

## Chapter 13

Their screams do nothing to abate my fury of finally finding her. Killing them a thousand times over would not be enough for the torture they put her through. Yet as the last cabin burns to the ground, and the cabins crumble in a pile of ash, I know I can't sit here for much longer. Casen drops onto the steps beside me, pulling a smoke from his pocket. He offers me the packet and I take it, staring at what is left. Now what do I do with myself? For years, I have chased the phantom, for years I chased her ghost, and now I have found her, all I can think of is my mother's words so long ago.

“Some people can't be fixed,” my mother told me that her aura resembled that of someone gone insane. After years of feeling her, I knew what she said was true. Temperance is more animal than human. I am certain of that.

Casen pats himself down and curses, pulling the smoke from between his lips. “Got a lighter?” he asks as I stare ahead. I hoped finding her and seeking revenge will fill this hollow void inside me, yet all its done is made it larger, more infinite, more consuming. Because now I am no longer chasing, I have no reason to not go home. No more excuses to not take my place as Alpha. No, now I have to see if any part of her is salvageable, if not I'll spend the rest of my life caring for her, keeping her safe.

Holding up my finger, Casen puts his smoke between his lips, then presses the tip of it to my finger that glows red with heat. Smoke wafts in my face and he sits drawing back on the smoke.

“I’ll never get used to your ability to manipulate light,” he says, exhaling, and I light my own.

“So now what?” Casen asks me. And I lean back, making sure the surrounding forest doesn’t burn as the embers burn out. It starts to sprinkle rain, like mist coating everything and extinguishing what remains.

“No idea. I might stop in and see Marabella before heading home.”

“Can you drop me to your uncles on the way?” he asks, and I nod my head.

“Going back to see Rose?” I ask, and he sighs.

“If she’ll see me. Although, I am nervous. I haven’t spoken to her in years.”

I purse my lips because I feel the same. I’m nervous to go back home as well, nervous to see my fathers, but more importantly, nervous about taking Temperance home with me. Casen and I sit out on the porch and finish our smokes when I glance at the front over my shoulder.

“She’s still asleep. I wouldn’t have come out if she was awake,” Casen tells me. Nodding, I get up and walk inside the packhouse. Her scent is strong in the living room where she is sleeping on the old checkered green and white couch; an old dirty blanket is chucked over her and the fire is going out in the old fireplace. An old box TV sits in one corner, the screen door shuts with a bang when Casen walks in. Glancing at him, he nods toward the hall, and I cast a glance at her one last time before following him. Besides the living room, I cannot smell her scent here until we stop at a door.

“Did you go down there?” I ask him, staring at the old brass door handle, the wooden frame it’s on is covered with multiple locks.

“No, I don’t want to know what is down there. I’ve watched you sleep for years, that is enough for my imagination, I don’t want to see the things you scream about!” Casen tells me, and I swallow. Casen wanders off

back to Temperance. Twisting the locks and pulling on the handle, I open it. The stench down here is putrid and steals my breath, a cold shiver runs through me as the icy stagnant air rushes over me. I run my hands down the wall looking for a light, but don't find one. It is pitch black down here, and I take the first step.

My eyes adapt and my vision turns luminescent as Malachi comes forward giving me his sight. The stairs creak as I take them, some feeling like they would give way any moment. My footsteps are loud, and I remember her fear as if it was mine every time she would hear those locks twist, every time she would hear the stairs creak. Reaching the bottom, I peer around the dark empty space, my eyes first land on the dog crate in the corner of the room.

It reeks of her blood, reeks of death down here. As I get closer, I spot the skeleton laying discarded in the dirt. It's clear that this person has been dead for quite some time, his clothes all moth-eaten and moldy. There isn't a scrap of decaying flesh, and the bones look old. I touch it, my eyes closing as I remember the way she would stick her fingers through the mesh.

Shadow is her friend in the dark for whom she used to call. And Nova, her wolf, would tell her stories, or tell her to be quiet, to hide in the shadows of her mind, no longer split but shared between them. Nova was no longer just a wolf, but the human counterpart. Temperance spent the vast majority in her head, becoming her wolf's alter ego until she became the wolf while Nova turned into the vessel.

Looking toward the spot she would stare, I turn around with a gasp. Instead of finding a second cage, I find a mirror. It is fractured, cracked, and stained from years of rotting down here. Though the reflection is a bit foggy, it's almost clear. Looking at the mirror, it reminds me of my mate, she too is fractured, waiting in the dark, searching for the next reflection. Waiting for a new image to appear.

“Where is Shadow’s cage?” Malachi asks me confused, despite being in my head, he still hadn’t figured it out.

“Here,” I tell him, grabbing the mesh of her cage, my fingers sticking between the bars like hers did so many times...

“Eziah?” Malachi whimpers in my head as clarity washes over me. She is truly broken, truly insane like my mother claimed. Yet as I speak, I remember how she morphed from a beautiful white wolf into a magnificent black one.

“Shadow never existed outside of her cage, Malachi,” I tell him.

“She existed within her reflection,” I whisper, looking at the mirror that sat across from her.

“She was talking to herself?” Malachi questions. But I shake my head.

“No, Malachi. She was talking to her wolf.”

“Nova is her wolf, mother told us this,” Malachi states, in denial about what we saw. He is convinced it was a trick of the light but there is no mistaking that she indeed changed, that she became something else.

“And so is Shadow. She isn’t a vessel for one Malachi, she’s a vessel for two.” As I speak the words aloud, I can feel the truth behind them, taste the rightfulness of what I claim.

“How is that possible?” Malachi questions, and I shake my head.

“I have no idea, but...”

“Ah, Eziah!” Casen sings out, and my head turns toward the stairs. My eyes widen when I hear a feral growl emanate from above. I run up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and burst into the hall. My feet skid on along the floor when I rush to the living room. Temperance is standing on the couch, claws extended from her fingertips and canines protruding.

I hold my hands up in what should be a placating gesture when her eyes go to me, that odd combination, one pink and one blue. One glows brighter than the other. The pink eye... burning back at me.

“Temperance, I need you to calm down,” I tell her softly, and her chest rises and falls heavily.

“I won’t go back down there! You’ll have to kill me first! I’m done rotting like his corpse! I won’t watch her suffer anymore.

I will put her out of her misery before I watch that again!” she screams, spittle flies from her lips as she snarls and fur grows up her arms. Only it isn’t white but black.

“That’s not Temperance,” Malachi tells me just as I figure it out myself.

“Nova?” I whisper, and she growls. Her lips pull back over her teeth, which are dripping with venom.

“Do you not recognize me, Nova?” I whisper. She tilts her head to the side watching me. The moment I mention her name, her other eye glows bright blue, flickers for a second, the same way Casen’s does when Zyan comes forward before being suppressed by Casen.

“You’re not Nova, are you?” I ask her, and she sniffs the air.

“Come closer and find out,” she challenges, and her eyes glaze over taking on a sadistic gleam.

I inhale putting myself between her and Casen. “Hello, Shadow,” I whisper, and her eyes flash, her lips tugging up wickedly.

## Chapter 14

Stepping closer to Casen, I grab his arm, shoving him toward the door. Her eyes watch me, calculatingly, tracking my every movement.

“You aren’t going back down into the basement. No one will hurt you ever again.”

Her eyes flick to the hall then back at me. Her rate spiking.

“Do you recognize me?” I repeat, needing to hear her say it despite knowing the answer.

“Should I? You are like the rest of them!” she snaps. I shake my head, holding my hands out to her.

“No, I want to help you. Help Temperance. I’m your mate, Shadow!”

“Lies!” she hisses, taking a step on the old spring couch as she shifts her weight.

“You may fool Nova but I won’t be fooled. I won’t let you have them!” she screams before she is lunging at me, a wild anger in her eyes

She lands on top of me, her teeth sharp as razors tear through my neck. She gasps, ripping them out, and tingles rush over my entire body. I gasp, feeling the toxins of her venom course through me when she sits on me thinking she has killed me, not realizing she just marked me. Turning her gaze to Casen, she gets up, staring at Casen while I choke on her bite my own blood, fighting it and healing me painfully slowly. She snarls, taking a step toward Casen.

“Woah, calm down. I’m not here to hurt you!” he says backing up as she steps over my body, stalking him.

“Temperance... I mean Shadow... Whatever your bloody name is. I’m Casen, Casen is a friend!” She nods her head slowly.

“See... friend...” Casen points at himself, then points at me as I slowly get to my feet.

“And Eziah, he is your mate!”

She snarls and he holds his hand out jumping back. “Woah, woah, woah,” he screeches when she tries to slash him with her claws.

“Friend, Casen is friend!” he tells her.

“No, Casen is dead!” she snarls and lunges at him, but I grab her around the middle, hauling her back. She thrashes, knocking us both to the ground. She lands on top of me and twists in my grip, she snarls and tries to bite me, only to stop.

“You’re alive...” she mumbles and her eyes flicker oddly as she twitches in my grip, fur grows up her arms, changing like a chameleon from black to white. I know Nova is trying to fight her for control. I watch horrified as her skin ripples and twists, teeth lengthening and shortening, claws piercing my arms and retracting. When she screams in frustration, and clutches her hair.

“No, no, I won’t go back, I won’t go back, Nova! You can’t make me!” she screams, ripping handfuls of hair from her scalp. My heart races watching her carve herself up with her claws, blood streaks down her face when she suddenly bites herself.

I stare at her watching the venom streak through her veins, shooting up her arm, and panic slivers through me when her face falls slack, her entire body becomes immobilized, stiff as if she is paralyzed and frozen in time.

“No!” I choke and my hands latch onto her hips just as she falls on top of me, and my power burns hot in my palms as it shoots through her, takes it, absorbing it. Just as her tiny body crashes against mine, and I see Casen coming up behind her, a fry pan in his hand when she suddenly gasps and sits up in alarm.

“No,” I mouth to him, sensing something is changed within her when she inhales deeply, like she was taking a breath of fresh air for the very first time. Her head turns in one direction then the next, her breathing becoming harsher and her chest rises and falls heavily as panic sets in.

“Nova?” she whispers when Casen exhales behind her, and she twists to look at him. Casen’s eyes go to me, and he puts down the fry pan. Her hands on my chest tremble, and I feel her fear loud and clear when I grip her hands, see it in her body language. Her head snaps down to me, her eyes widening in horror.

“It’s okay, Temperance, we won’t hurt you,” I try to tell her. I can feel her pulling on her wolf through the bond, feeling her as if we are the same person, connected in ways I can’t explain.

“Do you know who I am?” I ask her, and she blinks, her eyes darting to my neck where her wolf Shadow bit me.

She puts her fingers to her neck, touching the area where Malachi left his mark.

“No, no. You lie! You lie. Nova, she told me. She told me not to believe you all, that you all claim to be my mate,” she yells at me.

“You hurt her. You hurt her!” she screams, but I shake my head, trying to get her to understand I am not one of Satish’s pack members. “You hurt me!” she says, shoving off me and running for the door.

I snatch her ankle, growling in frustration, and she trips, falling face down on the ground with a thud. She grunts, and I move, crawling up her body and pinning her thrashing frame as she screams for Nova to save her. And she pleads for me to not hurt her. She presses her knees against my chest trying to shove me off, but she is much too weak, much too small against my crushing weight and large frame.

“I’m not here to hurt you!” I scream in her face, letting my command rush over her. She freezes in place and whimpers under the pressure of it before

staring past me at the ceiling, her eyes turn glassy, and she hiccups a shaky breath.

“Temperance?” I whisper, but it’s like she switched off. She mutters to herself, speaking so softly I can’t understand what she is saying. Leaning down, I try to hear what she is muttering, yet her lips are barely twitching when she whimpers as I lean closer, the sound crushing my very soul and splintering it into a million pieces.

When I find she is reciting some mantra, I listen harder, but it’s Malachi that picks it up before me. “He can have my body, but not my mind. He can have my body, but my mind’s confined.”

My heart beats faster at her words as I pull away, looking down at her horrified when I notice the way she is splayed on the floor.

Her legs that were kicking have dropped to the floor, looking down she has given up. Yet her entire body shakes beneath me like a leaf as she hiccups between muttering to herself, her eyes unblinking, and unfocused when I climb off her. My hands shake, knowing that she sees me as the monster they were to her.

“No, no, no!” I shake my head, backing away from her and I look for something to cover her body, something, anything! I peel my wrinkled shirt I had on yesterday off. Hearing the door shut, I see Casen walk out of the house. Temperance is completely immobile as I yank my shirt over her head, her body completely limp, I can hear she is there but her eyes are vacant, somewhere else hiding away with her mind.

Gathering her up, I pull her into my lap and stand up, then walk outside. Casen is standing looking at the house, yet while I was down in the basement he must have found something before she woke up because he has a book in his hand. I don’t ask knowing if he took it, it has the information we came here for.

Casen's eyes are bright red and puffy as he stares at the packhouse. "I shouldn't have stopped you, they deserved worse," he whispers as I clutch her body against mine. Temperance's muttering can no longer be heard, her words carried away with the breeze when I fall on my ass on the ash and scorched earth.

"See Temperance, you never have to go back?" I whisper to her, but she does not respond, her lips moving ever so slightly and I grit my teeth.

"He can have my body but not my mind. He can have my body but my mind's confined." Her little song reaches my ears.

"I don't want your body, Temperance, just you," I tell her, pressing my lips to her head.

"And I'll prove it," I whisper to her before I burn the place that held her captive for years to the ground while rocking her back and forth in my arms. I hope she sees, she understands she will never be back here, she'll never be in the dark again. I won't allow it.