

# COUGAR

By

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## Chapter One

*Post-apocalyptic Earth: after alien invasion, AEI, 2064 AD*

*Life has gone to Hell in two generations. Extraterrestrials altered the human genome, splitting humanity into two subspecies of humans, Shifters and Normals. Sometimes Shifters and Normals work together for survival in cities or remote villages. Other times they war for dominance. Regardless of the outcome, they must survive and fight against human enslavement. Hunted by aliens for breeding stock, Shifters understand this the most. Especially, Wolf males. But every once in a while, a female Shifter is born and her Cougar protected from detection because nobody knows what the aliens want with Cougars...*

\* \* \* \*

*The gangrene should have killed my half-brother yesterday, Jackal thought. My little brother, Rattler, would drop dead any minute. But Rattler had no intention of dying before he reached his mate. So, the others and I followed his ragged brown shirt with cut-off sleeves tucked into his black leather pants through the whispering forest on this last-ditch wild- goose chase of June. To the place Rattler lived the past eight years.*

*In hiding.*

*Eight damned years.*

*We'd wondered where he was as he'd come and go to the village, to the clan, a time or two a year. But we never guessed he had a mate. Everyone just thought he'd lost his mind. Or went on a killing spree. Nobody could blame him for slipping into a rage with life on Earth gone to Hell once the aliens arrived. But hiding a mate? That was the last damned thing we expected.*

*Not from him.*

*He wasn't the type to turn down a challenge though. To feel forced into hiding.*

*Rattler halted, his back to us. Shaking. Elbow jerking. Then, he stepped off again.*

*Driven onward. Toward love.*

*That's what he had secreted away.*

*Because of the damned aliens. Because Shifter mates were targeted above all else for abduction.*

*We should have guessed what he was up to. He was always so damned determined.*

*"Up here," Rattler said over his shoulder without stopping.*

*Demon shot me another one of his speculative looks.*

*Like I knew what to expect from my baby brother. Rattler and I shared the same mother. But hell if there was any way I could make sense out of his behavior. We'd grown up together. He was the baby five years in my shadow. Actually my shadow until he hit fifteen. But his father never treated me like his own son, just a step-son, and we went our separate ways thereafter. I became his father's right-hand man. Present, yet distanced from Rattler, while Rattler wallowed in his father's favoritism. Then, I hit twenty and proved I could beat the best of the village Guardians. Earned the respect of a man who could enforce village rules among the Normals and Shifters.*

With that came rank and duty. Whereas Rattler just lived off the prestige of being the son of the village's clan leader. He could kick ass and kill with the best of them. But he didn't have to work at making something of himself with his built-in reputation inherited through birth. Rattler had it all in becoming the next clan leader. Until he mysteriously abandoned the village. The clan.

Rattler veered toward a thick tree trunk.

A tall ash.

At the tree's base, he halted, slid his gaze up the trunk, wobbled, thrust his palms to his hips, and managed to steady himself. "Angel," he yelled almost a little hoarsely.

The four of us stared up at the weathered wooden base of a tree house, with Rattler. Nothing moved at the rectangular doorway's tarp covering. Except a breeze making the tan cloth flutter. A perfect place to sleep with the aliens' blood-thirsty Bounders crawling across the forest floor, hunting down anyone foolish enough to dare venture out every night after curfew.

"Angel?" Rattler yelled again, somehow managing to brace his rotting flesh, and waited for his mate.

Movement flashed to his left set back deep within the wall of tree trunks forming the forest. First, a bit of bare arm slipped between tree trunks. Then, a leg covered in faded camouflage and a beige hiking boot. A swath of her honey-colored hair pulled back into a long sleek ponytail swung into view. Then, she burst fully into our line of sight, running.

Silently. Like she was part of the woods.

Rattler extended a hand. "Hurry, Angel."

She was slim. About five foot six. Ample curves hidden beneath her olive-drab tank top.

Her gaze locked onto Rattler like he magically appeared and would vanish as she gripped the weathered black strap of the large firearm, something a good sixty years old, looking of military issue by the two visible ends, thrown over her head and shoulder where the strap bit between her breasts.

Damn. She had no idea her mate was about to die.

Poor woman.

For the *need* in her features.

For my brother's desperation to save her before he collapsed and passed from the living into the promised world of the fortunate dead.

"Come here, Angel," Rattler said calmly.

Probably didn't want to spook her. The last thing I'd want to do is tell my mate I was dying. All the better reason for letting the other Guardians take on mates when the opportunity produced an unmated female. I'd give freedom a few more years to show me what life had to offer before taking on the responsibility.

Angel crashed into Rattler with the gusto only a lover could display. He grabbed her, his foothold shifting. Undoubtedly from the pain. But he never let on he felt anything.

He *loved* her. That's how Shifters mated. For life. Wholeheartedly. Irreversibly. Until one of them died and released the other from the bond. He loved her so completely that the clan's head, Rattler's sire, sent out half the village's best Guardians to bring back Rattler's mate.

Rattler's body blocked our view of Angel. All but her hands where she threw them around his neck. He bent toward her.

For a last kiss.

Shit.

I couldn't stomach this anymore.

But I had to. For Rattler. Brothers owed each other favors throughout life. I'd be damned if I didn't hold steady to help his mate through the catastrophe awaiting her in a world where women *needed* men for protection. I ground my teeth and exhaled.

Purging. Trying to keep a level head.

She backed away, peering around his shoulder, at us with the palest blue eyes stretched into wide-eyed surprise. "What happened?" She shot him the same owl stare with her finely-carved features. "Who are they? They're Shifters. Do you know them?"

"I need you to listen to me," Rattler began and turned a little to face us sideways, holding her by the upper arms as if to begin introductions.

I guess, for starters, that's all you could say in this type of situation.

She eyed him suspiciously.

His knees buckled. His body fell forward, into hers, as he dropped.

She grabbed him under his arms.

He grunted, his pain magnified by her touch at his torso.

"What happened?" she asked again, her brow furrowing. She knelt, pushing him at arm's length from her chest, watching him, fear stretching her mask. "John?"

So Rattler told her the Christian name the villagers forced Shifter sires to give their sons. Insults to us who were deemed abominations by the Normals who feared our genetically-modified power. Especially Christians. Were these two truly mated? Did she know he was a Shifter? Was this woman a Normal who despised Shifters only to learn now that she'd married the wrong type of man because he brought Guardians to her?

Not Rattler. He wouldn't have hung on to return to her if he and Angel hadn't bonded with blood. Like Shifters.

So, why did she use his Christian name?

Rattler cupped one of her cheeks with a palm.

"Don't send me away." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and clutched him tight.

Rattler flinched from her squeezing his rotting flesh beneath his shirt.

She caught the motion, backed away, and ripped his shirt open where she could view his putrid abdomen. "No," she gasped the most pitiful sounding word I'd ever heard.

I couldn't watch anymore. I turned to pretend I guarded our back, the indomitable forest, from the direction we'd arrived.

She just kept crying *no*.

Over and so god-damned over. Again. And again.

"Promise me you'll go with them, Angel. My father says the clan will take care of you."

Damn. Talk about the miserable truth. She'd have to come with us. Or Normals would drag her off for marriage, breeding, or worse, trade her into prostitution. That's the way of things since the aliens invaded and began jacking with the human genome.

"No, John. I'll find the healer. She's not far. Wait here." She took a step toward the forest.

He grabbed her arm. "That old woman can't help me now. It took everything in me to bring the Guardians here. You've got to promise me you'll go with them."

She sniffed.

"Promise, dammit," he growled.

"I promise," she blurted. The response seemed more an effort to appease him than reflect her true intent.

"I love you, Angel. Keep Black Betty close. Take the supplies. The clan will need them. Or trade them."

Suddenly, you could have heard a whisper.

"No, John. Don't leave me," she begged with crackling words.

\* \* \* \*

This can't be happening. Sierra knelt on the ground with her mate clutched to her chest. She could feel his heart beat. The recognizable scent of him, a familiar comforting aroma of campfire and leather that kept her warm in her bedding whenever he was gone hunting or trading. Even though his body rotted.

Those gentle steel-blue eyes he always flashed at me, his stunning grin, all were absent in his attempt to save me from the isolation he brought upon me. He *wanted* me to leave the forest.

To leave the little world he'd carved out of the wilderness to safeguard me.

His palm trembled against my cheek. He calmly sighed and planted his soft velvet lips against mine.

So damned warm.

*You can't die.*

He couldn't.

"You promised," he said and closed his eyes.

The warm breath whistled out of his parted lips.

My heart split.

Blinding tears smeared my view of my Shifter.

I couldn't breathe.

My John was gone.

What did it matter where I went now?

What I did?

He was my life.

My family was dead.

Nobody else even knew I was alive.

Except for these four males.

What did they know about me?

Other than my heart died on the forest floor with the light in John's eyes.

The whispering scratch of fabric against fabric beckoned before I saw *him* kneel in my periphery.

He was tall. The dark stubble on the top of his head and his six o'clock shadow told me his hair was darker than his brown eyes. John's brother? I blinked, looking back at John's square jaw.

This Guardian was nothing like my John at all...

"Angel, we can't stay long. We have to reach our vehicle by nightfall. Rattler, uh John, wanted us to hurry. For your sake."

Who was the talker with the gentle words?

And how could I leave John?

How? I clutched John's heavy stiff body against my chest and slid my gaze over to the scuffed toe of the talker's combat boot, up his khaki bloused pants, up to his straight-lipped expression.

I couldn't leave John.

No.

*I couldn't.*

"I'm Demon, Angel," the talker said where he knelt beyond my periphery. "John and I have the same sire. Father wants me to bring you back to the clan. I need you to gather your things quickly. We have to leave *now*."

The more I tried to open my mouth to say no, the more hot tears blurred my view, smearing the blank expression on John's face.

"Please, Angel, we've got to leave before the Bounders start their night patrols."

I couldn't leave my John.

Not with the alien's creatures out to kill those foolish enough to ignore the sunset curfew. How could these *Guardians* think I could leave my mate? What was wrong with the fucking universe?

"You promised him. He killed himself making the two days journey back here, Angel. Hold true to your word. For him."

Demon's voice remained low and gentle.

Persuasive?

Maybe it was alright to leave?

John told me to leave.

To go with them.

I had promised.

The talkative Guardian skirted me.

Was he going to do what he would with me now? Like all the others. Without John, I had no protection. Just a goddamned rifle and some ammo. All but the one thing John and my father made me swear never to reveal. My inner Cougar.

Could my Cougar shifting ability save me now? Or damn me worse than the loss of my mate if I revealed I was one of the rarest creatures on the planet? Talk about irony of the Goddess. She would gift me something so powerful and taunt me with its dangerous use. Then slap me in the face with gang rape and the murder of my parents all to reiterate I damned sure better not use the power.

Well, I could try to outrun the Guardians. Absolutely impossible in human form...

They'll probably do what they will with me anyway.

Maybe they'd just rape me and put a bullet through my head. Release my spirit from the tidal wave of grief barreling down upon my accursed bones.

Hands gently grabbed me under my arms from behind and hefted me up to my feet.

"Come now, Angel, we've got two hours before sunset. That's just enough time to reach the tank," he said softly.

John's stiff body slipped away from me. Back to the grassy earth while my empty arms dangled at my sides.

*He can't be dead. Not my John.*

A hand nudged under my chin and lifted my gaze to meet those brown eyes. "I know you feel like you want to die. But John wants you to live. Do this for him, Angel."

And be cursed.

Hell, I *promised*. "My name is Sierra. Only *he* calls me Angel." I turned my chin out of Demon's grasp and stepped back twice. Away from them. Could they be trusted? John had brought them. I suppose I had to believe they were my Guardians.

The four males, all with the shaved heads of Shifter Guardians, each wearing a mixture of camouflage, leather, and combat boots, studied me. The pity in their eyes spoke louder than my dying drumming heart.

Maybe they weren't going to rape me.

Why would they?

John brought them here.

John said they were his brothers.

And I *promised*.

\* \* \* \*

Jackal watched the pale blue eyes of his brother's widow glint with pooling tears. But the tears had ceased flowing as if she realized what had happened. What must happen. She stared them down. Thinking, undoubtedly. I would. In a world where Shifter mates were hunted to use as bait to lure their mates into capture for exploit by aliens, a woman as beautiful as Sierra couldn't be too careful. She'd wind up on an alien spacecraft, heading for someplace far far away. Or traded for breeding or just for sex. That's why only a fool would risk mating. Risk his mate's life and the lives of his children. Especially after I'd watched my mother survive the pains of childbirth to lose four of the children she bore before they were old enough to have their own children. I'd never put a woman through that torture.

Sierra sighed, lifted the rifle strap over her head, and tossed her four-foot long black AR-15 rifle at Demon. "If you're planning on killing me, use this." She abruptly turned to the tree trunk, grabbed a length of rope coiled around the stump of what was left of a low branch, and shook out a rope ladder.

She ignored us.

Probably hoped we'd kill her.

With all the horrible things that roaming packs of Normals did to Shifters and their mates, I couldn't blame her for uttering that fear. Hell, it was the best reason not to take a mate. Once you had a wife and children, the level of danger in your life of simple village Guardian elevated to nightmare. Anytime, your family could be stolen in an attempt to get you to pursue in a rescue attempt. And that often resulted in your own capture. Resulting in imprisonment on an alien spacecraft. Talk about a nice one-way trip off world.

Sierra climbed up that ladder like it was the easiest thing she'd ever done.

Demon shot me another one of his stoic how-in-the-hell-did-we-get-caught-up-in-this stares.

Like I knew what to expect with this whole insane venture. He was in charge. He needed to make his own strategic assessment. I swear the man didn't want to take over the clan for his sire. Most Shifters would jump at the chance. Whatever Demon wanted was a mystery though. But one would think he wouldn't want to look like a fool in working toward his goal. Nobody dared call him on his actions other than his sire though. Still, a man had pride.

"He's your half-brother," Demon muttered.

"And yours. More so, you and he both got your sire's disposition. I was just gifted the sweetness of our mother."

Demon snorted. "Killing machines are anything but sweet."

"You only say that because I've kicked your ass more times than you can count." I guess we shouldn't be talking about trying to kill each other when our brother's widow could barely think due to her loss.

The tarp door flap fluttered overhead.

Sierra shoved the end of a large brown duffle bag through the rectangular doorway, and worked a rope, lowering the bag, hand over fist, to the ground at the base of the rope ladder.

"Untie it," she ordered.

Within minutes, she lowered a second duffle with a few steel firearm barrels sticking out where the zipper gaped. Then she sent down a heavy backpack before climbing down with two smaller packs and a guitar slung over her shoulder. She stepped off the ladder, turned to face us with the hardest mask I think I'd ever seen on a woman, and sucked in a deep breath. "I have to bury him."

Oh shit. There's no telling how Demon would react. Guardians directly in line to take over clan leader often were a bit unpredictable. Yet, he called the shots.

Demon claimed a foothold next to her and laid a palm on her shoulder.

She clenched her jaw and stared him down.

"There isn't time. John knew that," Demon spoke softly but firmly.

Her gaze met each of ours in a swoop. "If you're his brothers, you won't leave him like this."

*Where's a gods-be-damned shovel?*

Demon scanned the grass and knotted roots of the tree. "We don't have a shovel anyway, Sierra."

Good thing he was in charge. I'd already be clawing handfuls of earth from the ground to ease the pain in her eyes.

"I do," she ground out.

Demon sighed. "There's no time."

"Give me the shovel," I ordered.

Demon sighed, shooting me a disgusted stare as she riveted a serious gaze upon mine.

Something unsaid passed between us.

Something impossible to grasp.

Perhaps understanding?

But she dumped her bags in the grass and produced the pointed spade.

My stepbrothers took turns hacking at the hard earth to speed up the process while she strapped no-frills handguns at her hips and filled extra clips. Probably because she knew her delay would result in our party being attacked by Bounders. But she never met our gazes with the knowledge in her eyes that she endangered us all.

I'd do the same in her boots.

Demon finally patted the last clump of grassy earth atop the grave and tossed the shovel onto the long mound. "Let's go."

Sunset was close the way the intense orange light bore through the canopy.

\* \* \* \*

After strapping John's favorite handguns to her thighs, Sierra watched as the Guardians picked up her duffle bags, one by one, and heaved them over their shoulders. *They're carrying my packs.* For me?

Probably to steal everything. That was the way of life AEI. I grabbed my smaller lightweight backpack of extra clothing and the one containing medical supplies. And hoisted them each over one of my shoulders.

Just in case the men were out to rob me. It would be tough trying to get at Black Betty if I needed to. But the old rifle never failed me. I'd carry her close. And the handguns. Like John said.



A wave of smothering sorrow choked me.

The tallest quiet Guardian, the one whose eyes stared me down with empathy, strode over and extended a wide hand. "I'll take your packs for you."

He would?

Were these Shifters about to run off?

Leave me here?

Trade me to Normals for even more supplies? "It's alright. It's just my clothes. And medicine. I can carry them." Maybe he wouldn't care about either bag's contents. I clutched the straps at my shoulders and tried not to let the massive musculature of his broad shoulders intimidate me.

"No. You've got a heavy enough load to haul without dragging those packs along. And we'll travel faster if you don't have to rest." His strong broad hand waited.

For me to hand over.

Hell, what did anything matter anymore?

Without John, I'd be lucky to last two days without a male trying to claim me as a mate. My eight years in solitude with a man who loved me to death just ended. Lying to myself was stupid. I handed over, acquiescing to tote my guitar and Black Betty, and followed the tall capable forms of John's clansmen into the setting sun's reddening orange light.

Night was two steps away. With its monsters.

Bounders had to feed.

And this was the werescape. Earth altered by aliens. There wasn't anything to fear from genetically-modified shape-shifting warriors who swore to protect the weak. Was there?

\* \* \* \*

Jackal kept lookout behind his brother's mate as the others led the woman back through the night's quiet darkness to the tank. *We'd be safe locked away inside the vehicle's steel walls if Bounders showed*, he thought. Prepared, if we reached the vehicle. The trail we left on the drive out to the tree house meant we were highly likely to have visitors tonight. But since we were almost to the tank, we just might avoid a scuffle.

Hell, I just want to sleep.

The day had been too damned exhausting.

I buried my baby brother and followed his widow on a two-hour hike.

The thought of tightening down the tank's hatch and stretching out until morning sounded more satisfying than talking to the grieving lover my brother left behind. And for some gods-be-damned reason, I thought of nothing but talking to her. Maybe it was the fear in her eyes. Something that pushed me to reassure her she was safe. Or the woman's sorrow yelled for companionship. Just someone to speak to.

Maybe Demon was right. I'm too damned soft. Weak.

A shriek pierced the darkness.

The line of Shifters before me halted.

*Bounders.*

Shit.

Move now, Demon. I conjured up my internal deep hum to pull the change upon my Shifter eyes. To use night vision to scan the distance for the awkward gait of the squatty four-foot tall nocturnal creatures out to hunt the fools who lingered outside village walls.

They probably already had our scent.

Sierra turned to me, extending a hand. "The lighter pack, please."

I gave her the bag and kept my gaze on the distant expanse of dark tree trunks spaced out by shafting moonlight.

“Do you see anything?” she whispered and foraged through the bag’s contents.

“Not yet.”

She threw the pack over her shoulder. “Give me the other backpack.”

“I told you I’d carry them.”

“Not if you shift.”

She was right. My clothes would be shredded. And I’d mindlessly drop anything I carried. I passed her the bag.

“Move,” I muttered at my stepbrother, Badger.

Badger turned his burning silver Shifter gaze my direction. “Who stays with Sierra?”

“Tell Demon and Steel that I’ll stay behind her.”

She jerked something over her head, shot me a glance through night vision goggles, and curled her fingers around the butt of a pistol at her hip.

Talk about one prepared little angel.

The line headed forward again, ushering her along toward the tank.

We had to be close.

Where was the damned tank?

Movement fluttered to the left.

Party time. I closed the space between Sierra and myself.

She whipped the pistol out of its holster to point toward the Bounder.

Four awkward orange-red forms glowing from my night vision pulled black ground toward their bodies, heading in our direction.

Should I shift to guard her? “Will you feel better with me in were-form?”

“Do what you want.” She didn’t even glance my direction. “Just stay out of my way.”

Maybe I should have been insulted about my intelligence when it came down to my having enough sense to keep out of someone’s line of fire. But the time wasted on being angry wasn’t going to gain us anything. “Come on. Let’s keep moving. The others will fight them.”

She began to trot onward. “How much farther?”

“We’re close. Just keep moving.”

“I see the tank,” she blurted.

Talk about miracles.

Another shriek sliced through the darkness.

Demon roared.

My brothers’ were-forms loped through the forest’s stoic expanse of tree trunks.

Away from Sierra. To intervene with the advancing Bounders.

The bags my brothers carried littered the ground with their boots and belts.

Sierra leapt over the duffle full of firearms.

Leaving them behind would be a huge mistake. I stopped, bent, and heaved the load of ammo and guns to my shoulder.

Sierra caught my movement in her peripheral vision. She halted, raised her weapons, and fired into the nearby battle’s clashing bodies of werewolves and Bounders.

Screeches cut through the night.

Only to be snuffed by the burst from each moment she quickly aimed and pulled the trigger.

Like rattling off death blows. With seamless motions. Effortlessly. Not many men could shoot with one hand the way she used both of hers. Still, she'd be safer inside the tank instead of engaging in target practice. "Come on," I shouted and stretched my stride toward the duffle full of canned food.

She followed at my heels, picking off approaching Bounders with carefully placed bullets set right between their eyes. "Leave the duffles until dawn," she shouted. "There's so damned many of the beasts. And Bounders aren't going to do anything with the supplies."

True. But the guns were the difference between life and death these days. I didn't want them damaged. I raced the last six steps to the bulky side of the tank.

She was there, at my back, shooting with both hands, two directions, knocking off Bounders with every bullet. Damn. Nothing wasted.

But more orange-red loping forms burst from the ends of the tank.

Flanking us. I grabbed her around the waist and threw her up at the hatch.

She scrambled her feet beneath her and fired at anything that moved toward me.

Thank the stars the blood-thirsty creatures couldn't climb. I shoved the bag of firearms and ammo on top of the tank and yanked my body up beside her slim kneeling form.

She kept matching the Bounders' shrieks with explosive pops.

I turned the hatch's wheel, pulled the heavy metal open, and crammed the duffle into the black hole.

The bulky mass would be in our way. I jumped into the darkness and slid the heavy load across the tank's metal floor, creating space for everyone else to move when climbing in to safety.

But every minute I left her topside she could accidentally shoot a Guardian. So, I thrust my ass back toward the dark circle of night sky, grabbed her around her trim waist, stuffed her into the tank's black void, and closed the hatch behind us.

My brothers roared.

Finally. Or I just noticed them now that we settled down in the blackness.

She backed up against the far wall to sit, checking her ammo clips. "Are you okay?" she asked. "Ready to shift?"

My pulse was pounding.

Yes. My arms jerking. And with my heat vision. "I can control it." The Normal woman didn't seem upset about my transitional edginess.

She eyed me over through those night goggles. "I can help you if you're ready to kill the euphoria."

The last thing I needed was the hands of my baby brother's mate on me. That skin of hers, touching mine. It had to feel like intoxicating silk. And she was so damned beautiful. Not many women reached twenty without looking like they'd birthed a dozen babies and worked twenty years in the fields.

Every cell in my body screamed for me to utter *yes*.

My foot jerked.

Thoughts of silk were deadly.

She watched me for one more breath, climbed into a squat, and edged to my side. "We're better off with your thoughts on the present," she whispered.

Shit. She was going to touch me. How was I going to just sit there?

My blood was boiling.

Her palm edged toward my face. "Everything's going to be alright," she whispered.

Wasn't I supposed to be telling her that? Instead, all I could do was sit there with my cock hardening to stone, licking my lips, with thoughts of her salty flesh moving closer and closer.

For one bloody bite...

My inner Wolf drooled.

"You have amazing control," she said, sliding her palm across my cheek.

Skin to skin, my pulse shot from throbbing to nuclear. If she didn't get her hand off me, I was going to shove her onto her back and bite a chunk out of her shoulder.

## Chapter Two

*My pulse suddenly eased up as Sierra pressed her cheek against mine inside the tank.* I sucked in a breath and tried to relax. She smelled so damned amazing. Like the faintest hint of meadow flowers. A delicate softness only a hypersensitive nose on a Shifter could detect.

I had to struggle to sit still.

Appear unaffected.

But my grating teeth only alarmed any Normal foolish enough to lean against my cheek that I was having a difficult time not reacting to the skin-to-skin contact working to free my inner beast.

“Better yet?” she asked, her warm breath fanning my ear, leaning her curves against my chest. “It’s Jackal, right?”

Her orange-red knee slid between my thighs, and she straddled the one leg, sliding her other hand down my bare arm.

My cock strained against the taut fabric of my pants.

Gooseflesh shivered down my limbs.

Or my wolven hair was sprouting.

She was too gods-be-damned on top of me. “Yes.”

But the medicinal human touch suddenly began easing my heart rate to the point my heat vision started failing.

The blessed sign I was coming down from my Shifter high.

Her glowing form faded into the darkness where the only way I knew she was there was from how she pressed her body’s heat against mine.

Gods to slide my arm around that curve of her lower back I’d watched all afternoon. To hold her tightly. Those were dangerous thoughts. Thoughts that led to taking a mate. And I wasn’t about to impregnate the woman and watch her die during childbirth like my sire did with my mother.

Something thumped against the hull.

A shriek echoed through the tank.

She flinched.

Frightened in the darkness. I slid my arm around the slender curve of her warm lower back, and we sat there like lovers. “It’ll be over soon.” My voice was too comfortable. With her in my arms.

“Is there a light in here?”

Loss of vision was the fine line dividing life from death to Normals. “We’re better off sitting blind. I’d hate to lose my vision for a few moments because I jacked with a lantern.”

Her fingernails gently scratched my scalp at the base of my head as she continued petting my arm with her other palm. Each of her breaths shoved her breasts into my heart where she sat with her chin propped upon my shoulder. “How do you feel?”

Like fucking your brains out. “I think my eyes have shifted back to normal.”

She leaned backward.

Undoubtedly studying my face.

“You’re right.” She slid her sexy little ass off my leg and scooted a few blessed inches from my thigh.

She probably just didn’t want to sit in the darkness alone.

But my mind raced with all the dangerous things that could result from a beautiful woman straddling my lap.

My fangs in her shoulder.

The mindboggling taste of her metallic blood sliding across my tongue.

Her body spread-eagled beneath mine.

The hot wetness of her tight inner vise squeezing my cock into explosion.

Those angelic lips shouting my name.

But none of that would happen. She was my baby brother’s mate. And I damned sure wasn’t going to take a little sex from her during her period of mourning even with some herbs to ensure my seed didn’t take root inside her.

By the time she’d recovered from her loss of a mate, I’ll be over my little yearning for what her body could do for me. If you want to call euphoria-induced desire yearning. It’s bad enough my clan leader makes me have sex with village daughters when their parents request I court them. The risk alone in producing potential offspring is enough to make an honorable man have nightmares. I would never watch my mate bleed to death during childbirth like my mother did.

“Can you scoot that duffle over here so I can reload my ammo clips?”

She’d already loaded my groin into an unbending crowbar loaded with explosive shells. But I am a Guardian. And seeing her to safety is my job. More than shooting *bullets* into her womb. I yanked and shoved the heavy bag to her.

“Thanks.”

The duffle slid a bit out of my fingertips.

“It’s quiet now,” she whispered.

The peal of a zipper noted she foraged through the duffle.

Bullets jingled.

“Will your brothers immediately join us?” she asked.

Her question wasn’t laced with the fear of sitting with three hulking males in were-form. And I doubted the others would climb in to torment themselves with smelling her salty metallic tinge of blood. Absolute torture for a Shifter attempting to do the noble thing. If they couldn’t control themselves, I’d have to fight them all off.

Not a problem.

But they’d probably sleep outside until their blood calmed and their bodies shifted back. “They’ll probably sleep outside.”

“I can handle sitting with a few werewolves,” the darkness noted since my heightened vision had subsided.

“It isn’t a question of what you can stand. The issue lays in their ability to reason with your savory flesh so close.”

“I understand.”

And those were the last two words she uttered before crying herself to sleep and waking in the morning. I sat there on watch throughout the night, protecting her until the hatch opened, flooding the dark tank interior with white light.

“Throw us some clothes, Jackal,” Demon barked.

Sierra rustled to life, stretched out beside the duffle containing weapons like it was Rattler's comforting body. She pulled off the goggles, squinted at me, and levered up onto an elbow. Only to have her eyelids hang in awareness.

Sadly. Grief surfacing with the realization that yesterday's events hadn't been a dream. What kind of ass am I that would think of making love to her when she just lost her life mate? Like she'd want any piece of my fantasy. I shoved up to toss my naked half-brothers some pants.

By the time I'd finished, she sat with her back to the metal wall, knees bent, staring at her canvas hiking boots. Her expression spoke fathoms. So much pain twisted in those almost pouting lips. She apparently tried not to blink. I could tell by the unnatural way her eyes didn't move.

But her body forced the movement. And tears ran down her cheeks.

Hell. I didn't deserve to be her Guardian with my runaway thoughts. I'd have to leave one of the others to watch over her since I couldn't control thoughts I'd never struggled to control before.

\* \* \* \*

The tank viciously rocked Sierra when it hit some type of depression where the largest silent yet sympathetic brother Jackal steered the military vehicle back toward their village. *We headed for a trading post*, she guessed.

"We'll stop at Lenox to refuel," Demon said.

He studied me with interest.

My skin prickled at his curious gaze. But returning the attention was dangerous. Guardians read eye-to-eye contact with females as an invitation for bonding. Albeit, any Normal female would be determined to *catch* a werewolf in The Wild in such a manner. Mating with a killing machine who would love you unconditionally as long as he drew breath was the goal of any sane woman surviving on the fringe of what remained of civilization after the extraterrestrials turned human society on end. But Demon just wasn't my John.

My heart squeezed and ached.

*My John is gone.*

Warm tears stung my eyes again.

"Sierra, you need to remain hidden inside the tank. I don't want Hunters or their sympathizers spotting you," Demon said softly. "Do you understand?"

I almost ground out *I wasn't born yesterday* at the insulting way he babied me. My father taught me more than the average female learned in life. Father knew I was a Cougar. He knew how dangerous my life would be. He taught me the science Shifters learned to keep alive the knowledge in hopes of fighting the aliens one day. And he taught me hand-to-hand combat as well as how to use all sorts of weapons. But I nodded at Demon respectfully, staring at the toe of my boot. Demon was the group leader here. The only way I could survive was to cooperate with Demon's demands.

The tank jerked.

The bobbing tilt of my head loosed the ring of tears from the rim of my eyelids.

I felt Demon flinch, most likely just a reaction of mine to his movement in my peripheral vision as he turned away from my tears. Or my Cougar was on guard. They couldn't know my Cougar senses were as heightened as theirs though. That I controlled my inner cat in a manner they wished to control their inner mangled wolves. But that was the great joke in the aliens' genetic alterations. Males were turned into vicious volatile monsters, werewolves. Whereas the

few females the aliens altered became beautiful manageable golden felines. A cat a woman could hide deep inside herself. Control her ability to shift. Even the color change in my eyes could be gulped back into my soul. Maybe we didn't have the extraordinary hearing, scent, and sight the way a werewolf did when out of his Wolfskin. But we did when we'd shifted. Why the differences? All had to be part of the extraterrestrial's use of Cougars. And they wanted every Cougar they could catch. To this day, nobody had seen more than a dozen Cougars for that very reason. And if anyone saw my Cougar, I'd be tagged for retrieval. Hunted. Traded to the extraterrestrials. For what? A mysterious undefined future on a distant world.

*Because captured Cougars disappeared forever.*

The tank shook abruptly, coming to a halt, its engine dying.

The trading post's sounds of chatter and movement wafted through cracks in the tank's walls where sunlight penetrated the massive vehicle's almost perfectly overlapping metal structure. Fortunately for us, a few cracks in the framework allowed small shafts of bright light to stab through and illuminate the shadows where we rode.

The Guardians rose and shoved into fresh air through the sun-lit hatch.

All but Jackal, the hulking attentive warrior, who knelt by my outstretched leg. "Do you need anything while we're in the village?"

Just some time alone. Asking for anything meant I was awfully demanding. Needy females were considered a hardship on the group. I locked my gaze upon my faded camouflage pants and wagged my head.

"If you think of anything, let me know when I return, Sierra. I have to take care of something. But you won't be left unguarded." He started to turn toward the exit.

Maybe they should trade the extra weapons. I had no use for anything other than Black Betty, the handguns at my hip, and the sawed off shotgun. I searched for his retreating gaze. "You can trade John's guns for anything. Fuel? Or whatever."

He turned pinched dark eyebrows back to me.

So much compassion dwelled in his shadow-darkened green gaze. Empathy.

I choked on my display of emotion.

He squatted sideways before me, again, completely at ease, muscles bulging even though he did nothing to cause the display. His facial features had a softness to the strength and power of his overall persona. He was the type of warrior who would have had a squared jaw—the kind that looked like he constantly ground his teeth in thought, but his features were rounded a bit to take the sharp edges off. Even his nose. From genetics. Probably from his sire because John had the pissed-off angular jaw that meant business. But they didn't matter. Nothing about Jackal told me he wouldn't kick Demon's tail if necessary.

*These Guardians really meant to take care of me.*

His elbows casually settled atop his bent knees. "We have trade goods. Don't worry about what we require to return you safely to the village. All has been taken care of. Rattler saw to that. His sire, Tornado, will decide what to do with your possessions."

Tornado? *Not the meanest bastard left on the planet.* "You're taking me to *Death Summit*?"

A hint of suspicion danced in his eyes before he turned his body to completely face me. "Didn't Rattler tell you he was next in line to replace Tornado?"

No. But the mindboggling news that my deceased mate had been the successor to one of the only Shifters who could have kicked my father's tail thankfully dried my well of tears. I just stared at Rattler's assessing expression and wagged my head.



"I don't understand the secrecy," Jackal sighed. "Why hide for eight years?"

Why did I have to discuss the reasons now? *John* made the decision. In my state of mourning for my parents, I simply followed the Shifter who saved me from the Normals who had killed my parents. But nobody needed to know those details about my past. I just wanted to disappear. Become somebody else. Find a new life where no one knew who or what I was. I might be safe from the aliens then. And from the Rites-of-the-Goddess sisterhood. Gods know I don't want to return to my training. Mother had been *wrong* about that order. Her idea of devout reverence left a bad taste in my mouth. Only Father's science softened that bitter note. I shrugged and stared back at the toes of my beige boots.

Jackal sighed and disappeared through the circular doorway.

"Welcome, Demon. Jackal. Steel. Badger!" a man yelled beyond the tank's metal shell. "It has been forever since you visited."

Apparently the other two Guardians weren't significant enough to mention. Demon made most of the decisions. Led the mission. But Jackal seemed older. Wiser. And so damned emotional for a Shifter. Every time he looked at me, his eyes registered my sorrow.

"It's good to see you, Carter," Demon replied.

Carter. A human name.

Just a Normal.

And Normals had personal agendas strangers couldn't trust.

And most Normals would do almost anything to protect their families. Hence, their alliances with werewolves to police Normal villages or cities from Bounders and scavenging human hordes. Although Shifters found a niche when life turned into murder and mayhem after Earth's conquest, everything revolved around capturing Shifters now. Still desperate Normals betrayed the intense Shifter determination to save humanity. The fools. Shifters had maintained what little hold humans had on retaining their identity. Only to be betrayed by money hungry Normals. That's what happened to my father. You couldn't pay me to work with a Normal. Not after what they did to my parents.

*What they did to me.*

But Demon led this little expedition. And Jackal didn't intend on allowing anything to happen to me. I just needed to bite my tongue and keep my mouth shut. I was inside the tank. Safe.

A shiver fluttered through me nonetheless.

I shook off the resurging misty memories of Mother's violent rape by the Normals and tried to focus on the conversation outside. But how do you forget the humanity behind the hand grasping the knife the bastards fucked her with? The men who caused her to bleed to death?

I cringed.

"I've got Bourbon," Carter announced. "Tornado would be extremely displeased to hear you didn't trade for his beverage of choice."

Talk about leverage. This Normal had trading down to a fine art.

"We don't have time to trade, Carter," Demon replied. "Tornado wanted us home today. As you can see, we have another day's journey."

"Then rest a few minutes. Stretch your legs in the walk to my humble abode. Buy your sire a peace offering for your tardiness."

The Normal's last point had a wink implied in his tone.

Would the Guardians hurry back on the road? Or tempt fate with a delay?

Shit would fly if the Normals saw me.

If even one got a wild idea to kidnap me, I'd have to rely on these Guardians to deal with the problem and hide my shape-shifting ability. My survival hinged upon my hiding my fighting skills. Or maybe it didn't. Either way, I'd learn whether they would defend a woman with weak ties to them. Making them think I needed their assistance was the best way to appeal to a Guardian though.

"Hannah has the hind quarters of a hog on the spit, sizzled to mouth-watering perfection. Come. Eat with us. I promise not to take you in trade." Carter laughed.

Roasted pork. Melting in my mouth. I hadn't had pork in years. Dear. Gods.

My mouth watered.

Oh. Carter could talk a bird out of a tree. If only I could tag along.

Light fluttered overhead.

Jackal dropped into a thumping crouch before me, eyeing me with a straight-lipped smile. He waved a palm and placed one solid tanned finger over his lips.

Almost full lips with just enough definition to allow him a choice in wearing an expressive tightly reined-in Guardian circle beard or going clean without facial hair. His short dark stubble noted his preference of shaving most of the hair away for the circle beard ringing his mouth.

Or his choice to work as a Guardian.

Guardians rarely wore facial hair to mark themselves differently from Normals. Father always said it was a universal Shifter choice to be as hairless as possible when not in were-form though. To tame the inner Wolf trying to rip free of each one of them. Or maybe all the shaving was a conscious effort to look as *normal* as possible? Either way, the irony was Normals tended to look furrer than werewolves.

"We won't be long," he whispered, as if Normals already eavesdropped outside the metal walls. He plucked a loaded rifle from my bag and departed in silence.

So they chose to feast instead of protecting me.

Apparently, I wasn't that endangered.

If so, why do I feel so damned screwed?

Jackal shut the hatch and turned its squeaking wheel to seal me into murky shadow.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled to chilly attention.

Alright.

I'll just wait.

Locked away. Inside this shadowy box.

Thank goodness it wasn't a hot day. But the sun would melt my curves away if I had to hide out inside this tomb too damned long. Just what kind of imbecile Guardians did Tornado have under his wing these days? I'd definitely been in hiding too long.

Or Shifters like my sire were rare.

I could have watched time literally fly given a fair view of the sun's march overhead and the crawling shadows. But shut away inside the vehicle I had no clue how much time crept by.

The sound of whispering precluded a flutter of light at a slit in the tank's wall.

Hopefully it was Jackal. Those gentle green eyes were growing on me.

"We're screwed if anyone catches wind of us opening that hatch," a man sneered.

Shit.

The voice wasn't one of my Guardians' voices.

"Underneath. There's another hatch on the underside."

Make that a *holy shit*. I yanked a pistol from my hip and surveyed the floor looking down the short barrel.

“There’d better be something worth stealing since we’re about to piss off some Death Summit Guardians,” the first voice grumbled beneath the tank’s floor of metal sheeting.

“Tornado will send all of them for revenge. He’s the meanest son of a bitch.”

“Shut up!” someone snarled the talker.

Probably because the rambling imbecile’s blathering would get them discovered in their stupid little quest for treasure.

A squeak to the left indicated the thieves’ whereabouts.

Just where in the hell would the floor open? I rose, bent over, surveying the dark floor with my vision aligned with the linear length of my pistol’s barrel, finger kissing the trigger as I searched the dark floor for the entrance.

A circular section of floor cracked, raised, allowing a sickle-shaped ring of light to invade the shadows.

An eerily-lit hand shoved into my shadowy shelter.

Followed by an arm.

An elbow.

The crown of a head carpeted in mousy brown hair.

His dark eyes locked on mine.

Goodbye. I fired.

His body shook, blood running from between his eyes. He went limp and fell away.

“Holy fuck!”

How bright was his buddy? Surely he wouldn’t decide to see who shot whom.

“Give me a fucking grenade, Bob.”

Two more?

With candy.

Shit. I was dead if I stayed here.

Movement fluttered beyond the slit in the tank’s impenetrable wall.

“Whoever you are, fuck you, you’re dead,” the voice threatened. “Give me that fucking grenade.”

I leapt for the three bars on the ladder and shoved my shoulders into the upper hatch.

The solid metal didn’t budge.

They were fools to blow up any tradable goods inside the tank.

But I didn’t want to stick around to make the point. I grabbed the hatch’s wheel and yanked the squeaking latch, heaving solid metal upward with a sting in my shoulder as I turned the curved pipe.

The hatch flung into blue sky.

I shoved into the sunlight, casting my body across sun-warmed flat metal, and scanned the trading post’s hard-packed earth.

“Out. He’s getting away,” someone yelled.

Crap. Could things become any more ridiculous? I got my boots beneath me and fired at the barren ground.

Anything to trap the bastards beneath the tank with a warning until I could get off the vehicle. Especially since they had a damned grenade. The homemade ones were the worst. Full of all sorts of nasty sharp recycled metallic debris. I had to get the hell away from the idiots. I kept shooting until I leapt down in front of the tank.

Would the bastards even come out? I'd hide inside if I were them.

A large man burst from the left, plowing his lean mass in my direction.

A little target practice never hurt me. He landed a bullet exactly where his buddy had.

His eyes rolled back into his head.

"Goddammit, get *her*," someone yelled.

Oh yeah. I have plenty of bullets. And shooting them wouldn't make me look like I didn't need a few Guardians to help me. "Come on if you think you can, you bastards."

Two more stalked toward me.

One from each side of the tank. They'd probably crawled out at the rear. Still they were easy pickings.

Disgusting trash among the living.

Thin.

Scraggly-toothed with shoulder-length hair that looked untouched since birth save for someone sawing the ends off for whatever reason.

"Now don't do anything stupid, honey," one moron cooed with his palms held up in feigned submission. "We just want to talk."

End of discussion. "You mean discuss how you want to steal anything of value in our tank?"

The moron wore threadbare blue jeans full of frayed holes and a light-colored filthy shirt with lovely six-inch sweat rings in the pits. His friend didn't look any more appealing. Both needed to shave what had to be lice-infested eight-inch beards.

*Prophets.*

Members of one extremely repulsive Christian Normal culture.

"Come home with us. We'll save you from bearing *their* monsters. You don't want any of that, honey."

My skin crawled at his condescending tone.

"You don't want to go with those Shifters," the other taller jerk said. "Come back with us. Return to *your* people."

Like they'd cut me any slack for traveling with Shifters. I was soiled to them. Diseased by a Shifter's touch or simply by association. They'd pass me on in trade.

If they had any clue I was a Shifter, my fate would be far worse. I trained both weapons on the fools' chests. "Leave. Or I'll shoot. Don't misunderstand me. I'll kill you like your friends."

"Brothers," the shorter one announced.

Just where were *John's* Guardian *brothers*? I had a family pack of Normals here trying to steal from *us*. Should I just shoot them all? The whole damned trading post had to know I was here by now. Village law varied from town to town. What would result from this little excursion into civilization?

Hell, I didn't need to make trouble for Tornado.

A hand grabbed my waist from behind, locking me backward into an iron body.

The body's other hand clamped over my eyes.

The instant slight shift in the pressure of my fingers on the trigger sent off two rounds.

I couldn't see.

I had to get loose. I kicked and squirreled both guns around beneath my arms to shoot.

But couldn't tell if I pointed away from myself. I had a chance alive as trade goods. But bleeding, they'd rape me and leave me for dead.

“Come on, boys. Let’s get the fuck out of here,” the man behind me roared.  
With or without me?  
Hands grabbed mine.  
Squeezing. Pinching. Wrenching the guns from my grasp.

## Chapter Three

Jackal never ran so fast in all his life, leaving his half-brothers behind, in their quasi-state of Shifter transformation, to save the only thing of significance in the gods-be-damned trading post. The shame from losing Sierra would be far worse than refusing an order from the mission leader. *But this wasn't my fault.*

Demon made the call.

For bourbon.

What a dumb ass.

He traded Sierra's safety for Gods-be-damned liquor to appease his sire.

Or so things would appear to have gone down that path. Tornado had better wake up and reassess his choice of heirs.

And just who in the fucking hell had the balls to jack with a Shifter's tank? Or had Sierra disobeyed and left the secured vehicle? If that was the case, Demon wouldn't handle the disruption from his task, the death of locals, or her lack of respect well. I leapt from where I ran along the length of a weathered red building's wall to cover the four strides to the tank in two heaving breaths.

Something moved beyond the tank's boxy form and tracks.

An enormous bastard holding Sierra's flailing limbs blindfolded her eyes with one hand.

His stinking mouth covered her ear.

If the fool only realized how deadly that kiss was.

"No," she screeched and blindly kicked one of his friends between the legs.

Lucky strike. The two others had tucked her weapons into their waistbands at their lower backs and stood with their backs to me. Now, one buckled over, holding his crotch.

They weren't watching for us.

Ignorant carcasses.

How had they gotten a hold of Sierra with her little firearm fetish? I'd find out in just a minute. I plowed through the first echelon of idiots and hurled a fist at the side of the mangy bastard's head who had yet to retract his tongue from her ear.

The juicy thwack from his skull did all but knock him on his ass.

He lost his grip on her head though.

She blinked and stared at me with those stunned blue eyes.

Oh, I never wanted to see the terror I saw there again. I grabbed the bastard's arm and tried to peel the flesh from her waist.

Men grunted behind me.

My half-brothers were tending to the smaller fools.

She kicked backward, into the big bastard's shins.

He groaned and wobbled.

She shook loose from her captor.

And he was all mine.

I waited.

Just until he looked into my eyes.

He needed to know who killed him.

That he'd made a deadly error in touching Sierra.

The man's dark gaze locked onto mine.

The stinking Prophet, a member of the clan of Normals who fancied themselves seers.

Unfortunately, the course of today's events proved this handful of Prophets were frauds.

"You're about to pay for that little play of tongue."

The man pulled himself together, sliding into a boxing stance, arms wide like he couldn't decide whether to grab me or punch. "I'll stick my tongue elsewhere as soon as I finish with you." He flicked his tongue out rapidly against his upper teeth in a disrespectful manner I hoped Sierra didn't witness.

First a challenge.

Then insult.

Time to rip his head off. I lunged, ducked, swung, and hit his hard-ass jaw.

He gasped.

The slow fuck. How couldn't the moron see me coming?

The Prophet caught a foothold, lowered a glare, and threw his weight into me.

Hitting home with pain. I shoved his smelly ass backward, twisting a leg around his, knocking him off his feet. Down.

He was dead. I fell on his soft belly, straddling the weak flesh, and pounded his face.

"He's dead, Jackal," someone's voice finally found my ears. "You're shifting. Stop."

Not until I ripped the bastard's head off.

"Jackal," she shouted, "it's over. Stop."

Was she hurt? I turned to where her voice had been.

The small trading post's occupants had started forming an observation ring around us.

A good fifty feet away.

Sierra stood, fully dressed, nothing torn. No blood.

She's okay. Okay. I sucked in a deep breath to settle my racing heart and choke back my rising Wolf.

"Time to leave," Demon said where he stood beside her.

He didn't look upset with her.

Good.

The other two thieves were sprawled out across the ground, motionless.

"Come on, Jackal." Demon turned toward the tank, ushering Sierra along by the elbow.

She watched me for a moment, then climbed up and into the tank.

\* \* \* \*

Attacked by that stinking Prophet and limited to the extent she could safely react, Sierra almost choked on her heart until Jackal had arrived to deal with her oversized attacker. *But things worked out*, she noted, settling down against the safety of the tank's inner cool hard wall, reclaiming a seat beside the duffle filled with firearms.

The other Guardians planted themselves along the walls as well, their Shifter eyes glowing in the shadows of the vehicle's interior. Demon sat at the vehicle's controls, revving up the engine. None of them had sprouted Shifter fur like Jackal though.

Jackal's hairy form dropped from the open hatch onto the resounding metal floor. His furred legs hadn't shifted enough to burst through his clothing. But he knelt like a wild man and eyed her over with those glowing yellow eyes—the telltale first sign of a shift. "Did they hurt you, little one?"

The growl in his voice gave me chills.

"No." I wagged my head for emphasis in case he wasn't truly listening in his transitional state.

But his eyes said more than enough. Their absolute concern replaced the empathy I always found in those green orbs.

Nothing angry.

Nothing implying anything else either. I almost felt a little embarrassed because I had to wait for help instead of saving myself. Or give away my identity by fighting too well.

But just what was he thinking?

That I was his?

He hadn't made any threatening moves to indicate he claimed me for his own. Not that I cared for or adamantly refused to be claimed by Jackal. He'd killed a man to save me. Rather, beat his face to a pulp in a rage. But Shifters protected those left in their care. And with the loss of John, feeling safe wasn't any small wish. Mind you, the only wish I could manage at the moment. And Jackal's partially-shifted stare *made* me feel safe.

The tank rolled forward.

With human facial features staring me down, Jackal splayed his fingers against the floor to hold steady where he squatted in his combat boots. Just an enormous mass of muscles somewhat-covered in dark shaggy Shifter fur. He sighed and slid his gaze to Demon's back. "No more stops, little brother," he insisted with a commanding final growl.

"Everything's fine, Jackal," Demon replied. "I've got everything under control."

Brother? Half-brother or step-brother? Talk about confusion. But mating always resulted in puzzling family connections to those unfamiliar with a clan's history because powerful Shifters like their sire, Tornado, undoubtedly mated often if his mates died from childbirth or other causes. Why a younger brother like Demon would be making decisions made no sense though. Jackal was obviously stronger, wiser, and older. Jackal should be leading this mission. I slid my gaze to Jackal's glowing stare.

He watched me like a rabid animal, minus the frothing at the mouth.

Maybe I was being oversensitive. Jackal hadn't indicated he would lose control when experiencing Shifter euphoria. Albeit, it had to be difficult kneeling there, watching a female you desperately needed to bite to shove your body's cravings over the edge.

To give into the shift's desires and completely transform.

Or simply snuff the sensation altogether.

But Jackal held steady.

Quietly watching me with his strange brand of concern. "I'm alright, Jackal." Maybe hearing me say it again would help him settle down.

He inhaled sharply, his nostrils flaring, and nodded at me.

The other two studied us like we sparred.

Or something.

The need to pull my knees to my chest and hug them began to make my heart race.

What was going through Jackal's mind?

Did he need me to pet him again?

Dare I risk being bitten and raped in attempting to help him squelch his Shifter euphoria?

He had saved me. And I wasn't going to be any better off when I arrived in his sire's village lacking allies. Remote villages were renowned for their lack of females among other resources. And now that I was returning to the mating market, offering to help Jackal relax and



break the tension of the shift just might save my ass in the near future. After all, I'd already granted him such a favor last night.

He didn't hurt me then.

But he hadn't been standing on the precipice of transformation like now. Thoroughly furred. I stared into his burning eyes. "I'll help you again. If you want me to."

His glowing stare pinched, processing my statement.

Did he think I was frightened?

It's not like I have anything left to lose.

So what if he bites me. Screws me. There is nothing in my future except running from hunters and aliens. Making alliances now could do little more than help me. And Jackal's size and compassion made him the Guardian with the most to offer a girl wanting to stay alive and *unshared* by Normals. I patted the floor next to me. "Come here."

The pinch in his golden stare squared in understanding, then opened with a flash of doubt.

"It's alright, Jackal. I won't bite you."

The other Guardians sitting across the small space burst into laughter.

Jackal shot them a glare and edged toward the seat at my side using his hands to walk across the floor as he eased over in his crouch. His gaze finally focused on me as he settled on his ass at my side.

He looked like a wild man. An animal.

Maybe I was crazy.

But I'd had my own wild-man mate already. And Jackal's behavior had been exemplary up to this moment. If he hurt me, forced me, I'd just wind up bound to him. Mated.

At least I wouldn't be sitting around guessing my future. Maybe I'd cry for years after losing John. But I couldn't see Jackal hurting me. Not with the compassion I'd witnessed in his expressive eyes. Maybe I'd just use this moment as a little test... To see if he was everything his body language promised he would be. Then I'd know what to do about my future. Whether or not to stay with Death Summit Guardians or bolt. "Take off your shirt."

His nose dropped toward the floor. He gazed at me, head tilted, through his eyelashes.

My heart jolted into a sprint.

What did that mask imply? Just how foolish a choice was it to try to help him climb down from his imminent shift? Hell, I'd lost my mind back when the disgusting bearded Prophet grabbed me against his disgusting iron-hard body at the trading post.

Jackal focused on unbuttoning his sleeveless shirt, one small circular button at a time.

Like he stripped for an audience.

Torturing them with his slow seductive technique.

I really needed to stop being so damned stupid when dealing with my life. My freedom. My health and warfare. Gods, Father chewed my tail out about these ridiculous conclusions I came to... Why did I let myself get into this situation? I just seemed to have fallen into the John-less hole in my heart and couldn't see out of it to save my tail.

Jackal shoved one side of his shirt behind him, withdrawing a massive shoulder and arm.

Gods the musculature molding his shoulder into existence.

Then the other arm.

Fur erupting from his smooth skin.

Hell, the thought of my touch was making him metamorphose into a distorted werewolf.

He shot me another sideways glance and let his shirt disappear into shadow behind him.

Fine. I'd gotten myself into this mess. I'd deal with cleaning up the debris. Appear tough. Intelligent. "Here." I pulled on his furred firm bicep, leaning his unyielding torso toward my lap, and patted on my thighs. "Come on. We don't have all day."

Redundant point when all we had was all day.

He watched me with hesitation in those wary Wolf eyes.

The man obviously *feared* what he might do. To me. Worried he couldn't control himself. Thank the stars for his telltale eyes. I'd misjudged my stupidity. Helping him was the best thing I could do. Really. It was. "Come on, Jackal." I pulled his firm arm until he gave, leaning, settling upon his side atop my lap.

Nothing even close to sexual emanated from his rigid body. He laid so damned stiff that he looked like he feared moving as if he'd roll into glass shards or a cactus.

Or something equally horrible.

He had to be at least thirty. And how could a Shifter built like him housing a handy dose of intelligence not have used a female's touch to bring him down from a shifting high yet? If anything, he had been mated for years by now. He wouldn't rape me. No, he'd try to protect me. Like the good Guardian he is. I could even see that in his resolve not to hurt me now.

And, it's not like I planned to spread my legs for him in front of the other Guardians. Certainly he realized that much. Even more so, he probably hated my touch because I *wasn't* his mate. I'd show him I had as much self-respect as he had. "Just relax. This is all about calming down." I draped a palm over his shoulder and ran my fingertips down his arm, scratching through his coarse fur.

His thick wiry hair hid the sculpted muscle I knew to be there.

Maybe it was better I couldn't touch it?

I used to think I was cursed with unnatural sexual desires. But the problem had to lie in my inner Cougar. The monster inside me. I could harbor need like what Jackal struggled to control. Just like that. So, the Shifter gene had to be at fault. Especially when there were so many similarities between Wolf and Cougar Shifters.

But Cougars held a different genetic alteration. Why?

Nobody understood the other differences between Shifter sexes though. Like why the males turned into terrifying monsters and females became beautiful sleek golden cats. Probably because the extraterrestrials who instigated the mutations through all the strange scientific procedures they did on their spacecraft hadn't bothered informing us.

We were the dredges of life in the universe to them.

We were nothing more than slaves.

No more than livestock they used for whatever mysterious purposes they concealed from us.

And every day I had to deal with that perplexing alien mystery. I stroked my fingers through the coarse fur down Jackal's arm again.

His rigid body slowly relaxed.

Like the air gushed out of him. He'd be okay. I owed him that much. I switched directions and raked my fingers down the mat on his back.

He groaned, leaning forward toward my knees, crossing his arms beneath his face, resting his nose there, laying upon his stomach.

He was really kind of cute, presenting his broad shoulders to my touch. Any other time I would have chuckled. But he might take the sound as receptivity. And, Lord knows, I wasn't feeling receptive. Just helpful.

His shoulders stretched a mile wide. So damned far I had to use both hands to cover the area quickly.

Jackal growled.  
And growled.  
Chugging like a machine.  
And his coat thinned slightly.  
Maybe this wouldn't take all day.

\* \* \* \*

Something soft cushioned Sierra's cheek where her mind roused her from deep sleep inside the jostling tank.

The tank sure rocked a lot.  
*Probably hit a hole*, she concluded and opened her eyes.

Oh shit. Leaning against Jackal's shoulder as he sat against the wall wasn't wise. I met his alert gaze and sat up on my own. "Sorry."

He shrugged. "You fell asleep. All the jarring from Demon driving over a couple dozen bodies littering the road is enough to cause any sleeping body to wobble until hitting something solid enough to hold steady."

I still felt disgusting. Like I couldn't keep my hands and body off of him. What would John think?

"Demon's decided to drive through the night," Jackal said.

"Isn't that dangerous?" And foolhardy. Anyone could set up a trap on the road. Stupid young dolt. Demon needed some tough love before he got us captured or killed.

Jackal leaned close. "He's trying to make up for screwing up at the trading post." He sat back up. "Tornado will be waiting. The sooner we arrive the better."

I canted toward him like I couldn't stand not resting my cheek against his shoulder. Just so the others wouldn't catch wind of my question. "Why aren't you in charge?" I whispered.

He chuckled once, softly.

"Night travel is foolish in summer," I added softly.

He nodded.

I guess that was all I'd get. I retreated back to sit upright. "What bodies on the road?"

"It looked like there'd been an ambush. We didn't stop."

Demon probably wanted to, based on Jackal's tone.

"We'll arrive around midday tomorrow. Sleep while you can," Jackal warned.

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the drive back to Death Summit was uneventful for Sierra. The big Guardian, Jackal, remained nearby. *Never touching me*, she thought. But observant and quiet. My fear of him going berserker and bonding me to himself had passed. He exhibited incredible control over the male's shifting-gene curse of just losing it and transmuting into his Wolfskin.

Now, I just missed John.

He always made me laugh.

Always played chess with me.

Always slept wrapped around my body like I was his pillow.

And left me alone.

Why, oh why, hadn't he given me a baby? Was there so much to fear in the wilderness that I had to be left widowed without something of him to cling to aside from Black Betty and

some handguns? All those times he left me sitting there, waiting for his return, wondering if I'd seen him for the last time...

Nothing was as horrible as watching John just fade away in my arms.

How much time did I have with him in the end?

Goddamned minutes to say goodbye?

Because he insisted on traveling to trade when we were set for months?

Just what had happened to him? I slid my gaze to Jackal.

He knew.

The enormous muscled man's six-foot-something frame was propped up with one elbow tucked into his thigh just above where his knee bent one leg beneath the other outstretched muscled limb.

Light glinted off a metallic object he played with in the shadows.

"Jackal?"

He eyed me with sincerity.

I had to look pathetic lying on my side with my head on my backpack stuffed with clothing. Tears glinting in my eyes. But at least I wasn't annoying him. "What happened to John?" I managed to squeeze out the words with stinging tears only cutting one word in two.

He winced and shoved backward into the metal wall. "Normals. He said they followed him. But he didn't want to draw attention to your location. So he lead them the opposite direction. Into a trap waiting for him."

John must have fought. If enough Normals worked together with a new technique for caging a Shifter, even the toughest Shifter could be caught. "Is it true some Shifters work with hunters now to catch Guardians?"

Jackal's breath knifed. He nodded. "Mostly out here. In The Wild." He locked a serious stare on me. "But you shouldn't worry about that at Death Summit. The clan owns five tanks. Nobody risks penetrating the village's fortified walls." He reached out to pat my calf twice. "You're safe with us."

Funny he mentioned security.

"Here we go," Demon blurted.

The sputtering tank's engine died.

Demon turned to eye me. "Let's go. Tornado's waiting."

## Chapter Four

With guitar and Black Betty slung over her shoulders, Sierra studied the remote mountain village in the northwest of what used to be the United States in the land of Oregon. The village called Death Summit was built flush up against the base of a mountain. I stood in blinding sunlight over the tank's hood inside the village's eight-foot high outer wall fashioned from upright logs whittled into points on their upper end. Heavier artillery than what a person could pack, nothing too large to destroy the wall when fired, was mounted in strategic locations around the top of the palisade on metal scaffolding anchored to the roughly hewn tree trunks.

Big guns I'd been trained to use by Father.

And I'd damn sure use one if I had to.

Very military to boot.

Two armed men guarded the top of the wall, one on each side of the gate. There were undoubtedly other men equidistantly spaced along the rest of the wall. Just enough guards to watch the distance for any sign of Normals with foolish agendas. I scanned the village.

Beyond the tanks lined up at the base of the wall and the hard-packed earth of an area the size of two courtyards, many makeshift structures either squared or round separated by wide well-trodden paths riddled the view. Thrust above the various rooftops whirled a large windmill. Windmills harvesting wind for energy since electricity made life easier, thank goodness.

What appeared to be a corral housed livestock to the extreme right, up against the wall. Probably pigs by the look of mud. Hens paraded their fuzzy broods here and there around anything and everything. And one large black rooster, feathers glinting black and blue, eyed me a good ten feet away.

Easy protein. Life without meat wasn't worth living.

The smell of smoke was so strong that they had to be smoking something like ham or jerking game. But the acrid smell of boiling fat indicated the village used everything it had, including the animal fat to create bio-fuel to operate small engines.

Jackal hopped off the tank at my side and extended his arms to me.

Well, wasn't he helpful? I guess I'm supposed to play along with another aspect of the invalid female. And he genuinely seemed to revel in helping me. I gulped down a sigh and reached toward his strong arms.

He grabbed my waist, lifting me down to the ground. I instinctively planted my hands on the corded steel of his forearms. Muscles that felt amazing, working to safely move me to settle me standing upon the courtyard.

"This way," he said.

I followed his wide shoulders between the houses. Trying not to stare at the curious faces stepping through doorways to watch my passage. Albeit, I was new and interesting. I just hated being the center of attention. Someone might recognize me. Peg me for a good trade. Send me back to Father's cousins or the Rites-of-the-Goddess sisterhood. The only thing I could do was keep my eyes on Jackal's amazing tail.

Taut. Right beneath a narrow waist forming the base of his v-shaped upper body and those damnably huge bulging muscles of his bare arms. Suspended over slightly bowed legs.

Finally left in a position to assess the Guardian's backside, I couldn't imagine what compelled Tornado to send out the unqualified Demon in charge of my retrieval.

Jackal led me to the village's central-ringed Guardian lodge structure of one inner building surrounded by an outer series of lodges. Each village Guardian occupied one of the outer lodges that protected the clan head's lodge within the inner building.

Jackal led me right to Tornado.

Tornado would be waiting in the extra outer building connected to his over-sized home.

His meeting lodge. Would the other clan members be there already? And what did they have planned for me?

Skills. I needed to rattle off something of my value to ensure my hungry tail would benefit the clan. Or village. Because I must appear to be just a simple Normal. I could clean and cook. Like a good Normal. I could shoot too. But villages rarely let women risk death by functioning as guards on the wall. So, time to play all by ear.

Jackal stopped at a door, shoved it open with one of the elbows on those massive killer arms, and nodded for me to enter with a pricelessly optimistic green gaze.

How could I outrun him otherwise? I'd probably realize it was a big mistake coming to Death Summit tomorrow. But there was no turning back now. I stepped into darkness.

Jackal's hand at my lower back gently shoved me forward.

Into the darkness.

Apparently his eyes had acclimated to the change in lighting. Or he knew where to step. The circular room suddenly came into view.

Tornado scowled, or just looked like he scowled in his normal state, where he stood with three other older males. All wore the Guardians' camouflage, khaki, leather mixture of clothing. But their age allowed them the honor of wearing hair. And Tornado's shoulder-length locks sported some wide stretches of silver. He had to be fifty years old. Like his companions.

Tornado riveted an unsettling blue gaze upon me.

Or maybe it was just his friendly scowl that bothered me? But something told me I was in for a doozey of a welcome.

"So this is my son's mate?" Tornado took three measured steps to a wooden chair and claimed a seat like a king with his throne.

That's when my radar noted the other males in the room. Those with shaved heads. Village Guardians. And there were so damned many. Tornado had a huge clan with at least twenty young males who could protect Death Summit's occupants. A larger clan size would ensure the villagers' safety.

Jackal's touch gently ushered me to stand four steps from the almost curious clan leader.

"Do you speak?" Tornado asked.

Maybe I shouldn't and humor the asshole. "No."

Tornado burst out laughing, pointed at me, and looked back at his elder clansmen. "I like her. No wonder Rattler mated her."

My heart lunged into my throat at the mention of my late mate's name.

But there would be no avoiding discussion of my John with an asshole bereft of tact today. I choked down my heart and sucked in a huge breath.

Jackal's hand disappeared. "Her name is Sierra," he announced.

I really wasn't ready to stand alone at Tornado's black boots.

The clan head quieted and studied me. “You’re too pretty.” His scowl twisted into his left cheek. “Damned beautiful. *Trouble.*” He seemed in deep thought while uttering his assessment. Calculating his options. “Where were you born?”

Not the question I wanted to deal with. I’d have to lie to avoid mentioning my sire and who I am. “Far north.”

His eyes squinted as if he knew I didn’t want to answer the question. “And you have family outside of my clan?”

Well, at least he gave me credit for my connections through marriage. Maybe he just wanted to pass me on to someone else to avoid forcing another mouth to feed on the village. Not today. “No. They’re dead. In the Saskatchewan. There’s nothing there but bears for me.” That dead part was truth. Mother’s ties to the Rites of the Goddess weren’t blood bonds. And I so didn’t want to reconnect with the sisterhood after their Goddess left me high and dry to witness my parents’ murder.

Tornado sucked down a long breath and leaned forward. “Death Summit is a well-oiled machine, Sierra. The village is composed of eighteen wealthy Normal families who retreated here for one reason—to protect themselves. As you’ve seen, there isn’t much around other than the necessities to help us survive. We don’t plant fields. But we have a garden. We trade for grain, hay, flour, and any other food we can’t produce here. We raise pigs, chickens, and keep some cows on hand for milk and butter. Since you can’t buy your way into the village, I’ll have to convince the village’s senior males that you are of value to their families. Do you have any skills?”

“Like most women. I cook and clean. I can shoot. John said better than anyone in your clan.” The point should strike a chord with the leader. Maybe I should note I could pour bullets as good as any warrior. Bullet production ranked more important than laundry.

He nodded twice, slowly, obviously thinking. “What do you do with that guitar?”

Wasn’t it obvious? “Sing.”

Tornado *hmm*ed while thinking.

A thinking clan head was like a ticking bomb. An asshole on the verge of explosive caustic diarrhea. I had to stand there. Waiting. Wondering what crap fluttered through his mind. And powerful men who lived as long as he did had minds nobody wished to contemplate.

“Sing me something,” he commanded.

Not what I wanted to hear.

\* \* \* \*

Jackal watched Sierra lose a little piece of her soul while she strummed her guitar like it was an extension of her arms. *Her voice soft and clear, enchanting.*

She watched her hands.

But someone who played like she did shouldn’t have to watch her fingers. Her stance resonated pain. Probably from the song’s message of finding love and living. Most likely the pain of loss.

Not one person moved in the room.

I couldn’t blame them. We’d miss something. Angelic. This must be why Rattler called her Angel. And my step-father’s grimace actually softened with her song’s words of love and life.

If the clan’s women had been present, they would have whisked Sierra away from Tornado’s interrogative justice before he had the chance to torture her when she finished singing.

But the women weren't here. And Tornado intended on keeping peace in his little realm. After he'd stated the truth, that she was too damned beautiful, everything fell into place.

Sierra would have to choose a mate when he told her to.

No waiting.

No getting to know the village Guardians to ensure compatibility.

And the Gods know, we'd all witnessed women attempt bartering with Tornado for more time before making the choice. But Tornado's tactic of *just choose a man or I'll do it for you* perpetuated Death Summit's peace of hearth.

Unfortunately, Sierra hadn't even begun to grieve.

Would Tornado take that into account?

Hell, Rattler had been Tornado's chosen successor. Rattler's widow should deserve some sort of respect other than mating her off. Not that any Guardian would hurt her. Mating was a sacred act. A lifetime dedication seeded with an internal drive of the Wolf to protect and love its woman. A need that couldn't be shaken once a Shifter bit his woman during mating. Some Normal women tried to leave their mates. But Shifters never even gave the idea a thought.

The last strum of the guitar faded into silence.

Sierra slung the instrument back over her shoulder with. Black Betty. She lifted her chin, in a rather challenging way, to Tornado's calculating half smile and straightened her spine as if expecting him to explode.

"That was unusually satisfying, Sierra." Tornado rubbed his upper lip like his short moustache prickled to grow, and he eyed the Guardians. He leaned forward and eyed her closely.

Answering would have been totally stupid. Surely she realized she had to be willing to do anything to stay.

She straightened her spine even more.

"All mated Guardians leave." Tornado's ice-blue eyes pierced through her equally challenging stance. "And you, my dear, are most fortunate Rattler insisted we bring you into the clan. With that gift of singing and your beauty, you're in grave danger."

Why did he have to be such an irritating ass? I clamped my fists at my side and tried not to listen to the insulting announcement of his clan rules. And I tried not to look at her stiffening form.

"My policy is that all unmated females are matched within moments of entering our village wall."

She stepped backward once but found something to ground her in place for what he would say next.

"You will choose one of my relatives to mate before you leave this room."

"I didn't agree to this," she snarled. "Or I wouldn't have come."

"Well, you're here now. Under my protection. And you will do as I say. I risked four lives bringing you here."

Her hands fisted at her sides.

Tornado scanned the room. "Any Guardian remaining in the meeting lodge in one minute is agreeing to mate with this woman if she chooses you. So get the hell out if you're against it!"

Shit.

A brother-in-law wouldn't abandon her. Nobody would give her the time she needed to grieve.



I couldn't abandon her.  
It didn't matter what could happen to her in the future.  
I just couldn't stand watching Tornado shove her around like a piece of furniture.

\* \* \* \*

Sierra almost broke her teeth grinding them together to keep her words to herself. *To save my ass from the most ruthless of clan heads staring me down with his stipulations for my future.* And there is nothing I can do.

Mother was wrong.  
No Goddess existed protecting the life force of humanity.  
And Father was wrong.  
Clans didn't protect the weak and defenseless.  
They used them like Normals—their Wolves incapable of shaking their humanity!

Tornado had proven that much within this singular moment.

My John would have died all over again if he were present.  
Movement behind her noted unmated males vacated the shadowy room.  
Who remained?  
Did it matter?

I was about to be married off to a stranger until one of us died.  
If that didn't rank right up there with rape, what did?  
The door thumped.

Tornado rose, tall and muscular, a horrible threat, and sauntered across the few steps between us.

This is death.  
This is when everything in the world suddenly ends.  
*Beyond losing John.*

I might as well go throw myself at a spacecraft. Hand my Cougar ass over to the aliens.  
“Alright,” Tornado pointed to the left. “I’ll introduce the boys to you.”

Bile burned up my esophagus.  
Puking might insult the men. I choked down the sensation and inhaled.  
Tornado draped a palm over my shoulder like a caring sire.  
The bastard. I rolled my gaze where his finger pointed.  
“This is Steel.”

I couldn't bring myself to look above his knees at his brown eyes and angular features. He might be quiet. Add to that Shifters were incredible lovers. But Steel went unnoticed in the tank. Dwarfed by his half-brothers.

“You got to know him on your trip here. He’s the best tracker we have.” Tornado’s pointing arm shifted toward another male form. “And this is Demon, my successor. You won’t be popular among the village’s daughters if you choose him.” Tornado chuckled. “But you don’t look like the type who cares if you piss off a few folks.”

This was freaking insane. I’m inconsequential. I might as well be getting gang raped again. What would Father think if he stood in this room? He ruled with a firm hand. But he was The Black. Known for compassion. Tough as shit. Nobody crossed him. Everybody wanted to live in his village.

And then there was John. He couldn't have had any idea my future involved picking a mate from his relatives within days following his death. Or did he? Maybe I should be pissed. I just studied the hard-packed room's dirt floor.

Hell, Tornado had almost circled the entire room, rattling off names and the men's specialties when I saw those scuffed combat boots I'd stared at so often inside the tank.

Thank goodness. I couldn't recall much of what Tornado had rattled off.

But there stood Jackal.

"Well, well, would you look at that! Jackal stayed," Tornado whispered, leaning so close to my ear that his hot breath kissed my skin. "He never stays whenever there's a woman for the snatching. Looks like you broke through something with him."

I slid my gaze up Jackal's slightly-bowed legs, across the long stretch of undulating muscle of one of his arms, over his squared jaw, to meet his compassionate green gaze.

He lowered his head an inch. Almost nodding. But stood and watched me with a look that insisted I choose him.

Oh the sincerity in his stance.

I couldn't breathe.

This couldn't be happening. Why did my life come to my being recycled like a canning jar, wire, or part of a motor?

Tornado's hands grabbed my arms and whirled me to face his empty chair. He plopped down upon the wooden seat and stared me down with amused tolerance. "Choose."

I, uh... Everything in my head vanished. Words. I needed words. "I'm not an auto part or a pair of boots in decent condition. I—"

"I'll choose for you if you can't," Tornado snarled.

I could pull a fast one.

Admit my clan connections. But I didn't want to return to my cousins. They'd probably mate me off to be done with my rebel tail. And returning to my training as a Rites-of-the-Goddess priestess was the least appealing of my options. Especially when some Normals feared priestesses.

And here stood Jackal. I trusted him enough to live with the choice of giving my body to him. And his thoughtful glances always made me feel like he could hug me to death. "Jackal."

Tornado's face twisted with a sinister little smile. "That's who I would have chosen. My next in command." He nodded past my shoulder. "I expect her to be marked by morning. Don't take her anywhere until it's finished."

Jackal was there at my side. "This way," he whispered and touched my arm.

His quiet nature made my gut flop.

Maybe I had made the right choice. I turned, to find my duffle bags piled on the floor a few feet away.

He knelt beside them, grabbing the straps, swinging the handles over his strapping shoulder.

In my state of shock, I just watched him heave everything upward and shoot me a firm glance then nod toward the closed door. Mindlessly, I followed the heels of his boots into sunlight, around a corner, to the first round lodge where he shoved the wooden slab of a door into a small shadowy space.

A standard Guardian's lodge.

He held the door wide.

I just couldn't bring myself to look at him. To let him see my fear of being marked. Because I really wasn't ready to have sex with him.

Or anyone.

But I followed the sunlight shafting across the small sparingly decorated space. Just a small table and two ladder-back chairs sat under a barred window. A bed, the thorn in my side, stretched along the opposite wall.

What else did a Guardian need to function? The village fed him.

The door shut out the sunlight behind me.

Jackal's whispering footfalls halted.

Where was he? I turned to face my *savior*.

He threw open one of two windows' shutters and dropped the duffles one at a time without looking at me. His muscles strained and stretched.

Like he needed to run. Exercise.

"Are you scared of me?" he asked, kneeling beside the load of guns, looking up at me with the kindest touch of empathy in his eyes.

What a fucked up question. "How would you feel?"

"Scared." He waved at the table. "Will you sit and talk with me?"

Why talk? Just mark me so we can line out what counts as normal around here. "I'd rather have a bath."

He smiled and rose to tower steps away. "No problem. Grab some clean clothes. I'll take you to the bathhouse."

"I thought I was on lockdown until you marked me."

He grabbed some clothes from a basket beneath his bed and chuckled. "Tornado won't complain. He's getting what he wants. He knows I'm responsible. That's why I'm his right-hand man. He won't argue about a bath. Besides, he'll just think I marked you already."

"In three minutes?" I'd hope for a little more time and sensitivity when being mounted by a man. But I'd only had one lover aside from the rape. Maybe all males just took care of their business and left their mates wanting.

"He wouldn't put it past any of us, Sierra. That's how he operates. My mother died, and he took another mate in a week. Although, he chalks it all up to having to produce Guardians." He snorted and waved me toward the door. "I, myself, think he just can't wait to try out another woman."

I set down my guitar and Black Betty and grabbed my backpack stuffed with clothes. "You say that like you disapprove of his practice."

He waited for me at the closed door. "I've never mated before. He's the boss. I just take orders."

Like remaining in the room so I could choose him. I grabbed some pants and a tank top.

Why had this obviously perfect Shifter never taken a mate? Everyone knew Shifters had strong sex drives. Like their inner beast drove them to mate. But they had to bite a woman during sex to create the mating bond. He had to have been with other women. What kept Jackal single? "Why me?"

His compassionate eyes studied me as I crossed the space between us. "I didn't think any of the others would take care of you." He shoved the door wide.

Warm sunlight showered me.

But nothing as warm as the words he'd uttered.

The others wouldn't take care of me? How so? However, discussing the issue outside wasn't wise with all the gaping villagers. Even Tornado who leaned on the doorframe of his meeting room.

Maybe everything was going to be okay.

“Jackal?” Tornado called.

Jackal waved at him, placed his hand on the small of my back, and guided me through the hodgepodge of houses.

If Jackal had lived his entire life here, he knew how to handle Tornado. So, my worrying about things wasn’t going to do me any good.

“There are almost fifty Normals here,” he said, walking slowly. “That includes Guardian mates. Almost anything you could want is sold by the merchants. But we try to keep the population from exceeding seventy-five.”

“Don’t tell me. Tornado just kicks them out. Most likely women and children because he’s heartless?”

Jackal’s face split with a huge grin. “No. He’s a family man, Sierra. Besides, his job is to protect families. The weak.”

So, Tornado wouldn’t be happy to learn I’m a huge extraterrestrial magnet.

“The way you sing,” he said softly, “is beautiful.”

John said the same thing.

My heart burst in agony.

“It makes you sad to be complemented?” he asked.

My expression must have reflected my inner pain. “John used to say the same thing,” I focused on the scuffed toes of his combat boots as we walked.

He halted, lifting my chin with an index finger and a thumb to make me meet his sad gaze. “He and I shared the same mother. Our dame had the bluest eyes. Like Rattler. And she taught us to respect all people. If I had met you before him, I would have hidden you up in the wilderness too. He and I enjoyed most of the same things. Although, we’re very different. I’ll blame that on Tornado’s genes.” He fell silent, studying me. “I don’t want you to hide your grief.” His thumb brushed my cheek. “Give it time. Cry all you want. He was important to me too.”

Something hitched in my chest.

I was lucky John had been important to him.

Why didn’t Jackal keep talking? That voice of his was so soothing. Maybe everything really would be alright. Especially since I couldn’t ask for more than a Shifter who cared for my emotional wellbeing. But what would he do if he learned what I really was? Dumping the fact I’m a Cougar on someone had to be pretty life-altering. Especially to a mate. And I’d be mated before morning.

“Come on. We’re almost there.” His warm hand fell away from my skin, and he turned back to the hard-packed earthen trail winding between houses.

The village butted up against a mountainside where a cave gaped at the sprawling clutter of human dwellings. Mother would have said the mountain laughed at the people trying to cling to it for protection. But she looked at things so differently than I did. A Rites-of-the-Goddess priestess would. Yet, Father’s scientific Shifter perspective would see a resource. A cave. I preferred the resource.

Jackal entered the dark cave interior first. “Paulson.”

He seemed to be greeting a Normal.

Five steps into the cavern, my vision acclimated. Jackal towered in front of me, blocking what lay ahead. “Nobody enters until my mate has finished,” he warned.

Something in my belly warmed and spread throughout me at that threat. I kept on Jackal’s heels.

“Of course,” Paulson replied. “How was the trip?”

“Too damned long.” Jackal stepped sideways and turned to me.

Beyond him stretched the most beautiful sight lit by fires contained inside large tubs. Twinkling stone pillars extended from the floor to the ceiling or just hung like enormous icicles. An area to the far right sported a long lacey ribbon hugging a lower section of the cave’s ceiling, a strip of the finest dripstone icicles. Stalactites.

The Earth really could jack with a person’s mind sometimes. Like Mother’s thoughts of a cave as a mouth laughing at the village. Upon entering the cave, one would rethink the laughter related to protection as more like stupidity for living outside such an amazing natural wonder. But I’m not going there after giving up my Rites-of-the-Goddess training.

Jackal walked beside me down a path through the flowstone.

It’s funny how a lifetime’s lessons are impossible to shake when all a person wants to do is forget the dogma brainwashed into her head by the age of eighteen. Eight years in hiding with an amazing mate had given me ample time to write off most of the unpalatable doctrine. Not that the belief and principles were bad. Just something I could always see through and proven false as revealed by the events in my life.

Although, no honorable Goddess would abandon her devout follower the way the Goddess made me witness my parents’ death, leave me at the hands of rapists, and then take the only thing I had left—John, the man who brought me back from the ledge of suicide—when it was all said in done. Justice served? Maybe. But how cruel. I’d always prayed and studied. For what?

Why in the world am I thinking about this now?

We stepped around a bend in the path into a serene place jingling with a little more than a trickle of flowing water.

A surreal place of faint wayward sunlight mingling with shadow. Where the muted sunlight came from, I couldn’t see. But there was just enough blue light to dance upon a pool Jackal led me toward.

At the water’s edge on the right, the water rolled in a gentle trickle of a rush over wet stone, downward a few feet into the pool.

Recharge. Beautiful and peaceful.

“Go ahead and bathe.” He thrust a palm at me. “Use this soap. The stuff in the basket to your right is lye. You don’t want to use that trash. It’s eaten me alive before.”

He really was looking out for me. I plucked the circular bar from his warm palm.

He shot me a wink and turned his back, striding away.

The pool was a good twelve feet across at its widest. Although, the basin was anything but round. The edge spread out, reaching for walls, in anything but a recognizable shape. The cavern bent and bulged, leaving corners hidden away like some giant had squeezed the rocks with both hands and some spaces oozed out between the long-gone fingers. Water filled most of the floor of the space. All but the edge where Jackal walked, skirting the *bath* like he stalked some prey in his camouflage.

I’d be wise to hurry and strip to submerge in the water before he turned to face me.

Or was he providing me with privacy? Probably.

The man had a gentle way about him. Even though I’d seen him kill.

But I’d never hold his defending me against him.

That was just another reason to go along with Tornado's plan. I'd simply have to accept things have changed. That my future began the moment John's last breath eased from his body and left me here with his brother.

Besides, widows married their brother-in-laws all the time these days. For security. And more so because some brother-in-laws loved their brothers' widows enough to cling to them through the aftermath of a mate's loss. That's where I was.

The aftermath.

And I needed to hide. From the aliens and their hidden agenda for Cougars. I watched Jackal's broad shoulders, the bulging muscles in his arms, the strength and compassion in his stance as he walked slowly away from me, studying the pool's mirroring surface.

Protecting me. Maybe because of a moral obligation. But the Shifter had honor.

\* \* \* \*

*The splash of water indicated my soon-to-be mate had found a seat in the pool*, Jackal concluded. Time to bathe and complete the binding. Not here though. I wanted her in my bed. Where I could shut the door and hide our private union from village censure. Nobody had any business seeing my woman's nude body or what passed between us. I turned.

All I could see of her was in profile. She sat nude in the water with her side facing me. Where she could watch me with her peripheral vision. Her long wet hair covering her breasts.

Good thing. I didn't need any more temptation to push me over the edge and get on with *the marking* here. Her request to bathe was enough to shatter my resolve in marking her to allow her whatever she needed to be happy before Tornado's law had to be upheld. I'd help her every way I could. But *the marking* had to take place in the end. Afterward, I wouldn't touch her unless she asked me to.

She turned that pale blue gaze to me when I was a few steps from where she sat rubbing a lather between her palms. But she only watched me a moment then acted like I wasn't present.

Was she terrified I'd attack her?

She didn't radiate fear.

Or sorrow.

Just what danced in her mind? I grabbed my boot and yanked, then turned to the hem of my shirt. Within moments, I leapt, nude, into the deepest part of the cool water, massaging away four days of travel.

How would she react when I surfaced? Terrified? I thrust my head above the jiggling water's surface and wiped water from my eyes.

She had shifted her seat, deeper into the shallows, where her breasts were submerged enough to allow her nipples coverage from the snatch of the dancing water's dark surface. Still, she focused on working up a lather to bathe away our journey's grime.

I could have chuckled. Swam over and playfully borrowed the soap. Most women would have swum out to me and wrapped their arms and legs around my body to anchor their smiles before my lips. Offer themselves in hopes of my accidentally biting them when dipping into the molten velvet of their hot souls. Not Sierra. She probably housed so much grief she'd never come to me. Funny how I swore I'd spare a mate the torture of worrying for my return every time I left to pull my weight in protecting the village. Every time I risked death outside Death Summit's walls. So, I didn't mate. And here I float wishing the one woman I wanted to risk causing her additional pain enough to mate with her would acknowledge my presence.

Especially when the village daughters hurled their bodies at me.

I had to go and choose a widow. My brother's. A woman I'd never met until a few days ago. We had nothing between us but a dead man who had stolen her heart. I really had no right demanding she give me hers today.

But she'd gone and touched me, almost intimately, twice since we met.

And my Wolf craved her.

A knot tied in my chest.

Shit. I *wanted* her after she'd touched me.

But how would she react to me?

Once I marked her, no other woman in my bed would satisfy me.

Would she feel the same? She was just a Normal. She'd never have the permanent tie to her I'd create for myself during *the marking*. Would I live to regret the decision to take my brother's widow under my protection?

Especially when I craved her touch.

\* \* \* \*

*He spent a lot of time swimming*, Sierra thought, scrubbing the soapy lather deeply into her scalp. He hadn't snatched me up and groped me though. Nor had he even looked my direction since he first surfaced. I'd lose my mind waiting for him to take care of Tornado's business. He needed to just mark me and get it over with. I dunked my head forward and ran my fingers through my drifting hair to rinse the suds.

By the time I slung my hair down my back, he had eased over to float at my side, sat, and held out a palm. "Soap." He wore his signature contemplative gaze.

What did he think? I handed over the slippery circle of magic—the lemony soap.

He arched a dark eyebrow at me. "Feel better?"

Actually I did. Soap and a lot of water worked a special kind of magic that chanting and prayer never yielded during my priestess training. "Yes."

He rubbed up his own lather with his gleaming wet muscles like he masterfully turned the tip of a stick against stone to make fire.

Fast. Determined. Would he handle my body the same way? Hopefully he would just get the job done and leave me to a good night's sleep. To heal. The bite alone in *the marking* shouldn't cause any residual pain. Everything else probably would.

"You're still afraid of me," he said softly, eyeing me with one eye in profile while he worked the lather in his palms.

Goddess, who wouldn't be afraid? Look at him. He was enormous. Not fat. That body I'd watched out of the corner of my eye had just enough fat on it to soften his hard edges. Just enough cushion to house his bulging veins where they warned he could take *whatever he wanted*.  
Shit.

This was really happening.

But I chose him because he'd always seemed so caring. Understanding of my situation. Lord, he was so damned big that he'd certainly lock me down with his weight alone. I'd be at his mercy.

Before, during, and after the bite.

Why didn't he just get on with marking me?

He rubbed froth over his head, neck, and shoulders.

Maybe asking to help with his back would win me a bit of gentleness when he took my body.

He dove underneath the pool's dancing surface.

Too late to make a peace offering. I guess my being tortured in this life given I couldn't return home to my clan was inevitable. My sisters of the Rites of the Goddess would force me back into training I never appreciated though. Not even my father was here to stand up to the sisters like he'd done all those years when allowing me to learn to hunt and use weapons—sacrilege to all of the Goddess sisters except the enforcers. I was trapped here or forced to set out on my own, into The Wild, a woman alone, hunted by Normals in search of brood stock or women to sell into prostitution.

A woman couldn't win in this world.

At least at Death Summit, I could live without the dogma of priestesses trying to control my Cougar. And Jackal would protect me from other men.

Jackal surfaced his mass of glistening musculature with a spray of water and reclaimed his seat at my side.

I just stared at the jiggling water's surface.

Now? Would he just get *the marking* over with?

"Look at me, Sierra."

I managed to. Maybe not dead on. But I did look at him.

"I'm going to have to touch you once for *the marking*. But I swear I'll not touch you again until you ask me to."

Oh, the sincerity.

My heart tied into a choking mass.

Why did I want to cry? There couldn't be any tears left inside me after two nights of shedding my memories. Trying to let go. Clinging to my ghost of my John. I just nodded at Jackal.

His fingertip took the underside of my chin and forced me to look into his welcoming green eyes. "I've never bonded myself to a woman. But I know what it's like to want to feed the beast when it surfaces to feed during sex. And I know it's not an uncontrollable moment. A man who can't control *the marking* isn't worthy of taking a mate. You're safe, Sierra. I swear it."

Facing his Wolf was the least of my worries.

My aching heart tried to convince me to believe his vow of honor.

Was I a fool to listen to such an unruly organ that only brought pain? Love, the lie of life.

And did he respect me enough not to kill me during *the marking*? Werewolves had lost control. Everybody heard those tales. And he could rip me apart. With his teeth. Or his body. Even his hips could crush me while his Wolf buried his seed inside my womb.

His hands snatched up my waist, lifting me, planting me across his lap, over his rock-hard erection, my breasts fully exposed to the cool air.

Hopefully, he could read my mind or just scent my fear. I shot him a sideways glance hoping he wasn't staring at my beaded nipples. Anything to get his attention. Nipples ought to send the message.

He studied my profile.

Just kiss me. Dammit.

Was he so worried about my fears that he couldn't bring himself to just end my misery? Waiting was far worse than being finished with the possession of a Wolf bite. I slid my hand around his corded neck and pulled his mouth down over mine. To make him do it.

Gods-be-damned. Lips of the warmest softest velvet.



He sighed, long, sucked in deeply as if trying to inhale mine, sliding a palm up my side, touching me like I was fragile. Then his mouth softened even more against my lips.

He was so gentle. Almost loving.

My heart melted.

Those tender lips of his parted, and wet heat sucked my senses down into a demanding ache between my legs.

Why did I suddenly feel like I couldn't breathe?

But we were practically strangers. I think. Could a stranger's kiss make me feel drugged? Lulled more deeply into his spell beyond acceptance? Because I sure was feeling pretty damned agreeable. Now, how was mating going to be between us? He could show me.

He thrust his strong tongue into my mouth and explored every inch of me with his tongue's rough surface. Like he truly wanted me. As if I was some sacred vessel.

He barely raked his fingers into my hair beneath one ear and turned my head to gain his tongue better access in exploring my mouth.

More desire jolted from my heart to my groin.

How could I suddenly yearn for him? The need made no sense. Yet, I couldn't deny my sudden hunger. The promise in the way he paid homage to my body. I could do this. Bind with this amazing Shifter. Learn to appreciate his touch. Wallow in his embrace. I rose up to match the way he devoured my mouth and clung to him.

He jerked away, staring across the cavern.

Like his heightened senses blared a warning.

He roared.

Suddenly, he tossed my tail onto hard stone beside him, into the thrashing water, and leapt to his feet only to burst out of the pool the moment my gaze landed on a male standing in the bath's entrance.

## Chapter Five

Sierra watched as the intruder ran. Disappeared. Escaped. Not a bad idea with a pissed Jackal on his tail. Just in the nick of time. I had almost given myself to Jackal. Just like that. What happened? Time to get dressed. With speed, I managed to yank on pants and a top before the groans and moans coming from down the mountain's natural corridor ceased.

Jackal's seething form burst back into the bath cavern.

I tried not to focus on anything below his mouth. Hell, like he was wound up enough already.

He scanned the space, locking a golden Shifter gaze upon me. "Good idea." He sighed. "Nobody else gets to see my woman undressed." He sucked in a deep breath and thrust a leg into a clean pair of camouflage pants.

His woman? So he'd lost control when a male stumbled upon us. But the realization that Jackal would protect me to the extent of punishing someone for a simple misstep resonated *I was safe*. With him. And *my* Jackal could be trusted.

We headed back to his lodge, him in his pants and boots, passing the groaning male in the dark passageway and many curious folk among the houses outside in the warm sunlight.

Mostly young women wearing more than curiosity on their faces. More like shock or betrayal. Apparently, Jackal was quite the prize. Just how many of the lovely young things had he sampled before deciding upon me? After all, these women had wealth. Their families could *buy* them whatever they wanted.

He grabbed my hand, lacing his thick fingers through mine, never looking my direction.

Was he signaling our audience? Clarifying he'd taken a mate? With me in my tank top, they could see my shoulder or neck held no marking. But the way he held my hand stated otherwise. *I was his*. I followed him, the good accommodating woman.

Before I knew it, he shoved his door inward and waited for me to cross the threshold beneath the muscles of his extended arm. This time sunlight welcomed me through the small window's bars next to the door.

"Are you alright, Sierra?" he asked.

Why wouldn't I be? "Yes." I shot his golden stare a glance and entered my new *home*.

It was strange how everything had changed in a blink. At least Jackal seemed at ease even though his golden eyes still warned he was about to shift. "I should ask if you're okay."

He released my hand and gently nudged me with a palm at my lower back. "There are many fools in the world, Sierra. I'm not about to let them disrespect you."

The determination in his gaze, the type of look that insisted I believe him, made my knees wobble. Or maybe it was the kiss. After the way he exploded in anger with the intruder at the pool, only a fool would doubt his message. I stepped into the room.

He smiled. "I'll be right back. Lock the door behind me. Only open the door if I speak to you."

Was life in the village that dangerous?

His form sauntered directly away from the wooden doorframe, across the hard-packed ground trodden by who knows how many villagers, toward other buildings. But he glanced over his shoulder at me.

Probably checking to ensure I did as instructed.

*Okay.* I shut the door's slab of wood and blocked out the brightest sunlight.

All but the light shining through the windows. A beam of wood had been propped up against the wall behind the door. Two "locks" were placed on each side of the doorframe about four feet off the ground. I slid the rough two-by-four through both sides, hooking the beam in place to bar anyone's entry.

If anyone was that stupid after the bath incident.

The room wasn't really so bad. Small. But void of furniture. The two windows had been covered with metal bars to reinforce the hole in case the glass got broken. Probably because of Bounders. Just in case the alien beasts got past the wall. But plenty of light still invaded the lodge. Otherwise, the central stone-encircled hearth would provide light in the dark hours of the night. Half of the circular wall had been riddled with hooks. All sorts of firearms were meticulously hung from those hooks as if Jackal had some sort of organization with his weapons. I tossed aside my soiled clothing and turned to my firearm duffle.

I'd give Jackal the guns to do whatever he wanted with. One by one, I hung rifles, hoping he wouldn't be too irritated if I screwed up his system.

A knock tapped on the door.

Maybe he'd returned.

Sunlight danced at the crack beneath the door. I stopped at the lock. "Who's there?"

"It's me, Sierra."

So, Jackal tested me. I opened the door.

He held two metal dishes.

Food.

"Hungry?" His cheeks split into a gorgeous grin.

Absolutely kissable. I nodded and stepped toward the table.

The beam of sunlight fluttered at my feet as his shadow followed in my footsteps. "Feel like talking?" He placed the dishes on the table.

With food and a table, not a bad idea. But that damned kiss was going to haunt me until he decided to revisit it. "Sure."

He crossed the space with ease to close the door.

Not lock it. Just close it. *Apparently*, I was endangered.

"Sit with me." He waved a large palm at one of the two chairs.

Probably the hand he held my lower back with while he kissed me.

Oh, what's wrong with me? I loved John. How could I begin to find happiness with another man so soon? Damn the aliens. They left no room for grief. Only survival. I really was just an animal. Maybe I should shift into cougar form and slip into the wilderness for good.

Jackal settled into the seat across our small table and slid a pan to me. "When was the last time you ate chicken?"

Oh. Dear. Gods. Chicken. I scanned the pale meaty lumps covered in thick golden gravy. Orange one-inch pieces of carrots and green peas colored the dish around one large biscuit that appeared to serve as an island offset to one side. "Eight years ago." It had been that long since I had something as perfect as Mother's chicken and dumplings or chicken pot pie.

My mouth watered.

My gut growled.

"You better feed that beast before you shift," he chuckled and slid a fork across the table toward my hand. "What did you eat out in the wilderness?"

Like Death Summit was anything but the wilderness full of human beasts. The village was so damned remote. Almost as remote as my tree house had been. "Whatever we could shoot or forage for with the seasons. John traded. Hence, the canned food and dry goods." I stuffed a piece of savory moist chicken into my mouth and tried to chew away my memories of life in a tree house with a man wielding the funniest sense of humor.

Talk about salted perfection. Chicken tasted better than I remembered.

Jackal smiled at me, chewing. "Bring back memories?"

If only he knew. We ate chicken on Mother's holy days. "Can I stay?" I joked.

He shrugged, studied his food, and stabbed a carrot. "Guess so."

"Gee, thanks. You could act like you care." I tried not to cough up a nervous laugh.

His golden gaze locked on mine, and he studied me. "Don't think you'll be getting away. I've pissed off a lot of women today. For you." He winked. "Tornado's just going to have to deal with any of the repercussions caused by his brilliance. Especially since I don't feel like changing my mind." He tucked the carrot between his tanned lips and smiled.

Gods, what a possessive stare.

A shiver zipped down my arms.

What if I told him I wanted to stay with him? However insane it sounds. Now that I'd seen Death Summit, there was little to fear. Albeit, a village was no city. The same overlord mentality reigned anywhere a person went, even in the wild. In the cities, the only difference was Normals ruled. I had no intention of journeying into *that* insane realm where everyone lived the life of The Conquered. No. I'd pass on a future among the conquered. Hide my Cougar here. "Jackal?"

He arched a dark eyebrow. The golden light in his eyes flashed back to the docile green.

"I'll be okay here." Would he believe me?

"Sue made the chicken." He flicked his gaze to the food and back to mine as if he didn't want to respond. "She wants to meet you. She's older. The woman who looked after my lodge before you came. She has a kindness about her. I think you'll like her."

If Jackal said Sue was kind, it had to be true. So, Sue was history. I'll have to beat our sheets and clothes on a stone in the river to wash them myself now. Replace his help. "Okay."

"Why did you kiss me?" His gaze slid to his food, and he cut his biscuit with his fork.

"To make it easier for you."

His dark eyebrow hitched as he rolled his eyes back at me. "You're the one I'm worried about. Forget about me."

How had I ended up with a sensitive killing machine?

We finished eating with casual conversation about the weather, the standard curfew information about sunset, and his general family history of his father having been Marine Corps, abducted by aliens, and returned to sire many Shifters with his new *special* modifications. Thanks to the aliens.

His father sired him late in life but died when Jackal was three. Jackal's mother then mated with horny Tornado and had John. Both brothers were the only two of their mother's children to reach adulthood. But that was normal AEI.

Jackal stacked the two empty pans together and shoved them aside.

"Why lock the door? Do you think there will be trouble?" I asked.

"I've seen men do some really stupid things."

As in I'm female and there was a general shortage of females in small North American villages. And now the village women were upset. Joy.

"Sierra?"

He locked an unyielding gaze upon me. "It's time."

Fine. Better to get *the marking* over with. Afterward, I could sleep on a wonderful bed. It'd been so long since I had. Besides, Jackal hadn't hurt me. He'd always protected me. *I'd just pretend he was John*. I rose, walked toward the bed's brown blanket, yanked my tank top over my head, and reached for my bra snap between my breasts.

His hands gently caught my wrists from behind my back, encircling my upper body, with his warm strong arms as he pressed the heat of his iron body into my back. "Don't," he whispered. "Let me." His lips fluttered against my ear.

Every hair on my body stiffened with a prickly chill.

His soft lips planted a demanding kiss on my neck.

Was it caused by the brush of his whiskers? Or I was losing my mind and giving into Earth's AEI insanity? However, he really was trying to make this easy for me. Screwing this up by having him fear he frightened me would be a huge mistake. If I cooperated enough, I'd have a mate who nobody would cross. Combine his strength with his compassion and I'd be a fool not to wallow in his bed. I turned against his massaging mouth and tickling beard to rub my palms across the warm pliant muscle of his chest.

*To face my future.*

He softly groaned, pressing his fiery breath against the bend of my neck, stirring up a rash of gooseflesh all over me while sliding his wide calloused palms to my lower back, pushing me into his beating heart and drawing my breasts slightly upward as he leaned down to plant hot kisses across my clavicle.

Something raw and needy stirred low in my belly.

How could he make me so needy when John was barely in the ground?

Gods, that mouth was as magic as his soap. Maybe more. Letting him have his way would be wisest with a marking around the corner. I slid my arms around his neck to allow him better access to my shoulders, hiking my pearled nipples up against his warm supple pectorals.

What could it hurt to take a little respite from the madness of my life? To let go in Jackal's amazing arms? To feel safe?

A telltale hardness nudging my belly noted *his* readiness.

His willingness. Would we both benefit from the bonding? He had to. But what had Tornado meant that Jackal hadn't ever stayed to be chosen by a female? Why was I special? Maybe Jackal really wanted me as his mate. At least he desired me. But would he guess I fondled him merely for survival? Or was I lying to myself about my motives while his touch loosed wave after wave of heat through my core?

He backed his head inches away, facing me in our clench.

Oh no. Did he wonder what I wanted? If he questioned my motives, he'd be pissed. Maybe not so loving. I inhaled deeply and stared at his lips trying to indicate I fancied his lips against mine.

Silently, he bent down, scooping me up under my knees and back, setting me down on the softness of his bed, and claimed a seat beside me.

The homemade frame was fashioned from wood, the headboard being bent out of shoots from young trees woven together into a lattice.

Something to grasp. How long would I be gripping that wood? By the hungry look in his eyes, the answer could be long into the night.

A chill shimmied down my body.

I didn't even want to begin wondering how many of the village's daughters had clutched that portion of the bed frame. Why would it matter anyway? Here I sprawled out with John but days in the ground. Was anything sacred?

Jackal focused on me.

Instead of a village daughter.

*I am the woman he chose.* By Tornado's words.

And that kiss in the pool.

Shit. I could do this. Mate with him. He wasn't an animal. More like the most compassionate male I'd ever met. And the way he touched me...

He bent over, caging me in his arms by placing his hands beside my elbows, slowly pressing his knees between my legs until the intoxicating weight of his warm steely chest pinned my rattling heart to the bedding.

He sucked in a deep breath, his chest pressing into my breasts from the expansion of air. His smoldering gaze could have set the brown cotton blanket beneath me aflame.

"I swear I won't hurt you," he rumbled.

Aside from the fact he still wore his pants, the reassuring tone of his voice told me he spoke the truth. "That's why I chose you, Jackal."

His golden shifter gaze widened, then zeroed in on my neck.

Yes. The neck. A most sensitive place to loiter and dwell upon reinforcing my compliance. And if he ripped out my jugular, this insanity would end. All the more to tempt fate. I leaned my head away from him to encourage the maneuver.

His face vanished, tucking into the nook where my collarbone met my pulse. Into the heartbeat his prickly brush of beard helped massage into my skin with the aid of his velvet lips.

My thoughts numbed into nothing but the caressing flutter of his mouth and the flick of his hot tongue. Gods, my legs snaked around his amazing hips. All I could think about was his delicious weight. The kneading mouth latched onto my jugular. The searing heat of his tongue lathing my flesh.

Nothing had felt that amazing in weeks. I slid my palms around the tense muscles of his back and clutched his shoulders down against my breasts.

Security never felt so good.

The rough texture of his hands roamed my body, down my sides, across my belly, over my thighs, and between my legs.

Yes, there. Beyond the shivers he set off with his touch, I wanted him exploring me where he made me ache. I tried to spread my legs wider.

*Take off my damned pants.* Moisten those calloused fingers inside my bare damp folds.

His silky lips kneaded another tingling rash from my skin with each strategic place he pressed his sucking mouth, moving beneath my chin and farther upward, over my jaw. "Sierra," he whispered at the corner of my gasping mouth.

I met his hooded golden Shifter gaze and latched onto his lower lip.

He growled, closing his eyelids, and allowed me to suck his tender flesh.

But I wanted everything. And strangely enough, needed it. Now. I bucked my hips against his waist and released his lip.

His mouth captured mine, forcefully. Hungrily. He thrust his tongue between my teeth. Tasting me. Investigating every curve hidden from everyone's view. Moaning a note of possession.

Was it wrong to feel safe? The way he made me feel. And amazingly hot and hungry. I couldn't find a place on his muscled body that provided a good handhold though. So I feverishly groped and grasped at his flexing muscles.

He rubbed his stubbled cheek along mine like a cat marking its territory and slid his body downward, inch by glorious inch. His mouth working my skin, squeezing and sucking sections, finally to nip at each spot before moving lower.

To the bulge of my breasts.

So goddamned low that anticipation stole away with my breath.

Yes. The nipple. Gods, I let my legs fall away to allow him to move easily.

His fingers tickled the closure of my bra open where the lower curve of both my breasts almost rubbed together, then he angled his scraping beard across the rise of my left breast and rubbed a circle around the taut nipple with the stiff hairs of his chin.

I know. Because I couldn't stop watching him lick and kiss my body. My groin ached so damned badly that I had to watch. Had to know where in the hell he was going when he should have been ripping off my pants to thrust what had to be the biggest damned erection west of the Mississippi River inside me. Anything to keep me on the bed in total compliance.

Salvation never came in a more amazing package.

Goodbye roving Normals and tyrant Normal warlords. I *needed* Jackal. And nothing could ever convince me I made a mistake after he began paying homage to my curves. Especially since he made love to me when he could have just *taken* what he wanted.

His lips locked around my nipple's beaded knot.

Oh sweet life and breath.

He sucked my soul out of that aching point.

My body arched into the pressure, trembling and throbbing.

He growled.

If that was a warning, I couldn't stop squirming.

He snarled hot breath against that nipple's aching peak and met my gaze with ravenous golden eyes.

Gods, I wanted him devouring every inch of me. I think he could read my mind. He nipped at the nub of my other nipple and sank all but his attentive watchful gaze from my view beneath the bulge of that breast.

Down. He kissed down across my ribs.

All I could do was hiss my approval.

Until he lapped at my navel.

I ached so damned badly my inner channel clamped mindlessly at the promise of his possessive growls.

I tried to work my hands down to the button of my pants. But he swiped them away with a pinch of warning in his assessing yellow gaze. It's like he fed on my reaction to his every move.

His fingers slid beneath my waistband at each side of my sides.

Gently. Lovingly. Teasingly. "Jackal," I groaned and wriggled my hips against his touch to encourage he shimmy my pants down my legs.

He kissed a warm trail along the edge of my waistband between his thumbs.

Right beneath my navel.

Then he agonizingly fumbled with the button at my waist.

I was such a squirming mess. I clutched at the brown blanket beneath me and rocked my head side to side.

At last, he opened my pants and slid his fingers' knuckles-deep beneath my panties.

Caressing me like an enormous hunk of gold he hoarded for his eyes alone.

The way his palms encircled my hips locked me where he wanted me.

What was he doing?

He watched me still. And sighed tumultuously. His hands slipped out of my panties to peel my pants away from my undergarment. Only to jerk the coarse cotton down to my knees, turning to my boots, yanking each one off, and then each pant leg.

Come on. I'm dying.

He stripped his pants off.

Yes, that was the biggest damned erection west of the Mississippi. And that corded body framing his jutting hard-on snuffed any thoughts I had of running for freedom.

Just get my panties off. I fumbled with the elasticized edge of my panties at my hip.

He growled and shoved my hands away.

"Hurry," I snarled. He damned well better.

He shoved my knees up to my elbows and pressed my thighs to my ribs, pinning my hips to the bed with his navel, hovering with a stare that could frighten even the largest of brutes. "Mine."

Oh yes.

"Yes," I concurred. "Yours, Jackal." Anything to get him to take off my panties. To claim me by thrusting the iron rod he rubbed against the crease of my ass inside me. To end the freaking torture.

His weight lifted as he slid down to rub his cheek along my thigh. "You're all mine, Kitten."

Oh, yes. As long as he stayed on task and didn't go from calling me Kitten to announcing he knew I was a Cougar. I could be his everything forever as long as we left my Cougar under the bed and he preened me like this.

His lips continued deconstructing me piece by agonizing piece like a motor he painstakingly disassembled as he kissed a mind-numbing trail along my inner thigh.

Down. Down to edge of my panties. There. Right where he made me dance with uncontrollable need. I bit my lip and held my breath.

"You're so damned wet." He growled, studying me while he slid his thumbs beneath my panties' elastic seam.

And sucked the breath right out of me without any more than the slightest touch.

His thumbs plunged inside my wet channel.

My head dropped backward, until the back of my crown lolled right and left on the bed.

If this is what he did to me with my panties on, what was next?

He released a few ragged breaths pumping his thumbs into my grinding sex before yanking my panties off.

"Thank God," I rasped and managed to press my shoulders back into the soft blanket.

"Fuck, God. Mine," he growled, looping my knees over his shoulders with gentle ease.

Being eaten now would kill me. "Inside me, Jackal. Please."



Apparently, I wasn't specific enough. He didn't use his steely shaft. No, he used his wily tongue. Thrusting inside my aching channel. Taunting me. All I could do was beg he stop. "Please," I whined and mindlessly ground my clit against his teeth.

He snarled, his Wolf speaking now.

Sparks flashed behind my shut eyelids as I tried to hang onto my sanity.

He exhaled in a gusty hot breath and trailed his tongue around my clit in little circles.

Inflamed. Swollen. That little nub was so ridiculously tender.

Nothing mattered but my orgasm.

Now.

I was going to explode.

His teeth nibbled at the taut little bud.

I yelped.

My body shuddered and jerked.

And I had been complaining about all the practice he had before me.

Silly me.

Those poor village girls were probably slitting their wrists. I gulped and just let the bed consume my panting body.

He walked up my body with his palms on the bed, along my sides, until his gaze stared down where the length of his overpowering heat promised I would never yearn for another mate.

Ever.

The smooth head of his cock nudged my humming sex's entrance.

At long fucking last.

Oh, how I wanted to snake my legs around that slim waist of his and lock his amazing body into place until he came through on the promise of driving his steely shaft home. I was just too damned wasted from being eaten to manage movement.

"I'm going to mark you now," he rasped.

"Yes." I nodded enthusiastically. "I want you to make me yours." And that was anything but a lie. He would protect me. Love me. Just like this. Every day. What more could I ask for?

He gurgled a throaty growl inches from my nose, and, slowly, he shoved his solid thickness inside me. All the way down to the scratchy hairs covering the firmness of his seed-engorged sac.

Dear. Gods. My body simply gave with the slickness he'd conjured from its depths.

Move, Jackal. Hard and fast.

His serious features shifted slightly.

Dark hair began sprouting from his arms.

His thick cock jerked, threatening to explode.

Gods, he was shifting.

"Hard and fast, Jackal," I groaned and rocked my hips again. Anything to get him to hurry before it was too late. Before he lost control.

He practically roared with a snarl and began thrusting, claiming my clenching channel, his gaze sliding back and forth between my face and our mating bodies.

But the shift slowly came upon him and halted where his face hadn't changed. He balanced upon one arm's flexed muscles, taking care to study his thrusts and my reaction.

Thank the stars.

My limbs finally flooded with newfound energy on the wake of another all-consuming itch of orgasm.

*It was coming at long last.*

No. *I* was. I snaked my arms around his massive hairy body, pulling his stare completely to me, and clung to his lithe desperate movements.

It didn't matter that his body bulked even more because of his shifting.

He snarled possessively, grinding faster and faster, rubbing me with incredible Wolf hairs that only intensified my sensitivity. And his cock engorged even more. Was that even possible?

Possibilities... Now if only I could get him to hand his seed over to my soul, I'd have a chance to possess the only thing denied to me for eight years. A child. That coup in itself would be the ultimate gift from his guardianship.

*Gods, to bite him...*

To sink my teeth into his salty skin.

To finally claim a piece of someone for myself.

Shit, I never wanted to bite anyone before. What was happening to me? I dared not breathe, sliding my ankles over his hairy iron ass, pulling him into me as if trying to contain my inner Cougar. She was there. Clawing my heart into a tangled knot of fear. Demanding for release.

Why now?

*Mine*, Cougar snarled.

To claim him? I gulped back my breath. Bit back my cries. Slammed my eyes shut. And sank my nails into Jackal's back at the roots of his wiry wolfen hairs, trying not to scream. I had to control Cougar.

His huge iron erection bucked inside me.

His hips jerked.

Still he hadn't completely shifted. I'd have to give him credit for restraining his Wolf. And he gifted me an even better orgasm with the thickening of his erection. I loosed a scream and grabbed onto those coarse hairs of his shoulders.

Absolute rapture erupted inside my soul, driving out like the rings from a water droplet hitting a watery surface, growing as energy shoved those rings outward away from the point of impact, sending tremors to every cell in my limbs in consecutive bursts of mind-numbing pleasure. I threw my head back and half-moaned another escaping scream.

*Mine. Mine. Mine*, Cougar growled.

He roared and slammed his sharp teeth down over my clavicle.

Pain seared me into lying frozen for a moment until a bolt of lightning shot through my body jolting every one of my cells into a state of absolute numbness.

Blessed stars.

He hadn't bitten close to my neck at all.

I wouldn't bleed out.

I leaned my cheek into his furry head and ran one handful of fingers up to the back of his skull, through his wiry coat. Encouraging his ownership. Because he was so amazingly attentive in and out of bed. That's what I needed to survive. *I needed* a Jackal.

He hummed little vibrating growls into my numb flesh, clamping me between his razor-sharp Wolf teeth as our bodies slowly ground to a halt with our dying orgasm.

We feebly bucked to sustain the fleeting rapture.

The all-consuming sensation between mates.

Something I hadn't experienced with as much magnitude with his brother but dared not admit. I just gasped for breath with my eyes tightly shut and clung to his furry panting massive form.

His hips gave me one last tiny shove.

I matched the effort with equal enthusiasm.

He gurgled a faint growl, gently lifting his teeth from my flesh, turning his nose into my ear, snorting a gust of hot air, and nuzzled me. "Mine," he managed with nary a twinge of animal voiced in his claim.

"Yours." I curled my palm around the back of his furred head and held him in place, wanting him to lie still. To allow me the chance to calm my Cougar enough to convince her to crawl back into her cage.

Gods, if he saw my eyes now! Would they mirror his?

He shifted a knee, shoving back for a release from my grasp.

Not yet. Not until I knew I had a grip on my Cougar. "Don't move, Jackal. Stay with me. Hold me." I rubbed my cheek into his possessively.

He hummed another gurgle and turned his furred cheek to my shoulder, pressing down into the stinging cuts he'd branded me with, and sighed. "Mine."

"Oh, yes, Jackal. Yours."

Wasn't that the truth.

My father would have fancied a scientific explanation for the intense moments with Jackal's possession. Mother would have rambled on about the Goddess' favors. Something somewhere might finally be uttered to explain my latest life experience. But this was more than simple possession like with John. This was the melding of souls on a different level where my Cougar surged to make all known. To announce her claim. But what about John? Was I shallow? How could I just toss his memory aside?

Guilt threatened to choke my breath away.

"I promise to protect you always," Jackal began with his sacred vows. "To love you always."

Tears burned inside me.

Damn. I'd given myself to Jackal. For survival. And found more than I'd ever bargained for. I didn't deserve to feel safe. Or loved. Protected. I didn't deserve a mate like this. I wasn't worthy with the way I seemed to carelessly fling my heart at males.

Unworthy. I curled my fingers into the thinning wolf hair on his head and tried to choke back stinging tears.

The rest of his words were buried and muffled beneath my tidal wave of guilt.

He grew quiet, settling down even more.

Waiting for my response. "And I you." It was true. For the most part. My Cougar meant to claim him.

Shit. I owed him faithfulness for spitting on his brother's grave.

And he had no idea *what* I was.

Would he hate me when he learned I risked his life beyond the normal limits of mating?

## Chapter Six

Jackal struggled to stay awake but marking Sierra had sucked him dry. *And now she clung to me*, he noted. Giving oneself over to a woman took every ounce of energy a man had. But she'd accepted me without argument. Actually welcomed me. Anything else would have been insulting though. Her reaction reflected her understanding of our relationship as inevitable. And I hadn't given her any reason to fear me. As long as I hadn't hurt her when we mated.

Had I? My Wolf fought to surface. Had he done any damage? I had tried to lift my head from her shoulder, to look into her eyes where she held me in her arms after *the marking*.

My exhausted flinching muscles wouldn't permit me to move yet. Although, I could feel my shifting euphoria receding. The hair on my arms was thinning. And my fingers simply looked like those of a man.

"Did I hurt you?" I managed.

Her fingers gently wriggled in what remained of my wolf coat, and she rubbed her cheek against the back of my head. "No."

"Not even a little?"

"The bite never feels good," she chuckled.

*Never*. A word noting she'd done this before.

My gut coiled with deep-rooted realization.

Of course, she knew what to expect after Rattler. And I eagerly accepted her as his widow. But why? Maybe there was more to my honor in protecting my brother's mate than I dared to admit before?

She was beautiful. Damned attractive as Tornado had announced immediately upon laying eyes on her.

Had my motives stemmed from raw attraction?

Had I lost control and given into lust like the others?

Was I equally weak?

At least I hadn't hurt her. "You're safe with me. I swear." And damned sure intended on proving that singular truth every day for the rest of my life.

"I know. That's why I chose you, Jackal."

A little spark of something flickered to life in my chest.

Those words demanded I restrain my weaker tendencies. Forced me to vow to focus everything I have on proving I could keep my needs in check. Sierra was my mate now. I'd do whatever was necessary to demonstrate I deserved her. Respected her.

"Thank you for making love to me," she whispered, unlocked her legs from around my waist, and sliding them back to bedding.

Releasing me, the beast, as if she understood I'd done everything in my power to make *the marking* easy for her. Gods, I wanted to gaze into her sky blue eyes. Know she hadn't been frightened. But my eyes made me look like an animal. This first time, she needed to remember I could control my Wolf. As I'd done for her. "Can you breathe?"

"Oh yes. Don't you dare move." She briefly tightened her arms around me and sighed a little sound of contentment.

Who wanted to move with her soft curves clinging to him? Lying like this was the epitome of wonderful. Well, aside from finally shifting with my cock buried inside a woman's hot tight vise. The Well of Immortality. The place where purpose for the self pooled beyond duty a man had for humanity. A place to recharge one's soul. Nothing compared to dipping into that spring.

\* \* \* \*

Sierra woke in the fading orange light of the day to find her mate had finally eased off her to pull her body against his solid chest where he had repositioned onto his side, sleeping. He was just too damned warm. Too comforting. What now?

His arm wrapped around me protectively in his state of absolute ease.

Throw in the locking of the door when he departed and his bringing me food instead of ushering me around the nosy village as his prize and I realized he was extremely thoughtful. How fortunate. But John had everything to do with our chance meeting.

*John.*

Did his soul shriek I gave myself willingly and wholeheartedly to his brother?

Even worse, did John know my Cougar chose Jackal?

I had to believe I did the right thing.

For John.

For myself.

And even Jackal seemed content.

If I couldn't find positive points in my new state of marriage, I'd lose my mind. And the inability to rationalize in this world hinging upon the survival of the human race equated to the eradication of our species. I couldn't bear that planet-sized burden of guilt. Instead, I must focus on finding happiness. With Jackal. Reality, Goddess, or luck be damned. And the only way I can do anything to help save humanity from total annihilation is to move forward.

Survive.

Fight back.

I am a woman who can give birth. And I am more importantly a Cougar—a thing the aliens need desperately. Why? For whatever reasons, I had to survive to use my Cougar for the greater good of humanity. Somehow. Even though nobody knew what a Cougar's power entailed. Somewhere down the road, I had to do something to make a difference. Or my life was a waste. And so was John's existence. He'd helped me survive this long. I had to hang on. With Jackal—my rope.

My gut snarled.

Survival meant finding food.

Jackal's eyes popped open and met my gaze.

Those green gems almost looked black in the waning light.

His palm slid along my skin, easing down my lower back, then running back up my spine to my shoulder blade.

Stroking me ever so gently.

*Mine*, Cougar purred.

Cougar needed to go to sleep.

His hand froze. "I'm sorry, Sierra. I swore I'd never touch you until you asked. And here I am, breaking that promise." He wore the sweetest sincerest expression.

That ruggedly beautiful face mesmerized me.

To just sink into his beating heart.

To feel even safer.

What was wrong with that?

It was Jackal's right to touch his mate. Especially after he made love to me when he could have just raped me. I'd had eight years of absolute lovemaking after my gang-rape experience to know I damned well preferred lovemaking. And Jackal saved me with the Prophets. "No, Jackal. I'm yours. You may touch me whenever you like." I matched his stare expecting an argument.

He sucked in a sharp breath, his hand tracking back along its path with the lightest touch, to my lower back, where he gently pulled my groin into his hardening erection.

Gods, the way he stared at me with his intense gaze made my nipples pinch. That only set off the needy tug between my clit and breast. The nagging cry of a body to mount one's mate.

Oh to lean my taut nipples against the flat circles of his. To wrap my legs around that narrow waist and encourage him to roll me onto my back. I was so damned doomed in Jackal's arms.

"Let's feed you," he said, rubbing the rise of my ass with a few wiggling fingers before shoving onto an elbow.

*Feed me, Cougar purred.*

He didn't mean with sex because he threw his feet to the dirt floor and turned his gorgeous back to me. All I could do was stare up at the iron displayed in the undulating musculature of his shoulders.

He was strength. Power. Absolute control.

*Mine.*

Go to sleep, Cougar.

But could I blame the cat? To sit up. Snake my arms around that chest and massage his bulging pectorals. To wrap my legs around his waist and press my aching groin into his back. To just hang on for one second and feel his strength seep into my soul. A woman didn't have to be a Rites-of-the-Goddess priestess to experience such luxury.

He rose, lifting his rumpled camouflage pants, flaunting the rest of his amazing body at me.

That perfect ass. The way his muscles made his thighs bow slightly. Jackal was hot as the Christians' sin. My sinful temptation. I was so damned wet it wasn't funny.

He thrust his legs into his pants and turned, buttoning the waistband. "Come on, Sierra. We'll miss supper. We should be back inside our lodge by curfew to set a good example for the villagers."

That meant sunset. And I didn't want to be the reason he missed a meal. I hopped out of bed, dressed, and found my comb in my backpack to straighten my loose messy hair.

In the waning orange sunlight, he led me by the hand to a large open area ringed with lodges and filled with people seated on the ground, hunched over metal dishes. Many sat in groups. An adult male, female, and sometimes children. Families. Village life didn't change wherever a person ended up.

Women young and old looked up at me as Jackal led me through the crowd. I didn't notice glances from men. They were either anything but curious about me or had noted I'd been taken off the marriage market. Or so Mother would have said.

Jackal tugged my hand toward a table and a large pot. A few biscuits littered the bottom of a large flat basket.

“What’s for supper, Sue?” Jackal asked.

Silver strands threaded through the short woman’s long black hair that she’d pulled neatly back into a tidy braid. She shot Jackal a huge smile. Sue was one of the many unfortunate who had lost both eyeteeth. The gaping holes didn’t stifle her enthusiasm.

“Whatever you like, Jackal. And your mate as well.” She eyeballed me.

Jackal tugged me toward the long handle of a ladle Sue gripped. “This is Sierra, Sue.”

“Nice to meet you, Sierra.” Sue grabbed a round camping tin plate and poured a scoop of brown lumps into the dish but never stopped smiling. “Aren’t you a pretty thing?”

I stepped next to the table and tried to think about something other than my annoying appearance. Being attractive just didn’t do women any favors these days. “Thank you.”

Jackal halted with his knee pressed against the back of my thigh.

Possessively. Not a bad touch given the stares we’d drawn. I focused on the orange lumps, undoubtedly carrots, in the brown gravy on my plate. “Beef?”

“Pork today.” Sue eased the ladle’s handle back against the pot’s rim and extended the plate with a nod to my right. “Help yourself to bread.”

Anything to get out from under the woman’s scrutiny. “Thank you.”

Jackal left the dirty dishes. “Maybe you can show Sierra around the village soon. If you have time.”

So he wasn’t going to be as helpful after *the marking*?

“Of course. The women are anxious to meet her,” Sue said.

I bet.

Within minutes, Jackal sat me back down inside our lodge at the table where I silently thanked the stewed pork for drawing him back to our little private space. Away from the nosy villagers.

“Sue will talk your head off when she gets you away from everyone,” Jackal dipped a biscuit into his gravy and took a bite, locking a concerned assessing gaze on me.

Getting away from everyone with a strange woman wasn’t at the top of my priorities at the moment. I’d rather stay with my mate. Just in case. If he was going to get killed, I didn’t want to be left behind. Again. “So what do you have to do tomorrow?”

His brow pinched slightly and he swallowed his bite of bread. “Probably spend the better part of the day listening to Tornado deal with village disputes.” He studied me a few seconds. “You’ll be fine with Sue.”

Right. Just like I was fine left at the tree house when John went to trade. I tried to feign interest in my food.

“Sierra?”

Hell. I met his concerned gaze. “Yes?”

“You can stay with me tomorrow,” he said softly.

Could he read me that well? What if he could tell I was a Cougar just as easily? But that wasn’t the reason he seemed so caring. I was his mate now. He’d drag me along with him if he chose to do so. Coddle me by the way he had behaved.

Hopefully. Anyway, I nodded.

My mind wouldn’t let go of my new mate’s compassionate scrutiny during our supper. He said very little with words but measured my sanity with those damned adoring eyes. Eyes that could squeeze a woman’s breath into stinging tears. I wanted to dig a hole under the table and bury my traitorous self away from his unyielding gaze. Anything to save my self-respect from further irreparable damage.

How could I fall so deeply under Jackal's spell a few days after John was taken from me? If I looked at Jackal, my tears would spill. I stared at the tip of the prongs on my fork resting in the brown gravy in my plate.

He slid his pan and fork aside, across the table's rough-hewn surface. "You haven't eaten much."

Who could with a gut full of guilt? I'd be fortunate to keep down what I'd managed to swallow.

He sighed, rose, skirted the table, and placed a broad hand on my shoulder. "Come with me."

What now? The sun had set. Darkness meant curfew. We couldn't go outside. Just what did he have in mind? I could trust him. At least enough to know he would make love to me if he chose to lead me to his bed. I shoved up from the table.

He curled his fingers around mine and led me to the bed.

Father, come save me with your logic. Help me remember who I am.

Jackal descended to sit upon the bed's edge.

The bed seemed awfully small now. Slightly wider than a person would need to sleep. Even a person of Jackal's over-sized stature. Not to mention, the bed had swallowed me earlier today.

Jackal tugged my hand toward him. "I want to talk to you."

On the bed? The bed led to more than talking?

He pulled me down to where my thigh rested against his, and he lifted my chin with one of his fingers to match his gaze. "My mother cried for months after my father died. At night. When the fire burned itself down into embers. She thought I was asleep. Being five years of age, I should have been. But I worried about her. I hated listening to her sob." He scooped me up and placed me across his lap, forcing me to look into his insistent eyes again.

"She suffered alone, Sierra. I swear you won't. Cry. Scream. Claw my skin off. I'd even say rip out my hair, but they make me shave my head. Just let me help you." His forehead dipped until delicately touching mine, leaving his sympathetic gaze but an inch away.

Oh the tenderness in his face.

Molten tears choked up to fry the back of my nose.

How was I to fight such a barrage of emotion?

Nor did I deserve such a devoted mate.

Really. I didn't have any business with another one so soon after John's passing. "Take care, Jackal. I hadn't realized how easily my interests swayed until recently. I am weak. Uncaring. And I could forget you in the amount of time it takes to bat my eyelashes."

He scoffed. "No. You haven't forgotten Rattler." He grabbed my cheeks in his warm firm palms. "If you had, you wouldn't be crying. You haven't done anything wrong, Kitten."

Was I actually crying for John?

The way Jackal rubbed my warm tears into coolness upon my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs proved the heat in my eyes bled from my body. Why couldn't he just rip off my clothes and rub those strong palms over every inch of my flesh?

*Make me forget again.*

His hands slid to cup the back of my skull as his stubbled cheek grazed mine, allowing his cheek to scrape toward my ear. "Cry for him, Sierra." His hot breath warmed my ear.

His fingers massaged my scalp. "Cry for him. I'll hold you."

My tears flooded.



## Chapter Seven

Staring at the faint shadows on the ceiling above his bed about an hour before sunrise, Jackal rested with his sleeping mate's light weight draped across his chest. *I hadn't erred, had I?* I couldn't have. But she had needed to cry. She needed me to make her cry.

Her limp arms had slipped between his and his body after she crashed into a solid sleep from crying. But she had cried out her pain. Finally. Now, she slept off some of her grief. At least, we hadn't undressed. Her skin pressing against mine would have made holding her torture. Either way, finally having a woman in my bed felt good. As if Sierra being here was always meant to be.

She snuggled her cheek deeper into my heart.

That's how I wanted her.

Close.

Right where I could keep my eye on her.

To respect my brother's wishes.

Yet, I couldn't find where his wishes ended and my mating interests took over. The shifting bond had muddled the separation. And all I could think about was holding her. Comforting her. Ramming inside her wet heat. The metallic tinge of her salty blood. But I wasn't an animal. I could control myself. I'd prove it.

She stirred, lifting her head, turning to rest upon her other cheek right beneath my chin. Her blue gaze paused, connecting with mine.

"What should we do today?" I asked.

She sighed, pressing her cheek against my chest. "How many traders are here?"

"Three. If you count the old coot with his still. He's a rich man out here in the middle of nowhere."

"I don't need moonshine. What I need is something to keep me busy. Out in the forest, I hunted. They aren't going to let me hunt here, are they?"

Not a woman who can help increase the population. Damn. I'd have to let her have one child, or Tornado would think I used the herbs on her. But I couldn't avoid one risky pregnancy.

Still Tornado would never question my taking my mate hunting a few times. He'd know I always had her best interests in mind. "I'll take you out with me the next time I have to hunt for the community. For now, we'll see what the other two traders have. Ogden has quite a stock." I ran a palm from the crown of her head, across her shoulders, down the gentle curve of her back, to the silken ends of her hair fanning across her waistline.

Or maybe it was time to ease into Sierra finding friends among the village's women.

"Now, Sue knows everyone and can help you find something to do. If you like."

"You promise to take me hunting?"

Now a demand was a nice switch from cautious woman to comfortable demanding mate. Even though it would take a lot more evidence to believe Sierra was content. "I find it easier to hold myself to a promise than lie. You'll be safe with me."

She chuckled.

Laughter was good. But why? "So you find something entertaining?"

"I'm not certain you understand. I can take care of myself hunting. But I'm absolutely certain neither you nor Tornado will ever believe me."

Probably not. At least for me. A Shifter takes care of his mate. "I saw you shoot. In the dark. A weapon in both hands like both were an extension of your body. You can go hunting with me. Tornado knows I can protect you. I won't be leaving my mate behind if I decide you're going with me." Tornado would just have to humor me.

She sucked in a deep breath and lifted her gaze to meet mine. "I understand." She blinked slowly, almost seductively, and planted her pointed chin into my chest.

Her small heart-shaped mouth needed kissing.

Her eyes almost twinkled in the faint glow from the crackling embers.

Almost as if life flickered inside those sorrow-filled eyes. Not a bad thing to see in a mate. "What are you thinking, Kitten?"

"You'd disobey Tornado for me?"

If she only knew what I'd do to protect her. Tornado was a Shifter who understood Shifters and valued a man like myself working for him. "I work for him. He doesn't own me. And if he thinks I'm going to let him make decisions for my mate, he's got another thing coming. Don't worry, Kitten. He knows where my loyalties lie."

\* \* \* \*

*So Jackal would defy orders for me*, Sierra mused. I should have expected as much. "Have you ever refused to do anything he ordered before?"

Jackal's palm slid to my neck where he wriggled his fingers under my hair and massaged my skin. "I agree with most of his choices. He's a tough bastard like in dealing with new women entering the village. But as for how he keeps the peace, he and I think a lot alike. You know, nobody's seen his mate's nude body."

Good to hear. "Tornado has quite a reputation. It's a pity he's not as gentle in his approach as you are."

Jackal's hand snaked down to my waist.

My Cougar purred.

The world suddenly spun. My back sank into the bedding beneath his magnificent weight, the breathtaking strength of him settling between my thighs. And I stared up into his dark eyes.

Why wasn't he kissing me?

He inhaled twice, pulling his hand out from underneath my body, watching me. "I don't think the other villagers fancy me as gentle the way you do. But I wouldn't want you to think I was an asshole. So, go ahead and call me sweet." He shot me a wink and levered off my body.

Where was he going? I wanted those strong hands on me.

*Mine*, Cougar snarled.

He sauntered across the room, sinfully smoking hot. Or stalked. Either way, all I could do was watch his amazing body shift in the shadows.

He tossed a log on the orange coals and kicked it around with his boot until the embers crackled with hungry flames.

Feed me instead.

Damn *the marking*. I couldn't go twenty-four hours without lusting after my mate. Since it wasn't my fault, rather the mating's doing, I sure wasn't going to feel guilty about those notions. No. Guilt would be my undoing. I'd just have to face the future. Live for John. He must have known how his father would handle my entering the community. How I'd be claimed,

marked, and lusting after another Shifter within twenty-four hours of arriving at Death Summit. And death welcomed me wholeheartedly at the base of that mountain. I literally had died and was reborn. Through *the marking*.

Jackal planted his hands on his hips and slid his gaze to mine.

How would he react to an invitation? "Come back to bed."

He studied me with golden firelight dancing in his eyes. "What do you want, Kitten?"

"You. In bed with me."

"Want to talk more?"

Oh, he knew better by that sinful twinkling mischief in his eyes. "I'd rather you do something else with your mouth." Gods, did I blurt that?

He sighed so loudly that I couldn't believe the flames almost six feet below him at his boots didn't sway from the blustery effort. He dropped his arms and covered the space between us in a heartbeat to yank off his boots.

His understanding gaze never left mine. I threw my feet to the earthen floor and fumbled with my combat boots while he stripped out of his clothes.

All of his clothes.

My body was so thrilled my fingers barely cooperated with my tight bootlaces.

He squatted all of those naked glorious steely muscles before me to snatch the heel of one of my boots and tug me free of the one thing keeping my clothes on.

His intense gaze never wandered from mine.

Never released me as if trying to determine whether I truly wanted him or just lied. He could fancy the answer either lust or cooperation. I fell back onto my elbows on the sinking bed.

He softly growled and walked his palms toward my elbows, pressing his hard shaft into the pants covering my groin.

"Good morning, Jackal," I whispered at his serious mask anchored but inches from mine.

"Yes it is," he managed to reply and sank his prickly beard and the velvet heat of his lips into the sensitive crook of my neck where his hot mouth latched onto my pulse and sucked.

Then licked. Only to suck ferociously.

He shoved me back until his delicious weight and the bedding sandwiched me with intoxicating ownership.

Those bare muscles pinning me down while he drew my blood into a temporary tattoo of possession only made my hips rock uncontrollably. I snaked my arms around his flexing shoulders and snuggled into the heat of his iron body.

He groaned and cupped one of my breasts with a palm.

But my damned shirt prevented the best part of our unification. Skin-to-skin contact. "I want out of my clothes, Jackal. I want to feel your skin next to mine." Nothing felt like those magnificent muscles rubbing against me while he pumped his seed all over my pounding heart.

He groaned a little dying sound and backed away, just enough where I could see the starvation in his gorgeous face.

That's what I wanted more than anything.

To see his desire.

To know I could make him content with my body.

To get what I wanted. Rather, needed.

His fingers fiddled with my pants until he drew them off my legs. But he ignored the panties, heading for the hem of my shirt. He lifted the cloth, sliding it up a few inches.

Only to pause and press the soft warm silk of his lips next to my navel. To brand my quivering flesh.

I groaned and squirmed beneath his scratchy beard, liquid heat pooling between my legs. His yellow gaze locked on mine. "I smell your desire, Kitten. But I'm not going to just quench it. No," he growled, rising to trail his tongue up to the bra clasp between my breasts where he tucked his nose into the folds of my shirt's hem. He wiggled the wet tip of his tongue around the plastic as if he could release the mechanism without his hands.

I'd die. Right here. Right now. While he played.

He shoved the shirt's fabric above my bra cups, remaining focused on the clasp. "This," he whispered hot breath against my trembling flesh, "is one of those pieces of clothing I find only keeps the others from wondering how you look nude. It's annoying. But, I won't toss it into the fire."

Just rip it off. "If you only knew how difficult it is to wait to have a bra taken off at moments like this, you wouldn't bitch about it." I chuckled and ground my head into the bedding, staring at shadows dancing on the dark ceiling while his warm skin teased me as his body touched me between my breasts.

He practically cursed a happy little snarl and popped the clasp open with a pinch of fingers. "That mindboggling feeling is what makes our mating so damned perfect."

His lips locked onto the hard pearl of one of my nipples and sucked.

I almost jolted off the bed. His epiphany stated or not.

He growled and slid the amazing heaviness of his chest muscles against mine until he could look me in the eye. "Better?"

I almost groaned. "Yes," I hissed. "Please, Jackal, please! *Touch* me."

A slow measured chuckle eked out three humored clips from him before he sank his moist lips to my neck. "Mine."

*Yes. Yes!* Cougar snarled.

My heart hitched into a trot.

I wanted his mouth everywhere. And his hands. Everywhere his bulging mass trapped me on the mattress. He was so damned strong. Protective. So gorgeous. So attentive.

\* \* \* \*

*Her hands fluttered across my shoulders and down my back like she wanted to remember every inch of my body.* Jackal sighed and flicked his tongue to taste the length of his mate's salty neck.

The nipping scent of iron, her seductive blood, rooted in my nose.

Blood.

My mate's essence.

To take a bite.

To sink my teeth into her delectable flesh.

She moaned and arched her slender neck against my teeth, trailing a hand up to the back of my head where she pushed my teeth firmly against her skin as if demanding I gnash out my measure of her flesh.

My engorged cock flinched in anticipation, restrained from the touch of her divine skin by the soft crotch of my pants.

She turned her cheek against the crown of my skull. "Oh, Jackal, don't stop."

Like there would be any of that today. I'd have my fill of her breast, ribs, navel, and clit before I pumped my seed into her. I sucked mouthfuls of her supple skin into my mouth, marching my lips down to the hard point dotting one mounded breast.

She watched me, biting her lower lip, only to throw her head back and groan as I untied the nipple's little knot between my scraping teeth with one slow tug.

"Oh, Jackal." She threw her head back and ground her head from side to side.

A mate begging for the melding of souls was the most powerful force on the planet. I sucked out the pliable point of her nipple and teased the end with the tip of my tongue. Just to torment her.

Her hips rocked against my waist.

Hell, it would be all I could do to work her navel before filling her sweet tight channel. But self-restraint was all part of a mate's duties.

Her palms draped my shoulders and shoved at me, fiercely.

Downward. Toward what I knew had to be the wettest salty folds on Earth reflected by the determination in her actions. So she wanted me to work her clit? I chuckled, ignored her adamant shove at my shoulders, dropped onto her other taut nipple, fumbling with the button of her pants.

It wouldn't be long before her hungry little sex's mouth gobbled along the length of my cock.

Her hands slithered down my sides to assist in her unveiling while I teased her softened nipple with a raking motion between my teeth.

"Oh, yes, Jackal," she groaned and wildly bucked her hips against our hands. "I need you to hurry."

Talk about the sweetest words a man could hear. I released her nipple and backed away to watch her writhing body. Her hands shoved her pants as far down her hips as she could manage while my hips locked her against the dark blanket.

I'd soothe her fevered need. I yanked her pants from her legs.

She shoved up, bending her knees to her chest.

If she thought she was going somewhere, she had another thought coming. I growled a warning.

She dropped her knees to the bedding and held out a hand. "Hurry."

Not a bad thought. I fell against her soft pubic hairs and raked my fingers through them until I could part her moist folds. She groaned and curled her entrance up to my touch.

The hungry little thing. But she'd have to show some patience. I wouldn't be locking or loading until I had my fill while she rode my mouth. I leaned down, slowly.

She gaped as I canted.

"Wrap your legs around my shoulders, Kitten."

Mesmerized, she managed to comply before I had my morning dose of salted mate. And I'd be damned if I didn't partake of that delicacy every day for the rest of my existence. Yes, I'd been forced to humor the villagers by fucking a daughter or two a year whenever some parent decided I was the catch of the clan and bribed Tornado into insisting I court the daughter. But that was merely survival. Thank goodness Sue was always on hand.

Sue had a sneaky way of concealing the herbs to prevent pregnancy in candies she cooked. So, I'd administer the medication the morning after. Not anymore. This was Sierra's altar. And by the time I finished with her, she'd have to realize my bed was her sanctuary.

Sierra would never want to be anywhere else.

\* \* \* \*

*Gods' teeth!* Sierra almost shouted. That's exactly what Jackal had. Magic teeth that toyed the most blinding thought-deficient white lights from my mind as he scraped, nibbled, and sucked my clit. I couldn't do anything but hold myself upright with arms braced behind my back and grind my sex, tilted for his convenience, into his accommodating tongue as his fingers fanned around my waist, holding me still.

My gasping soul was trapped between locked elbows and my legs wound around his indomitable shoulders. Just to lie down for support from the bed... If I stopped long enough to reposition, the incredible sensation stealing my breath away would cease. And that just wasn't happening.

A wave of exhilaration rose to smother my soul.

I gasped, jerking in his unyielding grasp, and cried out.

Over and over.

He slid his strong palms up to my cup my breasts, and lifted his yellow Shifter gaze to mine.

My body throbbed for more. For him. Shove me back. Bury yourself inside me. Just so he could feel the same way.

He rose, slung his arm beneath mine, and lifted me until my arms no longer held me upright.

"Kitten," he rumbled, planted a hot kiss against my Adam's apple, and laid me back, lowering his intoxicating weight atop mine, spreading my legs with his knees, and thrusting his thick shaft deep inside me.

So damned deep. All the way to the stiff hairs on his sack. He halted a moment and twisted his hips. And he pumped and pumped, gurgling a growl, and touched the tip of his nose to mine with a determined yellow gaze.

Life couldn't get any better than this.

He snarled and thrust and lunged, with an unwavering gaze stared me down while his hard shaft nurtured the wild frenzy of pressure of a building orgasm inside me that could only be released by my screams. I clawed at his back and managed to gulp back the full force of a yell.

He slammed his mouth down over mine and sucked the rest of my breath away with the most demanding possessive kiss, his swollen shaft lurching inside me.

Oh, his sweet release. That's what my Guardian deserved. Exactly what he gave me.

\* \* \* \*

Sierra hadn't seen so much loot in one place in the past eight years. The trader's lodge held piles of odds and ends, all sorted into tools, clothing, boots, weapons, pots and pans, and more. The beautifully glistening canning jars of canned foods were stacked neatly. So beautiful that they almost seemed like treasures in the middle of summer when fresh vegetables and some fruit was easily available for the picking.

"Toby, she can have anything she wants," Jackal said from where he stood behind me in the doorway. "I'll be right outside, Sierra."

The door clapped at my heels.

The short stocky trader's broad grin split his brown beard. "He's quite taken with you."

What did that matter to anyone? I tried not to look into the man's blue eyes. He'd think he got the best of me. "Do you have any wool socks?" I foraged through a large basket of bundled sock balls. Top-notch quality made from homespun wool.

"Yep. They're out of season. I'll get them from the back."

The man left me alone. Where should I begin in this treasure trove?

Light fluttered in one of the two small glass-covered windows.

A person passed. Probably coming for trade goods.

Toby burst back through the tarp in the store room's doorway. "Here's three pair that look about your size, Sierra."

Three would get me through the winter. "Fine." I reached for the pristine homemade knitted beige socks. They'd hit me at the knees. The higher the warmer. "This is fine."

"Soaps? Perfume? What about some pretty things?" He waved toward piles to my left. "I know Jackal's partial to pink."

Jackal seemed more all black and camouflage. "Oh?" What did the trader mean by that anyway? I shot him a glance and turned to the canned foods. "Do you have any spices?"

"Cinnamon. Mustard. Pepper. Salt. We don't get much else as far out as we are." He pointed toward some small metal tins. "See if there's anything you want here."

"Cocoa?" I hadn't had chocolate in ten years.

Toby gasped, sucking in a deep breath, and crossed his pursed lips with a thick finger. "Speak of this to no one." He spun and left.

Whatever.

A high-pitched muffled voice came from beyond the door.

Female. And Jackal was out there. Hmm.

My Cougar purred. *Bad. Mine.*

Oh, he's definitely ours. I strode the three steps to the window and pressed my cheek against the sun-warmed glass.

She was about my height, dark brown hair flowing down her back like the luxurious silk my father always bought my mother. And the curves that matched that sinuous wave of hair had to have been three times sexier than mine. But I never fancied myself sexy. Maybe pretty. But nothing like *her*. She was in Jackal's face with a hand on her hips, knifing her head left then right.

Attitude. Well-dressed in brilliant colors. Nobody bothered with clothes like that this far out in the wilderness.

"I hear Sessily," Toby said.

I jerked back from the glass and faced his frown.

"Don't fret about her. Her parents tried to pay Jackal to mark her. Apparently, Sessily gets whatever she wants. But her parents couldn't pay Jackal to take *that one* on permanently."

Really? "Why would she be so angry?"

"One of Tornado's policies." Toby looked away.

What in the hell? "What policy?"

"Like the one where you chose one of his Shifters." Toby shot me an all-knowing glance.

The woman's voice suddenly elevated.

"And?" I asked.

"Tornado makes his unmated Shifters court the village daughters if the parents request the favor." Toby offered me a weak smile. "After all, these families have money. Money equals luxuries for the village. And the Guardians. It keeps the parents happy and daughters hoping."

Talk about daft. People had feelings. Tornado obviously didn't care. War would explode any minute beyond the wooden door. "And how many of these little trysts turn sour?" I stepped back to the hard glass to attempt to make sense out of the bitter muted sounds wafting through wooden wall.

Just in time to catch Sessily swing at Jackal's face.  
Jackal stood there when her hand slapped the shit out of him.  
Sessily really wasn't happy.  
Sessily pivoted and stomped toward me, past the window without glancing inside the trader's lodge.

The door swung inward with a whine.  
Crap. I took a step away from the glass.  
Jackal met my gaze. "Are you finished?"  
The arch to his eyebrow noted he knew what I'd been doing clinging to the windowsill. Maybe I was finished in that regard. Really there wasn't any way to hide the fact I caught the gist of his little dilemma. "Almost." I turned to Toby.

The trader didn't let on he knew anything about the argument. "Here. These are the last chocolates until my son returns from the coast next month." He handed me a silver tin.

Jackal beat me to the shiny box, opened it, and turned with loads of that sweet compassion in his green eyes. "Chocolate?"

Probably offering the candy to smooth over what I witnessed outside. But chocolate had to be as expensive as firearms. Surely, I could trade something I'd had in the tree house. "What do you want for them, Toby?"

"I got it." Jackal stared me down with the tin thrust at me.

Flat brown squares filled the container.

"I told you that you can have anything you want, Sierra. I meant it."

I guess now was as good a time as any to prove I trusted him. After all, he chose me back when Tornado gave me the ultimatum. Sessily couldn't do anything about that now. But who could blame her after having amazing sex with Jackal? I stared into his eyes. "It's alright. I believe you."

He inhaled and rubbed a knuckle against my cheek. "Got anything in pink, Toby?"

What a waste of money. "No, Jackal. I found some socks. I really don't need anything else."

"Socks?" His brow arched curiously, and he studied the beige bundles I flicked my gaze toward before focusing on Toby. "We'll take the chocolates, Toby. She plays the guitar. Got any instruments? And what about other things to keep a mind occupied?"

\* \* \* \*

Jackal walked his mate over every inch of Death Summit. She needed to know where all the weapons were. All the safest locations to hide during an attack. And with Sessily in a rage, who knew where Sierra might find herself needing a weapon or when she'd require a hiding place. How had my life come to this moment of being trapped between two females? I'd spent most of my time avoiding such a scenario.

"I'm tired, Jackal. Can we finish this looking around another day?"

My walking off my irritation wasn't going to do anything for my mate. Besides, she'd borrowed an old hardback copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from the town's small collection of about a hundred books. She'd have plenty to do after we ate. "Of course. Are you hungry? It's close to dinnertime. Let's swing by Sue's and see if she's got something we can take back to eat at our lodge. Tornado called a meeting tonight. So, we can use that as an excuse to eat early if supper isn't ready to serve the community."

"Whatever you want to do."



Now this was an accommodating female. Nothing like Sessily. I led her toward Sue's home.

And she followed. Quietly. Asking nothing about what she'd observed through Toby's window. Didn't she want to know what happened? Sessily would have been enraged if she'd been standing on the other side of the glass. The one night I was forced to spend with that wench only proved a man was better off alone. But Sessily merely became more determined when I didn't accept her offer of another night trapped between her legs. But her father's money couldn't buy another night with me. A man had self-respect. And he damned sure didn't want to risk siring a child on her.

That would be damnation.

Absolute Hell.

Nothing like my time spent with Sierra. Where Sessily raked on every nerve just in the manner her body moved, Sierra's movements begged to be caressed. Yes, a sane man would choose Sierra in heartbeat.

Sierra deserved respect. Adoration.

Maybe I just needed to bite her again. Just in case she wasn't fully marked. Just to make certain she wasn't worried about Sessily's little tantrum. And a Wolf's actions could be measured by where he sank his fangs.

To back Sierra up into a corner.

To lick her body until she arched that sweet neck of hers into my teeth again.

To sink my throbbing cock inside the hot hungry mouth of her sex, burying my seed so deeply it took root.

And to leave the seed there.

That resonated the difference between Sierra and Sessily. Sierra made me think of nothing but planting seed when before I met her I did everything possible to ensure my seed never took root. If the moment ever arose where Sierra doubted my devotion, I'd toss her that chip and make certain she understood how much my thoughts changed since she walked into my life.

\* \* \* \*

Firelight danced with shadow later that evening when Sierra leaned into the wall of Tornado's meeting lodge with the rest of the Shifters and their significant others who chose to attend the gathering. Next to Jackal. The poor guy. Sessily really had him worried I'd be pissed. So troubled he wouldn't listen when I told him I didn't need every bar of milled floral soap Toby had in stock, two bottles of fragrance oil—one rose and one forget-me-not, a short very sheer pink wispy nightgown, the chocolates, and every .56mm shell Black Betty could eat.

Well, Jackal merely frowned at the woolen socks I'd insisted on tossing onto the pile he intended to tote back to our lodge. But I learned a long time ago that sensible choices were the ones that saved your life. Chocolate and frilly things were a waste of money. But I wasn't going to be the one to teach Jackal that lesson after I saw Sessily slap his face.

Toby had produced a deck of playing cards, unopened, crisp and colorful. Between the chocolate and the playing cards, I doubted Jackal had a penny left to do any trading. So, I'd traded the extra firearms for one-hundred eighty bucks credit. Whatever that was worth. The socks were ten bucks a pair. Homemade, I couldn't complain. Someone had to raise the sheep, spin the yarn, and knit the socks. Good thing landing a buck while hunting translated into fifty trade *bucks* on a normal day. And when the priceless meat of a stag couldn't be found, firearms made for excellent exchange rates.

We spent the better part of the rest of the day walking every inch of the village. Jackal damned sure intended I knew everything there was to know inside the palisade. I didn't complain though. Especially after we spent the better part of an hour hogging the bathing pool. Cougar didn't mind the selfishness. Rather craved for more. And it just seemed the right thing to do after Jackal's big slap in the face. Poor guy.

Jackal leaned his elbow slightly into my arm and winked at me. "Sue's bringing coffee. When this is over, you can teach me a card game."

Coffee was rare. And did he intend to play card games and chess with me? Or was he just humoring me until I became comfortable with my new life? I could only hope he wanted a companion instead of a housekeeper.

The door creaked open, producing Sue's swinging green skirt and a tray of silver camping cups.

Tornado followed behind the woman's black hair. "Listen up. I need some volunteers. Two families are leaving for the coast in two days. They'll need as many Shifters as possible to ride shotgun. They're paying for fuel and ammunition. Who's up for the ride?"

Jackal slid his arm around my lower back and pulled my backside snugly against his ribs, fanning his strong fingers out over my belly.

As if he had no intention of raising a hand. No problem. Standing there, being possessed by Jackal was awfully nice. Or he just wanted me to know I shouldn't worry about Tornado. Although, there were many things to keep my thoughts busy. Like Sessily. Because Jackal still hadn't mentioned his little encounter outside Toby's shop. Maybe he never would. It didn't really matter since nobody could undo the mating. Jackal was all mine. Sessily could just rant.

Sue circled the room, handing out cups of coffee with her unwavering smile. "This will warm you up," she said, extending one sloshing cup to me. "Not that Jackal can't manage." She winked.

Geesh. What was up with all the winking today? I took the steaming brew.

Tornado's gaze swept the room.

Undoubtedly looking for volunteers. Well, he could just find someone else after he forced mating on Jackal and I. I pressed the warm hard rim of the cup to my lips and sipped some of the hot savory liquid.

No. Sweet. Sue had doctored it with sugar. Sugar wasn't cheap. Tornado's clan lived very well.

Demon flicked a gaze at Jackal and I from across the room, studied us a few seconds, and moved on.

Who knew what Demon meant by the gesture. Probably something about our standing so intimately together. Four other women were in attendance. Not one was cuddled by her man.

"Who's leaving, Tornado?" some large blond male asked.

"The Hamburgs and the Stanfords."

Demon's serious gaze snapped back to Jackal's.

Jackal didn't flinch. Although he sipped his coffee quietly, sliding his gaze from Demon to me, his lips twisting into a sweet smile.

What in the world was going on?

The door creaked and spat a short elderly woman propped up with a cane. Her long mass of messy gray hair looked the same as it had over eight years ago.

Keezia. White Priestess. Mother's mentor among the Rites-of-the-Goddess sisterhood. My eternal pain in the ass before John whisked me away.

Shit.

The shadow-cloaked walls closed in.

Keezia would try to take me back into the farce of her sisterhood. I had to get the hell out of the room. Run. Hide. Even though the elderly woman's white eyes no longer saw, she could *sense* things. Some attributed the ability to the Goddess' favoritism. I doubted supernatural input.

I did *not* want to discuss *anything* with her. She'd twist it into something completely different and unexpected. And there was no telling what Tornado would do if he learned who I was.

Keezia paused inside the snapping door and scanned the shadowy room with her blind eyes.

Nobody spoke.

Or moved. As if they all knew the White Priestess had come for someone.

My heart sank.

Keezia's gaze slid from Jackal to, oddly enough, my gaze at a much lower level, lingered a heartbeat, and moved on. For only a moment. Her blind sight flicked back to my eyes.

How in the hell?

She thrust out her cane with a thump against the hard-packed earth and leaned against the pole with a grunt.

And kept coming. One clicking step with her pole against the floor after another.

Why? Oh why did she have to sense me?

Not a sound dared interfere with the priestess' presence moving slowly toward me.

"Where have you been, little mongoose? They said you were dead," Keezia called.

Dammit. Nobody else gave a hoot about a mongoose. Keezia just had to refer to me and my stupid nickname.

Jackal's fingers gently petted my belly as he tightened his arm around me.

What was he thinking? I sucked in a deep breath and dared a glance at him.

He arched a dark eyebrow and squeezed me even more into his solid form.

But Jackal couldn't do anything about the damage Keezia could inflict. She wouldn't dare risk using her power on him, a Shifter. Priestesses feared the Wolf within. But she harbored no qualms in using it against me. I turned back to face the old woman.

She stopped three steps away.

Everyone in the room stared at me.

## Chapter Eight

"They say your sire and dame are dead," Keezia demanded through a statement.

Well, there was no running now. "Yes." I gulped down a choking lump before my rising scream crammed it into my skull.

"I will speak to you, Sierra. And you will show me the respect I am due." Keezia pounded her cane on the ground. "Since when have you cowered before me? Step forward and face me with the dignity of a sister of the Rites of the Goddess."

Demon's jaw dropped.

My heart stopped beating.

What mask had Jackal donned?

Did they all suddenly think I somehow jinxed the Christian encampment? Normal superstitions might be the biggest threat for my survival from here on out. Tornado couldn't send me away. I was mated *now*.

Now, to deal with the priestess. Maybe Keezia wouldn't ask too many questions. I handed the cup off to Jackal, looking at nothing but his knuckles, knuckles that had defended me at the trading outpost, and took the two steps to claim a spot before the old crone's form, towering over the woman by a good four inches.

Keezia's blind cataracts anchored on mine. Her eyes squared in suspicion. "What happened to The Black?"

Well, so much for secrecy. I tried not to exhale my last breath. But now everyone knew who I was. Damn the old bat. "Dead."

The light in Keezia's persona seemed to fade a bit. "So the rumors are true. And your dame?"

"Dead."

Keezia pounded the cane against the floor again. "You will show me the respect I am due." She spun her back to me and took one step away from me, only to face me again. "I can't believe I spent ten years instructing you. Coddling your spirit. And you snap like a spoiled child at me. Is that what life has done to you? Twisted your soul?"

How dare she begin to lecture me on life. "You have no idea what I have seen or where your damned Goddess laid the path I have followed—"

"Silence!" Keezia thrust her free hand at me, pointing a set of crooked arthritic fingers.

Something gripped me.

A White Priestess' invisible power.

The force grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and shoved me toward the floor, pressing my cheek into the cold hard earth, forcing me to bow at her frazzled brown hemline even though I shoved up with all my might against the energy. For what it was worth. Futilely. I couldn't move. I sucked in a breath full of sharp choking dust as she made me assume the position of a lesser-ranking sister being reprimanded.

"How dare you utter such sacrilege in my presence," Keezia slowly cooed. "You've been gone *too* long."

Or not long enough. Apparently it was only safe to return from the wilderness *after* the elders like Keezia died. “I never wanted to be a priestess,” I ground out. “Father told you that.”

The force yanked my head upward, bending my neck backward, to where I looked into her milky cataracts.

“You will answer my questions, little mongoose. And when I am finished with you, I just might let you crawl back into Jackal’s bed.”

Jackal seized the old woman by the shoulders, hefting her off the floor. “Let go of her, Keezia. You might be old. But I’ve heard enough. Don’t make me toss you out the door.”

“Oh, come now, Jackal. I wouldn’t hurt your mate.” She cast him a wicked grin and dropped her hand to her side where she hung in mid air.

The force grinding my knees into the hard floor vanished.

I shoved onto my feet and backed up against the wall. Anything to get as far from Keezia’s damned fingers as possible.

“It’s alright, Sierra,” Jackal said. “She won’t bother you again.”

“I have every right to speak with her, Jackal,” Keezia snarled.

Jackal gave the woman a shake. “Speaking is one thing. Pinning her down or breaking her neck is another. When you can respect her the way you demand to be treated, you may speak with my mate.” He carefully lowered her to her feet and blocked me from her view with his large body.

“Have it your way,” Keezia growled.

The witch wouldn’t dare set a Shifter into a rage. There was no question about my future. I was in the safest place possible. Protected against the sisterhood in Jackal’s arms.

Keezia thumped her cane until the door creaked and clapped in her wake.

Jackal slowly turned a concerned gaze my direction.

Realization sparkled in those orbs.

“Well, it’s not like the damned Normals are going to hunt her down because of her Sire,” Tornado blurted from beyond Jackal’s protective form.

Jackal smiled. “No. Once a woman marries, they go for her mate.” He winked. “Let me worry about that.”

My Cougar purred, content.

I’m with you, girl. If my gentle Guardian got captured, I had no idea what Cougar would do. I forced a smile.

Tornado stepped out from behind Jackal’s elbow. He stood three inches shorter. But looked twice as indomitable. “They say your mother was a Cougar, little mongoose.” His eyes scanned me from toes to nose. “Do you have something you’d like to admit?”

Like I’d ever confess that truth. “I never saw her shift. It was a lie. Fears of Normals out to make some bucks.” I slid my gaze to Jackal’s. “That’s why The Black taught me to shoot.”

Jackal nodded. “And you’re a better marksman than anyone in the village.” He reached for my shoulder. “She’s my concern now, Tornado. Scramble your guards to send with the families heading west. And leave the *little mongoose* to me.”

\* \* \* \*

Sierra stepped near the low flames in her lodge’s hearth, wondering how her mate was going to react after Keezia’s revelation a few minutes ago. “I didn’t get to drink my coffee,” I mumbled as my mate closed our lodge’s door and turned to me. “I miss coffee.”

His lips twisted with a smile. “You’re whining about coffee when that woman almost ripped your head off?”

Well, he could have reacted just a bit faster back in the meeting lodge if he had been concerned that was Keezia’s intent. “Either leaves you feeling the same way.” I shrugged.

He strode past me to the trade goods piled next to the bed. “I wouldn’t know. I’m not a mongoose.”

So I hate snakes. If only I could decapitate that stupid nickname as easily. “You have no idea how much I hate that nickname.” Just what was he really thinking now that my past hung over the village like thunderheads?

He chuckled softly and cast me a sideways glance. “How does one earn such a name?”

“I hate snakes. And every time someone found one, I hacked its head off.”

His eyebrows arched yet again today. “Killing simply for killing is not the way of the priestesses.”

Bad unavoidable topic. And he knew by my tone that I had no intention of returning to the sisterhood. “I never wanted to serve. Mother made me learn.”

He extended a palm and waited until I walked toward it. “I’m glad you no longer wish to be one. It wouldn’t be long before you turned into an evil old Keezia. And all that crap about souls and gods just wastes valuable time.” He smiled.

Beautifully. “Spoken like a Shifter, a person who thinks all gods are just placating scapegoats.” Even though they use the expletive *Gods* in speaking just in case the wrong moron is standing nearby with a weapon.

He nodded. “And what do you think?”

What did he want to hear? I believed the same scientific thoughts of Shifters. Was that what he wanted to know? I perched myself on the edge of the bed and met his stare. “My father sat me on his knee throughout my early years and told me the only thing stronger than all humans united is humans divided by their beliefs in different deities. Mother hated Father’s diatribes. Or so she called them. But she could see the logic in his words enough to mate with him. So after I came along, she decided the only way to ensure I didn’t choose one side—his side—was to toss me into another sphere of thought. So began my harrowing journey toward the Goddess.”

He knelt with an elbow planted on a knee, thoughts whirling in his eyes. “Why don’t you want to return to the sisterhood?”

Would Jackal appreciate the truth? Why not? Hell, he knew who I was now. “Because when my father bled out at my feet while a pack of Normals gang raped my mother, I knew there was no Goddess. Could taste it between my teeth. Then the bastards of humanity turned upon me like a pack of wild animals. At that moment, I knew there could be no loving protective spirit leading me down a path of glory for all mankind. Especially when they used a knife to fuck my mother with after they’d finished with her. No, I couldn’t believe in a supernatural force that did nothing to prevent such cruelty unleashed upon one of its most devout members.”

## Chapter Nine

*Or, maybe, I just couldn't forgive myself when I stood by and watched my parents being murdered,* Sierra gulped back the unshakable reality. Maybe I wasn't worthy of service to the Goddess? Maybe I'd failed my mother. What would have happened if I'd defied Father and shifted? What if I could have saved Mother from those bastards?

"Sierra?"

I blinked back Jackal's knitted brow where he'd knelt at my side.

"I didn't know," he whispered. "I didn't mean to cause you pain with those memories."

"It's alright. You know who I am. You might as well know the rest."

He placed a palm on my knee and studied me.

Worry didn't look right on his features. I deserved punishment for causing him discomfort. "You didn't hurt me, Jackal. You're not like them. And I'll be damned if I ever trust a Normal again."

He reached up to pet my cheek with a palm. "Why didn't they kill you too?"

"John stopped them." And then he saved me. He showed me how it was to be loved. He protected me from Normals. He lured back my soul and trapped it deep within my body. *I'm whole again because of John.*

Jackal sucked in a deep breath and dropped his hand back to drape across my leg. "That's why he took you into hiding. Do you know what the Normals wanted?"

My mother, a Cougar to trade with the aliens. But Jackal couldn't know that. "It was an ambush. Mother and Father had been arguing all morning. Mother was angry, distracting Father. It was the worst mistake Father ever made. He wasted his last breath on an apology—to me."

Something rammed into my throat.

I gulped down the lump. "But I suppose it better he died one breath sooner than witness the horrors the Normals planned for him to witness."

"Revenge?" Jackal muttered.

That explanation would more than satisfy my mate. I nodded. "It must be. I have no idea what for." Maybe the answer would satisfy Jackal.

"Normals need little reason when the mere fact we're different from them is enough to set them on a rampage. And I'm sorry. I truly hope I didn't hurt you when we mated."

"If you had known about the rape, you would never have marked me. And then where would I be? With someone else. You said yourself that you didn't think anyone else would take care of me."

He nodded. "I will care for you. I swear it. Nobody will bother you again."

Did he worry I hadn't bonded as seriously with him as he'd bonded with me because he thought me a Normal? He had no idea my Cougar spoke up during *the marking*. What a shock. Nobody prepared me for that moment. Not even Mother who taught me everything she knew about Cougars. And she knew more than simple rumor. My grandfather had been captured and genetically tweaked by the aliens. Then my grandfather escaped to sire my mother. But not one

living soul knew I was a Cougar now. I had to keep it that way. I reached for Jackal's warm strong palm.

He sat his iron body in the squeaking bed next to me. "You don't have to worry about Normals here, Kitten." He brushed a thumb across the back of my hand. "The clan will protect you. For me. That's what the clan does. We protect each other. With tanks. Heavy artillery. Nobody's taking you from me, Kitten."

"I know." I stared into those dark green eyes. "And I don't want to go anywhere with Keezia. Only a fool would trade a mate like you for the sisterhood."

He fought a smile and lost when his eyes glinted with amusement. "Where'd you put those cards?"

We spent the better part of the evening playing poker before Jackal made me try on the little *pink* shift Toby thought I might like. I wouldn't have to worry about washing the delicate garment *ever* as quickly as Jackal untied the three narrow ribbons holding the softest whisper of fabric together between my breasts.

Cougar purred until I couldn't hear anything but feline satisfaction as Jackal held my hips down against his hard thighs where I straddled him, his iron cock buried to the hilt inside me.

Right where I itched with the most desperate need to shove his shoulders to the ground and grind the amazing pressure into oblivion. But he kept me trapped at his mercy, rocking his hips upward.

Rocking me into a gasping, moaning fit, where I rubbed my forehead against his.

"Mine," he growled and sealed my moans in my mouth with a heart-wrenching kiss.

Gods, that one simple word was so primitive, so all-encompassing, I didn't care if I never heard him say another word. I just wanted him to keep making me his.

His steely shaft pulsed, and he thrust his insistent tongue along the length of mine, gently rocking our bodies with his hips. But he wouldn't release his grip on my hips. To hold me close enough to lasso my heart with his tongue. No, I had to slither my arms around his neck.

He groaned and pressed my hips downward more. Into his incredibly stiff spear.

I was so helplessly captured, prey. Oh, I'd die if he didn't throw me down and pound home. But who could voice demands with a starving mate sucking her tongue down his throat?

Suddenly, he jerked back, swung me up into his arms into cool air, then tossed me down onto his soft bedding.

The hunger glinting in his eyes flashed to burning yellow.

If I didn't want my Cougar clawing for release, I had to convince him to be quick. I dropped my knees to the bed and glided my hand slowly down my belly. Enticing him.

"Mine," he growled and claimed me with one thrust of his thick erection until his balls smacked my ass.

Spank me anytime.

Cougar clawed to free herself.

Not again. I gulped down air and held my breath. Focusing.

But all those muscles pressing down on my chest shoved out the air.

Gods, he was so wonderfully everywhere. Just hurry before Cougar is free. "Rise up, Jackal. I want to watch you." That should get him wound up.

He levered his body off me, shoving onto one bulging arm and pumped his narrow hips.

Just the first motion set off my rising wave of an orgasm. The mind-numbing crest of emotion rose, higher and higher until I could no longer watch his magnificent body dance against



my aching groin. I could only stare into his glowing eyes. Holding my breath. Waiting. For him to find his release with me. Or he'd start all over again.

*Mine.* Cougar growled.

Wouldn't he hurry? I snaked my legs around his waist, guiding his cock right where the little bundle of frazzled nerves hitched relentlessly inside my soul.

He clamped his free hand on my hip and jammed the firm head of his cock so deeply into that hypersensitive spot that I screamed.

Dear. Gods. He wielded more power than Keezia's arthritic hand.

He slammed his mouth down over mine and howled down my throat.

Like I needed him to breathe for me. I sank my fingernails into his shoulders for dear life as his call made my chest vibrate. And we ground our hips together to some silent melody while his hot seed soothed my frazzled nerves he'd so fiercely teased. We floundered, jerking in a primitive weak thrusting motion until neither of us had the energy to move, panting into each other's mouths. Clutching each other for all life was worth.

Oh how amazing it felt to hold his rigid sweaty body. I sucked in another hot breath and slid a palm through the dampness along his spine.

At last, he inhaled one extremely long breath and exhaled tumultuously. His body slackened. He marched his soft lips across my cheek, down to the pulse in my neck, and rolled onto his back, carrying my body along to drape his thumping heart. "Sleep, Kitten," he practically purred.

Not yet. If he thought he could ignore the incident with Sessily, he was wrong. I had to ensure he understood I didn't hold that against him. "Why didn't you mate with Sessily?"

He sighed, slightly, barely shifting my body, and lightly brushed a palm down my spine over my loose hair, petting me as if resigning to the fact he'd have to confess. "Her parents went to Tornado demanding I try to seed her with child. That's how the trap always begins with a Shifter. As if I want to sire pups in every welcoming womb of the village."

His voice's used tone resounded his opinion.

My heart clenched.

"But the last thing I wanted is to risk the lives of all those women through birthing my children. Can you imagine how many would be hunted? And the children as well just because I'd planted my seed? What of their safety? I told Tornado that the first time he informed me I'd been selected. As if I'd just smile and fuck them."

His hand fisted at my lower back.

Well, there would be no babies in my future. But that was okay since I had Jackal. His reasons for sparing us the torture were rational. Now I had to deal with the frustration I caused him. I shoved up to stare into his pinched eyes. "I'm sorry, Jackal. I shouldn't have asked. But you seemed so worried about what I witnessed back at Toby's. I just wanted you to know I'm not angry."

"I don't want anything hidden between us."

Slap me already. Here I am hiding my Cougar.

"I slept with a few village daughters who were kind and gentle. But I never felt the urge to mark them. And never in my Gods-be-damned bed." His arm squeezed around me, pulling my body along his steely curves up to where I could stare him down from directly overhead. To look into his compassion-filled eyes. "Nothing like when I crazed with euphoria with you." He lifted his mouth to place a swift peck on my lips. "With Sessily, I tried to just love her and be

done with the madness. But she launched her own little battle campaign of conquest. She even went to Tornado insisting I'd hit my head and couldn't remember marking her."

The ignorant fool. "That's ludicrous. Your Wolf would know. Every Shifter in the village would smell your scent *in* her." But who wouldn't do whatever it took to lie here bound within the muscled circle of Jackal's arms like me?

He nodded. "As Tornado explained to Sessily. Her parents are the Hamburgs."

"They're leaving the village because of me?"

He nodded. "And all I can think of is how thankful I am instead of how much the village needs the Hamburgs' money and numbers. That family provides most of the fuel for two tanks."

"That's why Demon gave you that look tonight? Because your history with Sessily?"

He placed a palm against my cheek. "You noticed?"

"I didn't grow up the daughter of clan leader and not learn to observe, absorb, and analyze everything around me."

He pressed my head down onto the pillow beside his and studied my eyes. "Tornado won't bother you about that. Hell, he admired The Black. Your sire's name was known from coast to coast. But you've got to trust me when I tell you you're safe here with me. Only a fool would enter our village and try to kidnap you to get to me." He planted a soft kiss on my forehead. "You're mine now. Mine to protect and care for."

He gently rolled his body onto one side, sliding me onto mine against his sculpted chest where he could stroke me from head to tail. He caught one ass cheek in his grasp and squeezed then petted the mound. "All mine. And I promise to never feed you those sweet rolls I fed to the village daughters the mornings after I planted seed inside them."

He what? "Come again?"

Cougar snarled.

Be quiet!

He shot me a wicked smile. "Sue always made some doctored candy or breads to knock my seed out of the village daughters. But not you. My Wolf is being a tad bit more than territorial with you."

A baby?

My heart thrashed.

*Must claim seed.* Cougar itched to pounce on him.

Settle down. Humans don't just react. Besides, you're loaded down with his seed. Seed that will grow. Into a child.

He placed a finger beneath my chin and drew my gaze from his neck. "What's wrong, Kitten?"

"You'd let me have a baby?"

His eyes pinched again. "What do you mean?"

Did I have to speak more about John? How would Jackal react if I kept throwing my past in his face? I closed my eyes just so I wouldn't see Jackal's reaction. "John wouldn't let me have a baby."

"Why?" he barely whispered.

At least his mood hadn't soured. I opened my eyes to find his capped with his standard compassion. "He said it was too dangerous in the wilderness. Us being alone. With the risk of childbirth and how he'd have to leave me to hunt when I was so pregnant I couldn't tag along..."

"No," he wagged his head. "It's more than that. Our mother died giving birth to Rattler. He never said anything about his stepmother nursing him at her breast. He always accepted her

for her mothering. But he knew our mother died giving him life.” Something dark washed over his face.

Fear? Or regret. I wasn’t about to risk another dangerous question.

“And Tornado would suspect I was up to something after knowing I made certain all those village women didn’t nurture my seed. No, Kitten. I’ll suffer through one pregnancy with you.” He held up one thick finger. “One.”

One was all I needed to maintain my sanity just in case something took Jackal’s life.

\* \* \* \*

A fairly uneventful day passed for Sierra until the next morning when two rumbling tanks led a large truck with an open bed out Death Summit’s gate. One adult male rode in the bed of the truck with two young children about eight years old and Sessily. Apparently, the other father and both mothers rode up front, leaving one male riding shotgun with the children.

Sessily shot Jackal a frown in passing.

But she didn’t grace me with a snarl. Jackal and I watched from the doorway of our lodge that was almost in direct alignment with the gate. Most likely the source of Sessily’s negativity.

*Go far far away.* Cougar gurgled a growl.

Just be quiet. Hell, I have enough problems without a wild cat running amuck.

Tornado waved the small entourage off and pivoted to us.

“Well, that’s that,” Jackal said and dropped his arms that had been snaked across the tank top stretched by his wide chest. “I’m hungry for breakfast, Kitten. How about you?”

I seemed to be famished around the clock with all of the attention Jackal insisted on showering upon me. “Yes.”

We stepped off toward the eating area.

Tornado veered in the same direction.

Great. The man could really push my buttons without realizing he had. I wasn’t his personal minstrel even though I was duty-bound to play at the evening meal now. He made that obligation clear yesterday afternoon. And it had turned into a golden moment when the children gathered around me. Singing for the children would most likely be as life-altering as my mating Jackal.

“Jackal,” Tornado called.

Jackal halted, shooting me a wary glance.

He knew I didn’t care for Tornado. Even though he’d explained how Tornado kept order in this village through his cantankerous bearing. I just hadn’t found a reason for liking the man.

Tornado stepped up to Jackal’s side and angled me a nod. “Walk with me.” He led us to the eating area. “Sessily’s gone now. Won’t return unless she’d lost her mind.”

“You didn’t send Demon along to lead the men?” Jackal asked.

Tornado glanced sideways at my mate. “No. He needs to be here in case we suffer repercussions.”

Repercussions? For what?

Jackal nodded.

Sue stood behind a pile of what looked like wheat fry bread and her signature large cauldron, beyond the sitting and milling families clutching pale hand-sized bundles. Breakfast looked portable today.

“Morning, Tornado, Jackal, and Sierra. I’ve got some beans and bread today,” Sue announced.

Not exactly what I wanted for breakfast. Cheese would have made the bland beans more palatable. But cheese was a luxury. And I wasn't insulting the woman who saw to it Jackal had lots of perks.

Tornado took his portion and trailed off between the villagers, greeting those he approached with nods and words.

"Here you go, Jackal." Sue handed him a burrito and then thrust one at me. "I'll be happy to show you around today if you have time." She shot me a smile.

I suppose it was time to find my place among the women. "Alright."

"I'll bring her back to you after breakfast." Jackal nodded at Sue and turned me back toward our lodge. He didn't speak again until we'd walked quite a distance from the crowd. "Are you okay with spending some time with Sue?"

Really, I had no qualms about it. "She's nice. I'd rather hear from her what's safe and dangerous for whenever you're not around. After all, she's privy to things you haven't experienced." Female things.

He snorted a laugh. "Are you telling me I have no clue what women do in the village?"

"Of course." I grinned the biggest grin I could muster.

"Well, if it was my choice, I'd keep you locked inside the lodge. But I'm not going to trap you away like a pet. You go on about your business. Just stay inside the walls. I don't want anything to happen to you."

His worry reminded me of what Tornado had said. "What repercussions?"

Jackal scanned the village beyond our shoulders.

We were a good ten steps from our door. I couldn't see anyone in the empty courtyard. Just a closed gate. What was all the secrecy about?

Jackal forced a half smile. "Sessily is the type to seek revenge."

"You're kidding."

He wagged his head. "No. We expect vengeance. How it will play out is a mystery."

"Because of me?"

"No. Because I refused her."

"But that's Tornado's fault. He ordered you to entertain her."

Jackal nodded. "But I chose you, knowing full well that when I chose anyone I'd set her off."

That's why he took on a mate!

Cougar started to claw at my ribcage.

Be quiet, cat. So, Jackal marked me to set off Sessily. *Not because he wanted me.* And I thought he was happy with me. Now, I know I'm nothing more than just another chore for him. "So you planned to use me to get to her?"

"No!" He threw up his palms and blocked my path. "No, Kitten. I didn't say that. You are my mate. I'm bound to you. Nothing is more important to me than you are. You are my life now."

How could he expect me to believe anything after the Sessily incident and his little confession?

## Chapter Ten

About an hour later, Jackal kissed me longingly on the lips before rubbing my cheek and leaving me with Sue at her lodge. He smelled divine, of campfire, a tinge of musk, and of pine trees. Where the pine scent came from, I didn't know. But the kiss and fresh scent couldn't chase away his misstep in explaining his strategy in dealing with Sessily.

"What was that all about?" Sue asked as Jackal's camouflaged muscles shrank in his retreat.

"He's just being possessive after *the marking*." But getting away from him for a while would help me. I needed to think all this madness over for a day or two. Get a grip on my feelings. Find a place for myself in a world that had no patience for me. So I wouldn't be a pain in Jackal's tail the rest of his life.

"I wish the biggest toughest Shifter in the village would mark me like that, You know, show some possessiveness," she chuckled.

Would she when learning he did it for necessity's sake and duty instead of for love? But why would I expect him to look at me any differently? I agreed to the mating for survival's sake. He simply had a different motive than I did. He wanted to oust Sessily's family from the village. I helped him drive her away. Was the favor really that much to ask in repayment for a lifetime of protection?

"He's a real treasure, eh?" Sue elbowed me in the arm.

I smiled at the strangely comforting gestures of the woman. She had lots of power. I guess I'd have to ignore her overly friendly behavior. Or accept it. "Yes. There's nothing on the planet like Jackal." How true that statement was. He could enchant a woman with his doting gaze and amazing touch. Especially when you learned you were just an end to his and Tornado's means.

"What do you prefer doing to help out around the village? Laundry? Cooking? Sewing? How about gardening? We even have a school that teaches children to read and write."

Why am I not surprised the children of Death Summit were being educated since their parents were wealthy? Adults who could read and write had an advantage in trade and travel. So what did I want to even suggest I do to help around the village? Actual cleaning and cooking made me ill. Always had. I'd be better off with the children. And they were the last people to expect to have hidden agendas. "I can read and write. And do math." Otherwise, my choice would be gardening.

Sue stepped off toward the door. "Your sire approved of females learning the three Rs?"

And more. The Black was anything but old school. And I wouldn't scare her with all the Shifter science I'd learned. "Yes."

Sue escorted me directly to the back of the village and a small circle of older children sitting within a tree's shade cast by an enormous canopy. Two women worked inside the circle. Both helping a different child. They noticed our approach. The tall brunette rose and waited for us. This only set off the children.

"That's her, Ms. Trinkle. She plays the guitar."

The brunette shot the boy a stern glance. "Back to work, Tommy. I know who she is."

The scolding look Ms. Trinkle used to observe my advance didn't indicate I was welcome. But why would I be? I'd already disrupted village life. Death Summit lost one of its wealthiest families. And then Jackal was off the market. I'd have to prove I was more than a fuck bag.

The other woman, a short thin redhead, stood up before the children and kept their attention while Ms. Trinkle met us a few steps from the huddle of students.

"Ann," Sue nodded.

Ann didn't bother offering a smile to Sue. "Sue." She reciprocated the nod. "Can I help you?"

"This is Sierra. She reads, writes, and does math." Sue smiled at both of us.

"And I'm educated in biology, geology, and chemistry." It couldn't hurt to appear to be a valuable resource.

Ann eyed me from boots to forehead before anchoring her gray eyes on my gaze. "So you want to help here?"

The woman's disbelief could have slapped me in the jowls. "Why waste what I know when you can use it to broaden the children's minds? They just might need the knowledge I can share, one day when facing the enemy."

Ann blinked slowly, the wheels in her mind churning shadows in her eyes, and sighed before eyeing Sue. "This is a safe place for children. I won't allow any bad behavior. We want the children to feel comfortable here."

Sue planted her hands on her hips. "Why are you telling me this? I'm not the one with the knowledge to pass onto them."

Ann's gaze sharpened even more. "Don't play games with me, Sue. I don't need your crap today." She slid her icy glare to mine. "You make one inappropriate move and you'll be working in the laundry. I promise, Sierra."

"I worked with children for years. They're our future. It's more important for me to help them than sit around whining about being bored."

"Time will tell." Ann spun back to the curious children. "Class, I'd like you to welcome Ms. Sierra. She will be helping you learn to read and write."

\* \* \* \*

Later after hours my working with the children, Jackal leaned against the side of a lodge near the laughing children when I turned around after finishing up working with the children's one-on-one reading lessons. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Maybe he liked seeing me busy. Out from under his constant supervision.

*I'll teach mine.* Cougar snorted.

For Pete's sake. Be quiet.

Ann stepped to my side. "You did well, Sierra. I look forward to having you help tomorrow."

"Thank you." The compliment was well worth the day I exchanged in earning Ann's praise. Working with children required more patience than dealing with Tornado. It was probably a good thing I had all the practice back with Father's clan. Or Tornado would have killed me if I'd reacted differently and pulled a gun on him the day I rode into Death Summit. But one couldn't go back and change the past.

"We'll see you after breakfast then, tomorrow," Ann said.

"Yes." At least, she hadn't asked me to leave my guns at home when I returned. I stepped off to meet my mate.

Jackal shoved away from the wall and waited for me.

What would he do? Commend me for staying busy, leaving him to himself? How could I have gotten mated to a man who obviously would tire of me as soon as he found something better to do? Would he eventually just seek me out when he had to relieve his pent up lust? Did it matter in a world where those reasons were the norm with men taking mates? I took the final step to his side.

"Did you enjoy yourself with the children, Kitten?" he cooed.

His gentle gaze tempted me to fancy him sincere. But I wasn't going to fall for that again. The Black had raised one intelligent daughter. I suffered from extreme sorrow when Jackal and I first faced *the marking*. My vulnerability had gotten the better of me. Even though I rationalized, I had made a logical choice. But Jackal's touch had a special kind of overwhelming power.

Even Cougar responded.

I'd been sucked into his game through some metaphysical addiction I couldn't fight.

Or something.

And now I must deal with the reality of my situation as the pawn who had served its purpose. I could exist the useless mate. Survive. Or settle for finding solace in working with the children. Maybe in time, I'd earn Jackal's respect. After all, we'd just met. How could I possibly think myself important to him beyond the lust of Shifter mating? But he stood there waiting for an answer about my day. "The children are our future. They make me feel as if I'm doing something good again."

His mouth curved into a smile. "Good. Let's find you something to eat so you can carry on with your work tomorrow."

The sad thing about my life was I required an escort to go anywhere in the village. Am I endangered? Or just perceived as completely inept? I suppose there were far worse aspects about a relationship with a Shifter I could dwell upon. Like he was abusive. A few Shifters had gone almost rabid in the past. Not a pretty possibility.

"You're quiet," he noted.

I would dig my hole deeper if I just tossed the damned shovel in and acted normal.

"Tired." I lied to avoid my irritation with my choices I'd made.

"Maybe you need to ease into village life again after eight years away from village duties."

"And have everyone call me lazy or weak?"

"Nobody would say anything."

"You weren't there when I arrived at the school. Ann did not want me near the children." I met his misleading genuine gaze. "*Because* they'd already said many things about me."

"People will be people. They don't trust easily. They don't like change. Give them time, Kitten. This is your home now. And the others will see what I saw."

Lovely lead in... What would he say? "And what would that be?"

He halted and looked me in the eye. "That you are my heart and soul. My life." He leaned down and planted the warmest softest kiss on my lips, enveloping me in the strength of his arms.

Damn the tender touch. It didn't matter his motives were different in the beginning. The kiss conquered me. Lifted me up into the strongest arms. Numbed my fingers and toes. Buckled my knees. And I sank into his beating heart.

But his warmth withdrew.

I leaned against his solid chest locked within the circle of his arms, and I sucked in a breath.

He smiled at me. "I don't like it when you look so exhausted, Kitten. Maybe I'm just selfish. But you don't need to work yourself to death. I can take care of us." He squeezed me in his enormous arms and kissed my forehead. "I'll show you after we eat."

What did he mean? Usually we spent the nights in our lodge where he touched me into a dead sleep. What would he show me? "Alright."

He ushered me back through the lodges toward the eating area.

Why did I cooperate? Was my body working against me? Maybe the guilty party was my Cougar. Is she my instinct?

Damn instinct. Could a person trust her instinct? Go with what made her feel good? Was that what life was about? Feeling good? Hell, it hadn't been but days since I lost one love to find a mate that struck far too deeply, making me doubt myself.

Sue met us with her standard smile. "How did your day go with the children?"

"Fine. They can drain every drop of your enthusiasm though."

She chuckled. "Maybe you'd rather do laundry?"

No way. "I already promised to begin biology lessons tomorrow."

Sue snorted and handed me a silver dish. "Then we'd best feed you. You'll need your strength for carving out humanity's future. And you," she looked at Jackal, "your job is to see she gets her rest. I don't want to learn you kept her working all night."

Jackal surprisingly didn't roll his eyes.

"Don't worry about me, Sue. I've got her best interests at heart." He shot her a wink.

We returned to our lodge where we sat to eat at the rough-hewn table.

"I can see I don't like you working at the school," he timbered.

I rolled my gaze up from my vegetables and rice. "What?"

He scraped his fork around his green beans and carrots. "You're too tired to talk to me." He propped an elbow on the table. "Unless something else is bothering you."

Shit. And I get the mate who would notice. "What would be bothering me?"

"Are you missing Rattler?"

Actually, John was the last thing on my mind. "I'm too busy to dwell on the past." Of which the past all too often kept people from embracing their future. But that was a Rites-of-Goddess mantra. He probably didn't want to hear anything handed down from the sisterhood.

His scrutiny trailed down to my lips, lingered a moment, then moved down my arm to my hand and over to his plate. "We can play cards then?"

Why did he suddenly seem like he *wanted* to spend time with me? "I'm tired. I'd like to just lie down and sleep."

He didn't look at me. Just nodded and scooped up some green beans.

\* \* \* \*

She'd just gone to bed. *For the first time without me.* Jackal sighed. She'd stretched out on her side with her back to me. Fully clothed except for her boots placed neatly out of the way toward the end of the bed. And she'd unbuckled her gun belts. Lain both beside her boots.

Her silence had nothing to do with working with children. She'd loved the attention they focused on her when she played her guitar and sang last night. So, working with the kids at the school shouldn't have tied her tongue. *She was avoiding me.* And my inner Wolf didn't care about her feigned exhaustion.

Even worse, my Wolf could smell her confusion.



Something bothered her.

And I'd find out before it turned me into a raging beast focused on nothing more than burying my seed inside the only woman who ever made me forget about the consequences. The woman who avoided me. I conjured up my night vision, focused my honed animal senses across the room at her form lying on my bed, and sat before the dancing flames of my fire on the earthen floor.

My Wolf sensed she was awake.

With her back to me.

Ignoring me.

Why?

What had I done to hurt her? I'd spent all my time with her since her arrival. Guarding her. *Touching* her when she begged for it. I couldn't have been the cause of her disregard. Had I misjudged the opportunity I found? Forced my affection on her? That had to be the answer. Her love had to still lay with Rattler. She'd never claimed to have such feelings for me. If anything, I had become her security. And her curves turned to the comfort of my bedding.

I'd have to be more comforting than the damned bed.

I'd have to win her over the way a man won a woman's heart during courting.

Or my Wolf would devour me from the inside out.

Because Sierra is my mate.

And I have no choice.

What a man did for honor's sake and a pair of innocent sky-blue eyes truly defied logic.

I waited until sleep eased her frustration and climbed into bed to wrap my arm around her slim waist and drift away myself.

\* \* \* \*

*The cries tore through my mind.* Sierra shuddered. Louder than muffled screams. Real. Piercing.

The darkness jolted.

I'm asleep. I jerked up, throwing my feet at the side of the bed.

Jackal yanked at his bootlaces, hunched over, sitting on the bed's edge.

"Bounders?" I blurted.

He twisted around to look me in the eye with a commanding glance. "Stay here. Lock the door." He shoved his muscled form onto his feet and headed for the window.

The screeches sounded like they were right outside.

"They're in the village?" I asked since he could look out the window.

"Yes," he snarled and turned a pinched gaze toward me. "Lock the door after I leave, Sierra." He left, snapping the door shut at his heels.

*Protect mine.* Cougar clawed for release.

Holy shit. Jackal *said* to stay.

I could help. Fight. But Jackal might get angry. I'd better think this through a minute before my Cougar pressured me into rash behavior. I leapt up and slammed the two by four into place.

*Save mine!*

Cougar, he's a Shifter too. He can save himself. That's his job.

*Wrong. So wrong. Bad things. Very bad.*

How had Bounders breached the village's walls? And why hadn't the guards seen them coming? Maybe something was wrong here. Terribly wrong. I quickly pulled on my boots and buckled my gun belts to my thighs.

And why did Jackal yell at me? I hopped to the window and scanned the moon-lit expanse of courtyard beyond the glass.

*Kill them before mine is hurt.*

The shadows shifted with the lurking dark extraterrestrial masses pulling the ground toward them with their stiff arms and taller more agile Guardians out trying to stem the invasion.

Damned horrible creatures that gnawed off human body parts. And the Bounders ran freely as if they enjoyed terrorizing the sleeping community. There were so many of them that I couldn't keep up with which were coming and going. People could die. Guardians. Even Jackal could die.

*Mine must live.*

My heart did more than flinch at the shrill gunshots contrasting with the lower-pitched Bounder screams beyond the door.

There were so many Bounders that the Guardians needed every gun they could find out picking off alien monsters. Before one got a hold of my mate. I wasn't ready to be passed onto another Shifter and learn how common or unusual Jackal's treatment was toward me. I fingered the grips of the pistols at my hips.

Jackal would be pissed. But I could follow orders or continue to carve out another niche for myself in the community. Maybe Tornado would see I had value beyond strumming the guitar. Boy Tornado had to be pissed I hadn't played tonight. Killing the Bounders just might earn me respect where it was most needed at the moment too. It wasn't like Jackal gave a shit about anything but his own feelings anyway. I grabbed my night-vision goggles, secured them over my eyes, and jerked the door open.

\* \* \* \*

The steady sound of rapid gunfire made Jackal's skin crawl beneath his thick coat of Wolf fur. The only other thing that made a similar sound was the machine gun on the wall. And nobody dared open fire upon Guardians in the middle of a pack of hungry Bounders. Especially at night. Guardians would die. The sound meant Sierra, my mate, was in the thick of the fray.

*She'd disobeyed me.*

Must save her.

I whirled toward the sound.

Darkness shifted everywhere as the orange-red boxy bodies of Bounders used their front legs like crutches to maneuver through the silver moonlight. Hundreds of feet away, in front of my lodge, I spotted her slim curvaceous orange form, both arms outstretched, yellow flames bursting from her hands with the rattling pops of each shot she fired. Warm Bounder bodies littered the ground. More angled toward her. Away from the massive Guardian forms killing the monsters closest to them. Her gunfire picked off the Bounders so quickly, so efficiently, that she dropped her arms, scanned the darkness, pivoted, and returned to our lodge without a word.

The Bounders were dead.

Tornado stepped before me, blocking my view of my mate. His glowing red gaze stared up a couple inches into my eyes. "Your mate."

What of Sierra? But fully-shifted Guardians often had difficulty speaking. We'd have to shake the euphoria before the event could be discussed.

I nodded once in more of a submissive manner. Just to get him out of my face.

Tornado hulked off through the darkness to kick at the reddish masses dying beneath the almost-full moon.

My mate. Disobeyed me. Tornado knew. He didn't have to tell me. I could feel it. There was nothing I could do but wait for my body to shift. And then I'd confront her.

\* \* \* \*

The door clattered against the two by four securing the lodge from whoever attempted to enter Sierra's home. *Waiting for the Guardians to calm down enough to call a meeting began to nibble away at my sanity.* Who was outside?

*Mine. Mine*

Where was Jackal? Had anyone been killed? Gods, not Jackal. Being passed onto another Shifter would undoubtedly be utterly horrible. At least, Jackal never hurt me during sex. But given my loss of another mate, surely Tornado would insist on someone taking me off the marriage market. I peered through the cool glass of the window.

Watching the Shifters drag the Bounder carcasses out the gate, now, didn't assuage my snowballing anxiety. I'd just have to insist my goals in entering the battle were to save the community and its Guardians. I had always made choices for the benefit of the clan. Jackal couldn't be angered with those motives.

A snarling hulk of a shadow passed the window.

*Mine!*

Shut up, dammit! I should have just stayed put. Jackal would be pissed. But who could stand around and watch a nightmare unfold without lifting a finger to help? I was qualified to end the attack. I did. I'd done nothing wrong. And after witnessing my parents die without lifting a finger to prevent their pain and deaths, I damned sure wasn't going to stand around tonight.

Never again.

It's better to die having faced your foe than to have lived with the regret of tucking tail and running. I packed shells into my pistols' clips, yanked off my boots, and crawled into bed.

If he wanted to fight in the morning, I'd be ready for battle.

But sleep didn't soothe me with all the growling beyond my door. I sat with the cold hard wall biting my back, my knees pulled to my chest. As if the position would contain my heart thrumming inside my chest. Because most of the werewolf forms had disappeared when the carcasses had been removed from the village. The Guardians had gone to bed. Yes. They must have.

*Find mine.*

Stupid Cougar.

If Jackal would just come home, the damned Cougar would leave me alone.

Faint growls seeped through the lodge's curved wall.

*Mine.*

The door rattled on in its frame.

*Mine!*

Was he out there? My Jackal? Angered beyond calming down from the euphoria?

I should have obeyed him.

Now he was pissed beyond measure.

If the Guardian was even Jackal.

Talk about being shit out of luck. I'd gone from living in isolation, to being forced into mating, to pissing off my Shifter so much he couldn't tame his Wolf. Hell, I had to know who

growled outside my door. I shoved my bare feet to the cool earth and crossed the space to the slab of wood separating me from the werewolf standing in the moonlight.

What the hell? Life was a joke these days anyway. I shoved the bar of wood up and pulled the door inward.

A fully-furred Shifter filled the doorframe, staring at me. Absolutely nude save for his dark burly coat and enormous erection.

“Jackal?”

He gurgled a growl and moved faster than lightning.

The wall stopped my shoulders where he pinned me against the hard gnawing surface. He stared me in the eye with those yellow eyes.

Forget compassion. Intent glinted in those golden orbs.

The door slapped shut with a clap.

At least nobody would witness my end. What was next? “Jackal?”

He roared.

## Chapter Eleven

Sierra dared not breathe or utter another word with the massive werewolf's pointed teeth hovering inches from her face. The beast had to be Jackal. Or he would have already taken what he wanted. Savagely. If I didn't act fast, no telling what he might do. That wolf-like muzzle had some wicked teeth I just didn't want ripping into me. I lifted a hand to drape his shoulder and petted down his arm. "It's alright, baby. Let me help you calm down."

He gurgled off a crackling snarl, sliding his gaze to my palm and back to me.

"It's alright. I'm right here." I pressed the back of my hand to his cheek and rubbed thick wiry fur.

He shoved me a fraction of an inch deeper into the hard wall and buried his muzzle against my neck to lick my skin with intoxicating friction.

Way too nice.

Need shivered through me.

My nipples pearly as I squirmed against the amazing texture of his bristly fur.

Only a fool would encourage a Shifter in Wolfskin to take what he wanted. But the man was too damned keyed up to think clearly enough to put me down. I'd have to suck him off to get him to relax. "Put me down, baby. Let me have your cock."

He practically purred, letting me slide down to lodge upon his bent thigh where his enormous iron erection jabbed into my belly.

If he'd wanted me to carry through on my promise, he wouldn't have held me against the wall though. What was he up to?

He grabbed my shirt with both somewhat-human paws and ripped it down the front with an abrupt jerk.

Clothes aren't cheap. "Jackal!"

A shadow danced in his dark luminous eyes.

He hauled me up by the armpits and tossed me on the soft bouncing bed where he ripped off my pants the same way he removed my shirt.

"Dammit, Jackal! It's not easy finding clothes that fit."

He dropped his palms besides my shoulders, leaned down until his black nose almost touched mine, close enough I could count individual hairs on his cheeks, and roared.

My ears rang.

Gods. And rang. "Alright. Alright." I tried to shove his hairy immobile chest off of me.

He just snorted hot air in my face.

Okay, I'm being punished. I closed my eyes. "I understand. You're in charge."

He sucked down a few more breaths and exhaled on my cheek, then his bristly leg kneed my thighs apart.

Fine. He could calm himself down fucking me if he wanted. But I *did* offer to do my share to reverse his condition.

He ignored all but my body, planting the sharp edge of his teeth against my jugular, rubbing the head of his cock along my nether folds until locking it into the mouth of my sex.

My inner channel clenched.

With anticipation.

He nibbled at my neck, then sucked my skin for so long I tingled all over with a rash of gooseflesh while his hand-paws curled around my breasts only to rake his rough claws across my nipples.

Every cell in my body quivered.

Gods-be-damned! I squirmed against his unyielding wiry fur. It was everywhere. Scraping and brushing me into a frenzy of wild need.

He growled a low sound embedded deep within his chest.

My heart liquefied, gushing, seeping toward his massive erection.

Now.

I wanted him inside me now.

But dared not move my arms.

He was right on my jugular. A dangerously powerful position with his razor-sharp canines. Why was he torturing me? "Please, Jackal," I whined for a pity angle.

He thrust his engorged rod inside my slick channel and groaned, shoving his hard shaft in and out, wedging me open, all the blessed way to his rock-hard balls.

I gasped for breath.

His cock was so much larger after the shift. And rough. Massaging. Something made it different. Incredible. I wanted to wrap my legs around his pumping hips. Would he allow me to? I snaked my feet up his thighs.

He jerked his leathery black nose to mine and flashed his teeth with a threatening growl.

Okay. He's in charge. I dropped my legs back to the bedding.

He pounded in and out of me, causing a strange marvelous raking sensation inside my core that defied all facets of normal sex shy of homemade ribbed condoms and over-sized sex toys. I just had to lie back, grip the headboard, and try not to scream too loudly as one wave of an orgasm after another shook me.

He suddenly stopped, withdrew, rose, heaved my grip free of the headboard, tossed me over onto my knees to hike my ass up into the air, and thrust that astounding hard-on inside me.

To plug me up again. And again. I braced myself against the amazing sensation of Wolf cock rubbing me senseless with another grip on the headboard.

Nothing could have prepared me for the next wave of friction driven by the concentric ridges of his erection. Beyond rapturous couldn't define the sensation. He was mine. All mine. And I didn't want him to stop. But conveying that when incapable of doing anything but screaming is kind of tough.

The door burst open.

"Jackal!" Tornado yelled.

Jackal roared, popped his thick hard-on from my body, and turned to face Tornado.

"Enough!" Tornado yelled. "You'll kill your mate if you don't stop."

Kill me? With what? Astonishing sex? But I was too damned winded to tell off the yet-again annoying clan leader. I just sank my face into the bedding and gasped for breath.

Jackal leapt toward the intruder.

Tornado ducked out the doorway. "Lock the door, Sierra," he shouted.

Jackal pursued him.

Like I could even get off the bed. And Tornado saw my nude ass. My body! The whole package. And I was supposed to do as instructed? Right. Men. I managed to flop my exhausted aching body over onto my side.

Jackal probably wasn't returning to finish the job.  
Maybe I would die.

And the Gods know I couldn't even lift my head off the bed. Who cared? Life would never be the same after sex with my werewolf.

Movement blurred in the shadows at the doorway.

Not another male. "Shit, go away."

The door slapped shut. "It's me," Sue said. The sound of the two by four locking into place noted Sue was following Tornado's orders. "You okay, honey?" She hustled toward me.

"I would be better." If Jackal had finished with me.

Sue plopped down on the mattress. "Oh my. You can't move. Can you?"

"Like I'd lie around with my bare ass pointed at my open door for the hell of it. He's worked off every ounce of energy I had."

"You sleep it off. At least try to heal while asleep."

I wouldn't be cured until Jackal returned and finished me off while strumming a tune inside me as he bathed my soul with his seed. "What's Tornado doing with my mate?"

"Making certain he leaves you alone until he comes down from his euphoria."

Oh that wouldn't be happening without me on the other end of his erection.

"Don't worry, honey. Tornado won't let Jackal hurt you."

\* \* \* \*

By the time the sun climbed halfway to midday, I began to fear my mate was dead while playing a round of solitaire at the table in his lodge. Why would Tornado have killed Jackal? Why not? He could torture me in the process too. And the Gods know Tornado loves to torture me. I turned over three cards and found nothing fit with any of the series of cards I had piled on the table.

A knock rattled at the door.

Sue had left a while ago. Apparently, there was no peace for me today. I rose to move the lock and pull the door inward.

Keezia's blank milky stare found my gaze.

Not today. I shut the door.

"If you would speak with me, Sierra, I have much to say."

Like I trusted her. She's only here because she knows Tornado has done something with Jackal. "I can't talk today. I'm waiting for Tornado." That wasn't really a lie.

The old priestess' thump thump faded away.

I reclaimed my seat and turned three more cards up.

A rattling clatter pounded at my door.

"Go away, Keezia." The old bat.

"It's Tornado, Sierra."

\* \* \* \*

Jackal stood in Tornado's meeting lodge, waiting for Tornado to decide what to do about his loss of control in the euphoria. Demon, Badger, and Steel stood in the shadows. Why just them? Shouldn't the entire clan witness my failure? And why weren't they concerned about who in the hell opened the Gods-be-damned gate last night?

Sierra was alright. Had to be. That's what was important. But how could I have jeopardized her life? I needed Sierra. My kitten. A future without her didn't exist. She was my sanctuary in the alien-induced insanity of life. My mate. My entire world.

Was my torment a sign of love then? Or the lust of bonding caused by *the marking*? Since I didn't have a hard-on, love had to be the answer. And if I found the one thing I feared possessing the most, why had I hurt her? Or frightened her?

Shit. I didn't deserve a mate if I had terrified her.

Tornado was damned-sure right to keep her away from me. But I couldn't recall a thing that happened before waking this midmorning. I'd heard the attack last night, gone outside, shifted, and awoke tied down in Tornado's lodge. From what Tornado had reported, I lost it and practically fucked my mate in two. But he told me an angered Wolf recalled nothing. I shouldn't have gotten angry. I should have remained in control. I should have been stronger.

I didn't deserve a mate.

The door shoved open allowing bright light to shaft through the dark round room with closed windows. Movement set the beam of light fluttering. Tornado entered the space and crossed toward where he stood to deal with village issues. More movement followed in his wake.

The bright light birthed a slim curvaceous female.

My mate.

Her pale-blue omniscient gaze found mine.

But revealed nothing. Why when she obviously knew what I'd done?

She approached and halted two steps from me, flicking a stern gaze from mine to Tornado, ultimately focusing on him. She dragged Black Betty along, slung over her shoulder. And wore both pistols at her hips.

I'd plant a bullet between my eyes if I were her. Spare her from being hurt by me again.

"Alright," Tornado began, "we've come here to decide what to do about your mating."

Tornado wasn't taking my kitten away.

I could control myself.

Fuck. What had I done last night? I studied the delicate detail of her silhouette.

She wouldn't look at me.

Had I done what Tornado said?

"Sierra, your safety rests in my hands. And maybe I was a little hasty to make you choose a mate upon your arrival. But my policy has always worked in the past."

"What do you mean?" she blurted. "How dare you think you can make choices for me! I'm not a child. I've lived most of my life with a clan leader who taught me to make choices. I don't know what you deal with here at Death Summit, but I don't need you to continually interfere with my life."

Tornado's gaze pinched. He nodded slowly and slid his gaze to mine. "I waste my breath confronting you, Jackal. Just answer the question. How do you explain losing control last night?"

Sierra turned her soul-piercing gaze to me.

Thanks for the moral support, boss. "You know I don't remember."

Her brow furrowed and her eyes rounded as if she struggled with understanding, not wanting to hear more.

"We can't allow you to injure a female," Tornado droned.

She snapped her nose toward Tornado. "He didn't hurt me."

Tornado snorted. "And females are known to lie for their men."

She fisted her hands at her sides. "How dare you, you bastard! I've beaten off males your size. I can put a bullet between your eyes at three hundred meters if you're standing still,



and I don't feel like trying to slit your throat. So, don't patronize me, asshole. My sire was The Black. And if he were here, he'd have me prove I could take care of you."

Tornado's eyebrows arched. "I just might have you try when I'm bored." He studied both her and I. "But I'm trying to decide if I need to give Jackal another chance or keep you under my protection."

"For yourself?" she hissed. "Think again, genius. Because you have to *sleep* sometime."

Tornado chuckled a few times and riveted a tolerant stare on my mate.

*My mate.* My gods-be-damned Sierra. The bastard. I stepped into his line of vision.

"I warned you to stand near the wall and not move, Jackal. Am I to believe you can no longer take orders in human form because of your mating?"

"I told you he didn't hurt me." Sierra shoved past my elbow and planted both of her boots wide like her shoulders between Tornado and I. "I don't lie, asshole. If he'd hurt me, I'd have defended myself." She whirled to me, inches away, and stared up into my eyes. "It's alright, Jackal. You didn't hurt me. He's lost his mind."

Dare I believe her? Would she lie to save herself for whatever reason? For me? Hell, if she felt the same way I did... If she loved me, I'd never be able to get off my knees again.

She reached out and slowly snaked her arms around my waist. "Jackal?" She pressed her curves into my chest and rose on her tiptoes.

To my ear. I leaned down to help her reach the ear.

She wound a hand around my neck and pulled my ear against the velvet of her mouth. "You couldn't have hurt me," she whispered. "It was the most incredible feeling I've ever experienced."

She liked having sex with my Wolf?

The world almost spun.

Gods, if I could just kiss her. Tell her how I felt. But Tornado watched us. And the others. I pulled her lower back until her body pressed against mine so I could hold her more carefully. Protect her from their stares.

"What do you think, boys?" Tornado began. "Do you see two bound mates desperate enough to be together to defy their clan head? Or two fools?"

"They're at least in lust," Badger replied.

"I'm thinking love," Demon said.

"You always had a soft spot for romance," Steel accused.

She ignored them and clutched my neck tightly. "Make them stop."

I chuckled myself. "I can't, Kitten. Tornado's family is all fucked up."

"Hey, speak for yourself," Badger snapped.

I planted a kiss on Sierra's cheek. "I don't know what happened, Kitten. But I swear I'll never hurt you."

She leaned her head back to look me in the eye. "I know. Especially after last night. I learned my lesson. I won't push your buttons again. Well, for the wrong reasons." She winked.

"Spare us. Go home." Tornado waved us off.

\* \* \* \*

Within minutes, we were back behind our closed door. *Safe.* Sierra smiled to herself. Maybe. I'd know soon enough what was on my mate's mind.

Jackal seated me in my chair next to the cards where I'd left them stacked in the solitaire game I'd been playing.

He just wore camouflage pants.

No boots or shirt. Tornado must not have seen clothing Jackal from head to toe as a priority. Like the clan leader just wanted to dress Jackal to reach his tail. But had Tornado really been angry with Jackal? I wasn't about to put it past Tornado to have instigated the entire meeting between Jackal and I simply to feel out our emotions as he'd done.

Jackal dropped on bent knee, between my thighs. "Tell me," he said with the help of a heart-melting compassionate gaze. He placed a palm against my cheek. "What did I do?" His thumb softly brushed across my lips. "Don't lie. How did it happen and what happened?"

My heart would never stop fluttering if he didn't withhold his touch until we'd spoken. And taking responsibility for setting off his tirade would be the mature thing to do. "It was my fault. I should have listened to you. Instead, I got it in my head that I could stop the Bounders. And I went out shooting. You told me to stay here. Lock the door. You get the picture." Even though I left out the part I feared losing him and being mated off to another Shifter male.

"How bad did things get when you were shooting?" He caressed my cheek with short movements of his fingertips.

And he was giving me all the credit for my poor choice. Talk about generous. I'd caused whatever set off his Wolf after I left our lodge though. His anger. Or rush of adrenaline to protect me. Whatever had pushed him up to the level of uncontrollable. I shook my head. "I just picked the Bounders off quickly. Then everyone stood around staring at me. Including you."

He nodded in understanding, his gaze clouded in deep thought. "I really can't remember." He sighed. "Did I throw you around? Do you have any bruises?" He leaned his head, sliding his hand down to my pulse to study my neck. "Did I bite you?"

"No. Nothing is sore. Well, maybe just a little where you rammed that big-ass erection." Gods, let's do that again.

His head stilled as he tenderly studied my gaze. "Kitten?"

If only he would kiss me. "I mean it. When Tornado burst in here and got you to chase him, I was feeling really good. He's a moron. Like I'm going to get you to shape shift again and abuse me to all ends and back after he chewed your ass out. And I'm sorry. But I wasn't going to announce that to your relatives back during Tornado's little interrogation."

A smile toyed with the corner of his perfect lips.

*Kiss mine. Kiss!*

He gently massaged my neck with his fingers.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?" Please. Dammit. I stared at those soft tanned lips.

"No." They fluttered. "I don't want to get carried away."

Hell. I slid my gaze over the curved lines of his circle beard and nose, up his nose's ridge, to his smiling eyes.

"You're a little sore, Kitten," he said as if he was protecting me.

I could have punched him. "You can't remember anything?" How could he shift into such a powerful creature and not recall what happened? "I'm pretty certain you liked it as much as I did."

His hand fell away.

Apparently, he decided I'd recovered emotionally enough to stop implementing his soothing touch to twist answers out of me during his grilling. Come on. I'd confessed his penis was the most amazing thing on the planet. He didn't have anything to worry about now. So, did this mean I was an asset or still just his pain in the ass?

"I have something for you," he rose and foraged through the baskets under his bed.

He had no idea what he had hidden away. One incredible ass-et. Not in the basket, genius. How had I managed to choose the Shifter packing that weapon? Nobody could ever know. I'd become the target of desperate women out to ensure Jackal was mate-less because of that extraordinary tail.

He shoved the basket back under the bed and turned, rising.

With a tin whistle. And a devilish smile.

My subconscious took over and I was suddenly in his arms holding the shiny silver pipe.

I couldn't play more than two songs on one. Because I'd lost mine back when I was seventeen. "Where did you find this? Toby said he didn't have any musical instruments."

He placed the cool lightweight metal into my palm. "I know who has what." He winked. "Do you know how to play one?"

"Enough." I could have died from joy. I wrapped my fingers around the cold metal.

He found me an instrument. Why? It wasn't like he was tired of being with me. Or I needed something else to keep me busy. Out of his business. But he traded for top dollar toys. "Thank you." I wasn't going to argue. I'd mull all of this over later. "You really need to stop spending your money on things to entertain me. We'll wish we could trade for food, warm clothes, medicine, or ammunition during the starving days of winter."

He snorted and hugged me against the long hard length of his body. "Kitten, I've got plenty of cash to take care of you."

Did he? "Oh? You're wealthy?" I scanned his barely humble abode.

"I've been alone working for Tornado since I was eighteen. Two years younger than Steel. I've had money to burn since then and nobody to spoil." He slanted his mouth with the turn of his head and leaned down to plant a sucking smooch on my lips.

A kiss. Really soul-strumming. Deeply gripping. Bottoming out low in my belly. I couldn't do anything but open my lips and beg him to claim me with his tongue. He obliged with a deep thrust of his rough muscle.

Cougar sighed.

He sucked his tongue away, retreating enough to study my eyes.

My knees wobbled.

Come on, knees! Lock.

"Anytime I find something to engage your mind, Kitten, I'll bring it back to you."

Please. And tell me why. It couldn't hurt to hear those three little words. "Why?"

## Chapter Twelve

My mate tightened his hold on me a moment where we stood inside our sparsely-furnished abode. "You're my mate, Sierra. My job is to keep you happy."

Nice answer. I shot him a smile. "I love the tin whistle. Thank you."

He chuckled and released me. "I think you should help the kids today at the school. Or they'll worry you're laid up in bed broken beyond repair."

At least he was being thoughtful, worrying I had some concealed injury from last night's Wolf encounter. I could deal with considerate. Maybe he didn't feel as strapped with me as I had feared. Or he's coming to a point where I have value for him. Chalking that estimation up to lust wouldn't work. His mind wasn't overwhelmed with lust every moment of every day. And our forced mating had more to do with reality than romantic convenience. We both needed time to establish value in each other. So, I'd give him time. He certainly wanted some.

\* \* \* \*

After a long afternoon explaining atoms and cells to twelve students between age six and twelve, I played the guitar for the village's Normals at dinner. The music would have been soothing if I'd sat among the audience. But twelve curious minds capable of shooting questions as quickly as Black Betty doled out precious bullets wore me out today. I strummed the taut nickel wires playing something Spanish I'd reduced to memory one summer I spent with my parents long ago in New York City's little fiefdom.

My gut gurgled at the smell of roasted potatoes.

Tornado penetrated the edge of the crowd of families eating sausage, potatoes, and mustard greens. He cast me a brief glance where I sat on a boulder and played music.

No singing. I'd talked myself hoarse with explaining the basics of plant and animal life. And why should I work harder after working all day? I deserved a meal!

Tornado sauntered through the sea of diners, nodding at those who made eye contact with him, heading toward where Jackal leaned against a tree trunk, his arms crossed. Jackal stood about ten steps from me.

Probably guarding me.

Tornado's gaze scanned my direction again. His brief glance hinted he doubted I could kill his ass.

I would. Give me a chance. All I needed was the right motivation. The bastard.

Tornado walked the five steps past Jackal to Sue's table and kept her talking while she served him his supper.

What was said, I couldn't tell over the tune from my guitar.

Jackal eyed me with a questioning look.

Whatever he wondered remained equally unsaid.

Keezia shuffled across the edge of the village's throng and headed directly toward me.

How did the blind priestess know where I was? Of course, the music.

Jackal took a few casual steps to a tree directly behind me.

"Little Mongoose?" Keezia almost rasped.

*Rip out her throat,* Cougar snarled.

A simple *go away* is more human, cat! Why don't you crawl back to where you rested before sex with Jackal? You're driving me insane.

*Must stay with mine.*

I've been cursed beyond measure.

Jackal's eyebrows arched.

I guess there was no avoiding the priestess.

Keezia hobbled over to stand before me, honing in on my spicy Spanish rhythm.

I wasn't going to stop playing to speak with her.

She scowled at me.

Waiting. Where were Bounders when you needed one to devour a person?

My song finally ended.

"Good evening, Keezia," Jackal rumbled.

"I know you're there, Jackal." Keezia cackled.

Evil annoying woman. "What do you want?"

"There's a meeting. You must go."

I don't think so. "If it's associated with you, I'm not interested."

"You will be, little mongoose. It's a gathering of minds. Of powerful spirits. You must join them. To meet your destiny."

Go choke on a breath. "That would have been a gathering for my mother. Go bother someone else, Keezia."

She pointed the upper tip of her knobby cane at me like it was fist. "Your dame lives through you. Through the power welling inside you. And you will go. Sooner or later."

"I don't know what you're referring to. I embrace my sire's perspective. Mother only struggled to turn me with my apprenticeship to the sisterhood. So," I smiled futilely at the blind bat, "you're wasting your time and energy on me." I rose, slung my guitar strap over my shoulder, and bumped into Jackal who'd relocated to stand a step behind me.

He nodded toward Sue.

Since my gut snarled for food, I didn't argue. "Good night, Keezia."

We sat back at our table in our lodge before I could think about anything other than White Priestess words.

"What was Keezia rambling about?" Jackal asked.

"I have no idea."

He thoughtfully stabbed at his potatoes. "She's always acted like a soothsayer. Like someone with something to share. To better life."

"How many years has she been at Death Summit?"

He eyed me, holding a bite of golden potatoes still. "Six. Apparently, she was wandering, stopped for the night, and decided to stay. Tornado didn't argue. He likes having her around to ease some of the tension folks need in turning to the safety offered by belief in the supernatural." He tucked the food between his tanned lips. "Then she lost her eyesight. She could no longer wander."

I preferred him casual and open like this. We seemed normal. Married. And there was much to be said for the comfort in that type of union. Like I had a normal future ahead of me. And it was about time I had some normalcy in my life.

"You look like you enjoyed working with the kids, Kitten."

Almost as much as I do sitting here. "Yes. But they exhaust me."

One of his dark eyebrows arched. "You're tired?"

Not if you're shape shifting. I chuckled and gnashed into a piece of brown sausage. "I'm never too tired to spend time with you."

Mischief glinted in his eyes. "You were the other night."

Oops. "Well, I was."

"Why? I did something that angered you."

Oh, I didn't want to go there. "Just let it go, Jackal."

"Why? There shouldn't be anything between us. And when you turned away from me, there was something between us."

I studied his serious green eyes. What would he do? Would I be stupid for ruining this comfortable oasis we finally reached in our relationship?

"Kitten?" he cooed.

The conspiratorial twinkle in his eyes couldn't be ignored.

"Alright! Enough. I know you just used me to make Sessily leave Death Summit. There. It doesn't bother me anymore—"

"What?" His spine straightened, and he grew deathly serious. "Sessily had nothing to do with you and I. She tried to come between us. But *I* took the woman *I* wanted."

Well, I gave him the opportunity. But I wasn't going to note that with the acidic tone he used.

"Sierra, I did not use you for anything other than some deep-rooted subconscious need I have a hard time defining. And that's the Gods-be-damned truth. I would never want you to think otherwise." He shoved up from the table, knocking his chair over, to pace out a trail across the shadowy room.

I sighed. "See why I didn't want to discuss it. I'd already come to grips with the issue by finding work to keep myself out of your way, and, then, realizing your actions were genuine with last night's events."

He whirled to face me, hands planted on his hips. Muscles bulging on his bare arms. "I believed myself better at relationships than I am. I'm sorry. I didn't want you to suffer any more than what you would through your unavoidable grief."

Guilt pinched deep inside my chest.

Why did I suddenly feel horrible? He'd always done everything to make me the happy person in our relationship. I stared at my dark soggy pile of mustard greens. "I'm sorry, Jackal. I didn't mean to repay your kindness with blithering callousness. You deserve better."

His pants whispered as he kicked up a wind, propping up his chair, and descending into the creaking wood. "Enough of that. Let's play chess when we finish. Or would you rather play cards?"

I'd rather get him riled up where he whipped out an enormous ribbed erection. But I wanted him to know how much I appreciated him for everything. Not just sex. "Maybe I can teach you a card game I loved when I was young?"

He smiled. "Is it easier to learn than poker?"

"Yes. *War* is just about which cards are greater than others. I could go on for hours though."

\* \* \* \*

*How does she get the aces and face cards?* Jackal sprawled out on one side on the bed propped up on an elbow, just wearing camouflage pants, wondering at the coincidences he experienced with his mate. Playing *War*. Sierra sat across from me, slapping cards down faster than I could pick them up. "How do you do that, Kitten?"

She grinned. "It's all in the luck of the draw. I have no idea which card is up next. Let's blame fate if that's easier than tossing around probability."

"No talking like Keezia." I threw down a two of diamonds.

She dropped the two of hearts on top of my card.

That's my sign from love. "I surrender! Let's be done with this, or I'll be here all night. And I have *other* things in mind." Oh yes. She loved the way my mind worked at bedtime.

She chuckled and picked up the cards. "Sometimes, you have to just quit or blow your brains out in *War*. For the record, I was winning." She winked.

Women. "So losers dig trenches? Or do the subjugated have far worse duties?" Of which I could think of a few associated with bed service.

She threw her head back laughing.

Kitten wouldn't be laughing when I taught her not to play games with large prisoners of war. I shoved up from the bed to push her back onto the brown bedspread and pin her wrists over her head.

"No fair. I won! You surrendered." She pretended to try to wriggle out from beneath my body, her head rocking side to side atop the haze of her golden hair spread out on the bedding.

Feeling her laughter only hardened my *determination* to please my captor. "Maybe I *let* you win."

She met my gaze with surprise. "Ha! You'll have to pay for that lie now that you've got me where you want me." She arched her hips against my swollen *determination*. Nice attempt to lull me into a false sense of security so I could abuse her in the most carnal of ways.

Those plump heart-shaped lips were just inches from mine.

Waiting. Parting. So ready.

Hot breath eased from those sweet lips. "Jackal," she whispered.

"Shall I fight my master? Or conquer her?"

Her eyes closed until half-shuttered. "I became your conquest the first time you touched me." She latched onto my lower lip and sucked like a good little captive after her little a confession.

All my blood drained into my cock.

The most useful tool of interrogation. Who mastered whom with the first touch? I remember a sleek little golden blonde rubbing intoxicating friction all over my body inside a tank. Enough to conjure my Wolf. Gods to peel my little trapped heart's clothes off.

But she *was* sore.

My fault. I pulled away from her sucking mouth and met her gaze. "Kitten, you're sore."

"Nope! The winner gets to make the call. Be lucky I'm not demanding you shift. Tornado's probably got his ear pressed to our door. The ass."

She was so Gods-be-damned right. "Don't worry. I barred the door." I shot her a wink.

"There you go. Taking care of me again." She smooched her lips, blowing me a kiss, and tugged one of her wrists free.

Probably because I wasn't holding them with much strength. I released the other one. "Well, somebody has to do it, right."

Her hand slid around my neck and slanted her mouth to kiss mine. "I won't argue with that. But for someone groaning about a woman like Sessily, I bet you're at fault with your manner of *conquest*. Now lower that intoxicating mouth of yours down here and give me a kiss."

Oh I wanted to bite her neck right beneath her sassy little mouth. Taste the salty iron tinge of her blood that had to sting from all her feistiness. I sank my lips to the rapid pulse of her jugular and decided to tease her by trailing my tongue along the length of that vein.

"So much for cooperation." She bowed her neck away from me and chuckled. "Mmm, Jackal. You really know how to keep me happy."

My little conquest was about to become extremely happy.

"Let me," she said, shoving an arm into my chest, pushing me away.

"What?"

"I want to have my way with you. Gods, you're just one big sexy muscle."

We'd have to play the game of *War* more often.

\* \* \* \*

Cougar purring, Sierra straddled her mate's waist as he stretched out on the bed in the dying firelight with his remarkably delectable arms folded behind his head. Smug without the expression to prove he knew he was gorgeous. But he deserved to be with all those damned muscles bulging at me. "You're flexing, aren't you?"

His passive expression strained not to grin. "Why do you ask?"

"Jackal, if there's one thing you don't have to do with your amazing body is flex your muscles. Nobody can miss them. Ever."

He growled, a strange little questioning sound.

The deep sound was almost as invigorating as the view.

*Mine!* Cougar panted.

Oh, if he only knew what he did to all of me. I slid my palms up his washboard abs to his mounded pectorals and watched his eyes flash to yellow. "Don't shift, Jackal. Big Bad Tornado is going to blow our house down if you do." But, Gods, to have his Wolf ramming inside me again.

"Come here and kiss me." He chuckled without moving an inch.

Is that what he wanted? I leaned into the solid trunk of waist and pressed my sore beaded nipples against his bronze-colored flat ones. Even though my accursed bra and shirt stood between us. "I will when I get good and ready."

He groaned, craning his neck to watch my body touch his.

What would he do when I took off my shirt? "Do you like that, baby?" I whispered, arching my lower back, thrusting my ass a bit into the air like a stretching cat.

He gurgled a growl and bucked his hips, shifting my body as I hunched over him with my bent arms supporting my frame. "Kitten, you have no idea how much I *like* everything about you."

Mmm. I do believe I like his serious bed-mask as much as his standard compassionate gaze. If he only knew how ready I am to fall on his hard cock, gliding the thickness all the way down to the root where I could squirm in delight until stars burst in my vision. But I wasn't ready to give into my needs. He had to agonize a little. Just a little more. After all, I won the card game! "Tell me what you *like* about me." I nibbled at one stony pearl of a nipple, perfectly round and knobby, poised, crowning the succulent edge of the bulge of his pec, raking my teeth across the tiny stone, over and over until he threw his head back and grabbed my ass, pinning me against his rearing solid abdomen.

Maybe women didn't make love to him.

Maybe they made him do all the work?



What a travesty. I could understand why after lying conquered by him in his bed. But he was so glorious. Who wouldn't want to caress and explore his meandering curvature? All the winding firm lines. All the dips and dimples.

*We do!* Cougar whispered.

Yes. I wanted to know him blindfolded. For what reasons? I couldn't grasp any answer other than instinct at the moment. I just wanted his body to brand my memory beyond incredible orgasms. I wanted to recall every twist of his iron form like the parts of Black Betty when I broke her down and cleaned her. In the dark. Minus my vision.

I wanted to know him that intimately.

Make him a part of me.

My heart froze.

Was this love? No. It had to be lust. All I wanted was to take his glorious body and abuse it. Or push him over the edge. Summon his Wolf to ravage me beyond breathing. Who cared if he split me in two? I'd die knowing what Shifter law warned to avoid. Stupid laws. I'd have sex with the man trapped inside his body. His Wolf. Hidden inside the security of his cloak of humanity. And I'd be content to depart this life after loving the real Jackal.

"Oh, Kitten," he gasped, sucking in a deep breath. "Never in my life did I imagine giving my heart to a woman could be so damned fulfilling."

He gave his heart to me? "So I possess your heart?"

"Kitten, you possess everything." His rough palms glided beneath my shirt, up my back, soothing me with a firm massage, back and forth to my bra strap. And he kept curling his hips into my ass, promising how his cock would plunge into me.

My inner channel clutched for him.

Maybe I was possessive of him? Sessily had ultimately pissed me off. Yes. She had by default. I *was* insulted by her. Okay, maybe by what he had said. But she was the root of the emotion. And, speaking of roots, his root would feel delightful when his shaft sheathed inside me, burying his hot seed in my soul. I trailed out my tongue to lathe the tip down one mound of a male breast, between the pair, and lazily lick the shadows of his ribs, one row after another, sliding my moist groin over his hard trapped erection as I slithered down his body to suck at pliant flesh surrounding the hollow of his navel.

Gods, his hairless trunk was as smooth as fine leather. Until right above the waistline of his pants where some dark hairs curled. Enticingly. Seducing my thoughts to dwell upon the button imprisoning his teasing arousal.

The bulging steel lurched.

His hands grabbed me under the arms and tried to heave me upward. "Kitten, oh, honey, come here."

I lifted my head and snarled at him. "No. I won *War*. I get to have my way with you."

His grasp fizzled, and he curled his fingers into my loose hair, growling.

I planted my mouth on the slightly bulging supple skin of his waist—the little extra flesh making him so damned beautiful from every angle. The meat I yearned to stroke. Devour. So soft. So pliable. I sucked in a mouthful of said magnificent flesh and toyed with the round hardness of his pants' ubiquitous button.

He snarled, arching into my teeth and fingers.

Gods, to suck that concrete rod into my mouth.

To run my tongue along its long velvety full length while he mindlessly squirmed under my power. Oh, yes. He needed to realize the extent of my appreciation.

Yes. I wanted Cougar's *mine*.

Blame it on my Cougar and our Gods-be-damned mating or simple lust. He was mine. I plucked the buttonhole free.

He roared.

I rolled my gaze to his. "Calm down, Jackal. I haven't finished claiming my prize."

He slammed his skull into the bed and clawed at the brown blanket.

If I laughed, he'd take over in a fit of rage. So, I choked back my thoughts and unzipped his trophy.

Thick. Engorged. Jutting. Damp with his thoughts of mating. The smooth head was so damned soft I just wanted to sit on it. Envelope the firm roundness inside my sheathe. Over and over. But that wouldn't be fun. I wanted to be in control. I tugged his pants down as much as possible, revealing his jutting phallus.

So erotic.

Perfect. Just to give in. But I wanted to tease him a bit longer. After all, I won the game.

He sucked in a breath, snarling.

On the edge of transmutation.

He had to be smelling my arousal.

Fine. As long as he left me to my exploration he could snort his ass off. I curled my fingers around his pliant shaft and gently squeezed down the silken length of him.

He gurgled and hissed, thrusting his cock through the pipe of my palm.

That's it. Poor baby. He probably had a tough time controlling his Wolf. I knew how to *help* with euphoria. I trailed my tongue out to circle the firm curves of the head of his erection.

He moaned, slithering into the mattress. But he didn't interfere.

He tasted of salt.

Smelled of musky Jackal. Gods, I took him into my mouth, sliding his thick cock across my tongue, sucking him witless.

He obliged my efforts with more wild noise.

His thickness seemed to swell.

Could his hard-on grow more engorged? I closed my eyes and memorized the feel of him as I bobbed my head along his splendid length.

My channel clenched mindlessly at the promise of bigger and better.

Wolf cock.

Yes. Cougar purred.

His shaft suddenly sprouted embedded rings. Hard. Ribbed. He'd shifted. But rested as quietly as before. Fidgeting in agony. Controlling himself.

Good Wolf. I sucked to the tip of his turgid flesh and studied the scene.

His Wolf coat thickened with each of my breaths as he observed me down the length of his nose. His hands had clawed holes through the blanket.

Hanging on to what was left of his humanity, to follow my instructions. Poor baby. We'd be cold later if he didn't stop shredding the bedding. I ran my hand along his abrupt ridges of his shaft and noticed my fingertips were a good two inches apart around his member.

Forget teasing him. I wanted to be plugged to the gills like last night. But not until I spared my clothes being ripped off. I rose, backed off of his beastly form, and wiggled out of my pants.

He watched me, growling, head bent.

But he didn't move.

"That's right, Jackal. You wait there." Talking was bad. Might set off his Wolf. The Gods know Wolves were alpha males. But for some reason, he was holding back. Most likely because he remembered something about last night.

Oh, what the hell. He could ram me up against the wall. Burrow his way inside me. Over and over. And I'd scream my pleasure so Tornado could hear it for years to come. Because Jackal had the forethought to lock the two by four in place across the door. "Do you want me, baby?"

Jackal laid there, his cock jutting up, thrusting to some silent beat, his arms spread out to the fistfuls of bedding he clutched, lying in the Christians' crucifix position, watching me. His face had completely shifted.

He roared so loudly I thought the roof would collapse.

So much for Tornado being the big bad Wolf. I pulled off my tank top and reached for my hard little plastic bra clasp. "When you're ready to take me, Jackal, I want you to come inside me—"

He lifted off the bed in such a frenzy I didn't have time to pop the clasp open.

## Chapter Thirteen

My Wolf shoved my shoulder blades into the wall's cool hard wood and tried to thrust his enormous erection into my narrow channel. Regardless of how wet my sex was I simply wasn't stretched for *that* invading mass. Yet.

He snarled, grabbed my hips, and watched himself pump the tip of his massive penis in a little deeper with each of his thrusts.

Gods, that was a sexy sight. Move faster. Plunge harder. Stretch me with agonizing incredible viciousness. I leaned my head into the stiff wall and watched him down my nose.

He focused solely on gaining entry.

Thank the Gods. How he felt inside me before was indescribable. "Hurry, baby." I slid my arms around his furry neck and tried to relax my inner muscles so he could ram up that last few inches. Right to the little bundle of nerves I couldn't wait for him to find.

With one final growl, he practically shoved into my throat and slid a palm around to squeeze my ass with his claws. He made a strange purring sound and leaned his teeth down to scrape my clavicle, like he dared me to chance escape.

I'd rather be shackled by his cock, but this wasn't a moment to be choosy.

He started moving, pulling out of me, completely, then spearing me to the tickling wiry hairs of his iron-hard balls, and retreating again. To thrust. And plunge. Instantly setting off my wave of orgasm. And another. And another. I couldn't do anything but cling to his shoulders, fingers fisted in the hair of his back, eyes shut, the rods in my eyes firing in blinding arrays of pattern-less fireworks behind my eyelids while the ridges of his massive cock stroked me breathless.

He was mine. Cougar's approval or not. All mine. I cried out over and over.

He threw his head back, roared, then turned me to the bed, where he leaned me down, rather carefully for a Shifter in wolf's cloak, and rammed into me one last time on the soft mattress.

Whatever he was up to didn't matter. I just clutched his hairy shoulders and cried for breath while the tides of my latest orgasm thoroughly sparked every one of my nerves into overwhelming electrical jolts.

He crouched against my chest, panting, staring into my eyes, his cock still speared me in astonishing perfection.

Gods, wouldn't he keep going? "Pump me, baby. Hard. Fast." I rocked my hips.

He snorted, then growled, withdrawing his scraping cock with measured slow friction.

The bastard. He knew I wanted him hard and fast. "Please," I whined.

He rose, flipped me over, and impaled me ball's deep.

Doggy style was delightful when your Shifter was all furred out. I grabbed the headboard and clutched for dear life as he took me over edge after edge of blissful mind-numbing wave of ecstasy.

So many orgasmic *edges* bombarded me that I couldn't tell if they were waxing or waning. And Jackal's strengthening growls defined nothing as we headed toward his release. It had to be approaching. How on earth could anyone being fucked by him not find release?

But pondering his problem didn't help with my cheek being ground into the suffocating bedding. I arched my ass up higher, hoping to gain him a better angle.

His pace increased, pumping, grinding, lunging. Roaring to the point there was no beginning or end to the sound.

Stars swirled in my mind's eyes.

Sharp pain cut into my shoulder.

Teeth.

His hips rammed into me and stopped. His cock jerked. And lurched. Heat erupted inside me. And my mate growled into my skin in short forgiving gasps. So forgiving my pain dissipated and a pounding at the door finally registered with my brain.

"Sierra!" Tornado yelled.

"I'm alright. Go back to bed."

The rapping halted. "Put him to bed. Christ. No one can sleep with all that racket."

That's one point for Sierra.

\* \* \* \*

Sierra awoke, wrapped in Jackal's sleeping human form where his warm chest covered hers like a blanket. We'd slept in the nude—not the best state for Guardians who just might have to leap from bed to save the villagers during the dark hours of the night. Most preferred to sleep dressed enough to dash out into the darkness without worrying about running into some child in the buff. But he'd fallen asleep after ravishing me. And I had no intentions of ever complaining.

He stirred as if realizing I woke and lifted his head to look into my eyes with the most tender gaze. "Good morning, Kitten."

Cougar purred.

"Do you remember anything?" I asked, ignoring Cougar.

"Oh, yes." One corner of his mouth twisted into a wicked little smile. "I remember all of it."

Without even seeing the shredded covers? "Why this time? And what's your Wolf's favorite position?"

"Sierra, he likes any position. But he's really fond of just ramming into you from behind. Call him a dog if you must." He choked a chuckle almost into nonexistence.

"I'm glad. Because I really like it when he does that." I giggled like an idiot. "You can only imagine how much."

He slid a palm up my belly and across my breast to brush his fingers against my cheek. "Oh, I think I can." He shot me a grin full of sparkling perfect teeth.

His body regenerated them every time he shifted. So, no rotten snaggle-toothed Shifters in a girl's bed. He was so adorable. So kissable. I pressed my lips to the stubble on his cheek and planted a smooch there. Then moved up to his temple, the tip of his nose, and finally his velvety lips, only to draw back and gaze into his green eyes.

I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to him. He was more important to me than my family, friends, and John. He took me beyond standard love to overwhelming possession. And I wanted him to hang onto me. To be safe. To survive with me.

"What's the sadness I see in your eyes, Kitten?"

Gods, I couldn't admit how much I needed him. Could I? "Nobody ever made me feel like you do before." I slid a palm around the curve at the base of his skull.

He touched the rounded tip of his nose against mine. "I know what you mean." He studied my lips, then my eyes. "Like if something happened to you, I'd die. But that's a byproduct of *the marking*, isn't it?"

So much for being rational. What was wrong with uncontrollable love? Love? Had I thought of love?

He snuggled his stubble down into the crook of my neck and hummed a short happy tune of possession before kissing me into a chill.

A knock rapped at the door.

Jackal growled. "Who's disturbing me?"

"Don't mention disturbing anyone after all the roaring you did long into the night," Tornado thundered.

I threw a palm over my mouth to hide the laughter spilling out of me.

"My meeting room in five minutes," Tornado ordered.

Jackal chuckled. "Since I don't have a clock, he can't bitch about my tardiness." He kissed my lips gently, shoved off the bed, yanked on his pants, and left.

## Chapter Fourteen

Jackal found Tornado waiting alone in the shadowy Shifter meeting lodge where nothing but embers popped in the fire pit. Apparently, the clan leader wasn't concerned about last night's racket. Besides, it's not like anybody ever lost control and mated in Wolfskin. So, why had he interrupted my morning with Sierra? "You insisted on my attendance for?"

Tornado arched a dark eyebrow and swiped his tongue along his upper teeth.

As if I've behaved rashly in my questioning his motives. But there was no reason short of blood-letting and invasion to call me out of bed.

"Keezia's rambling," Tornado announced.

"Oh, shit. Since when do Shifters give a rat's ass about soothsaying?"

Tornado scrubbed a hand down his face. "We've got problems. She wants your mate to participate in some melding of priestess minds."

"Sierra refuses to have anything to do with the old hag."

Tornado's stare intensified for emphasis. "Jackal, Keezia's stirring up trouble among the Normals. Their superstitions are getting the better of them."

"Sierra's done nothing but help the children and save many a Shifter's ass during the Bounder invasion. They can't think otherwise about her."

"Well, there's the Sessily incident."

"Don't feed me that bullshit. Everyone who has lived here the past year knows Sessily's game. And the only reason Sessily is pissed about my mating with Sierra is that you asked me to humor the bitch. I did one night and couldn't stomach her. I permanently attached myself to a different female. Sessily needs to deal with reality."

"I'm not pointing fingers other than to make it known Keezia is using her wit to ensure Sierra has no choice but to join in the gathering."

"I won't make my mate do anything she doesn't want to do."

"I'm not asking you to force her. Just explain what's happening. And for the piss-ass Gods' sakes, warn her before something goes awry. I know she dislikes me. I realize she wouldn't take a warning from me as in her best interest. But she'll listen to you. We need her here."

Why? "She's my mate. I need her. It's my right to have my mate. Do you think you can make me give up Sierra?"

Tornado turned sideways, eyeing me with one eye in profile. "Her mother was a Cougar. I know. I saw her shift."

And that could only mean Sierra carried the gene. So my little kitten either had the X-chromosome turn on or not. Why the hell did she hide it instead of trust me? We're mated for life! I slid my gaze to the dark wood of the door. "And this is a problem for the clan?"

"No. I wanted you to know. It's your problem. And don't accuse her of anything. If she's a Cougar, the clan must protect her. But it's better if nobody ever learns. Otherwise, somebody will inevitably trade your tails to the aliens. Just let it go and keep your eyes open. You're the strongest smartest male of the lot. She needs your intelligence."

He was right. "Understood."

"Never forget. She chose. And you stepped up to be chosen."

\* \* \* \*

Someone tapped at Sierra's door about ten minutes after Jackal departed through the village's gate to take Demon and two teenage Shifters hunting. Tornado had avoided me like an airborne venereal disease after the rowdy night a week ago. And Sue didn't come by except in between meals. So who rapped upon my door? I squeezed a pistol's trusty grip at my hip and pulled the creaking slab of wood inward.

Keezia's gray hair shone in the early morning's sunlight where the short elderly woman stood. "Sierra, I would speak with you."

"You're kidding. After so many children's parents complained about my strange association with the Rites-of-the-Goddess sisterhood, I can't imagine you'd dare approach me for chatting. I'd rather put a hole between your eyes than engage in mature debate."

Keezia's mouth straightened into an unhappy line. "I had nothing to do with those parents."

Jackal explained what he'd heard from the Shifters. "You ran your mouth, making me appear the nutcase. And you know most Normals are Christian on this continent. Their aversion to priestesses only makes me think you had ulterior motives. So, go away." I shoved the whining door at her tousled form.

Keezia lodged a combat boot in the doorway. "Just speak with me. There is much you must know. About your Cougar mating with a Shifter. Things never discussed until necessary."

*Rip her throat out*, Cougar roared.

Maybe I should listen to my inner cat because Keezia threw the Cougar crap in my face. What wouldn't my mother have told me? Besides, a White priestess never lost her purity through mating. Keezia was a virgin. "Oh? You fancy yourself an expert? When were you ever mated? Let alone to a Shifter. Nobody knows enough about Cougars to make assessments about them anyway."

Keezia brushed a palm along the door, shoving the hard wood into my chest. "These are things all priestesses learn when they reach twelve years training or earn a color status."

Maybe they did. But I was no longer any fraction of a believer.

"I know things about the aliens reserved for upper level sisters. You must hear my words."

"Or you'll torture me with your power? I'm not buying it, Keezia." Forget forcing me onto my knees and ripping my hair out. Not today. The evil bitch would try it! I shoved the door against her ankle.

She didn't budge, the evil old manipulative bat.

"Get out of my lodge!"

"A few private minutes of your time, Sierra. You can bind my wrists behind my back. Beat me for all I care. But you must know what lies in your future. Not even the Guardians can tell you what I know."

Bind her? Now that might be fun. I could leave her tied somewhere. A blind woman who couldn't use her arms would be truly vulnerable. "Alright. Just a minute. I need to find some cording."

Within minutes I looped rope around her wrists and shoved her into one of my table's squeaking chairs.

"You mated with his Wolf?" Keezia demanded.

So, what was her problem? Never got any? The White-Priestess virgin had to remain celibate to conjure the power she had used on me before. But that didn't matter at the moment. I



stood, feet firmly planted apart, studying her crow's feet where she squinted at me as if the action might produce the answers she wanted. "I thought the particulars of our mating were common knowledge after my mate's hullabaloo a few nights ago. Especially since Guardians are quite loud when in their Wolfskins."

"Yes," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "but only the sisters know what the result is of such a mating."

What is she babbling about? Just get on with disclosing information. "Mother told me many things."

"Did she tell you how the Cougar gene is passed on to offspring?"

"I assumed the process is through normal means. And that would be as defined by science. Not Rites-of-the-Goddess dogma. Why would Mother need to explain things otherwise?"

Keezia nodded with a sly smile. "Because she's a Cougar. She would know firsthand about the recessive gene. Attached to the sex chromosome. The X. And if a Shifter sire and the Cougar dame carry the gene, the daughters from the union bear the gift."

More like death sentence. "So, you're telling me this because..."

"Your dame told me you're a Cougar. You must know the risks you take since you encourage your mate to don his Wolfskin when mating."

"I don't believe you. You're playing games with me."

"I know your story spoken from your dame's very lips. You first shifted two months before your fifth birthday because your sire journeyed to New York City without you. And during his absence you had nightmares. Your dame found you shifted in your bed." Keezia's cataract-clouded eyes tried to watch me.

Could she detect my reaction to the truth? I was five when I first shifted. Mother must have planned to have me join the sisterhood to protect me that far back. And that's why Keezia called Mother my dame and toyed with giving me the nickname *little mongoose*—a hint that she knew. With truth came responsibility. I had to accept Keezia's message. "Even if what you say is true, why do I need to know these things *now*?"

"Because Cougars are born when a sire mates in his Wolfskin." She shook her head a bit. "We don't understand why the connection is there. But always this is so."

Okay, slow down on begging for the rise of the Wolf during sex. Or curse my daughters. "You said you know more about aliens. What did you mean?"

She licked her weathered lips. "One priestess escaped from her captivity aboard an alien spacecraft."

"Who?"

"Her identity is unimportant. What you need to know is that you must never be caught. The aliens use Cougars for breeding their own young. Unless they have your mate on hand and decide his offspring would be prime shifting stock. Then they might choose to breed you in captivity with your mate to harvest your children. Either way, your womb is what they're after. We still don't know what they do with those select few offspring."

Maybe what she said could be true. "So this is how you know how the genetics work? After all, the sisterhood isn't scientific like Shifters."

"The sister I speak of was bred by the aliens and bore them a male half breed before she managed to escape. She never nursed the child or saw him after giving birth. They were taken from her. Coldly. As if she were no more than a brood animal."

“Never risk capture, Sierra. You must start keeping your sexual encounters quiet in the village. Normals can’t be trusted. They know what to watch for when it comes to hunting Shifter couples for trade with aliens. The aliens teach them the signs to look for when choosing their prey. You must be careful now. You never know when a traitor lives among your happy community.”

“Okay. So what if I believe you. What other reasons do I have to take care other than just remaining alive?” Besides, the villagers were rich. They didn’t need blood money.

Keezia blinked slowly. “Know Jackal’s seed is potent when he dons his Wolfskin. You’re carrying his child now. That is the way breeding has always been with the Cougars protected by the sisterhood.”

Pregnant? My knees wobbled.

*Mine!*

And hunted even more because of a pregnancy.

Something knotted in my throat.

A big choking lump of White priestess. I’m in so much trouble now. And Jackal has no idea. I gulped. “Dammit, Keezia, your sisterhood is really pissing me off in its defunct mode of operation. You should be passing on this information to all Cougar sisters. Who else knows about my little problem?” I ground out.

Her expression went blank. “I’ve told no one. It serves nobody any good to know. Only you.”

“Not even Tornado! Tell no one,” I spat a warning through grated teeth.

“Have you heard of Seaside Haven?” Keezia changed the subject without so much as an indication of cooperation.

Mother had Father take us to Seaside Haven twice before I turned twelve for sisterhood gatherings. What did it matter? “Yes.” I sighed, tired of the games.

“Go there. The other Cougar priestesses are banding together to plan how to use Cougar powers against aliens. Much will depend on using your psychic power—”

“I have no psychic power.” And I wouldn’t be misled into ranting about educating Cougars and keeping all other humans in the dark. Hell, this was one of Keezia’s ruses to get me to do what she wanted.

Keezia nodded slowly, oblivious to my thoughts. “Yes, you do have a power. It differs from mine because it’s associated with the Cougar gene and has strength in you. You merely need to accept the gift to conjure it from the depths of your soul.”

Okay, this discussion was going south fast. “I’ll think about it.”

\* \* \* \*

Beneath the clear blue sky, Jackal rode through the gate on a haughty buckskin stallion with a doe carcass hung across the saddle between his hips and the pommel. He spotted me where I leaned against the wall trying to conceal my swelling joy caused by the killer-protector-strength I saw in him.

Safe now? Maybe. I was actually hiding far from our lodge.

Anything to keep from bumping into old Keezia again today. The discussion we’d had was more than enough to kick up my fears. I’d tried to process the information. To decide if I could believe any of the details. And all I could do was wish Jackal would hurry home.

The wilderness equaled danger.

Normals could lurk anywhere. I’m a Cougar he unknowingly mated and Keezia can hold it over my head. Or reveal the truth to everyone. Either way, I’m screwed.

Shit. I had enough danger among the civilized since reaching Death Summit.

The other three riders followed Jackal on their horses. Demon and the teenagers. One young redhead had his own kill to gloat over. But my mate sat the invincible hunter. More so than Demon. Something about Demon just seemed inexperienced. Or the problem was everyone looked incompetent in Jackal's shadow.

Jackal steered his mount away from the others, to me, and drew up the reins. "Miss me, Kitten?"

*Mine!*

Of course. Damn, he was so gorgeous, exuding strength, that surely even staunch Christian women would be driven to sin to lie with him. Yes. Hot as sin. I shot him a smile.

He reciprocated with a beaming grin. "Hungry for venison?"

And a whole lot of Jackal. "Yes."

"What happened? You're acting strangely."

"We'll talk later."

He swung his leg over the saddle and planted his combat boots on the hard-packed ground.

Hugging him might make me feel better. Or look suspicious. But I just stood there like a calm mate and tried to act normal while he towered a good six feet plus two inches.

He turned to me, his hulking arm muscles glistening from a day sweating beneath the summer sun. "I need a bath, Kitten. Let me drop this deer at Sue's, and I'll take you down to the pool." He winked.

Nobody delayed his promise.

We were rubbing up lather on each other's slick bodies before I could form a plan to reveal part of what I could safely confess from Keezia's revelation to Jackal.

Facing me, he used his fingernails to gently scratch soap into my shoulder blades where I straddled his hairy thighs in water that came up to the bottom curves of my breasts.

"Do you want to tell me what's bothering you now?" he rumbled.

His strong jaw line didn't provide any comfort when I hid all the Cougar information from him. The Gods know I didn't want anyone else to hear the information I could share either. Anyone could be lurking in the caverns, eavesdropping. "No. It's for your ears only."

"Does it have to do with the school, children, or teaching?" He watched his hands.

Giving me room for thought. I wagged my head and stared at his round nipple.

He placed a fingertip beneath my chin and raised my gaze to his concerned gaze. "I'm sorry about the school. I'd change it if I could. I know how much you enjoyed working with the kids."

I wasn't as tired these days after Ann had warned me to stay away or the children wouldn't be allowed to attend. Better for him now that I had pent up energy when we were together. "It's alright, Jackal."

He planted a sweet little kiss on my lips. "I'll play *War* with you if it'll make you happy since I abandoned you here all day without anything to do. You know how much I hate that game." His cheeks spread in a genuine taunting smile.

The offer was kind, but I read a book on herbal medicine. And it's not like he decided to leave me behind. Only four horses are allowed to leave the village with any party. And he also had responsibilities other than taking care of me. I'm a grown woman. Sufficiently armed. To the hilt. "I know you had duties to perform." I didn't have any problem grinning the admiration I felt for him. "After all, you're the best hunter in the village, and you should share your

knowledge with the youths learning to hunt.” That’s how I picked up my little thing for fire arms. From a teacher.

He snorted, slipping his hands around my lower back, sliding me up his lap until his stiff arousal prevented me from completely melding my belly with his upper body. “You are a tease, little mongoose.” He planted his nose along mine.

Ugh. “I hate that nickname.”

“Then don’t tease me.” He chuckled, rubbing his stubbled cheek against mine.

The teasing made my days so much more interesting. Especially since they’ve become so damned boring. “I can’t stop myself, Jackal. You know you’re hot as sin. I can’t help but point out all the ways you make me,” I cleared my throat, “proud.”

A little smile tugged at his eyes where he turned his forehead, pressing its rounded hardness against mine. “I’m glad I make you proud,” he rumbled.

Oh he felt so wonderful. So warm. So alive. “Let’s go home. I want to tell you what Keezia said.” And wrestle in bed. Quietly.

“Keezia?” He pulled backward to look me in the eye.

“Yes.”

Without another word, Jackal carefully carried me out of the water, dried me off, and helped me dress. He allowed me to button his camouflage pants. But he focused more on doing sweet things for me. We grabbed some beans and rice on the way to our lodge.

“So why did you speak to Keezia today?” he asked as he descended into a creaking chair over our evening meal.

Since he’d barred the door and the windows were shut, I could speak easily. I mixed up my beans and rice. “She said a Shifter in Wolfskin is potent when mating, and that I’m most likely pregnant.” I slid my gaze up to find him gaping.

Was he really surprised? He went after me night and day like he was determined I’d be pregnant within our first month together. “Are you okay?”

“Pregnant?”

Oh, I suppose dropping that news on him was like actually *knowing* I was with child. Shocking. And he had his fear stemming from his mother dying during childbirth. “I didn’t say she was right. I just wanted you to know what she said.”

He studied me, immobile.

Jackal really did have feelings for me. “And she went on about my attending the gathering of sisters in Seaside Haven. That I should go and learn how to use this psychic ability I deny I possess. I do *not* want to go, Jackal.”

He nodded. “Anything else?”

“She says the aliens use Shifters and their mates for breeding more Shifters aboard their spacecraft. That I don’t want to get caught. That the Normals know Shifters are potent when mating in Wolfskin. That Normals watching for signs to know which Shifters will bring good trades with the aliens might be living in the village. She warns us not to have loud sex. Gods, I’m not feeling good about any of this information.”

“Kitten, nobody’s going to lie low in Death Summit to get to you. Hell, you just arrived. And they have to get to you through me.”

“Well, now you know what Keezia’s been insisting to share. She says to tell no one. That you and I are the only people who need to know.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“If I’m hot as sin, you’re soft as sin, Kitten.” Jackal thrust his stiff erection along the fist of his mate’s squeezing moist vise.

*Mmm.* She sucked like a phantom at my neck. Between the grip her legs had on my waist, her hungry mouth marking me, and the clenching inner muscles of her inner channel, my cock would blow any moment. Damn. I wasn’t ready to release. She needed reassurance that all was well. That I’d protect her. I gulped down a deep breath and slowly withdrew along her slick channel.

She whined when I pulled out of the hungry chomping mouth of her sex. “Jackal.”

At least she stopped working on the hickey she liked me to wear around the village. “Roll over,” I whispered.

She growled and rolled onto her side, thrusting that soft ass of hers into my cock the way she always bucked her hips beneath me. “Hurry, baby.”

So much for delaying the inevitable. I grabbed her hips and thrust my hard shaft into her blazing furnace, the Well of Immortality, sinking to the Gods-be-damned hilt.

She squirmed and moaned, bending my aching erection with a twist.

“Gods, yes, Kitten. Like that.” I withdrew a couple inches and thrust back inside her.

To shift. To sink my sharp Wolf teeth into her shoulder. To fit the blessed Well so tightly that all she did was scream endlessly while my hot seed recharged the spring. Her. I couldn’t stop thrusting.

Had to tilt her soft ass.

Had to ram faster.

Had to lean back and close my eyes.

She screamed.

The world exploded.

We floated in brilliant star fall. Hips bucking and grinding. Nothing but my jerking cock mattered as her scream quickly died into a whine. With our dying movements. And all the fucking spasms.

What I’d give to do this in Wolfskin. Nothing compared to the way my ridged hard-on felt squeezed inside her body. Maybe that was how the aliens kept us breeding for their sport. With the mating frenzy caused by experiencing sex after shape shifting. But Keezia was right. No risking my mate’s life. Cougar or not. And Tornado wasn’t going to like hearing how Keezia thought a traitor lived under clan protection.

\* \* \* \*

Uneventful weeks passed while Sierra tried to keep busy during the long boring afternoons. Jackal had been called to duty more often than not, leaving me to play cards, the guitar, and pull the notes to a jig from my memory to play on the tin whistle. But Tornado had left me alone. He didn’t insist I play for the villagers anymore. Probably because he’d fear a riot after the way I was ousted from teaching. So, let the Normals suffer with their insecurities. Their children were the future of our planet. If their children didn’t understand science, Shifters would have to take over and rule Earth. Albeit, an asshole like Tornado could wind up running

the show. But those were the risks Normal morons took. And since they relished in using men like Tornado for protection, it wouldn't be long before someone as strong and asinine reigned supreme.

My stomach growled.

Again. The unruly organ worked overtime these days. Snarling for something that nobody served. Never liking what was on the menu except for bread. I grabbed the extra biscuit Sue passed onto me when Jackal went to breakfast. I had just stayed in the lodge while he went. Away from the censoring gazes.

How could they think I was up to something? Hell, I'd saved them from whoever let the damned Bounders into the village. They probably thought I opened the gate that night! That I tried to kill off all the Christians in Death Summit because I had been a priestess in training. Couldn't they grasp I had no intention of returning to the sisterhood? Human fears never ceased to amaze me. I went from living in isolation in a tree house to living among a bustling community but interacting with next to no one. There was nowhere to go without bumping into someone in this small community.

A buzzing sound barely overpowered the whispering breeze.

Maybe an insect. More like a motor by the way the sound cut out briefly to snarl back to life even stronger. Yes. A motor. I trotted over to the closest scaffold at the log wall and climbed up the equidistant crisscrossing bars of the framework.

The sound's crescendo began chugging.

Slowing? On approach. Probably didn't want to get shot if not from this community. I heaved up the final step and thrust my head above the wall's points to see a dusty black motorcycle veering toward the gate.

The rider was slim even though he wore dark armor. Must be painted metal.

The bike rolled along the base of the wall and turned in through the gateway.

Shoot or not?

Nobody had left on a bike today.

And strangers weren't readily trusted.

Since this person didn't fit the trader description because he had little room for carrying trade goods, I'd just have to be ready to shoot.

The rider thrust a black boot to the ground, stopped the bike, and scanned the growing crowd in the courtyard. Tornado stepped out of his meeting lodge and approached the newcomer with four Guardians.

What would the clan leader do?

The stranger climbed off the motorcycle and began tugging off his armor.

*Her* armor by the light build of her bare arm pulling loose from the plated coat.

*Her?*

Those long toned legs in form-fitting black pants. Those knee-high black boots of clean design. Her helmet's long back and side flaps. She was an *enforcer*, a Rites-of-the-Goddess mercenary.

And if she was here, she'd come for *me*.

## Chapter Sixteen

*I'd know that lean form cloaked in tight black mercenary attire anywhere.* Sierra gulped. My blood sister. We'd vowed to protect each other as Rites-of-the-Goddess sisters who bonded themselves as social siblings. Vowed to save the other. Even if we were captured by aliens. Silly as the oath may sound when we were nine years old and too stupid to know better, our sibling bond brought us closer than any other pledge of friendship.

So, what in the hell did Akita want?

To take me into custody?

To kill me?

I damned sure wasn't going to stand around and take whatever sentence she announced in stride after Keezia's crap. I climbed down the scaffolding frame.

By the time I hopped to the ground, things turned bad fast.

"To what do we owe the blessed sisterhood for your visit?" Tornado condescended.

Apparently, he wasn't up for the sisterhood relocating to Death Summit. Neither was I. Keezia proved sufficiently irritating. Now I'd have to contend with a killing machine.

"I was summoned," Akita enunciated her words perfectly, a skill she learned from her English mother. She shoved off her helmet and hung it on the bike.

"And who had the forethought to summon you?"

Good question. Unfortunately, Tornado was the last person who should be sent in to negotiate. The ass. Especially when Akita had a pistol strapped to each hip, knives jutting from her boot tops, and the cutting stare of a deadly animal. I studied the back of Akita's tank top. "You came for me?"

She turned, anchoring her clear blue emotionless gaze on mine. Her black hair, bobbed short to her neckline in the back but left a good foot long in the front, barely shimmied in the breeze where it framed her angelic features. She faced me with her boots squared beneath her stance of readiness. "I didn't believe the Red Priestess who claimed you were alive."

I halted about five steps from her. "You *would* doubt such a thing from one of the highest ranking sisters." But Akita *would* follow orders as well. Regardless of how gruesome and disheartening those orders might be. I was dead if she came to end my life.

"Of course I would doubt such news. You've been gone forever. Thought dead." Akita's heart-shaped mouth curled with a smile. "It's good to see you alive and well, little mongoose."

Not the nickname. "Well it was good to see you until you used that horrible nickname."

Akita threw her head back, laughing at the sky.

"So, have you come to kill me for my disobedient behavior to Keezia? Or were you sent for other reasons?"

Akita quieted and wagged her head once. "Personal reasons."

Why did that not surprise me? Akita and I got along because she and I were rebels in many senses. That's why she made such a good enforcer. She wasn't weak-willed. Whereas, I had no desire to participate with the sisterhood at all and took the first out that presented itself.

"Why?"

"It isn't safe here for you. Or me, for the record. There is a movement to end the aliens' tyranny. And we are part of the key strike force."

Like I'd believe this crap from *her*. "How so?"

Tornado maneuvered to stare me down around her shoulder.

To have his input. Although, I wasn't certain whether he was agreeing or in disagreement with Akita.

Akita caught my line of sight and glanced between Tornado and I. "You've mated with an elder?" she gasped, shocked.

Probably because of his silver-streaked gray hair. She knew me better than that. "No. But he's vowed to protect me. So, I'm not going to ignore him when someone rides into his village and speaks of my joining a cult."

He nodded, a sign of agreement.

For whatever reason. "I'm not going anywhere. I've mated, Akita. I'm no longer what I was. My life is with my mate. He is my family now." And I'll be damned if I fail my family this time around. I'd been given another chance to prove my merit. And if I was with child, the child is more important than any sisterhood, clan, or friendship. My child will always be my life.

"Then we will explain this to Keezia. You and I, little sister. Because I've traveled for two weeks to see what life has done with you. And I will not allow the sisterhood to force you into compliance. I remember our vow, even though others are in the mind to forget it whenever it's convenient. And our vow I hold above all else."

I could have fallen to my knees. Cried with relief. The thought of fighting my best friend for a chance to have a future was mind-numbing.

Tornado ushered us to the clan's meeting lodge to wait for Keezia with the rest of the Guardians. Demon edged closer to Akita where she watched his occasional shift of footing with a challenging sideways glance. But she wasn't threatened by the big lout's scrutiny. Who would be? His good-looking features and a musculature build were those any woman would admire. Akita probably just toyed with his thoughts in trying to see how far he dared shift his footing to get closer. If she wanted to, she'd slit him open or shove him against the wall and ram her tongue down his throat. One just never knew what thoughts fluttered behind that killer mask she wore. Hence, Demon's irrational urge to edge closer to her. To tempt fate.

The door squeaked a warning.

A tapping sound produced Keezia's tousled mass of gray hair, flowing red skirt, and sightless white eyes. The old priestess stepped across the space until standing in the middle of the ringing throng of Guardians. She knew Tornado stood at the end and faced him. "I was summoned."

"I thought you did the summoning?" Tornado challenged.

Keezia inhaled slowly. "My envoy has arrived?"

The bitch. Well, her plan backfired.

"If you wish to call her a messenger, go ahead. But we all have seen enforcers before." Tornado snaked his arms across his chest.

Keezia scanned the walls.

Luck held my favor today. She couldn't detect my presence.

"Step forward, Akita," Keezia commanded.

Akita stepped out to face the old priestess, saying nothing, halting but steps from her, dropping onto one knee, waiting, the obedient sister.

"And what news do you bring from Seaside Haven?" Keezia demanded.



It was a blind woman's test to see if Akita followed tradition and knelt before another sister of higher rank.

"Awny has given birth to twins. It is believed both exhibit the power of telepathy since neither cry nor attempt to communicate."

Keezia nodded slowly. "As it should be. Their sire was a telepath. But we can't be certain until they are old enough to prove they have the power."

Was? The twins' father must be dead. And he was telepathic? I don't believe it for a minute. This was a ploy to fool everyone into cooperation.

"When do you escort Sierra to the Haven?" Keezia asked.

"She does not wish to go. I will not force her to leave her mate."

Keezia's mouth twisted into a scowl. "You were not sent to rehash silly childhood blood oaths. Your instruction was clear. You will escort Sierra to the Haven."

Akita rose to tower over the wrinkled dollop of a woman and slid her piercing gaze to mine. "I accepted nothing more than the opportunity to see my little sister's choice was heard and honored. The sisterhood has yet to steal freedoms from its members. So, I've come to enforce Sierra's right of choice."

"You dare defy me." Keezia pounded her cane on the ground, knuckles whitening.

Akita claimed the three steps between her and the snarling elder and obviously had no qualms standing within reach of Keezia's arthritic grasp. "I am an enforcer, White Priestess. And I've come to ensure your motives are true to the sisterhood's purpose. If you think I fear you, lift your hand. Dare me to show you my power. My hand is stronger than yours. And my Cougar hasn't played in days."

Akita's Cougar?

"You insolent brat." Keezia grated her teeth. "I will see you punished for your disrespect."

"Not if you are dead. Tempt me, Keezia. And search deep inside yourself for the truth you espouse. You seem to have forgotten Rites-of-the-Goddess dogma."

Akita turned Keezia's plot on her.

The silence in the room was deafening.

Not a man flinched.

Keezia snarled, brushing a shoulder past Akita, and tapped out her anger with her cane on her way to the door. Nobody chanced a wince until the door clapped its approval at Keezia's departure.

Could I believe Akita's declaration?

My friend turned her cutting gaze to me.

Did she want some kind of confession? "I don't know what to think."

"What I said was true. Leila sent me."

My second cousin? She still lived? And acquired enough power to order enforcers?

"Yes, Sierra, she sent me. Leila knew Keezia meant well but, how do I phrase the rest? She said my balls and my claws would see your voice echo longer than Keezia's screech."

Oh, Keezia would screech a long time. I couldn't help but grin.

Akita grinned as well. "Now, where is this mate of yours? I wish to meet my brother-in-law."

"He should return before sunset." I scanned the Guardian faces encircling the room.

Not even Tornado budged after that little power play.

Akita stepped toward the door. "Well, then, where can a girl get some sleep in this village?"

"You can sleep in my lodge. If I'm lucky, I'll chatter enough you're forced to stay awake and talk to me."

"You haven't changed at all." Akita shoved the door into warm sunlight.

"No." I followed her into the bright sunshine. "And it'll be nice to have a female around who will talk back with equal enthusiasm." Not that Sue didn't.

We left the clan in their shadowy room to witness Keezia's retreating form heading deeper into the village between the lodges. Nobody had touched Akita's motorcycle or armor.

I should have recognized the armor immediately. Tranquilizer darts couldn't have penetrated the protective garb. Many people wore the plate covering when traveling without something like a tank for protection. When traveling alone. I nodded toward my door. "This way."

"Your clan leader has an attitude problem. Has the rest of the clan treated you well?"

"Yes." However, Tornado seemed more protective these days. Or I was finally reading him correctly.

We were on my door before anything else could be said. I shoved the warm wood.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

Inside, Akita stared at the weapon-covered wall. "It's so you, little mongoose."

"The weapons came with my mate. What you see on me is all I brought with me."

She turned her gaze to meet mine. "I was informed you recently lost a mate and bonded with this one?"

The understanding and sympathy in her eyes kept me from reliving the guilt I rarely experienced these days. I nodded. "The clan leader's son was the first. His half-brother, my current mate."

Akita's gaze faltered, lowering an inch in thought, only to snap back to mine.

Did she doubt my affections weren't as strong for the second brother as the first? "I am happier now than I have ever been. A month ago, I would have wondered if it were even possible to love again. But time has proven one cannot know the future."

"So embrace it," Akita added the rest of the Rites-of-the-Goddess dogma.

"Wholeheartedly." Could Akita even begin to understand the value of mating? As an enforcer, she would never know the joy in sharing one's heart beyond physical pleasure. Enforcers could have sex but mating among them was forbidden to help keep their minds clear.

"You look at me as if we are two extremely different creatures, little sister. What you do not know is I was captured by aliens four years ago and bred by one on a spacecraft. My son lives among them. Perhaps among the distant stars."

The priestess Keezia spoke of. "You escaped?"

Akita's indomitable stance never wavered. "You know me. Unfortunately, I couldn't find my son when I departed. But none of us could find shit in that labyrinth of sterile tunnels and chambers. So, I left my son in an attempt to avoid the extraterrestrial male who claimed my Cougar as his own."

Claimed her? "You never told me you were a Cougar."

One of her eyebrows arched slightly and fell. "Who would confess such a secret? But now I am hunted by the aliens more than most." She sauntered toward the window and peered out. "Although, he doesn't have an easy job of it. I found a surgeon to remove the locating device."

“Who is this alien?” I could trust her. She and I chose to be family. “Tell me what they want from us.”

“He said so little.” Her chilling gaze panned to mine. “Explained so little. But I could sense more than words. They use worlds. People. Selectively mating to protect their gene pool. He never told me what caused the mutations his people suffered. But something caused them to seek fresh blood elsewhere. So now they’re here. Harvesting. Impregnating. They’ve been here for thousands of years. Off-world. Working their little experiments. Biding their time until they had evidence our hybrid offspring would survive to satisfy their needs. And the safest place on the planet is out here in the wild. Stay here, Sierra. Protect your Cougar.”

A chill of foreboding tickled down my arms.

“You don’t want to go where I’ve been. You don’t want to be chained and raped. You don’t want to wonder if the façade of the man raping you is really what he looks like. Or if he’s hiding a different creature altogether. Are they some sort of Shifter or just cloaking something far worse resembling an insect or ravenous reptile? Oh, the thoughts I humored gripping the wall while he had his way with my body...”

But Akita was strong enough to survive. To escape. The sisterhood’s training made her that way. I didn’t know what to say. All I could do was stare into her blue eyes and compare the horrors of our rapes. “I met my future being gang raped, Akita. I understand your pain and pray to the Gods you do not think of it much these days. We deserve better thoughts.”

Akita’s breath gushed from her body in one tumultuous sigh. “I use the memory to fuel each day’s feeble attempt to make the world a better place.”

Such noble use of negative energy is the best one could do with such horrid memories. “You are truly stronger than I. I fear I lie to myself and hide away.”

Akita leaned against the window sill. “Why?”

“It was easy in the beginning. My first mate showed how sex should be between a man and woman. Not the animalistic free-for-all that took my virginity. My first mate made my life so beautiful. So pleasant. I didn’t want to lose him. Not after the loss of my parents. I clung to what he was. What he offered. I still can’t decide if the choice rooted in some other fear than losing *him*. But he chose to hide me away in the wilderness. And I agreed by ignoring my responsibilities. Happily. It was so easy to pretend nothing mattered after the rape. But we both know there’s an entire world out here, one demanding much more from each soul stealing away with life and breath.”

“And you wonder if you waste the life gifted to you?”

In so many words. “Maybe not consciously. I do look back today, after speaking with you. But I would never leave Jackal. I couldn’t. I know this now. He is my life. My breath. And I am certain that is why the Gods sent me here.”

“Gods?”

Yes. “Whichever or none of the above. I bear no allegiance to any or all touted to hold us by puppet strings or laugh from exalted thrones. I live by my sire’s perspective now.”

“You are better off with your mate then.”

Did she understand I couldn’t live a day knowing I’d never see Jackal again? He was my lungs. My heart. He’d earned every part of my body and soul just in being there for me. In giving me a future. I brushed my palm across my belly.

Akita’s glance flicked between my hand and gaze.

She knew what my gesture meant. “I think I’m pregnant. All the signs are present. Especially the hunger with the nausea. I should thank Keezia for the insight to Shifter mating. Or I wouldn’t be noticing the signs this early on.”

“Your first mate was sterile?”

Not really. But he hadn’t given me a child or made me suffer pregnancy. My first mating was simply an eye-opening jaunt through the dark. “He chose not to make me suffer in isolation.”

She nodded her understanding. “A man like him is one worthy of a Cougar’s mate.”  
How could she know I’m a Cougar?

## Chapter Seventeen

*Was Akita fishing for confirmation of something she wanted to learn by my admission?* She couldn't possibly. She'd defended me against Keezia. I could trust her. "How did you know I was a Cougar?"

"Cougars do not take well to groups. We are solitary creatures even though our human DNA makes us primarily the most social creature on the planet." She studied me as if knowing I wondered how in the hell we actually became complete cougars during a shift without somehow having one-hundred percent of cougar DNA woven into our individual genomes. "It's what the aliens have always done—genetic engineering. Their science perpetuates their species. They had to intervene here on Earth before we botched our own genome. Or so I was informed by my unwanted alien mate. Apparently, we were on the verge of treading down the path they followed long ago. So, they came and conquered before our bodies were useless to them."

That makes no sense. "If they needed fresh DNA, why would they alter ours?"

"I couldn't get my mate to explain that little idiosyncrasy in the grand scheme of things either. We earthlings are on a need-to-know basis. And what the extraterrestrials think we need to know is extremely insignificant."

Everything I ever heard about the aliens' motives became a circular type of insanity. What were they gaining from sowing Shifting genes?

"Forget it, Sierra. I've been driven to the cliff of madness trying to descry my place within the aliens' plot. We both find we have two options: jump or survive. You and I, we've been forced to accept our fates with Rites-of-the-Goddess sisters, to accept our rapes, to accept our very existences, but what everything boils down to in the end is that we *are* survivors. And that's what AEI Earth is all about now. Surviving. If you mated a Shifter, he must have proven himself strong enough to protect you. Stay with him. Give many Shifter children life. The only way humanity will survive alien conquest is to fight back with offspring tough enough to outlast alien interest."

"Then you should take a Shifter mate as well. Or do you patronize me with your guidance?"

Akita snorted. "Not I, little sister. I'd rather be an enforcer. Yet, I encourage everyone I encounter to end the abductions and altering of human DNA. Each in his or her own way. And you were never happy with the sisterhood. Why return?"

"What about your son? He's one of them."

She peered back into the sunlight whitewashing her face and nodded very slowly. With her arms crossed, she looked quite deadly. "It was never meant for he and I to know each other. They took him from me the second after the umbilical cord was cut. I was never allowed to even look at him. Or hold him."

How damned cold. I wanted to break something.

"There's nothing more dehumanizing than knowing you mean nothing to the person who impregnated you," Akita said with a blank expression.

Thank the stars for Jackal. I'd never leave him. Keezia could kiss my tail.

\* \* \* \*

Wanting nothing more than soap and velvety skin rubbed all over him in the pool, Jackal shoved the door to his lodge wide. Sierra sat across the table from a dark-haired woman, playing cards.

“Jackal!” She jumped to her feet and leapt toward me.

Enthusiastically. A man had to love a woman who found so much delight in his return.

She threw her arms around me and smiled. “You’ll never guess who came to see me.”

Kitten was as happy as a child. “If your friend can make you smile this much, then I hope she’s staying a while.” I slid my gaze to the visitor.

There was something odd and out-of-place about her. Maybe the issue lay in her hairstyle—a sculpted cut requiring more than simple thought from the wielder of the knife. Or was the biggest oddity her icy gaze? A sort of weapon. One capable of slashing your soul before you even realized you’d been sized up for termination. “And who would this be?”

Kitten backed away. “My blood sister.”

Only the priestesses would carry on a tradition of blood exchange to create connections through a nonexistent bond. Mating bonds are the strongest. “And does your friend have a name?”

“Akita. She’s an enforcer.” Sierra beamed with something other than pride.

I’d have to shake my mate good for bringing an assassin into our home. “Oh? What has she come to enforce?” Keezia had to be behind the enforcer’s arrival. Like everything else going sour in Sierra’s life.

“That Sierra’s voice is heard. That her choice is made and respected,” Akita stated with a ruthless tone.

The woman needed a mate. Badly. Something to soften her harsh exterior. But I couldn’t think of a brother among the clansmen who was ready to tame this one. “Well, then,” I ushered Sierra back to the table, “don’t let me interfere with your card game. I’m heading over to wash off the day’s grime.” I turned, grabbed soap and clean clothes, and almost stepped through the door.

“Hot as sin,” Akita whispered.

Both women giggled.

Well, there was hope for the woman. She could joke. And she thinks I’m hot as sin. I can’t fault her for that!

\* \* \* \*

“Do you think Akita’s offended we sent her to sleep elsewhere?” Sierra asked, wrapped around the bare muscle of her mate’s solid chest.

“No, Kitten.” The words rumbled deep inside my mate’s chest. “She had to see we had no bed for her. And at Sue’s, Akita gets a bed. Sue will take good care of her.”

Yes Sue would. “I bet Sue is talking her head off right now.”

Jackal chuckled. “Better Akita than us.” He brushed a rough palm down my back and planted a warm kiss on my ear. “Besides, your friend doesn’t seem so talkative. They’re probably asleep.”

Who cares about sleeping when you could cuddle like this? “I’m glad Akita came to Death Summit.” To end Keezia’s lunacy.

“You seem happier. More at ease. I think speaking with her again has done much for you. Ask her to stay a few days.”

“Right. It’s not like I’m busy and exhausted from helping at the school.”

“Kitten, you did nothing wrong. Don’t beat yourself up over the stupidity of Normals.”

Gods, I was tired. I could tell him about the baby now. But he'd get all frisky again. And I just needed to sleep a little more. I'd tell him tomorrow when we were alone. I closed my eyes and burrowed down deeper into my mate's drumming heart.

His arm tightened at my lower back. "Sleep now."

I sank into his humming warmth. Into my Jackal. And all my thoughts faded away.

Something nagged at the back of my mind.

In the darkness. What was wrong? Had I fainted again?

The world shook.

Wait, it was the bed. I was asleep. Jackal had leapt off the bed? I opened my eyes.

His muscles struggled to button his pants where he stood, trying to worm a foot into a combat boot.

What alerted him? "I don't hear Bounders."

"I heard someone cry out. Something's wrong."

Shit. Akita was here. Maybe she hadn't been honest. I shoved my feet to the earthen floor. "What time is it?"

"Almost sunrise."

Wow, I felt like I just fell asleep.

He yanked on his combat boots and shot me a stern stare. "Sit tight, Kitten. I'm going to check out the village."

Like I'd wait here while he went hunting down trouble. I wasn't about to let anything happen to him. I couldn't now. Not after I realized I loved him.

He darted out the slamming door.

Where were the other Guardians? Not one sound noted they policed the village. Jackal should go without me. I needed to prove to him that he could trust me. But I had to go.

*Help mine*, Cougar snarled.

Quiet. Okay, I'd wait just a few minutes to see what happened. Yes. I'd wait for any sign of trouble. Then I'd help. Just in case things went bad for my Jackal. I quickly dressed and strapped on my pistols, extra clips, and Black Betty.

\* \* \* \*

Jackal heard someone whisper behind Steel's lodge in the strengthening pre-dawn light. He continued edging along the smooth curving wall to squeeze between Steel and Demon's cabins. The gap provided just enough clearance to allow a large determined man to literally press through sideways. And we're talking a tight squeeze.

The sounds twisted into moans.

Sex. Who in the hell wormed back here for sex? Why? Maybe a teenager. Or a man cheating on his wife. But who would want to risk disturbing the Guardians when there was so much damned darkness around to drop anywhere in the open and plow home? I took another quiet step.

The man and woman came into focus, standing, her back pressed against a wall, one of her bare legs wrapped around his bare waist, hips grinding and pumping, arms writhing and clawing. Her head thrown back. The man gnawing at her neck.

Not Normals though. Demon and Akita. "Dammit you two. Keep it down. I swear I heard a cry for help."

Demon's glare whirled to me, his eyes glowing bright gold.

Fool. He should be mating in his lodge. Just in case he lost control of his Wolf. I stepped back quietly the way I came before he became even more foolhardy and attacked me for interfering in his euphoria-induced stupor.

But something was still wrong. What I'd heard before wasn't just sex. I shoved back through the narrow opening.

The boom of an explosion followed by the loud thwack of the falling gate made my heart stop.

How had the guards not seen that coming? With the gate down and out of commission, the village would be wide open, vulnerable. The men would have to work to raise and secure it all day.

The tha-thump of horse hooves only heralded an even more serious problem.

Invaders.

Who? I rounded the final step to scan the gateway and courtyard.

Riders with torches.

Normals with long beards.

Prophets.

The bastards either wanted revenge for our little side trip to the trading post or just decided it was time to plunder Death Summit. What kind of idiots planned to attack a village named with such a deadly warning?

Tornado's meeting lodge spat forth one pissed-off clan leader.

Guardians shot out their doors.

Some yanking on boots.

Others aiming firearms.

At least Sierra was locked away.

Prophets barreled their mounts toward different buildings, brandishing flaming torches.

Burn the village? Time had proven it always more logical to leave the town behind to recover and recoup enough supplies to warrant another raid in the future. Scavenging depended upon that line of reasoning. The only other reason the Prophets had come was to flush out someone.

Who did they want?

And how did they know to find their target here?

We'd had no visitors since I'd brought Sierra.

Until Akita arrived.

More Prophets burst through the gateway on horseback. The second wave wielded rifles. But there were so many now that it proved awfully difficult to focus on just one.

Nobody spoke in this planned attack.

Guns fired.

Bleeding Prophets hit the hard-packed earthen courtyard.

Rider-less horses darted through the mayhem.

What did the invaders want? We'd all be dead if everyone didn't stop firing guns.

"Wolfskins!" Tornado called for Shifting.

Not yet. Not until I learned who they came for. The others could fight in Wolfskins.

Other Guardians shifted into the safety and strength of a werewolf and attacked.

A Prophet charged his red mount at me.

Stinking Normal. He reeked of a month's worth of sweat and rotten teeth. I leapt at him, grabbing his shoulders.



He yelled, swinging a glinting blade at my chest.  
Like the blade would do any damage. I dodged the knife and shoved the bastard out of the saddle.

We hit the hard ground with a thud.

The fool stabbed the blade at my heart.

Idiot. I grabbed his arm and ripped it backward. "Why are you here?" I spat through grated teeth.

He didn't bother answering with more than pain-induced cries from my bending his shoulder out of socket.

Yelling and roars surrounded me.

But the sounds of battle weren't what made my hair stand on end. The steady quick pop of rapid fire from a weapon is what sickened me.

Sierra and her pistols.

Shit. I shoved off the shrieking Prophet, hyper-extending his arm even more, and struggled through the melee to find my mate.

A rider-less wide-eyed white horse bolted across my path. As its tail cleared my view, I saw Kitten with both pistols firing, the sparks from each shot streaking through the ever-so-lightening pre-dawn. Cutting her way through the crowd to the wall.

My mate. Disobeying me again.

She cleared the crowd, scaled a scaffold, whipped Black Betty off her shoulder to pick off Prophets one at a time from her vantage point, scanning the crowd along her the weapon's barrel, firing, never missing a beat, until her gaze caught mine.

She lowered her weapon a few inches, her eyes widening. "No," she screamed.

Pain bit my neck.

The world went black.

\* \* \* \*

"Gods damn you," Sierra screamed watching two Prophets slide to the gray ground beside her fallen tranquilized mate. Jackal had collapsed with a dart in his neck, strengthening yellow sunlight dancing upon the glinting metal.

Then the Normals descended upon him.

Even though I have shot many Prophets from their saddles, there were many many more. The two on the ground were too close to Jackal to dare to pick off with Black Betty. And horses ran wildly, crisscrossing the courtyard.

The mangy Prophets grabbed my mate beneath his arms and heaved him over a gelding's saddle to where he hung on his belly.

Taking him prisoner.

*Save mine!* Cougar roared for release.

They would not. Not if I could help it. I had to reach him. Gods, the horses could step on him.

Horse and riders kept blocking my view.

Intervening. Purposely. All I could do was fire. Over and over. Shooting limbs. Foreheads. And anything else that made a good target.

*Because Jackal was being taken.*

Life without him wouldn't be living.

I had to save him.

*Kill.* Cougar ripped at my ribcage.

My body began to burn with the need to shift.

Not yet. Not until I knew what I could do to help.

The scene below the scaffold became a whirlwind of roars, gunshots, shrieking horses, and desperate human bodies struggling for survival.

The two Prophets led the gelding away with my Jackal's hands tied to his ankles beneath the beast's belly.

Dear. Gods. I'd die if I couldn't stop them. Somehow. I tried to line up a shot to free Jackal's horse from the man holding its lead.

A horse blocked my shot.

Damn them all. Jackal was being taken farther and farther away. In a throng of retreating horses clearing the courtyard, pressing toward the gaping gate. I had to do something. I jumped, landing my boots on the unforgiving earth at the base of Death Summit's imposing wall.

There was only one thing to do. I ran, yanking at my belt, clawing out of my shirt, summoning the vibration from deep inside my heart, and forced the change upon my skin with nauseating speed, pinching the front clasp on my bra. Almost instantly, I fell upon four paws and wriggled my tail out of my clothes.

"Hurry, Sierra," Akita yelled.

Where had she come from? It didn't matter. I stretched my sleek Cougar body, pulling the dusty earth beneath my pads with my claws ripping into the ground, bounding toward the horses. Silently.

Ever-so-silently.

As if I had shifted into the dogmatic beast of a bitter wind lost in the ephemeral ebb and flow of the surrounding chaos.

*They must all die.* Oh yes. Everyone who risked life and limb capturing my mate. One by one, I would rip out their throats. Peel their flesh from their screaming bodies with the hooks of my claws. And when nobody remained to inform Normals they'd seen a Cougar, I would rest easy again.

With my mate.

And await our child.

A Prophet sitting a horse was but a pounce away.

Easy to kill. I knifed my legs, shoving off the ground to dig my claws bone-deep into the rider's stinking shoulders and sank my fangs into the soft side of his neck.

Jewels of his ruby blood sprayed every direction.

The most Gods-be-damned inhuman scream ripped from the filthy bastard.

I sucked in a deep breath and clamped my bite harder into hard bone and soft flesh.

His salty iron-infused blood burned my nostrils.

I felt like I was drowning in his blood. I snorted to clear the fluid away.

"Holy shit," a man screamed. "Someone's got a fucking Cougar! Nobody lift a blade. I want her alive."

Alive to use for bait. To use to trap the mate they wanted to trade with the aliens. If they possessed the couple, even better.

Horses shrieked in fear of one of their natural predators among them.

But I wouldn't harm the horses unless I had no other recourse. Horses were as big a victim in all of the madness as Shifters. And the clan would take care of the horses.

My prey toppled over the side of his horse.

They'd be on me in a heartbeat. I opened my jaw and fell atop the gurgling body to immediately jackknife my legs into a sprint, skirting the long deadly hooved legs beneath the riders.

"A net. We need a net," some Prophet howled. "I want her. We need her. No one draws a knife against her. You do, and your family is dead with you."

How many could I kill before they came up with something to serve as a net? I raced around the milling cluster fuck of dolts to keep the horses terrified, focusing on the guy holding the lead to Jackal's horse.

My Jackal's head hung like that of a dead man. And if someone didn't get him off that damned horse soon, my mate *would be* a dead man.

## Chapter Eighteen

*Die, bastards*, Sierra thought, springing off the solid ground toward another Prophet's exposed throat hovering atop a black-and-white painted pony. My teeth sank into his soft throbbing tissue.

His pulse drummed.

So quickly I knew he'd bleed out with two sprays of his bejeweled blood.

The shrieking man panicked, diving to the Earth, dragging me down by my muzzle.

The horses kicked into a trot and darted for the gate.

They were taking Jackal away.

No. I shook free of the gushing blood beneath the man's chin and raced after the mounts. And the game of chase began.

There was nothing like a chase to get my blood pumping to the point of euphoria.

The panicked throng of Prophets lured me through the gateway.

Not a problem. I could shred their asses anywhere. Heart pounding, nostrils flaring to take in every scent descending upon my senses, I pursued a horse, culled it from the pack, and tore the rider's throat out. One man after another. Over and over. Until my golden coat gleamed liquid red in the sunlight and the pack of Prophets dwindled to a few anxious fools scrambling to reach someplace they fancied safe.

My bloodied coat wasn't a problem. Being wet with blood had advantages. Lubricant. Slickened with the blood bath, I could slip from the struggling bastards' grasps.

A buzzing sound nibbled at my ears.

The annoying tone was too mechanical, steady. Like a motor.

A motorcycle.

Or more than one. The Guardians. Hopefully. I'd need help getting Jackal off the horse. Gods. To shift meant I'd be nude. With my clansmen around. So life had a way of making one pay for the borrowed power used to shift and perform miracles. I clawed at green grass, heading after the retreating horse haunches veering toward a line of trees.

Another man died.

And another.

My lungs began to burn.

But Jackal needed my help. Just keep going.

The zipping sound of the motor increased.

Neared. Who was it? I chanced a glance when coming back around a bay horse I'd separated from the pack.

Akita.

Cloaked in her black enforcer armor.

Loaded down with weapons. She'd use them if we could make the men stop running long enough to allow her to draw and aim. But riding a bike through the unforgiving forest required both hands. I was Jackal's only hope. So, I took out another Prophet.

The motor silenced.

Gunfire rattled off.

Men fell from horses.

And Jackal's horse raced off on its own to the left.

Into the forest. Akita could kill the other Prophets who could send reinforcements.

Jackal needed me. I chased the terrified mount at a distance, hoping to shift back to human form when the animal calmed.

But a cougar chasing a horse didn't equate to reassured gelding. And I was running out of steam. I had no recourse but to take the mount by its throat, clawing, sinking my fangs into the soft sweaty hide covering its jugular to bring it to a halt.

Exhaling loudly, the animal braced its legs.

As if trying to delay its inevitable fall. All I could do was hang on with claws buried in its shoulders. Waiting.

The poor creature snorted and teetered.

Dear. Gods. It would fall ramming Jackal's neck and head into the ground beneath its massive body if I didn't do something fast. I released my jaw hold and claws to shift back into human form.

Horse blood dribbled onto my bare legs, forming rivulets that pooled atop the tops of my feet.

Jackal had a knife in his boot. I grabbed it and worked to saw the rope at his wrists. For some Gods-be-damned reason, the gelding kept its legs beneath him. Maybe the boon was just luck. I'll never know. But I finally sliced through the cord binding my mate's hands and legs together and slid him to the ground.

Still, the horse could collapse on Jackal. I leaned my back into the animal's heaving side and waited.

The animal had to collapse. And when he would, my force had to be enough to send him the other direction.

Jackal laid in a tousel at my feet.

The drug-induced sleep hadn't closed his eyes. What did he witness? Would he recall anything? I'd never been tranquilized before. Who knew what he'd say.

The horse snorted one final breath and began wobbling.

I shoved into its massive weight.

## Chapter Nineteen

*When in the hell will I be able to move again?* Jackal seethed, trapped inside his body. Damn the irony of a Shifter unable to move. That's what made Shifters unique. My mate squatted at my side. Nude. Vulnerable. And all I could do was lie here and wait, staring up at her and the blinding sun breaking through the forest canopy. I can't even fucking blink.

"Jackal? Can you hear me?"

Gods, would she stop repeating the same freaking question? It was bad enough I had to hang in suspended animation, locked on horseback unable to even blink. But her fears had eaten away at my soul hours ago after the horse died. Scratch that. After she killed the horse. Tornado's hunch had been dead on. Sierra was a Cougar like her dame. And she was suitably nicknamed Kitten.

Lucky guess on my part. No hunch at all. Just a fluke. And all I could do was lie here contemplating life while I couldn't move my damned eyelids.

She gently petted my brow, staring into my eyes. "I don't want to be caught out here after dark without protection. I'll have to gather firewood soon."

Was that a warning? She must be talking more for her sanity than mine. Because, the Gods know, I'm going to be preening her tail for the rest of her life as soon as I can fucking move.

She ran the soft pads of two fingers down my neck to lock into the groove next to the jugular and held her breath.

Yet again. Feeling for my pulse. I'd have a bruise there if she didn't relax and give up on thinking I'm dying. I'm alive, Kitten. If only I could grab her, I'd never let go. Show her how alive I am. I stared into those pale blue eyes and watched her panic fade for a few moments.

She had saved me. In that moment, revealing something she kept from me. Why had she hidden what she was? We were closer than hiding such things as the point she was a Cougar.

Hell, I love her.

Didn't she know?

Maybe I should have said I loved her by now. But we hadn't been together that long. And if she still mourned for Rattler, I didn't want to hurt her by implying she needed to get on with life through a cruel and blunt declaration of my feelings.

She petted my cheek again, the glint of tears welling in her eyes. "I was going to tell you today that I'm pregnant."

Holy shit! Not the Gods-be-damned end of the Well of Immortality that should be leaking. I can't move. Damn it.

She sniffed back the tears. "I guess I should have last night. But I didn't think about it until we were exhausted." She poked me with a finger. "You really need to stop wearing me out. I need my brain to function at a certain level all the time! You know, I used to be Father's little genius. I could rattle off all sorts of facts, process them, come up with new ideas. Kind of like playing musical instruments. I just pick up a new one, and the music flows out of my hands. Father said I was his little Mozart." She snorted and slid her gaze to the surrounding wall of thick

tree trunks. “But these days, I just don’t seem to have the snap I used to have.” Her gaze pinched.

What was she confessing? My kitten wasn’t a failure. Hell, she’d taken out most of the Prophets on her own and gotten my big-ass carcass off a runaway horse. Those feats pretty much equate to success.

“I won’t let you die like I did my parents.” Her worried gaze locked back onto mine. “I can’t. Gods, Jackal, my uncle died when Normals tranquilized him. Another Guardian just wasn’t right when he came back around from the drug-induced sleep.” She inhaled sharply and slowly opened and closed her eyes. “I don’t want our baby to wonder what you were like. I can’t imagine a childhood without knowing one of my parents. Please, come back to me.”

Shut up! I can’t take it anymore. Why won’t my fingers, eyelids, or lips move?

She sank down, settling onto my chest, and curled her arms around my sides. “Come back to me, Jackal. I don’t know what I’ll do without you. It’s different with you than it was with John. So damned different. I have to be with you. My Cougar doesn’t want anyone else. We love you.”

My cheek twitched.

It’s about Gods-damned time some part of my body moved.

With every miniscule movement of my body, I felt the keys turn in the locks freezing my muscles. Or her tears lubricated my creaking joints. She hugged me, her nose pinned against my ear, sobbing.

“It’s alright, Kitten. I just need to sit up and stretch. Please don’t cry *anymore*.” I finally got an arm around her quaking shoulders.

“You could hear me?” Her words cracked. She sniffled in a deep breath and backed away enough to look into my eyes.

It was better she knew. No more secrets between us. I placed a palm against her damp warm cheek. “Yes, Kitten. We’re having a baby, and I love you too.” I mustered one of those *believe me* stares. “And as clearly as my thoughts are reeling combined with the amount of movement I have in my limbs, there isn’t anything wrong with me. I’ll be exhausting you by nightfall.” I winked.

She sniffed back more of her worry and nodded. “You better,” she warned.

After her endless fear-induced confessions, I didn’t want to make her cry again. But there was no avoiding mating when a man’s bundle of curves hovered without a stitch of clothing. Unfortunately, doing anything about the situation would be foolish. Out here. With nightfall approaching. And the curfew. We were deep in the wilderness without a ride back to the village. Who knew how long it would take to reach Death Summit by foot? *To beat the curfew*.

“Can you stand?” she asked, undoubtedly aware of the time constraints.

“I’ll try.”

We worked for a while to get my legs back to functioning sufficiently. And then I just felt normal again.

The sun hovered long past midday.

Time to go.

An hour passed before we caught the sputter of Akita’s bike. Demon and Steel had joined her on motorcycles though. Not good with my nude mate tagging along. I had to hide her behind a tree before waving them down.

“Where’s Sierra?” Akita demanded.

I didn't motion my mate's direction. "In the woods. She doesn't have any clothing."

Akita nodded and reached into her bike's trunk, extracting the wad of the clothes Sierra wore this morning. "I figured Sierra would need these. After she dresses, we'll give you a lift back to the village."

\* \* \* \*

*That was the last thing I expected to hear when Tornado closed the door to his meeting lodge.* Sierra sighed. Tornado should have been angry with me for lying to him about my Cougar. Or pissed I disobeyed Jackal after my mate gave a complete report of what he'd experienced. Even my confession of pregnancy revealed something else I had kept hidden. I guess the growing child should have been expected. Especially after Keezia's little tantrum. But I wasn't certain what was behind Jackal's capture. It could have been an angered Keezia driving the invasion to kidnap my Jackal. But Sessily? Who would have guessed she wanted me dead to release Jackal from his mating bond? And that she had opened the damned gate to allow the Bounders into the village that night...

And who would have guessed Tornado had been setting up a little system where I would teach the children to play the guitar? The sneaky bastard was really soft at heart. "So you tortured the Prophet until getting a confession, then you hanged him?" I asked the clan leader.

He nodded. "He deserved far worse. But nobody wanted to smell the flames eating away his stinking flesh in a bonfire. We opted for a more appealing mode of termination with the villagers in mind." His words held no sarcasm.

Maybe I'd somehow won his respect.

"Everything's going to be alright now, Sierra." Tornado paced between Demon and Akita, waving a hand for effect. "Sessily's gone. The Prophets are dead. Keezia will leave you alone." He stopped and faced me, feet spread wide to brace his weight. "You're family. And the clan protects family."

I could have cried in relief.

I could have hugged the man.

But I've just never been the type of woman to do such things.

Especially when I still had to wonder about the sisterhood crap. My alleged powers? And I was supposed to change the future with other sisters by joining some gathering? Not me. Not after finding a family.

"You and the baby won't be any safer anywhere else, Sierra," Tornado gently insisted.

"I'm not questioning that." I flicked a glance at Jackal's compassionate green eyes darkened in the shadows over my shoulder. "If I can't handle something, Jackal will take care of it."

My big mate winked.

"But I doubt the sisterhood will give up on my participation in their master plan."

"Don't worry about that," Tornado said. "If they come again, we'll send them packing. Besides, pregnant women shouldn't travel. Let Jackal take care of you."

I had every intention of relying on him for a while. "That's why I chose him."

"Well," Jackal rolled his eyes, "and because I'm hot as sin."

I can't believe he said that aloud in front of all his relatives. But he was right. "Yes, you are." He proved it later that night when the fire died down to a few low licking flames.

He stoked heat from my body with his lathing tongue like I was the log in the hearth mimicking the lodge's fire where he held me on his lap.



Gods, what I would do to have him in his Wolfskin. I slid my hand down his sculpted musculature of his chest and kissed his throbbing neck.

He groaned into my ear.

“How pissed do you think Tornado will be if I make you shift?” I gently suggested.

He snorted and moaned, leaning his head back so I could work the skin of his pliant neck with my lips. “Oh, about as pissed as clan leaders come.”

“I don’t care if he comes. Just you.” I chuckled into his warm skin.

Jackal lost a laugh. His firm hand glided down my back to clamp around my hips and hold me in place as he bucked his engorged cock deeper into my mind-numbing G-spot. “Kitten, you keep talking dirty, and I’ll be donning my Wolfskin with or without your permission.”

Since I’m in control... “Don’t you dare plant seed inside me until you’re so huge I can’t do anything but gasp for air and scream. The Gods know your Wolf cock is so damned enormous that I just can’t think of anything else.”

That was all it took to set off wiry wolven hairs sprouting all over his body. I leaned into his shifting iron form while his yellow eyes watched me scrape my taut nipples against the coarse matted hair blanketing his chest. Then I writhed agonizingly as his erection swelled inside me, locking its ribs into my soft aching tissue.

“Jackal!” I grabbed two handholds of his wiry Wolf hair at his shoulders and held on for dear breath.

His claws pressed into my ass cheeks as he held my quivering sex on his enormous shaft.

If only he would move before he grew sharp teeth and devoured me. “Please,” I begged, leaning my forehead against his, staring into his observant eyes.

“Mine,” he growled, pinned my crotch against his hairy waist, and rose to back me against the hard wall. “Sierra,” he hissed and withdrew his erection with a jerk, all the way until only the thick rounded head remained inside my clenching muscles, and then thrust purposely like a beast with only one intention on its mind.

Releasing hot seed. I managed to match his gaze even though I could think of nothing but throwing my head back and grinding my hips, eyes shut, lost in the starfall of mating heaven.

It didn’t matter how tightly my legs squeezed his dancing waist. He could pump so quickly that my teeth would chatter if I didn’t let my jaw gape. Because of those glorious ridges rubbing the most amazing mindboggling friction inside my core.

And who wouldn’t gape being taken so completely? In such a fundamentally raw fashion? This was the way sex was back during the dawn of mankind. Before cultures placed restrictions. Defined taboos. The way sex should be. Real. True to itself.

And there was nothing like sex with my Wolf.

Fulfilling.

So satisfying I could do nothing but scream at each successive wave of orgasm barreling through my soul as he used his cock to lay siege to my soul’s castle.

Forget battle with society’s rules.

Only Jackal remained. Strong. Potent.

*Mine.*

Leave it to Cougar to state the point.

He threw his head back and roared at the shadow-engulfed ceiling.

Pounding. Throbbing inside me. Coating my soul with warm precious seed.

Our hip thrusts became short and blunt. Erratic with of his erection’s consecutive spasms. But he kept showering me with life. I’d take every last drop and give him all the

children he could ask for. Give him a family I dreamed of having. And he'd teach the children to be as calm and rational as him. Together we would change the future raising a brood of Shifters that nobody dared cross. Because we are Shifters. And if the aliens wanted were-creatures on Earth, they'd get them. And more, creating their demise in the same breath. I didn't need a sisterhood to make me work for the freedom of humanity. No, all I needed was my Jackal.

## Chapter Twenty

I smiled into Jackal's sparkling green eyes where I planted my chin into the soft muscle of his chest, lying atop his human body as he stretched out on the bed recovering from wild sex. It was mid morning. We'd gone for food and returned to fritter away the day. In our own way.

A knock rattled at the door.

Jackal rolled me toward the wall. "Stay here. I'll see who it is." He crossed the space, nude, and pulled the door a few inches to lock his sight on someone.

Who? At least, the person couldn't see me in the way Jackal blocked the view into our lodge.

"Akita's gone," Demon's voice announced.

Jackal cast me a glance over his shoulder and turned back to Demon. "What do you want me to do?"

"Did she say anything? Where she's going? Anything else?"

The sunlight hitting Jackal's face only showed his confusion. "What do you want, Demon? You can't chase after her."

Why would Demon follow Akita?

"Forget it," Demon snapped.

Jackal shut the door and turned to me, planting his palms on his hips.

The nude sight of him was truly sinful. But what in the world was up with Demon?

Jackal's brow arched. "Do you know anything about Akita and Demon?"

"No. Why?"

Jackal ran a palm over his shaved head like he wanted to rake his fingers through his hair. "Kitten, I found them fucking the other day."

What? I opened my mouth. But nothing came out.

"Kitten?"

"No. Akita gave no indication she was after Demon." I could feel my brow wrinkle with a furrow. "You have to understand. The sisterhood makes rebellious sisters enforcers. Akita has a mind of her own. But she's powerful. And when she wants something, she just takes it. But I had no idea that her interests had turned to Demon."

He just stared at me in disbelief.

"I swear, Jackal. Enforcers can have sex whenever they want with whomever they chose. I was but a year from being given the designation. I know what she can and can't do. But I don't understand why she'd want Demon. He lives in The Wild. He's destined to take over the clan for his sire." I couldn't even begin to grasp the breadth of Akita and Demon. "Are you certain Akita told Demon she was his? Did he mark her?"

"I don't know."

"Listen, we can't control what they do. We have to live for ourselves. You have to stop worrying about Demon."

He snorted. And scrubbed a hand down his face. "I know, Kitten. Whatever he does is his problem. I swear he's fucking up on purpose because he doesn't want to lead the clan."

There could be other reasons. "Have you ever thought he just isn't interested in mating any of the local females? And maybe your finding me has given him reason to seek a mate elsewhere. Just think about it. Akita has always tempted men."

He descended onto the squeaking bed and patted my shoulder. "You're right. Tornado can worry about Demon."

\* \* \* \*

*My mate is nesting.* Sierra smiled internally. Or Jackal was failing at hiding his fears of my impending rendezvous with childbirth. But I couldn't scold him for wasting bucks on gathering baby items. I fingered the soft red crocheted shoes he had sat on the table. "These are the cutest pair of booties I think I've ever seen."

At least my chair didn't squawk at me for encouraging Jackal's attempt to provide, whether the purchases were warranted or not. Albeit, the chair squawked often these past months as my belly expanded with the child's final weeks of growth. Not as much as Tornado groaned and growled. But the clan leader had grown to accept Demon's departure over with the arrival of spring's warmer weather, still ruthlessly cold in Oregon, and sunshine.

Warm wetness gushed into the seat of my chair.

What was that? Oh crap. My water broke. I waited for Jackal to slide his gaze from my fingers pinching the booties to my gaze.

"What's wrong, Kitten?"

"Get Sue. My water broke." The Gods know I can't panic. Jackal is a total mess. Yet, I've never done this before.

The door banged a few times before stilling in an open position.

Cold winter air whistled into the room, freezing my crotch and ass where I sat in the puddle, forcing me to rise, secure the door, and pull on a dry buckskin tent dress. By the time I'd settled down with my back to the lodge's wall on the mattress, Jackal burst back through the door.

"She's coming," he said and dropped onto his knees at my side.

His worried expression would be the death of me. "Don't be such a pessimist, Jackal. I'll certainly get through this. If only to chew you out for spending all that money on frivolous baby toys, clothes, and pink things for me."

His mouth stretched into a wide smile. "I love you, Kitten."

"You won't be saying that when you're changing diapers and I go back to work teaching at the school." Although I'd had to put my teacher duties on hold a month ago, just in case I was pregnant before I met Jackal and his brother's child was coming a month sooner than when Jackal's would have arrived. The month without something to engage my mind almost killed me. Or the problem lay in Jackal's doting. I don't know. But I would be returning to the school to help teach the children a few hours each day while the baby nursed.

Of course, Sue announced she'd be around to help Jackal. She loved babies. And Jackal was like one of her sons. So, Jackal didn't wince when I warned him about diaper duty. He had been so thrilled when Ann approached me with the villagers' change of heart. Apparently, they'd taken my choice to stay and my Cougar's presence as a sign my heart belonged to Jackal. So, I returned to the enthusiastic children and proceeded to teach them all the science I could manage to cram into their days. "And don't worry. This childbirth is going to break you of your fear of my dying. Because we need to have as many Shifter babies as possible to drive the aliens off the planet."

His mask transformed from fear to petulance.

“Go ahead and sulk. You can’t argue your way out of your duty to humanity today. Of all days!” I threw my head back and laughed.

The door creaked. A bitter gust of wind produced Sue.

“How are you feeling, Sierra?” she asked.

“Wet. Icky. Not so thrilled to gaze upon my sulking mate.”

Jackal smacked his lips.

Speechless. He couldn’t complain today!

“Any pain?” Sue crossed the room to stand before me.

“Not at all.”

“Well, no telling how long this could take. You’re not even in labor yet.” Sue patted Jackal’s shoulder. “I’ll stay though. Just to keep you from losing your last wit.”

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Two days later, little Celia popped into the world. *I’d never wanted to cry more in my life about the joy my love for Jackal had brought to me.* I looked at my mate holding the tiny bundle of his Cougar baby and couldn’t fight back the stinging tears. I finally had a family.

“I’ve never seen a woman’s first child be born so easily,” Sue crowed and smiled at Jackal. “Sierra’s labor came upon her so fast and ended so abruptly that I swear she’s made for having babies.” She patted his shoulder for the thousandth time over the past two days. “I see lots of babies in your future.”

He grinned at Sue and me, only to focus on the tiny blue eyes of his daughter. “Yes. Celia needs a few brothers to teach her how to fight.”

Well he buckled easily to my decision to have more children. “Don’t go shrugging off your fatherly duties, sire. You won’t be turning her into a Daddy’s girl.” But it just dawned on me how his little habit of buying gifts would turn our children into a pack of Sessilys.

He shot me an evil smirk.

“Need I utter the name Sessily?”

He winced. “No.” He rose to claim a seat on the bed’s edge and brushed the knuckles of a finger across my cheek. “I’m going to buy her a horse though.”

Who can afford to keep a pet? “This is The Wild, Jackal. You and I are servants to wealthy families. Horses eat more than big brawly Shifters like you. So, forget it. But I love you just the same and won’t hold your weakness against you. Now, I need you to go see Toby about getting me a few more pairs of wool socks.”

A wicked smile split his face.

Something told me he would return with pink lingerie, fragrance oils, milled soaps, and chocolate. And throw in some hair ribbons now that he knew the baby was a girl. I guess things could be far worse in The Wild. I had a loving adoring mate. A baby. And a family. The sisterhood could try to recruit me for some alleged power I harbored or some melding of female minds they had planned. But I was staying with Jackal to build my own little army. And I’d bet everything we had that all my children were going to be spoiled little Cougars.

The End