



There's no soft in war...

Mira survived years in a secret prison, one she must return to and somehow rescue the people she left behind. The so-called peace treaty between the Paraspecies and humanity is fracturing, but she must seek help from the Alpha wolf she left behind. But how can she prove an imprisonment she barely believes herself?

He'll risk anything for another chance...

The Impure female from his past returns with a tale too gruesome to be false. The human government has imprisoned the genetically tainted humans they ostracized. Adrik wants to help, but the pack and Redemption are in turmoil. Dare he risk them all for one woman?

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Chapter One

Three years ago

Mira's finger itched to pull the trigger. Eron might be her older brother, but he'd proven to be dumb, trusting wolf shifters with their camp location. Great. It had taken months to get everything functioning. Now they'd have to rip it all up, trudge to a new location, fight whatever freaks got in the way.

The last thing Mira wanted was more fighting. No one in Hell's Highway had gotten the memo about The Rending's end. The bloody war between the Paraspecies and the fucking purists leading humanity's NAH may have officially ended, but the humans stuck between their newly established lands still suffered like they had for two decades.

Mira had lived most of her life in Hell's Highway. Unlike her older brother, she didn't remember the internment camp. All she knew was everything her family suffered was because the NAH wanted them obliterated from existence.

The NAH discovered the existence of people like the ones in the crosshairs of her scope. Paraspecies. Shape shifters, mages, and succubae. The ones marked for her bullet were wolves—tall, dark and deadly. Three of them had sauntered into the camp as though they owned it.

Eron had told her to stay inside, they were cool. Yeah, right. Like she was trusting her brother with people who could shift into an animal. Mira studied the one she assumed was the leader.

Way taller than her brother, twice as muscular. All male. Awareness fluttered in her pulse as she slid the sight downward slowly, guiding it down his broad shoulders, down his bare torso. She'd thought her brother crazy for ordering them to remove everything but their pants to make sure they had no weapons. Each glorious, sun-kissed inch of the man in her scope proved one vital flaw in Eron's plan—the men were the weapons.

Strong, powerful thighs encased in snug denim. Her mouth dried, her palms sweated. Life in Hell's Highway didn't offer men like this one. As she focused the sight on his face, he turned in her direction.

Full lips upturned into a feral grin that highlighted his cinnamon gaze. She shivered under the intensity. Thank goodness she was a hundred yards away, tucked behind an overturned vehicle on the hillside. They'd never notice her.

Unfortunately. In a different, warless time she could spend an eternity wrapped around a man like him. Strong. Virile. Commanding. She shivered under the intensity of her need. God, she was pathetic.

The lonely, dark nights of terror-filled battle had worn down her defenses. The hope offered in each sinewy inch of his golden body made her ignite. He was everything she needed. Strength. Security.

Hope.

He was also everything she feared. Her finger trembled on the trigger. Unlike most in the Highway, she'd never killed. But she would if necessary.

Eron coddled her. Sooner or later he'd have to see reason. It was time she took her rightful place within The Alliance. The movement to protect Impures from the succubae and the NAH needed fearless, fast people like her now that they'd secured assistance from the man in her crosshairs.

Redemption was a long way away from The Alliance's primary base of operations. Supplies and munitions were impossible to come by. Fortunately, the wolf shifters running Redemption had offered their assistance. Whatever provisions they needed would be theirs, in exchange for whatever intel The Alliance gathered.

It was a good deal.

Assuming they could be trusted.

Not that the tight-lipped paranormals bothered to offer any intel in return. They never spoke to outsiders about Paraspecies business. Ever. Eron never really knew who was in charge when he spoke to a group of them, like the one that'd arrived just now.

They'd spoken with Eron before, and he'd finally gained their trust. It was the only reason they knew who in the group was their leader. Mira respected the protectiveness within their pack, the way they held things important to them close. What would it be like to live among a group so tight knit? Adrik. The name suited the man. As he shook hands with Eron, she set the rifle down and rubbed the tension from her neck. It'd taken longer to secure the deal than she'd expected. The sun's rays blasted her skin with blistering heat, but she remained still. Eyes closed, she took a few deep breaths.

Crackling limbs behind her made her eyes snap open. She reached for the rifle but someone grasped her wrist firmly. Shock riddled her mute and she cried out under the pressure.

Adrik.

How?

She blinked away the surprise firing within her adrenaline-fueled bloodstream as the same primal grin she'd appreciated moments ago returned to his handsome face. The distance had done him no justice. The man was gorgeous.

She punched and kicked. The strong fingers wrapped around her wrist eased slightly. His other arm wrapped around her waist and drew her closer.

"Easy there, spitfire."

"Let me go."

Laughter tumbled from him. His muscles flexed beneath her splayed fingers. She swallowed the fearful scream in her throat and studied him a moment. Silence ticked by, moving slower than her quickening pulse. She stared at his lips. So full.

"You know how to shoot?" He held up the rifle. When had he taken it away?

"Give it back and you'll find out." Something crawled in her gut. She stared at the gun a moment, then at him. Damn. He's bigger than I thought up close.

He chuckled a moment and settled her against his side. The scent of woods and clean grass filled her nostrils. "What's your name?"

"Mira."

"Beautiful name. I'm Adrik."

"I know." She swallowed. "You aren't as hairy as I thought you'd be."

Crap. Did she really just say that? The wild laughter around her signaled two things. One—yes, she'd said it aloud. Great. Two—they weren't alone. Damn. Heat rose in her cheeks as she wondered if tunneling through the ground would be worth the effort. Eron warned her she'd regret her fast mouth one day. She was pretty sure the day was unfolding.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"I'm sorry my lack of hair disappointed you."

"I'm so not disappointed." Crap. There she went again.

His smile softened. Amusement flared with something darker in his eyes. Whatever it was made her belly flutter and her limbs weaken. "I'm thinking we'll get to know one another quite well, Mira."

"We'll see. I still find it hard to believe your kind gives a damn about Impures."

"Your success ensures our security. The NAH and succubae have to go through the Highway to get to us. If The Alliance keeps your area safe, we're safe."

It made sense. Still. Mira wasn't accustomed to someone caring about her. Awareness drifted between them. His hand moved along her back. She repeated the action on his bare chest.

"You're so warm."

A low rumble emanated from his chest. Shock stilled her. Had she been petting him?

"Sorry."

"I like your touch, Mira. My kind are very tactile."

"Oh." Oh. The possibilities cast a soft haze in her brain as her fingers continued gliding along his heated skin. "That's nice."

"Mira, look at me." He smiled when she looked up at him. "I'm thinking you're gonna be the best trouble to wander into my life."

"I'm not trouble," she defended.

He chuckled. "Every inch of you is trouble, and I'm looking forward to every moment."

* * *

Two years ago in Redemption...

Pleasure sparked along her skin, exploding wherever Adrik touched. Deft fingers delved beneath her bra and cupped her breast. Groaning, she deepened the kiss and clung to him, desperate to experience whatever existed beyond the precipice she traversed every time she snuck away with Adrik.

His name escaped her, an excited utterance born of desperation. His lips trailed along her neck. Cool air brushed along her skin as he drew her shirt down and exposed her bare breast. Wait. Where was her bra?

Confusion mingled with agitated arousal. She reached for him, running her hand under his shirt. Abdominal muscles honed from hours of grueling, daily practice flexed beneath her splayed palm.

"I need to fuck you, sweet Mira. I need to feel you come around my dick." He pinched her nipple. Sensation coursed through her, pooling between her legs.

Shock stilled her. Her pulse spiked and adrenaline blasted through her veins. She couldn't imagine denying him anything he wanted, but was she ready for him?

Yes. A thousand times yes.

Tentatively, her hand drifted downward until she cupped the prominent bulge that'd been the subject of many of her recent fantasies. Adrik growled and gently seized her neck. Desire danced along her spine in tiny tingles as he nibbled on her lips. His tongue delved, demanding her surrender as he thrust in a rhythm her entire body memorized.

Her pussy clenched and she swallowed her startled gasp when his fingers were suddenly there, where no one had touched her before. She squeezed her legs together, bracing herself against the wall behind her.

Oooh.

"Adrik, please."

He tensed and withdrew, his obsidian gaze blackened fully by desire. Her breaths came in tiny pants beneath the intensity raging there as she clung to him, wondering why he'd stopped. Why he always stopped? Oh no. He must've thought she wanted him to.

"Fuck, Mira. Stopping's getting harder."

"So don't." She dug her fingers into his thick arm. "Don't stop. This was meant to be. I can feel it. Can't you?"

The few moments she spent with Adrik here, in Redemption, made the hellacious journey through Hell's Highway worthwhile. NAH forces skirmished with Eron's resistance fighters more often, making every day a battle of survival. The intel she carried to Adrik and his people ensured her brother's safety. As long as the Paraspecies knew what happened with the NAH and Eron's fighters, they'd send weapons and warriors to train the latest wave of Impure fighters.

Somehow, though, she managed to forget all that for the few moments she was with Adrik. But he resisted the attraction growing between them. She couldn't lose him.

"You and me...what you're thinking it'd mean can't happen, Mira. Redemption and The Alliance working together is too important. My pack has to come first, so does your brother and your camp." Regret softened his face as he distanced himself.

The cavernous expanse he set between them every time returned. Though they stood scant inches from one another, he was a universe away. The ever diligent, sacrificial Alpha wolf. Damn him and his duty to his people.

“One day you’ll realize you can have a personal life and still lead your pack. I’m not asking for forever, but I need to know there’s more than a stolen moment here and there.”

She needed to know she was the only one. Jealousy clawed her insides. She still remembered seeing him with a woman in the alley behind Medical a month after she’d met him. She’d yet to venture into the area behind the most heavily used building in Redemption. No matter how many injured Impures Adrik’s pack treated, there were always more of Mira’s kind desperate for their help. She used to love helping however she could—dressing minor wounds, administering antibiotics.

Seeing that woman with him ruined that for her. Her pussy clenched, wondering what it would feel like to be the woman he shoved against the alley wall and fucked so fiercely Mira swore she’d heard the slap of flesh on flesh from across the empty market square.

Adrik cupped her face and brushed a kiss along her mouth. “I know. Next time, we’ll figure some of this out, okay? Things should be a bit calmer by then.”

She nodded. “Guess that’s my cue to make tracks back to The Alliance.”

Darkness clouded his gaze before he looked away. “I hate this shit. Every time you leave here makes my wolf howl. Eron is a fool for allowing you to be a runner.”

Eron hadn’t been left much of a choice. The desperate need for runners meant she’d finally been granted her wish eleven months ago. Ever since then she’d existed sprinting the long distance between The Alliance encampment and Redemption. Each time she left Adrik got harder, though.

“When will you be back?” he asked.

She shrugged. “It all depends on how the border wars are going. The succubae have been silent lately, so it could be a while.”

A part of her hoped they’d need provisions or munitions soon, but that’d mean The Alliance battling either the succubae to the north or the NAH to the east. Neither was good for her people. She’d always maintained a glimmer of hope that one day peace would come to Hell’s Highway.

“Would you stay here in Redemption, if my pack agreed?”

“What? Permanently?” She swallowed the hope back and forced reality to the forefront.

“Yes.” Determination rose in his voice and pinged her thumping heart. “We’ve been talking about offering residence to a few Impures in exchange for their services to keep Redemption running.”

“What about us?”

His jaw twitched and he looked away. Just as she’d suspected. Over the past couple of months several in his pack had mated Impures. Though still rare, it wasn’t outlawed nor shunned from what she could tell.

Then again, none of them were Alpha. He probably operated off different rules. Not everyone in his pack embraced the couplings. She’d seen the scorn firsthand. Having their commander with an Impure would be problematic.

The fact he was even discussing possible scenarios that kept her closer offered hope. Her stubborn wolf was mulling things over, trying to figure out a way to be Mr. Perfect Alpha while also holding onto her. The implied sentiment, though unspoken, warmed her.

“Think on it. We’ll talk next time.” She brushed a kiss on his cheek and picked up the heavy backpack. Settling it on her shoulders, she headed out of the alley.

“Mira.”

Don’t turn around. Keep going. Don’t turn around.

“Mira.” His voice rose. Desperation resonated in each syllable.”

She turned.

“We’ll figure this out.”

Chapter Two

Adrik stood sentry at the rarely used northern entrance to Redemption and stared out at the desolate highway. A soft breeze whipped hot, arid air across his skin and the punishing heat of the sun blazed overhead. Today marked the end of an era. How did he reconcile himself to a fate he wanted no part of?

As though sensing his darkening thoughts, his second in command appeared and took position beside him. Ren always appeared when needed. “Are you ready for this, man?”

“No.” How did one prepare to take away everything from a mentor? Whether Jarvis was willing or not didn’t matter. The wrongness still burned in Adrik’s blood. “Is everything ready?”

Ren grunted. “As good as it’ll get under the circumstances. We salvaged what parts we could from the barracks to get the water heater in the cottage functional. Giles diverted the necessary solar reserves. There should be plenty of energy.”

Running a city as large as Redemption with archaic equipment required sacrifice, most of which fell on his pack. They lived in squalor with no complaint to make the visitor portion of the bartering post thrive.

Starting today they’d have to find new ways to make it work because the cottage needed to run as though it was brand new.

“And the air conditioning?”

“It won’t work perfectly, but it’ll keep her cool, comfortable.”

Dread pitted Adrik’s gut as he stared out at the highway. “We’ve survived decades of war, but I’m not sure the pack will survive this.”

He looked over his shoulder to where the majority of the pack stood silently. Waiting. Sadness cloaked them all. Its presence choked him.

“We attempted to contain them. Marek and Giles both suggested an organized reunion tomorrow, but the pack wants to see Bessa—even if only from a distance.” Darkness settled in Ren’s gaze when it landed on Adrik. “They won’t let her come home to no one.”

Adrik stifled the curse lodged in his throat. “Why would Command Central think our pack can get past this after the losses they’ve already suffered?”

“We’ll manage because everyone will follow your lead. Bessa’s sharp. She’s the mate of our Alpha Commander and knows her people need her. She’ll be prepared for their presence.”

Dust billowed into a thick cloud in the distance. Unease pricked his skin. A lone vehicle made its way down the dilapidated road. “They were supposed to have an escort.”

“Fucking flyers probably didn’t think it necessary to escort them all the way here and diverted toward the south to tend to the borderland wars with the Outsiders.”

As Alpha wolf of the quadrant, Adrik was more than aware of the battles to the south. Fortunately Daryn, the Alpha dragon, had insisted on handling the matter. “The support is necessary. He’s been down there with his squadrons for well over a month. We can’t afford to have our attention diverted much longer. The border with Hell’s Highway needs to remain our focus.”

Hell’s Highway was a small patch of land allotted to the Impures during the negotiations that ended The Rending. The NAH obtained control of all lands east of Interstate 55 while the Paraspecies took everything west of Interstate 35 and north of Interstate 10. Use of the ravaged freeway system made sense even though vehicles were rare these days.

The gray van pulled into the gated entrance as Ren and Adrik stepped aside to allow entry. He made his way round to the driver’s side as Jarvis exited the vehicle with a forced smile.

“It’s great to see you, man.” Jarvis embraced him with a hard slap on the back. “Thanks for letting us come here. It means a lot to her, and to me.”

Adrik glanced into the passenger’s side and waved at the frail woman he didn’t recognize as the sweet, fearless Bessa who’d been embraced by every wolf pack as the epitome of the ideal mate. “How is she?”

“Determined.” Jarvis lowered his voice. “She doesn’t like to be coddled. There’s a ton of plants and gardening shit in the vehicle. She’s overhauling the city food garden while we’re here. She’s pretty sure you’ve let it fall apart.”

“She’d be right. Things have been hectic, so gardening duties didn’t hit the radar.”

Jarvis grinned. “Good. Really good. She does better when she has something to think about aside from her illness.”

“Doc’s looking forward to working with her,” Ren stated.

“Good.” The grim expression on Jarvis’s face said what his words didn’t. There was nothing Doc could do even though he was the most skilled healer of the Paraspecies. No one knew what was wrong with Bessa.

“Let’s get you both situated. I’ll send someone out to handle your stuff.” Adrik smiled as Bessa exited the vehicle and made her way to him on shaky limbs. “We’ve got a cottage house ready for you two. That’ll ensure you have a bit of privacy from the flyers when they arrive. We’ll put them in The Tower while they’re here.”

The Tower, a large skyscraper behind the high-traffic public bathing facility, sat vacant for the most part. Most levels of the building were unusable. Stairwells proved unnavigable for all but the most surefooted of Adrik’s pack. It was the

perfect defensible location for the visiting elite dragons and gryphons from Command Central, especially since most of the upper levels were immaculate.

The proximity to the Impure cleansing facilities, though, made it less than ideal—especially since the backed-up sewage system was under repair.

“Oh, Adrik. The stench around The Tower is vile and the noise intolerable,” Bessa admonished as she wound her arms around his waist and squeezed him tightly. “You always had the same warped sense of humor as my mate. I suppose that’s why you two get along so well.”

Emotion clogged Adrik’s throat. The beautiful shell of haggard female couldn’t be Bessa. Her once-thick black hair hung in a thin, stringy mass stopping short of her jaw. A cloudy gray masked the brilliant glimmer he’d remembered in her hazel eyes. Sunken cheeks highlighted her dry lips and pale, damn near translucent skin.

Thin arms covered with the same almost nonexistent skin appeared from beneath the thick blanket. She leaned forward and draped herself against him in a hug he longed to return, but the tension cording Jarvis’ body warned him against it. Bessa would probably break in two if someone exerted a wolf’s strength on her.

“I heard you’re going to salvage our garden.”

Bessa smiled and looked up at him as she stepped back and settled her hand on Jarvis’s arm. “I’ve been looking forward to it. I can’t wait to see what all you’ve done with Redemption since I was here last. I’ve heard so many wonderful stories about all the good your pack does here for the Impures, Adrik. The thankless work to help those poor, unfortunate souls makes my heart swell with pride.”

“Some of those unfortunate souls would rather carve out our hearts than accept anything from us,” Ren stated.

Bessa glowered at him, her face as expressive as always. “Ren Demanno, I know I didn’t hear you say that. You know desperation brings out the worst in anyone. I can’t imagine how horrid their lives have been in Hell’s Highway, forced to kill or be killed while being hunted like prey by the succubae.”

Ren’s cheeks reddened. “You’re right, sweet Bessa. It’s good to see you.”

Bessa’s gaze swept the area and landed on the gathered pack. Pride rose in Adrik when she gasped. Moisture pooled in her eyes and a smile appeared on her lips. “Oh, Adrik. Look at all the babies.”

Jarvis wrapped his arm around her waist as she headed toward the crowd. So much for getting her settled quickly and quietly so she could recover from the journey.

“You didn’t tell me there were so many babies here, mate,” she admonished when she stopped and looked up at Jarvis. “Go, tend to your business with Adrik before the flyers catch up. Ren will escort me to the cottage when I’m done here.”

Adrik looked over at Jarvis. “You ditched the flyers?”

Jarvis shrugged. “I didn’t want to wait until sunrise to leave.”

A wealth of unspoken words spilled from his gaze. He’d wanted time alone with Adrik without golden dragon Trent, the king of the Paraspecies, there. Adrik’s earlier agitation eased. At least The Council’s decision wasn’t a surprise.

Adrik and Ren turned as Jarvis kissed Bessa and whispered words meant for her alone. The woman giggled and responded with softer utterances Adrik couldn’t hear. Jesus, the couple had been through hell, but they still loved one another as though they’d just mated.

As Ren escorted Bessa toward the gathered pack, Adrik and Jarvis fell into a silent trudge toward the bustling square where visitors in Redemption could barter for goods, get medical aid, bathe and grab a hot meal.

“I’m glad to have you here, but I hate the circumstances,” Adrik said.

“As do I.” Laughter and a cacophony of voices from the crowded marketplace a few hundred feet away filled the air. Jarvis pointed at the crowd on the other side of them. “What are they in line for?”

“Medical.” The three-story brown brick building served as the pulse of Redemption. Every resource they had was allotted to the facility before any other. “Doc and his crew see thousands daily. The upper level is where the critical are treated. The second level has showers, a rehabilitation area and secured treatment rooms. Most Impures requiring an overnight stay are put in the building across from the alley, the Medical Barracks. They’re running two hundred fifty beds on average.”

“Impressive, way more than the twenty when I was here last.” He crossed his arms and looked at the other buildings. “I see some maintenance is past due.”

Adrik's jaw twitched. "Finding time to patch buildings, mend roofs and replace plumbing falls by the wayside when succubae infiltrate the town. Skirmishes along the NAH bus lines have increased lately, which means more injuries to tend and more people staying for extended periods of time."

Jarvis squeezed Adrik's shoulder. "It wasn't a judgment. No other Alpha could've done even half of what you accomplished here while also leading three packs. Hell, I can't even get some of them to lead one pack, and their borders don't require guarding against invasion by the Outsiders to the south, Hell's Highway to the east—not to even mention the threats in Hell's Playground. My job as Alpha Commander is going to be a vacation for you. I'm exhausted just thinking about taking your place here."

"So you know."

"Yeah, it was my idea for you to assume command. We both know it should've been you all along."

"That's not true." Adrik fisted his hands at his side. He loathed the defeat in his mentor's voice, the utter despair in his weary face. "There's no reason you can't continue to lead us."

Sadness filled Jarvis' weary gaze. "My wolf bleeds for her. When she..." He swiped his hand along his face and sighed heavily. "I'm lost without her, man."

They all would be. Bessa was the blood of their people—the mother to everyone and the one every warrior would die to defend. She'd unified the people amidst the chaos of The Rending. While Jarvis had gotten wolf shifters to support Bredon as king when King Sashi was slaughtered—the starting point of the war—Bessa had been the one to keep the packs there when Bredon died.

"This pack will do anything to help. Just ask."

They continued forward in silence. As they approached the primary entrance to Redemption, children's laughter mingled with the gasps of newly arriving Impures, who were scanning their wrist devices for the first time and saw how little lab test subjects earned for their two-year stint in hellish NAH facilities.

"I forgot how disgusted I get by all this, seeing the volunteers when they first arrive. Knowing they don't remember anything done to them."

"The atrocities have increased," Adrik stated. "Doc noted more unhealed fractures and scar damage."

Jarvis grimaced.

Adrik turned to face the man who'd mentored him, fought alongside him for decades. They'd bled for one another and now he was expected to dethrone him?

"Is this really what you want? Say the word and I'll make it go away."

"No, it's not, but Bessa does. She's my concern now, the pack is yours. This is bigger than you and me so, for now, we do what's right for the pack, and my mate."

Shouts echoed within the bustling square. Everyone jostled and shoved their way forward, turning their faced to the darkening sky.

"Everyone, stand back!" Marek, one of Adrik's fiercest sentinels, shouted as he pushed the crowd away to clear space.

Although every Alpha had six warriors serving in the elite position of sentinel within every pack, Marek was so much more. Although Adrik's sentinels primarily oversaw security, he'd somehow been fortunate to have dedicated soldiers like Marek, who worked tirelessly to make Redemption thrive.

Adrik's job would be a hell of a lot more difficult without Marek, Ren, Giles, Peyton, Caden and Cesar. They'd help Redemption through the upcoming transition. More importantly, they'd help Jarvis.

Adrik gazed skyward at the two circling gryphons and lone dragon. The smallest gryphon landed first, his massive body shifting to human form the moment his talons hit the dirt.

What the hell?

In the years since Redemption opened, King Bredon had visited once—at night. Flyers in the borderland outpost were rare enough. Sure, Dragon Alpha Daryn had a den of warriors here, but they remained in human form for the most part.

But that was years ago. The visitors here hadn't seen dragons in animal form in almost a decade. What was King Trent thinking? As the last two men landed in unison and stood, a hushed silence fell over the thickening crowd. Warriors from Adrik's pack shoved their way through the gathering to place themselves between the people and the three men who'd foolishly shifted in front of everyone.

Adrik prowled forward, shoving past a gryphon guard he vaguely remembered meeting. Kane. Why had a gryphon with his questionable history been assigned to the elite protective detail? His sister had betrayed their kind and chosen to enslave herself to King Varden rather than suffer in an internment camp or be executed.

"You knew he'd be part of the escort?" Adrik asked Ren.

"Yeah, I meant to warn you in case you recognized him. Kadal vouched for his loyalty. He's been solid." Ren's voice lowered. "Still not happy about their entry. Impures aren't used to seeing flyers in action."

"They won't be seeing it again," Adrik stated as he charged toward the flyers. Idiots.

The legendary gryphon Commander, Kadal, growled and shoved Adrik when he approached the dragon king. The ancient gryphon was more legend than reality, having defended three dragon leaders now. "Step back, wolf."

"Are you crazy? We don't shift in public, especially in front of Impures. Are you trying to incite them?"

The half red, half golden dragon King Trent stepped forward and leveled an amber-flecked obsidian gaze on Adrik. "My apologies. We're short on time and too weary for pomp and circumstance. I didn't mean to distress the Impures. We forget how they react to our kind since we rarely interact with them at Command."

"Of course." Adrik bowed slightly. "I would kneel, my liege, but it's not our custom to do anything to point out the hierarchy."

"Like I said, we're short on pomp and circumstance." Trent grinned as his gaze landed on Jarvis. "Imagine our surprise when we woke and realized our charge was gone."

"You needed your beauty sleep and my mate was restless to get here."

Trent crossed his arms and regarded them a moment. "I assume you two discussed the situation."

"Some," Adrik stated. "Perhaps we should head inside to have this conversation."

Adrik motioned toward Headquarters, but Kadal shook his head and inserted himself into the discussion.

"Inside isn't an option. We stopped to ensure Jarvis and Bessa were here. Daryn called. They need us down South."

Typical commanding flyer bullshit, short on time unless it suited them. Adrik's gaze swept the marketplace. The Impure crowd had dissipated thanks to his sentinels and warriors. The pack drifted down the path of the cottage they'd all helped prepare for Bessa and Jarvis.

One of his beta wolves, Hal, jogged over and waited a few feet away.

"There a problem?"

"Doc's requested your assistance in Medical. We have a security issue."

"Peyton's on Medical," Adrik reminded the beta. "She'll handle it." Few betas liked dealing with the lone female sentinel of the pack, which was why he'd put her in charge of handling day-to-day operations. Her formidable temper proved a worthy deterrent for any pack who may want to cause mischief around visiting Impures.

"I-I..." his gaze widened as it landed on Trent. The wolf stooped to kneel, but Adrik grabbed his shirt and tugged him upward. "Right. Sorry."

"Find Peyton. She can handle Doc's problem."

The beta hesitated a moment, his gaze on the dragon king, then the gryphons.

"Knowing the little hellion sentinel, she's the problem," Kadal growled. "Go. He'll be there shortly. We're leaving soon."

The man nodded his head and tore off for Medical as though the fires of hell were singeing his ass. He was ruthless in battle, but socially awkward more times than not.

"I'll go, grab Marek on the way, just in case. The warriors have the crowd contained now, so he isn't needed out here," Ren stated. Adrik nodded as the sentinel tore off toward the heavily populated area where Impures were treated. They'd learned early on to handle any security issues at Medical swiftly.

"Adrik, I understand your hesitation. To be blunt, I suspect I'd agree with many of your arguments. So, let me alleviate what I assume are your primary objectives."

This should be entertaining. Though he'd fought beside Trent in countless battles, he didn't know the man. "Go on."

"First off, this wasn't a decision I endorsed, but many other things are festering at Command Central. I'll trust Jarvis to fill you in later. For now, know I have my reasons for going along with the Council's decision."

"It's the right call," Jarvis stated. "I trust you to take my place, Adrik. The pack will as well, without question."

"Your presence at Command will give much-needed insight into the Redemption effort. Few understand this site, the fact it's the spine strengthening our defenses." Trent's approval made Adrik calm. "Providing Impures with a safe haven

keeps their Alliance forces strong enough to fight the NAH and the succubae. Thanks to you they're supplied and trained enough to win."

"Trained?" Kane asked.

"Adrik's three packs in this quadrant rotate into rigorous training regiments for The Alliance," Jarvis supplied.

"Under whose authority?" Kane demanded.

"Mine," Jarvis replied.

Trent sighed. "Let's get to the point. You must be appointed Alpha Commander. Who runs this quadrant and how many packs and sentinels within it will be your call completely. Unlike Council, I realize having Jarvis lead this quadrant isn't a viable option."

Tension vacated Jarvis's stance. "Many of Adrik's sentinels would make exceptional Alphas—far better than some of the other quadrant Commanders."

"Excellent. I trust you to restructure the pack leadership and locations however you desire. I've always endorsed a distribution of packs based on threat levels. What I can offer you is my approval, which translates to a distribution of the dragon dens for each quadrant to coincide with yours. You'll work with us at Command on the specifics, but the call will ultimately be yours."

How many times had he and his warriors discussed potential restructurings? Hundreds of times. Maybe thousands. The potential evident in Trent's promises gave Adrik pause.

"I believe we've given you enough to consider. We'll return once we've handled the Outsiders." Trent smiled. "Good luck with the issue at Medical, whatever it may be."

The man stepped back and leaped. Power hung in the air as the three flyers shifted in mid jump. The startling display of power made the residual gawkers gasp.

"Fucking flyers," Adrik ground.

"You haven't seen anything. Just wait until you get to Command." Jarvis chuckled. "Let's go figure out what's going down at Medical before your beta pisses himself thinking about coming for you a second time."

Amusement rose in Adrik as he swatted Jarvis on the shoulder. "I've missed you, man."

Jarvis locked gazes. "This is the right thing. Think on it, but know it's the only call we have to make. Give my mate the time she needs here. I promise we'll do right by Redemption. Your baby will be in good hands, and so will your packs—especially since I want to turn all three over to your sentinels."

"We'll talk about it. Let's get to Medical."

They fell into a trot as they wound through the alley to enter via the side entrance. The scent of antiseptic overrode a pervasive stench of illness wafting from the overflowing lobby. Patients sat in chairs set up along the narrow hallway. Voices rose from the end of the passage.

"Finally. I was about to send Hal after you again." Doc's white dragon assistant, Lynette, pocketed a fistful of tranquilizer darts and headed down the hall.

He followed dutifully with Jarvis on his heels. His wolf tuned to voices rising in agitation. Ren, Peyton and Marek. What the hell?

"Your sentinels are barring me from tending my patient. Remove them or I shoot their asses up." She paused in front of Ren, who'd put himself in front of the shut door.

"You don't know shit about this situation," Ren growled as he stepped aside.

"Then we're having words later about communication, wolf, because the day your pack gets in my way when I'm tending someone—especially someone who's injured—I swear I'll go all red dragon and flambé you all."

"Aren't you a white dragon?" Jarvis asked, his amusement evident since she was all of five foot.

"I'll get it all sorted," Adrik said.

"You'd better. Otherwise I'm tossing all your asses out. There's no reason for an overgrown shrew of a sentinel to try to toss my patient out of Redemption." The white dragon halted before the door. Angered shouts and growls echoed from behind the door. "We don't do shit like that around here, Adrik."

No. They didn't. The shrill scream from the other side of the door left little doubt who the overgrown shrew was. Peyton. The pack's only female sentinel, she was fierce, but short on patience.

Another scream echoed from the room beside him. Adrik growled. He had his own issues to deal with right now—namely a shrill female wolf. He threw the door open.

His brain drowned in shock as his gaze swept past Peyton kicking, jerking and punching in Marek's embrace. A couple of warriors stood between them and the patient sitting in a filthy heap in the center of the bed.

Blood and mud caked what'd once been alabaster skin he'd longed to lick, taste. If Bessa was thin, Mira was waif-thin. His wolf growled. From rage or a feral instinct to protect, Adrik wasn't sure. The Impure female blinked, her deep green eyes observing him from behind a mop of stringy, mud-caked hair.

"Adrik."

Shock overrode reason and he lunged forward until the stench of her presence permeated his nostrils and made his wolf flare with need—a feral necessity to protect, an anguished desire to taste, a potent rage to hurt. Like she had him.

Duty warred with desire and tangled with rage. The human vanished from his life two years before without a word. His wolf stirred, punching at his chest. Yeah. They'd both been fools back then to believe they'd meant something to her.

For months she'd edged her way past his defenses and wormed her way into his pack's life. A runner for The Alliance, she spent countless days in Redemption before running the provisions and intel back to her people. During her time there she'd forged friendships, bonds that'd meant something to his people.

To him.

Fuck. He'd thought she was his mate.

Thankful as fuck she was alive, yet furious she'd left. A part of him was ready to grab hold of her and not let go while the other wanted to get her gone before she ripped out what was left of his heart.

Mira.

Alive.

His wolf howled in mournful relief. Tension coiled within the room as his sentinels closed rank around him, their unease with her presence obvious. She'd been like a little sister to them before she'd left.

He'd have to play this right. Her abrupt departure had come across as a betrayal to many of his pack. Though he loathed the task, he needed to confront her, demand answers on where the hell she'd been. They'd mourned her.

Because he had.

Wrapping her in his arms and kissing away whatever hell she'd endured wouldn't get his pack on board with protecting her. Her terrified gaze warned him whatever the reason for her disappearance wasn't going to settle well with him. Or the pack.

The need to protect his people overrode his personal desires. For now. "What the hell are you doing here, Mira?"