badly,” Valeri said. “His face is a mess. The wounds are still bleeding.”

His voice held a curious note of...awe? Ellie couldn't be sure.

Her eyes were almost back to normal now, neither blurry nor too sharp. It gave her hope even though her ears were ringing. Ordinary sounds seemed distorted and unnaturally loud. Her head was throbbing, her bones ached, and she felt like her heart was on fire in her chest. She was in bad shape. She hardly noticed when Valeri left the room.

Rylek stroked her face. His touch was so light she could hardly feel it, but the warmth of it spread throughout her system. It calmed her, gave her strength when hers was failing. She absorbed it gratefully.

All she wanted was for him to hold her. She was so thankful that he had found her.

Ellie had been determined to fight, to escape if she could, but in the back of her mind was the very real fear that she would never see her mate again. That she would die in that little airless room with a madman gloating over her. And she had never told Rylek that she loved him. She had never said the words.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she tried to choke out the words to tell him how much she loved him. How happy she was that he had mated her. That he was the man she had dreamed of all her life. The sounds that came out of her mouth were wrong. She still couldn't speak properly.

“Ellie,” Rylek said in a calm tone, “relax into it. You don't need to fight so hard. I'm here.”

He stroked a hand down and patted her ribs. She wanted to object, but it felt strangely good. She wriggled against his hand and he patted a little harder.

“You are so strong, my beautiful mate. There is no need to be frightened. I will guide you through your First Change.”

And then she knew.

She closed her eyes and howled.

Chapter 15

His mate was howling in fear, and it broke Rylek's heart. He could actually feel the pressure building in his chest. A wave of tenderness swept through him. He gathered her furry body close and cradled her. He let her feel his warmth, his deep love for her, both as his mate and as the woman herself.

Gradually, as he rocked her, Ellie's frightened howls became tormented whimpers. Through it all, Rylek held her close and soothed her with the gentle support of his Alpha power.

Touch was so important in the vulfen world, especially between mates. And his mate was terrified. She burrowed against his chest, trying to make herself small. He dropped his head down to rest over hers. Offering his strength to her. Offering reassurance.

He had never expected this. He was quite sure that Ellie wouldn't think of it as a blessing right now, but he did. That he would be so fortunate as to be granted a mate and one who was so compatible with his vulfen nature that his mating bite had allowed her to transform. Truly, the goddess had favored him beyond anything he could have imagined.

He stroked Ellie's sleek coat. As a human, she was beautiful, but as a wolf, she was striking. Her stature was smaller than normal, her coloring unusual with blue-black fur and the same soft blue eyes that had stolen his guarded heart so easily. His mate was exquisite.

He rubbed his chin over her head. She wasn't whimpering any longer, but her little body was still tense.

He would be forever warning off unmated males. He could hardly blame them, his mate was a vulfen male's wet-dream, but if they

valued their lives, they would keep a careful distance. Perhaps the next county would be far enough. He didn't want to kill in front of his mate, but he would if other males made it necessary.

Ellie nudged his hand. He realized with a choked off laugh that he had stopped petting her. He resumed his long rhythmic caresses, and she relaxed in his arms.

After a few minutes, Rylek judged that she was calm enough to follow his lead through the First Change. The vulfen youngsters often changed for the first time at an emotional moment, but then didn't know how to get back to their human forms. A powerful older wolf would be called to act as a guide for the younger one. Ellie would need that guidance now.

He transformed into his wolf and stood facing her on the bed. He licked her muzzle and jumped down to the floor.

He gave a quiet yip, and she moved to the side of the bed. She looked down at him. When he barked, she got down on her belly and awkwardly slid off the edge of the bed to join him. Certain now that she would follow, he moved in close where the shifting patterns of his energy would froth around her. His famous control strained to the limit, he changed as slowly as he could. He could feel the moment her energy started to follow his into human form, because she panicked at the strong pull.

He bared his teeth and let his Alpha authority flood into her, and she grabbed it with startling strength. She held the warm stream of power like a lifeline and let it pull her into human form.

Rylek suppressed a sigh of relief at the ease of her change. She had been traumatized enough for one day. Like most young wolves, Ellie came back naked this first time, and the poor thing was shivering with reaction.

He gathered her up, stuffed her in their bed under the covers, shed his clothes, and crawled in to wrap his big body around hers skin to skin. He could feel her heart pounding. She curled up close to him and they held each other until their hearts began to beat together.

"Rylek, I love you," she whispered and snuggled against his shoulder. Her breath warmed his skin and only then did he realize he had been cold. He had wondered if she would blame him for not protecting her, for giving her incorrect information about the consequences of becoming his mate.

"I love you. You are my heart," he said and was shocked to hear his voice crack.

Rylek's arms tightened around her. He wasn't sure which one of them needed the contact more. He was shaken, his disciplined thoughts in disorder.

She just kept surprising him. His precious mate. His queen. She was everything to him. He held his world in his arms.

* * * *

Ellie cuddled in Rylek's arms, the place she most wanted to be, and tried not to think. Her mind shied away from the events of the day. It was too much. She couldn't handle it right now. She just wanted to savor this time with her mate.

She pressed a kiss to his shoulder and watched his skin twitch. She nuzzled his throat down to his wide chest where she ran her nose through the crisp hair. When she found a tight male nipple, she laved it with her tongue until Rylek moved under her.

"Ellie," he said, and his voice held a warning.

She ignored him and shifted down further.

Rylek pulled her up his body by burying his hands in her hair and tugging.

She allowed him a brief, hot kiss, and then took his hands in hers. She guided his hands to the headboard and curved his fingers around the metal bars.

"Hold on and don't let go," she said, and watched as his eyes fired and began to glow.

She took her hands away and waited, but Rylek stayed still, his

big hands wrapped around the bars at the head of their bed. When she realized that her strong Alpha male was putting himself in her hands, giving her control of their pleasure, she felt a rush of liquid heat.

Ellie took the gift he gave her. She explored his body with her hands and mouth, stroking and kissing the brawny muscles under velvet skin. His well-developed legs drew her attention, and she kneaded the solid contours there before moving further down to his rock-hard calves.

She spent long minutes exploring and enjoying his masculine form, even as she ignored his growing erection. She could see his pulse beating in the thick flesh. It twitched each time she came close. The flared head soon became damp but she bypassed it once again as she worked her way back up his body.

She was trying to tempt him, to give him pleasure, but she didn't count on how the submission of such a commanding man would captivate her. Her nipples tightened and her sex was damp.

When she reached his face, she rubbed his nose with hers in an affectionate caress. He surged upward and captured her lips, plunging his tongue deep, seducing her vulnerable mouth. The carnal kiss went on and on until Ellie moaned in deepening arousal and the headboard rattled.

Ellie pulled back a little, panting, staring into Rylek's eyes.

His nostrils flared and his knuckles turned white, but he held on.

She smiled and he groaned.

"Ellie, please." His voice was rough, grating.

She slid one hand down his body and curled her fingers around his rigid cock. It flexed eagerly in her grip and the bars of the headboard creaked in protest under Rylek's gripping hands. The muscles in his arms stood out in rigid relief.

"Ellie, come up here. Put your knees beside my face," he coaxed, licking his lips. "Come sit on my mouth."

Her body flushed and tingled as the image raced through her like an electric shock. But she shook her head in denial.

“Please. I must taste you.”

She stroked his firm shaft, and he groaned harshly. “Ellie, I have never been so hard. Please. I must make you ready.”

When she hesitated, he narrowed his gaze. “Come up here,” he said, and his tone made it a command.

Gingerly, she climbed him. He didn’t wait until she was situated, but lurched forward to lap at her with an urgent hunger as soon as her pussy was in reach.

She gasped out a cry and smacked her hands on the wall to steady herself as his wicked tongue flickered into her moist entrance. He licked and sucked. His growls of enjoyment and the sounds of his lips and tongue moving over her wet folds sparked fire through her nervous system. The man was driving her mad with only his mouth. His hands were still anchored around the bars where she had placed them.

His mouth was in constant motion, stimulating her until she cried out. The sensations were so strong, she almost tried to pull away, but he didn’t give her the chance. He found her tender clit and sucked hard. Electrical impulses shot through her and pushed her into a shattering orgasm.

Her head slumped down to rest on her extended arm. After a moment, she realized that her other hand was clutched in Rylek’s hair, holding his head to her. Appalled, she loosened her convulsive grip, but Rylek didn’t back off. Instead, he pushed his face up closer to her greedy core and licked her swollen flesh with a gentle tongue. A blazing aftershock rolled up her spine and she convulsed again.

When she came back to herself this time, Rylek was still nuzzling her wet flesh. She should be satisfied, but she wanted more. She needed to feel him inside her, filling her aching emptiness.

She moved down his body until she felt the tip of his cock brush the sensitive apex of her legs.

Rylek’s face was dark, his glowing eyes intent with a savage hunger that sent a tremor through her. She wanted him.

Ellie reached down and grasped his stiff penis, angling it up to lodge at her gate. Rylek's teeth clicked together. But he let her take the lead. He had given her his body, and she was taking it.

She pressed her body down, enveloping his thickness in a slow, slick glide that tore the breath from her lungs and made him gnash his teeth. Her flesh stretched and burned around him. She made that first penetration last until both she and Rylek were gasping for air.

Ellie swiveled her hips experimentally, and the resulting hot blaze of sensation made her grind down on Rylek. His big body shuddered under her. She looked into his eyes and repeated the move.

Rylek snarled and his fangs gleamed in the dim light. He lunged upward, piercing up into her softness until he was fully buried. Her pussy clenched around his intrusion.

"Yes," she cried, "Rylek!"

His hips worked like a piston, plunging his solid cock up into her again and again, bouncing her weight on his hips with breathtaking vigor. He continued his brutal thrusts until her blood sizzled in her veins and her heart pounded to his rhythm. She grabbed his shoulders and hung on for the bruising ride while the waves of orgasm crashed over her.

She screamed and her body arched above him in an agony of pleasure.

She heard him shout and thick bursts of heat filled her. She could feel every fiery blast. It went on and on until spots swam behind her eyes, and she collapsed on his heaving chest.

His arms came around her finally and the world was right. He made her fly and caught her when she fell. She finally had her perfect mate.

Chapter 16

“Ellie. Ellie, please wake.”

A beautiful voice disturbed her sleep.

Ellie mumbled a response and tried to pull the blanket up around her face. The blanket resisted.

“Ellie, please.”

The voice was starting to sound desperate. How long had it been calling her? She couldn't have been sleeping very long, she still felt exhausted.

“Ellie, the Crowning Ceremony is in less than an hour. You must wake up.”

“No.”

The voice sighed.

The blanket disappeared, and she was lifted into a pair of strong arms. She snuggled her nose against a warm chest and inhaled. Mmm. Her mate.

Mate?

The events of the day came rushing into her consciousness. Her eyes popped open and she gasped.

“I'm a wolf. You said it wasn't possible!”

Her words came out as an accusation, and Rylek grimaced.

“I am so sorry, my heart. Sorry that I brushed away your question and doubly sorry that you went through your First Change in trauma. Your wolf rose to protect you. You are a true vulfen female now. I did not know such a thing was possible. To my knowledge, no human has ever been fully turned before.”

He looked thoughtful. “There are legends, of course...” His voice

trailed off. "Perhaps we will set our historians searching for an answer."

"Mura would enjoy a project like this one, I think. And she knows already," Ellie ventured and was gratified when he nodded.

"Every vulfen will know soon enough," Rylek said as they entered the master bath. "The news of a First Change in a human who was unguided and in distress will spread like a wildfire through our people. The estate will be inundated with vulfen in the coming days and weeks. They will all want to see you, scent you, and marvel at the strength of their new queen. And of course, the unmated warriors will be even more attentive to you than they are now."

He didn't sound pleased about that.

He twisted the knob and stepped into the shower with Ellie still in his arms. He set her on her feet and gently but thoroughly washed them both.

"You are so beautiful in both your forms," he murmured against her sensitive shoulder. His breath flowed over the faint imprint of his bite, and it tingled in vivid response.

Ellie leaned back and let him support her weight. His arms came around her, and they stood for a moment under the cleansing spray.

"Rylek, I need some time to get used to this," she said. "I feel—" She didn't have words to describe how she felt. Terrified. Magical. Nothing she could think of quite covered this.

"I understand. I can help you, Ellie, tell you the stories we tell our young, guide you until you are more comfortable. Mura will help as well. There is no hurry. You have all the time you need."

He urged her out of the shower. His touch was affectionate as he dried her, and she let him reassure her. She just let go and basked in his love and support. It had been so rare in her lonely life. That made it all the more precious to her now.

They dressed together, Ellie in scarlet silk and Rylek in a stunning tuxedo, exchanging small kisses and caresses along the way. When they emerged from their suite and greeted Rylek's seconds and the

lone Queen's Guard, they were just a little late.

Valeri grinned at them and tapped his watch.

Ellie couldn't help but laugh, even as Rylek bared his teeth in warning.

They descended the stairs with their Honor Guard leading the way and walked into the large room where she had been introduced to the vulfen people two nights before. So much had happened in those brief days that it seemed like a lifetime ago.

The room was decorated in red, black, and gold. The stage area now held two huge, beautifully ornate wooden chairs carved with wolves wearing crowns and lined with plush red velvet.

Ellie looked sideways at Rylek in time to catch his eye.

"Just for the record, you told me it wasn't a throne," she whispered to Rylek, and his quick answering grin made her heart beat fast.

She heard Valeri laugh under his breath only to have his sister shush him.

In an unknown world with unfamiliar rules, Ellie was surrounded by friends. It was a warm and wonderful feeling.

Her smile was radiant as she ascended the dais on the arm of her gorgeous mate. It didn't falter even when Vasily approached in a long black robe, flanked by two other Elders to ask her the ritual questions to confirm that she understood and accepted the responsibility of her new position. She gave the required responses with joy.

She could feel Rylek's pride and approval flowing over her from his position of support behind her. For the first time in her life, she was exactly where she was meant to be.

"Kneel to accept the crowning, and rise as queen," Vasily intoned, and Ellie knelt. He lowered the hammered gold circlet over her forehead. There was a rustle of fabric as Ellie rose and the crowd bowed.

"No!"

The hoarse cry shattered the peace of the ceremony.

Roga Gabrov sprang from the side door. His eyes were wild and his face was torn apart, but Ellie would recognize her kidnapper anywhere. He wore her mark. A gun gleamed in his outstretched hand and it was pointed at her face.

Ellie didn't have time to move before the gun barked once, twice.

A horrible roar sounded in her ear and a ripple of unleashed power blasted out through the room. The marble floor buckled and the walls bowed outward. Ellie felt a blow to her arm and staggered just as a body brushed by her.

Eva Sidarova dropped to the floor at Ellie's feet, blood pouring from her throat. Her limbs were sprawled at odd angles.

Rylek's big body vaulted the prone form of his fallen cousin. He landed several yards away on top of the traitor. The force of his leap bore the other man to the ground. They slid across the floor with Rylek's fangs buried in Roga's throat. The gun clattered to the marble in front of the agitated crowd. One of the Elders scooped it up.

The Cadre enclosed Ellie and Eva in a circle of protection. Miros was kneeling by Eva, swearing, and Vasily was working to help save his daughter. Ellie struggled to see past the wall of male bodies, but they blocked her and no amount of shoving or begging could budge them.

The noise from the crowd cut off suddenly, and when the Cadre shifted positions, Ellie caught a glimpse of Rylek rising, mouth and chin bloody, coat in shreds, to stand over the torn form of Roga Gabrov. Something twitched on the floor. Was that Roga's...arm? Oh, dear. She winced at all the blood before her view was barred again.

Vasily shouted and Ellie's attention was drawn to the flurry of activity around Eva. Ellie's stomach lurched. She thought she might faint. A strange heat began to build in her hands and arms. She stepped closer and knelt beside Vasily.

Eva's blood pumped out through his fingers. It was coming too fast, a bright river of red pumping out onto the dais. Ellie's hands itched at the sight of it. She reached out to cover Vasily's bloody

hands with hers. She felt so hot, like she was burning with fever, consumed by it. Her vision was blurring with a film of red, flickering at the edges like a bonfire.

Rylek appeared by her side, and she turned to him blindly.

"Help me," she said, and her voice sounded strange in her ears. "Rylek, help me."

His eyes widened and he put his hands on top of Ellie's. His Alpha power flowed through her and some unknown part of her recognized it, welcomed it. She pulled it in and absorbed it until she felt swollen with the blaze of sparkling energy. Her mind was on fire.

She screamed with the scorching pain of the conflagration as it reached the bursting point and exploded. Waves of power surged out through her hands and down into Eva's torn body. It went on and on, pouring out until she depleted the terrible overload and was herself again. She was exhausted, leaning against her mate for support, but still Ellie.

She saw the people crying and clinging to one another, heard the hushed whispers, but everything seemed far away and unreal. Even when Eva, who had been so close to death a moment ago, sat up with the aid of her father, it took Ellie another minute to comprehend what had happened.

Eva had been healed. Her clothes were saturated in blood, but the skin of her throat was smooth and there was no sign of a wound. Not even a scar.

She turned to Rylek for confirmation, and was shocked to see tears standing in his eyes. He hugged her tight. The muscles in his strong arms had a fine tremor.

"You are a miracle," he choked out. "My own miracle and a miracle for my people."

She didn't feel miraculous, just bone-tired. Her limbs seemed too heavy, and she didn't want to move. Breathing deeply was an effort.

"Did we...?" Ellie stopped before she uttered the words. It was too farfetched. She had been an ordinary human just a few days

earlier, a woman who was a bit too curvaceous with no illuminating talent and no special powers. It was too much for her mind to believe that she could heal a bullet wound, but her spirit believed.

“You healed my daughter,” Vasily said. Tears ran down his face and he didn’t bother to wipe them away. “You saved her life. She is the Queen’s Guard. She put her body willingly in front of her chosen queen. She understood that it was her life for yours.”

Ellie gulped back a sob. The blow she felt must have come from Eva shoving past her to intercept the gunshots. To take the bullets meant for Ellie.

Eva was sitting up, supported on either side by two stone-faced warriors who looked enough alike to be twins.

“The injury was too severe, right through her vulnerable throat. She was dying.” Vasily’s voice caught. “She was dying, but you saved her.”

Vasily reached out to Ellie, and when she saw his hands, she cried out. His palms were red and blistered; the flesh on the backs of his hands where hers had covered them melted smooth as if he had held them in an open flame.

“Vasily, your poor hands!” Ellie was distraught over the damage she had caused.

“His hands will be scarred, but they will heal,” Rylek murmured in her ear. “He would have traded his life for his daughter. Be at peace.”

“The power moved through me,” Vasily said with wonder, gazing down at his injured hands. “Such power that I felt the healing begin in Eva when her heart was already faltering. She was slipping away from us. You have blessed my family. We are all blessed to have you for our queen.”

He stood and raised his burned hands in the air and the crowd roared with him.

Mura wrapped her arms around Ellie and Rylek and whispered her thanks to them over and over. Valeri joined in, and the couple was

encircled by the entire Cadre in a collective hug, including Eva. The vulfen people stomped their feet rhythmically.

Ellie looked at her mate, standing so tall and straight beside her. When the people began to draw away, she leaned against his side and he pulled her closer in his warm embrace.

"Your tuxedo is ruined. We'll never get all the blood out," she said. He nodded.

Rylek raised his hand, and the Cadre backed off a few feet. He looked out on his people.

"The traitor is no more, but the threat to our people still exists," he said. "Nasja, a vulfen female who drugged and helped to capture our Queen, has escaped. She will be found. And we must be wary still of the small group of human hunters who seek to destroy us. We must be more careful now than at any other time in our long history. I will count on each one of you to keep your eyes and ears open and listen for any warning of danger in the outside world. Together we will survive."

The Cadre roared. The people roared.

Ellie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She smiled instead. Rylek squeezed her hand.

One of the Elders turned off the lights and another threw open the wide doors. The scent of cedar and pine rode in on the cool wind. The moon was round and full and bright moonlight poured into the room.

The people began to shift and run out into the forest.

Rylek caught both Ellie's hands and brought them to his mouth for a lingering kiss.

"Run with me," he invited and the hope in his voice sent shivers down her spine.

Ellie rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him. He responded by taking over the simple kiss, drawing it out until it took on the character of an intimate promise.

"Ellie, you have seen the threats we face, the ugliness of betrayal. Let me show you the beauty of my world. The moon is calling to us.

Run with me.”

Ellie looked up into his glowing black eyes. Her mind was unsettled and her heart was racing. She felt nervous, exhausted, and exhilarated all at the same time. A cautious person would refuse, but Ellie was discovering that she was braver than she ever thought she could be. She wanted to run with her mate.

“Yes, I’ll run with you anywhere,” she said. It was a vow. He snatched her up in his arms and twirled her around. When he set her on her feet, she was dizzy and laughing.

He began to shift and the power foamed and bubbled around her. She let it take over. It pulled her into the form of a black wolf. She felt strong, powerful in this form, but she was much smaller than her Alpha mate.

He nuzzled and lapped at her muzzle in a wolfy kiss then lowered his head and front paws to the floor with his tail wagging in the air.

Ellie’s wolf understood. The danger was over for the moment. Her mate was asking her to play.

With a laugh that came out as a yip, she pounced at him and when he barked and bounced a few feet away, she chased him out into the silvery moonlight to explore her new world.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laina Kenney is a classically trained singer/instructor with a regular job and a deep love of the written word. Her family is supportive of (or perhaps just resigned to) a house full of books in every genre, with ancient history and romance taking up the majority of the space. She cheerfully admits to having a bizarre sense of humor and enough shiny accessories for any ten women. One of the greatest joys in her life is exploring the wonder of testosterone, both in prose and in person.

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