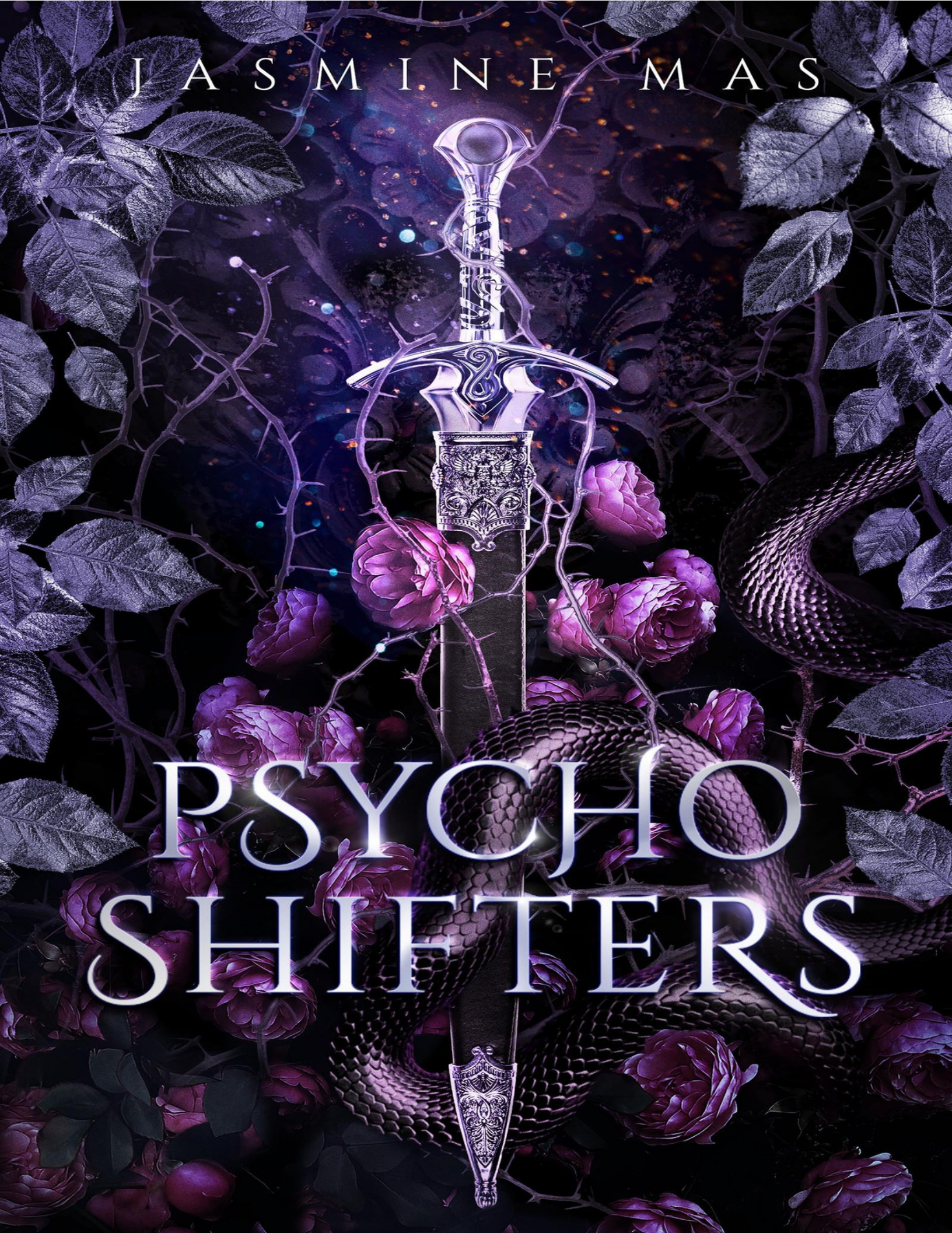
JASMINE MAS

PSYCHO SHIFTERS



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Contents

Cover
Title Page
Contents
Content Warning
Prologue
1: The Sacred Lake
2: Mistakes and Alphaholes
3: Fight Club
4: Choking On Emotions
5: Monsters Everywhere
6: Espionage
7: Sleepover Besties
8: Shifting into a Beast
9: Finding Friends in Unlikely Places
10: Things Get Spicy
11: Chaos
12: Stone Cold Killer
13: The Syndicate
14: Constant Confusion
15: Prophecies
16: Cranberry Sauce
17: Snakebites and Other Aphrodisiacs
18: Still Fighting, Unfortunately

19: Spiderwebs and Big Snakes
20: Kidnapped
21: Rescued by a Handsome Alpha
22: Rage
23: Cute Kittens & Hair Dye
24: Interrogations
25: Turn Up
26: Sex & Betrayal
Thank You
Announcement
1: The Evil Queen
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Content Warning

Please beware, this is a why choose dark romance. There are multiple male love interests. This story contains references to physical and sexual assault. Sadie has a traumatic past, and her experiences are intense. Please take care of yourself and avoid if this content will be disturbing.

If you object to a why choose romance, cursing, knots, violence, or spicy MM action, this is not the series for you. For a full list, please see the author's website, JasmineMasBooks.com.

This is not a traditional omegaverse but (hint) it will become one as realm secrets are revealed. It is a three-book trilogy and there is a cliffhanger in this book, but the series will have a happy ending.

Enjoy.

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Prologue

Sadie

I waited until Dick's heavy footsteps stopped.

The tavern was eerily silent now that the beast was gone.

A smile split across my face, and I jumped off my bed. Although, *bed* was a generous term—I slept on a scratchy blanket spread across the hardwood floor.

Still, it was a great day. It was time to get my younger sister, Lucinda, so we could enjoy our freedom.

I dug out my stolen paper clip and began to work it into the door's lock. It took me a while, my small ten-year-old fingers slipping and cramping as I contorted them.

Click.

The door opened, and I hurried to free Lucinda from her bedroom, which had a normal bed, desk, and dresser, unlike my mostly empty room.

We were both Dick's servants, but he *hated* me and seemed to tolerate Lucinda. I didn't know why he treated us differently, but Lucinda was a six-year-old angel of sweetness, so I hoped it stayed that way.

I could handle his anger.

Giggling and laughing, we grabbed our old wool coats and laced up our boots. Mine were a couple sizes too small, but I didn't care; I was too excited to go out into the woods and away from the tavern.

I held Lucinda's tiny hand as we stepped out into the cold temperatures of the shifter realm.

Cold wind howled, and a thick layer of snow covered the ground in a treacherous, icy sheet.

Today, the red sun was high in the sky and blazed with warmth.

The brutal cold didn't smack us in the face and steal our breath like normal. Instead, snow flurries drifted lazily from the partially blue sky.

It was a glorious summer day, and probably the warmest of the year.

I looked back and forth across the cobblestone street that ran in front of a few shops, the public library, and Dick's tavern.

The library was the only place Dick let us occasionally visit, and we loved it there, but we couldn't visit today because someone might see us and tattle.

Dick was our master; we were his servants.

This morning, he'd locked us in our rooms and taken his Yukata horse to do business in a neighboring town. Since we'd both been orphaned at his tavern as kids, we were Dick's property.

Everyone in town knew it.

Now none of the realm's furry horses clopped past. Usually I loved seeing the beasts with their long, shaggy insulating fur, which helped them survive the realm's freezing conditions.

But at the moment, I was glad no people were riding them about—it meant we could escape without being caught.

I held Lucinda's hand tight as we sprinted across the road into the thick forest. We ran, and ran, and left the sprawling valley town behind us.

"Finally, we're free of the beast!" I yelled as we hurtled deeper into the forest, weaving around thick tree trunks.

Pine needles blotted the sky, and the gaps through the branches revealed the towering white mountains that surrounded the valley.

Lucinda ran ahead of me, giggling like a maniac. She loved when we played "explorer" and chased each other through the mountainside.

"I'm gonna get you!" I hollered and gnashed my teeth in her direction.

With my hands in front of me like claws, I pretended to be an alpha warrior.

Lucinda screamed louder and turned around. She pointed a finger gun at me and said, "Pow, pow."

My body shook as I trembled from the force of fake bullet wounds, but I kept prowling forward and snapped my teeth at her like a beast.

The shifter realm had two classifications of people.

In the bottom tier were null shifters, who were unimpressive and made up the majority of the population. The realm had about fifty thousand people, and 99 percent of them were nulls.

That was us.

In contrast, the top tier consisted of ABOs.

Betas were the most common ABO. They were the realm's soldiers. Stronger and faster than nulls, they had extended lifetimes but couldn't shift.

Dick was one of them.

Alphas were the coolest ABOs. They were the realm's war generals, huge and immortal, and each one shifted into a unique beast of lore.

Finally, omegas were highly revered and immortal. They shifted into small, harmless creatures—they were physically perfect. Alphas were obsessed with them.

But lately the lady on the news had been saying alphas were dying out because omegas were the only shifters who could birth ABOs and there were none left in the realm.

I didn't understand how ABOs were disappearing when they were immortal, but I figured I must be too young to understand.

Most nulls got tested at the sacred lake when they turned twenty, to discover if they were an ABO. But ABOs were physically impressive even before they underwent their transition.

It didn't concern me.

Servants never got tested. ABOs came from elite families with elite bloodlines. They weren't unwanted orphans left at a bar.

I shrugged it off; I was used to not being special.

In front of me, Lucinda jumped up and grabbed a tree branch. Her long blonde hair billowed behind her body as she fearlessly climbed the branches.

I followed closely behind, the cold bark digging into my palms. We jumped and leaped from branch to branch.

I laughed with exhilaration.

As we climbed higher and higher up the massive coniferous tree, raccoons chittered. We waved to the fluffy little guys.

One waved back, one hissed aggressively, and another belly-flopped down into the snow. Lucinda giggled and waved back to the waving creature, her red eyes wide with amazement.

"It's a fluffy bunny," she said while laughing uncontrollably.

I nodded because I didn't have the heart to correct her. Lucinda loved bunnies.

Finally, we made it to the very top branches of the massive pine tree. Snowcapped mountains towered around us, and everything as far as the eye

could see was cold, white, and uninhabited.

The shifter realm was an icy, barren place.

It was more miserable when you were two null servants under a beta's thumb.

Up atop our perch, I wished for the billionth time that we could sprout wings, fly away to a portal, and travel to a different land. Somewhere, hidden in the snowy woods, there were a few portals to the fae realm and one that led to the human realm.

At least that was what I had read in a book. It had described portals as swirling black vortexes that sucked a person in if they got close enough. Adults always talked about them in hushed whispers.

But it didn't matter anyway. The portals weren't safe.

Currently, shifters were at war with the fae queen—she sent monsters into the realm, and ABOs fought them back. Rumor was, she wanted the land for herself.

I tried to imagine a big beast roaring through the forest.

As the large trees swayed in the howling wind, it wasn't hard to picture. The cold gusts rippled through the treetops, and we giggled as our perch swayed precariously.

For a long time, we sat in the treetop and told each other about our favorite stories from the library: tales of fantastical creatures from faraway realms.

Birds perched around us, squirrels and raccoons rustling branches below. The red sun kissed our upturned faces, and we basked in our day of freedom.

Finally, when the sun drifted low and the wind began to shriek with frigid intensity, we climbed down from our haven and trudged back to our prison.

That night, back in the rickety old tavern where we lived, Dick returned from his trip.

He freed us from our rooms and informed us that a shifter from town had spotted us climbing through the trees.

Dick glared down at us both, but I stepped in front of Lucinda to protect her.

She wasn't just younger than me; she was smaller and more delicate. Her large ruby eyes and blonde hair matched her shy, sweet personality.

We both had red eyes, but people described mine as burning flames of trouble and hers as beautiful, sparkling rubies.

I wouldn't let the monster take the sparkle from her; in contrast, I'd never had any sparkle to begin with.

"It was my fault. I picked our locks and dragged her out with me. She didn't want to go," I said while I stared him down.

Dick ground his teeth, and his eyes crinkled with annoyance like they always did when I glared at him. He said my eyes were unnerving.

Lucinda grabbed the back of my frayed coat with both her little hands, her fingers trembling against me. I wanted to gut Dick for scaring her.

"All you do is make trouble," Dick said.

Pain stabbed through my head as he grabbed me by my long white ponytail and dragged me down the hall.

Lucinda cried and ran after, but I motioned at her to stay put. With a quivering chin, she nodded and went to hide under her bed like she always did when he hurt me.

I bared my teeth as Dick grabbed my neck, but I was no match for his beta strength.

He shoved me into my empty room, slammed the door, and removed his belt.

I bit down hard on my lip and pretended I was a great alpha warrior.

In my mind, I turned Dick's violence back on him.

For every stroke of his belt, every drop of blood that left my body, I hurt him.

He screamed and writhed—he begged me to stop—as I beat him with my massive fists.

I didn't stop; I showed no mercy.

That was only in my imagination.

Tears streamed down my face, and I screamed until my voice was hoarse and broken.

Dick whipped me endlessly.

When the beating finished and Dick left—when I slipped in my blood as I tried to stand up—I promised myself I wouldn't cry next time.

In the library books, great adventurers never cried, so neither would I.

Even if I wasn't an alpha, I could be strong like one.

There was no way I would survive otherwise.

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1
The Sacred Lake

Sadie

Blood dripped down my arm, and it splashed onto the floor that I was trying to clean.

I sighed and searched for inner peace because it was just another shitty day in the shifter realm.

Crack.

Again, Dick slammed his belt across my back, and the loud sound echoed through the otherwise silent tavern.

My blood splattered.

"Now you've done made a mess. Clean it up." Dick leaned forward, and his spittle hit my face.

Over the years, Dick had become increasingly ornery and irrational, which was impressive because he'd started out as a violent piece of shit.

Personal growth was *not* his strength.

My back burned unmercifully.

I rubbed at my eyes tiredly and gagged as Dick's smoky beta scent irritated my throat.

"Clean faster!" he yelled and whipped his belt down with beta strength.

Dick was a retired beta war "hero." *Hero* was clearly a subjective term.

I would call him *monster*, *pig*, *scumbag*, *piece of shit*, *skank*, not hero.

Again, Dick slashed my skin mercilessly.

At twenty years old, I was starting to think Dick had beef with my flesh and was actively trying to remove it from my body.

My best guess was he was jealous that my skin was so gold and shiny.

The open wounds on my back burned as I scrubbed the floor faster, and I fantasized about taking the brush and shoving it down his throat.

The tavern was empty, and I was cleaning up the bloody mess from the bar fight I'd started after a beta groped my ass.

I was a lowly null servant, so shifters groped and pawed me like an object.

Patrons also heckled me because of my unnatural appearance. My eyes were bloodred, hair platinum white, and my skin golden bronze.

Sadly, at five and a half feet tall and barely one hundred and twenty pounds, I was a runty null. For sure one of the weaker people in the entire shifter realm.

Well, other than Lucinda.

My sister was also about my size, but smaller because she was younger.

The only differences were her hair was a golden, honey blonde, her body a little curvier, and her face a little softer.

Now Lucinda was away at school until she was eighteen.

In the shifter realm, kids were sent away to live at school from thirteen to eighteen. Lots of children perished in the cold, so the oligarchy didn't waste efforts educating them until they were thirteen.

As a result, for two more long-ass years, I was stuck living alone with Dick—who had poorer mental health than a rock.

The only good thing was Dick didn't hurt Lucinda.

He liked to focus on me, to the point where I was confused why he didn't just kill me.

Every day I caused chaos, and every day he whipped me with his belt.

It was almost like we had a routine at this point.

I was still waiting for the part where we transitioned away from violence and started a new schedule of meditating, journaling, and sharing our feelings.

Instead, it was an all-out war.

My recent plan had been to feed the rats in my room so much stolen cheese that they would band together into a small army.

Dick's home was now the rats' home.

I chuckled to myself as three rats scurried across the far wall of the bar, climbing under broken chairs, searching for more food.

The sight of the little buggers out and about, living it up in the tavern, almost filled my eyes with tears.

They were so cute and good at invading Dick's home mercilessly. It was inspiring.

The bastard slammed his belt across my back again, and my smile turned into a grimace.

I bit down on my lower lip to stop the silent scream that tried to make its way up my broken throat.

My eyes burned with the beginning of tears. There was only so much pain my body could take.

He hit fucking hard.

More of my blood pooled across the mahogany floor that I was trying to clean.

Rage started to build inside me until my hands shook and my heartbeat pounded in my ears.

Yesterday, when I'd turned twenty, I'd woken up and the solution to all my problems had been obvious.

I had to kill Dick.

My plan had always been to suffer through Dick's beatings until Lucinda came back from school in two years.

Yesterday, I had awoken with a burning need to murder the fucker.

Two years was too long.

Dick had to die. Now.

Maybe I could find the secret location of the portals to another realm, or maybe the oligarchy would execute me.

Either way, if Dick was dead, he couldn't hurt me or Lucinda.

It was the perfect plan.

"Hit me one more time. See what happens." My voice was rough and mangled from years of screaming and abuse.

I spat onto the ground in front of his boot.

Dick's ruddy complexion flushed, and his eyes lit with anger.

He slammed his steel-toed boot into my stomach and swung his belt.

"Useless whore!" His beady eyes flashed, and his jowls shook with rage. Dick wasn't the best with his words.

It was a tale as old as time. The servant on her knees, covered in blood, with the master enraged above her.

But I always liked the darker books—where the servant killed the master and bathed in his blood.

"It's Sadie, not whore." I grabbed the belt mid-swing, and his beady eyes widened in surprise.

Time stopped as we both gripped the edge of the weapon.

I focused on the lever in my brain: the little switch, that if I tipped just right, set me free.

The numb clicked on.

Endless numbness.

Cold relief.

All my emotions poofed out of existence, and the world became less vibrant. Colors held less hue.

My scattered, emotional thoughts dissipated into cool nothingness.

The endless rage, pain, sadness just disappeared. I was hyper focused on the threat and eliminating it.

It was the only reason I had survived my teenage years under Dick's increasingly violent abuse.

The switch in my brain flipped me into an emotionless bitch that could survive anything.

The only downside was the numb needed to recharge after each use.

When I'd turned twelve, the voice in my head had suddenly appeared.

It had arrived too late to save my voice, which was rough from screaming during beatings, but it kept me alive.

Now everything inside me was cold, icier than the glaciers outside.

Sweep out his legs. Take the belt. Wrap it around his throat and kill him.

Dick startled out of his shock, and a snarl contorted his face. The twitch of his right eyebrow was his tell.

Things were about to get even bloodier.

Dick wrenched his arm back and flung my body forward, but I didn't release the belt.

Superficial flesh wound, no internal damage. Sweep his leg. Punch out his ACL.

My legs snapped forward, and I swept his legs out from under him. Dick hit the deck with a thud and crashed over chairs in the empty tavern.

He released the belt.

Wrap it around his neck.

He roared on the ground, and I pounced. Before he could move, I had the belt around his neck and was choking him. His big, meaty elbows flailed backward and rammed into my ribs. He broke bone, and I didn't flinch.

Tighter.

When I was numb, pain didn't register.

Dick struggled and slammed my body back into a table, but I didn't release him.

His swollen face turned purple, and his beady eyes popped out of his head.

"I took you in. I saved you." Dick gasped as he fought for his life.

You didn't save someone by whipping them.

Long, nasty scars mutilated my torso, the raised white edges a stark reminder of every beating.

"No, you beat me."

Kill him.

He choked as I tightened and pulled harder at the belt around his neck.

It took forever to choke out a beta, and Dick's neck was thicker than most, but the numb didn't care.

I was in no rush.

All of a sudden, the tavern door slammed open. A person stood at the entrance.

I was startled by the unexpected noise, and the numb switched off. Sometimes that happened when I was surprised.

Now my emotions choked me and my side fucking hurt where Dick had slammed it.

A cloaked intruder stood in the doorway.

A blustery, icy wind blasted into the room and whipped his hooded garment.

"The oligarchy has received word that a twenty-year-old servant lives at this residence. New orders: all servants will also get tested at the sacred lake," said a deep male voice.

It wasn't a question.

The snowy wind howled behind the intruder, and he opened his cloak to flash a massive machine gun.

Technology didn't work well in the freezing temperatures without help, which was why the gun glowed blue with fae enchantment. It was strange which devices worked in the realm, and enchantments were extremely expensive and rare.

I released Dick from my stranglehold.

I couldn't kill him without getting blown to pieces, which really sucked.

Without preamble, the figure threw a warm cloak at me (that must be his thing), grabbed me around the neck, and shoved me out into the miserable

cold.

Dick followed behind us silently as we crunched across the thick snow.

I thanked the moon goddess that I was wearing my thick boots.

It was winter, so the temperatures were well below freezing, and a mix of snowy hail pummeled through my threadbare jacket.

My bloody wounds burned my back, but I could feel the skin starting to scab slightly.

All null shifters could heal wounds within a couple of days' time. The bleeding from my back injuries was already stopping, and I knew from experience that they would completely scar over in about three days.

Unlike ABOs, who didn't scar, I scarred awfully.

As the negative temperatures pricked my skin, it burned with the unnatural warmth of frostbite.

I shivered, but I would survive.

Unless an adult null shifter was trapped out in the cold all night, they'd live.

Visibility was shit, and the minutes passed in a blur of white.

Then the cloaked dude restraining my neck shoved me forward, and I fell to my knees in a thick snowbank.

Through icy lashes, I looked up.

I was kneeling at the edge of the sacred lake.

Mountains and pine trees reflected off the lake's serene surface.

Snow fell thick and fast, but it disappeared in midair and nothing touched the unfrozen water.

Rumor was it had been enchanted by the fae thousands of years ago, long before the war.

I shivered and sighed with exhaustion.

Everyone knew ABOs were always physically larger and more impressive, even before they transitioned.

This was a fool's errand.

The cloaked man spoke, his voice low and rough.

"Sun god, you bless us. Turn half the lake black for an alpha's beast, turn a quarter of the lake purple for a beta's strength, and turn the river's edge yellow for an omega's seed."

Before I could react, he removed a long, wicked-looking knife, slit my arm, and held it over the lake.

My forearm burned as he turned my arm over and squeezed.

In slow motion, my blood fell toward the surface.

A gust of wind slammed against the red droplets, and it was as if the air itself sought to redirect them, a desperate attempt to halt the unfolding events.

My blood sprayed the snowy banks.

However, one drop kissed the surface of the silver lake.

The lake turned black—every single drop.

Midnight black, soulless black.

Alpha black.

The endless darkness of the black lake contrasted with the pure whiteness of the snowy valley.

Alphas were violent, terrifying, and extremely rare.

As my ears roared and my knees trembled, my sweat defied physics—it broke out across every inch of my frozen flesh.

There were no women alphas.

Ever.

Before I could do anything, Dick grabbed my arm and yanked me back. "You've done it now, whore."

He dragged me away, but the cloaked man grabbed my arms and tore me out of Dick's clutches.

The strange man threw me over his shoulder and sprinted through the thick woods. As he ran, he lifted his gun and fired shots back at Dick.

I hoped the bullets hit.

My vision blurred as trees sped around me.

Alphas were angry psychos who shifted into terrifying beasts.

They were revered like gods.

Fierce, terrifying, psychotic, immortal gods.

Military leaders. Violent guardians of the portals.

Alphas battled monsters because they *were* monsters. There were only a handful of alphas left. Every single one adored and feared.

Now I was one of them.

I struggled to breathe through the shoulder in my stomach and the terror that crippled my brain.

My vision became kaleidoscopic.

Then I glimpsed the lake through the thick pines. I hadn't known true bloodcurdling fear until this very moment.

The lake was no longer black.

It was blood red.

According to the oligarchy, the fae had enchanted the lakes to turn three colors—red wasn't one of them.

My eyes watered from terror, and a whistling sensation tunneled through my ears.

I prayed my eyes were playing tricks on me.

Finally, I passed out.

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2
Mistakes and Alphaholes

Sadie

I groaned as my arm throbbed. My face itched something fierce from dried blood, and I remembered getting my nose smashed in the bar fight.

As I took stock of my aching body, I blinked open my crusty eyes and wished I hadn't.

Three godlike men towered over me and blocked out the sky.

Instantly, my hackles rose, and I tried to flip the switch that activated the numb.

Nothing happened.

Sadly, it must have only been a day since I'd used it, because the numb needed at least a day and a half to recharge. Sometimes it took even longer.

"Wake up, Princess," one of the gods said, and my blurry vision focused on him.

First thing I noticed: he was massive and covered in tattoos.

Second thing I noticed: he was ridiculously handsome.

Every inch of his arms, legs, chest, and neck was covered in colorful flame and rose designs.

I had never seen a man so heavily tattooed in all my life.

The designs were impressive and added intensity to his massive stature and bulging muscles.

Still, his tattoos weren't the most shocking part.

Massive onyx horns jutted out from a bed of shaggy gold hair. They were large and thick, and curled atop his head.

The tattooed, horned god leaned over and shook my arm.

Up close, his features were arresting: severe cheekbones, a sharp jawline, and slashing amber eyes that glared at me.

Yep, the horned man was terrifying.

My gut screamed at me to punch him in the throat and run for my life because no man should be so large, handsome, and cool-looking.

I scrambled backward as the horned god stared down at me with a quirked eyebrow.

The fog cleared from my brain, and I realized I was crawling backward over a snowbank, shivering, and cold as fuck.

My only protection was my heavy cloak.

The good thing was, Dick wasn't standing above me with a belt, and the wounds on my back didn't burn anymore.

I flexed my shoulder blades and sighed with relief when my back didn't scream in agony. The wounds were mostly healed.

The bad thing was a different god, the likes of which I had never seen, was standing above me. I hadn't even known men could have horns.

Had I finally lost my mind?

Was I fully hallucinating?

"Where the fuck am I?" My broken voice was loud and rough, and my dry throat made me cough.

I crossed my fingers behind my back and prayed he wouldn't say the afterworld, because I was not psychologically prepared to be dead.

Sure, my life sucked, but you know what also sucked? Dying when you were still a virgin. That was just *embarrassing*.

"Don't play games with us," the tattooed god said with a deep, raspy voice, and my gut pinched a little at the sound.

He took a step back as I hauled my ass up and stumbled away from him.

He hadn't confirmed I wasn't dead, and I was not about to let myself be attacked by a dark god of the afterlife.

As I slipped to my feet, I looked around.

Suddenly, I wished I were fucking dead.

Who cared if I was a virgin? Abstinence was cool.

In front of me, a towering gray fortress jutted out into the sky. The forest surrounded it on all sides, and there was a high brick wall around the perimeter.

Guards stood atop the wall, holding massive machine guns.

The big black guns glowed light blue with enchantment, and all of them were pointed directly at me.

Part of me was flattered that they thought they needed that much firepower to take me down.

A larger part of me wanted to pee my pants and start crying like a baby. Because someone had dumped my skinny ass on the front lawn of a fortress.

There were only a few fortresses in the entire shifter realm, and everyone knew they were located near the portals that led to the fae realm.

They were hidden in remote, mountainous valleys, and their locations were top secret.

Portals were the battlegrounds, where alphas and betas fought against fae monsters and stopped them from intruding into our realm.

The fortresses housed the soldiers as they trained and fought.

I was on the lawn of a war compound, on the front line of a war between monsters.

In theory, this was a good thing. If I was near a portal, I could escape from this shitty place.

In reality, this was a nightmare.

Lucinda was still away at school, and now I had no idea how to get to her. I couldn't escape through a portal without my little sister.

Then my sluggish brain chose that exact moment to remember the events at the lake.

Like a strong, independent woman, I keeled over and vomited into the snow. There wasn't much in my stomach, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten.

I gagged dramatically and choked on my spit, hacking with my back arched in front of the three gods.

It wasn't my cutest moment.

"Disgusting, pathetic creature," someone sneered mockingly beside the tattooed man.

I made the mistake of looking over at the second man's face.

Holy shit.

He was gorgeous.

He looked like an ancient statue of a marble hero, and his skin was so pale that his light-turquoise veins sparkled.

An inky swath of hair fell around his eyes—a deep emerald that was darker and more vibrant than the coniferous trees in the forest behind him.

The horned god's features were so harsh they were intimidating, but this pale god was classically handsome.

He was like a statue of the sun god, like a painting of an angel from the rumored god realm, like an annoying bastard who thought he was hot shit.

He had a strong jawline, icy cheekbones, a straight nose, and a wickedly sinful mouth that sneered down at me.

The *holy fuck* on top of the cake was hundreds of emeralds and diamonds melded into his skin in a fantastical glitter.

The little jewels decorated his cheekbones and crawled down the side of his neck.

"Obsessed much?" His perfect upper lip rolled up in disgust.

Yep, all men sucked.

"I'm just confused about why your skin is covered in rocks. It's weird." I flipped my hair over my shoulder as I acted like his jewels weren't the prettiest thing I had ever seen.

Unfortunately, my white hair was a frozen rat's nest, so it ruined the effect.

My stomach pinched, and I thought back to the little rats at the tavern.

I hoped they would be okay without me. They were going to miss their momma.

Yes, I had proclaimed myself the mother of rats.

It was a rare, powerful role that only the strongest women could strongest women could hold—or the ones that had access to cheese—either way, they were my babies.

I missed them.

I stopped worrying about my rats, because the horned man took a step toward me.

I took two steps back.

He and the pale man were made of muscles and tall as shit.

Both were more than a foot taller than me and three times as wide.

I was about five and a half feet tall and built on the less than impressive side. In contrast, they were built like they ate fifteen meals a day and lifted rocks for fun.

It was kind of embarrassing for them. They looked like they tried *way* too hard and had exercise addictions.

Not cute.

Still, I wasn't fighting them.

The most exercise I usually got was lifting beer glasses for patrons and fighting against Dick.

Just last week, I had dropped a tray of beer glasses because my bicep had cramped mid-carry.

Physical prowess was not one of my strengths.

I eyed the machine guns and the men in front of me. My best chance was against the guns.

All I had to do was sprint toward the brick wall, scale it, fight off the guards, jump down the other side, and run to the tree line.

I sighed heavily and wondered who I had pissed off in my past life, because this one was *not* going well.

"Relax, Ascher, no need to frighten her." A third man stepped forward from the shadowed wall.

Apparently, the horned man was named Ascher.

Also, apparently, this new man had eaten his twin in the womb. There was no other possible way someone could be *so* massive.

I stepped back and almost peed myself with fright when he came fully into the light.

I was 100 percent screwed.

The third *beast* managed to make the other two men look average.

A fantastical feat, because until now, they had been the strongest and tallest men I had ever seen. Much bigger than even Dick. He must be almost seven foot tall.

My mind short-circuited, and I took another step back.

The man had dark skin. Long braids hung to his biceps, and hundreds of chains and gold trinkets dangled from them.

The chains twinkled in the icy wind and blew around his waist.

He also had bars of gold through his ears, and a gold nose ring decorated his wide nose.

As far as I knew, shifters didn't wear piercings, because the extreme temperatures would weld them to our skin.

This absolute *mammoth* of a man looked fine.

I was kind of jealous; the piercings were pretty.

High cheekbones, plush lips, and stunning gray eyes completed the handsome picture.

His features weren't as harsh as the other men's, and it should have softened him.

It didn't.

I had never seen someone so large. It seemed impossible that someone *could* be so imposing.

Mountains of muscles piled atop his frame and stretched his fitted long-sleeved shirt to obscenity.

He looked like a drawing of a comic-book hero, with bulging muscles that were too large to be real.

Yet he towered in front of me. Alive and in the flesh.

My neck hurt as I tried to look up at him.

I estimated he was close to five hundred pounds and at least a foot and a half taller than me.

One punch would kill me.

"My name is Jax. What are you doing at portal three?" He took a slow step toward me with his palms out, like I was a wounded animal that would startle.

"I don't know."

"Liar. No one knows this location." Ascher glared down at me, his amber eyes burning with fire as his chest heaved. Tattoos of flames leaped across the side of his neck and traveled up his high cheekbones.

"Perhaps she's a spy." The pale man whose skin glittered with diamonds and emeralds sauntered in a circle. He caged me in.

All my instincts screamed at me to run away. His voice was frosty cold, and his rich green eyes were dead—completely soulless.

I could tell he was cruel.

"Stand down, Cobra." Jax held out his hand and stopped Cobra from circling around me like a predator trapping his prey.

Cobra was such a fitting name for the gorgeous pale man, and he moved so gracefully he almost slithered across the snow. Nothing crunched beneath his feet.

"You have no idea why you are here? That seems doubtful. We found you slumped on our front lawn. Somehow you got through the gate. Explain yourself," Jax said calmly. He didn't sneer or do anything intimidating. He just crossed his boulder arms casually and flexed them.

I stared at his arm; it was two times the size of my thigh.

"Last I remember, I was getting tested at the sacred lake," I said quietly, my permanently broken voice a rough rasp.

"Are you a new beta? Our forces are low, so that would be good. Although, you are unimpressively small. No offense," Jax said with a

grimace as the jewels in his hair tinkled.

His large frame blocked out the red sun, and I tried to inconspicuously shift away from the three men.

"Um, not a beta." My heart jackhammered in my chest, and my vision spun.

"Alphas, please, there is a message from the oligarchy. Alphas, it is urgent!" A tall, skinny boy sprinted out of the front door of the fortress and ran across the lawn like his ass was on fire.

I took another step back, hopeful I could disappear over the brick wall while they weren't paying attention.

Alphas.

It made sense.

All the rumors said they were formidable and psychotic, unlike any beta or null shifter.

A force to themselves.

These men were forces all right, a frigid snowstorm that froze everything in its wake.

I inched slowly into the shadows as Jax stepped forward to talk to the frantic boy.

Jax seemed to be their leader, and it made sense. He was a literal mountain. Plus, his eyes didn't gleam with crazy like the other two. He seemed more rational.

"Tsk, tsk. Do you think the little spy is running away? Do you think the fae queen sent her?" Cobra asked Ascher as his warm hand wrapped around my neck and gently squeezed.

Little jewels were embedded in the fingers, and my skin burned where they pressed into my neck.

Cobra's skin was warm, but his diamonds were cold.

I also didn't let men touch me. Ever.

"Release me." I slammed my heel down as hard as I could atop the bridge of his foot and shoved my elbow back into his solar plexus.

Instead of letting go, or even grunting in pain, Cobra laughed. A silky chuckle.

The hand around my neck tightened, and I saw stars behind my eyes. My elbow burned with pain where it had collided with his abs.

"What is it, Zed?" Jax asked the boy, who was keeled over and panting like he had been sprinting as fast as he could.

“The oligarchy just sent urgent word. The girl is an alpha. *She’s* the next alpha. They’ve confirmed it. Don’t hurt her!” The boy, Zed, pointed at me and looked terrified, like he expected Cobra to snap my neck.

I wouldn’t put it past him.

“My name is Sadie . . . not girl.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest and tried to look intimidating, which was hard with a hand still wrapped around my neck.

“Bullshit.” Cobra released my neck and shoved me away like I burned.

It took me a moment to realize he wasn’t talking about my name, but that Zed had said I was an alpha.

“There is no fucking way this *princess* is an alpha. There are no female alphas. They made a mistake.” Ascher stomped his foot with frustration and ran a hand along one of his horns.

From the fire in his amber eyes, it was clear he was a hothead.

I was used to his type: big babies who took their anger out on everyone else.

“Are you sure?” Jax tilted his head to the side and inspected me, like he was searching for some sign that I was a psychotic alpha that could shift into a beast.

“Yes, the oligarchy has confirmed it!” Zed said, gesturing at me like I was a busted fork he was trying to sell. It was hard to watch.

Jax nodded like he had come to a conclusion. “We need all the help we can get. Fine, we’ll bring her in and test her mettle.”

“No fucking way,” Ascher said.

At the same time, Cobra laughed. “We’re gonna kill her.”

All three alphas stomped toward the fortress, not bothering to make sure I followed.

They didn’t view me as a threat.

Zed came up to me. His big brown eyes were sincere, and when he smiled at me, he seemed genuinely kind. A rare trait in the shifter realm.

He said, “Sorry about that. We’re honored to have another alpha at portal three, since it has been many years since another was found. I’m a null shifter. It’s a big deal that you’re an alpha. Congrats.”

“I think the sacred lake made a mistake,” I said and rubbed the back of my neck as we followed the alphas.

I didn’t feel like celebrating.

An alpha wouldn't be covered in scars; they would be strong enough to protect themselves.

"The lake never makes mistakes. I feel good about having you here." Zed patted my back, and I tried not to wince when he hit one of the still-healing belt wounds.

I shifted away from his touch, and he quickly dropped his hand.

The boy was terrible at reading situations.

Still, while I did not appreciate another male touching me, I enjoyed his misplaced support. It was better than the hatred and indifference of the alphas.

As we entered the building, one thing was obvious: the fortress was overwhelmingly large. It must have had hundreds of rooms and hallways.

"So what creature are you, Princess?" Ascher asked with a sneer as he raked his hand over his onyx horns, and I followed them into a massive gymnasium.

We walked into the largest room I had ever seen.

Blue-and-pink mats covered the floor, and there was a track along the perimeter.

Across the gym, about thirty male and female soldiers stood and stretched.

"What?" I asked in confusion. I had been distracted by the size of the room and the group of beefy-looking soldiers inside it.

All three alphas stared at me expectantly.

"What beast do you turn into? What is your alpha form?" Jax said calmly.

"She's probably a kitten." Cobra laughed and elbowed Jax. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

Zed had left as soon as we entered the gym, and I found myself wishing he was still standing beside me. His presence was somewhat comforting, the opposite of the energy the alphas were giving off.

"I don't know," I said truthfully.

I didn't have jewels in my skin like Cobra, horns like Ascher, or strength like Jax.

Unlike alphas, omegas weren't known for their physical prowess, and they transformed into small, nonthreatening beasts.

It would be less shocking if I were an omega and turned into a small animal, like a fluffy raccoon, or a rat (as a mother of rats, the latter would be preferable).

Alphas were big beasts, and I was a little bitch—physically, not emotionally. *Obviously.*

"Well, lucky for her, violence helps reveal an alpha's second form." Cobra cracked his neck as he grinned at Ascher, and the sound echoed in the large room. The horned alpha grinned back.

I didn't feel lucky.

I also didn't understand why Cobra kept talking about me but didn't address me directly.

It was weird.

Jax ran his hand over his face in frustration. "We usually don't allow our alpha forms in the gym because they can be . . . intimidating. We'll make an exception today and see if yours is revealed."

My stomach dropped to my toes. "I think there's been a mistake. I'm just gonna go."

I turned and ran into Ascher.

He moved quickly, and his large, horned head blocked the door, his harsh features scowling down at me.

Up close, his alpha pheromones wafted, and my mouth watered at the amazing scent.

Ascher smelled like pine trees, a rich, musky scent that made my toes curl.

He leaned forward, and his nostrils flared wide, like he was breathing me in.

His amber eyes burned with rage. "You don't get to run away. You fucking wanted this. Now you get it."

His delicious scent didn't match his annoying personality.

"I didn't ask for anything," I said with disgust.

Jax sighed heavily. "You're going to want to stretch."

Cobra smiled at me, and it looked downright evil on his gorgeous face.

Ascher shoved me forward, and I stumbled to the ground.

On my hands and knees, I realized the mats weren't actually blue and pink.

They were all blue—some were just dyed pink.

From blood.

The lever in my brain tipped.

The numb had recharged.

It clicked on.

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3
Fight Club

Sadie

I walked forward through the massive gym, following behind the three alphas.

As I got closer, the soldiers turned and stared at me. They wore matching green outfits, and each person was large and intimidating.

I sniffed the air. Each soldier emitted a soft, smoky scent.

They smelled like Dick; they were betas.

I stood out in my too-small hoodie that had holes and my tattered pants.

I also stood out because dried blood from the bar fight still coated my face, and my hair was a mess.

Every beta in the gym appeared to be at least six feet tall—both women and men.

Betas weren't immortal like alphas and omegas, but they still lived for two hundred years or longer.

These betas could be ten times my age or older.

A couple openly sneered as they looked down at me with disgust.

The numb was flowing through my veins, so I wasn't embarrassed by the stares and scowls that greeted me.

Thirty shifters, eighteen men, twelve women.

I stared at them, knowing my blood-red eyes would make them uncomfortable.

Dick had always freaked out when I'd glared at him.

Like I'd predicted, a man with a bushy beard pulled his upper lip back with disgust as I met his gaze.

Staring down thirty beta shifters, I cataloged the two escape exits, and forty-foot ceiling.

There was nowhere to hide, just a cavernous room covered in bloody mats.

Use the element of surprise.

Straightening up, I widened my stance and bent my knees.

Cracking my neck back and forth, I let a small smile curl the edges of my mouth.

"Who the fuck is the little girl?" the large beta with the bushy brown beard said loudly from across the room. His words echoed.

I slowly backed away.

"Stay where you are, Sadie." Jax's head whipped around, and he stared at me with his gray eyes.

The only thing that stopped me from snapping back, or running away, was the fact that his voice wasn't angry.

Strong alpha. Obey.

My subconscious acquiesced to Jax, and I obeyed mostly because I was shocked.

I didn't bow to anyone, ever, especially not when numb.

Cobra stood at Jax's side, his glare becoming even more hostile, and Ascher smirked.

It was clear they thought I was a little bitch for heeding to Jax.

I rolled my eyes at their antics.

They might be beasts, but I had known only monsters all my life. Their attempts at intimidation did nothing to me.

"What did you say?" Jax's attention was fully on the beta who had called me a little girl. His gray eyes were cold and harsh, like the frigid realm outside.

"We were confused. Who's the new girl?" The beta's voice was respectful and subdued. He was a good actor.

"We have a new alpha to train," Jax said calmly.

Instantly, the room erupted into whispers, and all the betas stared at me, some with expressions of awe, most in horror and disgust.

Kill them quickly, before they attack.

I tried to tune out the homicidal numb and focus on the betas in front of me.

I had to fight *with* them, not against them, in the war against the fae queen.

This was my new servitude.

“Apologies, sir, we had no idea.” The bearded man lowered his head and exposed his neck in a sign of subservience.

There was a long pause, then Jax nodded.

The betas let out audible sighs of relief that their alpha had accepted the apology.

Ascher whipped his head around to grin at me. It wasn’t a nice expression. “Let’s see what our new alpha can do.”

Ascher gestured to me mockingly.

His flame tattoos covered his neck and hands, and I tried not to notice how pretty his gold hair was. It practically gleamed under the skylights.

Cracking my neck back and forth, I grinned back at him.

I showed all my teeth.

Ascher sashayed forward until I could smell the thick pine scent of his alpha dominance. It filled my nose with notes of balsam and cedar.

It took all my willpower not to move forward and breathe it in.

Instead, I leaned my head back to look at him.

Ascher towered over me, and my neck hurt as I leaned further back to meet his amber eyes.

With me standing so close to him, my small stature seemed like a cosmic joke.

He was a monster of a man. Yet, somehow, we were both alphas.

“Excited to fight?” Ascher flashed a row of brilliant white teeth behind his overly lush mouth. His horns were large and menacing.

His perfect teeth should have made him look more polished and less scary—life wasn’t fair—somehow coupled with his sharp jawline, they added to his menace.

“Can’t wait.” I grinned back at him and scrunched my nose up patronizingly.

Break off his horn and use it as a weapon.

I let him see the crazy in my eyes.

He wanted to scare me, but the numb was coursing through my veins in a rush of cold adrenaline.

All he did was challenge it.

He should be afraid.

Jax walked over and glared at Ascher. They shared some type of silent communication, and Ascher backed away from me with one last glare.

The heady scent of pine drifted away, and I fought the urge to follow the intoxicating scent.

Jax walked over, and I noted that my eyes barely came to his chest. “We’ll see how you do with hand-to-hand combat. It is the starting point of all training.”

He turned and addressed the room.

As he spun, his alpha scent of warm chestnuts made my mouth water. “Today, we will do King of the Hill. Everyone will participate in twenty-minute one-on-one battles. Whoever gets in the most hits at the end of the time moves up to the next partner. If you lose, you stay where you are and don’t advance. The new alpha training begins now. As always, we protect this realm. We are the harbingers of fae death.”

I stopped drooling over Jax.

Prepare to fight.

The numb was ready.

Jax raised his fist into the air and gave a roar.

Every person in the gym lifted their fists and bellowed in response.

I tried to not let the shock show on my face.

The most fighting experience I had was breaking up a couple of drunk bar fights or getting away from larger shifters who tried to grope me.

In one day, I went from playing tortured servant to playing war soldier.

We will kill them all.

The numb didn’t care. It was all the same: endless violence.

Following the betas, I stood in a line on the blue mat, across from a heavily muscled man. He sneered at me, and I took a centering breath.

It was time to fight.

Hours later, I rocked back and forth on the balls of my feet as vomit dribbled out of my mouth.

My knuckles were smashed and swollen, and I dragged my bloody hand across my mouth to clear the bile.

Sweat stuck to every inch of my skin, but I kept my sweatshirt on. Regular shirts didn’t cover all my scars. I preferred sweatshirts.

The beta fighting against me now spit blood out the side of his mouth, and I smiled with pride.

I’d lost track of how many men and women I’d fought. It seemed endless.

My sparring partner was a foot taller, muscular, and a couple of years older. He towered above me, and even though we were tied for hits, it wasn't an even match.

His face was perfectly intact, except for a small amount of blood dribbling down the side of his mouth.

In contrast, my nose had been smashed so many times that it no longer filtered air.

Dried blood crusted on every inch of my face, which was starting to itch unbearably.

I'd held my own, but it had been a massacre.

There was only so much I could do with no muscles or training.

The bloodthirsty numb kept me in fights, but in the process, I was getting the complete shit beat out of me.

Good thing the numb didn't give a single shit. So neither did I.

Sink left, dodge right, step back, and snap your foot against his shin. Slam the side of your hand into his neck. Jump back.

I followed the numb's instructions.

Unfortunately, a fist hammered into my sternum because I was too slow to jump back.

Gasping, I hunched over at the waist and tried to ignore the way my lung pinched as I inhaled air through my gaping mouth.

Stand up straight. Lock your knees so you don't collapse.

Straightening up barely, I willed myself not to fall over.

The numb kept most of my agony at bay, but the physical toll was starting to wear me down.

Before my opponent could absolutely obliterate me, the bell rang, signaling the end of the training.

We had been at it for hours.

If I weren't numb, relief would have coursed through me and I probably would have collapsed to the ground, crying.

I didn't shed a single tear.

The numb felt nothing except a small sliver of disappointment that I hadn't gotten to draw more blood.

"We tied." The beta I had been sparring with stared at me like I was some type of creature he had never seen before.

I nodded back at him and wiped away the blood pouring from my nose. It coated the blue mat, puddling beneath my feet.

Betas turned to stare at me with shock, which was weird because I hadn't fought nearly as well as the other three alphas.

All three had beaten their partners and quickly advanced to the top of the sparring line.

Most of the time, Jax and Cobra had battled for the first position. When one of them lost, Ascher would advance and then lose.

Jax had fought like a man possessed, heavy muscles bunching and contracting as he'd delivered punishing blow after punishing blow. He was large, but his feet were fast.

Meanwhile, Cobra had danced like the wind, peppering punches and kicks faster than the eye could follow and dancing out of harm's way.

Ascher had held his own and was a mix of might and dramatic moves. The numb had noted that he was trained in Muay Thai.

The tattooed man was large and talented, but he wasn't strong enough to beat Jax's power or fast enough to stop Cobra.

The rest of the betas had been impressive, but much less skilled than the alphas.

Meanwhile, I'd won as many matches as I'd lost and was smack dab in the middle of the group, so I'd never gotten to fight the other alphas.

Number fifteen. Unacceptable.

Around me, betas collapsed to the mats in exhaustion, some vomiting, while others chugged water.

I stood where I was, afraid my body would give out if I tried to move.

"Who trained you?" Jax walked toward me with purpose. Ascher and Cobra followed him.

The three alphas moved like a pack of the long-tailed snow lions hunting in the mountains, synchronous and terrifying.

"No one." I picked dried blood off my face.

I'd taken a punch to the throat, so my already mangled voice was even harsher than usual.

Unsurprisingly, it had been from the man with the bushy beard.

I turned my head to find him across the room, and he was staring me down. He looked like he still felt the pain from when I'd scissor kicked him in the balls.

I gave him a knowing smile.

The beta was going to be a problem. His hatred for me ran deep, and I wasn't sure why.

Kill him.

"Bullshit. You've clearly been trained. Who taught you?" Ascher invaded my space as he accused me.

His alpha scent of heady pine reminded me of the woods. It made me want to run away into the forest and disappear.

I snapped my head back and stepped away from the three alphas who were crowding my space.

Up close, towering over me, they seemed more like gods than men.

"No one," I repeated calmly.

My calm demeanor pissed Ascher off, and his amber eyes lit with anger.

Jax and Cobra said nothing. They just studied me with narrow eyes, like I was some type of creature they had never seen before.

In fact, everyone in the room was studying me.

I could see the questions in their gazes and the glimmers of fear.

They were confused about how I was still standing.

I'd managed to take at least one hundred blows and give just as many without collapsing.

My body was broken and covered in blood, yet I was still standing. In contrast, many of the betas were incapacitated by much weaker injuries.

Hold their gazes. Let them see your dominance. You could kill them all.

The numb had accomplished its goal.

No one viewed me as a weak little girl anymore.

I was covered in blood and broken all over, but for every pounding I'd received, I had hit back harder. Now they knew not to underestimate me.

It was a start.

Jax turned to address the betas, many of whom were now looking at me warily. It also didn't help that I was covered in blood and had matching freakish red eyes.

"You have three hours to bathe and eat before strategy classes. We will meet in the black room for class tonight. We are the harbingers of fae death. Death to the queen." Jax pumped his fist into the air.

"Harbingers of fae death. Death to the queen." Everyone in the room raised their fists, mimicking him.

I didn't move.

I turned to leave, but a massive body blocked my way. Jax leaned down so I could see his face without breaking my neck.

The mouthwatering scent of warm chestnuts wafted off him and stroked my senses. He really smelled delicious.

"There is a private bathing room on your wing. Use the pink salts. They help heal bones. And then you will join us in the dining hall, little alpha." Jax's voice was silky and his gray eyes warm.

Nodding, I forced myself to back away from him and the wonderful chestnut scent.

Disturbingly, I wanted to get lost in his gaze.

He was dangerous.

Men are monsters.

I wasn't a little girl anymore, and the scars that mutilated my body were a permanent reminder of who I was and who the true enemy was.

I wasn't about to get close to Jax, no matter how beautiful or kind he seemed, because no man was ever going to save me.

No one could save me but myself.

Jax stood with his hands fisted at his sides.

He looked like he was torn between wanting to offer me help and wanting to interrogate me.

He reached a massive hand forward but then turned on his heels and stomped away, and the hundreds of gold jewels in his hair jingled as he left.

Back straight. Flex your core.

Alone in the big gym, I rolled my shoulders back, sucked in air through my burning lungs, and began to limp slowly on a broken foot.

If I weren't numb, I would have collapsed.

Zed stood in the hall, waiting for me. He prattled on about rooms and a healing tub, and I barely listened as I focused all my energy on shuffling behind him.

He didn't notice my pain as he happily pointed out rooms and the alpha dining hall.

Apparently, the alphas ate and lived separated from the betas. Since I hadn't transformed yet, I got my own wing with a room, and there was a bathroom down the hall.

Zed motioned to my room and ran off to do work.

Arms plastered against the wall for support, I just barely managed to make it down the long mahogany hallways without passing out.

Unsurprisingly, no man appeared to coddle my wounds and carry me to safety.

Good thing at ten years old I'd stop believing a prince was going to come save me.

I had to save myself. That was how life worked.

Finally, collapsing onto the bed, I moaned like a dying animal.

My stomach plummeted because I still had to limp down to the bathroom.

Without the numb, I would have succumbed to exhaustion and passed out—thank the gods I was a homicidal maniac and still numb.

Finally, after what felt like forever, I dragged my limp body through the door labeled "bathroom." A massive tub was sunken into the floor, and a bucket marked "healing salts" sat beside it.

I dumped the entire thing into the warm bubbles and pulled my bloody clothes off my sweaty skin.

Spreading my arms wide, I face-planted into the hot water.

For a long moment, I considered drowning myself in the frothy pool. Life had been cruel living with Dick, but this didn't seem any better.

I must have pissed off some god in the past, because I was clearly a magnet for pain.

Even numb, a part of me wanted to cry at the injustice of it all.

Instead, I relaxed into the warmth and ignored my problems.

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4
Choking On Emotions

Sadie

A sweet-scented bubble popped on my face and jolted me awake. Sputtering, I took a second to orient myself.

I had fallen asleep in the bath, and I hadn't been transported back to Dick's tavern.

Instantly, regret and melancholy weighed me down.

Sweet Lucinda was going to be devastated if she came back from school in two years and found me gone. I couldn't let that happen.

Hazy steam swirled around me as I sprawled in the massive bathtub filled with bubbles of deliciously warm water.

Sleep had made the numb go away. I tried to sit up straight but groaned as every muscle in my body screamed in protest.

My favorite thing to do growing up was to read books from the library. In the dusty cellar, they had bootleg books from faraway realms.

I had loved to read about the half warriors from the fae realm: half alphas, half fae. They were crazy, overpowered warriors who traveled the realm, fighting evil.

As a kid, I had found the idea of physical training and fighting all the time so exciting.

I'd thought if I could take a beating from Dick, I could fight mythical beasts.

Holy mother of the moon goddess, I'd been wrong.

Every single inch of my body ached, and I was surprised I hadn't drowned in the warm water.

I had meant to stay awake, but the bath was too soothing, and my body was beat-up after the training session. Dick had only let us shower with cold water, and the tub of fabulous warmth was low key changing my life.

Too bad vomit was currently traveling up my throat and ruining the delicious experience.

In the aftermath of the numb, every repressed emotion battered through my head.

Dragging my body on aching arms, I crawled out of the warm water until I lay belly first on the cold tile.

My head swam, and I fought not to pass out.

Nausea swirled heavily in my gut, and I vomited water onto the ground.

Pain coursed through every cell in my body.

The longer I held the numb, the harder the recovery.

I didn't know how long I lay naked in the bathing room, but eventually the pain left my stomach and sanity returned.

Thank the moon goddess the shifters had given me a private bathing room.

Gingerly, now that I no longer wanted to die from endless pain, I felt my face, my ribs, and my ankle. The salts had definitely accelerated my healing because my nose was back in its rightful place.

Slowly, I tested my legs beneath me and sighed with relief when my ankles easily supported me and there was no bone-crushing pain. I had cracked my foot training this morning.

Nothing was broken anymore.

However, it felt like I had been flattened by a building and then beaten by a hundred beta shifters. I basically had.

Now that the numb was gone, emotions whipped through my psyche.

It sucked.

Thinking about Dick made my skin crawl with anger and disgust.

The clock on the wall said I had napped for thirty minutes.

Thankfully, it was still lunchtime. I had just taken a quick nap. Zed had said to meet in the alpha dining hall after training.

I avoided looking in the large mirror as I dressed in the green training sweats and sweatshirt.

Quickly, I covered the scars that mottled my torso, chest, and arms from Dick's belt.

Fucking Dick loved his belt and had made me hideous.

With tired arms, I barely ran a brush through my hair and left it down to air-dry.

It hung in straight white strands down to my lower back.

A quick glance showed the purple bruises under both my red eyes were even darker. Plus, there was now a matching purple bruise across my golden jaw and forehead.

Apparently, the healing salts helped heal bones quicker than bruises. Or, as an alpha, I could heal my bones quicker?

It didn't make any sense, and I rubbed at my forehead tiredly.

"Look good, feel good," I had heard a woman at the bar say before.

"Look like shit, feel like bigger shit," I said to the mirror and gave myself a thumbs-up.

I turned to walk to lunch—and fell over.

My legs gave out beneath me.

Sure, my broken bones were healed, but I still hurt everywhere.

Heaving myself up, I smacked my face a couple of times. "Don't be a little bitch." I locked my knees and lifted with my back.

Half shuffling, half hobbling like a two-legged horse, I made it to the dining hall without falling over again.

It was a miracle.

Desperately, I needed to find the mental strength to be the coldhearted bitch that I was with the numb. The shifters had watched me fight without wincing once.

Now that the numb was gone, everyone was going to find it suspicious when I turned into a drama queen.

I'd never told anyone about the homicidal voice in my head, not even Lucinda, because it sounded crazy. I didn't want to be sent to the clinics where they kept the shifters who lost their minds.

In the cold, brutal realm, people lost their minds more often than you would think.

Of course, because my life was a series of depressing events, when I got to the room, all three alphas sat at a table together.

Since it was the alpha dining hall, they were the only inhabitants. It was impossible to avoid them.

All three men whipped their heads to stare at me as soon as I entered.

Trying to look like a strong, competent woman was hard when I was pretty sure I had pulled both my ass cheeks.

Somehow my broken bones were healed, but everything still ached.

Tensing every limb, I just barely hobbled over to the buffet. Fighting for hours had really taken a toll on my body.

The only things that kept me upright were the smell of bacon and a single shard of dignity.

It was a close one.

After what felt like hours of shuffling down the buffet line, I turned to grab the closest seat next to me.

"Sit with us," Jax alpha-barked, and my knees immediately locked in compliance.

Before I could even think and show him my middle finger, my aching feet carried me over to the table.

Rolling my eyes at Jax's high-handedness, I collapsed into a chair across from them.

Immediately, I began to inhale my food.

After I polished off three burgers and a pile of bacon in less than thirty seconds, I looked up at the three alphas.

All their mouths were open.

"Did you grow up in a barn?" Ascher had a horrified look on his face. "That was pathetic and embarrassing. We're alphas. Try to act like you have some dignity." His strong jaw and chiseled cheeks tensed, his tattoos pulled taut as he looked down at me with disgust.

"She has no manners," Cobra said to Ascher. His green eyes were once again filled with endless hatred.

I never knew green could be so menacing and cold.

Cobra ran his red tongue across his lush lips.

I pressed my knees together as my core throbbed.

From the glare on Cobra's face, it was clear we were not having the same thoughts.

He was probably fantasizing about breaking me and pummeling me with his fists.

Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself that I wasn't a hussy, and I did not find big, scary men attractive.

Cobra sat next to me, so I inhaled his alpha scent.

Unlike Jax, who smelled like warm chestnuts and Ascher pine trees, Cobra's scent was frosty and slightly burned.

It was like burying my head in a snowbank. I couldn't tell if I wanted more or less of it.

Instead of sniffing the air near Cobra like a weirdo, I focused on my unanswered questions. "So alphas heal quicker than normal, I take it? Or

are those healing salts magical?”

I rolled my foot that had been badly broken this morning and marveled that it felt fine. The times Dick had cracked my ribs, my arms, and my legs had taken me at least two weeks to recover.

Now I was good as new.

Jax said, “Alphas heal broken bones in about a day, but the salts are actually enchanted chips of unicorn bone. They accelerate the healing of broken bones. We heal bruises and muscles quickly on our own, but it usually takes about a day.”

I blew a raspberry, and my mind mentally exploded. There was so much to unpack in his statements.

First, I hadn’t even known unicorns were a thing—second, I was going to pretend it was salt and not what the hell he’d just described—third, it seemed lame that I couldn’t heal bruises and muscles immediately.

Jax narrowed his eyes like I was a puzzle he was trying to figure out. He seemed to think I was *way* more mysterious than I actually was.

I didn’t know why they were convinced I was a spy after fighting. It seemed much more probable that I had a homicidal voice inside my head and turned into a killing machine (duh).

I ignored all of them and ate my food as they looked on in horror.

They had not been fed one meal a day for sixteen years of their lives, and it showed. *Prissy bitches*.

The pit in my stomach was endless, and I had a feeling that no matter how much I ate, it would never be full—I had gone hungry for too long.

There was a basket of bread rolls in the center of the table.

Greedily, I grabbed about five with one hand and positioned them neatly on my plate.

My knuckles were scabbed over, but when I opened my hand quickly, the scabs cracked, and blood dripped out.

I winced when I got a little blood on my bread. Embarrassment pooled through me as I brushed it off as much as possible.

A small, girlish part of me was embarrassed that the men thought I was disgusting. I tried to ignore those emotions because I was starving.

Since I was only half-unhinged, I had standards to uphold. One of them was not eating blood like a sadistic fae vampyre of lore.

Staring down, I concentrated hard on biting around the bloody edge of the bread.

Even though it was gross because it had blood on it, I was too hungry to let food go to waste.

"Oh my sun god, this is pathetic to watch." Ascher put his bread roll onto my plate. "Just eat this one and try not to bleed all over it."

I made the mistake of glancing up into his striking amber eyes.

The three alphas were so physically gorgeous it was nauseating. They reminded me of how hideous I was.

"You did well for your first day of training." Jax smiled, and his praise warmed me like a hug. Of the three alphas, Jax seemed the nicest. A shocking character trait for an alpha shifter.

"I wonder who trained her?" Cobra asked coldly to Jax.

I leaned my head slightly to the side and discreetly inhaled their potent alpha pheromones.

Jax's warm chestnuts, Ascher's strong pine, and Cobra's frosty ice scents mixed in a mouthwatering combination.

"No one." I sighed heavily and shoved more bread in my mouth.

Don't worry, there is just a numb sensation in my brain that takes over my body and makes me into a homicidal killing machine. But in the aftermath, I'm overwhelmed by my own emotions like a sissy. Also, go fuck yourself.

"You go fuck yourself, little girl." Cobra leaned forward.

Oops, must have said the last part aloud.

The emeralds and diamonds embedded in his cheeks sparkled in the dimly lit room. The jewels twinkled so much it almost looked like they were moving.

He sat back and stared out the window like I was too disgusting to even look at.

Jax's eyebrows rose as he looked back and forth between us.

I realized it was the first time Cobra had addressed me directly. Such a minor thing, but for some reason, it felt important.

With a heavy sigh, I focused my attention away from the gorgeous-confusing alpha and drank the cup of hot coffee that a servant had placed in front of me.

It warmed my tongue deliciously.

"Why are you so short? I've never seen a shifter so physically pathetic." Ascher laughed at me like my entire existence was a joke.

Clearly, he was gearing up for "interrogate Sadie over lunch and try to make her our little bitch."

I looked up from my fourth bread roll and glared at all three of them. I had been told that from this close, my red eye color was extremely unnerving.

Hot rage at their vitriol twisted in my gut, and I wanted to scream at them like a child.

I'd dealt with Dick my whole life. There was no room left in my miserable existence for bullies.

New life motto: anyone who was mean to me was getting shanked.

Hard.

I forced myself to keep my voice low. When I talked loudly, its scratchy, broken sound was unbearable.

"My name is Sadie. Two days ago, I was living in less-than-ideal circumstances, but just because I haven't lived with luxuries doesn't mean I'm going to roll over and play bitch. You're all big, bad alphas. Well, kudos to you. The fact that I don't have a dick doesn't mean I'm any less likely to slit your throats if you treat me like shit. I can learn to piss standing up too, fuckers."

Heaving with anger, I gripped my coffee in my hands. It took all my willpower not to throw it across the room and scream at them like a lunatic.

I missed the numb. It kept all my emotions at bay.

Ascher opened his mouth like he was going to say something, and I quickly cut him off.

"Stop trying to interrogate me. I'm not a spy for the fae queen, and I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here. Understood?"

"Understood." Jax smiled at me like I was a kitten and not a bruised girl who had just yelled nonsense about pissing while standing up.

A part of me cringed at my own statements (why was I like this?).

"No one cares about your sob story." Cobra rolled his eyes and hung his arm across the back of Jax's chair.

His jeweled fingers caressed Jax's large bicep, staking a claim over the big alpha.

Once again, Jax looked between us like he was shocked the gorgeous alpha was addressing me directly.

I rolled my eyes and made a childish face at Cobra.

He just stared back at me with his soulless eyes. Either Cobra had been born cruel or he had been hurt *very* badly.

"I never asked you to care." I drank more coffee, and it soothed my boiling rage.

The coffee was delicious, and I moaned a little. I had never had anything so bitter and rich at the same time.

It was divine.

Abruptly, all three alphas leaned forward.

Three sets of eyes glowed. Two with blown pupils and one with snake eyes.

I started with shock.

Cobra's eyes had transformed to slit pupils. It didn't take a genius to figure out that he was a snake and Ascher was some sort of horned ram creature.

Jax's gray eyes glowed almost white, and I wondered what his alpha form was. From his size, it was something large and menacing.

Not understanding what had caused the sudden shift in their eyes, I looked around the room for threats.

My body ached all over, I also needed at least a day and a half to recharge the numb.

I looked back at the three men, and they were eating like nothing had happened.

Had I imagined it?

"I find it hard to believe you aren't some spy for the fae queen. She's been known to use her enchantments to play tricks and trap alphas." Ascher cut at his steak savagely.

Rage bubbled inside my chest, and I had to forcibly swallow it down.

I didn't give a single flying shit about the queen, the war, or other shifters.

I was a lowly servant.

I had zero rights in the realm, but then they just dropped me off at a portal and expected me to fight for them? They were delusional if they thought I was going to obey.

I let my hatred show on my face. "I hate the fae queen and shifters equally. Why would I take sides?"

Ascher shook his head like he didn't believe me, but said nothing else. In fact, no one said another word for hours.

It was bliss.

Thankfully, the rest of the day passed quickly in a blur of exhaustion. The morning's training had felt like an entire week.

The afternoon was spent in a classroom, learning battle strategies with the betas.

An old lady at the front of the room named Auntie droned on and on about battle tactics.

Apparently, battle fae took the mutated forms of animals. They were strong, but their overly large sizes hindered them in the shifter forest, and the best tactic was fighting in groups.

Alphas were used to fight them.

Auntie explained that lots of fae creatures had natural armor that was hard to penetrate with just bullets and knives. Which was what betas used to fight.

You needed beasts to fight beasts. That was where the alphas came in.

Thankfully, Auntie said the fae realm usually only sent one creature through the portal at once. Only a few times in the last thirty years of the war had they sent more.

No one knew why the fae queen didn't send a ton through at once, or why there wasn't talk of a truce.

The entire war was shrouded in mystery.

Still, I couldn't really focus on the battle formations. Most of my attention was consumed by the beta with the bushy beard who had called me a little girl during training.

The bearded beta didn't look away from me for three straight hours. Every time I glanced across the room, he was staring at me.

Hatred wafted off him in tangible waves, and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that he wanted to harm me.

He wasn't the only one.

All twelve beta women were glaring at me with disdain.

When Jax had pulled the chair out next to him and told me to sit down, the first female had glared at me.

When Ascher had given me a pen and said, "You better return it," every female in the room had glared.

When Cobra had scoffed and told me I was pathetic for forgetting my notebook, everyone in the room had gaped at me.

Men and women alike.

I was confused because the men were literally not being nice to me. Shifters made no sense.

When class was finally over, I got stuck behind a group of beta men and women gossiping. They had at least half a foot of height on me and didn't even notice that I was trying to discreetly get by.

I might have shoved past them, but my self-preservation kicked in and I waited for an opening.

"Did you see that Cobra talked to her? He never talks to women, *ever*." The beta man scowled like I had committed an atrocity.

Of course, the frosty bastard would refuse to talk to women. He seemed like the misogynistic type.

A woman sighed dramatically with longing. "The things I would let that alpha do to me. He's literally perfect, like a pale god. But there is no way he would ever go for the new alpha. She's pathetic. Everyone knows he likes strength."

"She did fight pretty well yesterday for being so small," the other beta said.

I swallowed down a scoff. I fought amazingly when numb.

Also, while Cobra was the most gorgeous man I had ever seen, he was also the most terrifying.

Hatred wafted off of him in palpable waves, and my skin smarted with phantom pain where beta knuckles had pummeled me.

My gut told me I wouldn't recover if he ever punched me.

There was nothing romantic or swoon-worthy about Cobra. He was a predator and should be treated as such.

He 100 percent broke his weird rule about not talking to women because he wanted to beat the shit out of me.

The other beta said dramatically, "Whatever, she's still unimpressive. Cobra's so gorgeous, but Ascher is also hot. I prefer his tattoos and horns. Plus, rumor has it he's tattooed everywhere, like *everywhere*. I also heard he comes from money and, unlike Cobra, he loves women."

The group of beta men and women laughed like it was hilarious. I didn't get the joke.

"Ugh, who doesn't love the horns? The man's a beast. Although, I still can't get over how gorgeous Cobra is."

Finally, the betas turned to the side, and I was able to slip by them.

Hurrying down the hall, I made it to the alpha dining room without running into more gossipers.

That night, dinner with the alphas was a silent affair.

Jax wrote up a report while he ate. Cobra glared at me, and Ascher glanced over every couple of seconds like he wanted to say something to me, but then thought better of it.

Studying the three men while I scarfed down four steaks and a small mountain of potatoes, I couldn't understand why none of the betas had mentioned Jax.

Jax was just as handsome as the other two men, and his mountains of muscles were physically impressive.

Sure, Cobra was gorgeous, and Ascher was tantalizing with his horns and tattoos, but Jax was handsome and the strongest.

Also, they must have been wrong about Ascher's dick being tattooed. That had to hurt too much, right?

Shaking my head, I tried to stop salivating over the alphas and instead focused on eating my food.

After dinner, I went back to my small room and inspected it. My door had a weak lock that could easily be broken.

I sat down on the cold, hard floor and slumped back against my door, clutching a knife I'd swiped from the carving station at dinner.

If anyone tried to open my door, I would immediately feel it.

I wasn't a heavy sleeper.

As I looked at my warm bed with longing, a part of me rationalized I was overreacting.

Still, I didn't allow myself to go to the warmth.

I hadn't survived twenty years because I ignored my instincts.

The hard floor was a familiar bed—I fell asleep in seconds.

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5
Monsters Everywhere

Sadie

Something hard pushed against my back. Instantly, I was awake.

Dick's favorite time to torment me had been in the middle of the night, and my body had adjusted accordingly.

I barely slept, and any sound woke me up.

Now the bedroom door slowly pushed open and bit into my back.

I calmed my breathing and inched backward. The numb wasn't available because it was recharging.

Panic made my hands shake.

Moonlight cast shadows around the room.

I quietly picked the large butcher knife off the ground. I stole it from the dining hall last night for protection.

The door creaked open slowly, and I scooted out of its way.

Quietly, I climbed to my feet and tiptoed backward.

The butcher knife shook in my hand, and I pretended the numb was coursing through my veins.

Instead, pure terror made my palms sweat.

The numb would tell me to remain perfectly still and use the element of surprise to my advantage.

My un-numbed brain was telling me to scream like a maniac and run for my life.

Breathing deeply, I tried to channel my calm alter ego.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard I concentrated, the calm wouldn't come.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and the scent of burned smoke choked my senses.

A large figure barreled into the room—a fist pummeled straight into my face.

My nose burst, and agony stabbed through my skull.

Lights flashed in my eyes.

In the midst of sheer terror, annoyance flared hot and heavy.

My body was already hideously scarred, and at this rate, my naturally small nose was going to be a crooked mess. Could the universe not let me have anything?

Before I could punch back, my attacker tackled me onto the floor.

All air left my lungs as the much larger weight knocked the wind out of me.

He pinned me to the ground with his massive frame.

Eyes watering from shock, I slammed my right fist repeatedly into their kidney.

Over and over, I pounded my knuckles against his flesh.

They reared back with their fist, and moonlight highlighted a bushy beard and cruel eyes.

It was the beta who had stared at me.

"Why?" My rough voice was too loud in the quiet room.

Instead of answering, he slammed his fist into my nose.

The pain of him smashing my already broken nose was overwhelming, and I screamed in agony.

My mangled voice barely made a sound.

I had screamed so much growing up that I had shredded my voice box. Now screaming was impossible.

When the haze of pain lessened, rage mixed with the agony.

The gross beard quivered against my chin as the beta leaned closer to me. Warm spittle sprayed my face.

"I know you're a pathetic servant. I'm a friend of Dick's and recognized you. You don't belong in a war camp. You're no alpha. You're a little bitch, and I'm going to prove it. And when everyone finds out how weak and pathetic you truly are, they'll thank me for raping you. A woman can't be an alpha." He smiled with pure joy.

My stomach rolled at his words.

A cold sweat broke out across my body, and I became hyperaware of where the beta's heavy body pressed against my own.

Just hearing Dick's name filled me with terror.

My attacker thrust his hips forward insidiously, and I tasted bile in the back of my throat. For a second, panic consumed me, and I couldn't move.

Every muscle in my body froze.

"Like that, little servant bitch?" He pawed at my chest cruelly with his hand.

The room spun around me as panic made me weak. Before I passed out, or sunk deeper into terror, I reminded myself to use the element of surprise.

I had kept my left hand tucked into my sweatpants for a reason.

What would the numb do?

Somehow, I found the strength to pull my left hand out of my pocket, where I had hidden the weapon.

I sliced the butcher knife across his face.

Deep.

Cheek to cheek, the blade split his face. Hot blood flowed over me in a gross waterfall.

A severed tongue fell out of his mouth, and it flopped onto the ground beside my head with a squish.

"You won't be telling anyone shit," I whispered. My voice was overpowered by the gagging noises coming from the beta's mouth. The moonlight cast menacing shadows.

The room spun as I drowned in blood.

My attacker scrambled off me and clutched at his mutilated face.

If I were numb, I would have pushed to my feet and calmly cleaned myself off.

I was the opposite of numb.

Terror, fear, and shock burned through me like fire.

The blood triggered memories, and suddenly, it wasn't a beta's blood. It was my own.

Once again, I drowned in the past.

Dick stood above me in the middle of the night. I lay on the floor and tried to pull my one blanket up to protect myself. I begged and cried, pleaded with him to spare me.

"You fuckin' think you can spill my drinks and backtalk to my patrons? You ungrateful whore. You have no idea what I've done for you. What I've sacrificed. If it wasn't for me, you'd be dead," Dick said.

"He groped me first. I just told him not to touch me." I was only eight. Sally at the bar had told me I was much too young for men to be touching

me. She hadn't had to warn me.

Men were all large and scary. They used their fists and hurt those weaker than them. Dick had shown me that.

"What you did was disrespect me. Grow up already. Be better. Then we wouldn't have to keep doing this," Dick growled, and there was a rasp as he pulled off his belt. The heavy hardware clicked menacingly.

The first slam of the belt across my back made me yell in surprise.

By the tenth stroke, I was screaming in agony. Dick used his beta strength to keep me pinned to the floor. His clammy left hand pushed me facedown by the neck. Dick's right hand was merciless with the belt.

By the fifteenth stroke, the scent of my blood overwhelmed my senses. Blood was everywhere. It wasn't the first time he'd beaten me.

"Sadie, snap out of it!" Zed screamed and shook my shoulder. His thin face and dark hair filled my vision.

Blinking away awful memories, I remembered with relief that Dick wasn't beating me.

I was free of him.

Unfortunately, I also remembered I had just slit a man's tongue from his mouth and his blood was splattered across my face.

I looked around. My beta attacker was gone, but his blood still covered the floor.

Cobra leaned against the wall and stared at me with a frosty expression.

He turned and slipped out of the room.

I stared down at the blood covering my hands and the floor.

Was it possible to have another panic attack during a panic attack? Because I was in the middle of one.

My chest squeezed, and I couldn't draw air through my lungs.

Slap. A hand smacked my face, and it whipped to the side.

"What the fuck?" Anger replaced the smothering terror as I glared at my assailant.

Ascher's square jaw quivered as he leaned his tousled gold hair and curling black horns down beside Zed. His amber eyes were wide with panic, and he forcefully shook my shoulders back and forth.

"Don't hit her." Jax's scent of warm chestnuts replaced wintry pine as he pulled Ascher away from me.

Disoriented by having so many people yell at me, I tried to focus on calming my erratic breath.

That didn't work, so I concentrated on the handsome face above me. Jax stared down at me with concern in his warm gray eyes.

Maybe it was because he was so much larger than me, or maybe it was the way his lush mouth pulled down into a frown and his eyes radiated sadness.

The big man made me want to break down and sob like a little girl.

For just a moment, I imagined wrapping my arms around him and letting him protect me from the world.

I closed my eyes and slammed my head down against the hard floor. The minor concussion cleared the crazy from my brain.

No one was going to save me.

"What happened, little alpha?" Jax asked softly, as if I was a little girl that might burst into tears.

He wasn't wrong, but I would be damned if I showed it.

My voice was rough from trying to scream, and I had to cough a couple of times before it worked. The scratchy sound was too loud in the silent room.

"The beta broke into my room, punched me in the fucking nose twice, and told me he was going to rape me because I was an . . . outsider. He glared at me all class, so I stole a butcher knife from the carving station at dinner. While he had me pinned and groped me on the floor, I stabbed him with it. Across the face."

I talked quickly, not wanting to get lost in old memories.

The real reason he'd attacked me scalded my brain like a brand.

I might have escaped Dick, but as long as I was a female alpha, I would never be safe in the shifter realm.

Pushing my aching body into a sitting position, I gently ran my finger over my smashed nose. It was practically hanging off my face—cute.

Zed stammered. He spoke fast, like he was afraid the alphas were about to call me a liar and attack. "The door lock has been broken, and the knife is from the kitchen. His quarters are three floors away. He should never have been here."

My face throbbed, and I stumbled as I righted myself.

Jax offered me a hand up, but I ignored it.

The alphas were extremely large, and they took up all the space in my small room. My stomach cramped with nausea.

“This never should have happened,” Jax said, and a deep animal rumble filled the space.

It took me a moment to realize the sound was coming from Jax. He was growling, literally, like a wild animal.

My fight-or-flight instincts told me it was time to run for my life.

Tentatively, I edged closer to the door.

“Don’t leave this room!” Ascher yelled, and I jumped.

Naturally, I threw the door open and ran out into the hallway. I wasn’t about to die willingly at the hands of two pissed-off alphas.

I had seen them fight. I didn’t have a chance against two of them.

“You fucking dare,” Cobra whispered into a bloody man’s ear.

In the dark mahogany hallway, Cobra held a body up by its hair.

Candelabras on the ceiling cast dim shadows, and the person in Cobra’s hands was missing half their face. Both their arms and legs had been broken, and they had a mangled beard.

My stomach rolled. I had slit the beta’s face open.

It was my attacker. The alphas must have beaten him afterwards because he barely looked alive.

Keeling over, I vomited the contents of my stomach onto the shiny wooden floor.

Cobra looked over at me but said nothing.

He just held up my attacker by the hair, with bloody knuckles.

My mutilated attacker squinted his dark eyes at me, and for a second, the memory of his hand pawing at my breast assaulted my senses.

The door to my room slammed open. Jax, Ascher, and Zed joined us in the dark hall.

Thankfully, no one said anything about the pile of vomit in front of me.

Jax was still growling like a wild animal, and I fixated on Ascher’s head. His curled onyx horns appeared larger and straighter than usual, like they’d grown on his head.

That couldn’t be a good sign.

“He was going to rape her. You can’t punish her for that.” Zed’s dark hair stuck out in all directions, and he was wearing his pajamas.

The null shifter looked frazzled and out of his league, standing next to the three alphas. They were each a head taller and had at least a hundred pounds of muscle on him.

“Rape?” Cobra looked at Jax, who nodded.

Abruptly, Cobra grabbed my attacker's head with both hands and snapped it to the side.

There was a gruesome crack as he broke the beta's neck in one move. Cobra dropped the dead body like it was garbage, and with a thud, it hit the ground.

Zed jumped at the violence.

Instinctually, I shifted in front of Zed. If the alphas were going to get violent, I wasn't going to let them hurt my only friend.

"Run." I pushed Zed behind me as my eyes stayed on the three alphas in front of me.

A warm hand pressed lightly into my shoulder, and Zed stepped forward beside me. "I'm not leaving you."

A weird feeling pinched my gut.

No one had stood up for me before, let alone a null shifter against violent alphas.

I stared at my thin protector, and gratitude warmed me. Even though I had just met Zed, it was like I had known him my whole life.

"Don't touch her," Ascher alpha-barked at Zed, who jumped again in terror.

An alpha's bark held persuasion, and Zed immediately dropped his hand from my shoulder.

"Don't yell at him!" I shouted.

Ascher scoffed down at me but didn't say another word.

I fantasized about stabbing him with his own horn.

"Calm down now. Everyone, stand down." Jax acted like he was unaffected, but his chest still rumbled. He stared down at the beta's corpse like he wanted to murder it all over again and said, "He never should have attacked you tonight. This was our fault."

His braids hung loose around his massive biceps, and some of the long gold chains dangled down to his waist. They tinkled as he ran his hand through his braids with frustration.

"Are you okay?" Jax stepped toward me like he was going to hold me. An arm's length away, he stopped and stared down at me.

Glancing up at his handsome face, I nodded automatically.

Warmth burned my cheeks because I had just zoned out while admiring his gold jewelry.

I must have hit my head harder than I'd realized.

“I’m fine.” I was a good liar.

Technically, I was suffering from PTSD from Dick. I was the first female alpha in a shifter realm, and a beta had just threatened to rape me.

I was as far from fine as a person could get.

“I’ll just be getting back to bed. Thanks for taking care of . . .” I trailed off and pointed at the dead beta on the ground.

“Night, Zed,” I said, and headed for my bed. However, instead of going through my bedroom door, I walked into a brick wall of frosty air and cool muscle.

Cobra stared down at me and blocked the entrance to my room.

“You gonna beat me up?” I bared my teeth at him.

I had watched Cobra fight during training.

He was a merciless beast.

The biting scent of cold frost became thicker, and my nose burned in Cobra’s proximity.

Inches from his chest, I could see that small diamonds and emeralds were also embedded in bands of skin around his pale arms. The jewels sparkled so much they seemed to move.

“What Cobra means to say is that you will be sleeping in the alpha quarters. It is clearly not safe for you to be alone,” Jax said softly.

I looked up at Cobra questioningly and cocked my eyebrow. It didn’t feel like that was what he’d meant to say.

Cobra bent forward until his sharp cheekbones and emerald eyes filled my vision. It was unfortunate that someone so mean was so stunning.

“Why did you cut out his tongue?” he asked, and his breath was warm against my ear.

“Because he was spewing shit.” Another bout of nausea churned my stomach, and I swallowed down bile.

Shrugging my shoulders with feigned nonchalance, I spun on my heels and smiled up at Jax. “Lead the way to my new room.”

Ascher stalked away down the hallway.

I couldn’t tell if he was mad at Jax for inviting me to live with them or mad at me for getting attacked and putting Jax in the position. Either way, he was a drama queen.

“Actually, wait. Do you need me to help pack up my room?” I turned to Zed questioningly.

“No, please go get sleep. I’ll have everything arranged.” Zed nodded and smiled at me with relief. It was obvious the null shifter was glad I wasn’t going back into my room.

“Let’s go, roomie,” I said with a grimace, to Jax. He offered his massive forearm like I was an omega debutante and not splattered in a dead beta’s blood.

Tentatively, I placed my hand around his forearm. He was so large that it was near my head.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” Jax asked.

“No.” My broken voice echoed too loudly in the quiet hall.

Cobra shouldered past me roughly but bent down to whisper in my ear, “I don’t beat up weaklings.”

Goosebumps broke out all over my skin.

It took me a long second to process what Cobra had said, and then the implication hit me: he was answering my question from before.

My stomach pinched, and I swallowed thickly.

For some damn reason, Cobra whispering about beating me up was making my breath short and my palms sweaty.

Clearly, mental health was *still* not my strength.

“We’ll keep you safe.” A soft growl vibrated in Jax’s chest comfortingly.

I kept my arm tucked in his as Cobra stalked away from us.

I decided to not point out that Ascher and Cobra were more likely to attack me than they were to protect me.

The image of Cobra snapping the beta’s neck flashed before my eyes. *Maybe they will protect me?*

I sighed heavily. The only person I could trust was myself. And I needed to remember that.

Jax led me through the door with a wooden *A* for “alpha” on it. I barely registered anything as I sleepily walked over to my new bed and collapsed onto it.

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6
Espionage

Cobra

An hour earlier . . .

The endless black vortex threatened to drown me.

For the last six years at the training complex, fighting as an alpha to contain the third portal, I had managed to hide my darkness deep in the recesses of my broken mind.

Living, training, and fighting alongside Jax had slowly thawed me.

The large man's calm presence had given me the strength I needed to fight off my demons. Around him, I had rebuilt my broken consciousness piece by blackened piece.

Now all my effort was crumbling around me.

I hadn't been obsessed with a woman since the *incident*. They disgusted and repulsed me; the new white-haired girl was no different.

Her almond-shaped eyes, thick lashes, and overly large lips were the perfect disguise.

The most poisonous vipers were the most beautiful.

Their menace was almost unrecognizable until their fangs sunk through your flesh and their venom stopped your heart.

I would never be a fool again.

Sitting on my bed in our shared alpha room, I focused on writing up a training plan for the next day. Jax and I alternated drawing up training schedules.

My pen left large ink splotches as I pressed it too hard into the paper. My instincts screamed at me.

The pit in my stomach was a lead weight that cramped uncomfortably.

The girl was unnatural and full of secrets, and I knew in my bones she was hiding something.

During training, I had barely focused on my own battles. I had been distracted by the smallest shifter I had ever seen.

She was so short it was laughable. Her head barely reached my chest.

Not only was she short, but her muscles were so wimpy it was amazing she hadn't already perished in the biting cold.

There was no way this pathetic slip of a girl was an alpha.

When I'd first met her, I'd completely dismissed her, thinking she would be dead in the first battle.

Now I wasn't so sure.

Her unnatural red eyes should have warned me. I had never seen a rich ruby around someone's pupils before, and I had seen a lot of different creatures.

She'd lived up to the sharpness of her eyes when she fought the betas.

She'd been pounded repeatedly by blows, blood had dripped down her face, and she had endured it all without flinching.

After fighting for that many hours, others would have crumbled at so many challenges.

She hadn't crumbled; she'd fought like a beast.

I had never seen a shifter so small, so weak, who didn't flinch.

Even with her cheek cut and foot broken, she had stood ramrod straight like she was completely unaffected by physical pain.

There were only a few people in all the realms that could take such a beating without a bat of the eye.

They were all trained killers. And they were the demons that haunted my memories.

The girl had smirked back at her fighting partners like she had wanted them to pound her harder, like she lived for the violence.

My pen stabbed through my paper, and I fought the urge to slam it into my thigh.

The emeralds and diamonds in my skin itched, like my beast was at the surface and wanted to break free. It was hammering at my subconscious, screaming something at me.

Jax's fierce strength enraptured me because he gave as hard as he took.

With him, the broken part of my soul could bathe in the comfort of a bloody fight, in the endless peace of violence.

My knuckles flexed as I imagined the feel of the girl writhing beneath me.

She was the first woman I'd met who could give and take like Jax—she hadn't crumpled underneath fists.

She took brutal hits and punished back.

Fucking Jax was a fight that soothed the void within me. My instincts told me that fucking the girl would be the same.

No.

She was a woman, and I despised them all.

For some sun-god-forsaken reason, I'd broken the vow I made to myself to never talk to a woman again.

A vow I had kept for over fifty years.

All it took was a few snarky quips from her lush mouth, and I couldn't help myself but snap back at her. Not talking to her was impossible.

I wanted to taunt her as I brought her to her knees.

The darkness became more stifling. I couldn't do anything, I just lost myself in the endless void that burned me alive.

I needed to stop obsessing over the girl.

"Do you hear that?" Ascher asked without looking up from his fancy phone.

The young shifter had been revealed as an alpha only a year ago. Sometimes it took longer for a shifter's body to grow into its full immortal size.

Ascher was unique in that his horns had appeared on his twentieth birthday, and he had immediately bulked up. He'd mastered his shifted form the first day we'd fought him.

Still, he was loud and obnoxious and unbroken by the world, eager to prove himself.

In contrast, Jax was a hundred and twenty years old and had been assigned to fight at many portals.

I was a hundred years old, but had spent most of my miserable life in the fae realm.

I had only escaped to the shifter realm six years ago. That same year, Jax and I had both been assigned to this portal.

We'd never had any issues with Ascher. He was hardworking and his beast was formidable. Even now, his black horns curled large on his head, a constant reminder that he was more than he seemed.

Still, I ignored Ascher's question, like I usually did.

Even though I appreciated him, it didn't mean I was going to indulge his antics. Jax dealt with that.

I didn't have the patience.

Most of the time, all my attention was focused on keeping myself together, keeping my mind intact.

Jax grunted noncommittally as he did push-ups on the ground. His bulging muscles shone with sweat, and I couldn't help but admire the larger shifter.

He was my rock.

I also knew him better than myself, and I could tell he was rattled by the girl as well. She was an unknown and practically stank of secrets and lies.

No way was she an alpha.

The oligarchy had told Zed she had no battle experience whatsoever. Every time her skin cracked with a punishing blow, she retaliated harder.

It was like the pain fueled her—we'd been lied to—the darkness crept into my vision.

Both Jax and I were distrustful in general. We took our orders and led our troops, but neither of us were big nationalists.

The only person I was loyal to was Jax.

The oligarchy had its secrets, and something about the never-ending fae war didn't taste right in our mouths.

I hadn't survived what I had to be a fool to the political machinations of people with too much power.

They were using the girl for something, and I would break it out of her.

"Right there, again. Did you hear that?" Ascher sat up and put his phone down.

The cocky alpha looked stressed, and my skin prickled. What were the odds that my instincts went haywire at the exact same time that Ascher's did?

"I felt something, a vibration." Jax stopped doing push-ups and jumped up. "On the floor above us."

I listened quietly and heard the echo of a body hitting the floor. When you trained for war all the time, you knew what physical combat sounded like.

Two people were fighting.

Instantly, my mind snapped the pieces together.

“The girl is above us.” I had barely finished speaking, and all three of us were rushing out the door.

Zed was cleaning the hallway, and when he saw us running, he followed.

I knew she was up to something, and I shouldn’t have ignored my instincts.

She needed to be locked in a questioning room and tortured until we were sure she wasn’t here to destroy us.

The scents of blood, pain, and fear intensified the closer we got to her room. The darkness inside me broke, and it took every last ounce of willpower to not release my beast.

I saw the room, and everything stopped.

A rushing sound filled my ears, and suddenly, I was drowning.

The girl was lying on the floor, twitching.

Her eyes were wide open and sightless. She had a large butcher knife gripped in her right hand.

Beside her body, Darren, one of the more aggressive betas, was kneeling on the floor, clutching a bloody face.

He gurgled in shock.

It wasn’t his bloody face that broke me.

It was the girl’s sightless eyes and empty expression, the mewls that bled from her cracked voice, that dragged me into the swirling abyss of darkness.

Her nose was smashed, and her face coated in fresh blood.

I knew what an attack looked like, and Darren had no permission to be in the girl’s room.

Unthinking, I grabbed Darren by his hair and dragged him into the hallway.

He looked up at me with a pleading expression and motioned furiously toward the girl.

He wanted to come up with an excuse.

Clearly, he thought he was somehow justified in attacking her.

The void flashed between an endless inky darkness and blinding red rage.

He thought he was *justified*.

My entire existence flickered, and it was times like these that made me wonder if I had already lost my soul.

They had taken it from me.

Calmly, I broke each of his legs and arms. His dark eyes filled with horror, and tears tracked down his mangled face.

Mercilessly, I took every break and applied pressure expertly above it.

A high-pitched scream tore out of his lungs and disfigured mouth as I created compound fracture after compound fracture.

He dared to scream and plead like a victim when he had attacked the girl in her room.

He was a monster of the worst kind, the ones that tried to hurt those they thought were lesser than themselves. I scissored my hand into his windpipe.

Instantly, the screaming stopped.

"You fucking *dare*." He had the audacity to try to plead with me for mercy after what he had done.

The endless fury raged through me like a tempest as I held him up by his hair.

Holding myself still, I didn't allow myself to move another inch. I had taken it far enough on my own.

I wouldn't make any more decisions without Jax.

This was our training center, our portal to protect, our soldier to punish.

We made decisions together.

There was a raspy gasp, and I turned to find the girl standing there. Her braided hair was messy around her face, and her eyes were wide with terror.

With a glance, I took in her injuries.

The beta had broken her nose twice—violently. The blood poured off her face, and her knuckles were bruised from where she had punched back.

I shuddered to think what would have happened if she hadn't had a knife.

Why did she have the knife? The thought infiltrated the void.

She keeled over and vomited across the floor. My instincts screamed at me to comfort her.

I stood still.

If she was an actor, then she was one of the best I had ever seen. The images of her covered in blood, fighting in the training center, flashed before my eyes.

She might be that skilled.

"He was going to rape her." Zed stood in front of Sadie, like he could protect her with his weak, useless body.

He stood too close to her for comfort. I didn't fucking like it.

Then his words sank in.The void splintered within me, and my skin itched.

My monster screamed to be released.

I focused on Jax, the only person who had ever kept my beast at bay. As I looked into his stormy gray eyes, the void retreated.

“Rape?” I asked softly.

Jax nodded. He knew what that word meant to me.

I snapped the beta’s neck. The bloodlust and endless banging against my skull perished.

A cold peace calmed me.

My instincts, my beast, were finally appeased.

Standing still, I ignored my surroundings as I muscled the void back into the deepest, darkest parts of my mind.

Back where it belonged. Back where I could control it.

The girl moved to return to her room, and I shifted in front of her.

As I listened to Jax demand she live with us, the calm I worked so hard to control threatened to fracture into a million pieces.

I could barely keep myself together around the girl. How was I supposed to live with her? In close quarters?

“You gonna beat me up?” The girl bared her little white teeth at me.

Her red eyes flashed with anger, and the white strands of her hair framed her heart-shaped face.

For a second, I itched to run my fingers through her silky locks, across her high cheekbones.

The girl had no idea how much I yearned to hurt her, tie her up, and have my way with her pathetic body.

If she knew, she wouldn’t have taunted me.

She would run away screaming.

“Why did you cut out his tongue?” I asked instead of wrapping my knuckles around her small throat and squeezing until she gasped and begged me for air.

My body itched to slam her against the floor and ravish her.

“Because he was spewing shit,” she said as her red eyes flashed with pain.

She bit down on her quivering lower lip.

I had watched her fight for hours without flinching, and now her lip trembled like a little girl’s.

Instantly, rage boiled through me; she was keeping secrets.

Nausea spread through my gut.

The voice beckoned.

This was why I hated women. They were all liars.

Jax gave her his arm, and his usually calm eyes were passionate, his body tense.

Once again, the weight in my stomach returned.

Jax was my rock, my alpha. Without him, I was broken and untethered.

Now someone else had his attention—someone with secrets.

How long until she manipulated his protective instincts and love of women and drove him toward her and away from me?

She was everything I could *never* be.

She wasn't broken.

Jealousy ate at my chest like writhing maggots. I bent over to whisper in her pathetic little ear.

"I don't beat up weaklings." I fantasized about throwing her to the ground and ravishing her.

As much as I wanted her to be, she wasn't weak.

Still, she was nothing compared to the warrior beside her. Jax was a magnificent specimen of strength and control.

She was a little girl in over her head, and she would never tempt me. Her weak breakable attitude was all an act, a concentrated lie, and I wasn't going to fall for it.

I stalked down the hall.

I had barely survived a woman before. She had held me captive for decades, and I'd promised I would never be so helpless again.

Women coveted pretty, shiny things, and that was all I was to them.

The ultimate bauble in their collection, a massive alpha covered in the rarest gems of all the realms.

They wanted to own me, use me, and brag to their friends that they were involved with the sparkly man, the one much prettier than all the others.

The void in my soul, the one that made me cruel and harsh, was a dark, swirling abyss with no end.

Jax was the only person who could touch me without my skin crawling off my bones in disgust—he was the *only* person who didn't view me as a shiny trinket to be possessed and bragged about.

I was the warrior who fought and lived beside him.

He was calm and collected and sometimes too gentle for the horrors of true leadership. When it came to violence, he turned to me for help.

Jax didn't like me for the facade of my looks. Jax liked me for the inky depth of my rotten soul. He was the first lover to ever do so, and he would be my last.

The big alpha was my end and my beginning.

My everything.

Right now, the little girl was touching Jax's glorious skin and walking beside him like a debutante.

She was a waif with delicate features and secrets.

How dare she touch my Jax? How dare she try to take him from me?

A woman had broken me into this being of frost and darkness, but I lived to spite her.

My instincts screamed at me.

I wouldn't survive Sadie.

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7
Sleepover Besties

Sadie

I slept like a baby. I should have been wary of sleeping in a room with three strangers—I should have been a wreck because I'd stabbed a man and watched him die.

Weirdly, for the first time in a long time, I didn't suffer a single nightmare.

Instead of breaking into a million pieces like I wanted to, I shoved my trauma back into the deep recess of my brain, where I kept all of Dick's bullshit.

It was the only way I had survived for so many years. I compartmentalized and moved forward, one step at a time.

The soft tinkling of an alarm clock woke me up, and I stretched my hands above my head. My large sweatshirt and fur blankets engulfed my small frame with heat, and I marveled at the sensation.

It was strange to wake up feeling warm and cozy. I had gotten accustomed to waking up frozen.

Sunlight filtered through the blinds beside me and illuminated the cozy room. It was much larger than my old room.

Nevertheless, the exposed beams, low ceiling, and large fireplace against the far wall made it much cozier.

There were two beds on the left wall and another bed across from it. My bed was at the end of the room, in a small alcove opposite the wall with the stone fireplace.

Ascher had sneered at me that I got the smallest bed in the room.

Still, I liked how the bed fit perfectly in the small space and had a window. The ground was three stories below, and I could jump out if I needed to. Cozy and functional.

“Sleep well, Princess?” Ascher’s deep voice was scratchy in the morning, and I shivered at the sound. I rolled my eyes at his absurd nickname.

He lounged in the lone bed against the right wall.

“Like a log,” I said. He was going to have to work harder to upset me.

The clock on the mantel above the fireplace read six in the morning.

Suddenly, the door next to the fireplace swung open, and Jax entered the room, fully dressed, looking like he had been up for hours.

“We wear green for training, and we have a private bathroom through this door. All your clothes are in the dresser next to your bed. You will train until you reveal your shifted form,” Jax said.

“Okay.” I looked away uncomfortably as Jax stared at me with his warm gray eyes.

It felt intimate having him look at me while I was in bed, even though I was completely covered in a massive sweatshirt and sweatpants.

Inexplicably, I fought the urge to pat down my hair, which was definitely sticking out in all directions.

My fingers dug into my palms, and I stopped myself from acting like a ninny.

“Are you okay after yesterday?” Jax asked softly, as he looked at me with concern.

“I’m fine—let’s not talk about it.” I put force behind my words and tried to smile like I had a semblance of mental health left, like I wasn’t hanging on by a thread.

“Don’t clutter the bathroom . . . *girl*.” Cobra’s silky voice wasn’t scratchy like Ascher’s, but it was rougher than usual.

Goosebumps erupted.

However, the meaning of his words penetrated through my sleepy brain and anger flamed hot in my chest. Clearly, Cobra wasn’t worried about my well-being.

I didn’t even own anything to clutter the bathroom with.

My anger turned into a different type of warmth as Cobra sauntered shirtless across the room toward Jax.

The pale muscles on his wide back flexed and bunched with every sway of his hips—a trail of emerald diamonds snaked delicately down his spine—it was breathtaking.

When he reached forward and grabbed Jax’s face roughly with his hands, I should have looked away.

I stared.

Cobra slammed his mouth against Jax's, and he aggressively kissed him.

Jax stood still for a moment, but then the much larger man fisted his hand in Cobra's short, silky dark locks.

It was like watching two masculine gods collide in a show of might.

"*Oh my sun god*, relax . . . we get it. You have hot sex." Ascher threw his pillow at Cobra's back.

Jax chuckled and released Cobra's face. Neither said anything to Ascher, but Cobra turned around and gave me a smirk.

I rolled my eyes at him and made a childish face back. I didn't know why he was so concerned with staking his claim on Jax, because I was well aware the big man was out of my league.

Plus, I was never going to enter into a relationship; zero sexual experience ensured that. If I were in a league, it would be called "scrawny chicks with homicidal voices and general unwellness."

Ascher crawled out of bed. "We have fifteen minutes to get ready—you might want to hurry."

Once again, I was loving Ascher's insinuations that I was some type of pampered princess.

Since my broken nose was still pounding on my face and I was covered in hideous bruises, I was really wondering how he had made these assumptions.

I opened my mouth to tell him to go fuck himself, but I quickly closed it.

Drool almost fell out.

Ascher stood shirtless in front of his bed, all *six and a half feet* of sculpted muscles on display.

His entire torso, arms, and neck were covered in intricate tattoos. Yet it wasn't the gorgeous tattoos that had me praying to the moon goddess.

An eight-pack of tattooed abs literally rippled as he stretched his arms above his head.

Suddenly, I felt light-headed.

Deep grooves on his lower hip formed a *V* that went low into his gray sweatpants.

His golden hair was tousled after sleeping, and his onyx horns made him look like a fantastical creature from the fae realm.

I couldn't help but look at the bulge in his sweatpants. Was the beta gossip true?

“I’m not interested,” Ascher sneered at me with his lush mouth, amber eyes rolling in disgust.

It took me an embarrassingly long moment to realize what he was talking about.

Face flaming, I quickly turned around and busied myself getting ready for the day.

“Trust me, I’m *not* either.” I gathered my clothes. My rough voice was harsh and broken compared to his sexy drawl, and the pit in my stomach grew larger.

“Sure, that’s why you were eye-fucking me.”

I refused to turn around and look at him.

His body was all hard edges and bulging muscles, so different from my much smaller form. His flame and rose tattoos were a colorful work of art.

I should have ignored it, but his blatant rejection made my heart twist and my stomach curl in on itself.

Ascher wasn’t the first man to tell me I was repulsive, and he wouldn’t be the last.

I took my clothes to the bathroom but was stopped when the door wouldn’t open. “Fucking hell.” I yanked at the handle with desperation.

I needed to get away from Ascher.

“Cobra and Jax are bathing. Change out here.”

I refused to turn around and look at the bastard. “I need privacy to change.” Weird grunts and groans and splashing water sounded within the bathroom. I quickly backed away from the door.

“Of course, the princess thinks she’s just too attractive to change in front of the other alphas. You probably think you’re so special . . . the first woman alpha.”

As I breathed shallowly, the tightness in my chest grew and spots danced in front of my eyes.

No way was I showing off my hideous scars to the arrogant alpha that already found me repulsive.

“I need *privacy*!” I shouted mid-gasp and stared at the floor.

“Relax, Princess. Just go next door—there are empty rooms. We have this entire wing to ourselves.”

I barely caught the tail end of Ascher’s words because I sprinted out the door, into a neighboring room. It was an open room with a fireplace, but it didn’t have any furniture.

Gasping for air, I slammed the door shut and fell to the ground.

I'd once told Lucinda to lie on the floor when she was having a panic attack because it helped center the body. Now I fell like a starfish onto the hard ground and felt zero comfort.

Instead, it just reminded me of yesterday when the beta had pinned me against the floor. I quickly scrambled to my feet.

Bumping around the room, I got dressed in a frantic rush.

Ten minutes later, I calmly walked into the alpha quarters with a fake smile plastered on my face.

The bathroom was open, and I slipped inside.

I went to brush my teeth with my fingers, but was surprised to find a toothbrush, hairbrush, and hair ties in a pile with a piece of paper that had my name on it. I had never had such luxuries before.

I guessed Zed had done it.

Staring at my reflection in the floor-length mirror, I took a deep breath and cracked my broken nose back into place.

My eyes watered and pain paralyzed my brain as blood gushed onto the floor.

A moment later, I stepped out of the bathroom with a silky wave of straight white hair hanging down my back.

I never knew my hair could be so smooth and soft.

My nose was now straight on my face, but the circles under both eyes had become a hideous deep purple. According to Jax, it would take a day for the bruising to heal. I hoped he was right.

Still, my teeth were freshly brushed, and I had washed my face with sweet-smelling soap. I felt like a million bucks.

All three of the alphas stood in front of the door, waiting.

"Your hair looks nice." Jax stared down at me. His warm chestnut scent was tinged with that of cold frost, and Cobra stood behind him, looking smug.

I grunted nondescriptly. Ascher's words still rang in my head, and I was horrified by how much power they had over me.

These alphas were nothing to me, and I didn't care about their opinions. I needed to keep it that way.

"We're going to be late for breakfast because *you* took too long." Ascher stomped out of the room.

The alphas followed, and I walked with them but kept a foot between them and myself—I wasn't actually one of them—and I would never be.

It was best if I remembered that.

At breakfast, Ascher loudly complained about the betas, the weather, and his pancakes. Jax made a couple of passing comments, and Cobra said nothing.

I gorged myself on sausage and waffles. Honestly, it was one of the best breakfasts I had ever had, and my spirits immediately improved.

Turned out it was impossible to have a pity party while eating warm syrup on a waffle. That shit *slapped*. I tucked a few waffles in my pants for later.

Jax raised his eyebrow at my bulging sweatpants but didn't say anything.

He was definitely my favorite.

After breakfast, the morning training session started. This time, we were in the gym with all the betas. Weirdly, no one mentioned the bearded man that had attacked me. Everyone just acted like he'd never existed.

We stretched and jogged to warm up, and then Jax led everyone through a punching and kicking sequence.

I got some side-eyes, but for the most part, everyone ignored me. Betas were good soldiers who didn't question their alphas' commands.

If Jax wanted me here, I was here. No one wanted to upset the alpha psychos.

I understood; I didn't want to either.

The trouble hit an hour into stretching and going through punching exercises.

Suddenly, sirens blared, and lights flashed throughout the gymnasium.

"Fae breach, portal three. Midsize fae battle creature, species unknown. Fae breach, portal three. Midsize fae battle creature, species unknown," blasted through the speakers on repeat.

Terror shot through me.

"Everyone to the battle room!" Jax jogged toward a black door hidden in the corner of the gym. Everyone followed.

The battle room turned out to be a large locker room that was full of every weapon imaginable. Guns, swords, and throwing knives decorated an entire wall.

"Every locker has your battle gear!" Jax yelled, and betas scrambled, opening lockers and putting on clothes.

There was a locker labeled “Sadie,” and I opened it up to find . . . nothing inside.

Fear made my hands shake. *Great, they want me to die*.

I took a waffle out of my pocket and had a bite. My terror abated. Slightly.

“We fight in our alpha forms.” Ascher stood close to me, and I jumped in surprise.

My locker didn’t have any battle gear, and my petrified brain struggled to understand what Ascher meant. “So you don’t use anything else?” I asked. “I’ve never fought . . . like ever . . . before.” I swallowed roughly around the waffle in my throat.

War was all fun and games until you were smack dab in the middle of it. I’d thought growing up with Dick would prepare me for anything.

It hadn’t.

Ascher handed me a large gun. I had never fired before, but I had seen men use them, so I got the gist.

The long, cold barrel sent a chill down my spine.

“We know, Princess,” Ascher said softly. For once, the name didn’t sound like an insult. “We were told you had no experience. You have to come with us, but just . . . stay behind us. It might trigger your transformation.” Ascher stared down at me with an intensity I hadn’t seen from him. He seemed different. Less hotheaded. Calmer. More controlled.

For a second, Ascher’s amber eyes hardened, and it felt like a different man was staring down at me. He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something—he snapped it shut.

He looked away from me, like he could see the question in my gaze.

I bit my lip to stop my teeth from chattering in fear and nodded like I was fine with going into battle. I didn’t feel like agreeing, but there were literally zero other options.

What was I going to do, refuse to fight?

The oligarchy forced all alphas to fight in the war. It was our purpose in the realm. I had to act like an alpha. Even if it was just pretend.

“Sadie will not lead a beta team until she is ready!” Jax shouted to the betas, who were donning forest-green armor, the color of the oligarchy.

The beta soldiers strapped guns to their waists along with throwing knives. Almost all gripped swords in both their hands.

“We will head out in our three usual teams. teams. Sadie—come with me. Follow my lead and stay behind me,” Jax said, and all the betas and alphas turned to stare at me. Biting my lip hard enough to draw blood, I knew I looked like the nervous wreck that I was.

I tried to nod and give the room a smile of encouragement.

Whatever they saw on my face satisfied them, because everyone turned their attention away from me and back to preparing their weapons.

“Harbingers of fae death. Death to the queen!” Jax bellowed, and everyone raised their arms in the air and shouted it back.

Nothing in life was ever black and white, and I wasn’t going to believe the fae were monsters just because shifters said they were.

Before I could start panicking again, the door was thrown open, and we ran out into the cold winter’s day.

Heavy gray clouds obscured the sun and made the towering mountains seem melancholy. Wind shrieked through the forest in front of us, and the cold instantly froze my bones.

My face hurt as we jogged to the line of trees that separated the forest from the training compound.

“Alphas, transform now.” Jax’s deep voice could barely be heard above the howling winds. “No matter what happens, stay behind me, Sadie.”

Nodding, I walked over to where the three alphas had separated themselves in front of the betas.

Suddenly, Jax shifted into a monstrous bear.

If Jax was seven feet tall as a man, he was almost twice that as a bear.

He stood nearly as tall as the shortest coniferous trees. Thick, shaggy black fur covered his entire body. Long, dagger-like claws decorated both his feet and hands, and massive black spines poked out from his back like armor.

He must have been over five thousand pounds.

Ascher turned next. Unlike Jax, his entire body didn’t change.

Ascher grew taller until he stood a few feet shorter than Jax. His black horns tripled in size, and they jutted off a massive ram’s head. His torso expanded and bulked up but for the most part, looked the same, unlike his legs, which were covered in thick brown fur and ended in hooves.

Ascher resembled a creature depicted in the rumored god realm—he was a horrifying rendition of a devil ram, brought to life—his nostrils chuffed out air, and my stomach cramped.

I never knew a ram could be so terrifying.

Finally, Cobra changed.

Unlike the other two, only his eyes were physically transformed. It was clear, however, how he'd gotten his name.

Hundreds of snake shadows wrapped themselves around Cobra's pale skin.

His emerald eyes changed shape on his face until massive snake eyes glared out at the world.

Slit pupils glowed on his otherwise normal face.

The shadowy snakes writhed around, quivering black masses that flashed across his pale skin.

I stared at the three alphas in shock.

Jax was a monstrous bear, Ascher was a freaky ram, and Cobra had shadow snakes.

Somehow, it made perfect sense. Still, it was bizarre to see them transform with my own eyes.

Jax roared, and I jumped at the guttural sound.

Alpha shifted forms were more terrifying than I could have ever imagined.

I couldn't envision the beasts they fought against. From far away, a menacing sound shook the forest.

I was screwed.

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8
Shifting into a Beast

Sadie

Cobra stood still and stared at me. The shadow snakes writhed across his pale skin as I backed away from him.

Wariness crept through me at the sight of the snakes. They were unnatural.

Jax gave a soft roar that commanded me to follow behind him and stay close. I didn't know how I knew what he was saying, but I just did.

Jax turned, and the nearest betas stumbled backward, away from him. His claws and teeth were monstrous.

He was built for mauling.

The ground shook, and the wind shifted slightly. The scents of black tar and something unidentifiable tickled the back of my throat.

It burned.

Whatever made that smell didn't belong in the forest; it wasn't from the shifter realm. My stomach twisted as I thought about what fae creature emitted such a pungent scent.

Ten betas jogged over in a line behind each of the alphas. Jax tossed his head behind him, and I nodded in understanding.

I tried to click on the numb, but it was just out of my grasp. Not enough time had passed.

I was going to have to go into my first battle without the numb. Without a shifter form. With a gun I didn't know how to use and nothing else.

Ninety-nine percent chance I was dead. The one percent was divine intervention.

I sent a prayer up to the moon goddess for strength and asked her to look after Lucinda if I died.

Cobra turned toward the betas and shouted over the wind, “We stay in groups, and we surround it! Follow your alphas. Like usual, our goal is to incapacitate, not kill the creature. However, the oligarchy has given us permission to kill if needed.” His usual silky voice had a slight lisp to it.

It was also the most I had ever heard him speak at once.

Suddenly, we were running through the forest at breakneck speeds.

My lungs began to burn, and I fell behind the lines of betas. I was slower than everyone.

Navigating through the woods, I made sure to keep my eyes on the shifters.

Jax led. His lumbering form moved extremely fast through the woods.

Ascher’s ram form was right behind him, his hooves pounding against the ground.

Beside them, Cobra slipped through the forest without making a single sound. Compared to the heavy footsteps of the betas behind him, he was a ghost.

“Screeeeeeeeeee.” The soft clicking shriek grew louder as we ran through the forest.

I stumbled and almost fell face-first into the dirt. A creature from a nightmare stood in the forest.

The fae was a monstrous spider that was at least two times the size of Jax’s bear and probably weighed thousands of pounds.

Eight hairy, spindly legs protruded from two large circular body segments.

Menacing black pincers arose off its head. Hundreds of multifaceted eyes reflected light from different angles.

It would have resembled a spider, if not for the dozen knifelike teeth that jutted at angles around its pincers.

The fae creature was heinous.

The scents of tar and spices burned my nostrils—I choked with disgust—its body was so large that it could barely stand among the tree trunks. Its spindly legs sprawled at weird angles against the trees.

Jax reared up to this massive height and let out a fearsome roar at the creature.

The sound was so powerful and commanding that the ground rumbled beneath my feet.

I threw myself behind the wide trunk of a tree.

There was a long silence as I waited. Maybe the battle was already over?

I stuck my head around to see what was happening. The spider fae reared its pincers back and let out an ungodly shriek.

Nope, the battle is still very much happening.

Pain burned the side of my head—my right eardrum burst from the creature's unholy noise—blood poured down the side of my neck.

There was a scream behind me, and a beta slumped on the ground. Blood gushed from both his ears. He was out cold.

Ascher leaped from behind the creature and slammed his onyx horns against its body.

A crunch echoed through the forest—he penetrated the creature's exoskeleton.

All hell broke loose.

Betas shot bullets at the fae creature and stabbed it with their swords. I held the gun in my hand and fumbled with it.

The air was so cold that my fingers were numb and I could barely use them. I struggled with the icy barrel as I tried to switch off the safety.

When it finally clicked, I held it up in front of my face and took a deep breath.

I crept out from behind the trees and waited until betas weren't standing in front of me because I didn't want to accidentally hit them.

I aimed at the creature and fired.

A couple of my shots went wide, and I almost clipped Jax's bear form, which was hanging off the spider's body.

My hands shook badly, and the cold only got worse, so I lowered my aim and tried to hit its many legs.

My bullets seemed to do nothing. It just appeared to get more enraged.

The spider kicked out its long legs and sent shifters flying backward through the air.

Jax leaped forward and latched onto the creature's neck. His massive claws sawed at the creature's body as he stabbed repeatedly.

Cobra stood to the side of the forest with his yellow snake eyes glowing—he raised his hands forward—hundreds of black shadow snakes twisted off his skin and shot over the snow toward the fae.

Cobra's shadow snakes reared their heads back and revealed needle-sharp shadow fangs. They snaked across the trees and ground, then latched onto the spider's legs.

The fae creature shrieked, and black blood slid out like sludge from where the shadow snakes bit it.

All around, shifters were covered in blood as they struggled to contain the massive spider.

Jax had told me to stay out of the way, and I was really trying, but the fight was stumbling closer to my hiding spot. I was too terrified to run and expose myself.

The fae's legs reflected light as bits of sunshine filtered through the clouds. Thousands of tiny daggers covered the spider's legs.

Red blood coated the white snow, pouring from where its dagger-clad appendages made contact with shifters.

Suddenly, the spider fae released a loud, chattering shriek that echoed through the forest.

With a rapid lunge, the spider fae bent its head backward unnaturally and lunged with its pincers.

It grabbed Ascher off its abdomen and held him between its pincers. Ascher's ram head bleated and chuffed, and he raked long claws across the spider's eyes.

It didn't release him.

Abruptly, the fae reared up on its back legs and shook itself violently back and forth.

Jax was thrown off its back.

All the betas went flying.

In a blur of movement, the fae turned around and began sprinting through the forest sideways.

Everyone was lying on the ground, momentarily stunned by the force of the fae slamming them against trees.

The fae moved deeper through the forest. Directly toward where I was hidden.

The massive beast moved toward me, and my entire body froze. I'd thought I would run away, or fight, in a moment of high stress.

I froze.

Ascher was wrapped in its pincers.

It was just little old me behind a tree and thousands of pounds of monstrous spider hurtling at me.

Every cell in my body tingled, and the weird sensation locked my limbs.

The tingling intensified until it was a paralyzing pain. My limbs locked in agony, and my body tilted.

I fell to my knees and face-planted forward.

Directly into the path of eight sharp spider legs covered in daggers.

I lay on the ground convulsing in agony as the spider sprinted directly toward me.

By some miracle of fate, the spider ran over me and its legs barely missed my prone form.

The tingling . . . *snapped*.

My clothes ripped off my body and lay shredded on the ground, but I was warmer than I had ever been.

The world was different.

Colors were richer.

I was different.

It was no longer unbearably cold and miserable. The temperature was comfortable.

I stood up and went after the spider.

I didn't just run; I *leapt*.

Fresh oxygen filled my lungs.

My four legs ate up the ground.

I was built for power.

For chasing.

For the hunt.

I was hyperfocused on the spider, on catching it. It was what I was built to do.

The spider fae skittered quickly through the forest, but the tightly packed trees slowed it down.

I was made for sprinting short distances.

Head down for power, my massive leg muscles contracted and released as I flew after my prey.

I would *not* let it get away.

The swirling black mass of the portal came into view. It was just like I had read in a book, a circular void of darkness against the white landscape.

Ascher bleated louder as he struggled to release himself from the fae's pincers.

Within fifty feet of the portal, I threw myself toward the fae.

My large body went airborne—I extended razor-sharp claws in front of my face.

Maw open, jaw unhinged impossibly wide, canines elongated in my mouth with a snap.

I slammed into the back of the creature with extreme force—ripping my fangs through its body.

A loud, chitter-like shriek echoed through the forest as the beast stumbled and fell to the side.

Between my claws and mouth, I sawed deeper into the wounds that Ascher had created on its backside.

Frantic, I bit down like a madwoman. Tar and spices filled my mouth, and I ignored the creature's gross taste.

With single-minded purpose, I bit through the black sludge. My body rocked to the side, and pain scoured my abdomen, but I refused to release my massive maw from its backside.

One spider leg bent unnaturally and kicked at me unmercifully, the beast was desperate to unlatch my fangs from its body.

Lights sparked in my vision and everything jostled as my fangs dug deeper into flesh.

I didn't release.

It could have been seconds or hours as the creature stabbed at my side frantically.

Pain and existence became a swirly haze as I single-mindedly focused on keeping my jaw locked shut.

When Dick would beat me, I had found that the harder I focused on a speck of dust or biting my lip, the easier it was to ride out the pain.

Now I focused all my energy on keeping my jaw locked.

The rest of the world faded out.

All of a sudden, the weight rolled over and pinned me to the hard ground—I was crushed—fear overwhelmed me, and I fought to untangle my jaw from flesh.

I dug my claws in desperately as I attempted to separate myself from the creature and get air.

Long moments expanded as my lungs collapsed and I couldn't draw in breath.

My head grew hazy from a lack of oxygen.

In a rush of relief, the crushing weight lifted off my body. Rolling and crawling, I detangled myself. As I stumbled away, sticky black gore covered my white fur in a heavy sludge.

Stinking of burned tar, I hacked the black pieces of fae onto the ground as I sucked in oxygen.

Jax roared as he threw the fae body to the side. His massive bear moved to the front of the creature, and with another bellow, he helped Ascher pry its massive pincers open.

Ascher fell from its grasp.

His torso was shredded in a band where the pincer had held him. Still, he stood up straight and brushed sludge off his tattooed torso. He seemed mostly unharmed.

Stumbling onto four shaky legs, I took in the carcass before me. Its body was savaged from where I had sawed my fangs into it.

Cobra stood beside the spider's head, and his shadow snakes slowly streamed out of the fae's eyeballs and wrapped themselves back around his body.

I had a feeling I hadn't been the one to kill the fae.

Cobra's snakes had done it.

Abruptly, Jax roared into my face and transformed into a very naked male.

His dark skin was splattered with black-and-red blood. He was a macabre painting of masculine strength, with gleaming muscles piled atop each other.

Unlike Ascher's lean form, Jax's body was thicker, with muscles bulging everywhere.

He was beautiful.

In an act of pure strength, I focused on his gold nipple piercings and not the impressive, pierced dick hanging between his legs.

"I told you to stay behind us!" Jax grabbed my furry shoulders and shook me back and forth. His gray eyes flashed like frigid daggers.

As I glared back, annoyance swelled in my chest. You would think he would have thanked me for helping save Ascher. If I hadn't acted, Ascher would have been pulled through the portal.

Also, based on my fucking *claws and canines*, I had shifted into my alpha form like they'd wanted.

I was an alpha, a beast.

My spine popped deliciously as I stuck my butt in the air and my furry white paws forward. I reached my neck down, ears flattening on my skull.

I was a cat.

A huge one.

Opening my large maw, I showed Jax my fangs and bit the air. He could shove his scorn up his ass.

Jax didn't say anything. He just turned around and stalked away through the forest.

My stomach sank at his disapproval. For some reason, I wanted the alpha leader to be proud of me.

Next, Ascher transformed back and stomped, naked, over to me. His tattoos rippled as he walked, and his black horns were still larger than usual against his hair's golden waves.

"I had it handled . . . you *didn't* need to interfere," Ascher snapped. He was probably pissed because he hadn't thought there was any way I could be a female alpha.

A low rumble filled my chest, and I growled at him.

Ascher didn't say anything else. He just turned and followed Jax. His disapproval meant nothing to me.

I wanted to chase him down and bite him.

Instead, with my side aching from pain, I lay down on the gore-covered snow. I huffed in the cold air with annoyance.

The alphas should have been grateful for my help.

"You did well out there." Cobra stood near me, and his eyes were still snake eyes—his slit pupils stared at me with unnatural stillness.

Cobra held himself like he usually did, his movements were smooth and graceful. If black shadow snakes didn't writhe across his skin, I could almost believe he wasn't shifted.

"Do you know what you are?" he asked.

I shook my furry head back at him. *Some type of cat?*

"You're a saber-toothed tiger . . . A beast of lore." Cobra extended a hand. Shadow snakes slithered across every inch of his pale flesh, as he brushed a chunk of black gore off my shoulder.

A strange sensation zinged through my shoulder, where his hand touched my fur.

He winked over one of his slit pupils.

It was creepy as hell.

If I were in my other form, my mouth would have dropped open with shock. Cobra was *complimenting and helping* me?

Also, *heck yeah*, I'd always liked cats.

I was a badass.

My stomach sank with melancholy. I wanted to share this moment with Lucinda—she would love my shifted form—she always enjoyed the stories about alphas and their second forms.

"Pretty impressive . . . for a girl," Cobra called over his shoulder as he walked away.

Chuffing with annoyance, I limped through the forest, following the men.

Did alphas taste like steak? I wanted to find out.

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9
Finding Friends in Unlikely Places

Sadie

Still in my cat form, I limped back into the battle room and collapsed onto my haunches.

Betas helped each other stand upright and strip out of their battle gear. A couple of betas had wicked wounds and were only supported by others holding them up.

A few glanced over at me, and the air perfumed with their fear. It was nice that they were finally showing me the respect I deserved.

Blood coated the locker room floor.

"Everyone should report to the ward immediately to get their injuries treated—the doctors are waiting." Jax announced as he lowered a limp beta male onto the ground.

Ascher and Cobra followed behind, both carrying passed-out betas over their shoulders.

Finally, the last beta shifters stumbled in and shut the doors behind them. Instantly, the howling wind stopped, and the small room became too warm.

I started to pant, but remained in my beast form. My shredded clothes were still out in the forest.

I couldn't let them see my scars.

Slowly, the room emptied as betas helped one another to the ward. The alphas handed off the limp betas to servants who ran into the room with cloth gurneys.

Everyone bustled about as they hurried to the injury ward.

The heat made me drowsy, and I struggled to keep my eyes open as I rested my head on my furry paws. I just needed to take a long nap.

"Imagine your other form and focus on transforming into it . . . when you start to tingle, imagine shoving through a wall—turn back . . . now" Jax

alpha-barked down at me. His tree-trunk-like legs spread wide.

Thankfully, he had put on combat pants. At least his dick was no longer on display.

Jolted fully awake, instinctively I began to transition.

At the last second, I remembered why I couldn't.

Flattening my ears back against my head in annoyance, I shook my heavy maw back and forth.

"I gave you an order." Jax stalked toward me, and vibrations from his chest rumbled through the small room.

A high-pitched whine escaped my throat, and I tucked my head down between my paws at his censure.

I wanted to listen.

Instead, I lifted my right paw and pointed to the door.

I opened my large eyes wide and pleaded with the big man to understand. His handsome face contorted in fury, and his bare chest rippled with power.

Gray eyes sharpened until they were icier than Cobra's frosty scent. I crept backward—my furry butt hit a locker.

I whined low and long and pointed with my paw at the door.

The adrenaline from the battle had disappeared, and in its wake, I was light-headed and woozy.

Jax's anger was too much. Behind Jax, Ascher and Cobra flanked him, and I shook my head, desperate to not pass out.

The room spun.

"*Oh my sun god*, is this the same bullshit as this morning?" Ascher stepped around Jax and stared down at me. Like usual, he was overly aggressive, and he flexed his tattooed muscles like he was going to force me to turn back.

I nodded my heavy head, annoyed at his attitude but grateful he had understood.

"The princess has an issue with nudity. She probably wants to change back without us here . . . probably thinks she's too good for us to look upon her." Ascher laughed like it was absurd to even think I might be better than them.

I nodded vigorously.

Even though that wasn't the real reason, I was desperate for them to leave the room. It was getting too hot, and I was beginning to pant uncomfortably.

My thick fur was suffocating.

“We’ll be waiting outside the door to take you to the ward. You have one minute to transform and change—or I’ll be coming in to get you,” Jax alpha-barked and stalked out the door.

Before he left, Ascher sneered down at me one more time.

Cobra just kept staring. He still had snake eyes, and it was freaking me out. *How come he doesn’t have to change back?*

Once they were all gone, I pictured my two-legged form, and when the tingling started, I imagined shoving myself through a wall.

I transformed back. I was sprawled naked across the freezing floor.

In a rush, I dug through the room until I found a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt in Ascher’s locker.

His clothes smelled like rich conifers, and I took a second to sniff them. It was wonderful, like hugging a soft tree.

Stumbling to get dressed, I had to roll the shorts up about five times, and they still hung loose off my hips. The black sweatshirt, which had been tight on Ascher, hung to my mid thighs.

Nervously, I looked down at my exposed legs.

My tan legs were puny, and weirdly they never grew any hair. I had seen hairy male and female shifter legs, so I knew mine were not normal. At least my scars were covered.

“Time’s up. Let’s . . .” Jax trailed off when he saw me standing there.

All three men stared down at my exposed legs in shock.

My cheeks flamed hot. I didn’t need them to tell me my legs were embarrassing.

Their alpha scents—chestnuts, pine, and frosty snow—grew thicker in the small room. Their eyes glowed, and the rich pheromones made my mouth water.

“I’m ready,” I said quietly, breaking the spell. “Sorry, I need privacy to change . . . I couldn’t shift back with you all—”

Jax cut me off by grabbing my face with both his massive hands.

“Are you injured?” His gray eyes glowed as he softly growled, gold jewelry tinkling.

“I’m fine. I think shifting healed my wounds.” It was bizarre; my side no longer burned with pain, and I felt lighter and healthier than I had in a while.

Ascher manhandled Jax out of the way. For a second, his lush lips softened, and he didn’t look so angry.

Immediately, Ascher's signature scowl returned. "It usually does for alphas. You still need to go to the ward to get checked."

Cobra grunted, like Jax was being dramatic.

I agreed with Cobra.

"*Obviously,* she's going to the ward." Jax proceeded to drag me by my arm like a caveman.

"You're being ridiculous." I stumbled over my own feet as Jax pulled me through the massive gym and down the long hallways.

The training compound was a sprawling maze of hallways and rooms, and I struggled to orient myself.

My sense of direction sucked. Although, not for lack of trying.

"I can walk myself," I repeated like a broken record. Jax just kept growling and dragging me about like a prized deer.

"I told you to stay *behind me* during battle," Jax said instead of acknowledging my words.

"I was!" I blurted. "But Ascher was being carried away and everyone was on the ground. I had no choice—trust me, I didn't plan to, and I didn't want to have to go after him. It all just sort of happened . . . plus, you wanted me to transform, and I did. So, it was actually a good thing." I rambled as I thought back to the chaos of the forest. I hadn't had a choice.

"No . . . what you did was *not* a good thing," Ascher snapped from behind me. "We said we'd protect you—you shouldn't have done that. . . . I had it under control."

"Bullshit," I said.

"You put yourself in harm's way." Jax's grip on my arm tightening.

"*No,* I turned into a saber-toothed tiger and helped *save* everyone's asses. " I made a face up at him. "You're welcome."

"I agree with the girl." Cobra glided beside me like he was floating on air.

I tripped in shock. Jax's strangling grip on my arm was the only thing that kept me upright.

"See, even Cobra agrees with me," I said. "You both are being ridiculous."

Jax growled at Cobra and stared him down. However, the pale alpha was unconcerned. He just smiled back at Jax with his creepy snake eyes.

"How come Cobra gets to stay a snake thing, but I had to change back?" I asked with a grumble.

Instead of answering, Jax gently pushed me through a massive wood door labeled "Ward." Inside, the long, thin room had curtains pulled around dozens of beds. A handful of doctors in white coats bustled around giving betas pills and smearing a yellow paste on wounds.

Jax dragged me down the long room until he found an open bed at the very end.

As we walked by, betas lowered their eyes and bowed their heads in respect to Jax. They also looked at me with fear and curiosity.

Females weren't alphas, but somehow, I was? It didn't make any sense. I'd always thought I was a null shifter.

Jax didn't glance at the betas. He just manhandled me into a bed and demanded a doctor look at me.

"I'm fine—you can leave me be now." I tried to shrug out of the big man's grip. Hell, I was feeling better than I had in a long time.

Even with me sitting on the elevated bed, and with him leaning forward and caging me in with his arms, he towered over me.

All the alphas healed after they transitioned back. So it was weird that Jax was treating me like a broken doll. He wasn't freaking out about any of the other alphas.

I was about to use some very colorful language to tell Jax where he could stick a doctor but my breath caught as Jax's large hand fell away from my arms—but his calloused fingers trailed softly along my forearms as he released me.

There was a weird pinch in my stomach.

I leaned back against the wall and stopped myself from reaching back for his touch.

Jax's warmth and towering strength were comforting. Once again, I was losing my head around him.

I needed a lobotomy. Unfortunately, I wasn't rich enough to hire one of the few brain surgeons in the realm. So, I settled with the next best thing.

My head cracked as I slammed it hard against the wall. *Pull it together, woman.*

"Stay here until the doctor clears you." Jax leaned forward at the hip and put his massive hands on the wall on both sides of my head.

Warmth radiated off him like a furnace, and his lush lips were inches away from mine. His high cheekbones framed his perfect face, and up close his dark skin was silky, without imperfections.

I swallowed thickly.

For a fleeting moment, I wished I were tall and busty so I could handle all Jax's energy. The alpha was built like a god of war, and his close presence made my skin tingle.

Mentally, I slapped myself. Small bitches could still give off big-dick energy (obviously). Numb Sadie knew how to do it.

I was thrown out of my musings when Jax reached his finger forward and delicately brushed my hair off my forehead.

For a long moment, we stared at each other in silence as his breath mingled with mine.

My forehead tingled where he'd touched it.

Jax leaned further forward, and I stopped breathing altogether.

His long braids fell across my lap—I shivered when his cold gold trinkets tickled my neck.

I followed the veins that trailed down his neck, across his impossibly wide shoulders, and along his arms.

I had forgotten he was shirtless. Clearly, I must have hit my head harder than I'd realized, because it was difficult to forget.

Unlike Ascher and Cobra, he wasn't lean with sculpted abs. He was *thick*.

Everywhere, muscles bulged atop muscles. Hell, his pecs were probably bigger than my boobs.

Weirdly, I was into it.

The little gold barbells in his nipples twinkled invitingly, and I wondered if he would growl if I touched one. Before I could move my hand, his stubble scratched slowly against the side of my jaw.

Jax's hot breath made my core spasm.

It had never done that before.

His warm chestnut scent wrapped around me. I wanted to lick his neck to see if it would taste like chocolate-covered roasted chestnuts or the honeyed ones.

Suddenly, I had an overwhelming urge to reach forward and find out. For scientific purposes.

"I'll be waiting for you in our room," he whispered in my ear, his ridiculously deep voice making my core clench.

There wasn't enough oxygen in the realm.

The burning spread to my groin, and my stomach turned over till I was queasy.

Maybe it's good that I'm seeing the doctor?

I was unwell.

"Jax, we need to debrief the oligarchy on the breach." Ascher stalked across the room to grab Jax. As he moved, every beta, man and woman, greedily drank in his colorful tattoos.

It was too bad he was a hothead and annoying.

Still, the queasiness got worse. I inspected my bitten fingernails and tried to ignore the alphas surrounding me.

I failed.

The side of my neck prickled—beyond the edge of the curtain, Cobra smirked at me—he still had fucking snake eyes.

A strange zing bit at my shoulder. It was the same sensation I had felt in the woods when Cobra had wiped the fae gore off my shoulder.

Jax took a step back and reluctantly walked away with Ascher. Still, he kept glancing over at me, like he was afraid I was going to disappear into thin air.

Keeping my eyes on him, I ignored the urge to look down at myself. The zing sensation traveled across my collarbone, down my arm.

When the three alphas left the ward, I pulled up the sleeve of my sweatshirt and gasped.

A tiny black shadow snake traveled around my tan wrist in a circle. I touched my finger over it, and a little zip of electricity sparked. Then it slithered across my wrist, winding around my fingers.

The little guy was playing.

I had never been that into snakes, but I'd always wanted a pet—the little guy was so tiny and cute it made me smile—somehow, I could feel the snake's happiness as it spun around my fingers.

Glad someone liked me. Apparently, I was desperate for affection.

"Wow, that was *a lot*." A shaggy blue head popped around the curtain next to me, then a lanky boy came into view.

I jumped and guiltily shoved my hand into my sweatshirt. My heart beat erratically, as I was terrified that I had been caught doing something I shouldn't have.

I had a feeling Cobra didn't know I had one of his snakes, and I didn't want to have to give the little guy up.

"The alphas were growling and staring at you with such intensity that it made *me* overwhelmed . . . and I was in the sickbed next to you." The

boyish-looking beta grinned at me.

I couldn't help but smile back.

He was all lanky limbs. Atop his head, he had natural-looking electric-blue hair—I'd never seen such a color in my life.

Physically, he was my polar opposite. Where I was golden with white hair, he was pale with aqua hair. I was built compact, and he was built lanky with long legs. His aqua-blue eyes were startling, like a crisp lake at the bottom of a mountain.

I'd been told staring into my eyes was like looking into the rumored hell realm.

I tried to live up to that analogy, but it was hard to be a badass all the time.

"They are a lot," I said. "Like I'm completely fine—but Jax still dragged me here like a caveman."

There was something about the beta that immediately put me at ease. I wanted to share things with him. Which was weird for me.

He whistled and walked over.

Up close, he was about a head taller than me, with long skinny muscles a narrow frame.

He was the leanest beta I had ever seen. In general, most betas were built wide and bulky. Alphas were even larger and bulkier. Except for me.

"I'm Sadie," I said, coughing to clear the roughness from my throat. As I held out my right hand, the shadow snake zinged around my left one. I was glad it stayed hidden.

"I'm Aran, a recently discovered beta." He shook my hand firmly, like he was trying to impress me with his handshake.

Between him shaking my hand like I was some important person and the snake zipping around my arm with joy, I smiled and barely swallowed a giggle.

As we shook for an unnecessarily long time, I noticed that Aran's hand was thin but rough, and covered in calluses. He might have been a new beta, but he hadn't lived an easy life.

"I just wanted to thank you for what you did during the battle," Aran said. "If you hadn't gone after it, we would have failed. Rumor has it we get punished for every fae creature we fail to apprehend," he whispered conspiratorially.

“Really?” I asked with confusion.*Leave it to* the oligarchy to punish people after they’d just fought for them in a *war*. They really were pussies.

Aran perched himself on the end of my bed and whispered like he was sharing a big secret, “I’m not . . . big on the war.”

He was feeling as out of place as I did. All the alphas took everything so seriously. It was nice to find someone who had similar energy.

I didn’t know if it was the shocking aqua mop on his head, his smaller stature, or the feminine softness of his features, but I found myself wanting to trust him.

“I’m not into it either . . . something is going on with the oligarchy, and I’m not sure I believe their story about the fae,” I whispered so quietly that only he could hear.

I thought back to the battle. The spider thing had definitely been violent, but it hadn’t gone out of its way to kill any of us. In fact, it had acted more like it wanted to kidnap Ascher than attack us.

Aran looked up at me with an expression close to awe on his face. “I feel exactly the same way—thank the sun god I came over to talk to you.” His brilliant white teeth made him seem even younger.

“So how has the shifter realm hurt you?” I asked him.

Instead of sadness like I had expected, Aran’s turquoise eyes danced with humor.

Some people were broken by bad circumstances. Others embraced their shitty lots and used it to terrorize the world. He was definitely in the latter category, and I aspired to be like him.

“Awful null parents worked me like a dog on a farm and tried to exploit me when I turned into a beta.” He grimaced when he said “parents,” his eyes clouding over with hate. However, he shook off the emotions and rolled his eyes dramatically. “How about you?”

“Orphaned and raised by a beta innkeeper that used me as his own personal whipping post . . . also, I just found out I’m the first female alpha and can turn into a saber-toothed tiger, which you saw.”

Aran’s eyes rounded with horror, and silently I cursed myself. I had never told anyone about the beatings or scars. Now he would treat me like I was broken.

Surprisingly, a massive smile split his boyish face. “Oh, sweetie, you just found yourself a best friend. Fuck most shifters. Except you. You were a

beast out there . . . and oh my sun god, your fangs are seriously sick." Sparks jumped in his turquoise eyes as he grinned at me.

A heady rush of relief coursed through me. He wasn't going to treat me like I was damaged.

Aran was going to be dangerous to be around. His smile was infectious, and once again I grinned back at him.

"I have a feeling—" I said. "We'll have to overthrow the oligarchy." I winked to let him know I was only half joking.

"First—" Aran said. "We'll have to overthrow your alphas, and I have a feeling it's going to be dirty, dirty, dirty work." He dramatically drew out the last part and fanned himself.

His raunchy expression made it clear what he was insinuating.

They weren't my alphas, but I didn't correct him. Like Cobra and Jax, Aran was definitely into men.

I relaxed further, and my smile widened. I didn't have to worry about him expecting something from me.

"You have no idea." I chuckled. My voice was still scratchy and broken, but it was the happiest noise I had made in a while.

The shadow snake sent a small electric zip of delight across my lower back when I thought about Cobra—now it was slithering merrily around my back, adding to my joy.

My life was still a flaming mess.

But making a friend had made everything so much better.

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10
Things Get Spicy

Sadie

Unsurprisingly, the doctor checked my vitals and announced I was completely healthy. I promised Aran that I would hang out later and left to find my bed and take a long nap.

I wandered aimlessly through the training compound—long mahogany corridors with shiny candelabras and exposed brick walls repeated endlessly—it was a maze of cramped stairwells and sharp angles.

After a few wrong turns, I sighed with relief when I finally saw the familiar wood door with an *A* carved into it.

My sigh of relief got stuck in my throat as I opened the door.

The first thing I noticed was the alpha pheromones—the scents of frosty chestnuts and pine hit my face in a choking cloud.

The second thing I noticed was the noise.

Heavy grunts, growls, and moans vibrated through the room. The sounds were so deep and guttural that goosebumps broke out across my skin.

The third thing I noticed was the alphas *fucking* against the wall.

I'd seen betas and null shifters have sex at the tavern: women discreetly sitting on males' laps, men bending each other over behind the pool table, women finger-fucking each other in the bathroom; I'd even taken the trash out and found a man on his knees, sucking another man off in a pile of snow.

Shifters were known to be extremely amorous and would fuck literally anybody.

The bar encounters had made me feel gross and want to want to puke with disgust.

This was different.

Jax had Cobra pinned against the wall, and his sweatpants were pulled down his thighs, like he'd been in a rush and forgotten to take them off.

Firelight cast shadows across his bulging muscles and rounded butt as they flexed with each punishing thrust into Cobra.

It was breathtaking. Cobra's light skin and emerald jewels contrasted dramatically with Jax's dark skin and gold jewelry.

They were both impressive men, but Jax's bulky muscles managed to dwarf Cobra's tapered frame.

His right hand pinned Cobra's neck against the brick wall, and Jax's skin glistened with sweat. His chiseled bicep bunched as his left hand stroked Cobra, and he grunted loudly with every thrust.

Jax's large frame hid most of Cobra from view. However, parts of pale legs and arms were exposed.

As they fucked, the shadow snakes slowly disappeared off Cobra's skin.

Concern flared in my gut, but the tiny black shadow snake still zinged contentedly around my wrist.

"Fuck . . . you like that?" Ascher moaned, his voice startling me. I hadn't noticed him.

Ascher was sitting on his bed with his back against a mountain of pillows.

The alpha was completely naked, his glorious tattoos covering every inch of his chest and thighs.

I swallowed thickly.

His dick was in his hands, and he was stroking it up and down as he watched Jax fuck Cobra against the wall.

I nearly squealed and gave myself away when his hand showed off the root of his massive dick along with his alpha knot.

The beta rumors were correct—Ascher's entire dick was tattooed with colorful ink—it must have hurt like a bitch.

I'd also heard rumors about alpha knots, but had never seen one in person. The bulge was massive at the base of his cock, and with each stroke, Ascher paused to squeeze it.

"You want him to take you even harder than that?" Ascher asked in a silky voice.

Cobra moaned low as Jax thrust harder into him.

The entire wall vibrated from the force of Jax's thrusts.

The sexual dynamic of the three alphas and the heavy pheromones in the room had my knees trembling and my stomach feeling weird again.

"You're gonna come so hard all the betas will hear you scream." Ascher closed his eyes and started pumping his hand faster.

"Fuck—yes you are." Jax growled deeply and slammed Cobra against the wall.

Cobra shouted and jerked, but the veins on Jax's biceps popped out as he pressed Cobra forward in an unforgiving grip.

As Cobra bucked, the cool scent of frost became more prominent and all the shadows disappeared off his pale skin.

Abruptly, Cobra turned his head to the side—his normal emerald eyes stared at me.

His icy gaze was terrifying.

My little shadow snake zinged in alarm, traveled up my arm, and down my back, obscured by my sweatshirt. My heart jack hammered in my chest.

I'd been caught.

Jax continued to thrust slowly, unaware that Cobra was staring at me—with each thrust, a soft blush spread across Cobra's cheeks—it would have been cute if he weren't pinning me with intense, soulless eyes.

I swallowed thickly and prayed to the moon goddess Cobra wouldn't call me out for watching.

My feet should have slowly backed away from the room, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the men.

"Beg him to fuck you," Ascher ordered in between loud moans, his powerful, tattooed hips bucking off the bed. He stroked himself faster.

"Fuck *yes*," Jax growled, and Cobra moaned beneath him, but his emerald eyes didn't break contact with mine.

"Beg him to fuck you *now*, Princess!" Ascher shouted, and his seed erupted out of his hand as he turned to stare directly at me.

When Ascher said "princess," Jax roared loudly and jerked into Cobra.

Princess. Fuck my life.

Ascher's golden eyes danced with heat, and from his smirk, I realized he'd known I was standing there the entire time.

My mouth dropped open in shock—my face caught fire—the implication of everything Ascher had said hit me like a hammer.

He'd been talking to *me*—not Cobra.

Suddenly, I felt like the spider fae was pinning me to the ground. Ascher and Jax turned to me at the same time.

Three sets of eyes speared me where I stood.

Ascher's white cum covered his hand and thighs, and he smirked at me evilly—his tattooed dick bobbed against his ripped stomach.

Jax slowly pulled out of Cobra, watching me with an unidentifiable expression on his face.

I stared at Jax's dick in shock—it was dripping cum and pierced with gold bars—the jewelry traveled all the way down, including along his alpha knot. *Holy shit, the betas should be gossiping about that*.

As the three alphas stared at me expectantly, the crushing weight became heavier.

Pheromones and the scent of sex filled my nose, and I struggled to make sense of everything that had just happened.

Ascher had insinuated Jax was going to fuck *me* . . . hard. I didn't know how to feel. Breathing erratically, panic clouded my brain because no one could ever see my body. My scars.

It was wasteful to use the numb, but this was an emergency.

As terror overwhelmed me, I let my brain click.

Instantly, all emotions left me.

I became indifferent to the situation.

The numb had recharged. I flipped the switch in my brain, and all my emotions poofed away.

You're an apex alpha. Assert yourself.

"Very dramatic," I said coldly as I stalked forward into the room.

Ascher, for once, had nothing to say—he raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised I hadn't run screaming—even Cobra and Jax watched me with shock.

None of the men knew what to do with my cool indifference. *Look them in the eye. Do not look away.*

I grabbed a pair of sweats from my dresser and a clean towel from on top of Jax's dresser. "I'm going to take a long bath."

The numb said to look them in the eye, and I listened, mostly.

My eyes trailed downward against my will, and I wondered how men functioned with things between their legs. Three cocks with swollen knots bobbed in my vicinity. If I weren't numb, I probably would have passed out.

Good thing I was numb.

Openly, I stared at the gold piercings on Jax's cock—the heavy metal was pierced through the tip, and there were bars all the way down the underside—the bars were thick at the bottom to fit through his knot.

His dick was impossibly thick, and the swollen knot at the base made its girth monstrous. It was physically unfeasible that would ever fit inside me. Cobra was worried for *no reason*.

With one last casual sweep of the room and the naked male figures on display, I walked into the bathroom and locked the door.

The huge tub was wide enough to fit ten shifters and bubbled with warm water. I dumped a bag of salts labeled "Relaxing" into the tub and climbed in.

I deserved to be pampered.

After soaking in the tub for an extended period of time, I dried off in Jax's massive towel. The oversize towel dragged on the floor when I tied it around my chest.

Brushing out my long hair, I stared indifferently at my face in the mirror.

Shifting had accelerated my healing, and my nose was no longer swollen. The black circles under my eyes were gone, and my bronze skin practically shone with health.

You're a predator. Show the alphas your strength.

Images of me mounting the alphas flashed in my mind. The numb had never been remotely sexual before. Usually it was all death and stabbing.

Ignoring the numb, I pulled back on Ascher's pine-scented sweatshirt and shorts. I told myself I was only wearing them because they were clean and there was no reason to change.

Slowly, I stepped back into the room.

All the alphas lay on their beds, but the scent of sex still lingered.

Jax and Cobra sat writing out battle reports. In contrast, Ascher was lying on his back with a glowing enchanted phone in his hand, tapping his thumbs and leaning it back and forth. Enchanted phones were from the human realm, and they were so rare that only the wealthiest shifters could afford them.

When I closed the bathroom door, all three stopped what they were doing to stare at me.

Mount them. Assert your dominance. I stared back but ignored the numb that was urging me to sexually attack them. Highly concerning.

There was a line of books and notebooks above the fireplace mantel, and I took an empty notebook. Sauntering across the room with my prize, I stared at Jax, then leaned forward and grabbed an extra pen off his bed.

The big alpha arched his eyebrows at my hubris, and I stared back. The numb kept all emotion off of my face, and I could tell he was confused.

Keep the upper hand. Assert yourself.

After stealing the pen and notebook, I crawled into my bed, which was warmed by the roaring fireplace. The flames kept the howling cold at bay.

My bed was furthest from the fire, and it was a little drafty compared to the rest of the space, but in contrast to my room at Dick's, it was an oasis of warmth and comfort.

Outside the window above my bed, thick white snowflakes gathered on the windowsill and framed the white mountains.

As I wrapped the fur blanket around my shoulders, even in the numb state, warmth spread through me, and I curled my toes.

In the notebook, I began to write out every single thing that had happened during the battle, down to every last detail. My numb brain cataloged patterns and events, meticulously noting everything.

A few hours later, Zed stuck his head through the door.

"Sadie, how ya doing?" Concern was etched in deep grooves across his face.

Even though I was numb, a smile split across my cheeks at the sight of the scrawny null shifter. His black hair was shaggy on his head, like he had been running his hands through it.

I gestured him forward.

He hurried past the three alpha shifters, who were now staring him down like he was a tasty deer and they were starving.

"How are you doing? I heard you transformed into a cat. Everyone in the fortress is *freaking* out. The first female alpha . . . wow . . . the sun god has blessed us. The entire realm is going to know soon." He perched on the edge of my bed and looked at me like I was some type of divine savior.

Jax growled deep and low, and Zed jumped off the bed like it was on fire.

Assert yourself.

I whipped my head around to stare at Jax. "*Don't* threaten my friend." A soft grumble started in my chest. I rubbed my palm across my sternum, as vibrations shook through my hand. This was new.

“Easy there, tiger,” Zed joked as he settled on the edge of my bed, and I smiled at him. Maybe I was becoming more of an alpha?

“Thanks for the support,” I said. “I’m just glad I didn’t die in battle. So, what’s your job in the compound?”

Surprisingly, even though the numb was coursing through my veins, it settled down around Zed. It wasn’t telling me to slit his throat or mount him, which was nice.

“I do odd jobs around the compound. I’m . . . a servant,” Zed said softly, and his dark eyes clouded.

My chest tightened, and I made a note to look into his situation. I had a feeling he was here against his will. I could relate.

“Better than having to fight creepy fae creatures.” I chuckled, and he joined me, laughing.

“True—well, I’m so glad you’re okay. I was freaking out, and the doctors in the ward wouldn’t tell me anything.” Zed grabbed my hands in his.

Chaos erupted.

Jax and Ascher jumped out of their beds and crowded around us.

“*Don’t* touch her,” Jax growled while physically pulling Zed away from me. Jax’s eyes glowed, and he dwarfed Zed, but at least he was fully dressed.

“Leave.” Ascher leaned over Zed and invaded his personal space.

Fight them off. Assert your dominance.

My chest vibrated with a deep growl as I shoved myself in front of Zed. Jax growled back, and Ascher just sneered down at me with a cocky smile.

“I better be off to work anyway. I’m glad you’re okay,” Zed said, rolling his eyes at their antics and hurried out the door.

Before he left, he turned around in the hallway. “Also, the compound gave you an enchanted phone, Sadie. It’s in your top drawer. You can text me at any time.” He gave me a thumbs-up before Ascher slammed the door shut in his face.

“Give me your phone, Princess.” Ascher held out his hand expectantly, like I was a little bitch who listened to him.

Who was going to tell him?

Stab him, quickly.

“Touch my shit and I’ll stab you with your horn after I rip it off your head.” I climbed back into bed and opened up my notebook (apparently I

was). My broken voice had sounded harsher than usual and nicely emphasized my threat.

Ascher opened his mouth like he was going to argue, but Jax shoved Ascher onto his bed before he could say anything, the horned alpha rolled his eyes and picked up his glowing phone.

Wisely, he didn't say anything further or try to order me around again.

The entire time, Cobra wrote his report on his bed, unbothered by everyone's antics regarding Zed. *Mount him quickly.*

Ignoring my concerning thoughts, I went back to cataloging observations from the battle. Unfortunately, even my numb self wasn't unbothered by the sexual events that had transpired in the room.

Staring out the snowy window, I didn't sleep a single second that night.

When the morning alarm went off, numbness still coursed through my veins.

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11
Chaos

Jax

The next day . . .

Sadie was different, and it made me want to roar with frustration—or goad her and prompt a response.

Yesterday, the spider fae had attacked, and she'd transformed into an impressive alpha form. Today, she was impossibly cold.

"Another rep," I said, and my normal voice came out in a guttural growl.

Frustration coursed through me. I was a hundred and twenty years old, and I was known for being calm and collected.

At least, I had been known to be that way.

Ever since a white-haired woman with shocking red eyes and a scratchy voice had joined our training, I'd been acting like a madman.

When she'd first arrived, I'd kept a lid on my protective instincts and played it cool.

I hadn't thought she was *actually* an alpha.

That coolness had completely devolved during the battle.

Sheer terror, the depths of which I had never experienced, had coursed through me when the fae had barreled toward Sadie.

Then a gorgeous fucking *saber-toothed tiger* had stood in her place. Almost as large as my bear, with shaggy white fur and black markings, it had stunned me for a moment. Then she had turned her head and flashed canines that hung longer than a foot.

My beast had gone crazy inside me. *Mine*, a voice had told me.

I wanted to claim the magnificent alpha.

I wanted to make her *mine*.

When Sadie had gone after the fae, I'd worried and given chase. When the creature had fallen back atop her, I'd lost my shit and roared like a maniac. I'd thought she was dead. My beast had screamed in agony, as a red haze had taken over my vision.

I would mutilate anyone that dared harm her.

"I'm done." The alpha placed the sixty-pound bar back on the rack. She'd done *four* reps. Only.

Her muscles were so puny they would snap in a stiff wind, and she wouldn't survive if she didn't bulk up. That was why today, I'd ordered the betas to focus on weapons practice and the alphas to weight train.

"Five more reps," I growled back. Once again, I completely lost control of my chest. I was trying *not* to scare her away, but every time I fucking talked, I growled like a wild animal.

It was slowly driving me insane.

"Two reps." The little alpha leaned back against the bench like she was unbothered by a five-hundred-pound alpha growling at her.

I didn't know what had happened. The spitfire who couldn't mask an emotion to save her life had become stone cold. Nothing I did got a reaction out of her.

There was something off about her, and it filled me with distrust—she was acting like a spy—it also filled me with rage.

I prided myself on my calm, controlled leadership, and it was all slipping through my grasp.

"*Pathetic*, Princess," Ascher sneered at her as he easily hoisted six hundred pounds above his chest.

I fought the urge to throw my thousand-pound dumbbell at his head.

Cobra and I had run the facility together for six years, and Ascher had only turned a year ago. The oligarchy said it was a miracle another alpha had shifted and since portal three was invaded the most frequently by the fae, he'd been assigned to us.

Before the little alpha had arrived, I had no issues with Ascher. He was a hothead, desperate to prove himself, but for the most part was a hard worker and a good guy.

Now he was a raging *jackass*.

He saw Sadie as competition, and it killed him that she'd saved him.

From Ascher's background check, I knew his father ran the largest enchanted weapons syndicate in the realm. It was technically an illegal

operation, but since they also provided weapons to the oligarchy, their power went unchecked.

His father was a classic misogynist, and in Ascher's mind, he was supposed to save the little alpha, not the other way around.

"Half rep," Cobra said silkily as he looked over at Sadie and did pull-up reps with two-hundred-pound plates hanging off his waist. "It doesn't count."

"I'll show you a half rep." Sadie's chest rattled with anger. She had started growling yesterday, and I didn't know if I should be concerned or turned on.

I was kidding myself. It was sexy as hell.

Watching her and Cobra send death glares at each other did weird things to my stomach, so I hoisted my barbells quicker.

It didn't escape my notice that Sadie was the only woman Cobra ever spoke to directly.

My chest sparked with warmth. I was glad he didn't ignore her like other women.

I also wasn't blind, so I couldn't help but admire the way Cobra's abs rippled and how the emeralds in his skin sparkled. He was a breathtaking man.

He smirked over at me as he pulled himself easily up and over the bar.

At a hundred and twenty years old, I had loved, fought, and fucked many men and women in the shifter realm. *None* of them held a candle to Cobra.

Cobra's high cheekbones framed a stately nose, wicked mouth, and shocking emerald eyes. His wide shoulders tapered to a lean waist that was striated with muscles.

But it wasn't just his outer beauty that made him devastatingly handsome; it was his contrasting nature that drew me in. On the surface, Cobra was cold as ice, but underneath he was an inferno of passion and loyalty.

He was an intoxicating mix of cruel and loyal—he was damaged and angry with the world—but fought fearlessly. He'd risked himself to save dying betas countless times in battle.

Cobra liked to pretend he was evil, cruel, and unsavable, but he wasn't at all.

He hurt those who hurt others, and he fought to protect the weak—sparring with him was like a breath of frosty air—it filled my lungs with

adrenaline and spiked my beast into a fever pitch.

Just being around him was exhilarating. You never knew what would happen next.

Now, Sadie and Cobra glared at each other, and sparks practically leapt between them.

The ferocious woman and heartless snake man.

They were polar opposites.

It should have been impossible for me to be attracted to both of them at the same time.

I hoisted my weights and grunted. Everything was messed up.

Taking care of five younger sisters, over time I'd become overly protective of women. My sisters would beat my ass if they knew how I was treating Sadie, and I would let them.

My stomach cramped like it always did when I thought about my family.

I was an immortal alpha, and my mother was a null shifter. She'd lived unnaturally long for a null, but still passed away a decade ago. She'd adopted me when I was just a baby.

I thought about her every day. There was an aching cavern in my heart that would never be filled.

A little less than twenty years ago, she adopted my oldest sister. Before my mother had died, she'd adopted four more girls. She was selfless like that.

I didn't get much time off as an alpha, but when I did, I went home to the girls. All the money I made, I sent to them. It didn't matter that they were adopted; they were my family.

My sisters.

It hadn't taken long for them to become my everything. An immortal alpha, I'd been lonely for as long as I could remember.

Between my five sisters and Cobra, in all my years, I'd never felt so loved.

If only my mother were still alive—I breathed deeply and tried to stop my thoughts from spiraling—lately, I hadn't been sleeping well because I'd been so stressed.

My oldest sister Jess would turn twenty soon. That meant she would. She'd get tested at the sacred lake.

My stomach pinched and my chest hurt; I didn't know if I wanted her to be an ABO so she would be immortal and never leave me, or terrified that

she could be forced to fight in the war.

I was overwhelmed with stress just thinking about Jess being tested.

Now I tried to focus on not panicking about my sisters, and I focused on how happy they made me.

My sisters were all hopeless romantics. They would be horrified by how I was growling at Sadie like a wild beast.

My sisters had taken over running our mother's flower shop. She used to harvest rare frost flowers from the valley and had been skilled at making them blossom.

The girls still had the luxury of being hopeless romantics. I hoped it stayed that way.

As soon as I had been revealed as an alpha at the sacred lake, I'd lost that luxury. *Brutally*.

At twenty years old, when I'd tested as an alpha, there had been more ABOs in the realm. I'd always been larger and stronger than everyone, but in the months after I'd been confirmed as an alpha, I'd bulked up ridiculously.

Back then, the fae queen hadn't been invading as frequently, and I'd worked a multitude of jobs for the military. I'd mapped unexplored forests, fought against the monsters from the northern lands.

Over time, fewer alphas turned, the war effort picked up, and more and more ABOs disappeared or died out.

An alpha couldn't die unless all their blood was drained from their body, and I'd seen it happen more frequently throughout the years. There were also many alphas who'd just disappeared, never to be seen again.

Over the years, I'd grown introspective and disillusioned by the realm. I lost interest in fighting and relationships.

My melancholy had worsened as my sweet mother aged and I stayed the same—but nineteen years ago, when she'd adopted my oldest sister, Jess, I'd had a reason to live again—something to fight for.

Those emotions only grew stronger when she adopted four more girls.

Then, six years ago, I'd been assigned to portal three at the same time Cobra was.

We'd bonded immediately and were successful together. He was the icy bite to my calm leadership.

It was a bonus that Cobra liked men and found me attractive.

I would have to be blind and dumb to not be into him. He was physically the most beautiful man I had ever seen.

When we'd discovered Cobra couldn't wrestle control back from his beast unless he was sexually aroused, our fate had been sealed.

There was nothing that could keep us apart from each other. We'd become a two-man unit, in every sense of the words.

Our fates were intertwined.

Currently, Cobra did pull-up reps and glared down at Sadie, who sat panting on the bench, drinking water. She glared back.

Cobra's dark past made him distrustful of women. He'd never told me the full story, but I'd gathered snippets here and there over the years. What I could gauge about his past was horrifying.

I shuddered thinking about it.

I needed to figure out what the little alpha was hiding, and soon.

The longer she kept secrets, the longer Cobra was in danger. Even if I felt protective of her, that didn't change the fact Cobra was my priority. Always.

I'd secured portal three by listening to my instincts and trusting my gut; now my instincts were telling me that everything was *not* as it seemed about Sadie.

I did another punishing rep and sighed heavily.

The secretive way Sadie hid her body, her ability to flip her emotions off, and her brutal fighting skills were all characteristics of a trained professional. Even her broken, raspy voice was a mystery.

The oligarchy claimed Sadie had no battle or combat experience, but everything about her said differently. They were lying to us, which meant she was working with them, and she was up to something.

Cobra gave the little alpha a death glare, and amusement sparked in my chest at his hostility.

Sometimes, I was convinced I was put on this earth to be the warmth to Cobra's frosty cold. The problem was, I could tell Cobra was already becoming dangerously obsessed with Sadie.

He usually ignored women completely.

Even though Cobra hated women, he still could appreciate them sexually.

We'd shared betas and null shifter girls before and taken them at the same time. It was the only way I could fuck them without feeling like I was cheating on Cobra, and it was the only way he could stand to touch them without being repulsed.

I couldn't help but picture Sadie between us.

"I'm done." She looked over at me haughtily.

Her upturned nose, high cheekbones, almond eyes, and unfashionably large lips made me want to ravage and protect her at the same time. Even with the stony expression on her face, she was adorable.

Like a kitten with claws.

I knew from having five sisters that if I ever dared tell her she was cute, her saber-toothed beast would likely rip my face off.

Women didn't like to be told how adorable they were. Which was too damn bad because, from my towering perspective, she was cute as hell.

She was *too* cute Everything about Sadie triggered my instincts, and I couldn't help but think she'd been trained to do so.

My thoughts were all over the place. No one woman should be so tempting.

She had to be a spy.

She was also an alpha.

Reminding myself she was a fellow war general, sent a icy dash of fear streaming through my chest. I had to prepare her for war when all I wanted to do was keep her safe.

At the same time, I had to protect myself and my men because she wasn't what she seemed.

My head was scrambled, and I tried to focus on contracting my muscles and not the little alpha—it was an impossible task, and my mind drifted back to yesterday's events.

Everything had gotten out of control last night when I'd helped Cobra transition out of his beast. Alpha pheromones had swirled hot and heavy, and we'd all lost our heads.

When Sadie's alpha scent of sweet cranberries had filled the room, I'd nearly lost all control of myself. Cobra had tensed beneath me, and I had felt him clench around me. He'd also been affected.

Fucking cranberries.

Her alpha scent was intoxicating.

Never mind Ascher, who'd been so out of his mind with lust that he had goaded the little alpha like an idiot. His taunting had worked us all up.

My mouth watered just thinking about it.

I hoisted the thousand-pound dumbbells quicker and grunted loudly to release my frustration. My orderly training regimen was starting to feel

more chaotic every day.

The rest of the session flew by in a blur of weights and trying not to stare at the little alpha. Cobra didn't bother. He criticized almost every one of her reps, and Ascher made rude comments about the "princess."

A few hours later, we sat in the battle tactic classroom, listening to Auntie—the old crone who was in charge of helping us prepare for battle—drone on and on about formations.

It was a waste of time; in the heat of the moment, everything always went to shit, no matter what you planned beforehand.

I didn't know why the elderly beta required everyone to call her Auntie, and I didn't ask. ABOs had extended lifetimes, and it was rumored that she was over three hundred years old. I believed it.

Sadie still had a blank expression on her face, and I watched with annoyance as she smiled when a beta named Aran came up to talk to her. He was one of our newest betas and hardest workers.

I dug my fingernails into my palm to stop my chest from rumbling with displeasure that she was talking to the younger beta.

My beast's protective instincts were out of control.

I reminded myself that she was suspicious and probably a harm to Cobra, but my beast ignored me.

Auntie singled people out and asked them how they would handle hypothetical situations. It was her favorite way to teach.

"Can anyone tell me how you would defuse this situation? Three betas defect from battle and run off into the woods. You come across the three of them together. What do you do?" Auntie asked, her wrinkled jowls shaking as she squinted back and forth, looking across the small room.

I was convinced she couldn't see anything and that the looking around was just for show.

"Cobra?" Auntie stared at a beta on the opposite side of the room from where Cobra sat. She always looked at the wrong people.

I smiled over at Cobra as he rolled his eyes at her antics. He hated Auntie, and I was pretty sure she loathed him back.

Cobra didn't reply, just turned his head and looked away from her. Apparently, talking to Sadie was the only exception. He still didn't speak to women.

"Ascher?" Auntie asked after she finally realized Cobra was not going to respond.

Ascher replied in a monotone voice, “I would charge them and knock them out with my horns, then alert the oligarchy of their location so they could deal with them as they saw fit.”

“Hm,” Auntie said vaguely, like she wasn’t happy with his answer.

“How about you, Sadie? What would you do?” Auntie looked at a three-hundred-pound male beta shifter with a mohawk and smiled expectantly.

The class turned to look back at Sadie. She hadn’t been called on yet by Auntie.

This was a defining moment for her.

Would she be a favorite student like Ascher, or one of the disliked ones like Cobra? Or would Auntie be indifferent to her like she was to me?

The little alpha’s expression was stony, and she looked at Auntie with disinterest. When she spoke, even her raspy voice seemed sharper.

Her entire persona was frigid.

“I’d tackle one defector in my beast form and knock him unconscious. Then I’d transform back, and I’d steal his gun. Quickly, I’d shoot one of the other traitors perfectly in the head—I’d spray the other with multiple bullets in his thighs and chest so it looked haphazard,” Sadie said casually.

The room was dead silent as she spoke.

“Then I’d shoot the incapacitated beta through the heart and stomach. Carefully, I’d place the gun in the first beta’s hand . . . I’d take out all the weapons and place them in the betas’ hands to make it look like they’d killed one another and empty the cartridges to match the number of bullets sprayed.”

Her eyes didn’t so much as twitch. She held herself completely still and kept talking, like she was discussing something mundane, such as the weather.

My mouth dropped open. Like every person in the classroom, I gawked at the little alpha.

“Then I’d cover my hands with blood and track footsteps around each beta, so when the search party arrived, I’d have a plausible reason for my presence at the scene . . . I’d be administering CPR and crying . . . I’d tell them I did everything I could to save them—but when I found them, they were already dead.”

She paused to take a breath, and everyone in the room held theirs.

“I’d say I’d heard them argue over defecting and shots fired as they’d killed themselves. The oligarchy would no longer have to punish these three

defectors or deal with an investigation into their death. The problem would be eliminated. Situation de-escalated."

She finished talking, and there were audible gulps around the classroom.

Sadie's long white hair and bright-red eyes practically glowed in the small room's candlelight.

At that moment, she reminded me of descriptions of devils and angels, rumored mythical beings from faraway realms.

She was a mix of both.

Auntie stared directly at Sadie like she was a creature she'd never encountered before.

Cobra raised his eyebrow at her like she was a puzzle he was trying to solve. Ascher just looked confused. I could relate.

"That is *fantastic* problem-solving." Auntie broke the tense silence and clapped her hands.

Now everyone gaped at Auntie. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat; while I appreciated the little alpha's creativity, her attitude was not conducive to beta morale.

"However, I also must order you to attend a weekly psychological meeting with me to work on . . . homicidal impulses. As a war general, you must curb them if you're to be successful." Auntie's exuberant smile said she wasn't actually concerned about hindering any impulses.

I was half-worried that Sadie would become more intense if she met with Auntie.

The little alpha said nothing, just glared back at the woman with a stony expression.

"I have to disagree. It wasn't homicidal. It seemed logical," Aran said loudly from beside Sadie.

The blue-haired boy put a serious expression on his face, but it was clear what he was doing.

Unfortunately, Auntie fell for it. "Very well. Aran is also ordered to attend my sessions with Sadie . . . anyone else showing signs of sociopathy?"

The entire room stayed dead silent. I fought the urge to bury my head in my hands and pull out my hair.

Our well-ordered training facility was going to hell. It was all Sadie's fault.

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12
Stone Cold Killer

Sadie

I stumbled as the beta's leg slammed against my sternum, knocking the wind from my lungs. We were sparring one-on-one and working on our form.

Thankfully, the red-haired beta threw a slow punch that I easily ducked—he was going easy on me, and I was glad for it—I'd woken up this morning feeling nauseous and weak.

The aftermath of the numb sucked, and today was worse than usual because I'd held it so long.

A headache throbbed through my skull, and I tried not to let the pain show on my face.

If we had to do King of the Hill again, I'd be writhing on the ground like a little bitch.

I thanked the moon goddess that Jax had said we needed to work on precision and control. A small miracle.

"You're probably still recovering from the battle—you really saved all our asses," the red-haired beta said as he smiled kindly and threw another slow punch. "Practice breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth . . . it always helps me."

I nodded and held my arms in front of my face like Jax had instructed. The beta telegraphed his next punch, but I was so weak I barely got out of the way in time.

The aftermath of the numb *sucked* balls.

"I'm John," the red-haired beta said conversationally.

"I'm Sadie," I replied after an awkward silence. Sometimes, I forgot that people tried to bond with each other. It was easy to keep your head down and focus on survival.

The more people I interacted with, the more names and faces I had to keep straight and the more chances they had to betray me.

"Your saber-toothed tiger is sick. I just wanted to let you know . . . some betas were afraid of your answer to Auntie, but I wasn't. You're a beast, and I get that. It's *sick* that you're a female alpha." John easily ducked my kick and smiled at me warmly.

"Uh, thanks." John's niceness made me feel weird. My gut told me not to trust him, which made no sense.

Sighing heavily, I mentally berated myself for being dramatic. I also wanted to kill my numb self for revealing itself in Auntie's classroom. After I had answered Auntie, even in a numb state, I'd been shocked by my own words.

With a few sentences, I'd managed to make most of the betas terrified of me and I'd alerted the other alphas to my unwellness.

"Saber-toothed bitch," betas whispered as I walked into the gym for training.

A part of me preened at the nickname. It was better to be thought of as heartless and strong than weak and quivering.

Slowly, it felt like I was actually taking the power back from Dick and becoming my own person.

It was nice to make a name for myself, even if the name was an insult and everyone thought I was a sadistic psycho (these things took time).

"Let me know if you need help with anything." John smiled kindly as he slammed an uppercut into my stomach.

Bile filled my throat, and I just barely choked it down. If I spewed chunks, I would definitely lose my badass reputation. I tried to smile back at him, but it came out as an awkward grimace.

"Will do." I gasped as I struggled to bounce on my toes.

Next to me, Aran jumped high in the air and impressively scissor kicked his partner, blue hair flashing. The much larger beta hit the mat with a thump, passing out cold.

Aran was lanky, but an insane fighter. He stood over his partner's prone body and gently prodded the downed beta with the toe of his boot.

"She already has all the help she needs," Aran said as he stomped over to where I was getting my ass kicked.

"I know," John said. "I just wanted to also offer my cap into the ring. You can never have enough help around here." John flashed his perfect white

teeth at Aran and gave a shrug.

He seemed like an easygoing guy, which was an extremely rare trait among betas.

Instead of smiling back or nodding, Aran aggressively punched the air in front of John's face.

I raised my eyebrows at Aran's antics. While I appreciated his support, he was acting a tad ridiculous. John had just asked me if I needed help with anything.

"It's fine, Aran." I choked down a laugh and dodged John's punch. Aran's eyes were twitching like he was struggling to hold himself back.

I didn't know what I had done to earn such unwavering loyalty, but I was grateful for it.

Aran was a great friend to have. I wasn't the only one trapped fighting a war I didn't care about.

"Thanks, John. I'll take you up on it," I said honestly.

John visibly relaxed, and a massive grin split his face. Clearly, the guy was dying to be my friend, which was not something I usually experienced. Since most of the betas were now terrified of me, I wasn't going to look a gift Yukata horse in its mouth.

To punctuate our friendship, John's shin bone slammed against my ankles as he swept my legs from underneath me.

Lying on the mat, staring up at the ceiling, I wondered how long my body was going to stay weak. John offered me a hand and hauled me up easily.

He patted my back, and the action sent me sprawling forward. At this rate, my new friend was going to accidentally *kill* me.

"Time for media interviews." Zed's voice echoed through the gym. "Alphas must leave now."

Relief coursed through me. Blessedly, I didn't have to keep getting beat up by John. I wasn't in any shape to fight.

"Great working with you, Sadie." John shook my hand aggressively, with more strength than Aran had.

I didn't know what energy I was giving off lately, but men kept giving me firm handshakes.

I guess my bitch energy was shining through. *Finally*, I was getting the respect I deserved.

"You too." I smiled and detangled myself from the red-haired beta's grasp. John was really laying it on thick.

“Let’s go, Sadie,” Jax alpha-barked at me from across the room. His voice was filled with command and annoyance.

Immediately, my feet began to move toward the door. So much for respect.

After a few steps, I gritted my teeth and fought the persuasion. He hadn’t put the full force of his bark behind it.

I gave Aran a hug goodbye—the blue-haired beta was a hugger, and I decided I liked it—before he’d hugged me the other day, I had only ever hugged Lucinda. It was a comforting experience to embrace a friend.

I wanted to practice it more often. So I could get good at it.

“Remember, you’re a badass . . . also, remember we have therapy tomorrow with Auntie.” Aran squeezed me tight to his lanky body, and a scratchy laugh burst out of my throat.

“Stop holding us up,” Ascher snapped angrily from across the room.

I said goodbye to Aran and dragged my aching body toward the other alphas.

Of course Ascher would be excited about the media. He loved to talk about the alpha fame and riches. Jax stood calm and collected, and Cobra looked downright bored.

“Should we change?” I turned to Zed and ignored the three annoying alphas.

“No, the media likes it better when you’re sweaty from training. They say it makes it more *authentic*.” Zed rolled his eyes like he wasn’t a fan of the media circus.

“Let’s not keep them waiting.” Ascher stalked ahead of Zed, in a hurry to get his five seconds of glory.

After an hour of riding Yukata horses through thick snow, we arrived at the neighboring town—towering stone buildings and trees decorated with twinkling lights greeted us.

Thankfully, Zed had given us all thick winter coats, gloves, hats, scarves, and boots, so the biting cold was kept mostly at bay.

I still shivered and barely managed to mount my horse. It was my first time riding one while conscious, but Zed had assured me the horses knew the route and practically rode themselves.

He’d been right.

When we got to a stable in the middle of town, it was time to dismount—everyone gracefully jumped off their horses.

In a show of pure alpha athleticism and strength, I tipped off my horse's furry back headfirst—before my face could kiss a snowbank—Cobra stepped forward and grabbed me.

Although, his scent made me feel like I had face-planted into the snow. I was stunned.

My breath left my face in a frosty puff as I stared up at Cobra's perfect features. Up close, he really did look like a god carved from ice. No man should be so beautiful.

His strong arms tightened around my body, and his emerald eyes burned with a strange light.

It was almost as if a piece of his soul had sparked back to life.

He leaned forward slightly, snowflakes dancing around us like magic—my heart stilled in anticipation.

Perfect mouth curling at the corners, Cobra dumped my body into a snowbank.

He walked away.

Lying in a thick pile of snow, I slumped backward and scolded myself. Instead of "saber-toothed bitch," my nickname should be "pathetic ninny." That was how I was acting.

"Let's go!" Ascher yelled in a huff and stomped into a large brick building with "Broadcasting" carved on the pediment.

Zed gave me a hand up, and he patted me on the back. Neither of us said anything, and we both pretended I hadn't just embarrassed myself.

Inside the building, a wall of warmth greeted me. Teeth chattering, I slowly thawed.

A tall, gorgeous, dark-haired woman ran forward and helped Ascher out of his coat. She gushed over Ascher's horns and asked about his tattoos while running her fingers over his biceps.

Ascher grinned, white teeth flashing against his bronze skin, as he soaked up her attention.

Next, the woman moved to Jax.

She visibly jolted at his massive frame, and a delicate waft of fear trickled through the room. She quickly took his coat and turned toward Cobra.

Unlike with Jax, she leaned forward into Cobra and made moon eyes up at him as she caressed the diamonds and emeralds that trailed up his forearms.

Watching her antics, I couldn't swallow the chuckle that bubbled up. Since my voice was shredded, the noise came out in a loud squawk that made everyone stare at me.

A flush of embarrassment burned my cheeks, but I couldn't keep the humor off my face.

What kind of *idiot* was scared of Jax and not of Cobra? Any creature with a shred of instincts would recognize the soulless depths in Cobra's gaze.

"The first female alpha—you're much smaller than I expected," she said with a nasally voice and looked down at me with a sneer of dismissal. Word sure got around fast in the shifter realm.

As she walked away, I was glad she didn't take my coat, because I was freezing.

Cobra looked over at me, eyebrows raised, and Jax barely contained a smile. "What's so funny, little alpha?" Jax asked.

Ever since I had come out of the numb, Jax had been way more relaxed around me.

"Just can't believe she feared you and not Cobra," I said. "Is she blind?"

My stomach dipped as I laughed. My voice was harsh and rough compared to the gorgeous woman's high-pitched twinkle. I tried to remind myself I didn't care.

Jax laughed and smiled back at me. "She must be crazy." He gave an exaggerated wink at Cobra, who scowled over at us like we were ridiculous.

"Down this hall!" the same lady yelled, and Ascher charged ahead. The rest of us followed with less excitement.

When we entered the studio room, I was immediately attacked by a lady holding a tan powder and a man with a hairbrush. Luckily, at the last moment, I realized they weren't coming at me with knives, and I refrained from punching their throats.

I was a beacon of self-control and grace.

The other alphas were given similar treatment, and a man even tried to put mascara on Cobra's eyes.

I was busy being attacked by my stylist, but I was pretty sure the mascara man now had three broken fingers, and Cobra had thick sooty lashes. Every time I looked over at him, I chuckled.

The stylist working on Ascher kept making comments about his tattoos and traced over them with a sparkly powder. When the stylist tried to do the same to his horns, Ascher leaped out of the way like he had been scalded.

The only person a stylist didn't manhandle was Jax. They kept a respectful distance and asked him politely if they could arrange his braids or powder his face. He smiled and told them "sure" good-naturedly, but the stylists' hands still shook with terror when they touched him.

I guessed being seven feet tall and covered in muscles made other people scared.

It was still weird to me. Cobra was clearly unhinged, Ascher was a hothead, and I had a homicidal voice inside my head. Jax was the calmest and least terrifying of all of us. People were dumb.

Before I knew what was happening, we found ourselves standing in front of a small crystal that was enchanted to broadcast throughout the realm. It glowed purple and sat on a metal stand.

A man standing next to it held a small screen in his hand and adjusted the crystal back and forth. He spent forever changing the crystal stand's position and grumbling that I was too short to get a good shot.

Eventually, he gave up and made me stand on a massive box in front of the men.

I felt ridiculous. The men were in formfitting T-shirts showing off their impressive physiques. Meanwhile, I was still in my puffy winter coat.

"Hello, shifter realm, I have a treat for you!" A blonde bombshell appeared out of nowhere.

I estimated she was over six feet tall. Her silky blonde hair hung in perfect curls down her curvy body. Her boobs were bursting out of her low-cut dress, and her long legs went on for miles.

I wasn't even into women, but I was attracted to her. Her pale skin was completely unblemished. She was *perfect*.

"Everyone knows portal three is the most dangerous battlefront in the endless fae war, and here with us today, we have the impressive alphas that guard it. We also have a special treat for our viewers today. The first female alpha, who our sources have revealed saved the other alpha Ascher during the last portal breach, is here with us today."

A cloud of perfume choked me as the perfect woman leaned the microphone into my face.

"Tell the realm, what is it like being the first female alpha?"

Fear climbed up my throat at her question. If the entire realm was watching, that meant Dick was watching. The television was always on in his tavern.

“A lot,” I said as I bit my lip, unsure of what I was supposed to say. My voice was grating compared to the sultry drawl of the announcer lady. All I could think about was Dick watching. *Listening*.

“Oh my sun god, what happened to your voice?” The microphone was shoved back into my face, and my stomach plummeted.

I had no idea what to say.

“Did it happen while battling the fae?” Her eyes gleamed with excitement at the possibility of a big story.

“Yep,” I said weakly, glad she’d given me an out.

The announcer paused like she didn’t know what to do with my one-word answer.

She pivoted the conversation. “We are excited for you to join us for the Ianuarius celebration. As you know, all the alphas, betas, and omegas attend the annual holiday. It is a designated day of cease-fire in the never-ending war. As the first female alpha—do you have a date yet for the party?” The announcer’s bright-red lips smacked as she shoved the microphone into my face again.

“Um, I haven’t found one . . . yet.” My palms were clammy, and the puffy jacket was suffocating. Nothing in the realm sounded worse than having to attend a stuffy ABO party and parade about like a stuffed chicken.

I’d seen the party broadcasted on the television before, but I hadn’t thought anything about it. No one had told me I had to attend.

The announcer grimaced, like I was a failure of a woman for not having a date and a dress picked out for a party I hadn’t even known about.

She leaned more into my personal space, desperate to salvage the interview. Since I stood on the dumb fucking box, we were eye to eye.

“So, what is your alpha form? Rumors have been spreading all over the realm, and the speculation is endless. Because of your small size, the most popular rumor is that you are a small predator. Is that true?”

“Yes,” I answered quickly, eager to have the spotlight turned off me. “Well, actual—actually—” I was cut off when she whirled her head around and took the mic away.

Great, now the entire realm probably thought I was a raccoon or something.

“Ascher, what was it like being saved by Sadie?” The reporter moved on and interviewed the other men.

The only humorous part was when she tried to talk to Cobra, and he said literally nothing. He really had issues talking with women.

Why am I different?

Still, the announcer's confusion when Cobra wouldn't answer her wasn't funny enough to stop me from spiraling. I slumped forward and focused on breathing through a panic attack.

Bright lights were pointed at us, and the glowing purple crystal looked like a dangerous fae artifact on its stand.

Bile filled my mouth as I stared at it. Dick was staring at me right now. Through it. I was going to blow chunks on the realm television (help).

I pinched the skin of my hand to ground myself.

My thoughts spiraled as I thought about Dick watching me right now. *He can't hurt you*, I reminded myself desperately.

Absorbed by my panic, I barely noticed when the interview ended.

The gorgeous announcer drooled over all three of the other alphas, and the lights were turned off. Someone came to collect the stone and put it in a shiny metal box.

Barely aware of my surroundings, I stumbled to the side of the room and leaned against the wall.

People milled about while I drifted off untethered.

From what seemed like far away, the announcer ran her long fingers over Ascher's and Cobra's chests. At the same time, she made googly-eyes up at Jax and rubbed against his large muscles.

Even as I panicked, my stomach clenched uncomfortably. I wanted to break her hands (I do?).

"Hey, do you dye your hair?" A dark-haired stylist who had sprayed gloss on my hair walked up to me.

I shook my head and tried to clear my thoughts. He was tall and wide and built more like a warrior than a hair stylist. Objectively, he was handsome.

"No, it's always been white since I was a little girl." I fingered the long, silky locks that I never really thought about.

"Your white hair, with your red eyes and high cheekbones, is stunning." He blushed as he smiled down at me.

"Thanks," I mumbled awkwardly, and dragged my hands over my face.

"My name's Cam. I know you're an alpha and I'm a null, but we'll probably be seeing each other around a bunch with the whole media thing . . . so it would be good to get acquainted." He held out his hand, and I

gave him a shake back. I noted that his hands weren't calloused, like Aran's or mine. They were smooth.

He had lived a pampered life. *Lucky bastard*.

Also, something about me really must have been screaming at men, "Shake my hand." I couldn't decide if I was flattered or worried.

I was so used to men groping me at the tavern that it was weird they wanted to shake my hand. *What does it mean?*

Cam smiled at me expectantly.

"Cool." I pointed a finger gun at his chest and pretended to shoot him. It was official: I'd lost my mind.

Abruptly, an icy frost scent filled my nose.

"Don't touch her." Cobra grabbed my forearm and yanked my hand out of Cam's grip. The null shifter sputtered in confusion, and I gritted my teeth at the gall of the alpha.

Warm chestnuts and musky pine joined the mix—all three alphas stood behind me and cornered Cam against the wall.

Of course, the blonde announcer tittered and still hung onto Jax like she was an alpha attached to a fae in battle. *I wanted to* bite her.

"Cam is harmless." The announcer smiled and flipped her luscious blonde locks off her exposed chest while she made moon eyes up at Jax.

Instead of Jax agreeing with her and scolding Cobra, because Jax was *usually* not insane like his fellow alphas, he leaned forward and growled in Cam's face. "Stay *away* from Sadie."

Jax softened and turned to me with a shrug. "You can never be too careful, little alpha."

Poor Cam gulped and started to shake.

Ascher glared at Cam while draping a hand over the announcer's shoulder. She tittered some more and transferred her claws from Jax to Ascher. Her pelvis ground against the side of the horned alpha.

Rolling my eyes, I thanked Cam and shoved Cobra out of my way.

Well, I *tried* to shove Cobra.

He didn't move an inch, so I squirmed my body past his. Even in a big puffer jacket, my breath caught as my chest dragged across his steel-hard body.

Jax, with his massive body, was standing next to Cobra, so my butt dragged against his front as I shoved by.

For a second, I was in a sandwich of alpha pheromones, and my knees went weak at the overwhelming strength on both my sides.

I stilled as the air became saturated with the scent of frosty chestnuts. My mouth watered, and I gulped.

Both men moved forward at once and pinned me between them.

An unnatural warmth burned my core, and the queasiness came back with a vengeance.

The announcer giggled, and I turned to look at Ascher.

I tried to break myself out of whatever spell Jax and Cobra had me under—their bodies were rocks on either side of mine, and my skin began to heat feverishly—desire pooled in my core, and my face flushed.

Instead of staring down at the gorgeous woman whose ass he was groping, Ascher stared directly at me. His amber eyes swirled with heat, and his horns lengthened atop his head.

The tattooed flames that snaked up the side of Ascher's face rippled as he bit his lush lip.

Jax growled behind me as Cobra shifted his hips forward until I was painfully pinned between them.

Dragging my eyes away from Ascher, I stared up into Cobra's perfect face.

The sneer that contorted his lips and the hatred radiating from his emerald eyes reminded me of all the reasons I *shouldn't* be fooling around with alphas. They were overbearing, rude, and misogynistic jerks.

Thinking about jerks reminded me why I'd been panicking in the first place. Dick had just watched me on the television.

The terror returned like a splash of glacial water to the face—I threw my body violently to the side and extracted myself from the alphas.

Gasping, I stumbled out of the room and down the hall in a haze of desperation.

I barely noticed as the other alphas followed and we climbed back onto our horses. The pressure on my chest was so heavy that I didn't notice the freezing temperatures or the movements of the horse beneath me.

The furry horses moved with painful slowness through the freezing snow, and each second we traveled felt like a lifetime.

As if he sensed my panic, when we finally got back to the compound, Jax gently helped me off my horse and carried me back to our room. I was too terrified to reprimand him.

Like a zombie, I crawled into bed and hid under my covers.

Dick knew where I was—*he's going to come after me*—yet that was somehow the least of my problems. I had two years to come up with a plan to eliminate Dick or get Lucinda away from him.

Overwhelmed by the fae war, I hadn't thought about Lucinda as much as I should. She was still away at school, but in two years, she'd come home, and I wouldn't be there. The thought of her devastation, Dick turning on her, or her believing I'd abandoned her, made me ill.

Shivering from fear under my covers, I mentally prayed to the moon goddess for strength.

Somehow, I had to survive a war against fae monsters, Dick, the alphas, *and* save my sister. Pure terror expanded in my chest until tears silently tracked down my face.

The little shadow snake zinged across my arm and offered me comfort. As I ran my fingers over its tiny body, my chest felt a little looser, a little less painful.

I wished more than anything that the numb had recharged. Everything was so much easier when I felt nothing.

Now the world burned around me.

And there was nothing I could do to stop it.

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13
The Syndicate

Ascher

That night . . .

The media day had been a shit show, and now we were all back in our room. It was past midnight, and the other three alphas slept soundly.

I couldn't sleep.

Instead, I stared down at my enchanted phone, at my father's message. "Disgrace our family name one more time and there will be consequences. Complete the mission."

After reading the message for the hundredth time, I began to type out a reply, but stopped once again.

What could I even say—sorry that I'd gotten my ass handed to me by a fae and a delicate fucking princess had had to save my ass? *It was beyond* embarrassing.

For my father, there were only three things that mattered in life: (1) the syndicate, (2) pride, and (3) loyalty.

My knuckles, with "SPL" tattooed across them, mocked me as I held my phone.

Father had had them tattooed on me when I was eight. I had cried like a little bitch, and he'd slapped me across my face and told me I wasn't worthy.

When I was nine years old, my father had tattooed the intricate family crest, a symbol of fire and roses, across my entire back. When I was ten, he'd tattooed more flames across my thigh.

Now I'd lost count of how many rose and flame tattoos I had. At some point, I had started getting them myself. A part of me was addicted to the

pain, to the act of getting them done.

One for every person I killed.

The fire blazed in the hearth, and I stared at the curling flames as they spoke to me—my horns itched on my head as a quiet voice whispered through the flames—the whispers were soft and complex. They spoke a language I couldn't understand.

Since as far back as I could remember, fire had always talked to me. I'd never met anyone else who could hear the whispers.

My phone vibrated, and I looked down. "We all saw you on the news. He's not happy," my best friend Carter had texted.

When your father ran the largest weapons cartel in the shifter realm and you were his only heir, it was hard to find people you could trust.

Carter was one of the few, and I would die for him. He was nineteen and hadn't yet been tested at the sacred lake. I hated that I was an alpha. It had taken me away from him.

After my ceremony at the sacred lake, the trajectory of my life had dramatically changed. I'd been trained to run my father's syndicate since birth.

Instead, I was now the perfect weapon for his machinations, an alpha my father could control and trust.

As I stared at the fire, the orange flames called to me, and I wondered if my father's plan was as perfect as he thought.

Lately, I found myself doubting his orders and my allegiance. I wanted to make a name for myself as a war general. I wanted to make my *own* life.

I shook my head and typed to my father, "Understood, sir, it will not happen again." I hit send.

At only twenty-one years old, I had an eternity to make my own name for myself. Alphas were immortal. We could only die if all our blood was drained from our bodies. My father was just a null shifter.

I would outlive him, and then I would take over his empire—when the day came, I wouldn't have to listen to his commands—I would be in full control.

The fire popped and crackled in the silent room. The clock above the mantel read three in the morning, and the rest of the alphas were fast asleep. Outside, the wind howled against the glass and snowflakes fell thick and heavy.

Looking at the window and the small alpha huddled in the bed beneath it, my gut turned over uncomfortably.

A few days ago, I'd taunted the princess about having to sleep in the smallest bed. It was under the window and farthest from the fire. Staring at her huddled form, completely obscured by blankets, I felt like a fucking ass.

What man let a girl sleep in the worst conditions?

Jax was such a mammoth of muscle and padding that he probably didn't even know what the cold felt like. Cobra would never give up anything to a woman; he hated them all. And I was apparently just like my father, distrustful and a jackass.

Sluts crawled around my father's lair in the southern province. Half-dressed men and women gave their bodies to cartel members twenty-four seven. They fell all over my father and the highest syndicate members, desperate to be one of the chosen ones who got access to the massive credit lines.

I'd thought I was different from my father, that I was better than him. I'd been wrong.

As a teen, I'd genuinely believed I had real connections with a few girls in the compound.

My spirits had been crushed time after time when I'd caught my "girlfriend" stealing my enchanted phone, trying to access my credit line.

Now I recognized another person's use.

Sluts were good for fucking and passing the time, but it would never be more than that. Other people didn't deserve more than that. Not from me.

Sighing heavily, I dragged my hand over the stubble on my chin and stared at the lump completely obscured by the covers.

The princess was so fucking delicate that she barely took up any room on the small bed.

At first, I'd thought Sadie was just like the others, another person after attention and money. Pretending to be the first female alpha, trying to use her feminine wiles to get what she wanted.

But then she'd fucking shifted—the sun had cut through the clouds and glinted off her white fur—it had looked impossibly soft, and some of the strands had literally fucking *sparkled*.

I wanted to bury my hands in her fur. I wanted to antagonize her until she leaped at me with those fucking wicked canines.

She was physically perfect in both forms.

Her delicate, catlike features and golden skin were the stuff of fantasy. I wanted to bury my hands in her waterfall of silky white hair and shove her ridiculously lush lips up and down my cock.

I shifted my boxers uncomfortably. As if her looks weren't enough, her deep, raspy voice made her a fucking siren. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed to not pin her against a wall and ravish her.

I tried to remind myself that women were just distractions to be fucked and discarded.

Like that announcer who had salivated over all of us. She had crawled over Jax and then me, and it was clear she was indiscriminate.

She would fuck any one of us if she could, just so she could brag about being with an alpha. The ultimate prize to men and women in the realm would be dating an alpha. The fame and glory would be theirs—classic slut behavior.

The problem was, Sadie wasn't like that.

She turned bright red when she saw our cocks and couldn't even maintain eye contact. Her ratty clothes always hid her frame, and half the time her eyes were unnaturally cold, that or they were hooded with shyness.

Unlike other men and women in the realm, she didn't crawl all over us with desperation.

I thought about how Cobra and Jax had pinned her between them, her pupils blown and breath shallow.

When the announcer had fondled me, I'd fought the urge to throw her across the room with a roar. I'd wanted to be pressed against the princess, completely boxing her in among all three of us.

Fuck, *we* were the sluts throwing ourselves at her.

I nodded. Yes, Sadie was definitely a princess and not a slut.

She reminded me of a girl I'd read about in a bootleg fae book my father had in his study. In the book, a colorful princess defied her evil queen mother and escaped from the fae realm. Sadie's red eyes reminded me of the flames that called to me. She was a colorful, defiant princess.

Mesmerized by the whispers from the fire in the hearth, I almost didn't hear the soft mewls.

I turned back to the princess, and I watched as the covers began to shake back and forth—her soft cries became different.

The sound was harsh and terrified, but it was barely audible. As if someone was trying to scream, but couldn't.

Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself leaning over the princess's bed and gently pulling back the covers.

My heart rate sped up at what I uncovered.

Her red eyes were wide, nose scrunched, and mouth wide open. With her body locked in the fetal position, Sadie screamed, or tried to scream.

A soft whooshing noise exhaled through her mouth, like her voice couldn't make the sound. It was the same raspy noise I'd heard the day she was attacked by the fucking scumbag beta.

I'd wanted to be the one to kill the bastard. Cobra had taken it from me.

"Princess," I whispered, and shook her shoulder back and forth. My hand engulfed her entire shoulder, and I was struck by how delicate she was.

Her body stayed tense as she silently screamed. It was fucking horrifying.

I shook her desperately, my mind flashing to the interview. Before I'd been embarrassed in front of all the realm and my father, the interviewer had asked her how she'd hurt her voice, and she'd lied.

A sick sensation spread from my gut through my chest as I thought about the implications of her lie.

The background check on Sadie had said that she had zero combat experience, which was obviously *not* true.

Now the flames whispered louder. My chest burned with discomfort, and my horns itched. *What if she really doesn't have combat experience?* What if something else had happened to her?

"Princess, wake up." I spoke louder and jostled her harder, desperate to make the heartbreaking screams stop.

"Don't hurt Lucinda," she whispered softly and punched me in the gut. I barely felt a sting.

"Princess, it is Ascher. *No one* is going to hurt you. Wake the fuck up." I shoved her harder into the bed. Her sightless eyes looked back and forth like she was watching something.

"Fuck you!" Her voice cracked mid word as she pummeled and started kicking me.

"What's going on?" Jax growled from his bed. "Why do you have her pinned?"

Before I could explain, the princess shrieked, "Let her go!"

Jax slammed me against the brick wall.

Unlike Cobra, I didn't appreciate being fucking pinned. My horns lengthened on my head, and the fire whispered louder.

“She’s having a fucking nightmare—I’ve been trying to wake her!”

Jax was growling at me like a wild animal.

He let me go, and we both turned toward the princess. Cobra was standing over her and just watching as she shrieked and kicked.

“Do something!” I yelled at Cobra.

Cobra stepped in front of us so we couldn’t get to her. His large pale frame blocked us, and he leaned down toward her.

“Violence won’t help the nightmares go away.” Cobra’s voice had the slight lisp that occurred when he was close to shifting. I had a feeling he was talking from personal experience.

Jax looked torn, like he didn’t know what to do with Cobra blocking his way and Sadie shrieking on the bed.

My own desperation peaked, and I got ready to fight with Cobra—she needed to be woken up—she was clearly in pain.

What happened next I wouldn’t have predicted in a million years.

Cobra climbed into the small bed and wrapped his large frame around the princess.

She kicked and shrieked, but gradually calmed down as he held her. Cobra wrapped his long pale arms around her stomach and held her flush against himself.

He didn’t say anything.

Slowly, her eyes closed and her breathing returned to normal.

My gut pinched with jealousy. I should be the one holding the princess, not Cobra, who hated women.

Jax ran his hands through his hair and looked at the bed longingly. Just like myself, he was fighting the urge to crawl in and surround her completely, but the bed was too small.

There was barely any room.

The princess was bundled in sweatpants and a massive sweatshirt, so there was nothing sexual about the way Cobra held her. Still, the pit in my stomach expanded as Cobra closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Jax gently grabbed the blankets and gently tucked them around the two alphas.

He checked the window and pushed it down to make sure it was fully shut, then stoked the fire so it burned hotter.

The flames whispered to me louder, and I crawled back into my lonely bed as I shoved my head under the pillow.

“Sorry for pinning you,” Jax said quietly. I waved my hand to let him know I was over it.

I tossed and turned and finally settled into sleep, staring at Cobra’s perfect face tucked above the princess’s delicate features. His pale skin and dark hair contrasted with her bronze skin and white hair.

They looked like a perfect match: the small princess and her dark prince.

I rubbed at the tightness in my chest.

Before I fell asleep, I texted Carter back, “Remind him that the mission is still on track. It will be completed.”

Carter instantly replied with a thumbs-up.

In my messages, I replied, “Sure,” to the twin betas, Sara and Sora, who’d texted asking if I wanted to fuck. They kept making sexual passes at me during training.

For syndicate men, there were people you fucked, and the cartel. Nothing else was allowed.

I needed to stop dreaming about the princess, when the tattoos covering every inch of my skin proved I was the opposite of a prince.

It didn’t matter anyway. She couldn’t handle what I wanted to do to her.

Cobra and Jax could have her.

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14
Constant Confusion

Sadie

Warmth enveloped me, and I snuggled deeper into my blankets. In my twenty years, I'd never felt such delicious heat. It was like the howling winds outside didn't exist.

I cuddled deeper into the sublime warmth and yawned loudly.

When I opened my eyes, all contentment drained from my body.

Cold emerald eyes stared down at me. His chiseled bicep supported his perfect head, and he'd spread out beside me in *my* bed.

Part of me wanted to kick him in the groin, just to see if I could shake the cold expression off his face. The other part of me wanted to close my eyes and pretend I hadn't seen him, so I could keep snuggling under his arm.

Cobra was surprisingly warm for someone who smelled like frosty snow. His hardened body sprawled beside me and my face started to heat with embarrassment.

Looking away, I debated throwing myself out of the bed in horror.

Mentally, I scolded myself. Yesterday, I'd acted like a ninny when he'd caught me falling off my horse. Today I was going to play it nonchalant.

What would numb Sadie do?

"Why are you in my bed?" I asked as I closed my eyes like I was completely unaffected by his presence. Instead of rolling off the bed and scrambling across the floor, I cuddled closer against his warm body.

Cobra grunted but said nothing. I was hyperaware of his arm wrapped around my stomach and the hardness that was pressed against my leg.

The queasiness came back. *Would it be dramatic to call for a doctor?*

Awkward silence stretched.

Why hadn't he answered me? Like usual, Cobra said nothing and probably didn't feel a damn thing while I suffered from a panic attack.

If he moved his fingers and they accidentally went underneath my sweatshirt, he would feel my scars. He would know just how weak I was, and he hated weakness above all else.

Plus, he was physically perfect, and my flesh was mutilated horribly. A small part of me wanted him to be interested in me as a woman.

He wouldn't be if he saw my scars.

My panic grew until I was holding my breath and shaking.

Was he secretly in love with me? Was he afraid to say it? I made the mistake of glancing up at him.

Cobra's face was pinched with annoyance, like I disgusted him. I didn't know anything about love, but that was definitely *not* what was happening here.

Anger coursed through me. I hadn't invited him into my bed and he had the audacity to be angry at me?

"Excuse me, I'm not the one harassing a woman early in the morning." I huffed and pushed against his hard chest.

In my mind, he fell off the bed and was ashamed of his actions.

In reality, Cobra's abs were so hard that I pulled tendons in my fingers when I pushed at him. He didn't move an inch.

Instead, Cobra picked me up and shoved me off the bed like I weighed nothing.

Sprawled on the floor, I huffed with feminine outrage. I was getting damn tired of him dumping me on the ground.

The cold bastard climbed gracefully off *my* bed and stood over my body, his gorgeous face hard. I prayed to the moon goddess for strength because the blankets had covered the fact that he was shirtless.

Cobra's abdominal muscles rippled with power, and a trail of emeralds and diamonds swirled low, disappeared under his sweatpants, and outlined the deep *V* lines that cut across his hips.

For a second, I forgot to breathe.

He was a work of art.

"You were having a nightmare—you're welcome." Cobra stared down at me with his signature frosty expression. The man might as well have been carved from marble.

My heart skipped a beat in my chest. *Why would Cobra hold me in bed to help with a nightmare?* He hated me.

I tried to act like I had some dignity as I stumbled to my feet. He wasn't the only alpha in the room, Jax and Ascher were sleeping in their beds.

Chest puffed up, I stood to my full height and glared up at him. I deserved respect. Before I could karate chop him and assert my prowess, he leaned forward until his sinful lips were close to my ear.

Frost burned my nose as he overwhelmed me with his presence. "You'd *know* if I was harassing you." His voice was like silk in my ear, and once again, my core spasmed.

All prowess melted from my body, and the queasiness returned with a vengeance. The room was too warm, and my skin prickled all over.

Smirking, Cobra sauntered away from me without a backward glance.

"Well, you'd know if I was harassing you!" I yelled his words back at him like a mature, intelligent woman.

"Who's harassing who?" Ascher blinked awake. His morning voice was deep and scratchy, and my queasiness got worse.

"Ascher, stop harassing Sadie." Jax threw his pillow across the room and hit Ascher in the face. "You need to work on personal control."

Lovely, everyone was now awake. A manic chuckle bubbled up my throat as Ascher's face turned red, while Cobra smirked from his bed.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Ascher glowered. "Cobra was just straddling the princess on the floor and then whispered something about harassing her."

"Cobra?" Jax turned.

I fought the urge to slam my forehead against the brick wall and end it all. It was unfair that one person had to suffer this much.

"Actually, you *misunderstood*," I said. "I was asserting my dominance over Cobra, and I threatened him. So yeah." I trailed off as all the alphas stared at me.

All three burst into laughter.

"Good one, Princess." Ascher laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

"You almost had me there for a moment, little alpha." Jax chuckled as he got out of bed and started getting ready.

Cobra didn't even bother to defend himself, just smirked at me like I was pathetic.

A low growl burst through my chest and vibrated around the room.

“Oooh, the princess has bark,” Ascher joked as he got ready for the day by pulling down his pants and exposing his tattooed dick.

I covered my eyes with my hands. Seeing a massive colorful dick before sunrise was cruel and unusual punishment. Realistically, dicks were not cute. Did the man have no shame?

“Kitten has claws.” Jax patted my head as he walked past, pulling a T-shirt over his mountains of muscles. At least he had the wherewithal to keep his underwear on.

Although, the studs from his jewelry bulged against the white cloth. Suddenly, I found myself picturing Jax’s giant dick and its intricate piercings.

I sighed heavily with the exhaustion only a short woman who turned into a thousand-pound saber-toothed tiger, that was stuck living with massive alphas, could muster.

The day only got worse from there.

A few hours later, I wanted to fucking end it all.

Cobra was in charge of training, and I wished for the billionth time that it was Jax’s day. Cobra had announced, “We’re running until I say stop.”

He should have just said, “Fuck you.”

At twenty years old, I discovered a very important fact about myself: I was *not* built for running.

What saber-toothed tiger alpha shifter couldn’t run?

Me.

We ran as a group along the track that covered the perimeter of the massive gym. “Please, sun god, make it stop,” I whispered to Aran, who was grinning beside me.

I didn’t even believe in the sun god and I was praying to him. That was how bad it was. My leg cramped, my arm cramped, my foot cramped, even my *boob* cramped (life could literally not get any worse). Everything hurt.

“You should really take that sweatshirt off,” Aran said for the twentieth time.

Annoyance sparked through me. I would *love* nothing more than to not have to run in the heavy sweatshirt. The hideous scars covering my body meant the sweatshirt stayed on.

“I can’t,—stop saying it.” Everything hurt so badly that I didn’t even care about being rude.

“Fine, fine. It’s really not bad. Just try to relax.” Aran chuckled casually.

I punched Aran in the throat. For his own sake. He had lost his mind and was spewing bullshit.

Aran gagged, but kept laughing as he ran. I was going to kill him.

I started to reach for the numb. At the last minute, I stopped myself.

It was my strongest weapon, and I couldn't waste it on training exercises when at any moment I might need it for battle against the fae. I had used it after the alphas fucked, and I was trying to be more responsible.

Which meant I was dying from cruel and unusual punishment.

My feet burned as I tried to place one foot in front of the other to keep running forward. It was fucking *bullshit*.

The little shadow snake zinged across my spine and offered me encouragement. The snake spent most of the time on my lower back, slithering in circles and giving off positive vibes.

I was appreciative of its help, but right now I was one stomach cramp away from saying "fuck all" and activating the numb.

Dying in battle would be less painful than this (I was pretty sure my nipples had started chafing).

"Fifty more laps," Cobra alpha-barked as he easily jogged at the front of the group.

I fantasized about breaking off one of my wooden bed legs and shoving it up his ass as he slept. It would be less painful than this shit.

Air filtered through my lungs roughly. *Should I fall to the ground and pretend to pass out?*

At least then I would get to stop moving (it was that or die).

It didn't even make sense. Why the hell did I have to practice running as a person when I would fight the fae as a beast? I had asked Cobra at the beginning of the run, and he had calmly responded, "Builds character."

I wanted to tell him he could shove his character up where the sun don't shine—and I would have…if I weren't literally terrified of him. I also wasn't 100 percent sure that he wouldn't shove something up *my ass* in retaliation, so I suffered in silence.

I hoped the fae invaded right this very moment and killed one person: me. Even with the numb, I would be completely useless. My body was spent.

"I used to go for long runs every day for pleasure." Aran had a big smile on his face as he jogged easily beside me and tried to make conversation.

Where had he run for fun? The entire shifter realm was freezing.

“I used to walk”—gasp—“Five minutes to school”—gasp—“And back to the bar every day.” I struggled to inflate my collapsed lungs. “Never had anywhere else to go.”

Because I’d been a lowly servant, Dick had made it clear that if I tried to escape, I wouldn’t survive the brutally frigid shifter realm. I’d always thought he was full of shit. He was. But, since I was now being *tortured* at a training facility for war, he hadn’t been completely wrong.

We ran in the very back of the group. I had a feeling Aran would be running at the front if it weren’t for me.

If it weren’t for him, I would have keeled over and given up thirty laps ago.

John, the red-haired beta, had started the death march running beside us. He was nice, and I appreciated his easygoing nature, but Aran had insulted him until he’d gotten the hint and jogged ahead with everyone else.

I would have been mad at Aran, but I was too busy trying to stay alive.

“Just try to focus on relaxing your arms and driving with your legs.” Aran demonstrated by shaking his arms loose.

I tried to follow his advice, but my legs burned like they were on fire, and my neck cramped from holding my arms at weird angles.

Maybe I did need to lift heavier in the gym.

I was pathetic.

We were a few steps away from the end of the group, and I forced myself to keep pace. Far ahead, at the very front, Ascher, Jax, and Cobra ran without breaking a sweat.

It was unnatural. Such large, muscular men should *not* be able to run so fast. It was also highly annoying.

Of course, Ascher ran beside two blonde betas who touched his arms and giggled—they were much taller than I was and curvy—they fawned over him, and he grinned down at them, eating it up.

He was so irritating.

I didn’t focus on Ascher long because every cell in my body was screaming in agony and trying to mutiny against the captain.

I was the captain.

Things were not well.

Next to Ascher, Cobra and Jax jogged comfortably beside each other. A few beta men and women had tried to talk to them but quickly given up because Cobra scared them away.

Jax was talking a lot, and Cobra didn't say anything; however, every once in a while, Cobra's lips curled up in a small smile.

Anyone could see they were perfect for each other, two sides of the same coin. Both loyal and protective, yet one was calm and kind, while the other was psychotic and evil.

Opposites really did attract.

"So, do you have a date for the Ianuarius celebration? It's always a super big deal in the shifter realm—everyone raves about it." Aran grinned like he was looking forward to it.

"No, do you?" I gasped quickly because talking was slowly destroying my will to live (it was already gone).

"Nah."

There was a long pause as I suffered a mini heart attack from physical exertion and Aran pranced easily beside me.

"So, um." I gasped and pursed my lips, wondering if we were both thinking the same thing or if I was being presumptuous. I tripped over my tired feet, and Aran's quick hands were the only things that kept me upright.

"Wanna be my date?" Aran asked, as he caught me from falling.

I chuckled at his overeagerness and nodded in agreement. Here I'd thought he'd felt uncomfortable and was nervous to ask me.

Clearly, the beta was not intimidated by me at all. I really needed to work on re-cultivating my reputation.

Not one person had whispered "saber-toothed bitch" today. After my performance today, no one would respect me (honestly, I didn't even respect myself).

After what felt like an eternity in hell, we stopped running. Although, *stopped* was a generous term. In reality, my legs collapsed beneath me and I face-planted aggressively onto a gym mat.

Limbs splayed, the light of the moon goddess neared. *Had she come to deliver my soul from this awful experience?*

Aran laughed and dragged me into a seated position.

The light went away, and I realized I'd been lying directly under a skylight. I was still stuck in the shifter realm. The goddess hated me.

Aran said something about getting water and jogged away.

Before I could yell after Aran and tell him to just leave me here to die, two betas sneered, and it took me an embarrassingly long time to recognize they were talking to me.

My blood had been rushing in my ears during the run, and now I had a wind tunnel sensation.

As my heart stopped exploding out of my chest, my hearing came back.

Still, I was so delirious that it was hard to process what they were saying. Truthfully, I didn't really give a shit, but they were super animated, so I tried to act like I was engaged and not floating away on a high of sweaty pain.

"Have you ever run before? That was embarrassing," a female snickered above me.

I blinked my tired eyes. It was one of the blonde betas who had been hanging all over Ascher. Glad she was feeling energized after the run.

Not relatable.

"Not really." My already broken voice was even raspier because my lungs burned. I tried to concentrate on her pretty face, which blurred in and out of focus.

"How do you expect to lead anyone in battle?" another blonde asked beside her. Great, the girl was identical. I was seeing double.

"Um, because I'm a saber-toothed tiger?"

It was pretty self-explanatory.

My stomach cramped with impossible pain. Fuck, I had pushed my body too far, and now my organs were rebelling (rotting inside of me).

"The other alphas all think you're dead weight."

"Probably am," I said as I laid down on the mat to die, with my arms sprawled. The realm spun beneath me.

"Sara and Sora, I see you're still desperate for alpha attention," Aran said from somewhere above me.

My eyes were closed because I was trying not to die from pain, so I couldn't see where he was. Relief spread through me at his words. There were two of them. I hadn't completely lost my mind.

"Why did you wear a sweatshirt?" Jax asked. I squinted my eyes open—he was kneeling next to me.

"I was cold." Sweat poured down my face.

Jax made a "you're full of shit" face, and I pretended to pass out to throw him off my trail.

Just kidding, I wasn't pretending. I was five seconds away from literal death. There was no way my organs could hurt this badly and still function.

“She’s dumb,” Cobra said to Jax, giving his classic sneer of disgust as he also crowded around (attended my funeral).

“What were you saying to her?” Ascher asked the twins.

“We were just making sure she was all right,” one of them said.

What a sweet woman—not.

“She’ll be fine,” Ascher said dismissively. I opened my eyes to find him wrapping his arms around the twins and walking away.

Jax pronounced that I would live and also walked away with Cobra to shower.

“Why didn’t you call out the twins for talking shit about you?” Aran asked curiously. He helped me to my feet and, like a true friend, didn’t comment on the vomit that dribbled out of my mouth.

“I have bigger problems,” I said honestly as I struggled to remember how to walk.

“You really do.”

I punctuated his statement by falling over.

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15
Prophecies

Sadie

After my soul left my body, aka the morning run, instead of going to lunch, I limped through the compound trying to find Zed.

I talked to a couple of servants and found Zed outside in the stable, tending to the horses.

When I wandered into the wooden barn, Zed was bent over shoveling poop.

A fire pit burned in the center of the structure and kept the horses from freezing in the negative temperatures outside.

"Hey Zed," I called out, and the null shifter jumped in surprise.

"Sadie, what are you doing here?" He tilted his head down like he was embarrassed to be caught doing menial labor.

Anger coursed through me. I didn't think any less of him for doing that type of work, but others would. The shifter realm was cruel that way.

"I have some personal affairs I need to handle and was wondering if you could help me?" I let my sincerity bleed through.

He paused for a moment, then nodded.

Zed understood what I wasn't saying, that I needed his complete secrecy. Between the politics of ABOs, the oligarchy, the fae war, and the servants, people had different agendas in the shifter realm.

You couldn't trust anyone.

"I need a map of the shifter realm," I said quietly.

If I was ever going to get to Lucinda, or kill Dick before Lucinda came back, I needed to figure out where I was in the damn realm. I knew the names of towns and mountains and could probably figure it out if I searched hard enough.

"How soon?"

“As soon as possible.”

My voice trailed off as Zed looked at me with worry. He squinted, like he wanted to tell me I couldn’t leave the compound. Something in my eyes must have conveyed my desperation.

He nodded. “Follow me.”

A few minutes later, Zed unlocked a heavy metal door hidden behind a stairwell on the bottom floor of the compound.

The door opened with a loud creak, and we walked into a wall of spiderwebs.

Clearly, training for war had changed me, because I didn’t even flinch when dead flies fell from the broken web like rain.

“Sometimes the chef sends me down here for an old recipe, or an engineer needs a schematic to fix the plumbing,” Zed explained as he flicked a switch and a dusty candelabra lit with firelight.

I wasn’t surprised. When I’d been a servant for the tavern, the local bakers and chefs had given me access to old storage units and food safes that other shifters didn’t know about.

My mouth dropped as I looked around.

The room was narrow and long, with a low ceiling. Wood shelves held hundreds of heavy, bound books, which were piled atop one another in every direction.

Zed clicked his tongue and placed his fingers along numbers carved into the wooden bookshelves. There was some type of organizational system that he understood.

“Here’s a book on maps—it should have what you need.” He handed me a thick, leather-bound book.

I flipped through it quickly and saw that it was filled with hundreds of maps. Some even seemed to depict different realms.

My gut plummeted with disappointment.

I’d hoped he would just hand me a scroll of the shifter realm that I could easily use. I was going to have to do some research, which would take time I didn’t have.

For some reason, even at school, no one had access to full maps of the realm. The exact schematics were all very hush-hush.

“Thanks, Zed, I really appreciate it,” I said sincerely as he locked up the room, and I followed him out into the hallway. “Aran and I were going to have dinner together today, if you want to join?”

“Are you sure?” Zed looked down at me with surprise.

“Of course. It’s nice to have friends around.”

“Then I’ll see you tonight.” A massive grin split his face. The heavy exhaustion in his eyes seemed lighter as he looked down at me.

Reaching forward, I gave his scrawny frame a quick hug. Tentatively, he wrapped his long arms around me, and we just stood there hugging.

“Okay, see you later.” I pulled away and hurried back to my room with my new book.

Zed had relaxed into the hug—all my practice was paying off—I was definitely getting good at hugging. I couldn’t wait to tell Aran.

Tiptoeing back into the alpha room, I was relieved to find that no one else was in it. All the other alphas were at lunch.

My stomach was still cramping with pain from the run, and just the thought of food made me sick. I was also still shivering because of my trip to the stables, and I eagerly huddled under my blankets.

I threw more blankets over my head and let a small crack of light from the window illuminate the book.

I flipped through the old yellow pages and marveled at the sheer number of maps. The book was heavy and thick, and every page had a different schematic.

There were lots of languages I didn’t understand. However, there was a chapter I did.

“The Quad” was the title, and beneath it, the page was divided into four sections.

The sections read, “Human Realm,” “Relicta Realm,” “Fae Realm,” and “Beast Realm.”

My stomach flip-flopped, and my head buzzed with confusion.

There were times in life, even if you couldn’t completely comprehend why you had come to that conclusion, you just knew—you were fucked.

I had experienced the exact feeling a few times in my life: when Dick had first told me I was his possession, when Lucinda had told me Dick said something about unlocking my potential, when the numb had first told me to stab someone, and when the sacred lake had turned black.

The “relicta realm” was covered in snowcapped mountains, and there were three black circles to the fae realm and one to the human realm. The key at the top of the page labeled the black circles “realm portals.”

There was no shifter realm labeled. It was called the relicta realm.

Also, there was a beast realm on the opposite side of the fae realm, and I'd never heard of such a place. If the map was correct, why was the beast realm a secret, and what did "relicta" mean?

I hadn't had free time to do my homework after school, since Dick had me working at the tavern constantly, but languages had always come easy to me.

Relicta was the Latin word for "abandoned."

I stared at the ink-etched snowcapped mountains that dotted the realm labeled relicta. It seemed to be the shifter realm, but it wasn't labeled as such.

My eyes watered as I stared at the page, hoping the answers would jump off and reveal themselves.

The longer I stared, the more I was convinced the ink was slowly moving on the page—little ink snowflakes drifted down around the mountains.

"Fuck, I want you so bad," a familiar female voice moaned nearby.

I was no longer alone in the room.

"Fuck, we want you now," a matching voice begged with a high-pitched whine. It was the twins.

Heart jackhammering, I quietly shut the book of maps, discreetly tucking it under my pillow.

Stomach twisting with nausea, I was afraid I would be caught with the book.

Every bone in my body was screaming at me that I shouldn't have seen the different realms on the map. *Was there a reason the realm was mislabeled*?

No one called me out for hiding in the bed. The mountain of fur blankets atop me kept me concealed.

This morning, Ascher had thrown one of his blankets onto my bed and told me he didn't want it. Now I was grateful for the added cover.

I lay completely still and held my breath as my heartbeat slowed in my chest.

"On your knees, ladies," Ascher drawled lazily, and sloppy kissing noises filtered through my blanket hut.

I cursed the sun god and wished I'd gone to lunch instead of hidden in my room. Now I was about to be a reluctant voyeur. *Again*.

There were loud slurping noises, and Ascher moaned softly.

In contrast, the twins squealed and chattered endlessly. “Oh, Ascher, it’s so big,” a twin said exaggeratedly.

“Sun god, your tattoos are so hot,” the other twin moaned even louder. She wasn’t going to be shown up by her sister.

Ascher grunted in response and didn’t say anything as the twins continued to wail. Eyes closed with horror, I couldn’t help but envision what was happening so close to me.

Ascher’s insane body was probably on display, and I had a feeling the girls were going down on him.

His tattooed dick was probably swollen with his massive alpha knot, his golden head thrown back in ecstasy, onyx horns growing larger as he found his pleasure at the hands of the beautiful betas.

He was in heaven; I was in hell.

Stomach pinching with a gnawing sensation I’d never felt before. Lying silent while Ascher found his pleasure with others made me feel dirty.

If Ascher knew I was here, it would just be one more reason to hate me. He had made it clear he was disgusted by me.

It made sense; I was nothing like the beta twins.

“Fuck, Ascher. Fuck yes, give it to me!” Sara screamed, and I almost jumped in surprise and gave myself away.

The grunts and slurps rang louder through the room, and I couldn’t help but imagine what was happening. *How did one guy take two girls? How did it work?* My curiosity grew as the beta moans became louder.

Discreetly, I created a small crack in the blankets that covered my eyes.

Ascher’s alpha scent of pine and conifer overwhelmed me. It was mouthwatering. Unfortunately, my other senses were less impressed.

One of the twins was completely naked and kneeling in front of Ascher.

His hands were buried in her blonde hair, and he slammed her head down on his hard cock.

She moaned exaggeratedly, but couldn’t fit his alpha knot in her mouth. Her eyes watered, and she choked on his large member while dramatically squealing and pushing up her heavy tits.

Ascher’s head was thrown back, and his eyes were squeezed shut.

Colorful tattoos bunched across his body as his muscles glistened with sweat. His onyx horns curled against his tousled golden locks.

All three of them were completely naked, and they made an impressive picture—the beta twins were gorgeous, with thick asses and large boobs—

Ascher looked like a fae god of lore with his horns.

My heart rate really sped up at what the other beta twin was doing.

The blonde knelt behind Ascher and had his thick, tattooed ass parted as she fingered his butt hole. When she leaned forward and licked it, my mouth fell open in shock.

Why would anyone voluntarily do that to someone else?

Out of nowhere, Ascher growled, "Enough," and pushed off both the twins.

His dick bobbed against his abs and highlighted the ridiculous *V* that cut across his hips. However, the tattooed member started to deflate.

"Please, I want that alpha dick," the twins whined loudly. One fondled her heavy breasts, and the other literally spread her legs wide on the bed.

I was impressed by their confidence. They were going after what they wanted. In contrast, I was hiding under the covers, watching them.

Maybe I needed to be more like them and just go after what I wanted. *Scars*, my brain supplied, and my growing confidence disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Other women could pursue the men they were interested in. I was the first female alpha in the shifter realm, with a shit ton of problems that weren't going to solve themselves. Sex sure as shit wasn't going to free Lucinda from Dick.

"Not now." Ascher groaned as he raked his hands over his face tiredly.

Was he having performance anxiety? I heard there were drugs for that.

"Now." One of the twins took his deflated dick back into her mouth.

"I said stop!" Ascher's horns straightened on his head as he shoved her away and pulled on his sweatpants.

"But, alpha, please." The other twin started fingering herself dramatically.

"Ascher, are you coming with us to lunch or not?" Jax banged on the door.

I held my breath, terrified I would be caught by all the alphas. Also, I couldn't let them find the book. My scent was masked under heavy blankets, and I hoped if he smelled me, he would just assume it was my lingering scent from this morning.

"Yes, coming now!" Ascher shouted back overeagerly.

"Later, ladies. I just can't right now—I have to go to lunch, sorry. You know how Jax gets." Ascher tugged on a sweatshirt.

The twins made pouty faces and nodded like he wasn't completely full of shit. Once again, I was confused because Jax was usually calm and pretty chill most of the time.

"Okay, we're ready at any time." The twins continued to pout and nod as they opened the door.

Jax and Cobra stood blocking the doorway. Jax chuckled when he saw the twins, and Cobra sneered at them in disgust.

"Perhaps you want to play with us, Cobra?" The twins immediately pressed their bodies against him and rubbed their impressive breasts against his chest.

Cobra aggressively shoved both women off him, and they stumbled out into the hall. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The disgust on his face was clear.

Surprisingly, the twins didn't seem upset by his rejection. They both smiled and winked at him before traipsing down the hall.

"We'll let you get fixed up. Meet us in the dining hall." Jax motioned toward Ascher's pants, which were still hanging half off his hip, exposing part of his dick. With that, they walked away.

Once the door was closed, Ascher turned back to the hearth. For what felt like forever, he stared at the massive fire like he was mesmerized by the flames.

After standing still for a long time, Ascher hunched over dejectedly, still staring at the flames. "I don't fucking know what you're saying or why you're yelling at me!"

He stalked out of the room and slammed the door.

I waited a second to make sure he was really gone, then threw the covers off and stared at the fire in confusion. It was just normal orange flames.

Whatever, Ascher losing his mind was a minor problem in the big scheme of things. I had other issues.

I patted the bed and made sure the book of maps was tucked safely under my sheets.

Between the confusing labels on the map and Ascher yelling at the fire like a madman, I was lost. Every day it felt like I understood less.

The clock chimed above the mantel. "Fuck." If I didn't hurry, I was going to be late for Auntie's mandatory therapy.

Anyone who didn't arrive on time for Auntie's classes was forced to run laps while the old crone watched. I would rather *die* than be late.

I ran down the hall and tried not to think about Ascher's tattooed dick.

Finally, I found Auntie's classroom and threw myself into a chair next to Aran. Breathing heavily, I tried to keep a normal expression.

When Aran glanced at me with his brow raised, I was half-convinced he could see the guilt written all over my face. Ascher's grunts as he'd fucked the beta's mouth still filtered through my ears.

Luckily, Aran said nothing.

A few seconds later, Auntie entered the small room and sat down in front of us.

She wore her signature green dress, which was long and made of heavy wool. I'd never seen anyone wear anything like what Auntie wore. Her white hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and thick kohl lined her wrinkly eyes.

"Do you want to kill everyone at all times?" Auntie asked casually as she scooted her chair closer to both of us.

I guess she wasn't going to be beating around the bush during these sessions.

"Not always," I said. It was the truth. The numb wasn't a constant state, and it didn't *always* tell me to strangle people. Just most of the time.

Auntie stared at me with her dark eyes, and I stared back. The wrinkles around her eyes quivered, like she was trying to penetrate my soul with her gaze.

"Yes," Aran said beside me and jolted me out of my staring contest.

I looked over at him in surprise. I thought he had acted homicidal in a show of solidarity. The blue-haired beta was always grinning and laughing like he didn't have a care in the world.

Now he looked pensive and worried, like he was also suffering from violent thoughts. I guessed no one was truly what they seemed.

We were all a little messed up.

"What does it feel like, Sadie, when you sometimes want to kill people?" Auntie asked.

"It feels like . . . nothing," I said as I thought about it. "There are no feelings, just a voice inside me that whispers to kill and blissful emptiness."

The room was unnaturally quiet as both Auntie and Aran stared at me with raised eyebrows.

Maybe now they would realize how messed up I was. These therapy sessions weren't going to do anything. I didn't suffer from the numb; I

embraced it. It was the only thing that had kept me alive this long.

"And what does it feel like to you, Aran?" Auntie asked him, and turned.

There was a long pause, and I thought Aran wasn't going to say anything. When he finally spoke, it was in a soft hush.

"Rage consumes me completely until I feel like I'm burning alive. But it's not a fiery rage, it's icy and jagged. It stabs at me like icicles until I act on my impulses." He slumped forward like he was ashamed of himself.

I wondered how often the rage overwhelmed him. Was it like the numb, or was it constant? I reached over, put my hand on his shoulder, and smiled at him grimly. He wasn't alone.

Auntie opened her mouth, but instead of her normal breathless prattle, a deep voice bellowed out,

> "*Blood and ice will fall the lie,*
> *Color and white to break the queen,*
> *Heir and friend join and tie,*
> *A reborn quad the fates foreseen*."

Suddenly, Auntie's wrinkly mouth slammed shut and her head slumped forward. With a crack, her forehead hit the desk.

I leaned backward in shock. *What the fuck had just happened?* Icy fear gripped my heart.

As the shock receded, my mind spun. What were the odds that I had just seen a map labeled "quad" and now it was mentioned in a fae poem?

Everyone knew the fae talked in riddles. Their language was built on rhymes. And the fae queen led the never-ending war. Was the poem about her?

"What in the moon goddess was that?" I turned to Aran.

Instead of looking confused, the blue-haired beta visibly shook in his chair. He was terrified.

"What just happened?" I asked with more urgency.

He blinked slowly, and he grabbed my hand with his long fingers. "Tha-tha-that was a famous fae prophecy. It's titled 'The Apocalypse.'" Aran looked at me with sheer horror, his soft, feminine features ashen and tense.

"Why does it matter that she just read it to us?" I whispered softly, my raspy voice too loud in the quiet room that now reeked of fear.

"I have no idea . . . but . . . that shouldn't have just happened," Aran whispered back.

"What are the chances that she's just crazy? It's a popular poem . . . maybe she suffered some type of psychotic episode."

Aran paled further and my stomach plummeted. He wasn't telling me something.

He gripped my hand. "Fae prophecies tend to have lives of their own. They aren't just words. The rhymes themselves are enchanted and . . . *alive*. Her voice changed."

We both looked at Auntie, who was just now blinking her eyes open. The implication of what he was saying hit me like a beta punch to the face.

A fae prophecy about the apocalypse and fae queen might have just taken over our teacher and read itself to us.

Read. *Itself*. To us.

Here I'd been thinking watching Ascher get his ass eaten was the most traumatizing thing to happen today. Instead of crying, I took deep breaths and calmed my racing heart. "Let's go get dinner with Zed. We deserve bread rolls—it was probably some weird fluke."

Frankly, I'd experienced enough bullshit. Fighting against the fae, running, Dick's threat, and the alphas fucking in front of me were enough to break me. *Especially* the running. Just thinking about it made me sick.

My will to live was hanging by a thread, and I was one more fae prophecy away from a mental breakdown.

I was going to deal by not dealing.

Aran nodded in agreement—he also looked like he was about to be sick. We gathered our stuff and avoided Auntie, who was slumped over but still breathing shallowly.

"Bye, girls," Auntie said in her normal voice as we walked out of the classroom.

Neither of us turned around.

Aran was a guy, and clearly Auntie wasn't in the right headspace. I just hoped she wouldn't spout another poem.

The sight of her eyes rolling back in her head and the deep voice had made my stomach churn.

Holding each other's hands in death grips, we went to stuff our faces at dinner.

We deserved it.

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16
Cranberry Sauce

Ascher

A few minutes earlier . . .

Still in the alpha quarters, I closed my eyes and threw my head back, desperately trying to forget the feel of the two betas touching me.

For some reason, the memory of the twin gagging on my dick and the finger in my ass disgusted me.

I should have just come in her mouth and been done with it. It should have been a fucking easy task.

It hadn't.

The fire crackled loudly, and the voices yelled something at me. As usual, it was in a language I couldn't understand, so I tried to ignore it, but the tone was atypically angry.

It was like the fire was mad at me—I thanked the sun god that Jax had interrupted when he did—I'd needed to get away from the twins before I hurt them.

Hurting women was not something I did. That was my father.

For some reason, I was losing my mind.

Not only was the fire fucking distracting, but the delicate alpha scent of sweet cranberries wafted through the air.

My mouth watered.

The princess's scent lingered in the room and had made me irrationally mad at the betas beneath me.

It wasn't their fault that I was obsessed with the little princess. However, it was their fault that they'd been touching me when I belonged to her.

What the actual fuck? I fought the urge to snarl in frustration as I raked my hands over my face. I didn't belong to the princess. I'd never even fucking kissed her.

So why were her lush lips and long white hair all I could focus on?

The twins had whined and moaned like they'd been putting on a performance, and it had made me ill.

The voices in the flames screamed at me in frustration.

Like the fire, my beast screamed within me—the scent of cranberries grew stronger until all I wanted to do was hunt down the twins and strangle them because they'd touched me—I wasn't fucking theirs to touch.

The room spun as the fire shrieked.

The flames were pissed as fuck, and I didn't know why. They screamed louder than ever before, and my ears burned.

As the world spun, for a moment, I allowed myself to pretend the princess was in the room.

That it had been *her* sucking my dick and on her knees before me. Her silky white hair fisted in my tattooed hands as she looked up at me with her startling ruby eyes.

The depraved thoughts that flitted through my mind made me simultaneously turned on and disgusted with myself.

If Sadie knew the depth of depravity I felt toward her, she would run screaming into the cold mountains.

Abruptly, the voices in the flames changed.

The language was still undecipherable, but they were softer, like they were imploring me to do something.

"I don't *fucking* know what you're saying or why you're yelling at me."

The flames continued to whisper—I'd had enough—I slammed the door shut as I left the room, cutting off the maddening scent of sweet cranberries.

I stalked through the compound and didn't bother to get food in the alpha dining hall. I just threw myself into a chair beside Jax and Cobra and slammed my head down against the table.

The other alphas raised their eyebrows, but kept eating their steaks. They were used to my meltdowns.

For a second, a potent scent of cranberries reached my nose, and my heart jumped with excitement.

The princess was in the room.

I looked up and whipped my head around, trying to find her, then groaned with frustration when I saw Cobra had fucking *cranberry sauce* on his plate.

This had to be an all-time low. I'd just gotten aroused over a fucking side dish.

I'd lost my mind.

"Can you not eat fucking cranberry sauce?" I snapped at Cobra irrationally as I dragged my hands over my face in frustration.

Because Cobra was a right bastard, he lifted a spoonful of cranberries into his mouth and licked the spoon wantonly. The smirk on his face told me he knew *exactly* what he was doing.

"Mature." I tried counting to ten in my head.

Miss Mabel, the cook at my father's palace, had helped me learn techniques to control my anger. Counting had always been her go-to advice. She was more of a mother to me than my own had ever been.

Miss Mabel was caring and nurturing, while my mother was a slut that wanted to appear sexually available to the syndicate members, and a kid had gotten in the way of it.

"Certain alpha on your mind?" Cobra licked his lips dramatically and smeared the sauce across them.

My blue balls must have really been getting to me, because I found myself fixating on the way his pink tongue ran along his plush red lips.

I usually wasn't into men. *Usually* being the key word.

Adjusting myself in my pants, I didn't even try to hide my lust.

Images of Jax pinning Cobra against the wall and ramming into him had my dick throbbing.

Truthfully, Cobra was the handsomest bastard I had ever seen in my life.

He was physically perfect, like a marble sculpture covered in diamonds and emeralds. There was also something about the darkness that swirled in his green eyes that drove a person crazy, and he knew it.

"Really? You're both gonna sit here and fantasize about her after we literally just *killed* her in the gym this morning? Am I the only one concerned about her performance?" Jax glared at both of us.

The big man was usually easygoing and controlled, but lately he seemed stressed as hell—not to mention the fact that he had started growling like a wild bear—he'd never done that before the princess arrived.

Fucking concerning.

“She was pathetic,” Cobra said as he bit into his steak like he didn’t give a single fuck about the princess. I would have believed him if I hadn’t lived with him for the last year.

Cobra’s back was ramrod straight, and his upper lip curled like he was thinking about strangling Sadie for being inept at running. Never mind the fact that he had fucking cuddled her all night like Prince Charming.

He was as obsessed as the rest of us.

“She’s going to get herself killed if she can’t run fifteen miles without keeling over like she’s dying,” I said with disgust. “Also, why the fuck did she wear that ridiculous sweatshirt?”

“She’s a prude.” Cobra shrugged like he didn’t care, but stabbed his fork into his meat so hard that one of the tongs broke off.

“And she lied to the media about how she injured her voice,” Jax said with a heavy sigh.

“Why the fuck is it so. . . . ?” I struggled for the correct word.

“Raspy,” I said at the same time Cobra said, “Dirty.” I groaned miserably because that was exactly what I’d been thinking.

Cobra smirked, and I couldn’t help but picture the princess writhing between us, whispering dirty words.

He lifted his dark eyebrow.

Suddenly, I was envisioning Cobra underneath me as he took the princess. He licked his lips again, like he knew exactly what I was imagining.

“Ow!” I said.

Jax had leaned forward and slapped Cobra and me behind our heads. His hands were fucking colossal, and I swore he’d given me a slight concussion.

“Harder,” Cobra moaned dramatically and thrust his hips.

Jax glared at us both like we were the biggest idiots (we were).

“And her nightmares,” Jax said, determined to have a normal conversation about the princess.

I slumped back into my chair and thought about everything. The truth was, I was also concerned.

“How—” I said. “Can someone go from a fighting machine to not being able to run without gasping like they are dying? It just doesn’t make sense.” I thought about the day she’d caught Jax fucking Cobra.

In the hall, the prettiest blush had stained her cheeks, but then something had happened and she had become cold and distant. She'd fucking walked past us like we were nothing to her, like we were beneath her.

Her dual nature was hot as hell.

I pictured Auntie naked to stop myself from getting hard again.

"She's hiding something, probably a spy." Cobra shrugged like it didn't bother him one bit that we could be sharing a bedroom with a traitor.

I stilled at his words, then willed myself to relax.

"She seems too volatile to be a spy—a spy would be more consistent with their performance. The little alpha is all over the place." Jax shook his head and sighed heavily.

I thought back to the run today. She really had been pathetic.

Poor little princess looked like she'd been literally *dying*, not running laps around an indoor track.

Another thought struck me. "Why the fuck is she all over that blue-haired beta, Aran, literally *all* the fucking time?"

I became irrationally angry thinking about how much the princess smiled at the beta. He was lean and practically feminine, with his baby face and ridiculously colored hair. Compared to his small form, we were fucking men.

What could she even see in him?

"I don't know…she probably just wants a friend." Jax rubbed his palms into his eyes, but the soft growl that rattled his chest said otherwise.

"She's an alpha…it's inappropriate." Cobra tightened his hand around his knife like he was imagining stabbing the beta.

"Why? Ascher fucks beta women. What's the difference?" Jax asked.

"It's not the same," Cobra said with a growl.

On this, we were in complete agreement.

"We should tell him off." I nodded as I thought about it.

She was the female alpha, which meant she was better than the betas. If she wanted fucking friendship, she could have it with us. If she wanted more than friendship, then she could suck *my* dick, not his.

A part of me recognized I was acting like an archaic ass, but a larger part of me was so obsessed with wringing the beta's neck that I didn't care.

"We're not intimidating one of our own soldiers…because we're jealous he gets to spend time with our little alpha," Jax said with exasperation as he glared at me.

The big guy was always worried about doing the right thing and making sure everyone at the compound felt supported. Still, he'd called her "our little alpha."

I would bet all my money Jax's possessive instincts just needed to be prodded one more time and he would go full psycho on her ass.

"No, we won't intimidate him," Cobra said calmly as he ate, and I glared over at the bastard. I'd thought we were on the same page. "We'll simply break both his legs so he can't spend time with her during training."

"I'm in." I pushed my seat in and stood up, ready to hunt down the beta and break his femur.

Realistically, he deserved it. I had seen Aran catch her when she'd tripped today during the run.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. He had fucking touched my princess. It would be wrong *not* to punish him.

"Sit down!" Jax alpha-barked, and instinctively, I slumped down in my chair.

Jax might be the nicest and most rational of the three of us, but his beast was also the most dominant. You didn't want to piss it off.

"We need to do something about the beta," I snarled back at him with frustration.

"He needs to bleed." Cobra smiled like Aran's death was already imminent.

"I have five sisters," Jax said. "I *know* how women work. If we hurt who she views as her only friend, she'll hate us forever—and that gets us nowhere. We need to focus on working to find out her secrets to make sure that we're safe…and then we need to concentrate on beating the damn fae."

"Fine," I huffed back at Jax and imagined beating the shit out of the blue-haired beta. Even if it was in my mind, it made me feel better. The red haze that covered my vision receded slightly.

"Hmm." Cobra chewed slowly, like he was thinking deeply. "Perhaps, but if he touches the girl sexually, I *will* kill him."

"Fine," Jax growled back and glared down at Cobra. From the way they snarled at each other, I couldn't tell if they wanted to fuck or fight (it was probably both).

The fact that Jax had agreed with him told me the big bastard also wanted to kill the beta—he might not know it—but all three of us were on the exact

same page when it came to the princess.

Cobra scooped up a big spoonful of cranberry sauce and shoved it past his lips.

The sweet red juice ran wantonly down the side of his wicked mouth, leaving a crimson trail against his pale skin.

Cobra's sharp cheekbones stood out starkly in the flickering firelight, and his eyes hooded as he dragged his tongue across his sinful lips. Cranberries and frost filled the air.

Jax's gray eyes glowed.

In slow motion, Jax leaned forward and licked the trail of cranberry sauce off Cobra's Adam's apple, up his face, all the way to his mouth.

A servant who stood holding drinks behind Jax stared openmouthed at the alphas—a glass broke—neither gave a fuck.

Cobra looked over at me and smirked as Jax slowly licked the cranberry sauce off of his red mouth.

Adjusting my swollen cock in my pants, I couldn't help but imagine that Jax was licking the princess's juices off Cobra's mouth.

Groaning, I ran my hand over my face and sighed heavily. We were acting like horny teenagers over fucking *cranberry sauce*.

We were fucked, and it was all the princess's fault.

Something needed to change.

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17
Snakebites and Other Aphrodisiacs

Sadie

I was never running again.

While I sat on the toilet, my intestines screamed in agony as I suffered.

I fantasized about clawing Cobra's smirk off his face and pictured the alpha writhing in pain. It was the only thing that was getting me through this torture.

As I died on the toilet, I thought back to the epic book of battles I'd used to read growing up.

In the bootleg book from the fae realm, the three half warriors, Demetre, Shane, and Noah, chased down vicious monsters.

Part alpha and part fae, they were the strongest warriors in all the realms. Demetre was even rumored to shift into a dragon.

Yes, I know what you're thinking: I did have an intense crush on him.

He was a freaking *dragon*. As a ten-year-old, I'd found that sexy. In contrast, Lucinda thought Demetre "seemed scary and mean."

Our reactions to Demetre probably spoke loads about our mental health; one of us was well, and the other had deep psychological issues from being whipped every other day of their lives.

We all had our things.

Still, in the story about the half warriors, they would chase monsters for *days* without stopping.

As a kid, I'd thought the long runs had sounded exciting, exhilarating, and adventurous.

Now they sounded like absolute bullshit.

Maybe Demetre had special dragon blood that helped him run fast because my scrawny ass wanted to nap, lie still, and never run again.

A while later, I limped out of the bathroom.

I fell weakly onto my warm bed and sighed with exhaustion.

"You didn't eat lunch—you need to consume more food," Jax said from the other side of the room. He was lounging shirtless on his bed, and his ridiculous biceps glowed in the firelight.

For a moment, my mind froze as I tracked the veins that snaked across his biceps and down his forearms.

"She'll live." Cobra lounged on his bed next to Jax. His upper body was on his own bed, but his feet were kicked up on Jax's.

I was ignoring the bastard because he'd ordered the run from hell. Ignoring him meant *not* noticing he was shirtless and *not* staring at the jewels embedded in his abs.

Living with alphas meant I was constantly surrounded by half-naked, annoying men, and it was slowly driving me crazy.

"I'm still recovering from the death march." I turned so my back was to the room and the three infuriating alphas (truthfully, I would never recover from that run—I was emotionally scarred).

"You need to eat more—now," Ascher said with a steel edge to his voice, like he was trying to command me to do something.

I almost laughed at his hubris. "All I *need* is for you to shut up so I can sleep."

I'd just spent the last hour dying on the porcelain throne, and I was too tired to deal with their weird alpha bullshit.

Not to mention, I'd seen him this morning, getting his *ass eaten* while a twin bobbed on his dick. A woman could only take so much.

"You must eat…you can't starve yourself and be an effective alpha." Jax spoke calmly but with each word became more agitated until he growled loudly.

Staring out the snowy window, I searched for inner peace.

Peaceful thoughts, Sadie: sunshine, soft snowfall, a warm bubble bath.

"Go to the dining hall now," Ascher ordered.

"I just had violent shits. I'm not going anywhere!" I half growled, half shouted into the room.

There was a pregnant pause as everyone reeled from my admission.

A couple of weeks ago, I would have blushed with embarrassment. Now my face flushed with anger. They had already tortured me physically; couldn't they just leave me alone to sleep in peace? Was nothing sacred anymore?

"You're probably dehydrated…I'll go get you some water for your…condition," Jax said, breaking the awkward silence.

Coward.

"The girl can get her own water," Cobra said at the same time Ascher asked, "Why are you so out of shape?"

My vision literally blurred with rage, and suddenly I understood exactly why people committed homicide.

I didn't access the numb, because I needed it for combat, but my inner voice still told me to stab them violently. My entire body tingled until I was vibrating from the force of my rage.

I transformed into a saber-toothed tiger.

The room shrunk around me, and I stumbled off my bed. The tiger form was too large to fit on the twin frame.

I roared with all my might.

As I bared my massive fangs, they elongated in my mouth and my jaw ached with the need to bite someone.

I turned toward Ascher—he would do. With my advanced vision, Ascher's onyx horns sparkled atop his head and his eyes glowed a rich umber.

He watched me track toward him, but didn't move away. His onyx horns lengthened and grew larger on his head.

In my beast form, the hotheaded alpha seemed different—there was tension around his mouth and a glint in his eyes—his thick pine scent was deeper, with woodsy notes.

Flattening my ears against my head, I opened my maw wide and flashed my fangs at him.

My beast didn't trust him.

I leaned forward to take a small nibble from Ascher's thigh to assert my dominance.

"Calm down, little alpha—turn back now," Jax alpha-barked, and instinctively I went to transform back.

At the last moment, I remembered I was free from Dick and no man was ever going to tell me what to do.

Never again.

Whipping my head around, I roared at Jax. The vicious sound echoed through the small space.

On oversized tufted feet, I prowled forward toward the large man. In my beast form, my head was almost at his shoulders, although he was still a formidable mountain of muscles. It would take some work to break him.

I could do it.

I stalked toward Jax, my dagger-like claws distending and releasing as I kneaded them against the hard floor and padded forward.

My claws clenched uncomfortably, so I reached my front legs in front of me and dragged my nails across the hardwood.

The sensation of my nails slicing through the hardwood sent a shiver of satisfaction down my furry spine. My tail whipped back and forth with excitement as I cornered my prey.

"Um, the princess is ruining the floors," Ascher said dryly, but I stared down Jax.

The big bastard held himself completely still and looked down at me—his gold jewelry glinted in the firelight, refracting pieces of light across the room.

Shiny.

I wanted to wrap my maw around his bicep and gnaw. He looked chewy.

"Little alpha thinks she can handle Jax's bear?" Cobra's silky voice taunted me, and I lunged at him.

Cobra had been slowly inching closer from my side, and I'd been tracking his movements in my peripheral vision.

Now my furry body slammed into his frame and tackled him onto his bed. Instead of screaming in fright, or at least trying to get away, the beautiful man laughed underneath me, like we were playing.

"The kitty's so dramatic," Cobra drawled between bouts of laughter.

From his tone and manic chuckles, it was clear he thought he was the only one who could handle Jax's beast form.

Bastard thought he was more dominant than me—I would show him.

Whirling around, I bared my fangs and placed them around Cobra's warm neck. Holding him lightly, I let my fangs gently pinch the skin—if he moved a bit, my razor-sharp teeth would kill him.

Little zaps started wiggling across my face and down my body. I recognized the sensation. Cobra had unleashed his shadow snakes.

"Sadie, release Cobra! Cobra, pull back your snakes!" Jax alpha-barked at both of us, but I fought the compulsion. So did Cobra. The snakes moved faster across my fur.

Cobra wasn't letting up, and neither was I.

A massive arm wrapped around my throat and began to exert pressure. Flexing my neck, I easily countered the pressure and held my ground.

Cobra's body jerked beneath me, as if someone was trying to pull him free.

"Remember this moment, little girl," Cobra whispered with his silky voice.

The zinging sensation changed until it felt like thousands of needles were scraping against me; it was Cobra's shadow snakes.

From the prickles across my skin, their lethal fangs were bared, and they were slowly dragging them across my skin.

He wouldn't.

Gently, I exerted pressure against Cobra's neck, until warm blood flooded my mouth—reaching out my tongue, I slowly lapped it across his Adam's apple, consuming every drop.

The pungent taste was an aphrodisiac. Trace amounts of Jax's warm chestnuts were on his frosty skin. The flavor was *divine*.

Cobra jerked beneath me, but the moan that escaped his lips wasn't a sound of pain.

If I could smirk in tiger form, I would have—I was the more dominant alpha—he was *putty* beneath me.

Abruptly, bursts of pain exploded over every inch of my body.

Lethargy shot through me, and I struggled to exert pressure against his neck and keep my eyes open. Pain snaked through me—I fought the urge to sleep.

The bastard had *bitten* me with his snakes.

Falling away from Cobra on shaky legs, I detached myself from the pile of alphas and stumbled toward the bathroom.

Ascher and Jax roared at Cobra—there were heavy thumps as men were tossed against the wall.

Uncaring, I leaped into the bathroom and head-butted the door shut.

Focusing on pushing through the metaphorical wall, I transformed back into my naked skin. I gasped as sweat ran down my brow and my body burned unnaturally.

I stumbled around the large bathroom and dug out the clothes I kept for easy changing so that the alphas would never see parts of my torso in a

towel. I barely tugged the clothes over my burning flesh before I collapsed onto the cool ground and moaned in agony.

The pain was different from anything I had experienced before. *What the fuck had been in that bite?* The worst of it emanated from my core, and I burned alive with heat and queasiness.

Overwhelmed by the sensations, I barely noticed that the bathroom door was thrown open, and Jax tenderly gathered me into his arms.

"I don't know what's happening to her…what the fuck did you do?" Jax yelled at Cobra as he carried me back into the bedroom.

Through hooded eyes, I noted with satisfaction that both sides of Cobra's neck were cut open and blood was still pouring from the wounds.

My satisfaction transformed into anger when the snake shifter grinned at me with his classic sneer.

The gorgeous bastard wasn't shaken at all.

For a long moment, I considered transforming back and lightly mauling his head. That would show him.

My core fluttered with a spike of burning need, and I moaned in frustration.

Concentrating on surviving the feverish pain consuming my entire body, I was distracted from fantasizing about maiming Cobra.

"What *the fuck* did you do to her?" Ascher bellowed into Cobra's face, and the pale alpha's icy sneer faltered.

"It was just a small dose of my poison." Cobra laid his hand on my forehead with concern.

"That should not be causing this." I vibrated in Jax's arms as his growl shook through me.

"The smallest amount—it should only cause lethargy." Cobra's usual silky tone was clipped and forced, like he was internally panicking and didn't know how to express it.

"It burns," I whispered and writhed in Jax's arms. My feverish body simultaneously wanted more and less of Jax's touch. I wanted to consume him, but he was already consuming me.

I needed to get away.

Kicking out, I struggled until the large alpha deposited me gently onto my bed. Gasping on the fur covers, I squirmed, desperate to squelch the burn that was roaring through me.

“Where does it hurt?” Cobra yelled down at me. It was the most agitated I’d ever seen him. His perfectly sculpted face strained with worry.

A moan ripped from my throat. “Please,” I begged, as the fire consumed me completely.

The scents of frost, chestnut, and pine filled the small space—for some reason, the alpha pheromones stoked my pain—my back arched off the bed in desperation.

“She’s fucking turned on!” Ascher’s deep voice cut through the room like a hammer.

“What did you do?” Jax slammed Cobra against the brick wall. Bits of brick broke off and fell to the ground and logs in the fireplace rolled from the force of the blow.

“I don’t know.” Cobra looked at me frantically. His emerald eyes bore into me, and his lush mouth opened slightly, red tongue snaking out and licking his lips.

The fires within me reached a fever pitch. I needed Cobra’s perfect body atop mine.

“We have to help her,” Ascher said, like he’d come to a decision. In a blur of movement, the horned alpha stood over me, and his hand gently moved up my clothed knee toward my center.

I burned hotter, and I opened my mouth to beg him. I didn’t know what I wanted him to do, but I knew I *needed* it with every fiber of my being.

Ascher’s tattoos bunched across his tan skin, and he leaned forward toward my face. His harsh jaw tensed, and full mouth slightly parted.

Cobra slammed into him and threw him across the floor. Somehow, he had gotten away from Jax.

Anger spiked with need, and I wanted to howl with frustration. Without Ascher’s touch, the pain increased tenfold.

On the floor, Cobra sat atop Ascher and slammed his fist into his face—in a clash of muscles and testosterone, Ascher rolled over and pummeled Cobra back—they pounded each other mercilessly.

“I’m so sorry, little alpha. No one will hurt you.” Jax looked down at me with worry and stroked his massive hand softly across my hair.

A low, guttural moan ripped from my throat, and my back arched.

“It hurts,” I whispered to the gentlest alpha.

The hand on my head stopped stroking, and with excruciating slowness, he dragged it down the side of my face, across my neck and my collarbone.

Jax's hand ran along my sweatshirt, but it felt like the most intimate touch in the world.

Gray was usually cold, the color of the sky in a vicious blizzard, but Jax's gray eyes were soft and warm, his high cheekbones and prominent nose stunning in the dim candlelight.

Once again, I wanted to lose myself in his gentleness and strength. I wanted to let him take care of me and fix the pain.

"It would be wrong, little alpha." He removed his hands from my chest.

Never mind, I wanted to shank him.

Ascher and Cobra must have been done beating each other up, because they huddled beside Jax. Looking up at the three alphas, I mewled like a pathetic creature as pain shot through me.

"We must," Ascher said—Jax punched him in the gut.

"We can't." Cobra groaned and raked his hand over his face as his eyes flickered back and forth between man and snake.

"Just make the pain stop," I said with a strangled gasp. My poor body had almost given out after the damn run this morning, and now I was going to die from a different type of pain.

"Sleep," Jax alpha-barked at me.

Everything went black.

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18
Still Fighting, Unfortunately

Sadie

"So let's go over this one more time. You're telling me Cobra's freaky shadow snake things bit you…and then you became feverish and super weird…then everyone started touching you and freaking out? And now none of them will even look at you?" Aran's blue eyes were wide as he stretched before for our morning training.

Aka, our morning death march, where I considered ending it all (and taking everyone down in a blaze of glory).

It was a week since I'd been bitten by Cobra's shadow snakes, and every day I became more confused by what had happened.

We'd been training brutally all week, and I'd been too embarrassed to tell Aran about my bizarre experience with the alphas. However, now we were stretching for a while and everyone was chatting.

Plus, I just needed to get it off my chest to someone.

"Yep." I popped the *p* and debated if I should tell him about stomach pain that day or if that was over sharing.

I always told Lucinda everything, but I'd never had a nonrelative best friend before.

After a week of training together and suffering beside Aran, I would definitely consider him one. I wouldn't have survived without him.

"Dude, it sounds like when omegas go into heat. That's *super* weird." Aran contorted his leg behind his head in a wicked stretch.

"Wait, what?" I stared at my blue-haired best friend and struggled to touch my knees.

Some people were born flexible and good runners; others were born inflexible and barely able to maintain a brisk walk.

Unfortunately, I was in the latter category, and it was a highly disappointing, upsetting one.

You would think as an alpha, I'd be a beast of physical stamina and performance.

Sadly, the moon goddess hated me.

"Yeah, omegas go into heat around alphas, and they lose control of their bodies…but you're an alpha, so it must have been some freak thing. I have no idea," Aran said with confusion as he contorted his other leg behind his head.

"Oh."

A few weeks ago, I would have blushed with someone talking to me so frankly about being turned on.

Getting pulverized daily in running and combat training had really changed something inside of me (I was now a sexual deviant). However, my stomach did twist as the implication of what he was saying hit me.

"They were horrified by me in that state," I whispered as I reached for my shins.

Ascher telling me he wasn't interested in me and all the men saying that they couldn't touch me played on repeat in my head.

They hadn't even seen my hideous scars.

Aran shrugged. "Hm, I don't know. Remember that whole ethical dilemma thing…I feel like there could have been more to it, then. Plus, they have been death glaring at me like every second of training this week, so I'd bet they have feelings." He dipped into a full split and rested his blue head on his thigh.

The dude was freaky flexible.

"My hips would crack if I tried that." I reached for my toe, but it was so damn far away. My legs were short, which should have meant they would be easier to reach, but nothing in life was ever easy (I had T. rex arms).

"We're running today. Start now," Cobra snapped, and everyone sprung to their feet, ready for action.

I glared daggers at the asshole, and satisfaction filled me when I saw twin scars on either side of his neck. My beast had marked him—permanently.

It was a small victory and arguably not one I should have found so satisfying, because of my own physical issues.

I'd never pretended to be completely sane, mentally well, physically well, or spiritually well. In summary, I was unwell.

Sara and Sora, aka the beautiful twins who hated me, bumped my shoulder aggressively and glared at me as they jogged by. All three other alphas were looking forward, so they didn't notice.

Aran tried to leap after the twins like he was going to slaughter them—I held back the blue-haired beta and chuckled at the murderous expression on his face.

It was like no one thought I could handle myself.

I held Aran back and was once again struck by how lanky he was.

"They're not worth it." I kicked him gently in the shin to get my point across.

"They keep disrespecting you. It's inappropriate," Aran said with annoyance, but his trademark grin was back on his boyish face.

That was what I liked most about Aran: he didn't hold grudges or get all crazy like the alphas. He was chill, for the most part.

"Honestly, I still can't run a mile without low-key dying, so I kind of deserve to be disrespected." I chuckled, and Aran joined me, laughing.

It was hard to explain to people, but when you had literally been abused by a physical monster your whole life, you recognized when people were threats and when people were just juvenile. The twins were in the latter category, and it was easy to ignore them.

I still hadn't decided what the alphas were.

"Fae breach, portal three. Four midsize fae battle creatures, species unknown. Fae breach, portal three. Four midsize fae battle creatures, species unknown," blasted through the speakers on repeat.

Relief rushed through me. Yay, I'd be getting out of running.

As soon as the relief came, it left because I realized there were four creatures attacking and I was potentially about TO DIE (I was still glad I wasn't running).

Still, this was about to be a shit show.

The numb clicked on.

A few minutes later, I ran through the forest in my beast form.

Sprint faster. Don't stay at the back.

Branches slapped my fur, and the snow fell in a cold white sheet of snowflakes and hail.

From every direction, the wind screamed, and even with my advanced vision, the visibility was only a couple of feet in every direction.

The scents of pine, chestnut, frost, and cranberry burned my oversensitive nose—the four of us ran together—we were alphas in beast form, and we did what we did best.

We hunted.

"Screeeeeeeee, screeeeeeee, screeeeeee, screeeeeee." The chattering screams of the spider fae echoed throughout the forest from four different directions—there were four of the fucking creatures.

Holy fuck. Even numb, something close to fear squeezed my gut.

Shaking my furry head, I roared back into the forest.

Slit their throats and mount their heads.

My numb self didn't know fear; there was just conflict and power, and it conquered both.

Jax's bear bellowed beside me. His beast's call joined mine and sent vibrations through the forest floor.

Bark cracked like gunshots as the spider fae maneuvered their spindly bodies through the tight tree trunks.

Whipping my furry head side to side, I tried to track the four fae, but it was nearly impossible with the limited visibility.

The wind howled and slammed branches back and forth. They clattered all around, and thick green pine needles slammed against my body. If I weren't over a thousand pounds, I might have been knocked to the ground.

The betas hunched low with their guns pointed high as they fought for stability in the brutal conditions.

Beside me, Jax's bear and Ascher's half-ram form were heavy enough to withstand the punishing wind.

Cobra, with his snake eyes and shadows, stood eerily still in the onslaught—his mostly unshifted form should have been blown back—but he stood unaffected with his characteristic snake stillness.

He was a predator waiting to attack.

"Betas, stay with the alphas—we'll each take one fae," Cobra alpha-barked, and somehow the sound carried in the shrieking valley. Since he was the only beast that could speak, he was in charge of directives during the battles.

Immediately, Jax roared back at him, his furry muzzle opened wide to showcase his dagger-like teeth as he tossed his head toward me—it was clear what he was trying to say.

He still wanted me to stay behind him. I kept my eyes forward, my breath puffing in a frosty cloud in front of my face.

Show him.

Cobra and I were on the same page. For some reason, when Cobra was in his beast form, he was the only alpha that treated me like an equal, and not a weakling that needed to be protected.

I was the opposite of weak. I was made for power, for killing, and I would show them.

A loud "screeeeeeeee" echoed closely, and everyone burst into action.

Jax took the lead and sprinted after the creature, and everyone followed.

Head whipping from side to side, I searched the forest for the other three. As we ran, the glossy black exoskeleton of the spider fae came into view.

In the howling white wind and green trees, the shiny black glistened as it flashed. The fae jumped from tree to tree. Once again, its legs shone with thousands of daggers.

Kill it and rip off its legs.

Jax sprinted ahead, his massive bear moving much faster than expected—but the fae didn't turn to fight him—instead, it jumped from tree to tree and sprinted toward the mountains on the edge of the valley.

With my ears flicking back and forth atop my head, I pinpointed the clattering noise of the fae's spindly legs through the forest.

All four of the fae were headed toward the mountain. As a group, we turned and sprinted after them.

My powerful legs bunched and contracted beneath me as I flew over the snowy ground.

Leaping over snowbanks and fallen trees, I sliced through the frosty air like a bullet.

In my non beast form, running felt like a thankless chore and my lungs collapsed in pain—in my beast form, my lungs expanded and my body flew—running was freedom.

Follow the spider. Catch it.

The numb egged me forward. I could have easily overtaken Jax in pursuit, but I held myself back. He was still the leader.

As we followed the fae closer to the mountainside, the trees became less dense, and the fae started making larger leaps among them. Jax was close to overtaking it.

The fae whirled in a flash of black, hundreds of eyes glaring as its massive pincer opened—it screamed at Jax.

Jax leaped with his claws and maw extended directly at the spider fae—there was a loud crunch followed by a deafening roar the two beasts collided.

Jax's sharp claws fileted the creature as he dug through its neck, and the fae kicked him with its shiny legs.

Jax's red beast blood and the fae's black blood sprayed across the white snow, a gruesome painting.

The putrid stench of black tar burned my nostrils. Roaring, I halted in the thick snow and tensed my muscles, looking for an opening to help Jax.

To my right, three loud shrieks echoed—I whipped my head in their direction—three black spiders skittered away.

Jax snarled, and the betas ran up to help him battle the other spider with bullets. He had backup, and Cobra had said each alpha was to handle one beast.

Go after it. Kill. Hunt.

The numb screamed in my skull, and I listened.

Turning, I sprinted after the three other spider fae. Ascher and Cobra followed closely. Ascher's hooves clomped behind me, and Cobra moved like a ghost. His unique frost scent was the only thing that alerted me to his location.

Screeching ahead of me, the fae sprinted up the side of the massive mountain.

The air grew thinner and powder snow transformed into icy rocks, which rolled down behind me as I climbed higher.

Somehow, the howling wind became more punishing, and the air became so cold that even in my beast form, a slight chill bit at my nose.

With fewer trees to hide them, the large black spider fae flashed before me as their many legs struggled over large boulders and slipped on slick ice. Sleet fell faster and harder the higher we climbed, the visibility worsened.

Faster. Hunt and kill them.

Ascher and Cobra fell farther behind me as my powerful muscles allowed me to leap over the heavy boulders, and my thick, tufted toes helped me easily maneuver through the icy conditions.

I was built to rule the mountains.

The clattering of the spider fae's exoskeleton slapping against the rocks vibrated beneath my paws. I was gaining on them.

With a powerful leap, I cleared an enormous boulder—the spiders were a few feet away. All three stood behind an opening framed by two massive snowcapped boulders.

I launched myself at the creatures but realized my mistake.

Turn back.

It was too late to change direction, I was flying straight at them.

My momentum abruptly stopped—I hung suspended in midair.

Shiny white strands covered in sharp, little grooves tangled across my fur. The strands were unnoticeable from a distance; they blended seamlessly with the white-capped mountain terrain.

I was caught within their web.

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19
Spiderwebs and Big Snakes

Sadie

The three spider fae screamed behind me as I struggled to extract myself from the web.

They laid the trap and led me here. It was all planned.

My muscles burned with pain as I struggled to remove myself from the web. The tiny threads were impossibly strong, wrapping around my arms and legs and holding me tight.

We'd been debriefed by Auntie on the spiders after the last attack, and no one had said anything about them making webs. The web had sharp little grooves, and everywhere it touched, my skin burned.

Every small movement caused a stabbing pain.

I held myself still and tried to catch my bearings.

The three spider fae continued to scream and chitter behind me. Visibility was still shit as a mix of sleet and hail hammered the mountainside.

The sun was high in the sky, but it was completely obscured by heavy gray clouds. It might as well have been dusk. Good thing my advanced vision worked better in the dark than in the light. Although, right now, there wasn't much to see.

Hail clacked all around as it ricocheted off frozen rocks. The world screamed around me, a swirling tempest of rage that promised only agony.

The conditions were so rough and the mountain was so steep that I doubted the betas would be able to climb the boulders to reach me.

It was all up to the alphas.

There was nothing soft about the shifter realm, but today was a particularly brutal day.

While I was ensnared on the side of the mountain, the low visibility made it seem like the rock face plummeted at an impossibly steep angle.

Stay still. Wait for them to make the first move.

The numb didn't care how precarious the conditions were—all that mattered was I was an alpha, a saber-toothed tiger, and I would prevail—there was nothing else in my mind.

Inside, I was colder than the freezing temperatures that swirled around me.

So I waited.

They'd trapped me in the web for a reason, and I would uncover it.

There was a loud bleat as Ascher launched his half-ram body over my web-entangled form and landed behind me. His massive onyx horns and colorful tattoos flashed by me as he cleared at least a fifteen-foot jump easily.

Screams and shrieks sounded behind me, and Ascher bleated loudly—the web had ensnared my head—I couldn't turn around.

Wetness slapped against my back, and the scents of blood and burning tar filled my nostrils. Whipping my head to the side, I chuffed in frustration.

I couldn't turn enough to see what was happening behind me. The struggle to turn hurt, as the web bit into me with every moment.

"Need help?" Cobra lisped slightly as he appeared in front of my face.

His eerie snake eyes glowed, bits of green, red, and black were visible in them. With my cat eyesight, I could see more of the colors from such a close distance.

They were breathtaking.

I chuffed in his face, and he blinked back creepily.

Nope, his slit eyes were still weird.

Behind us, the sound of crunching exoskeleton echoed.

Cobra should have been in a frenzy, working hard to defeat the fae and helping Ascher battle. Instead, like a total creep, he stood and stared at me with his head cocked to the side.

I was held off the ground by the web, his eerie eyes were aligned with mine.

I opened my mouth to show off my dagger fangs.

A smile split across Cobra's pale face. It *wasn't* an expression of happiness.

He stood creepily still, the backbreaking winds hammered against him, but the only sign was his inky black hair slapping back and forth atop his head.

The longer he stood, the more shadow snakes slithered across his icy jaw, darkening the crystals and emeralds embedded in his face.

The thousands of tiny jewels sparkled and winked as if they physically responded to the snakes' caresses.

I chuffed louder to let him know I didn't need his help.

Apparently, Cobra spoke saber-toothed tiger, because he threw his handsome head back and chuckled darkly like what I had said was hilarious; like we were old chums hanging out, and we weren't in the middle of a vicious battle.

Ascher bleated behind us, and the noise was louder and more frantic, like he was screaming at Cobra to help.

Stay perfectly still.

The numb sounded subdued, as if it was afraid I would startle Cobra. He was the biggest threat on the mountain. The fiercest predator.

On my back, obscured by the web, I felt the tiny snake that had been with me for the last week give a little zing of excitement. It was overjoyed by Cobra's proximity, slithering in joyful circles across my back, zigzagging amid my downy fur like it belonged there.

Even numb, I rolled my eyes at its antics.

I roared as something slammed into my back—pain shot down my spine.

The force threw me forward with ridiculous momentum, but somehow the web was strong as steel. I didn't break free. However, the collision banged the sharp edges of the web deeper into my flesh.

I whimpered

Stay calm. Chew through the web to free yourself.

I leaned forward and tried to drag my dagger-like fangs across the web. Unfortunately, the web didn't break and some of it got snarled on the corner of my lip. A gush of tangy blood flooded my mouth.

It had razored through my mouth deep.

Do it again. I ignored the numb. Most of the time, it had great ideas, but sometimes its lack of self-preservation was concerning.

More pain streaked down my back, and it felt like someone had taken a hot poker to my flesh.

Burning tar filled my nostrils, and if I weren't numb, I probably would have passed out from the onslaught of pain.

A spider is stabbing you with its leg.

Writhing in the web, I growled at Cobra to do something.

There was a frenzy of bleating behind me, followed by loud crunching, and the hot poker sensation stopped. It sounded like Ascher had barreled into the fae with his massive horns.

"Watch and learn, little kitty," Cobra said, and then maniacally chuckled like it was all good fun.

He needed serious psychological help. Even while numb, I noted that was ironic, coming from the person with the homicidal voice.

Cobra's expression darkened as he raked his gaze over my wounds—the shadow snakes writhing across his skin slithered to the ground—but they didn't stream forward in the hundreds like in the last battle.

Each snake seemed to lie atop another snake.

The writhing pile grew and grew as an endless stream of snakes appeared on Cobra's pale skin and slithered down to join the . . . *thing*.

In less than thirty seconds, hundreds of separate snakes had expanded and combined.

Into a *monster* snake.

The creature was as tall as Cobra and as wide as my beast. It was also disturbingly long. So long that I couldn't see where its mammoth body ended on the side of the mountain.

Shockingly, the massive snake was three-dimensional.

Before, Cobra's snakes had been completely flat, like shadows. This creature was thick and wide, with glistening black scales darker than the onyx of Ascher's horns.

The massive snake's mouth opened up and showed off twin dagger-like fangs longer than my body. A forked bright-red tongue tasted the icy air.

It wasn't the creature's size, scales, or massive teeth that shook me the most.

It was its eyes. The huge snake had Cobra's eyes—the same startling swirl of colors stared back at me.

When Cobra blinked, the snake blinked.

The little shadow snake on my back twirled around and sent zips of happiness and wonder across my back. It gave off a distinct impression of shock and amazement. Apparently, Cobra had not released the full creature in a very long time.

Ascher bleated in annoyance behind me, and before I could blink, the huge black body slithered over the boulders beside me.

Cobra's hand ran along the side of the snake like he was petting a favorite dog and not a terrifying beast.

Screams echoed behind me, the snake head hissing and rattling, as Cobra kept his hand on the gigantic snake's body.

I still couldn't see its tail.

All at once, something banged into my back, and a spider fae jumped over the web and faced me. Before I could growl or do anything, two of its legs cut the web on either side of me and folded it inward.

I was completely ensnared.

Before Ascher or Cobra could react, it jumped ridiculously high, and I went airborne down the side of the mountain. The fae creature barely caught itself.

Bite it.

The spider fae scurried through the brutal conditions, down the side of the mountain, slipping and sliding on icy rocks. My body was wrapped up in the web, held by its giant pincers, but my head and maw were free.

Still, with how tightly it was wrapped around me, there should have been no way for me to gain purchase and bite.

If I weren't numb, that was.

As I wrenched through the barbed web, every inch of my body screamed with agony—I shut the pain away in the deep recesses of my numb brain.

I would have passed out cold if I weren't numb.

A copper tang filled the air as cuts skewered almost every inch of my skin. From the sticky sensation on my fur, I was completely covered in my blood.

The spider ran quicker, but then scuttled slower down the side of the mountain as dangerous ravines jutted out around us.

One wrong move and we both would be dead.

I tensed all my muscles and pulled my head forward again until my maw was close to one of the spider's dagger-covered legs. The sharp pain intensified.

Do it now. Too much blood loss. Act now.

I lunged.

Three things happened at once.

First—my teeth caught one of the spider's legs and its thousands of tiny daggers stabbed through my jaw as the leg crunched in two beneath my bite.

Second—the spider fae screamed, slipped on ice, and tumbled to the side. Ascher had already taken out two of its legs, and it didn't have enough left to control its movement.

Third—the spider released the web from its pincers as the creature tumbled down a ravine.

Claws extended. Grab purchase now.

The web still dug into my skin like a sticky blanket, but when the spider had released the sides, it had flapped open, allowing me to move.

I reached both of my front claws forward and dragged them along the side of the mountain—my skin burned as the web hooks bit into it at the movement—but the strands no longer constricted me.

My furry body skidded across the rough, icy boulders, my paws screaming in agony as my claws struggled to find purchase. With each bump of rock, it felt like they were being pulled out of my paw.

Finally, my claws slid deep enough into rock that they stopped my momentum. My back feet kicked at nothing.

I was hanging, with only half my belly on the mountain.

The other half dangled over the ravine.

Beside me, the spider screeched as it slammed against a boulder balanced on the edge of the ravine. Its black body clattered in a splay of limbs.

It twitched in pain.

With the boulder slowly rolling back behind it, its hundreds of eyes turned to stare at me.

For a long moment, beast and fae stared eye to eye. Both of us were covered in blood.

Help it.

The strangest urge overcame me. The longer its hundreds of eyes stared into mine, the more I became certain that it needed my help.

We weren't foes—we were two animals on the side of a mountain, staring at our deaths.

I dragged my aching limbs forward, crawled away from the edge, and stood on my four legs. A part of me noticed that my fur was no longer white. It was blood red.

I opened my maw and took a step forward to help the fae.

Abruptly, Cobra's massive snake barreled down the side of the mountain like a shot.

Its scales glimmered like stars in the night sky—there was a loud crunch as the snake slammed into the spider fae, broke the boulder behind it, and plummeted it into the ravine—turning, I watched them both fall hundreds of feet.

The spider fae splattered into tiny pieces at the bottom of the rocky outcrop. Cobra's snake bounced and turned its creepy eyes back up the mountainside, then slithered calmly into the forest.

"Boom," Cobra said behind me.

I turned and roared into his perfect face as Ascher climbed down behind him, covered in cuts and blood.

Cobra smiled down like I was a little kitten and patted my head.

Whatever, I probably couldn't have helped the spider fae anyway. It had likely been some trap.

Together, the three of us limped down the side of the mountain to find Jax. *He had all the betas. He's fine.*

With his snake eyes gleaming and a creepy smile on his face, Cobra buried his cold hands in my bloody fur, on my back. I was so large I stood near his shoulder.

Ascher limped beside us, his horns big and his terrifying snout puffing frosty clouds in his wake.

Even numb, I noted we were a disturbing sight, red and black blood dripping in a twisted trail behind us.

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20
Kidnapped

Sadie

When we limped back to the forest, we found Jax and the betas standing atop a tied-up spider fae.

Jax roared as he stood over his prize.

Auntie had said the ultimate mission had been to capture a fae.

This was a huge victory for us.

Standing in front of the betas, Ascher transformed back into his male form—all six feet, five inches of glorious tattooed male stood naked on display—his abs rippled as he hurried over to Jax.

Sensing Ascher's urgency, Jax transformed back naked.

My long tongue rolled out of my mouth as impressive physique was displayed, piercings shining against his dark skin.

I wasn't the only one who noticed.

A bunch of the beta women and men blushed and openly ogled the alphas. Giggling to each other, with massive guns in their hands, they whispered about the sizes of the alphas' manhoods. One man licked his lips wantonly.

My advanced hearing caught every salacious piece of gossip. One of the twins whispered, "Jax has the biggest dick I've ever seen." Her twin nodded in agreement.

I couldn't fault their logic; the man was enormous.

Still, Jax and Ascher seemed worried and unaware of the fuss they were creating. Cobra's hand tangled deeper in my fur, and I winced a little as his hand dug some of the spiderweb's barbs deeper into my flesh.

"Cobra created a huge snake, like the biggest fucking thing I've ever seen, and it slithered away into this forest," Ascher whispered into Jax's ear.

Suddenly, Jax's gray eyes filled with worry, and he snapped his head over to look at Cobra.

Jax's face was contorted with fear. Something told me it would be a problem if Cobra's monstrous snake got loose.

"Cobra and Ascher, with me—we have to do some recon of the battle. Also, Sadie, help all the betas get to the ward, and get yourself checked."

Cobra reluctantly disentangled his fist from my fur and walked over to join the other two men. He looked back over his shoulder at me with an intense expression.

My beast chuffed in annoyance. *You're an alpha. Assert yourself over Jax.*

I was covered in a spiderweb and blood, so I nodded at Jax and limped back into the compound alongside the other betas.

They could figure out Cobra's shit on their own. I had a date with a hot bath, and a coma.

Once inside the locker room, I lay on the ground as the betas dropped off their weapons and left for the ward. I waited to change back into my other form until I was completely alone.

Changing back was easy. The hard part was the fact that the spiderweb didn't magically poof away like I'd hoped.

Instead, it fell on top of my much weaker flesh and opened thousands of little cuts across my sensitive skin.

Even the numb couldn't block out the pain as the web's hooks dug into my sensitive breasts, stomach, and thigh. Biting down on my lip, I screamed at the agony and slammed my head against the cold floor.

Blessedly, I knocked myself out.

As soon as I came back to consciousness, I wished I hadn't.

I wasn't lying on the ground in the warm training room.

My ass was naked—butt fucking nude—and I was being dragged across the ground like a deer carcass. Through the snow.

Hail and frigid wind battered my exposed body.

I took stock of the situation.

Oh great, I'm dead.

And what a situation it was.

A man hauled me by my feet across the hard ground. His back was to me, but he was fully clothed and looked warm. Meanwhile, the icy conditions

pummeled my naked form.

Instantly, I began to kick and buck about as I tried to free myself from my assailant.

"What the fuck?" I screamed at the fucker who was carting my limp body through the freezing forest, like an elk carcass.

Unfortunately, I was in the aftermath of the numb. As if the cold wasn't enough, a wave of nausea and queasiness overtook me.

I was being carted with my feet in the air so there was nowhere for my vomit to go but all over my chest.

Anger burst through me at the same time as the pain.

I had worked too hard to be treated like this. I was *not* a little girl anymore.

I was a fucking alpha.

"Put me down and let me go," I alpha-barked at the fucker.

Immediately, he dropped my legs, like he was surprised by my alpha persuasion.

Sadly, he snapped out of it quickly and grabbed my legs again.

I gasped in shock.

"John, what the fuck?" More bile dribbled out the side of my mouth.

The kind red-haired beta that had tried so hard to be my friend didn't look so friendly now. He looked harder, angrier, more desperate. Still, he didn't look evil.

"Yes, let's not waste time on surprises," he said. "I'm about to get a massive payout from the queen, and you are the only thing between me and riches." John calmly continued to drag me across the cold, snowy ground.

I kicked and tried to gain purchase, but with my legs up in the air, it was almost impossible. John had beta strength, and I needed to recharge the numb. Plus, I was weak in the aftermath of fighting.

It was hard to focus on getting free when the cold was making my muscles lock up and everything was spinning.

You're a fucking tiger, Sadie, I reminded myself desperately and pushed through the tingling that allowed me to shift forms. *What the goddess?*

No matter how hard I concentrated on transforming, nothing happened.

Did he have some type of enchantment?

"Why can't I transform?" I yelled like a banshee as the dizziness continued.

The trees might as well have been leaping about for how steady my vision was.

John said nothing.

"Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform? Why can't I transform?" I yelled it over and over again in the loudest, most annoying voice.

Numb Sadie knew the power of silence. Un-numb Sadie knew the power of screaming like a psycho.

The cold wind bit at my skin, and the freezing temperature made me sleepy. Screaming was the only thing I could focus on. At least the freezing temperature numbed the stings from the small cuts all over my body.

"For sun god's sake, *shut the fuck up*." John twirled around and slapped me across the face.

Truthfully, my face was so numb from the cold that I barely felt the hit, but it was still so rude. However, as John whirled back around, a medallion on his neck flew forward. It was a vial that seemed to be filled with some type of blue flame.

It glowed with the telltale sign of a fae enchantment. I would bet all my money it was blocking my ability to shift.

One mystery solved. Now I needed to save my ass.

"And to think I was fucking nice to you and untangled you from the spiderweb," John said angrily as he continued dragging me.

I loved that he was trying to act like he wasn't the *villain* in the story right now as he hauled my naked, weakened form literally through snow.

If I didn't freeze to death, it would be a miracle.

My eyes closed, and my skin started to prickle with unnatural warmth.

Frostbite was setting in.

What would the numb do? I asked myself.

With all my remaining strength, I reached my hands wide and grabbed a downed tree branch. Quickly I swung it forward with all my might, toward the back of John's head.

It hit with a sickening thud—he dropped me.

Unfortunately, he didn't hit the deck and pass out. He whirled around and attacked.

Clutching my weapon, I was able to scurry back, find purchase, and hit him with it.

A crack sounded like a gunshot as my branch collided with John's arm. I'd never known breaking bones could feel so satisfying.

At that moment, I felt like I understood Cobra a little more.

"Just come with me. I'm rescuing you," John said through gritted teeth as we circled each other.

I actually scoffed and swallowed down a manic chuckle. What buffoonery was this? Did John think I was the queen of dumbasses?

"By dragging me naked through the freezing forest?" I shouted with incredulity. "Were you taking me out to die?" I looked around at the swaying trees and heavy white snow.

"Of course not!" John yelled like the idea was preposterous.

Something that looked an awful lot like guilt flashed across his face.

I fought the urge to keep my eyes open as the cold made me slow and sluggish. "Then where the fuck are you ta—" I stopped talking. As I stared around the familiar forest, it hit me like a truck.

John was taking me to the portal.

He'd mentioned something about a queen as he'd dragged me. *Holy shit*. My knees almost collapsed beneath me. He was taking me to the fae queen. Maybe as a hostage of war?

"Why would you bring me to her?" I asked, genuinely confused, as we circled each other.

My steps were getting smaller, and I started to stumble more. While my tan ass was bare and freezing, John was bundled in heavy, warm garments.

I had a weapon, but it wasn't going to hold him off long.

"Nothing is as it seems…this entire realm is a fucking lie," he said cryptically as he spat onto the ground to punctuate his statement. His eyes looked down at my scarred torso, then back at my face.

His features pinched with horror as he took in my abused flesh.

I snarled at him and refused to feel ashamed over my flesh. It was his fault I was exposed and naked in the cold.

My chest tightened, and a part of my brain flickered, like I knew information relevant to what he was saying. But the cold was oppressive, and my last brain cell was barely firing.

In a flurry of motion, John dove and tackled me to the ground.

I got in a few good whacks with my stick, but the cold was seeping into my blood and the world was still spinning.

He landed two punishing blows to my face, scooped me into his arms, and began to sprint through the forest. He carried me fireman-style.

Hot blood coursed down my mouth, onto my forehead, and I noted hazily that it felt good in the cold. I knew my life was falling apart, because I was marveling at the warmth of my blood.

A kernel of rage lit inside my chest.

How dare John break my nose again? At this rate, it was going to be amazing if it ever looked normal and didn't just hang off my face. These fucking men and my nose. What had it ever done to hurt them?

The cold was shutting my eyes, but a part of me was still wide-awake and panicking. The fae queen was rumored to be a ruthless bitch who tortured her enemies brutally.

All rumors had some truth to them.

Opening my mouth, I screamed as loudly as I could. My only hope was that someone would hear me.

My mind flashed to the spider fae that had looked at me pleadingly before Cobra had sent it to its death. Was the moon goddess punishing me for not helping it? Why was everything so cryptic and complicated?

John yelled at me to shut up, so I bit down on his tricep.

There was a tear in the sleeve where I'd cut him with the branch—I burrowed my small teeth deep into his skin—like my beast, I bit and savaged the exposed flesh.

John jerked and grabbed me by the hair. He ripped my head off his arm.

Still, he stumbled to a stop to do so, and satisfaction burst through me. Even with my eyes shutting from the cold, I wasn't completely useless.

A chunk of his skin was caught in my teeth, and I spit his gore back at his head. John snarled down at me but resumed running awkwardly, with one of his hands painfully tangled in my hair so I couldn't bite him.

Fine.

I shrieked for my life.

John tugged my hair painfully back to get me to stop, my neck bent at an impossible angle, and I just screamed louder.

I was still an alpha.

He wasn't taking me easy.

I tried to kick out with my legs, but his other arm tightened around them and held them clamped against his chest.

Thud.

Out of the blue, a figure slammed John's face against a tree—my captor went limp as the momentum knocked him out.

Terrified, I kicked away from John's body and whirled to see the new attacker.

Had someone else come through the portal, something more terrifying than the beta?

"You're okay, little alpha," came Jax's deep voice as he walked forward to my crouching form. I looked up at his friendly face.

And promptly passed out with relief.

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21
Rescued by a Handsome Alpha

Sadie

S*lap*.

The tingling intensified, and the hands shaking my shoulders refused to let me sleep. Why was my life so hard? Could the moon goddess give me a break, just once?

"Little alpha, don't you *dare* go to sleep on me now," Jax alpha-barked, and my eyelids fluttered open against my control.

"Whaa?" I tried to say "what," but my lips were numb with cold, and they were tingling like the rest of my miserable body.

Snowflakes fell heavily around Jax, and even dying from frostbite, a part of me was shaken by how beautiful the large man was.

I was also jealous that he'd been blessed with so many muscles.

"It's too cold. You can't fall asleep—your heart will stop beating!" Jax shook me with increasing ferocity as he stared down at me in concern.

He had me gathered in both his arms and pressed against his chest as he ran through the snow.

"Fabulous," I garbled and let my neck fall back. It was too much effort to hold it up.

"You're immortal but you're young. I can't risk it and this isn't working—it's too far," Jax said mostly to himself.

He began to unzip his heavy coat and take off his massive sweatshirt.

My mouth lolled open, and I would have told him I was not feeling sexual, but I was too busy admiring his eight-pack and ridiculous *V* lines.

My eyes started to drift shut, and I wondered how many sit-ups I had to do to look like him.

"I'm going to tuck you against my chest for warmth. It's the only way." Jax maneuvered me against his naked chest. Somehow, he pulled his

sweatshirt and jacket on top of both of us.

"One b-b-billion sit-ups," I said with a manic giggle. My tongue was numb in my mouth, and the world was spinning.

"You're losing it. Keep your eyes open, Sadie," Jax alpha-barked again.

I chuckled as his hoodie completely encased both of us. The head hole was too tight, so Jax leaned down and ripped it open so we could both fit.

"T-t-two heads!" I pointed out helpfully and sighed at the delicious warmth wafting off Jax's chest. It was so much better than the freezing air.

He easily put his arms through the jacket and zipped it up atop both of us.

I was completely curled up in a ball against his expansive chest, and he supported me with a hand across my backside.

With me cocooned against his warmth, still awkwardly naked, Jax sprinted faster through the forest. It wasn't sexual at all.

Just one alpha giving another alpha heat. No biggie (I was panicking).

The longer I was pressed against his warmth, the more my skin tingled with pain. Little pinpricks bit me everywhere, and I wished I had access to the numb.

Fucking John had really done it, dragging me out in the cold, ass naked. What a jerk. You *really* couldn't trust shifters these days.

"Th-th-thank you," I said softly as my teeth chattered from the cold.

As my core temperature was slowly heating, sanity was also returning.

The pain focused my brain, and the world stopped spinning around me.

"Where was John taking you?" Jax asked softly, and I sighed heavily in response.

I leaned my head against his chest. Cradled against him, I felt protected from all life's evils. There were a lot of them.

I was also really grateful that Jax had been the one to find me. Cobra would somehow have spun it so that I was on John's side, and would have found a way to blame me.

"He said to the f-f-fae qu-qu-queen." I gnawed on my icy lip to try and stop my teeth from chattering. It wasn't a good sign that she wanted me. My short, miserable life was looking like it was about to be way shorter and more miserable.

"What? Why?" Jax stopped running for a second and stared down at me in shock.

I gave him a small, pitiful smile, and he immediately resumed sprinting. His chest and ab muscles bunched against my skin.

“Does it have something to do with the scars covering you?” Jax asked softly, and my stomach plummeted.

Bile climbed up my throat at the reminder of my hideous scars, and I fought the urge to distance myself from Jax.

He knew.

He fucking knew.

I sighed heavily and had a small pity party for myself. Then I girded my lady loins and told my truth.

“I w-w-was an indentured s-s-servant before I became an alpha. He liked to use his b-b-belt. G-g-growing up, I was s-s-so s-small and weak. I thought I w-was a null.” I tasted blood as I gnawed on my lower lip and my chattering teeth slammed into it.

Jax didn’t say anything. The world seemed eerily quiet, even though the wind and snow shrieked around us.

“I’m an a-alpha, but I am super s-s-small and my coloring is weird. J-J-John said s-s-something about a reward, giving me to the fae queen, and that the whole realm was a lie? I honestly have n-n-no idea. I woke up after p-p-passing out from my wounds to him dragging me n-n-naked toward the portal. I swear I f-fought him off as hard as I could. H-he must have taken advantage of the s-s-spiderweb incapacitating me so he could bring me to her?”

I trailed off awkwardly as my teeth chattered uncontrollably. Apparently, fighting spider fae and almost being kidnapped by a trusted beta made me ramble. *Who knew?*

“I th-th-thought he was a really nice g-g-guy, and I t-t-trusted him.” I tucked my head lower in the sweatshirt hole. I couldn’t deal with Jax’s anger or rejection of me.

It would break me.

“He will pay for what he’s done. I will return and retrieve him once I bring you back.” Jax’s chest rumbled with a slight growl. The vibrations were more comforting than scary. “You’re no one’s servant.”

“Thanks for b-b-believing me,” I whispered as tears welled up in my eyes.

Jax’s calm acceptance and warm presence made me want to sob in his arms. He had an aura of softness about him, which was ironic because he was built like a boulder.

“Of course, little alpha.” He sprinted faster through the forest.

The training compound came into view, and once again, my stomach plummeted to my toes. My skin still prickled all over with pain, but the anxiety in my gut hurt worse.

"You c-c-can't tell the other a-a-alphas, p-p-p-please," I begged him while patting my hands against his chest to get his attention. My worry made the chattering worse, and my words were barely discernible.

"This is a major security breach and impacts the war. They need to know…I will not keep secrets from them," Jax said calmly, and I fought the urge to sob like a baby.

Post-numb emotions really sucked.

"P-p-please, p-p-please. They don't r-r-r-respect me now. They d-def won't then." My eyes burned. As my tears fell, they froze to my face, and it was hard to blink.

"They will respect you," Jax said with a snarl. "I'll ensure it."

"You kn-kn-know that's not how r-r-respect works." I desperately tugged at his sweatshirt.

We were a few feet away from the door to the locker room.

Jax didn't say anything.

Obviously, his loyalty to Cobra was paramount to anything I wanted, and I understood that. "F-f-fine, but at least don't tell them about my s-s-scars. That doesn't change anything!" I shamelessly begged and aggressively tugged at his sweatshirt. "P-p-please."

Jax took a deep breath through his nose, and his lungs expanded beneath me—he stared down into my eyes—I held his gaze, giving him my most pleading face.

Since I was covered in my own blood, naked, frozen half to death, and tucked in his coat, it wasn't hard to look pathetic.

Something in my face must have gotten to him, because Jax nodded as he entered the battle room.

"Fine…I won't tell them about your scars, but that's it. I'm telling them everything else. And you need to debrief us all in detail about what happened…after you get warm and have eaten." Jax gently lifted his sweatshirt and helped lower me to the ground.

Turning around, he gave me his back and pointed to his locker.

Wordlessly, I pulled on his sweatpants and sweatshirt—the warmth from the building was too much on my frozen skin—I was barely able to pull the clothes on without screaming in agony.

Each brush of warm clothes over my flesh burned.

Thankfully, the sweatpants had a tie, so after rolling the waistband ten times, I knotted them off. Jax's sweatshirt fell past my knees, so my modesty was intact.

"You can t-t-turn around now."

I winced at the roughness of my voice. Now that he had seen my scars, it wasn't going to take much for Jax to put two and two together about why my voice was so broken.

So much for him respecting me as an alpha or desiring me as a woman. My secret fantasies were going to definitely remain fantasies.

"You aren't alone now…if you ever need to talk." Jax reached forward and cupped my chin with his rough hand.

His clothes smelled of warm chestnuts, and the scent wrapped around me, comforting. I leaned forward into his hand and smiled up at him.

"H-h-honey I need more therapy th-th-than you can offer." I cackled and punched his arm to lighten the mood. The tension in the room was heavy, and I didn't want Jax to view me as broken.

"Go to the ward now, get warm, and eat. I'm going to bring back John." When he started speaking, he looked down at me with warmth and care. However, by the end, he was shaking with rage and his gray eyes had become sharp chips of ice.

For a second, I was afraid for John. You *didn't* want Jax mad at you.

Before I could say anything, Jax spun and charged out the door, back into the howling wind.

Hastily, I hurried away from the cold door and stumbled back into the compound. I'd almost died a lot today, and I couldn't wait to drown myself in a delicious bath of healing salts.

I deserved it.

Stumbling down the long halls and rickety stairs, I wondered for the billionth time who'd designed the compound and what drugs they had been using when they did. They must have been good drugs, because the building was a complex maze of halls and stairs that made literally zero sense.

Arms pressed against the walls for support, I barely dragged myself through the door with an *A*. A doctor wasn't going to do anything that a good bath filled with healing salts wouldn't fix.

When I walked through the bedroom door, Ascher immediately stalked across the room toward me.

“Where the fuck have you been? We were hunting down Cobra’s snake, then we came back, and no one knew where you were. You freaked us all the fuck out!” Ascher yelled, and I noted that both his arms were in slings.

Jax must have made him stay in the room, and the tattooed man was pissed as shit about it.

I didn’t have time for his drama.

“I was g-g-getting kidnapped.” I tried to shove past him.

“What the fuck, Princess!”

I winced; he really was a drama queen. Frankly, it was exhausting.

“Likely story,” Cobra sneered. He was propped up against the wall behind his bed with an ice pack across his head. For the most part, he looked fine.

Still, the pale man managed to look paler than usual and his sharp cheekbones seemed to protrude like daggers, his cheeks more sunken. Summoning that massive snake must have drained him.

Shuddering from the cold and the thought of the creepy snake, I ignored his distrust. I’d been expecting it.

At least Cobra’s eyes were no longer snake eyes. The dark, emerald abyss of hatred swirled in his normal eyes. It was nice that he was back to normal.

“Wh-wh-whatever, J-J-Jax is g-g-going to bring b-back the kidnapper now. H-he kn-knocked him out,” I barely managed to say through chattering teeth. The building was warm, but the cold had spread bone-deep and I felt myself growing sleepy.

“Excuse me?” Ascher stilled. “What kidnapper…Have you been out in the cold…Get in the fucking hot bath now.” Ascher shoved me forward toward the bathroom.

Cobra worked his jaw back and forth, staring at me with a manic expression. He still looked pissed, but something had changed in his gaze. He hobbled out of his bed and leaned against the wall for support.

Both men stared at me. Cobra’s eyes sharpened. *Kidnapper*, he mouthed silently, but said nothing else.

“P-p-please stand r-r-right h-here.” I pointed at a random spot on the far wall.

Both Ascher and Cobra looked at me distrustfully, but I filled my eyes with tears and gave a pathetic sniffle.

They both went to the far wall and leaned against it.

With all my remaining strength, I threw myself into the bathroom, slammed the door, and locked it behind me.

"What do you need from us, Princess?" Ascher called out, his voice thick with worry.

"T-t-to leave m-m-me the fuck a-alone!" I screamed, and they shouted expletives back at me.

Actually, Ascher swore up a blue streak and shouted. Cobra said nothing. He was uncharacteristically quiet on the other side of the door. I could practically feel him glaring through it at me.

Ripping out of Jax's clothes, I fell over a couple of times as I tried to get my frozen limbs to work.

With my eyes shutting from tiredness, I barely manage to dump the entire bag of healing salts into the tub. Unfortunately, I also dropped the bag itself into the tub, but I had bigger problems.

Stumbling forward, I once again face-planted, naked, into a hot bath.

Except this time, I turned over and screamed.

The warm water burned impossibly, and I reckoned my skin was melting off the bone. I fucking hated the cold.

I reminded myself why I was putting myself through this shit—Lucinda was still safe and at school—I needed to get her away from Dick.

In the meantime, I couldn't get myself killed. I had to obey the oligarchy.

Outside, Ascher bellowed as I screamed, and slammed against the door.

"If it burns, that means you'll live," Cobra said darkly, his tone strange.

I fucking hated it here.

Lying back in the boiling tub, I squinted my eyes shut with pain and fantasized about slowly dismembering a certain pale alpha.

There was a small zing on my back as the little shadow snake laughed in agreement. It didn't care about how violent my thoughts were; it always got happy when I thought about Cobra.

Little snake was as fucked up as he was.

Sinking deeper into the boiling tub, I closed my eyes and prayed I would wake up in a different realm. I prayed that everything about the shifter realm was just a bad dream.

"Who kidnapped you?" Cobra asked softly on the other side of the door.

I didn't respond.

Cobra made a harsh, strangled noise.

I sunk deeper into the water. Spoiler—it wasn't.

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22
Rage

Jax

A few seconds later . . .

I sprinted as fast as I could through the forest. Inhaling icy air, I exhaled pure rage and . . . pain.

The forest flashed around me in a blur as I ran away from Sadie and toward John.

A goddamn *coward*.

My chest hurt, but it wasn't from running. I'd become so accustomed to physical activity it rarely registered; it was like breathing.

No, my chest hurt for what the *fucker* had been doing to Sadie. My chest hurt for what had already been done to her delicate flesh.

My sisters flashed before my eyes, and I wanted to retch. If anyone ever touched them that way, scarred them like that . . . Tears blurred my eyes, and I blinked away the frozen ice.

All the times Cobra, Ascher, and I had taunted her or been rude to her flashed before my eyes.

We were the worst type of men, lower than scum.

As the trees whizzed past me, more memories rose from my grieving heart. Every time Sadie had rolled her eyes and fought like a beast. *Sun god*, she'd already earned the respect of every beta in the group.

She was so strong.

The image of her naked body coated in blood, gold skin covered in raised white scars, would be forever branded in my brain.

She didn't have just a couple of tiny scars.

No, thick angry welts covered her entire torso, her back, even her arms. Her goddamn delicate, perfect little breasts were covered.

Once again, I swallowed down bile. I needed to gain control of myself.

My vision flickered—I itched all over like my bear was trying to physically climb out of my skin—it had never acted like this.

I focused on breathing in and out and calming my racing thoughts.

The little alpha was a fucking survivor, and I would ensure no one ever hurt her again. She'd just gained an angry bear as her protector.

Whoever had scarred her like that, I would *hunt* them down. I would beat the fucker till they passed out and shit themselves.

Then I would give them to Cobra to carve up. No one could torture like he could.

I shook my head and tried to calm my thoughts.

First, I needed to figure out why one of our betas had just kidnapped my little alpha. *Mine*.

The forest whipped around me.

My heart burned in my chest when I thought about Sadie begging me to not tell the others about her scars—a woman's tears had always been my weakness—but John was a defector who appeared to be in line with the fae queen. He also needed to die.

We'd start by torturing every ounce of truth out of him, even if it wouldn't appease the aching pain in my heart. I growled as I thought about Sadie's scars and how she'd trembled naked in the frigid temperatures.

She should have been in the ward healing, not out in the fucking ice, naked and bloodied.

I sighed with relief, as I stopped sprinting through the woods—John was still slumped face-first on the ground where I'd left him. Usually I pulled my punches.

I flipped him over; his face was bloody and broken. It had already swelled significantly. Satisfaction swirled through me.

I was glad I'd punched him with every ounce of my strength.

The fucker deserved it.

Thoughts of how demoralized the little alpha looked when I'd left her filled my mind. I needed to get back to her quickly.

Sun god knew Ascher and Cobra were probably needling her like usual.

If they only had an idea of the fucking truth.

Maliciously, I stripped every piece of clothing off John. When the beta lay ass naked in the freezing temperatures, I grabbed him by his ankle and ran back to the compound.

I'd seen the scratch marks and dirt that covered Sadie's naked back.

The bastard would get the same treatment.

He would be dragged.

John was passed out from my fist, so he wasn't aware of the abuse, but the vindictive side of me still wanted to hurt him. I felt his pulse and could hear his soft breath.

He wasn't dead, *yet*. He was a beta, so he would heal and wake up from the trauma.

Instead, I made sure to sprint as fast as possible and "accidentally" swung my arm back and forth with all my strength.

John's body flopped behind me, and his head slammed into tree trunks and large rocks.

Each crack as John's limb or face slammed into a tree filled me with a kernel of satisfaction. My heart still ached something fierce, but it was a good start.

No one fucking *touched* my little alpha and went unpunished.

After I'd been training and living with her for the past weeks, she'd needled her way into my heart. Her sarcastic energy and ferociousness were a nice change from Cobra's and Ascher's violence. Also, it was hilarious watching her try to run.

The little alpha was funny, but tough as nails. I enjoyed being around her. Now that I knew what she'd been through—I would never leave her side—I would be her protector.

When the training compound came back into view, I didn't go to the locker room like usual.

Instead, I turned and headed to a large steel door on the far side of the massive center. It was hidden behind an alcove, and a person would only find it if they knew to look for it.

After dragging John through the door, I "accidentally" threw his body down the stairs as hard as I possibly could.

Also, I stomped down the stairs and "accidentally" stepped on his hands and limbs a couple of times.

Finally, after a long string of "accidents" that left John a bloody mess, I hooked both his arms to steel cuffs drilled into the concrete walls.

The cuffs glowed blue with a truth enchantment.

The room was a fortified interrogation room, otherwise known as a torture room. Each portal and training compound had one for prisoners and other unsavory characters in the never-ending war.

The steel cuffs forced the prisoner to speak truthfully—they were also impossible to open unless the prisoner died.

Satisfied that John couldn't hurt Sadie anymore, I hurried through the compound to try to find the little alpha. Every second away from her felt like an eternity.

Now that I knew the truth about her past, I would not be letting anyone abuse her again. In *any* way. It was what I wanted for my sisters, and it was what I would give her.

Twice she had proven her loyalty and courage in battle. It was time for me to repay her.

I ran through the training compound and was alarmed to find that Sadie wasn't in the ward or at the dining hall. *Had something happened to her while I was away? Had I failed her again?*

Throwing open our bedroom door with all my might, I practically roared at Cobra and Ascher. "Where is she?" I half yelled and half growled at the two men.

Ascher and Cobra were both standing outside the shut bathroom door.

"Princess is in the bathroom. She's taking forever." Ascher lazily tapped away at his phone. "She made up something about a kidnapper."

Cobra clenched his jaw, eyes flashing, but he didn't correct Ascher.

Relief flooded through me that she was safe in the room.

No one had taken her.

At the same time, my hands tensed into fists, and I had to physically stop myself from walking over and burying my knuckles in both their thick skulls. *How could they be so blind?*

I focused on breathing and remaining the calm leader that I was known to be. I knocked on the bathroom door.

"Leave me the fuck alone, Ascher. Go fuck yourself." The little alpha had such a way with words.

Then it clicked.

I grabbed the door frame for support.

Her voice.

It was so obvious: it was broken because of the goddamn abuse she'd suffered.

My heart burst in my chest, and I had to stop myself from keeling over and puking. Sadie had screamed so loud from the beatings that she had lost her voice. She'd been tortured.

I was aware that Ascher and Cobra were staring at me with confusion, but I didn't care. *She* was all that mattered. Not their continual bullshit.

I cleared my throat and yelled through the door, "It's Jax! Are you okay?"

There was a long, awkward silence, and I imagined she was gnawing on her lower lip like she usually did when she got anxious.

Of course she's not okay. She was just kidnapped and has been fucking abused her whole life. Dumb question.

"I've literally never been better." Sadie laughed, and I heard bubbles splashing.

Even as my heart broke, I smiled.

I didn't realize how abused Sadie was because she didn't act like a victim. She acted like an alpha.

In the new light of her past, her droll wit and confrontational attitude seemed like a bloody miracle.

No one would fault her if she were emotional or needy. I didn't know if I could have survived what had been done to her and acted so blasé.

"Have you eaten, and has your body temperature returned to normal? Do you need anything from me?" She might say she was fine, but she had just fought three spider fae and been kidnapped.

"I swear I'm fine…the warm bath is doing wonders." She splashed some more to get her point across.

Abruptly, I was imagining her delicate little body covered in soap—my gut pinched for a different reason, and I forced myself to think about her pain—not how badly I wanted her. I was messed up to be thinking that when she'd just been attacked by John.

"Okay, I need to take care of something. I'll be back in a little to check on you. Do *not* go anywhere by yourself."

"Aye, aye, alpha."

Turned out I was really into sassy women. However, it didn't escape my notice that she hadn't said whether she had eaten anything.

"I'll be back," I hollered as I ran out of the room. Ascher and Cobra watched me with confused expressions.

Finally, a short while later, I knocked on the bathroom door, and Sadie emerged wearing my sweatshirt and sweatpants. I'd left them in the bathroom, and she must have needed a change of clothes.

My sweatshirt hung past her knees, and she had the hood pulled up over her long white hair.

Big red eyes looked up at me with a small smile. Rubies glinting in the firelight.

Holy shit. My brain short-circuited.

Her alpha scent was pungent, and the delicious smell of sweet cranberries mixed with warm chestnuts wafted off her.

My stomach actually *growled* with hunger, and my cheeks heated slightly. I wasn't hungry for food.

"Eat this," I said as I pushed the heaping plate into her small hands.

She was so cute I had to physically stop myself from picking her up and bundling her close.

The feel of her frozen body pressed against mine as we'd run through the snow had awoken something in me.

She was *mine* to hold, to care for, to nurture. And I wanted to.

There was a burning desire in my gut to take care of her, so she never looked up at me with sightless eyes again. Her scars broke a piece of my heart.

"I'm too tired to eat," she mumbled as she rubbed her eyes and crawled into bed. *Not acceptable*. *She needs to eat*.

"You will not survive if you don't eat…do it!" I alpha-barked, and my chest vibrated.

Shame filled me for barking at her, but fear over her safety was greater. She needed fuel.

Automatically, Sadie picked up a bread roll and ate it at my word. I put the plate on her lap and brought a couple of pillows from my bed.

She stared up at me with raised eyebrows as I tucked the pillows behind her head so she would sleep more comfortably.

"Wow, I'm getting the special treatment." She smirked and stuck her tongue out at Cobra, who was glaring at both of us from across the room.

The two of them were ridiculous.

"Eat and I'll be back," I said. She was small, and I would bet money that her nutrition growing up had been lacking. That would change. Now.

Satisfied Sadie was safe and not in immediate danger, I turned to Ascher and Cobra. Both men were looking at me with raised eyebrows, and it was clear from their expressions that they thought I'd lost my mind.

"Come with me now. I need to tell you something," I said.

We walked through the compound, and for once, Ascher didn't make any annoying comments.

They could sense something was very wrong.

When we stood outside the interrogation room, the chilly night winds shrieking around us, I turned to address them. I was confident out in the blustery snow that no one could hear us.

John was a loyal beta soldier and we'd never had a problem with him—odds were high that there were other traitors in the compound right now—the idea of the soldiers betraying us filled me with rage.

"While we were controlling Cobra and his beast, John dragged Sadie, naked, through the snow. He was trying to take her through the portal," I said with a growl.

"Motherfucker—I thought she was joking!" Ascher yelled and threw his hands up like he was going to punch someone.

Cobra grabbed him by the back of the neck. "Quiet the fuck down. Jax, tell us everything," Cobra demanded and Ascher quieted.

No one fucked with Cobra when he had snake eyes, and right now his eyes flickered back and forth between round and slit pupils.

"When Ascher took you back to the ward to get checked, I went out and did my usual perimeter check," I said in a rush. "On the edge of the forest, I noticed trail marks and fresh blood. With the heavy snowfall, the blood must have fallen seconds earlier to be visible. Since no one was supposed to be outside, I followed it." I paused and closed my eyes.

For a second, I considered going back into the compound to check on Sadie. I'd almost lost her forever.

I swallowed down bile and continued with my story. "I followed the trail, and the deeper I went into the forest, the more sounds I heard. They were indiscernible but clearly distinguishable from the sounds of the forest…a few hundred feet from the portal, I found John running with a naked and bloody Sadie held in his arms. He'd beaten her, and she was screaming as loud as she could…he had his hand in her hair, and he had her head yanked back at an impossible angle…she was screaming and kicking, and he was running to the portal."

“Then what happened?” Cobra asked. His pupils were now staying slit, and they were starting to glow. Next to him, Ascher’s horns had lengthened on his head.

“I punched him and brought Sadie back to the compound. Then I went back out and brought John into the interrogation room. He’s chained there now.”

A sadistic smile spread across Cobra’s face, and Ascher popped his knuckles like he was fantasizing about beating John. I could relate.

“Here is the important part though—Sadie told me that before she transformed at the lake, she was kept as a servant. And she said John said he was bringing her to the fae queen, and he was going to be rich.”

“I’m going to kill him!” Ascher shouted. Once again, Cobra grabbed him by his massive neck and restrained him.

“Who kept her as a servant? Are we sure she’s not lying?” Cobra asked icily

I didn’t like the look in Cobra’s eyes. I could practically see his gears churning and distrust building. He was going to take it out on Sadie.

“She didn’t say, but don’t you dare fucking accuse Sadie of anything. She’s been through more than either of you know.” I got up in Cobra’s face and used my height to look down at him.

“What do you know that we don’t?” The bastard was too perceptive for his own good.

“Nothing—let’s see if the prisoner has woken up.” I stalked down the stairs into the torture room.

Against the wall, John was slumped out cold with his hands pinned above his head in the enchanted cuffs. His chest rose and lowered, and it was clear he was still breathing.

A beta could take massive amounts of abuse. Their body might shut down, but they always woke up after a few hours unconscious.

John was barely recognizable. His naked body was a swollen mass of bruises and blood.

Ascher whistled when he saw John, and Cobra chuckled.

“I see you handled John with care. I’m impressed.” Cobra laughed, and I could tell from the genuine mirth in his voice that he was. Cobra loved violence.

“He may have *accidentally* hit a few trees, rocks, and stairs on his way here.”

Cobra walked over to the slumped man and reached down. He squeezed the beta's dick and yanked it forward so hard I was surprised it didn't rip off. Ascher winced at the action.

John remained passed out cold.

Cobra looked back with a smile. His slit pupils still glowed. "He's out. We'll try again later."

Everyone nodded in agreement. Ascher and Cobra "accidentally" kicked John's body as we left.

Quickly, we hurried back to the room to make sure the little alpha was okay.

After all, no matter what anyone else thought or said. No matter what we did. No matter what *she* thought.

She was our little alpha.

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23
Cute Kittens & Hair Dye

Sadie

Look what I found!" Aran shook my shoulder through the blankets.

"Don't care." I buried myself deeper under my warm covers. No way was I leaving my warm bed on the first day I'd been allowed to sleep in.

Half the compound had been given the day off to prepare for the Ianuarius party, and the other half had tomorrow off. The party was two weeks from now.

Luckily, Aran and I were both free today. Jax was off too, but he'd left early to visit his sisters.

Unluckily, I was planning on sleeping in and Aran wasn't.

After last week—fighting off the spider fae and being dragged buck naked through the snow—I felt like I had been run over by an avalanche. I deserved some beauty sleep.

A kitten made a soft meowing noise.

"Look, it's a little, fluffy white kitten!" Aran shouted.

Abruptly, I was wide awake. I threw back the covers and instantly fell in love. "Oh my goddess, it's so cute. Where did you find it?"

The tiny creature was barely bigger than Aran's hand and covered in white fluff.

Realistically, it was the cutest thing I had ever seen in my life.

"Can I hold him?" I asked.

"Of course." Aran proceeded to dump the little poof on my lap. Immediately, it started to purr and curled up against my warmth.

"Aw, she likes me." I petted her silky fur, and the little angel flipped over, showing me her tiny belly.

"I figured *he* would enjoy hanging out with a much bigger cat. Maybe he can sense your cat vibes?" Aran flopped down on the end of my bed and

wrapped himself in my fur blanket. “It’s cold in this bed by the window. How do you sleep here?”

“I don’t mind it. Also, he definitely loves my cat energy. Maybe I’ll show him how to roar?” The little fluff ball proceeded to crawl up my sweatshirt and lick my nose.

My heart melted. With everything I had been through lately, I really needed the support.

“That would be cute…can you believe I found him wandering the halls by himself, meowing? There are some mousers in the fortress, but his mom must have abandoned him, so I decided to take him in. I know what it feels like, little guy. Mom’s suck.”

I remembered Aran had scoffed when he’d talked about his parents.

I held the kitty up and cradled him to my chest. “Who needs parents? What are they good for anyway? Emotional support? It’s much healthier to repress emotions and ignore red flags.”

The kitty looked up at me with big purple eyes. It felt like he was sympathizing with me and offering me comfort.

Clearly, I had been needing an emotional support pet for a while. Holding the kitten made me realize that.

“I’m so jealous you found him. I’m going to come to your room all the time to play with him.”

“Actually, as a beta, we aren’t *technically* allowed to have pets on the compound. Since Jax makes the rules, I was hoping you could convince him to let you keep it, and I would visit you.”

Joy swelled through my chest—I cradled the kitty closer to me. “What makes you so sure Jax will let me keep him if it’s against the rules?”

“Hm, maybe because he stares at you twenty-four seven and literally growls like a wild bear whenever I touch you.” Aran rolled his eyes like I was being dumb. “Especially after the attack. Sadie, the man *stopped* training the other day to give you a fucking bread roll because he said you looked hungry.”

I made a face back at him while inside, a repressed, girly part of me squealed and flopped around (I’d really needed that roll).

When Jax had stopped me mid-run to give me the buttery goodness, it had been like the moon goddess herself had reached down and kissed me. Seriously, I’d been dying.

It was the single sweetest thing anyone had ever done for me. Ascher's annoying comments and Cobra's scoffs couldn't distract me from it.

Still, that was just Jax.

Aran seemed to think I had some sort of power over all the alphas. If he saw the way they constantly berated me, he would lose that assumption real quick.

Some people loved each other, like Jax and Cobra, and some people hated each other, like Dick and me.

In contrast, some people low-key did not like someone, so they spent every waking minute tormenting that person and letting them know they did not like them. That was how Ascher and Cobra felt about me.

I sighed heavily and kissed the little kitty's tiny, perfect head. "I'll try my best."

"Yay." Aran clapped his hands and jumped off my bed. "Now get your sleepy ass out of bed. We're hitting the town and going shopping for the party!"

Hitting the town sounded glamorous, exciting, and fast-paced.

A few minutes later, my tired ass was on the back of a furry horse, shivering, as we trudged slowly through the snow.

"Giddyap!" Aran shouted at his horse and bucked his feet. The large beast whinnied and trotted slower.

"I'm pretty sure we could just walk faster than this!" I shouted above the freezing wind. There was a reason we stayed inside all day and trained. The shifter realm was fucking freezing.

"It's all about the experience!" Aran yelled from behind me. His horse was mutinying against him and was falling behind mine. Which was impressive because my horse was barely moving.

Thankfully, it really did take no skill to ride a Yukata horse to the nearest town. The massive furry horses from the stables were extremely well trained and knew the path by heart. I just sat and shivered as it led the way.

Slowly.

An hour later (we should have walked), we arrived at the nearest small town. It was built on top of a huge glacier that jutted out over a dark lake—houses were piled atop each other, lit with lanterns.

In the middle of the homes, there was a little street of shops. On one side of the street, there was a café, a tavern, and a restaurant that specialized in

elk meat. On the other side, there was a tailor, a boot store, a hairdresser, and a trinket shop.

Aran grabbed my arm and dragged me into the tailor's shop.

The beta's blue hair was frozen to his head, and his lips were a similar shade of blue, but he bounced up and down like he was having the time of his life.

A warm wall of heat hit us as soon as we walked through the door. Instantly, I began to thaw.

"Hot cocoa for you warriors. Thank you for your service at portal three. My name is Loria. How can I help you?" a middle-aged woman said as soon as we entered.

She was a null shifter, and she made a show of adding fresh chocolate shavings to the drinks before she handed them to us.

Loria made a mean hot cocoa. It was the best thing I'd ever had.

Immediately, the decadent chocolate and soft shop music made me relax.

It was nice to be treated.

Still, I found it bizarre when a shifter was nice—the realm was harsh and unforgiving, and its inhabitants were usually the same way—it was impossible to stay soft when the world was so brutal.

"We need two outfits for the Ianuarius celebration. Sadie needs something sexy and daring, since she's the first female alpha," Aran told Loria while he whisked around the room, pulling fabrics like he was a pro.

Technically, I needed something warm that showed off zero skin. But I let Aran live in pretend land for a little bit.

For a farm boy, he was really into colors and textures. I was really into books and Lucinda was really into cards. I guess fashion was Aran's thing.

Thinking about my little sister made my heart hurt, but I reminded myself she was safe and sound at school.

Sipping my cocoa, I sank into a plush velvet chair and watched Aran have fun.

My eyes started to close as I sipped, and I wondered if my hobby was sleeping. Sometimes, I just wanted to curl up and sleep for days (I yearned for death).

"Sadie wants her cleavage exposed," Aran said, and I choked on my delicious cocoa. Her words startled me out of my restful state.

"No. I must have my entire torso covered. That's nonnegotiable."

There was a long pause as both Loria and Aran stared at me like I was crazy.

"Oh, I get what you are doing," Loria said.

"Um?" *Did she know about my scars? Could she see it in my eyes because I looked like a victim?*

"You want a completely tight dress but will have it cover everything so you don't seem too sexy. Smart girl. It is important to not seem too needy around those alpha warriors."

The hot cocoa went down the other pipe, and I choked so hard my eyes watered.

As an alpha myself, I did not worry about seeming needy around Jax, Ascher, or Cobra. If anything, the men were all into wanton sexuality.

I was zero percent concerned about impressing them.

At least, I wasn't *that* concerned about impressing them sexually because that already seemed to not be happening.

I did want them to respect me as an alpha. Although, as soon as they'd seen me run, that ship had sailed.

Ascher spent every waking minute making fun of my fitness, and Cobra made constant snide comments about me being pathetic.

Still, images of Jax taking Cobra, and the twins climbing all over Ascher, popped into my mind.

I snorted with laughter at the thought of them preferring a classier woman.

"Sure, we'll go with that."

Sadly, my comfort in the plush seat didn't last long. A few minutes later, a small army of servants physically lifted me out of my chair and brought me into a side room.

On one wall, a large hearth blazed. Fabrics were draped over mannequins and every available surface.

Before I could process what was happening, the ladies had taken off my sweatshirt and pulled down my sweatpants.

I stood ass naked.

There was a loud gasp.

Everyone in the room stopped moving.

Sighing heavily, I pushed my palms into my eyes and prayed the moon goddess would deliver me from this awkward moment.

I had gone from zero people seeing me naked to a bunch in less than one day. It was a little overwhelming.

"Mistress?" one of the servant girls whispered in horror, and I took my hands away from my face.

With a small shrug, I forced a smile across my lips and tried to give off "I'm fine" vibes. From the female stares of horror, it was clear my tactic was not working.

"It's not a big deal. Please don't worry about it. Let's just cover them up," I said.

Loria had tears in her eyes, and she gripped my hands in hers. "Oh, sweetie, we will make something for *you*. At the party, you will shine, I promise you."

A tear streaked down her cheek, and my eyes watered in response to her kindness. The numb would probably tell me to stab her and collect her tears as trophies.

I giggled at the thought of my psychotic alter ego. Unaware, all the women instantly relaxed and began measuring me.

The awkwardness dissipated as the women wrapped string around my limbs, showed me different fabrics, and rushed around in a blur of productivity.

Unfortunately, the moment of tenderness from earlier passed, and as the fitting progressed, they proceeded to comment on how stumpy my legs were.

At one point, Loria actually prodded my hips and made a gagging noise. "Not birthing hips." She jotted down notes on her clipboard.

I was super confused about how that was relevant to anything?

When they got to my arms, Loria had the audacity to laugh at me. All the servants tittered as she measured my bicep, then held up the measurements for the room to see.

"Warrior you are not."

My one eye twitched with annoyance. I was half-tempted to transform into a saber-toothed tiger and roar in Loria's face.

Like a smart warrior, I did what I could in the situation.

Nothing.

You didn't mess with middle-aged women holding pins and measuring tapes. The danger was palpable.

Finally, after what felt like forever, I stumbled out of the fitting room. My self-esteem was at an all-time low, and I'd been stabbed by pins about five times.

Loria had yelled at me to stop moving, and I wasn't convinced the last stabbing had been an accident.

As a result, I kept the servants at arm's length and nodded suspiciously when they said my dress would be delivered in a few days. I didn't trust them.

In contrast, Aran was lying on a chaise in the shop, his feet up as a servant massaged them. He had a receipt in his hand and had already ordered his clothes. Glad someone was enjoying the experience.

I stood over him and punched him in the gut to wake him up. He was at fault for this painful shopping adventure.

"Perfect timing, Sadie. We have a hair appointment now!" Aran's bright-blue eyes blinked open, and he shoved me out the door before I could protest.

It was my day off, so I didn't feel like fighting him—it was just easier to acquiesce to his demands—plus, he had a massive grin on his face. I hadn't seen Aran this happy the entire time I'd known him.

The beta was unwell.

Before I could mutiny and ride my horse (slowly) back to the compound, I sat in a hair salon.

"What color sums up your personality?" the hair stylist asked as he spun me around in a fancy leather chair.

"Um?" I didn't know what to say. I just gaped at him.

The stylist was a tall, burly man with bright-orange hair. He also had a massive face tattoo of a middle finger and "fuck off" in big letters across his forehead.

My brain short-circuited, and my mouth flapped open as I stared up at his tattoo. The middle finger was perfectly placed between both bushy eyebrows and took up most of his forehead. The fist covered his cheeks and mouth.

"What color!" he barked at me, and I jumped up in the salon chair.

This was not what I had imagined a hair salon would be like. Suddenly, I was grateful I had chosen to cut my hair myself once a year with a kitchen knife.

“Probably black,” Aran said from the far corner, where a normal-looking woman was delicately snipping his electric-blue hair.

How come he got the normal stylist while I was getting assaulted?

“I can’t do black on white hair. That’s so boring!” the stylist yelled and breathed heavily like he was trying to calm himself down. He seemed to be one second away from an aneurysm.

Thankfully, he mumbled words under his breath and began to work without me saying anything. I closed my eyes and prayed he didn’t choose an ugly color like pink or purple.

Aran wasn’t wrong. My favorite color was black. Or gold. Still, I was too afraid of my stylist. I wasn’t saying shit.

At the thought of gold, my mind flashed to a certain alpha covered in golden piercings—I didn’t like being separated from him—it was worrisome that I had gotten so used to being around the alphas constantly.

I needed to remember I was on my own. As a female alpha, the shifter realm was a lonely place to be. Always had been, always would be.

Sadly, it was dark by the time I finally left the salon.

Once again, Aran hurried me outside. Apparently, there was a masseuse visiting the training compound for two days and he’d booked us appointments (I still had no idea how, no one had told me anything).

Since I’d been struggling to survive training and the fae last week, I was genuinely confused when he’d had time to plan all this. Hadn’t he also been training?

When we got back to the compound, I barely had the energy to drag my tired body behind Aran.

Today I’d learned I would much rather fight people and get attacked during training than have to get poked and prodded by stylists. Honestly, it was almost as painful as running.

As we headed toward the masseuse, I shuddered thinking about how the tailors had laughed as they’d prodded my naked body.

Those null women were ruthless and way scarier than beta soldiers. Someone should recruit them and my hairstylist for the war. His aura, and his face, literally screamed “fuck off.”

Finally, Aran led me to a room at the top of the compound. The masseuse was a big, burly beta named Mika. He had pretty blonde hair and dark eyes.

For some reason, every time he smiled at me, I blushed like a ninny. It had been a long day.

A few glorious minutes later, I found myself face-first on a soft bench, getting massaged. Thankfully, Mika said it was fine to leave my clothes on.

Still, the experience was divine. When Mika massaged my aching feet and hands, I swore I saw the moon goddess.

The room had soft music and a delicious lavender scent that put me to sleep.

When Mika said he was done, I lifted my head to find a large pile of drool on the pillow.

As I climbed off the table, the handsome blonde-haired beta handed me a business card. "If you ever have any massage needs, please call to schedule an appointment."

"Will do." I made a mental note to steal Ascher's phone.

I turned to walk out the door, but a hand on my arm stopped me. Lethargy coursed through me, so I didn't bother to pull away or knee him in the balls.

Turned out inner peace was the best deterrent of violence. Maybe that was why I was homicidal all the time?

"I really like the red highlights," Mika said. "They match your pretty eyes."

Instead of shaking my hand like every man in the damn realm, Mika did something completely shocking.

He leaned down and kissed my cheek.

Like a mature, competent alpha female, I turned and ran out the door.

I didn't say anything, just hightailed my ass out of the room and away from the handsome beta.

I fingered the spot on my cheek where he'd kissed me as I sprinted down the hall.

My first kiss.

On a high of happiness, I tumbled into the alpha room.

"What the fuck did you do with your hair?" Ascher launched off his bed angrily.

"It's a little *much*." Cobra made a face as he looked up at me, but he didn't pause doing push-ups. He clapped behind his back after each rep.

"You cannot wear it like that!" Ascher yelled in my face, and I kneed him in the balls.

He fell to the ground with a crash, and I quickly jumped under my covers. The alpha was all bluster; he never retaliated.

My little, fluffy white kitty was still lying on my pillow where I'd left him. Cuddling him to my chest, I turned my back to the room. Snow fell heavily outside my dark window.

Cobra grunted as he worked out, and Ascher muttered expletives under his breath.

I fantasized about maiming them both—graphically—with one of Ascher's horns.

My inner peace was gone.

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24
Interrogations

Cobra

A few days later . . .

I pulled another one of John's toenails off.

Unfortunately, the enchanted fae handcuffs took all the fun out of torturing someone. They forced them to tell the truth.

Fortunately for me, John was mumbling and wouldn't wake up. Everyone knew pain was the best wake-up call.

He'd awoken a short time ago, but his brain was so concussed from Jax's fist that his words had been incoherent.

His body had passed back out to heal. I wasn't worried. I had seen betas heal from much worse injuries.

It just took time and enough of it had passed that I was pretty sure he should be coming back to the living soon.

Slowly, I pulled off his next toenail, going down the line.

Hurting John calmed the black void—but only a little bit—for some reason, the abyss was swallowing me whole, and I didn't know why.

I hadn't been this irritable in a long time. Not since *the* dark time in my life. Still, with each toenail, I felt a smidge better. It was the little things.

With a vicious yank of John's big toenail, the beta sputtered into consciousness.

Both Jax and Ascher crowded the prisoner. They'd been lounging against the wall, letting me work.

John mewled like a little baby, and tears streamed down his mottled face. Poor little fucker was scared. *Boo-hoo*.

I pulled another one of his toenails off. For no reason other than fun. Fucker deserved it.

"Why were you kidnapping Sadie? Tell us everything you know regarding her and the fae queen," Jax alpha-barked down at John with disgust.

The cuffs flared a bright blue, and electricity traveled down John's arm, up his face, to his mouth.

His entire body shook violently as the zapping took him over. Gotta love fucked up fae enchantments.

When John spoke, it wasn't his normal voice. The enchantment spoke for him.

"The fae queen has a massive bounty for whoever can bring her in alive. All alphas have bounties for live capture, but hers is the largest."

The thought of the fae queen getting her fucking putrid hands on the girl made me sick to my stomach. She might annoy me, but she was still *mine* to torment. Nobody else's.

"Why does the fae queen want alphas?" Jax ran a hand through his braids with frustration.

It didn't make any sense. *Why pay for prisoners? It was easier to try to kill us than to pay massive amounts of money to capture us. What game was that bitch playing at?*

"The fae queen doesn't want alphas. The beasts do. They pay the queen to bring them back. But the fae queen is playing both sides. You don't know who you are fighting for…you're all fools."

Jax grabbed John's face and screamed at him, "Who are the fucking beasts?"

"The beasts are, are, are—" John began to choke, and foam came out of his mouth. Jax slapped his face, but the beta just convulsed and said nothing.

Abruptly, he gasped loudly and spoke in his normal voice, *"Fae flame, fire, flicker, burn."*

There was a loud crack, and shimmery blue flame twirled lazily in the air.

The void consumed me, and I took a step back—I knew that blue flame—had felt it along my flesh.

It had broken me.

The fire came from the tiny glass vial hanging around John's neck, and we hadn't seen it because it was covered in his blood.

The bright, shimmery blue began to crackle and pop. Then it defied gravity and lunged forward. John gasped as it rushed into his nose and open mouth.

Immediately, John's body collapsed.

"No, no, wake up, damn it." Jax leaned forward and shook John back and forth, desperate for answers.

Ascher looked sick and backed up.

I grabbed Jax around his shoulders and pulled him away. He needed to get away from the fucking blue fire. I knew just how dangerous it was, how painful it was.

It was still in John.

"Don't touch him." I pushed Jax against the far wall, and he stumbled back in shock.

"Who are the beasts? Those were truth cuffs. If he says we are fools, then we are." Jax's hands were shaking as he stared across the room at the dead beta. Jax liked to be in control, to know all the facts.

Apparently, we didn't know anything.

"I have no clue," I said. "But you can't touch him. We need to get away from that fire." I grabbed Jax by his arm and pulled him out of the room. The big guy was still in shock, so he let me manhandle him.

Ascher followed. He was quiet for the first time in his life.

The stakes had never felt higher.

Apparently, we were all wanted men. Ironically, by beasts. And we didn't even know who they fucking were or why they wanted alphas—or why they wanted Sadie more.

When we walked out of the torture room and into the frigid night air, Jax whirled around and grabbed me. The chilly air had snapped him out of his shock. "What was that fire?"

I took a deep breath and let the cold center me. The void was a burning inferno of darkness. The chilly air reminded me I wasn't back there.

I was free.

"You know how I told you I grew up imprisoned?" I asked.

Jax nodded but didn't say anything.

"I was held by the fae queen. That fire was her power."

"Cobra," Jax said softly as he stared at me with horror. He reached a large hand out, wrapped it around my neck, and pressed his forehead to mine. For a long moment, our breaths mixed as we stood in the icy world.

Warm chestnuts filtered through my nose, and the anxiety that gripped my aching heart began to fade.

I was safe, Jax was beside me, and I was free of her.

We didn't say anything for a long moment, just held each other in stillness and offered each other support.

"She covets pretty things." My voice cracked, and I hated the weakness. I was a warrior, an alpha shifter with terrifying snakes, and yet I trembled at the sound of a woman's name.

"You are *not* just a pretty thing," Jax alpha-barked back and wrapped his arms around me in a bruising grip.

"Okay, big man, don't make it weird." I scoffed, trying to hide the way my insides burned with warmth when Jax had barked at me. He *understood* me, and it made me fucking emotional.

Jax released me with a shake of his head that said he knew I was full of shit. Ascher didn't say anything as we went back inside to our rooms.

Usually we would spar at night, the three of us training and practicing until the early dawn. Sometimes we pulled all-nighters. Alphas didn't need as much sleep as betas, and all three of us preferred to fight out our aggressions.

At least, we'd used to.

Ever since a certain princess who reeked of cranberry wine had infiltrated our room, no one stayed out late.

I told myself it was because I needed to keep an eye on the girl, to make sure she wasn't a spy and rummaging through our stuff. But the truth was, I wanted to antagonize her.

I wanted to watch her pretty golden cheeks flush with hatred as I taunted and called her names. She was so juvenile sometimes, and it made me furious

I wanted to fucking throw her onto the bed and taunt her until she agreed *I* was superior.

My fucking void wanted to swallow her up and welcome her into my darkness. It was fucked up.

I rubbed at my sternum as we walked into the room. The little alpha was still in Jax's sweatshirt, and I didn't know whether to groan with arousal or jealously rip it off and wear it. Jax was *my* alpha, something Sadie conveniently ignored.

Now she sat on the bed, looking pathetic and breakable as she read a large book. From the leather binding, it was one of the ones from the mantel.

I'd noticed the little alpha liked to read. She spent all her free time hanging with Aran or curled up in her bed with a book.

The thought of the blue-haired beta filled me with rage, and I decided against leaving her alone. Sadie fucking pissed me off.

"You didn't eat all your food." I pointed to the half-full plate on the floor beside her bed.

A growl erupted from Jax's chest at my words.

She narrowed her eyes at me, like she knew exactly what I was doing, and her little ruby eyes promised death. Her sharp cheekbones stuck out too far on her face, and my gut pinched a little.

We'd been running a lot lately. Was she looking thinner?

"Sadie, you need to eat," Jax growled from behind me.

"Princess is being a snob again. What else is new? Is the food not good enough for you?" Ascher taunted as he jumped onto his bed and began to fiddle with his enchanted phone.

An angry flush spread up her neck, and suddenly I was annoyed that all her attention was on Ascher and not me. It was *me* she needed to worry about, not the hothead.

"Eat your food," I snapped, and satisfaction warmed my gut when she looked away from Ascher.

"I'm full." Sadie narrowed her eyes at me. "I've been through a *lot* today, and my stomach hurts, so I can't eat it. Everyone needs to fucking relax. I love food. Also, this is rich coming from you, when you're the one that makes me run like a maniac so I lose weight!"

"You're losing weight?" Jax asked with concern and ran his hands through his hair like he was contemplating rushing to the kitchen again.

Ruby eyes glared at me, and my stomach pinched. How dare she blame me when she was failing to take care of herself properly?

Before she could blink, I launched myself across the room at her.

"Eat the food. Now. It's your own fault, not mine." I grabbed her by the back of the neck and took a bread roll off the plate. At dinners, she always ate them. They were her favorite.

"I will kill you," she said, and her voice was scratchy and low. Like usual, it sent tremors straight to my groin.

She trembled with rage, and I couldn't help but note that my one hand wrapped all the way around her fragile neck. My fingers fucking overlapped, for god's sake.

Images of her underneath me as my hand was wrapped around her for a different reason flashed before me.

The scent of sweet cranberry wine grew strong, and my mouth watered.

I dropped my face closer and whispered in her ear, "Be a good girl." Underneath my hand, her neck quivered as a shudder ran through her entire body.

Her pupils were blown and her breath shallow. I could feel her pulse fluttering.

She fucking wanted me as bad as I wanted her.

The gorgeous red highlights framed her face and made her eyes sparkle like rubies.

Her delicate pink tongue snaked out and ran over her pillowy bottom lip. It was unfair that her lips were so fucking lush. It was unnatural.

I leaned forward.

And shoved the bread roll into her mouth.

She spit back at me, and crumbs got everywhere as we tussled.

Her legs kicked into my ribs, and I fought to shove more food in her face.

We rolled about on her bed, fighting for dominance. At one point, she kneed me in the balls so hard I lost my grip.

She slammed her elbow down on my sternum, and she crawled on top of me, shoving bread in *my* face.

I reached up and flipped her over—hard—I had been holding back, and her eyes widened as she realized she was trapped.

"Fight, fight, fight," Ascher chanted from his bed as he continued playing on his phone and barely paid us any attention.

We continued to grapple and ignored the annoying fucker. I tried to press a big hunk of chicken between her clenched teeth.

Before it could slip through, she reared up.

Sadie head-butted me hard; blood ran down both our faces where she had split our skin.

I didn't know if I should be annoyed or impressed, but I was definitely turned on.

"Oh, you wanna go?" I taunted and bared my teeth down at her.

I was about to shove the entire plate of food into her face when Jax grabbed my wrist and yanked me back.

"Are you kidding me? Are you a child? What has gotten into you?" he yelled at me and shook my shoulders back and forth.

"Yeah, Cobra, what has gotten—"

"You too!" Jax turned around and cut off Sadie, whose grin fell as she hid under her covers.

"Don't think I've forgotten that you didn't eat everything." He turned his attention away from me and prowled toward her.

For a second, I thought he was going to launch himself at her, and we both held our breath.

Jax mumbled about psycho alphas who acted like children and stomped into the bathroom. He threw the door shut, and the entire room shook.

"You have chicken in your hair." Sadie broke the silence.

"We're running tomorrow for training," I taunted back and smirked at her.

Her face immediately fell, and my gut pinched at her forlorn expression.

I should have been happy she was upset. I'd won our war of words. For some reason, it felt like I had lost.

"I hope the bedbugs bite your frosty ass," she said as she ate chicken scraps off her bedding and then pulled the blankets over her head.

That night, I dreamed about the little alpha licking something else as I hand-fed her dessert.

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25
Turn Up

Sadie

We were in a large town I'd never heard of, in an elegant club with a red carpet laid out for the ABOs of the realm.

I teetered down the red carpet. My towering heels pinched my toes, and I just barely caught myself from falling over by grabbing onto Aran's forearm.

Of course, my dress was so fucking short that I was sure half the room had just seen my vagina flapping. I should have known the tailor ladies would do this to me.

Loria definitely had beef with me.

What else would explain the skintight long-sleeved gold dress that hugged every inch of my body? Literally, it was so tight that it hurt to breathe.

Sure, the dress covered every inch of my scars. It went up to my neck and was plastered across me like stretchy silk.

It also stopped *barely* below my ass cheeks. And I was short, so I knew those bitches had done this on purpose. That'd also included a pair of towering red heels in the box, with a smiley face.

A fucking smiley face. I almost tripped again, and I cursed under my breath. They were pure evil.

As I fumed and struggled not to bare my vulva to the crowd and horrify the young shifters, Aran preened under the attention.

Shifters screamed our name as we walked down the long, elegant red carpet.

I brushed my hair out of my eyes and tried to avoid their creepy wails. Zed had procured a wand that heated in the fire and curled my hair at Aran's insistence.

I didn't know how Aran knew how to curl hair so expertly, but he did an amazing job.

My long white locks, with red highlights framing my face, curled down my back. The one good thing was I felt like a bad bitch with red highlights. They contrasted with my gold skin and accentuated my eyes.

Said red eyes were lined with thick black kohl, and mascara weighed my lashes down. I struggled not to itch at my face.

A part of me loved that I looked like an edgy bitch with my pretty hair; the other part of me wanted to scrub off my makeup, put on sweatpants, lie down, and read a book.

Besides the screaming null shifters, the Ianuarius celebration was way more *intimate* than I thought it would be.

We walked down a narrow hallway with low lighting. Which made it hard as fuck to walk without tripping.

"Smile." Aran turned and flashed a megawatt smile at the null shifters.

At one point, he blew them kisses, like he was an actual celebrity. I rolled my eyes and tried not to throat punch the shifters who leaned over the barrier and reached for me. They got way too close for comfort.

Finally, we reached the end of the carpet, but the room we entered was not what I'd expected.

I gasped at the opulence.

The low ceiling was covered in glittering candlelit chandeliers. Gold and silver glinted everywhere.

Small tables held food, and people stood around them. In the center of the space, betas and alphas from all the portals ground together on the dance floor.

The whole compound had been in a rush getting ready, and I'd left with Aran. I didn't see my alphas but assumed they would be here soon.

The lighting was low. Surprisingly, it was a mood. Not stuffy like I'd expected.

Aran wiggled his suit-clad shoulder against mine. His blue hair was slicked back, and the suit fit his body like a glove. He looked swanky.

As we walked forward into the room, people turned to stare at us—my nose tickled, and I fought the urge to sneeze—the smoky scent of betas overwhelmed me. I'd never been around so many at once.

At the same time, the pungent pheromones of alphas wafted at me. Some had earthy scents, like dirt or rocks. Others smelled like fruits and candies.

I would estimate there were about six alphas, all from other portals.

Not a large number compared to the betas, but with each alpha having a strong presence and even stronger scent, it was overwhelming.

"What do I smell like?" I turned to Aran. Until now, I hadn't really thought about my own scent.

Aran smiled and wiggled his eyebrows at me. "Like sugary cranberries when you're happy and like cranberries on fire when you're mad. It kind of burns." He flashed his perfect white teeth as he laughed at me.

Whatever, I liked cranberries.

I leaned forward and tried to smell Aran. Maybe it was because there were so many people around, but I realized why I enjoyed hanging out with him.

He didn't reek of smoke like most betas. He almost didn't smell at all.

All of a sudden, a large man stepped between us. "This exquisite creature can't be the new female alpha?" His scent reeked of sandalwood, and I coughed as it irritated my nose. He was definitely an alpha.

For some reason, all my instincts warned me to get away.

So I listened.

"Don't fucking touch me or my friend." I shoved him out of the way and grabbed Aran's arm, pushing us through the dancing crowd and away from the creepy alpha.

As we shoved through the dancers, my ass was groped by multiple men. I punched one in the kidney and slammed my stiletto down on the toe of another. But I couldn't get them all.

Finally, we gasped with relief as we extracted ourselves from the crowd.

"I think I just got fingered in the ass?" Aran whispered in horror, and I choked on an inappropriate laugh.

It wasn't funny. But that didn't stop the chuckling from bursting through me.

"Oh, you little hussy." Aran reached for my ass with his finger pointed, and I screamed like a lunatic, jumping away from him.

A server stopped in front of us with her eyebrows raised and two drinks in her hands.

"Oh, we're just friends…no worries." I laughed and took the drinks from her hands. She backed away with big eyes like we were crazy (she had good instincts).

I handed Aran a flute, and we both immediately tossed the contents down our throats. We needed the liquid fucking courage.

I had drunk alcohol before but nothing so thick and bright-colored.

Immediately, stars sparkled in my vision and the world spun deliciously. They'd broken out the special alcohol for this event. Nothing I'd ever drunk had made me feel like this.

"Oh my moon goddess, this is it. We *needed* this." I giggled as Aran flung his arms around me dramatically.

"Oooh, sweet cranberries." He laughed and twirled one of his long fingers around my hair.

I leaned closer to him and practiced my hugging. Not to brag, but I was getting *really* good at it. Pressed against him, for the first time, I smelled his scent.

It made me realize again that I'd never noticed Aran's scent before, which was weird because usually betas reeked.

"Wowza, you smell like icy death." I giggled as it burned my nose. Holy moly, he smelled dangerous. My beast would *love* it.

His scent reminded me a little of Cobra's frosty scent but it was different. It had more bite.

"Oh, honey, you have no idea." The noise that erupted from his chest sounded suspiciously like a giggle.

Then we proceeded to grab more drinks from the same servant and throw back the contents. I didn't know how long we stayed huddled and laughing around a table, but it was long enough for the lights to get even dimmer.

The sweet, lyrical music transformed into something dark and heavy. The bass shook through the room, and my body vibrated with its force.

"Holy shifter moly," I said. Bodies had been pressed together on the dance floor. But now they writhed. Bumped. Ground.

"Penis!" Aran pointed to the dance floor, and we both looked to see a naked male with his dick out while he openly fingered the girl grinding against him.

"He's not even using it?" I giggled and pretended my finger was a penis flopping about like the guy's.

Weirdly, the same servant from before made eye contact with us from across the room and quickly turned around. She was avoiding us. *Rude*.

When she brought the last drink, I only told her she would probably be really good at stabbing people because it was true. You could see it in her

eyes. She was violent.

Whatever, we took drinks from another servant.

Also, we started a game: we screamed every time we saw an exposed penis on the dance floor. Excitingly—and also upsettingly, depending on your perspective—we saw a *lot* of them.

So many that I was definitely no longer a virgin.

It was liberating.

My fizzy brain felt a little less fizzy as familiar men came in to view—Ascher's onyx horns gleamed, and his colorful tattoos flashed. His gold hair was slicked back.

He looked stunning in his dark suit.

I wasn't the only one who thought so. Three busty women and two short beta men ground against him. Somehow, he managed to move with all of them in rhythm to the music.

He was taller and stronger than everyone around him, and even from afar, my knees trembled at the way his powerful hips thrust forward.

"Don't worry about him." Aran punched my arm and rolled his eyes, and I tried to smile back. It was hard.

I couldn't help myself and looked around the crowd. If Ascher was here, that meant . . .

Jax and Cobra danced behind him. Jax's large hand was wrapped around Cobra's neck. Cobra's back was pressed against Jax's front. And they *ground* against each other.

Jax whispered in Cobra's ear, and a smile split his gorgeous face—they were breathtaking together—a couple of beta men and women pressed against the two men, but they didn't look away from each other.

Still, the betas' hands traveled across their muscles. They touched them.

Breathing heavily, I grabbed someone's half-empty glass off the nearest table and downed the contents.

A small eruption of stars fried my brain, and I forgot what had made me anxious.

"Who is that?" Aran asked, and I turned to see who he was talking about.

"Hey, Sadie." A tall blonde beta who looked kind of familiar slowly walked toward me.

"Oooh, he is *sauntering*," Aran commented helpfully, and I nodded in agreement.

The guy really was killing the whole slow-motion approach. His short hair billowed in a phantom breeze.

"Oh my moon goddess, it's Mika, my massager." I squealed and ran to him like we were long-lost lovers. I'd seen it in a bootleg human movie played on the small enchanted television at the tavern once, and I'd always wanted to try it.

Mika's arms wrapped around me, and his chest rumbled with laughter. He was warm, and I melted against him.

My brain was like sparkly fizz, but a part of me still wished he was a little bigger.

Okay, about two hundred pounds of muscles bigger, and a foot taller. Also, I wanted him to have dark skin and gold chains in long braids. *Yep, I wanted Jax*.

I wouldn't even mind if he was covered in tattoos or had diamonds embedded in his skin and snake eyes.

Mika said something to me, but I didn't hear a word. I was too busy wishing he were more shiny or more sparkly.

Mentally, I slapped myself. He was cute, and his beta scent wasn't too strong. It didn't overwhelm me.

My brain fizzed, and I chuckled uncontrollably. Plus, he was my first kiss. We were probably destined lovers.

Mika pressed me closer against him, and his hand slowly traveled down my back—I closed my eyes and tried to get lost in the sensation.

Weirdly, even with my brain fizzy and the world sparkling, he didn't make my core spasm like my alphas did. And Mika was literally touching my butt.

It must be broken.

I squinted my eyes closed and tilted my head back as I tried to concentrate on the sensation; Mika pressed his warm mouth against my lips, and I fought the urge to make a face and push him away.

Nothing was tingling.

Still, I wasn't a quitter, so I tried to enjoy it.

Nope, I pulled my head back and stepped away.

I opened my eyes, expecting to find the pretty beta looking at me.

Instead, I watched Jax *slam* his fist into Mika's face like he was a spider fae. *Wowza*.

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26
Sex & Betrayal

Sadie

"Ten out of ten, good form!" I giggled, and sparkles appeared around Jax's handsome face as I looked up at him.

Mika moaned on the floor, and I grimaced. Poor guy hadn't done anything wrong.

"Love the punch, Jax, but he's a friend. He didn't do anything," I said.

Cobra slammed his foot into Mika's side and kicked him viciously. "He touched our property."

Even tingly, I knew that was wrong. "I'll show you property."

I kicked Cobra in the nuts. *Hard*. However, I lost balance because the tailor ladies hated me and wanted me to suffer. My stiletto wobbled, and I wobbled with it.

Ascher appeared and grabbed me before I hit the deck. I'd never noticed he had "SPL" tattooed on his knuckles.

"Special. Pooping. Lid?" I guessed aloud.

"What the fuck, Princess?"

Guess I was wrong.

"This is an elite party. You *cannot* punch patrons!" A stuffy lady in a hideous feather dress scolded Jax. Servants surrounded Mika and carried him away. To be fair, everyone on the dance floor was still grinding. Dicks were *still* exposed and twirling around. She was being dramatic.

A growl rattled through Jax's chest, and I laughed at the sound.

"Why are you dressed like this?" Ascher asked and glared down at me, his horns straightening and elongating.

"You need to change now," Cobra ordered me.

I flipped him off.

“You like it?” I asked Jax and spun in a wobbly circle, showing off my tight dress and makeup. For the first time in my life, I felt girly and pretty. It was nice.

“Little alpha, you’re killing me. I’m going to get fresh air,” Jax said as he ran his hands over his face and stomped away.

“I’ll come!” I hurried after him. I loved air. And I didn’t want the big guy to be alone. I didn’t like seeing him like this.

He deserved to be happy.

Cobra’s hand latched around my wrist and stopped me from following Jax.

“Ascher—go after him. Make sure he’s okay,” Cobra alpha-barked.

Ascher grumbled expletives but stomped away out the door. I didn’t understand why Cobra wouldn’t go after him. He was *his* man, after all, and I was jealous as fuck.

Before I could point out that Cobra was being a bad boyfriend, he tugged me mercilessly across the room to a small alcove.

He threw open a door and shoved me inside.

We stood chest to chest in darkness. Even with my heels, he was half a head taller than me.

I grumbled and flailed my legs around, but I had nowhere to go. We were definitely in some old linen closet.

“How ya doin’?” My brain was still a little fizzy, and it was kind of funny that we were in the dark. He was being *soooo* dramatic.

“Let me make this clear: you will not fuck with Jax’s emotions. You will not touch another man. You will not dress like this in public ever again.” Cobra’s voice a frosty whip.

From his cruel tone, it was clear he needed to try the fizzy drink. He had so much rage. It was unhealthy.

A wicked thought sparked in my brain. If I went down on my knees and took him in my mouth, that would *probably* make him less angry (I was a genius).

His pupils flickered between round and slit as he looked down at me in the darkness. The little jewels in his skin glowed like they were lit from within.

This time, I swore on my life, they were moving.

“First, I’ll dress naked if I want to…second, soooo I can’t touch you?” I slid my hand along his chest and slowly trailed it down over his abs. His

button-down shirt was already unbuttoned.

He smelled like warm chestnuts and frost. It was mouthwatering.

"No, you can't fucking touch me." He grabbed both my wrists.

With one hand, he pinned both my arms behind my back, against the wall.

I shivered, and my knees shook.

My legs spread wide—I shuddered as he shoved his thigh against my core. Shamelessly, I ground against it.

My stomach pinched, and frost nipped at me. An avalanche of snow smothered me.

I fucking *loved* snow.

His hard hips bucked against mine, and he pressed me deliciously into the wall.

My skirt rode up, and the warm air tickled my sensitive flesh.

The dress had been too tight for me to wear panties. That was what the other side of the smiley-face note from the tailors said.

I loved those women.

Cobra ran his large hand slowly over my dress and down my body; even though I was covered (kinda), my body *burned* in the wake of his touch.

A part of me thought he was fudging. That he would stop and dump me onto the ground like he usually did, with his classic sneer and mean laugh.

Cobra's hand gripped my thigh tightly, and I moaned. The sound was rough and scratchy, too loud in the small room.

"Say my name," he whispered in my ear, and my core spasmed.

"Cobra."

He growled and bucked his hips against me. His hand left my thigh and grabbed my waist. It was so large that his fingers spanned across my entire back.

Those harsh fingers squeezed, and he ground against me so hard that my legs gave out and his hips pinning me to the wall were the only things keeping me upright.

"Why can you touch me but I can't touch you? Not fair." I pouted, but then moaned as he rolled his hips forward and another streak of pleasure shot through me.

He whispered in a deliciously sinful voice, "Because, kitten, your pussy is mine."

The heel of his hand rubbed against me, and I arched as pleasure sparked through me. It was so hot and intense that I felt myself falling away.

I was lost in the maelstrom of pleasure.

"Is it not?" Cobra's cruel, silky voice wrapped around me like a vise.

Ecstasy built, and it took over my brain.

"Mm-hmmmm," I moaned breathlessly, unaware of what I was even agreeing with.

Abruptly, he dropped to his knees and pushed me up against the wall.

As he held my ass up with his hands, my entire body was off the floor. He licked me, ass to clit.

Stars. Everything sparkled with pleasure as I fisted his silky hair in my hands. I wrapped my legs around his shoulders, and I shoved him harder against me.

That fucking mouth that sneered at me most of the time.

Now it destroyed me. Consumed me.

Owned me.

He shifted so he held up my ass with only one hand.

He took his other hand and pushed his large finger into my mouth.

"Suck," he growled.

My core spasmed, and I sucked on his large, calloused finger and stared down at his glowing eyes.

Then he took the finger and dragged it around my sensitive asshole. After teasing it forever, he ever so *slowly* pushed his wet finger inside my ass. The fullness combined with the pressure of his mouth on my clit threw me over the edge.

Everything inside me tightened and then broke in a wave of blissful pulsing. I screamed and threw my head back as everything shuddered around me.

Cobra kept eating me out.

"It's enough, too much." I moaned as he worked my overstimulated clit.

Instead of stopping, Cobra kept slowly fingering me deeper as he buried his head between my legs.

My body quivered as pleasure built inside me.

He took his fingers out and spit on them, then slowly traced around my ass as he licked my clit aggressively.

Then, instead of one finger, he slowly worked two fingers inside me.

I fucking came again.

Shamelessly, I rode the high, grinding my pussy against Cobra's face.

When the stars stopped bursting behind my eyes, everywhere Cobra touched felt overstimulated.

He kept his fingers in my ass and the sensation made me shiver uncontrollably.

The stubble on his chin raked across my inner thigh, and I shuddered all over. Frost saturated the air around us.

It was like climbing a glacier.

Sadly, my moment of bliss ended *way* too soon.

Light attacked me as the door slammed against the wall.

The first thing I noticed: the heady scent of pine that went with frost *so* deliciously.

The second thing I noticed: Ascher was standing at the door and glaring down at me and Cobra.

Unfortunately, Cobra was on his knees, with his tongue still buried inside me

Also, my dress was pushed up around my waist, so everything downtown was on display. Cobra turned his head to look at Ascher.

Then, in a move that reminded me he was unhinged, he leaned forward and licked me clit to ass. I couldn't hold back a moan.

His finger tormented my ass, and he smirked up at Ascher. My pleasure dripped off his mouth.

Ascher stared for the longest moment, his amber eyes lit with fire.

I swallowed, as his hands slowly moved toward the bulge in his pants.

At the same time, Cobra licked me and ever so slowly dragged his fingers out of my ass. I couldn't stop the moan that escaped my lips.

In a blur of motion, Ascher went crazy.

He lunged at Cobra, and I scrambled to the side as they fought.

My alphas really needed to try the fizzy drink. They just were *not* relaxed enough for the party atmosphere. It was kind of a buzzkill.

Stumbling on freshly fucked legs, I pulled down my dress, patted my hair, and pranced out of the closet. Warmth tingled through me, and the world fizzed.

Yep, that really had just happened.

I was a bad bitch.

Unfortunately, Ascher was not as excited as I was about me getting eaten out for the first time.

He pummeled Cobra with his fist; the crazy bastard just laughed and punched him back.

I shook my head because alpha men were nuts. Not alpha women though. Nope, they were cool-as-a-cucumber, badass bitches who got head in closets at parties like a boss.

The *magic* that had just occurred to my pussy had changed my life. Not even joking.

I ran along the outskirts of the party because I did not want to relive the groping scenario. When I went to the entrance, I scanned the room for Jax's head. He wasn't in there.

Why would Ascher leave him alone? With a sharp whoosh, the butterflies in my gut sizzled and died.

Worry cramped my stomach, and my instincts told me to hurry. I sprinted down the long red carpet and burst out into the wintery cold.

The chilly air slapped the remaining fizziness out of my brain.

As I scanned the dark, abandoned cobblestone street, there was nothing to see but fresh powder snow.

"Jax?" I called out into the dark.

I hurried around the side of the building and gasped in horror.

Jax was slumped face-first in the snow.

Just lying there.

Dropping to my knees, I listened to his breathing. He was still alive; but there was a bloody mark on his neck.

He'd been stabbed with some type of needle.

"What the fuck?" I shouted as I looked down the snowy street. "Who are you? Reveal yourself, coward!"

Meow.

A little white fluff ball pranced toward me through the snow.

My fluff ball that I had left at home. In my room. Warm. Cuddly. *In my room*, my brain repeated.

Not a town away in the middle of bum-fuck who knew where.

I rubbed my eyes and slapped myself in the face. Was I way drunker than I realized?

"Stay back!" I yelled at the little kitten that kept prancing toward us. My kitten or not, I wasn't about to let anything hurt Jax.

Three things happened at once: the kitten transformed into a large, terrifying-looking man; Ascher walked around the corner, holding a limp

Cobra over one shoulder and a limp Aran over the other; I took off my stiletto and threw it at my kitten-man as hard as I could, and it stabbed him in the gut.

"You brought them. Good work," the *man* who was not a *kitten* said to Ascher.

The fucking kitten now had long blonde hair that fell to his butt, and bright-purple eyes. His bronze skin was similar to mine.

Of course, since my life sucked, he was almost as large as Jax but covered in leaner muscle like Cobra. It would be hard to take him down.

He also smelled delicious.

Spicy, sweet cinnamon oozed from his pores and wafted around my throat like a vise. My core clenched, and I trembled to lick him, claim him.

Holy fuck. He's an omega.

Everything about his scent made my skin burn with desire, and I felt a new muscle in me clench as I inhaled his scent.

I shook my head to stop myself from throwing myself at him and licking his golden skin. Only an omega could cause such a strong reaction in an alpha.

I'd thought only women could be omegas? That was what we had learned in school. We'd also learned that only men could be alphas, so what did they know.

Grunting, ass naked, he pulled out the stiletto that I had buried in his eight-pack of abs. "Ascher, I told you to take care of her."

"It was complicated, Xerxes. We still completed the mission. Relax." Ascher's voice sounded different. Instead of being fiery, full of rage, he was calm.

Calculated.

Like a fucking spy.

Bile rose up my throat at his betrayal.

The numb clicked on.

Transform.

I focused on tingling and shifting into my saber-toothed tiger, but nothing happened. Fucking Xerxes had a vial with blue flames hanging around his neck.

Stab him in the trachea with your heel. Throw him at Ascher. Stab Ascher through the temple.

Before either man could move, I snapped the stiletto off my other heel and threw my body at Xerxes.

Unfortunately, Xerxes ducked at the last moment, and my weapon speared his shoulder instead—he threw me off him, and I slammed against the wall of the building.

Instead of rushing me like I'd expected, he held the vial around his neck in one hand.

"Fae flame, fire, flicker, combust."

There was a loud popping noise, and the air sparkled with blue shimmers.

Out of nowhere, a tall, beautiful woman appeared. She had bright-blue eyes and midnight-black hair. Her dress resembled a gossamer spiderweb. It hung off her tall, willowy limbs and billowed in the cold wind.

Xerxes and Ascher both dropped to their knees. "Hail the Queen," they said in unison.

The fae queen stood in front of me.

Claw out her eyes.

I lunged forward, but blue flames shot from her fingertips and pain pricked all over my body like I was being stabbed with needles. It wasn't hot like fire; it was pain incarnate.

Everything inside me screamed with agony. I should have been writhing on the ground, screaming.

Fight it.

I was numb.

The physical pain drifted away into the deepest recesses of my mind. However, there was so much of it that my limbs were locked, immobile. I stood still. My neurons fired improperly, and my fingers twitched.

I couldn't move.

"Interesting. I've never seen a person defy my power like this. How cute." The queen walked around me like she was inspecting a shiny sword or a pretty dress. I was an object to her.

"Xerxes and Ascher, you will both be rewarded. Let us finish the job."

The world spun and blue flames consumed everything.

The biting cold was replaced by a magnificent domed ceiling and shiny marble floor. We were in a massive ballroom, and it sparkled with opulence and wealth.

Outside, the world glimmered, with green hills and bright sun.

We were in the fae castle.

In the *fae realm*.

My worst nightmare had come to fruition.

Pain still locked all my muscles, but a tear leaked out as I stared at Aran's, Jax's, and Cobra's limp bodies.

They were all sprawled on the marble floor.

"Thank you for bringing my daughter back to me." The fae queen kissed Xerxes's brow, and my stomach rolled.

She turned around and stared at me.

No, this monster couldn't be my mother. I wanted to cry.

She floated forward, but instead of coming to me, she fell to her knees in front of Aran.

Gently, she cradled his head in her lap and ran a finger across his brow.

Aran, with his feminine features.

Aran, who smelled like blood and not a beta, who Auntie had called a girl, who'd told me he liked to run growing up, who'd known how to curl my hair, who'd told me he hated his parents.

Aran was the daughter of the fae queen.

Aran was a *princess*.

Aran was really a girl.

It dawned on me. When the poem took over Auntie, it had said "Heir and friend join and tie."

Aran was the heir. The poem had been about her, my best friend, the lost fae princess.

This was *worse* than I could have ever imagined.

I choked on bile and tried to move my paralyzed limbs.

Aran had run away and disguised herself for a reason. Unlike Ascher, *she* would never betray me. I knew it in the depths of my bones.

"Secure the rest of them. Bring them to the dungeon. Come with me, boys…you shall have your reward." The fae queen walked away like my entire world wasn't imploding.

She led my former kitten and Ascher out of the hall.

Xerxes didn't bother to look back. Fuck him, he'd been *way* better as a kitten. Also, a part of me swelled with satisfaction that my stiletto heel was still sticking out of his shoulder.

However, Ascher did look back at me.

From the way the slinky fucker rolled his shoulders and walked with his back straight, he didn't look younger anymore. He was a completely

different man. A confident man.

Not a hothead.

My Ascher had never been real.

It had all been a facade.

It took all my willpower, but even paralyzed with pain, I moved my fingers.

I flipped him off with both hands.

He smirked back at me and licked his lips like a total creeper.

With his horns and tattoos and the way he prowled out of the room like a monster, I would bet all my money he was crazier and more dangerous than Cobra.

Stab him with his horn. I couldn't wait to make the fucker bleed.

The queen and the two traitors left the room and left me alone with my unconscious friends. I wanted to fall to my knees and beg them all to wake up, to be okay. But my paralyzed limbs wouldn't let me.

When the guards descended, blessedly, one of them knocked me out.

I didn't want to be conscious anymore.

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1
The Evil Queen

Sadie

"Oh my goddess, this is rich. What a disgusting surprise," a tinkling female voice said above me.

I blinked open crusty eyes and immediately wished I hadn't woken up.

I'd been having a horrible nightmare that I was drowning in a sea of my blood.

Of course, because my life was depressing, I woke up to arguably *worse* circumstances. Which was hard to do.

The first thing I noted—the voice belonged to evil lady number one, aka the fae queen.

She leaned casually against the bedroom wall like she didn't have a care in the world.

Glad she was feeling relaxed.

Not relatable.

The second thing I noted—there was a breeze against my vagina.

On closer inspection, I was buck naked, with my limbs like a starfish's, tits up, scars on display, lying in the middle of a massive bed.

"What the flying fuck?" I asked. My broken voice was extra scratchy, a stark contrast to the queen's melodic tone.

I struggled to sit up, but my entire body ached with phantom pain, and I didn't even bother to preserve my modesty.

Unlike what they'd taught us in school, modest was not hottest. You know what was hot? *Not* being kidnapped by psychotic evil fae rulers.

The last things I remembered: Cobra and Jax had been drugged unconscious. Ascher had betrayed us. The queen had attacked me with her blue fire, which was painful as hell but didn't burn like a normal flame.

Then we'd all been transported from the shifter realm to the queen's palace in the fae realm. Aran had turned out to be a girl in disguise and the fae princess. A guard had knocked me out.

If I weren't so tired and sore, I would have burst into tears.

My life, which had been training for *war* at a fortress with alpha and beta shifters who were all stronger than me, had somehow gotten worse. I was so tired that I couldn't attack the fae queen like I wanted to.

Instead, I settled for raising my head slightly and death glaring at everyone in the room.

It was the best I could do.

About two dozen women cringed as I struggled to sit up.

They were the queen's servants.

They wore unique white dresses that I'd seen depicted in a book growing up. Each woman was gorgeous and had slightly pointed ears like all fae.

As I glared around the room and tried to act intimidating, the women grimaced as they stared at my torso.

My gut told me they weren't wincing because they were overwhelmed by the beauty and prominence of my nipples.

They were horrified because thick white scars covered my golden skin.

The queen walked closer to the bed, and I stopped playing the staring game with the servants.

Bright sunshine streamed through gold windows, and her hair sparkled a rich dark blue. The queen had dark eyes and a perfectly symmetrical face, and she wore a gossamer spider-silk dress.

It reminded me of the spider fae whose web had shredded my flesh in battle.

My neck cramped, and I flopped back onto the bed in a poor imitation of a dead fish. Not my strongest moment.

The queen sneered down at me, "Does Cobra know how brutalized your skin is? How ugly you are?"

Who asked someone such a rude question? Clearly, living in a palace didn't make you classy.

I perched my right elbow beneath me, coughed, and said, "What a trashy question. And really, you don't like my scars? I thought they were pretty."

Yes, I had just called the evil fae queen with insane fire abilities "trashy." It was called living without regrets, and it was my new motto.

There was a pregnant pause as everyone in the room stared at me like my tits were out and I was crazy.

Both were true.

Of course, I hated my scars and low-key suffered crippling anxiety, but I wasn't about to tell the *evil* queen that.

I might look dumb and was probably concussed from the guard knocking me out, but I still had a few brain cells left.

The queen arched a perfectly trimmed eyebrow. “You’re quite annoying, aren’t you?”

I grinned, wrinkled my nose at her condescendingly, and asked, “You’re quite the bitch, aren’t you?”

The servants gasped and bowed their heads, and for a long moment, the queen and I stared at each other.

I tried to act like I wasn’t five seconds away from losing consciousness because sitting up was too much effort.

Finally, the queen leaned over the bed and said softly, “You’re barely a beast, while I’m a full-blooded fae with eons of experience crushing crass little fools like you. I’m going to break you.”

“Where is Aran? What did you do with her? You better not hurt her,” I whispered back, and her face was so close to mine that our breath mingled. If she’d hurt my friend, I’d kill her.

Her eyes lit with anger. “It’s *Arabella*, and since she’s my daughter, I will do whatever I want with her.”

I punched her in the throat.

People must not punch her often, because my fist landed hard. She sputtered and fell backward.

There was one universal truth to life: no one looked elegant after a chop to the trachea.

While the queen choked, I collapsed back onto the bed as the room spun around me.

Every muscle in my body was exhausted, and the only thing standing between me and a coma was sheer willpower.

Beside my bed, servants scrambled around the gasping queen and tried to help her, but she slapped their hands away and straightened her spider-silk dress.

She slowly turned toward me, her pretty face contorted into an ugly mask of fury. I sneered back.

Then the bitch lit me on fire.

With a whoosh, blue flames consumed every inch of my naked body.

My mouth opened, back arched, and eyes watered as her power consumed every one of my cells in stinging pain.

It was agony.

Once again, the flames didn't burn like fire. It felt like a thousand needles stabbed into my skin and ripped the flesh off my bones.

I gasped and twitched as tears streamed down my face.

Seizing on the bed, I reached into the dark recess of my mind and tried to flick on the numb.

My homicidal alter ego, which shielded me from pain, hadn't recharged. I must not have been unconscious for long.

With no way to relieve the anguish, my naked body twisted and convulsed on the satin covers.

Through a wall of blue, the queen smirked at me.

I tried to scream, but my broken voice only made weak, gasping noises as I gurgled air.

Tears poured as the misery continued.

The queen snapped her fingers, and the flames disappeared.

Gone, like they'd never existed.

Every single muscle and bone in my body relaxed.

I'd never been so relieved to *not* be on fire.

For a long moment, I gasped and stared up at the painted ceiling of fae wielding the four elements—water, earth, air, and fire.

A water fae held a massive ice sword, an air fae was flying, an earth fae swung a boulder, and a fire fae was covered in flames.

I focused on the first three images because the last one was triggering.

Pretty, my overstimulated brain supplied unhelpfully as I stared at the gorgeous female water fae.

In the aftermath of torture, my body trembled with relief and my brain was only functioning at half capacity.

I choked and said to the queen with a gravelly rasp, "I always preferred the water fae in stories. Their weapons are cooler than your little flames."

It was a bald-faced lie; I'd always been obsessed with the stories of the fire fae.

They were the strongest, the masters of pain, makers of kings, and slayers of gods. Notably, they seemed less cool now that one was literally *lighting* me on fire.

The queen laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Please, the water fae are pathetic compared to the fire wielders."

I argued back, "Maybe, but the half warriors would still destroy you in a fight."

At the mention of half warriors, the queen's perfect smile fell.

Her tone was sharp as knives. "They are no longer a threat to me or this realm. It doesn't matter how powerful they were. I broke them."

"For sure, dude." I rolled my eyes like I was bored and not panicking.

I'd grown up worshipping the half warriors; part alpha and part fae. They not only shifted into beasts, but controlled a fae element.

They were called the Big Three—three half warriors who roamed the fae lands, fighting off monsters and protecting the realm from evil.

If the queen had somehow defeated them, I 100 percent didn't stand a chance.

As if she could read my thoughts, she smirked at me, then turned to address the servants. "I wanted to wait until the prisoner was awake to announce the good news. Today, we have a special treat for the realm. Cobra is back."

Immediately, the women squealed with excitement.

My first reaction—embarrassment flooded through me just hearing Cobra's name. He was an asshole. Literally, he'd fingered my asshole while he ate my pussy like dessert.

I didn't know what they'd put in that wine at the Ianuarius party, but boy had it really lowered my inhibitions. I'd been fighting with him the day before, then I'd just let him put his face in my vagina.

That had not been very alpha of me.

If I were a bad bitch, when he'd pinned me against the closet wall, I would have slammed my knees into his crotch, flashed my vagina, and slinked away in my high heels.

Instead, my resistance had crumbled.

My second reaction—pure terror.

Cobra hated all women and refused to talk to them. Yet he was some type of celebrity in the fae realm, someone the queen referred to by name?

The whole situation had trauma and abuse written all over it.

My flesh tingled, and I trembled as awful scenarios flashed through my brain. I tried to follow the buzzing and shift into my alpha form of a saber-toothed tiger.

No matter how hard I pushed and strained, nothing happened.

"Alphas can't shift in this realm. I've ensured it," the queen said casually.

Any hope that was left in my body disintegrated into smithereens.

My mouth dropped open, and I gaped at her.

If I were standing, my legs would have collapsed beneath me. Good thing I was lying buck naked on a bed surrounded by strangers.

The little glass vials with blue smoke had restricted our ability to change in the shifter realm.

The smoke in the vials was blue, just like her power. Somehow, the queen's fire could stop alphas from shifting in the entire realm.

I might as well just find a shovel and start digging my grave.

The full extent of how fucked everything was crashed down around me. I didn't stand a chance against her.

The queen continued speaking, "As you all know, Cobra is the prettiest man to ever exist and our most popular *entertainer*. He is still an eligible bachelor, and I have set up a treat for the realm."

My chest hurt. She said Cobra's name like he was a fucking object, not a person. I hated the gleam of ownership in her eyes.

I leaned up on my arms and growled, "He's not fucking eligible. He's with Jax, and they love each other."

"No!" the servants shouted and gasped like I'd told them the sun god was dead.

For a split second, the queen's lips pinched together as she glared back at me.

Her eyes clouded with worry as she said, "Settle down, girls. Am I not your queen? I assure you he is very much eligible and will be providing his usual entertainment."

I laughed loudly. "No, I assure you all he is very much *not* elig—"

Flames lit my body, and the stabbing sensation was ten times worse than before.

Instantly, I was paralyzed with pain.

I gasp-screamed as every neuron in my body writhed and sputtered. Blue fire consumed my existence.

After endless moments of suffering, the agony stopped.

I heaved.

The queen sneered down at my convulsing form like she'd beaten me.

If I had any sense of self-preservation, I would have kept my mouth shut.

Too bad the bitch had triggered me.

I choked on saliva and said loudly, "Cobra's with Jax and never touches women. In fact, because of whatever shit is going on here, he hates all women and thinks they are disgust—"

My words were cut off because, again, she set me on fucking fire.

The world thrashed in blue flames, and it felt like my bones disintegrated into wisps of dust as my veins exploded like grenades.

Vomit spewed up my throat, but it had nowhere to go because my body was paralyzed with agony.

I choked and gasped.

For the longest moments, I desperately gurgled. Tears streamed down my face, and my lungs screamed for relief.

This was how I was going to die, naked and choking.

Not the most relaxing end.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the flames extinguished.

I leaned over the bed and spewed chunks across the gleaming white marble floor.

With a gasp, I tried to catch my breath and struggled to push my sweaty limbs up into a sitting position.

"Are you done?" the queen asked in a bored tone, like she was late for her afternoon tea, not torturing me with flames.

She was *so* rude.

Like a mature, independent woman who was good at comebacks, I asked, "Are you done?"

The queen's dark eyes clouded with annoyance, and she stepped closer to me. "No, I've only just begun. I'm going to welcome Cobra back to our realm with a *bang* of a performance. I wasn't going to use you—I couldn't give him something he might actually want—but that was before I saw your naked, hideous flesh."

She paused for dramatic effect and as the servants held their breath in anticipation.

I looked down at my fingernails like I was bored, while every cell in my body shook with terror.

It took everything I had to school my expression and act like I didn't care.

The queen clearly loved drama, and I was not giving it to her.

She continued gloating, "Now that I have seen the extent of your ugliness, I know Cobra would never dare touch your awful flesh. He covets strength above all else, and darling, you are the opposite of strong."

Her words burned because she was right. Cobra did covet strength, which was why he was obsessed with Jax.

Jax was literally three times my body weight and one hundred times stronger than me. He could also run for five minutes without wanting to die, which was impressive and not relatable.

Sure, Cobra had eaten me out in a closet, low-key the best moment of my life, but my dress had covered my entire torso, and the closet had been dark.

The jeweled bastard had sneered at my small stature and inability to run, and he didn't even know the true extent of my weakness.

I never wanted him to see my scars.

The queen snapped her fingers, and a painting on the wall transformed.

The painting rippled, and a naked Cobra was displayed on what seemed to be the fae's enchanted equivalent of a television.

On the screen, Cobra was displayed naked on an ornate bed. *Same*.

However, he also had a diamond-studded collar wrapped around his neck and cuffs around his wrists, and he leaned against the headboard like he didn't have a care in the world.

But his emerald eyes were frozen chips of darkness.

In my room, the servants tittered and ran around to get closer to the screen. They shoved at each other, jockeying for a better view.

The queen turned to me and said, "I've decided that because of your insolence, you're going to be Cobra's first guest."

My soul left my body, and my stomach twisted into a million knots.

Before I could sink fully into panic, the queen grabbed my arm and wrenched me out of the bed.

I slipped in my vomit and barely kept myself upright.

When I straightened, everyone in the room looked down at me.

Now that I stood up, the fae were taller than I'd realized. Also, they were all unnaturally gorgeous. Everyone's features were perfect, hair glossy and skin glistening.

In both realms, I was small and *not* perfect.

The queen tilted her head down to smirk at me. "Cobra is a professional, but there's no way he'll be able to keep his cool when he sees your horrid flesh. Afterward, he'll beg me to let a gorgeous fae fuck him."

My brain struggled to understand what she was saying.

Fuck him?

Before I could process what was happening, the queen called for guards, and large fae men burst into the room.

With every inch of strength left in my exhausted body, I straightened my head, pushed my tits forward, and clenched my butt.

I fought and kicked as they dragged me down a crowded, ornate hallway. My struggling did nothing.

People pointed at my naked, scarred body as the guards manhandled me.

I refused to be embarrassed about my less-than-ideal nude state, so I focused on the paintings on the wall and not on the fae staring and taunting me.

Just like the bedroom ceiling, symbols of the fae elements were carved and painted with exquisite details.

A guard shoved me forward down the hall with so much force that my legs collapsed beneath me.

I fell to my knees.

Fae laughed. Instead of looking at their cruel expressions, I focused on the painting at the bottom of the wall.

Now that I was on the floor, I could see that the image differed from the rest.

It depicted a male fae lying prone, with bright-red blood flowing from cuts on his wrists. His body was limp like he was dead, but his eyes were wide open.

The image was graphic and horrible.

My brain shivered with foreboding.

A guard hauled me to my feet and shoved me through a gold door, and I pushed the horrifying image out of my thoughts.

As I stumbled to catch myself, I turned toward the bed.

An unnaturally gorgeous shifter leaned against the wall.

Cobra looked like a pale Adonis.

His snake eyes stared at me.

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