

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER SERIES #7



ENEMIES
BY
NATURE

JAE



CHAPTER 1

TALA'S GAZE DARTED FROM AISLE to aisle as she scanned the grocery store for potential threats with the precision of a wolf on the prowl.

Shelves stacked with boxes of cereal towered over her five-foot-two frame, filling the air with the scent of cardboard and sugar. The squeaky wheel of Kelsey's shopping cart grated on Tala's nerves, but otherwise, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Still, her instincts howled at her. The skin along her forearms itched with the urge to shift.

Someone was watching her—watching them.

She should have gotten used to it in the year since she had been assigned as the commander of Kelsey's security detail. As the first Wrasa to shift shape on national TV, Kelsey garnered attention wherever she went.

But this time, it felt different—like a real threat rather than an annoyance.

For a moment, Tala regretted having told Zoe, one of her team members, to wait outside. But then again, at least she could be sure that no one was messing with their car while they were in the store.

Snippets of conversations from other shoppers drifted over.

Tala tried to swivel her ears, but, of course, the tiny muscles were unresponsive in her human form.

From behind the shelf of canned soup, people whispered to each other. "I'm telling you, it's her!"

The stench of fear and hostility hit Tala's sensitive nose, nearly drowning out subtler notes of curiosity.

She lengthened her stride, gripped Kelsey's elbow, and rushed her down the aisle. "Let's get out of here."

"Wait!" Kelsey tugged softly to free her arm, but Tala hung on. "We still need to get the jalapeño chips Rue loves."

Tala wrinkled her nose. “She’ll survive without them.” No jalapeño had ever been near those chips anyway. How humans could enjoy those artificial flavors was beyond her.

As they rounded a corner, a rustle of fabric caught Tala’s attention.

She let go of Kelsey’s elbow and whirled around.

A bright-red missile soared through the air. Time seemed to slow as it arced directly toward Kelsey’s head.

Tala’s instincts kicked into overdrive.

She lunged, twisting her body in mid-air to shield Kelsey from the projectile.

The missile hit her in the chest and imploded on impact. Crimson mush splattered all over her crisp white shirt. For a fraction of a second, she thought it was blood. But it wasn’t a coppery odor wafting up; it was the sour stench of an overripe tomato.

Agilely, Tala landed back on her feet, which ached as if claws were about to burst through her shoes. Heat raced along her skin, and it took all of her considerable self-control not to let the transformation take over and charge their attackers.

Not that she needed her animal form to intimidate them.

They were just human pups—three boys of maybe thirteen or fourteen, who were lingering by the produce section.

“Oh Great Hunter! Tala, are you all right?” Kelsey tried to dash around to inspect the damage.

Tala pushed her back, keeping her body between Kelsey and their attackers. “I’m fine. Stay back.” Her upper lip raised in a silent snarl, she squinted at the three teenagers. Tomato mush dripped off her shirt, but she ignored it. “What do you think you’re doing?”

The tallest one had thrown the tomato, but under her glare, he shrank back behind his friends. “It, um, slipped from my hand.”

“Wolf poop! You threw that tomato at her. Apologize—right now!”

“Or what?” the boy on the left asked. He was the smallest, but Tala knew from experience that might also make him the most dangerous.

Other shoppers started to walk over, drawn in by the loud argument like ants checking out left-out candy.

The boy seemed to be bolstered by their presence. “Or you’ll turn into... whatever freaky thing you are and slash us open?”

Only years of military training as a Saru enabled Tala to hold back a growl that would have made the boy pee his pants. “Don’t give me any ideas,” she muttered under her breath.

“Get the manager,” one of the spectators said to a person in a polo shirt adorned with the store’s logo. “They’re getting out of hand!”

Tala wasn’t sure if “they” meant the boys or her and Kelsey, but she had a feeling it was the latter. Humans always seemed quick to blame the Wrasa, no matter the situation.

“That won’t be necessary, Alyssa,” Kelsey said. Either she was reading from the employee’s name tag, or she knew the names of every employee in her favorite store by heart. “It was just a harmless prank. No one got hurt.”

The store employee hesitated, then nodded. “All right.” She pointed at Kelsey. “But you’ll have to pay for the tomato.”

That was ridiculous. “Us? If anyone should have to pay for it, it’s them! They threw it!” Tala stabbed her finger toward the boys. “Besides, it’s not like we can weigh it.” She pointed at the tomato pulp covering her shirt.

The store employee didn’t back down. “We’ll charge you based on the average weight of a tomato. It’s store policy.”

Store policy. Right. Tala was sure it was only enforced on Wrasa, while humans never had to pay for damaged produce.

“Of course.” Kelsey ducked her head. “Don’t worry. We’ll pay for it.”

Tala’s jaw ached, either from clenching it hard or from sharp canines threatening to emerge. She wanted to scream and shout at the injustice of it all, but she knew she couldn’t. Her superiors had made it clear Wrasa needed to stay in the humans’ good graces. Even Syak—wolf-shifters like the pack that had adopted Tala—had to act like docile little lambs.

But her patience had its limits. She wouldn’t let the boys get away with openly attacking a Wrasa.

Kelsey softly touched the small of her back.

Tala fought the instinct to pull away or snarl at her. While Kelsey wasn’t part of her pack and didn’t have the privilege to touch her, Tala knew she was acting on instinct. Omegas like Kelsey tended to seek comfort from a more dominant wolf in tense situations or try to calm them down with a soothing touch. Maybe Tala should have been flattered Kelsey perceived her as a fellow Syak, never once insisting she was a fox. That was the one good thing about this assignment: everyone seemed to accept her chosen identity, despite what their noses might tell them.

As if sensing her unease, Kelsey wrenched her hand away. “They’re just kids, Tala. Probably not even Danny’s age.”

“They’re kids who’ll grow into adults who’re convinced it’s fine to attack Wrasa.” Tala pierced the boys with a steely glare. “Apologize, or we’ll call the police.”

Of course, she wouldn’t. It was a risk she couldn’t take. You never knew if the responding officers harbored any resentment against the Wrasa. With the way human/shape-shifter relations were going, the police might choose to let the boys go and arrest her and Kelsey instead.

But the teenagers—all white and dressed in designer jeans and expensive sneakers—had likely never had to consider something like that, and Tala was counting on it.

Under her unflinching stare, their bravado waned. They squirmed and exchanged uneasy glances. Finally, the tallest boy shuffled his feet and looked away. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Tala cupped her hand around her ear. “What? I couldn’t hear you,” she said, even though she could detect the squeak of a mouse from more than a hundred feet away.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated more loudly.

The shortest boy elbowed him. “Pussy!”

“Shut up.”

Shoving and jostling each other, they disappeared around the corner.

The onlookers gawked at Tala and Kelsey for a moment longer, then bustled away.

Kelsey exhaled audibly. “Let’s grab what we need and get out of here. Next time, we’ll order online.”

“Like I told you to,” Tala muttered, flicked a bit of tomato off her shirt, and followed Kelsey to the aisle that held the jalapeño chips. She remained on her guard, her senses attuned to every sound, every scent that might announce another attack.

Next time, the humans’ weapon of choice might not be a tomato.

* * *

As soon as Tala parked the car in the driveway and got out, she caught a stranger’s scent.

It wasn’t a human. Her nose immediately identified the intruder as a Syak, a fellow wolf. But that didn’t necessarily mean Kelsey wasn’t in danger.

Many Wrasa blamed Kelsey for all the restrictions humans had placed on them since finding out about their existence.

“Stay with Kelsey,” Tala told Zoe, the panther-shifter who was part of her unit. Muscles coiled with tension, she scanned the circular driveway.

A tall man was leaning against one of the stone lions flanking the entrance of Rue’s two-story mansion.

The tiny hairs along Tala’s neck bristled. The audacity! How dare he not only enter her territory without her permission but also act as if it was his!

Okay, strictly speaking, it was Rue and Kelsey’s property, not her own, but that was beside the point.

He took two steps toward her, his stride measured and his expression giving nothing away. His entire demeanor screamed Saru.

Ab. Part of the tension fled Tala’s muscles. So that was why he hadn’t asked permission. He didn’t need it. Even now that they were no longer tasked with keeping the Wrasa’s existence hidden, their elite soldiers stood above pack hierarchy.

But Tala was one of them too. She straightened her spine and angled her shoulders to appear taller and broader. Then she stood motionless, forcing him to come to her instead of approaching him.

“Tala Peterson?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

She gave a terse nod.

He raked his gaze over her—up, down, then up again, as if he couldn’t believe someone with such a diminutive build could be the Saru’s best tracker. Or maybe he was eyeing the half-dried tomato juice covering the front of her once-white shirt, probably making her look like a pup in need of a bib.

Tala acted as if it were a fashion accessory and coolly returned his stare. “You didn’t come all the way from Boise to admire the view, did you?”

He flinched. “How did you...?”

Easy. Tala held back a satisfied smirk. The aroma of recycled air and stale airline pretzels clung to his clothes, so it hadn’t been hard to guess that he’d spent most of the day traveling. Few Wrasa would get on an airplane unless they really had to—or a superior had ordered it. And not just any superior. Judging by his self-important stance, he was here on orders of the High Council, which was located in Boise, Idaho.

“So?” She waved her hand at him. “You have a message from the council?”

He closed his gaping jaw, his poker face returning. “I do.”

Kelsey approached with her head bent respectfully. “What do they want from me?” She was too polite to add “this time,” but Tala could practically hear it anyway.

She couldn’t blame Kelsey. Any time the council sent a message—either by pigeon post or by one of their lackeys showing up—they had another event they wanted Kelsey to go to, an interview they wanted her to give, or something else they needed her to do.

But the Saru shook his head. “Nothing.” He turned back to face Tala. “The message is for you.”

Tala raised her eyebrows. For her? What could they want from her, now that she was no longer a tracker who was called in when the council needed her? “What is it?”

“You’ve been transferred,” the Saru said.

Oh thank the Great Hunter! Her higher-ups had finally listened to her pleas and decided she’d been punished enough for failing to keep the Wrasa’s existence secret.

No more babysitting a human and her submissive mate. No more fending off tomato attacks. No more being under the microscope twenty-four seven because she was Kelsey Yates’s bodyguard. She could breathe freely again and maybe do a job where she didn’t have to deal with humans and their hateful attitude toward her kind every day. If such a job even still existed.

“Transferred? Oh no!” Kelsey clutched the back of Tala’s shirt.

The touch made Tala sigh, but the shirt was toast anyway, so a few wrinkles wouldn’t matter. “Where to?”

“They didn’t tell me that. They’ll give you your new assignment once you get to Boise.” He pulled something from the inside pocket of his coat and handed it to Tala.

It was an airplane ticket—and her name was on it.

She nodded at him, and he nodded back, then turned to go.

“Wait!” Tala called after him.

He glanced over his shoulder.

“What about her?” She pointed at Kelsey, who still clung to the back of her shirt like a scared puppy. “What will happen to her once I’m gone? We can’t leave Kelsey and her mate without protection.”

“Without protection?” Zoe muttered. “What about me and the three other Saru guards in your unit? Are we just pretty decorations?”

If Tala were human, she would have rolled her eyes. *Cats*. They got their feelings hurt so easily. “Even a good unit needs a strong leader, kitten.”

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“Don’t worry,” the council’s messenger said. “Someone will arrive within the hour to replace you.”

But Tala stood her ground, not yet satisfied. While Rue, Kelsey, and their son weren’t exactly pack, she wanted to make sure they were safe. “Who?”

“Theodora Wylder.”

Tala barely managed to hold back a surprised yip. Theodora Wylder was one of only a handful of bear-shifters serving as a Saru and the only one to ever reach the rank of tas, the title of a commander. Most of them didn’t have the emotional control to keep from shifting when things got dangerous, but Theodora Wylder did...and then some.

She gave Kelsey a short pat on the arm, knowing Kelsey as a nederi would find physical contact from a higher-ranking wolf reassuring. “I’ve heard only good things about Tas Wylder. You’ll be in good paws.”

“And you?” Kelsey asked quietly as she followed her into the house. “Will you be okay too?”

“I’ll be fine.” Tala had no idea where the council would send her next, but after being attacked by human pups with an overripe tomato, things could only get better.

CHAPTER 2

THE BUILDING THAT HOUSED THE High Council was a lot like Tala: People tended to underestimate it. They walked right past the unremarkable structure without suspecting what lay inside.

Even once Tala entered, it looked like any other office building.

The sound of her boots echoed across the marble as she crossed the small lobby, strode past the security guard, and entered the elevator. She pressed the button for the top floor.

Tala had been here on a regular basis in the past. When she'd been the Wrasa's top tracker, they had called her in for high-profile cases a lot. But that had been before her last encounter with the council, right after Kelsey had outed the Wrasa to the human public. It had not been a pleasant visit. If the council chamber hadn't been soundproof, Jeff Madsen's shouting would have been audible all the way to Patagonia.

He had blamed Tala for not keeping a closer eye on her prisoners. Her negligence had allowed Rue to record and then send a video of Kelsey shifting to a TV station.

In weak moments, Tala blamed herself too.

When the elevator doors slid open on the top floor, she schooled her features and pushed down her emotions, not wanting the council to be able to sniff out any weakness. Then she nodded at the two Saru guarding the council chamber. "Tas Peterson. I'm here on council orders."

Clearly, they had been expecting her. Without hesitation, one guard pulled open the heavy oak door.

She stepped through, and the door swung shut behind her, cutting off the outside world as if it ceased to exist. No sounds or scents from the city penetrated this sanctum. The air felt heavy with the weight of expectation.

The nine members of the High Council sat at a round table. According to legends, it had been hewn from a single ancient tree back when their ancestors had fled Europe after their near extinction during the Inquisition, when the Catholic church had tortured and often killed them as witches and sorcerers.

Leather creaked as Jeff Madsen, the council's speaker, leaned forward in his high-backed chair. A strand of his thick, silvery hair fell onto his forehead, and he swiped it back with an impatient gesture. "Tala Peterson." His voice resonated with authority. "Welcome."

"Manarks." She addressed the nine council members in a respectful tone, bowed her head the tiniest bit—just enough to indicate deference—and kept her face expressionless.

The members of the High Council studied her as if they had all the time in the world. Their gazes were like needles, pricking at her composure.

She wished they would get to the point and tell her why they had called her to Boise and where they would be sending her next, but she couldn't ask. Protocol demanded that she wait for them to speak.

"We're granting your request for a transfer," Madsen finally said.

"Thank you. I think I could be much more valuable as a maharsi seeker or maybe heading the Suspicious Deaths Unit than—"

Madsen interrupted her with a wave of his hand. "I'm sure you could. But we have something else in mind for you."

Why did Tala get the feeling she wouldn't like what he was about to say? He wasn't going to assign her to work with yet another human, was he? While she didn't exactly hate humans and had gotten along with Rue well enough, she also didn't have any desire to closely work with them again.

"Starting right now, you'll be serving in our public-relations unit," Madsen added.

Tala's nose twitched as if she had caught a whiff of rotten eggs. "The public-relations unit?" she echoed. Maybe staying as Kelsey's bodyguard wouldn't have been so bad after all.

The last time she'd had anything to do with the PR unit, they had wanted her to dress up in a red velvet skirt and a red hooded cape so she could march in the Wrasa Pride parade as Little Red Riding Hood or, even worse, put her on a glass-encased float with several other Rtar in their fox form for the amusement of the human spectators.

"Sir, with all due respect—"

“This is not up for debate, Tas Peterson.” Madsen’s loud voice crashed through the council chamber like thunder. “You will serve in the public-relations unit for the foreseeable future. We already have your first mission lined up.” He nodded at Kylin Westmore, the councilor who represented the Puwar.

As a hybrid, Kylin was even more imposing than other tiger-shifters. When she stood, her massive six-foot-two frame towered over Tala, making her feel like a little pup. “Not just any mission,” Kylin said, her soft-as-velvet voice a stark contrast to her intimidating appearance. “You’re the only person who can do this.”

Ah, so the council did want to take advantage of her excellent skills as a tracker. Tala straightened a bit more. “What is it you wish me to do?”

Instead of an answer, Kylin picked up a magazine, walked around the table, and handed it to her.

It was one of those glossy tabloids that Tala had seen at the grocery store. Humans seemed to be weirdly addicted to trashy, sensationalized articles about messy celebrity divorces, secret affairs, and royal revelations.

The headline of the article immediately jumped out at Tala: *Forbidden Love at Shape-Shifter Parade: Is a Secret Romance Brewing Between a Shifter and the Daughter of Anti-Wrasa Activist Peter MacAllister?*

How ridiculous. Tala had met MacAllister’s daughter at the parade last week. While she hadn’t waved protest signs in their faces or spouted hateful anti-Wrasa rhetoric, as her father had, she had eyed the shape-shifters warily and stepped between them and her daughter as if confronted with a pack of rabid dogs. There definitely wasn’t any kind of romance brewing between Faith MacAllister and any Wrasa, secret or otherwise.

Who was the poor person the tabloids made out to be Ms. MacAllister’s love interest?

She squinted at the article, printed for human eyesight, until she could read it.

In a surprising turn of events at yesterday’s Wrasa Pride parade, a chance encounter between an unnamed shifter and the daughter of Peter MacAllister, leader of HASS (Humans Against Shape-Shifters), has ignited rumors of a possible romance amidst escalating tensions between humans and Wrasa.

The up-until-then peaceful protest for shape-shifter rights threatened to turn into a bloodbath when MacAllister and his group of anti-Wrasa activists blocked the path of the parade.

As tempers flared, it was a six-year-old girl and her runaway balloon that unexpectedly resolved the situation and brought the two budding lovers together.

Tala nearly dropped the magazine. Fire shot up her forearms. “Me?” she burst out, her usual self-control wavering. “They think I’m Faith MacAllister’s secret lover? Absurd!”

If any of the council members answered, she didn’t hear it. She was too busy scanning the rest of the article.

Witnesses report that the girl’s balloon slipped from her grasp and floated away. That was when a mysterious fox-shifter leaped into action, using her animalistic agility to snatch the balloon from mid-air and return it safely to the child.

We captured the moment the girl’s mother—none other than Peter MacAllister’s only daughter, Faith—stepped up to the fox-shifter to express her heartfelt gratitude.

Tala’s low growl at repeatedly being called a fox turned into a disdainful huff as she took in the photograph.

It showed Faith MacAllister, pausing inches from Tala, staring into her eyes.

Her expression hadn’t been one of warm gratitude, though. Resolve had hardened her soft, heart-shaped face, and her plush lips were compressed into a determined line. Her long, chestnut hair flowed over her shoulders like a cape, giving her the look of a superheroine. When Tala had walked over to the girl to return the balloon, Faith had blocked her path, ready to protect her daughter. Apparently, she had fallen for her father’s propaganda, believing the Wrasa to be bloodthirsty monsters who ate human children for breakfast.

Captivated by the fox-shifter with the pretty golden eyes, she then turned to her father and implored him to cease his protests and let the parade pass.

Onlookers couldn’t help but be moved by her display of compassion and the obvious connection between her and the heroic fox-shifter.

Could this chance encounter be the start of a forbidden romance between these two women from opposite sides of the shifter controversy?

Stay tuned! We will report any further developments in this captivating tale of forbidden love!

What the fuck? Tala reined in the urge to rip the tabloid into tiny pieces. This was all bullshit. Every last word of it. Faith MacAllister hadn’t stopped her father because she was smitten with Tala’s “pretty golden eyes.” She had

merely reminded him that there were children present, including his own granddaughter.

“All right,” Tala said with determination, “I’ll get on it right away.”

“Um, get on what?” one of the councilors of the Feline Alliance asked. “We haven’t even told you yet what we want you to do.”

Wasn’t it obvious? “You want me to hunt down the paparazzi and the tabloids who wrote this piece of wolf poop. No problem. I’ll put the fear of the Great Hunter into them!”

“No,” Jeff Madsen said.

“No? What then?” Tala tightened her grip on the magazine with the ridiculous article. Heads should be rolling for that nonsense.

“This ‘piece of wolf poop,’ as you put it, is the most positive portrayal of us in human media since that feel-good piece about the Ashawe who spends his spare time visiting nursing homes as a therapy dog. Since then, the only headlines we seem to get are like these.” Madsen held up a large stack of magazines and newspapers, then slapped them down onto the table one after the other.

Their headlines were all equally ridiculous:

Shifter Frenzy: The Truth About What Happens Under a Full Moon!

Shocking Discovery: Is the Vice President One of Them?

Royal Corgi Eaten by Shape-Shifter!

Tala shook her head. “How do humans come up with this drivel? It’s as absurd as the story about a romance brewing between me and MacAllister’s daughter!”

“What if it were true?” Madsen asked. His amber eyes held something...a twinkle of knowledge...that made Tala’s forearms itch.

“It’s not. I assure you I would never get involved with a human.” Up until last year, when the Wrasa had been outed to the human public, they’d had strict laws in place to keep their existence hidden. One of them had forbidden any kind of relationship with a human, and Tala had never been tempted to break that law.

“But what if it were?” Madsen repeated. “What if there was a romance brewing?”

What was he talking about? Tala furrowed her brow.

“The world craves stories like this.” Madsen waved at the tabloid Tala was still white-knuckling. “We need them. That’s why our PR unit planted that therapy animal story.”

Okay, maybe that wasn't so silly after all. While Tala resented her kind being seen as cute pets, that was probably less harmful than humans viewing them as murderous monsters. "So you"—she tried to connect the dots—"planted the story about Ms. MacAllister and me too?"

Madsen shook his head. "No. The tabloids came up with that all on their own. But we're planning to use it to our advantage."

"How?"

"We'll give the human press those further developments they're waiting for in this captivating tale of forbidden love," Madsen said with a hint of a smirk. "By having you date Ms. MacAllister."

A buzzing sound started in Tala's ears. Maybe that tomato had hit her harder than she had thought. He couldn't possibly have said what she thought he'd said...right?

"Fake-date," Kylin added, as if that would clear up the confusion. "We're not expecting you to get involved with her for real."

What a relief, Tala thought sarcastically. *You had me worried there for a second*. But, of course, she knew better than to give a snarky reply to a council member.

"This could be exactly the break we needed," Jeff Madsen said. "Various hate groups have been lobbying the government."

Tala suppressed a sigh. "Yeah. They're trying to block the Wrasa Rights Act."

"It's more than that," the representative of the Rtar spoke up for the first time. A worried expression was etched on her narrow face. "If they can get enough people in the House and the Senate onto their side, they might even revoke our citizenship."

"And Peter MacAllister is the one with the most sway," Kylin added. "Not only with politicians, but with regular people too. His propaganda fuels a lot of the hate against us. But he's got a chink in his armor."

"His daughter," Tala said. She had seen it herself—MacAllister had backed down and let the parade pass because his daughter had asked him to.

All nine council members nodded.

"That's why Operation Make-Believe Mate is so important. If we can make humans believe one of us is in a loving relationship with her"—Kylin pointed at Faith's photo in the magazine—"the daughter of our biggest enemy..."

As absurd as the plan had initially sounded, it was starting to make sense. "It would make MacAllister less credible and help change public opinion."

Madsen gave her a grudging nod. “Exactly. It’s a brilliant plan.”

Tala bit back a grin. Typical alpha. They were all convinced of their own genius. But then again, no one had ever accused her of having an inferiority complex either. “There’s just one problem with that brilliant plan, sir.”

“Which is?”

A rush of air swept into the council chamber as the heavy door was pulled open behind Tala.

She didn’t turn to see who had entered. Right now, nothing mattered more than convincing Madsen his plan was destined to fail. “Why would Faith MacAllister agree to help us?” She wouldn’t. Tala was convinced of that.

The sweet scent of coconut, mixed with feline musk, wafted through the room.

Tala knew that aroma! She whirled around.

Jorie Price stepped into the council chamber, with her liger-shifter mate hovering protectively behind her. “Because I dreamed she would.”

* * *

Tala pinched her earlobe as if that would make the words stop echoing through her mind. Jorie Price had dreamed that the daughter of the biggest Wrasa hater on the planet would agree to pretend-date Tala? Surely, that could only be a result of Jorie—who penned love stories for a living—writing one too many fake-relationship romances.

As soon as the thought crossed Tala’s mind, she ducked her head. She shouldn’t be thinking like this about their last remaining dream seer. It had been a year and a half since the Wrasa had found out Jorie had precognitive dreams about them—a sacred skill only a few select tiger-shifters were supposed to have. Even though Tala had witnessed Jorie’s powers firsthand, she still struggled to get used to a human maharsi.

“How?” Tala finally got out. “I mean...there’s no love lost between Faith MacAllister and us. Why would she agree to such a charade?”

Jorie walked farther into the room. “I don’t know. That wasn’t part of my dream. But I did see the two of you kiss while cameras flashed around you. When she broke the kiss, Faith asked you in a whisper if you thought the paparazzi fell for it.”

Tala scrubbed the back of her hand across her lips. She couldn’t imagine kissing Faith MacAllister. Not that she was unattractive. Quite the opposite.

Her slim waist emphasized the soft curves of her hourglass figure, and with her girl-next-door face, pert nose, and full lips, she was good-looking... for a human, of course.

But after the confrontation with Peter MacAllister at the Pride parade, Tala couldn't help seeing his daughter as the enemy too—and no doubt Faith would view her the same way.

"I mean no disrespect, but...is it possible you're misinterpreting what you saw in your dream, maharsi?" Tala asked, keeping her head bent.

"No." Jorie's tone left no room for doubt. "Believe me, there was no misinterpreting that kiss."

"Especially since Jorie is a bona fide expert in sapphic kisses," her mate, Griffin Westmore, added, a feline smirk obvious in her voice.

Tala kept her gaze averted and struggled not to scrunch up her face. Thinking about Jorie—a near sacred figure—kissing anyone felt wrong. She wondered, not for the first time, how Griffin kept the maharsi separate from her partner. "Is Faith MacAllister even attracted to women? Do we know?" She looked from Madsen to Kylin, who seemed to have done most of the research on this project.

"We're not sure," Kylin said. "If she is, she's discreet."

"I would be too, if my father were a conservative Christian like MacAllister," Jorie muttered.

Tala shook her head. Humans were weird. She couldn't imagine believing in a god that condemned people for who they loved. "She has a pup, though. A daughter. Do we know who her other parent is?"

Kylin flicked through the papers in a folder. "Her daughter's name is Chloe. She's six. Her father is Jonathan Davis. He was raised in a Christian family and works as the director of finance for his father-in-law's chain of hotels and resorts. Well, ex-father-in-law's. He and Faith got a divorce three years ago, and Faith went back to using her maiden name."

"And since then?" Tala asked.

Kylin shrugged. "Nothing. No known relationships. No scandals."

"What else do we know about her?" Tala asked.

"Not much," Kylin said. "She's thirty-one, born and raised in DC. Her mother died in a hiking accident when she was nine. Faith graduated with honors from Cornell University and currently works in the family business too, as a director of guest experience in MacAllister's flagship hotel in DC. Otherwise, she keeps her head down. She's not even on social media."

The Kasari councilor and the representatives of the Feline Alliance exchanged incredulous looks. Apparently, the fascination with social media wasn't restricted to Zoe, the only feline shifter on her team, who practically lived on TikTok, no matter how often Tala told her that curiosity killed the cat.

Did Faith MacAllister have secrets to hide? Why else would she carefully keep her personal life private?

"What about her attitude toward us?" Tala asked. "Does she share her father's beliefs?"

Kylin leafed through her folder again, then closed it and held up her hands as if showing her empty palms. "We don't really know. She attended the Wrasa Pride parade last week, but only as a spectator. She doesn't participate in her father's anti-Wrasa protests and hasn't echoed his sentiments, at least not publicly. But neither has she objected to his rhetoric."

"Which probably means she shares his opinion and just doesn't want to be in the spotlight." Tala fiercely shook her head. "If we give her of all people access to us, we'll take a huge risk. She'll use the opportunity to find out ways to hurt us, then report every little detail to Daddy."

"I know. But it's a risk we have to take." Jorie's dark eyes burned with the fire of her conviction. "In my dream, I saw snippets of the future...a future that will only happen if we have Faith MacAllister on our side. She'll make the difference between losing our citizenship and all of our rights and being accepted as just another minority."

"Our?" Tala repeated and surprised herself with how bitter she sounded. Jorie was human. She wouldn't lose a single right, no matter what happened.

"I know I'm not a Wrasa, but I married into a big, lovable, chaotic pride. They are my family. This"—Jorie waved her hand in a gesture that indicated everyone in the council chamber—"is my community. I nearly died and had my entire life uprooted since I found out the Wrasa exist, and yet I've never felt more at home. I stand with the Wrasa one hundred percent...and I know Faith MacAllister will too."

Madsen slapped his hand onto the table. "I've had this exact same conversation with the maharsi half a dozen times over the last few days, and she convinced me we need to pursue this plan, no matter how silly or risky it might seem. So let's not waste any more time. I want you"—he zeroed in on Tala—"to approach Ms. MacAllister before the week is over and convince her to fake-date you."

It was a good thing Wrasa didn't get sweaty palms. Tala wiped them on her pants anyway. "Me? Shouldn't that task fall to someone else?" She glanced at Jorie, who was human after all and would have an easier time earning Faith's trust.

Jorie lifted her hand as if to volunteer. "I would have done it, but—"

"No!" A loud growl rumbled up Griffin's chest. "We're not putting our only dream seer into the crosshairs of Peter MacAllister and his anti-Wrasa hate group!"

Tala bowed her head for a moment. "You're right. I just think it shouldn't be me. We need someone more...diplomatic." Giving orders had always been more Tala's thing than negotiating. "Manark Westmore, for example." She pointed at Kylin.

Madsen barked out a humorless laugh. "She's a 400-pound liger-shifter. You're a fox. Who do you think would appear less threatening to a human?"

"I'm a wolf." Tala's words boomed through the room. When she noticed her tone, she belatedly added, "Sir."

"There's nothing wrong with being a fox," the Rtar councilor spoke up softly.

"It's wrong for me." Rather than lowering her gaze in deference, Tala met her eyes, then Madsen's. She had fought to be accepted as a wolf...an equal or even leader in her adopted pack all her life, and she wouldn't let them dismiss her as a fox now.

"You're on the...um, less intimidating side for a wolf," Kylin finally said. "And you are the one we need Faith to trust. It's best to start that trust-building right away, so why prolong it by sending someone else?"

All right. Tala finally lowered her gaze in a half-nod, half-bow. "Agreed. So I'll hunt her down...um, I mean, *track* her down in DC." She glanced at the councilors, then at Jorie and Griffin. "Any last advice?"

"It's the unknown that breeds paranoia," Jorie said, a serious expression in her dark eyes. "For this mission to succeed, she has to get to know the Wrasa...get to know *you* better. Can you do that?"

Tala had always accepted any assignment with complete confidence, convinced that she'd be able to do an excellent job and see it through successfully. But letting in a human and someone who was the daughter of their biggest enemy...

For the first time, Tala wasn't sure success was guaranteed. She swallowed down the twinge of uncertainty clawing at her chest. Very likely, it wouldn't come to that anyway. Despite whatever Jorie thought she had seen in her

dream, Tala couldn't imagine Faith MacAllister agreeing to this publicity stunt.

If she even heard Tala out, she would probably deem the idea ridiculous and dismiss it outright.

Tala couldn't say she disagreed. If she hadn't known about Jorie's dream vision, she would have rejected their plan as absurd too. Ha! For the first time in her life, she would have something in common with a human!

"Of course I can do it," she said, keeping her voice steady and her stance as tall and confident as possible. "In fact, I just discovered the first thing we might have in common."

Jorie's expression gave nothing away, but something in her gaze made Tala think she knew exactly what that commonality was.

A shiver went through her. What a weird feeling! She wasn't used to being so transparent. She had learned to control not only her facial expressions but also her chemical reactions. Most of the time, not even a fellow Wrasa could sniff out her emotions. "Is there something else I should know? About your dream."

Jorie adjusted her position so her arm brushed Griffin's. They didn't look at each other, but some sort of unspoken communication seemed to pass between them. "No," Jorie finally said. "Nothing."

The maharsi had been a semi-professional poker player in her former life, so she kept her expression completely neutral. Her scent, though, wasn't.

Tala's nose was hit by a mix of so many emotions she couldn't identify them all or tell if Jorie was lying. Fear was most prominent. Was she afraid of what would happen if Tala's mission failed?

If Jorie was right about the meaning of her dream vision, Operation Make-Believe Mate was crucial for the future of all Wrasa. The last time something so monumental had happened, Tala had fucked it up.

This time, she would succeed. She had to—even though she had no idea how.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN THE DOORBELL RANG, CHLOE scrambled out from under the blanket fort they had built after dinner.

Clothes pins ricocheted across the living room, and the blanket collapsed onto Faith.

“Slow down, Chloe!” Faith called after her and tried to disentangle herself. “You know you’re not supposed to open the door without me.”

“But, Mom!” Chloe whined in a tone only a six-year-old could master.

She had recently switched from “Mommy” to “Mom,” and Faith was still struggling to get used to it.

“Maybe it’s Mrs. Rowe,” Chloe added. “Maybe she wants us to feed Garfield again!”

“I doubt it. We just saw her this morning, remember? She would have mentioned it.” Faith somehow managed to crawl out from under the collapsed fort without getting strangled by the twinkle lights. As she crossed the living room to stop Chloe from opening the door, she pulled her phone from her pocket and swiped at the notification from her doorbell camera app. Before she could see who it was, she stepped on one of the clothes pins in her sock-covered feet.

Pain flared through her instep. She gritted her teeth and hopped through the hall to stop Chloe from greeting the visitor on her own.

Chloe was bouncing up and down in front of the door.

Faith put one hand on Chloe’s shoulder and finally caught a glimpse of the live video feed on her phone, which showed the courtyard in front of her house.

The sun had all but set outside, with only a sliver of orange peeking through the gaps between the surrounding brick buildings. In the soft glow of the light above the door, she could make out her visitor’s features.

It wasn't their elderly neighbor.

Her father stood in front of Faith's town house. Maybe it was just the dim light, but for a second, she thought he looked older than his fifty-nine years. Usually, the touch of gray at his temples and the fine, silver threads in his neatly trimmed beard gave him a distinguished appearance, but now, a weird expression deepened the lines etched on his face.

He had always been careful not to let her see the depths of his grief after her mom had died. But this look wasn't sorrow, was it? It seemed more like anger.

Faith's stomach tightened. What had happened? It was unlike her father to show up unannounced, especially so close to Chloe's bedtime and after they had seen each other a few hours ago at work.

"Mom!" Chloe craned her neck to see the live video. "Who is it?"

Her voice wrenched Faith from her stupor. "Your grandpa."

Chloe pulled the door open before Faith could do it. "Grandpa!" she squealed in delight and launched herself at him.

He bent to scoop her up in his arms. The expression on his face softened, and his eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at her. For a moment, the stiffness in his broad shoulders seemed to ease.

Faith slid the phone back into her pocket. "Is everything all right, Dad?"

"Yes. Just thought I'd drop by to check on my favorite girls." He set Chloe down and pulled Faith into a hug.

The familiar scent of his cologne enveloped her, and for a few seconds, she felt like a child again.

When the hug ended, he looked down at Chloe. "Hey, Chloe, can you give me a minute alone with your mom?"

Faith tried not to tense up. No need to assume he wanted to share bad news. It was probably harmless. "Why don't you go brush your teeth and pick out a bedtime story?"

Chloe sighed as if she'd been asked to eat broccoli for dessert but then bounded upstairs.

Faith's father turned toward her. His smile faded away, and his entire demeanor changed. "We need to talk," he said, his voice low because they both knew Chloe loved to eavesdrop on the adults.

Her throat felt as dry as a communion wafer...at least as far as she remembered. It had been a while since Faith had set foot in a church. She led him over to the couch.

His gaze roamed the living room. For a moment, he looked the way he did when he inspected one of his hotels, and Faith's cheeks warmed as she tried to see her home through his eyes.

The beautiful acacia hardwood floor was an obstacle course of clothes pins and beads that Chloe hadn't picked up yet. They had brought over two chairs from the dining area and pulled the cushions from the couch to help build a blanket fort in front of the fireplace. Faith still hadn't found the time to paint over the purple squiggle, where Chloe had decided the wall was a bit too white when she'd been younger.

At the end of a long day, spending time with Chloe was her top priority, not trivial stuff like tidying or painting a wall.

Her father dismissed the mess with a wave of his hand and pulled something from his coat pocket. "Have you seen this?"

Ugh. It had to be the guest complaint they had gotten this afternoon. She put the cushions back onto the couch, sank onto it, and pulled him down with her. "I've got it handled, Dad. I already talked to the guest, and I'll meet with the in-room dining team first thing tomorrow morning to make sure something like that never happens again."

The lines on her father's forehead deepened. "It's not about work. I know you'll take care of that. It's about this." He held up a magazine, opened to a glossy page.

The headline screamed in bold letters: *Forbidden Love at Shape-Shifter Parade: Is a Secret Romance Brewing Between a Shifter and the Daughter of Anti-Wrasa Activist Peter MacAllister?*

She stared at the tabloid. "What? They think there's something going on between me and...and..." She glanced at the photo to see which shifter the journalist had paired her with.

It was the intense woman from the parade last week—the one who had saved Chloe's balloon and then faced her father's group with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"And her? A shape-shifter?"

Not too long ago, it would have been a toss-up about what bothered him more: rumors about her being involved with a woman or with a shifter. When she had first come out as bisexual four years ago, he had struggled to reconcile it with his Christian beliefs.

Faith got it. She'd struggled with it too.

Their relationship had been strained for a while. But then he had surprised her. Slowly, he had softened his previously rigid stance. He had

decided he didn't want to lose her as he had her mother, so he had learned to come to terms with it. Well, at least in theory. Faith wasn't sure how he would react if she ever introduced him to a girlfriend.

"Is there something going on?" he asked, sounding tortured. His face was so red that Faith worried about his blood pressure.

"What? No! Of course not. The tabloids write all kinds of ridiculous things to make money. You know that."

He shook the magazine clenched in his fist. "I'll sue them! I won't allow them to mock our convictions or drag your good name through the mud!"

Faith covered his hand with her own. "It's not worth it. No one will take it seriously. It's just harmless gossip."

His facial color ventured into apoplectic territory. "Nothing is ever harmless when it comes to these monsters!"

"Shh, Dad, please! Chloe will hear you." Her daughter was at an age where the thought of monsters hiding under her bed made her afraid to go to sleep. The last thing Faith needed was for her to start worrying about scary beasts that were real.

"They're not harmless," he repeated more quietly, but just as fiercely. "We know that better than anyone."

They paused and looked at each other.

Faith glanced away first. The unspoken pain in her father's eyes was hard to take, even after twenty-two years. Worse than the grief had always been the not knowing. All the questions still kept her up at night—questions she would know the answers to if only she'd gone hiking with her mother, as she had many times before that fateful day.

Her father, however, had found his answers when the shape-shifters had revealed their hidden existence last year. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that one of them had murdered his wife.

Sometimes, Faith wished she could believe it with such conviction too. In rare moments, she did, but most of the time, she wasn't sure.

Her mother had left the marked hiking trail and had been found weeks later, after decomposition had progressed, so the medical examiner couldn't tell for sure whether the teeth marks on her bones had been caused by scavenging animals after her death or were signs that she'd been hunted by a predator—animal or shape-shifter—and had fallen to her death while running for her life.

"They're bloodthirsty killers, Faith. Abominations in the eye of the—"

Clomping noises that sounded like a herd of elephants on the stairs announced Chloe's return. She skipped into the living room, her chestnut curls bouncing with every step, and slid to a stop in front of the couch.

"Teeth all brushed?" Faith asked.

Chloe nodded and opened her mouth wide, revealing the cute gap where she had recently lost her first baby tooth. "Can Grandpa read me my bedtime story?" She held out a worn book to him.

Faith studied him. His face was slowly returning to a more normal color, so she trusted that he could control his anger and not scare Chloe. "If he has time to stay."

"I'll always have time for my favorite granddaughter," he said.

Chloe giggled. "I'm your only granddaughter, Grandpa."

"Two things can be true at the same time, kiddo." He rolled up the magazine and handed it to Faith. "Get rid of that for me, will you?" He took the book from Chloe and got up.

Faith watched them climb the stairs together. Her daughter's favorite book, *The Selfish Shellfish*, was much more pleasant reading material than this tabloid. She unrolled it and stared at the picture of herself and the shifter locked in a silent standoff.

A shiver went through her.

She ripped the page from the magazine, tore it into tiny little pieces, then rose to toss the entire thing into the nearest trash bin.

* * *

Faith could barely remember what a vacation felt like, but it had to come close to this. Chloe was with her ex-husband this week, and it was Faith's day off, so she had treated herself to a latte and a chocolate croissant at the Blue Bottle Coffee close to her house.

The weather was perfect for the beginning of April—a pleasant sixty-five degrees—so she sat on their cobblestone patio, her laptop open on the small, square table in front of her.

The soft hum of conversation from the tables around her mingled with the hiss of an espresso machine from inside. The air smelled of blooming spring flowers and freshly brewed coffee.

Faith had taken off her jacket and rolled up the sleeves of her blouse so she could enjoy the sunshine on her skin as she scrolled through feedback their guests had left on Tripadvisor and other hotel review sites. A duck

splash-landed on the green water of the C&O Canal below her, momentarily distracting her from work.

When she redirected her attention to the laptop, a shadow fell across her keyboard.

Faith looked up.

A stranger stood next to her table.

No, not a complete stranger. Faith just didn't know her name. It was the shape-shifter from the Wrasa Pride parade—the one the tabloid article had insisted was romantically interested in her.

Faith's pulse stuttered. What was she doing here? Her presence at the café couldn't be a coincidence—which meant the shifter was here for her!

A chill ran down Faith's spine. She tried not to show how shaken she was as she stared up at her. She faintly remembered being several inches taller, yet somehow, the woman created the appearance of towering over her. Maybe it was the alertness in her golden eyes or the short, slightly tousled, coppery hair that framed her angular features with an air of defiance. She could only be a few years older than Faith—maybe in her mid-thirties, and yet despite her petite frame, she exuded an aura of authority and confidence.

In her job, Faith talked to new people every day, but now her brain struggled to form words as she fought to grasp the situation. Finally, what came out was, "How did you find me?"

"Who said I was looking for you?" Her voice was surprisingly deep for a person of her size, and she kept her tone soft and casual yet it still cut like a finely honed blade. She lifted the paper cup in her left hand and nodded at Faith's own. "Seems I had the same idea you did."

Admittedly, Faith didn't know a lot about the shape-shifters or Wrasa, as they called themselves. She had a feeling that most humans didn't. They knew just some carefully selected details that the shape-shifters wanted to reveal. But she remembered one thing. "Shifters don't drink coffee."

"Who says it's coffee?"

Faith also vaguely remembered they didn't drink hot chocolate either, and there was no tag dangling from the cup, indicating that it was tea. Whatever game this shifter was playing, Faith didn't find it entertaining at all. She clicked her laptop shut and clamped her hands around the edge of the table to stop her fingers from trembling. "My father didn't raise me to be naive. You didn't come here for the beverages. Why are you here?"

The woman gave her an almost imperceptible nod. "All right. Let's be completely honest with each other and talk." Without asking for permission,

she slid onto the chair across from Faith and put her cup down on the low stone wall to her left, as if she had never intended to drink it anyway.

Faith clutched the table more tightly. Her gaze darted left and right in search of a police officer, a security guard, or someone who might help if the shifter got out of hand.

But there was no one. A young mother with a stroller and a student engrossed in a book occupied the tables next to hers, and neither was paying them any attention.

She was on her own.

Faith squirmed on her chair. “What do you want from me?” She strained to keep her voice steady. “If this is about the tabloid article, I can assure you I didn’t have anything to do with—”

“It’s not,” the shifter said. “Well, maybe it is. In a way.”

“What?” Faith shook her head, feeling as if she’d missed a step in a twisted game. “Look...” She paused when she realized she didn’t know the woman’s name, then continued. “This is a big city. Why don’t we just go our sepa—”

“Tala.” The woman tapped her chest as if Faith otherwise wouldn’t understand. “Tala Peterson.”

No doubt the shifter—Tala—knew exactly who Faith was, so she didn’t introduce herself. “What do you want, Tala Peterson?”

The corners of Tala’s golden eyes crinkled slightly. It was a change so subtle that Faith at first mistook it for a squint against the sunlight. But the sun was behind her, so maybe it was a grudging respect that darted across her face. “I want us to do what the article said.” Tala’s voice didn’t waver.

“I don’t understand. It’s a tabloid article. It didn’t say a thing that made sense, just went on and on about us having a forbidden romance.”

Tala nodded calmly, as if she were spelling out something obvious to a child. “Exactly. That’s why I’m here.”

Faith pressed both feet against the cobblestones as the world around her started to spin. “You want us to...get involved?” The last word escaped her in a squeak. Was that how relationships between shifters worked? They just walked up to someone and stated their romantic intent?

“Not for real, of course,” Tala said as matter-of-factly as if they were discussing the weather. “But if we pretended to be dating, I believe that could be mutually beneficial for both of our species.”

She should get up, grab her laptop and latte, and storm away. Or grab her laptop, toss the remainder of her latte into Tala’s face, then storm away.

But she was too stunned to move. “This is a joke, right? You can’t be serious!” Then it dawned on her. “Oh! It’s April first! If this is your idea of an April Fools’ joke, let me tell you I don’t find it funny at all! Spare me your weird sense of humor and leave me alone!”

The student at the table next to hers glanced over, but when Tala glared at him, he quickly ducked back behind his book.

Tala wasn’t laughing. Her expression was completely blank. Not even a hint of a smile curved up her lips to soften her stern look and sharp features.

Did shifters even smile? Faith couldn’t remember if she’d ever seen it.

“Wrasa don’t do April Fools’ jokes,” Tala declared. “I’m serious.”

Faith gaped at her, caught between shock and anger. “You really invaded my privacy to suggest this ridiculous proposal?”

“I have a good reason for it,” Tala replied coolly, completely unimpressed by Faith’s growing ire. “If you could just stay calm and hear me out, it’ll all make perfect sense in a minute.”

“Stay calm?” Faith’s voice rose. “I’m perfectly calm! You’re the irrational one, barging into my life with this absurd idea!”

Tala regarded her steadily. “This isn’t about you and me. It’s much bigger than us. The situation between Wrasa and humans is like a powder keg that could explode any moment and—”

“I’m hardly responsible for that. Besides, how would a fake relationship between us change that?” Faith’s heart raced, along with her mind. How on earth had she gotten stuck in this bizarre nightmare?

Tala shrugged. The gesture didn’t seem quite natural—more like something she had learned from observing humans and repeated to fit in. “We could show people that not only can our species peacefully coexist, but they can also learn to love each other deeply. It could be a start.”

Love each other deeply... Faith couldn’t fully grasp the words. Not when they were used in regards to her and a shifter. She inhaled and exhaled deeply, trying to calm her inner turmoil. Her father had drilled into her that the shifters were predators who took advantage of any weakness. Showing one of them how upset she was would only confirm that humans were soft and weak—easy prey. She forced a neutral expression onto her face. “I don’t get it. Why me? There are already several humans and shifters in a relationship with each other.”

“Name a few.”

“What?”

“Humor me,” Tala said, then added, “Please.”

It sounded as if she didn't use the word often. This entire conversation was absurd, but maybe if Faith played along and let Tala get out whatever she had to say, this weird interaction would be over sooner. "Um, there's Kelsey Yates and her girlfriend, Rue... I forgot her last name. And also... um..."

Tala gave her a knowing look. "I bet most people could name only Kelsey and Rue. And frankly, no one had ever heard of them before Kelsey shifted on TV. Why would people give a crap about Rue's opinion of us Wrasa?"

But they would care about Faith's opinion—because of who her father was. "So you're asking me to pretend to be in love with you even though you embody everything my father despises? Why would I do that?"

Tala tilted her head to the side. "Your father."

"What?"

"You said I'm everything *your father* despises. You didn't say *you* despise me."

"I don't even know you." Faith held up her hand before Tala could interrupt. "And I have no desire to change that."

"Fine. If you don't want to do it for yourself, do it for your daughter. Do you really want her to grow up in a world full of hatred and prejudice? In a world where a full-out war might break out between humans and Wrasa?"

Anger surged through Faith, hot and fierce like a wave of lava. "Stop trying to manipulate me! And leave my daughter out of this! She's not a pawn in whatever twisted little game you're playing—and neither am I!" Her chair scraped against the cobblestones as she jumped up, snatched her laptop from the table, and shoved it into her backpack.

"Ms. MacAllister... Faith... Wait!"

But Faith had heard enough. Whatever nefarious thing Tala and the shifters were planning, she wanted no part in it. Without taking the time to grab her latte, she whirled around and stormed off.

Tala's gaze seemed to drill into her as she marched up Potomac Street, but she didn't look back.

* * *

Faith pulled up in front of the headquarters of Hearthstone Hotels and Resorts in Arlington, barely remembering how she had gotten there. She'd been on autopilot, scenes from that weird encounter with Tala Peterson flashing through her mind.

As she got out of the car, the crisp spring air made her shiver.

She glanced back at the car, searching for her jacket, and realized with a jolt that it wasn't there.

Ugh. She had been so upset and angry that she had stormed off, forgetting the jacket draped over the back of her chair.

Thank God her wallet, phone, and keys had been in her backpack.

She wrapped her arms around herself as she entered the towering office building. Usually, it had a calming effect on her. It embodied everything her father had worked so hard for, starting with that first modest hotel her mother had named.

But this time, her heart kept beating frantically as she got out of the elevator on the top floor.

"Hi, Stacy," she greeted the admin behind the desk in the outer office. "Is my father in?"

"Yes, but—"

Faith hurried past her without stopping to chat, as she usually did.

"Wait!" Stacy called after her. "He's in an important—"

Faith had already opened the door to her father's office.

He sat behind the giant desk that had once belonged to Faith's grandfather. He was on the phone, his tie loosened, which he only did when it was a long, stressful call.

Faith paused in the doorway. A second ago, her encounter with the shape-shifter had felt like an emergency, but was it really? Maybe she was overreacting.

Her father looked up. A tired smile darted across his face, then froze as he took her in. "I'll call you back," he said into the phone and ended the call without waiting for a reply. His gaze stayed locked on Faith. "What happened?"

"You were right." Faith fully stepped into the office and closed the door behind her. "They're not harmless."

"Who?"

"The shifters."

Her father leaped out of his leather chair, hurried around the desk, and gripped Faith's upper arms with both hands. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I'm fine. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I just... I had the most bizarre encounter."

Instead of loosening, his grip on her arms tightened. "With one of those beasts?"

Faith winced at the word but nodded. “Do you remember the woman from the parade...from the tabloid article?”

“Of course.” He finally gave her one last soft squeeze, then let his hands drop away. “Not like I had a chance to forget it. I’ve been getting calls and visits from friends and HASS members about it all week. One of them from Jon.”

Faith groaned. She should have known her ex would eventually find out about it. “Why did he come to you instead of bringing it up when I dropped Chloe off at his place?”

“Because I told him to let it go. It’s all made-up nonsense.”

“Um, actually... The woman from the article—Tala Peterson—approached me earlier, when I was getting coffee.”

A sharp intake of breath cut through the sudden silence. “What? How did she even find you?”

“I have no idea. The shifters probably have their ways.” The tiny hairs on the back of Faith’s neck prickled with unease.

Her father’s jaw tightened. “If she hurt you in any way, I’ll hunt her down and—”

“She didn’t. She just wanted to talk. Said she had a proposition that could be mutually beneficial.”

“Mutually beneficial?” He snorted. “Since when are our interests aligned with the shifters? They’re out to destroy everything we hold dear.”

“I know it’ll sound ridiculous, but she suggested...” Faith could barely bring herself to say it. “That we pretend to date. Each other.”

For several moments, her father didn’t speak or move. A heavy silence spread through the office.

“What?” Her father ripped his tie off completely as if it had suddenly constricted his airway and threw it across the room. “I’ll skin her alive and hang her pelt from—”

“Dad, please, calm down. Think of your blood pressure.”

“Calm down? Calm down?” His voice became louder with every word until he was shouting. “How can I calm down when it’s clear those monsters want to use you for their evil plans? I hope you told her to go to hell!”

Faith had expected her father’s reaction, but she hadn’t anticipated the intensity of it. “Of course I did,” she said softly “I was pretty angry too. But now that I’ve had some time to think about it, a tiny part of me can’t help wondering... What if she told the truth and they’re really trying to achieve

peace between our species, even if they're going about it in a ridiculous way?"

"Peace?" Her father spat out the word. "Don't be naive, Faith. I don't believe that for a second. Shifters are cunning, manipulative creatures. They're up to something. I don't know how, but they're planning to use this tabloid article to advance their own agenda, and they won't hesitate to use innocent people like you as pawns in their sinister game!"

He paced the room, his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. "We can't let them win. If we do, they'll take away our homes and erode our values! Before we know it, they'll have us worship their animal god. No! Enough!" He smashed his fist against the padded top of his leather chair.

Faith jumped and clutched her chest, her heart thumping hard against her palm. "Dad!"

"I'm sorry." He instantly stopped pacing, uncurled his fists with visible effort, and scrubbed his face with both hands. Groaning, he sank into his office chair like a deflating balloon. "I didn't mean to shout. I just worry. It's clear as day to me that these creatures are trying to gain power over us, and most people seem to not even realize what danger we're in, so it's on me to protect them. I have to find a way to turn this around before it's too late."

Faith didn't know what to say. Most of the time, she didn't feel threatened by the shifters—at least not enough to do anything against them. Was she one of the people who refused to see the danger?

She had always hesitated to believe they had murdered her mother since there was no conclusive evidence. But could she really rule it out? After all, one of the shifters had tracked her down and ambushed her with this absurd suggestion, so maybe her father was right and they were unpredictable menaces.

He tapped his knuckles against his chin as his gaze went inward. "Turn this around," he repeated, more to himself.

"Um, what?"

"The shifters are trying to play their devious games with us. Maybe it's time we turn the tables on them and play back."

"What do you mean?" Faith asked.

The anger on her father's face was replaced by steely determination. "You should do it."

Faith stared at him. "Excuse me? Y-you want me to date a shifter?"

"Pretend to. Just think about it. If she wants everyone to believe you are her, um, girlfriend, she needs to give you full access to her home, her friends,

her family. Her secrets. She might start to let her guard down around you. After they printed that article, I had her investigated, Faith. She's not just any shifter. She's one of Kelsey Yates's bodyguards."

"So that's why she was at the parade. She was there to protect Ms. Yates."

Her father nodded. "Some of our people also saw her going toe to toe with their top dog, Jeff Madsen. She's connected to the higher-ups. As her fake girlfriend, you could infiltrate their inner circle. You could spy on them and find out what they're planning."

Faith hesitated. All she wanted was a quiet life with her daughter. She wasn't sure she could do whatever her father expected of her. "I don't know, Dad. I'm a hospitality professional, not a spy."

"Do you remember when you were Chloe's age and that little stinker of a boy started to bully you? Your mother wanted me to intervene—talk to his parents, the principal—but I knew you could handle him. And I was right."

They both chuckled at the memory of six-year-old Faith flushing the bully's beloved action figure down the toilet.

He intently looked her in the eyes. "I've always believed that you can do anything you put your mind to, and this isn't any different. If there's anyone who can do this, it's you."

The weight of the world seemed to settle heavily on Faith's shoulders. "But what about Chloe? If you're right about the shifters planning something nefarious and I get caught up in it, she could become a target."

"We won't let anything happen to her," he said fiercely. "I don't think these monsters would try to harm her or you. At least not while they still need you for their little scheme. But in the long run, Chloe is the very reason why I think you need to do this. It's the only way to keep her and every other human child safe. This could be our one chance to find proof of their evilness and expose their lies to the world." His gaze went to the framed picture on his desk, and he gently touched the glass with his index finger, right where Faith knew her mother's face was. Then he looked up and into her eyes. "You and Chloe are the most important thing in my life, and I would never put you in any danger if I didn't think it was important. But if we can save just one person from dying the way your mother did..."

Faith's chest burned. She sucked in a breath, but the sensation didn't abate.

"And who knows? Maybe you'll even find evidence proving that the shifters killed your mother. We could finally go public without coming across like conspiracy theorists and losing all credibility."

“That’s a really long shot, Dad,” Faith said quietly. Even if the shifters had killed her mother, would there be any evidence left more than two decades later? If there was, surely they wouldn’t be so reckless as to leave it where she could see it.

“I know.” He rubbed his eyes. “You don’t have to decide now. Just think about it. For humanity’s sake.”

No pressure or anything. She gripped the back of the visitor’s chair in front of the desk. The leather groaned beneath her desperate grip. “I’ll do it,” she choked out before she could talk herself out of it.

“Are you sure?”

Faith wasn’t, but she nodded anyway. “Are you?” She lifted her hand, stopping him from giving a quick answer. “Have you really thought this through? What will your friends from HASS think if they find out your daughter is dating a shifter?”

“If we’re lucky, it won’t take long for you to dig up dirt on the shifters, so it won’t become an issue. But if it does, they’ll eventually find out it was all for a good cause.” He studied her intently. “Are you worried about *your* friends?”

Faith didn’t have to think about it for long. Or maybe she didn’t *want* to think about it—otherwise, she would talk herself out of going through with the entire scheme. Besides, it wasn’t as if she had a ton of friends anyway, at least not friends she hung out with regularly. Most of her free time was spent with Chloe, so it had been ages since she had seen her friends from the kayak club. The only one she still made time for was her best friend, Sabina. “No,” she finally said. “You know my friends. They’re all pretty liberal.”

Her father playfully wrinkled his nose. Then he sobered. He got up, rounded the desk, and pulled her into a tight embrace. “Please be careful,” he whispered into her hair. “If it gets too dangerous, you can walk away at any time. I don’t want to lose you too.”

“You won’t,” she whispered against his shoulder, praying that it was the truth.

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Enemies by Nature

BY JAE

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