

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER SERIES # 8



# SHIFTING NATURE

JAE



# CHAPTER 1

FAITH GAZED THROUGH THE PASSENGER-SIDE window and watched the rolling hills of northern Virginia pass by in a blur.

She and Tala had been driving east, toward DC, for twenty minutes, and now the mountains were slowly fading into the background.

Her head was still spinning with everything that had happened this weekend.

Less than forty-eight hours ago, she had accompanied Tala to her brother's engagement festivities as her pretend mate, while secretly having only one goal: spying on Tala's pack for her father, who was convinced the Wrasa were hatching sinister schemes against humanity.

And she had found out a lot: that the average Wrasa family could bankrupt any all-you-can-eat restaurant; Tala made an excellent heating pad for period cramps; and, most importantly, Tala's pack had nothing to do with her mother's death.

Her father wouldn't be happy with any of that information, and she dreaded telling him she hadn't gone through with his plan to plant a bug in the Petersons' home.

After the warm welcome most of them had given her, she could no longer justify it.

Another twenty minutes went by, and neither of them had said anything.

Tala was just as quiet as Faith. Her gaze was locked straight ahead, and she seemed to be a million miles away.

After the constant lively chatter of the pack, the silence felt strange.

Faith had thought she would be relieved, even eager, to leave Silver Falls, to escape Tala's pack and the need to pretend to be her mate.

And she did feel relieved, but more about finally being able to stop spying on Tala.

Yet Tala's silence gnawed at her, eating away at her relief. It was so different from the night before, when they had freely shared painful secrets from their pasts.

Was Tala trying to process everything that had happened this weekend, as Faith was, or was something else going on?

Was she angry with Faith for telling her off in front of her entire pack during breakfast?

When she couldn't stand the silence anymore, Faith cleared her throat. "I feel like I should apologize."

"You already did," Tala said. "Twice."

"Well, they say the third time's the charm," Faith quipped to lighten the mood. But this time, she wasn't actually apologizing for following Tala's pack into the woods—and alerting her father, who had sent two members of his anti-Wrasa group after them.

Before she could explain what she was apologizing for, Tala glanced over. "I don't need a third apology. I'm not saying what you did was great, but now that I've had some time to think about it, I get why you followed us."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I mean... Finding out that our ritual spot is in the exact same location where your mother died all those years ago... That must have seemed suspicious, especially since your father keeps telling you we're all evil monsters."

Faith's heart beat faster as she remembered the shock of seeing the red pin on the map, pointing at the spot where her mother's body had been found. She hadn't wanted to believe that Tala's family had anything to do with her mom's death. The better she had gotten to know Tala and her pack, the more she had started to doubt her father's convictions about the Wrasa.

But she hadn't been able to rule it out—not without following them so she could see what was going on with her own eyes.

"That and you were pretty secretive about what would happen during that ritual taking place in the middle of the night and about why I couldn't come with you," Faith added. "It made the entire ritual seem like something you were trying to hide from humans."

"We were," Tala said quietly.

Faith tamped down the old instincts to immediately assume nefarious intentions. "But... why? You freely shared all the other engagement traditions with me. What made this one different?"

## SHIFTING NATURE

“The name of the ritual—yasi makamar—translates to *night run*,” Tala said. “The packs of the two people getting engaged meet at the more powerful pack’s ritual spot, where they shift shape and run together in their animal forms.”

Faith nodded. “I figured that out.” A shiver went through her at the memory of a Syak pack—wolves with eerily glowing eyes—charging toward her, their howls echoing through the dark forest.

All her nightmares seemed to have come true. She hadn’t known they were Tala’s family. How could she when Tala had failed to mention her relatives were wolves, not foxes? Thank God she had tried to run instead of squeezing the trigger on the gun her father had smuggled into her suitcase!

Tala glanced away from the road and gave her a worried look. Her fingers twitched on the steering wheel as if she was suppressing the urge to reach over and touch Faith. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Faith wanted to move forward, not linger on that night. Both of them had contributed to it by keeping secrets, so now it seemed important for her to know the full truth. “So why’s that a secret? I mean, you’re shape-shifters. Humans already know you can turn into animals.”

“Yeah, but what humans don’t know is...” Tala hesitated. She tugged at the collar of her shirt, and Faith noticed that she wasn’t wearing her ID tag, as if she was delaying putting it back on until the very last second. “When humans saw Kelsey shift on TV, they were stunned and entirely focused on the end result of the transformation—the powerful creature she turned into—not the transformation itself. But the truth is, during those moments, my kind is very vulnerable. All of our bones, joints, muscles, and organs rearrange themselves, and our senses change too, leaving us disoriented.”

Tala was right. Faith had focused on the wolf in that recording, not on how defenseless a creature would naturally be while their body rearranged itself.

“That’s the reason shape-shifting is part of the engagement ritual,” Tala added. “The two packs show that they trust each other like family.”

“That’s why you didn’t tell me anything about the yasi makamar.” It all came down to trust—or the lack of it. “Thank you for telling me now. I swear your secret is safe with me.”

“I wouldn’t have told you if I thought otherwise,” Tala replied.

Silence fell again, but this time, it wasn’t awkward.

“Um, by the way, that wasn’t what I meant when I said I feel like I should apologize,” Faith finally said.

Tala glanced at her again, then back to the road ahead. “So what did you mean?”

“I wanted to apologize for telling you off in front of everyone during breakfast,” Faith said. “That’s probably not something a Syak mate would do to the future leader of the pack, is it?”

“No, it’s not.” Tala tapped her fingers against the steering wheel. “But you weren’t completely wrong.”

Faith pressed a hand to her chest in faux shock. “Wait... If I translate that into non-alpha language... Are you admitting I was right?”

Tala shrugged. “While I stand by my assessment, rating your looks against Mirella’s to one-up my brother was an asshole thing to do.”

“Yes,” Faith said. “I mean, I probably should have told you in private, but it didn’t sit right with me, especially since Lasandra was right there.”

Then she paused and mentally repeated what Tala had just said. *I stand by my assessment...* A flush warmed Faith’s body. Did that mean Tala really did think Faith had been the hottest woman in the room, even compared to her brother’s gorgeous fiancée, and hadn’t merely said it to outdo Rey?

She pushed the thought away to focus on the conversation.

“Lasandra?” A frown marred Tala’s face. “What does she have to do with it? I didn’t even mention her.”

For someone so clever, Tala could be pretty clueless when it came to relationships sometimes. “Exactly. You told your brother his fiancée was the second-hottest woman in the room, implying that I’m the hottest. That means Lasandra didn’t even rate second place in your book. Since she’s your ex, that’s just...ouch.”

“What? That’s not what I... Damn.” Tala thumped her fist against the steering wheel. “I owe her another apology, don’t I?”

“Another?” Faith asked.

“Mm-hmm. I apologized earlier for breaking things off the way I did, without much of an explanation.”

Faith turned in the passenger seat to study her, but Tala’s focused expression gave nothing away. “Do you still love her?” she asked quietly.

Tala was taking much too long to contemplate the question.

The muffled roar of a truck speeding by emphasized the silence in the car.

“Yeah,” Tala finally said. “I do.”

The seat belt seemed to tighten around Faith, squeezing her chest and making it hard to breathe.

“I mean, she’s family and an amazing person,” Tala added. “But I’m not *in love* with her, and if I’m completely honest, I’m not sure I ever was.”

The pressure on Faith’s chest eased.

“I thought I was, but maybe I was merely in love with the idea of being with a Syak because I thought that would make me more of a true wolf.” Tala sounded as if she had only now figured it out herself. “I know it might be hard to understand, but—”

“No, not at all,” Faith said. “I get it.”

Tala turned her head toward her. “You do?”

“Yes.” Faith fiddled with the edge of the bandage on her palm. “If I’m perfectly honest, I think I’m in the same boat. Don’t get me wrong, I loved Jon. I mean, what’s not to love? He’s a wonderful father and gets along great with my dad. But I’m no longer sure if I was ever in love with him or just the idea of having a complete family again.”

Deep down, she had known it for years, yet she had never told anyone, not even her best friend, Sabina. But she sensed that she could tell Tala without having to fear being judged.

A soft chime from Tala’s side of the car interrupted before she could say anything.

“I bet it’s my mom,” Tala said with a grin. “She probably noticed that you ‘forgot’ to take the leftover skiyo with you.”

Faith shuddered at the memory of the Wrasa dish and its earthy taste.

Then Faith’s phone chirped too.

“You got your phone back?” Tala asked.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you. Arnold found it in the forest.”

Tala let out a low whistle. “And he gave it back? That’s as close to an apology as you’ll ever get from him.”

The phone in Faith’s back pocket chirped again, followed by a chime from Tala’s. Apparently, someone was trying to reach both of them.

Faith pulled hers from her back pocket and unlocked it.

She had two new messages, both from the same unknown number. Quickly, she tapped to read them.

*This is a message from Jeffrey Madsen’s office, it said. The council speaker wanted you and Tas Peterson to be aware of this, in case the press reaches out to you for a statement. He’ll be in touch with you later today.*

The second bubble held only a link.

“What is it?” Tala asked.

“Your boss sent us a link. You probably got the same message.”

Faith tapped on it.

An article from a news website came up.

The headline declared: *Peter MacAllister Speaks Out Against Interspecies Marriage.*

With a sinking feeling, Faith started to read the article.

*As debates about the proposed Wrasa Rights Act intensify, Peter MacAllister, leader of HASS (Humans Against Shape-Shifters), voiced his staunch opposition to interspecies marriage in a recent interview with WNN.*

*The Wrasa Rights Act, if passed, would be the first federal law to recognize Wrasa as having equal rights, including the right to marry humans.*

*Though human/Wrasa partnerships currently remain rare, attitudes appear to be changing, especially among younger people, who no longer view interspecies relationships as taboo.*

*MacAllister, who has long opposed the Wrasa Rights Act, took a hard stance against what he calls a “dangerous threat to families and our society’s moral fabric.”*

*He asserted that “marriage should be a sacred union between two humans, not between a human and a shifter. If we let this so-called Wrasa Rights Act pass, we’ll be undermining the sanctity of marriage. What kind of world are we leaving our children if we allow such unnatural unions?”*

There were more quotes, but Faith couldn’t bear to read them. Her stomach churned.

Tala glanced over as if sensing her distress. “What’s wrong?”

“My father.” Faith sighed. “He gave an interview. I’ll spare you the details, but he spoke out against the Wrasa Rights Act and interspecies marriages.”

Tala’s knuckles whitened on the steering wheel, yet her expression remained impassive. “That’s not exactly new, is it?”

“No. He’s said similar things before. I never agreed, but back then, it didn’t feel so...personal.” Then she realized how that sounded and quickly added, “Not that you and I will really get married, but it’s only a tiny step from not allowing interspecies marriages to banning Wrasa from marrying at all. To think that your brother and Mirella or any of your relatives could have that right taken away...”

Tala nodded grimly. “No doubt your father will advocate for that next.”

If Faith was honest, she couldn’t rule it out. She stared at the last paragraph of the news article.

## SHIFTING NATURE

*MacAllister's daughter, Faith, has recently been revealed to be engaged to a shape-shifter. Ms. MacAllister has not publicly commented on her father's statements. As the debate over Wrasa rights and interspecies marriage heats up, her silence speaks volumes.*

Faith worried her bottom lip between her teeth. The journalist who had penned that article was painfully accurate. The world thought she was engaged to a Wrasa, while her father fought to keep her from having the right to marry one. And still, she acted as if she had the privilege to remain apolitical and stay out of that debate.

But if she spoke up, that would have grave consequences.

She could lose her father and her amicable relationship with her ex-husband. If she sided with the Wrasa, they would see that as a personal betrayal. It would become impossible to keep Chloe out of it because her entire life would be affected.

Was she really ready to risk it all?



## CHAPTER 2

IT HAD BEEN A QUIET ride back to DC.

Faith had been deep in thought since she'd read her father's interview. She had felt Tala's questioning gaze on her several times, but Tala hadn't pressured her to reveal what was on her mind.

Very unlike the pushy Saru she'd been when they'd first met.

Or maybe Faith was paying more attention, and that was why she caught glimpses of Tala's considerate side more often.

Once they passed the Waterfront Center, Faith pointed to the right. "Take a r—"

Tala had already flicked the indicator on and guided the SUV into the steep, narrow street that led to Faith's town house.

Faith sent her a startled look. Tala had picked her up at the hotel after work on Friday. Why was she familiar with Faith's neighborhood? "How did you...?" She bit her lip. "Let me guess. That was in the brief the council gave you too?" Even though she was no longer convinced the Wrasa were evil, it still felt like an invasion of her privacy.

"Um, no, not exactly." Tala hesitated.

"No secrets, remember?"

Tala sighed. "I staked out your den...um, your neighborhood before I approached you."

Faith put two and two together. "That's how you knew which coffee shop I frequent. You didn't just coincidentally show up there."

Tala stared straight ahead, avoiding her gaze, and nodded.

A shiver crawled up Faith's spine. For a second, that old view of the Wrasa as sinister beings with evil plans reared its ugly head. Forcefully, she pushed it down. While the Wrasa hadn't approached it in a straightforward way, she wanted to believe they'd done it with good intentions.

## SHIFTING NATURE

Tala parked along the street and shut off the engine.

For a few moments, they sat in silence, neither of them getting out.

“Why?” Faith finally asked. “Not just the not-so-coincidental coffee shop meeting. Why did you approach me to be your fake girlfriend? I mean, you couldn’t know I’d agree to that ridiculous scheme because my father wanted me to spy on you.”

Tala glanced down to where she was making grooves into the fabric of her pants with her fingernails. “I want to tell you, but I need Madsen’s okay for that. I already told you more than I should. Can you give me some time?”

Faith reached over and stilled her hand before Tala could shred her jeans. Then she realized her hand was basically resting on Tala’s thigh, and she quickly pulled her fingers away. “Um, yes, of course.”

Tala brushed her hand over her leg one more time before she climbed out of the car.

Faith followed her to the back of the SUV and tried to take her suitcase from Tala, but Tala didn’t relinquish it.

“What kind of fake girlfriend would I be if I didn’t carry your suitcase all the way to your door?”

Faith chuckled. “By all means, carry it, then.”

“Oh, wait!” Instead of closing the hatch, Tala lifted the panel of the spare tire compartment and reached inside. “Here. Your father would become suspicious if he didn’t get this back.”

Faith stared at the object Tala had pressed into her hand. It was her father’s gun.

Heat shot into her cheeks as the memory of following Tala’s family into the forest with the weapon flooded back. She knew Tala returning it was a sign of her trust, and that made her feel even more ashamed.

Quickly, she unzipped the front compartment of her suitcase and slid the weapon in before zipping it back up.

Tala watched her without saying anything, but her eyes held no trace of anger.

Side by side, they climbed a set of half-hidden stairs that led from the street into a tranquil courtyard. The afternoon sun made the brick facades of the town houses appear to glow. Faith had instantly fallen in love with the historic buildings when she had first seen them. More than a hundred years ago, they had belonged to a paper mill before they’d been converted into town houses.

Tala's nostrils flared as she inhaled, and Faith imagined that she might still be able to detect a hint of paper pulp lingering in the air.

But whatever Tala smelled didn't seem to be something pleasant.

"Humans lying in wait!" Tala jerked her head at the bushes to their left and pushed Faith behind herself. "Could be reporters...or HASS goons!"

Faith's heartbeat sped up as she stumbled backward. She gritted her teeth. Surely her father wouldn't dare send more of his group members?

Before she could reach for the gun in her suitcase, four guys jumped out from behind the bushes.

Faith's gaze flew to their faces. She'd never seen them before. They clearly weren't part of her father's group.

Camera flashes went off, making Faith squint against the sudden brightness. She raised her arm to shield her face.

"Ms. MacAllister, how does it feel to be in a relationship with a shifter, knowing how your father feels about them?"

"Did it cause a rift between your father and you?"

"Did he disown you?"

"Do you regret getting involved with a shifter?"

Relentless questions rained down on Faith, who flinched back.

A menacing growl rose from Tala's chest, raw with fury. "Back off!" She kept her own body between the paparazzi and Faith. Her fingers curled into claws as if she was barely holding the instinct to shift at bay.

"No, Tala!" Faith gripped the back of Tala's shirt. Even through the fabric, she could feel the tension rippling through Tala's body. A single fox couldn't possibly take on four humans—and even if she could, the resulting photos would condemn the Wrasa.

Tala whirled around, gripped Faith's elbow, and urged her toward the town house.

The paparazzi followed, now leaving more space between them and Tala, as if sensing they had pushed her dangerously close to losing all self-control.

"Hey, is that a wound on your face?" One paparazzo rushed around them and snapped several close-ups of Faith's face. "What happened?"

Faith lifted her hand and touched her cheek. It was still tender.

When she winced, more flashlights erupted.

White spots danced across Faith's vision.

Once again, Tala leaped between her and the paparazzi with a growl.

Faith shrank behind her. "It's...nothing."

As soon as she'd said it, she knew it had been the wrong answer. The paparazzi didn't know why she was so reluctant to reveal the truth, so now they were jumping to all the wrong conclusions.

A glint entered the paparazzo's eyes. He looked like a shark scenting blood in the water. "Did you two get into a fight? Is there trouble in paradise?"

"Is the wedding off?" another asked.

"Did she hit you?" a third one shouted, each word cutting deeper.

"What? No!" Fury gripped Faith. How could they think something like that of Tala? But then again, a month ago, she would have been ready to believe the most sinister things about her too.

Her upper lip lifted into a snarl, Tala advanced on the nearest paparazzo, who immediately staggered back.

Faith latched on to her shirt. "Tala, no! You'll only make it worse." She circled around Tala so she was the one in the front. "It was an accident," she told the paparazzi. "Just a branch that hit me while we took a walk through the forest."

They traded skeptic looks. "Accident. Right."

*Oh God.* This was getting out of hand, and nothing she said seemed to make any difference. They had naively thought they could control the tabloids. But now Faith could already see tomorrow's headlines: *Evil revealed: Faith MacAllister spotted in tears after her shape-shifter girlfriend's violent attack!*

"It was!" Faith tried to reason with them calmly, but her voice came out strangled with desperation. She needed to make them see Tala wasn't the violent monster they believed her to be. "Everything is fine between us. Wonderful, in fact. Tala would never hurt me."

More doubtful looks from the paparazzi. Her denial only fueled their twisted fantasies.

This was spiraling out of control. They had to do something before the tabloids painted Tala or even all Wrasa as domestic abusers. "She's the most tender lover I ever had," Faith added. She turned toward Tala, gripped her hand, lifted it to her mouth, and pressed a gentle kiss to the inside of her wrist.

Tala's pulse was pounding a wild staccato beneath her lips, and her skin was even hotter than usual.

Flashes went off around them.

*Ooh.* Photos of tender kisses clashed with the domestic abuse story, yet they had still pressed their shutter buttons.

The paparazzi couldn't care less about what had really happened between Faith and Tala. They weren't after the truth—they were after money. They would sell whatever pictures they could, and the tabloids would write a matching story.

*So if we give them scandalous photos of a different kind...*

A daring plan formed in an instant. She reached for Tala's other hand too and tugged her closer.

Tala went willingly, probably trying to shield Faith with her own body.

But that wasn't what Faith had in mind. How could she give her at least a heads-up, warn her that she was about to do something unexpected, without giving her plan away to the paparazzi?

An idea popped into her panicked mind.

It was silly. Completely outlandish. But it was the only thing she could think of, so she did it anyway.

She winked at Tala.

\* \* \*

Tala blinked. Had Faith just...winked at her?

*Humans don't wink*, Faith had told her repeatedly.

And yet she had. Clearly, she was using it as a warning, the way she had when Sabina had wanted to go bowling with them and Faith had sent her a bunch of winking emojis. But what exactly was she trying to tell her?

She searched Faith's eyes. Her pupils expanded, making her eyes appear even darker, like black holes pulling her in.

Faith slid one hand up Tala's arm, to her shoulder, setting off goose bumps, then tugged her forward. Her breath, quick and ragged, washed over Tala's mouth.

*Great Hunter! She's going to—*

Then Faith's lips were on hers.

Tala had expected the same whisper of a kiss they had shared in the bowling alley, but this was different.

Heat flooded Tala's body, and surprise instantly gave way to desire.

She cupped the back of Faith's neck to hold her in place—for believability's sake, of course—and returned the kiss.

Faith's lips were as soft as she remembered and cool at first, but they warmed against Tala's within seconds.

## SHIFTING NATURE

The paparazzi's voices faded into the background, replaced with the thrum of Tala's own thundering heartbeat...or maybe it was Faith's, pounding wild and fast against her own as their mouths moved against each other.

Tala traced Faith's full bottom lip with her tongue.

When Faith's lips parted, Tala grazed her tongue with the tip of her own while caressing the back of Faith's neck with her fingertips.

A low gasp escaped Faith, making Tala's pulse trip even faster. She clutched at Tala's shoulders with both hands and surged forward until her body was flush against Tala's.

The press of Faith's breasts against her own made Tala bite back a moan. She couldn't think, couldn't do anything but pull Faith even closer and deepen the kiss.

Fireworks went off.

Tala had always assumed things like that happened only in human romance novels, but now star-shaped bursts exploded behind her closed lids.

*Closed? Wait!* She forced her eyes open and struggled to pull herself back to reality.

It wasn't fireworks. Camera flashes went off all around them.

With a growl, Tala broke the kiss.

The paparazzi were taking photos of the hottest kiss Tala had ever experienced!

Which was probably exactly what Faith had intended, Tala realized when her brain started to function again.

"Did it work?" Faith whispered into her ear while pretending to nibble it.

The brush of her lips against her earlobe sent a flare of arousal down Tala's body. "Oh yeah, it definitely did," Tala whispered back, her voice hoarse. She cleared her throat. "Um, I mean, yes, they bought it."

Then a realization struck her. This was what Jorie had seen in her dream vision—the two of them kissing while the cameras flashed around them!

The paparazzi stared at them. One of them let go of his camera with one hand to fan himself. "Man, I think I don't need payment for this job," he said with a husky laugh. "This was reward enough."

"See? No trouble in paradise, boys." Tala smirked at them. "Now get out of here before I call the police and have them delete the photos!"

The guy closest to them snapped one last picture, then they ambled down the path and disappeared around the building across from Faith's home.

Within seconds, Faith and Tala were alone.

Faith took a wobbly step back, away from Tala. “Um, sorry for ambushing you like that,” she said, her voice low so no one could overhear. “It was the only thing I could think of.”

“Oh, no, no. Brilliant improvisation.” Tala waved her hand dismissively, as if sexy kisses were part of the strategic warfare curriculum at the Saru Academy.

“Thanks,” Faith said with a small smile. She lifted her hand and touched her lips, which were reddened from their kiss.

*Great Hunter, don't do that.* It made Tala want to surge forward and kiss her again, and this time, there were no paparazzi around to give her a reason.

“Um, I'd better go after them and make sure they're gone.” She waved in the direction the paparazzi had disappeared in.

Faith nodded.

Tala's feet felt heavy, every muscle protesting as she walked away from Faith and crossed the courtyard. She took several deep breaths and tried to get her rebellious heartbeat under control.

A single fake kiss shouldn't leave her this rattled. But then again, nothing about it had felt fake.

One of Faith's neighbors sat on a bench in front of her house. She scowled as Tala approached.

Usually, Tala's sharp senses were on high alert, scanning her surroundings, but her brain was still dazed. The only thing she could focus on was reliving the feel of Faith's mouth, the softness of her body against her own, so she needed several seconds to make out what the blonde was wearing: a *Moms Against Shape-Shifters* T-shirt.

“Disgusting animal!” the woman shouted, her voice cutting through Tala's daydream like a knife. “Leave your dirty paws off human women!”

Tala's kiss-stunted reflexes had no time to react as an object arced through the air toward her.

Pain exploded through her temple. Tala stumbled back. She lifted her hand to her pounding head, and her fingers came away bloody.

Fire flared along her skin. She pulled back her upper lip in a wild snarl, revealing teeth she could already feel lengthening.

*No!* She couldn't let it happen. Not here, out in the open, with the paparazzi still nearby. She fought to stay anchored to her human form, but the fox clawed at the edges of her self-control, threatening to break free.

## SHIFTING NATURE

“Tala! Oh my God!” Faith rushed toward her—Tala sensed it without having to turn around.

Tala could barely hear her because every cell in her body pounded along with her head, getting ready to shift and tear into her attacker before the woman could harm her mate too.

Her vision blurred. The fire beneath her skin burned hotter and hotter. She couldn’t fight it much longer.

\* \* \*

A surge of adrenaline cut through the haze of desire clinging to Faith’s brain. On legs that had felt wobbly only seconds ago, she sprinted across the courtyard.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she shouted at Camille. She couldn’t believe her neighbor had thrown an unopened soda can at Tala!

Camille pulled out her phone and started to film Tala. “Wrong with me?” she shouted back. “Asks the woman sleeping with this monster!”

Fury hit Faith like an avalanche of lava that boiled up from deep within her. Her vision went a hazy red, and her nails bit into her palms. The pain wrenched her back from her focus on Camille.

She wasn’t important—Tala was.

Faith skidded to a stop next to Tala, who stood bent over, clutching her head. “Tala! Are you okay?” She grabbed her shoulders and guided her to straighten up so she could see.

Blood trickled from a gash on Tala’s temple.

Faith sucked in a sharp breath. “Tala!”

Tala’s eyes instantly locked onto hers. They were wild and unfocused, and her pupils had elongated into vertical slits, like those of a fox.

*Oh shit!* Tala was about to shift! Pain could do that to them, she remembered Tala telling her.

“Stop filming!” She lunged at her neighbor, trying to wrench the phone out of her hand, but Camille was taller and lifted the device out of reach. “You have no right!”

Camille kept recording. “I have every right to show the world what a monster she really is!”

“The only monster the world will see is you!” But as clear as that was to her, she knew the Wrasa haters wouldn’t see it the same way.



If she didn't do something to prevent it, the video of Tala shifting and possibly attacking the can-throwing Wrasa-phobe would go viral on social media.

"We need to get you inside. Now!" She pulled Tala's arm over her shoulder, hooked an arm around her waist, and dragged her toward the house.

Tala leaned heavily against her and staggered along. Heat radiated off her in waves.

They stumbled up the six steps to the front door.

"Hang on," Faith repeated again and again, her voice urgent, as she fumbled with the keys, trying to find the right one. "Don't shift. Focus on me."

Finally, she shoved the key into the lock and turned it.

But as she tried to pull Tala inside, Tala dragged her feet. "Are you sure?" she gasped out.

Faith tugged on her arm to urge her forward. "What?"

"You said...no one gets through...your front door until you're...you're ready to introduce them to Chloe." Tala's voice was hoarse and guttural, each word scraping from her throat as if it cost her tremendous effort.

Faith gaped at her. She couldn't believe Tala remembered what she had said what felt like eons ago—especially in the state she was in. "You're bleeding and barely hanging on! Come in!" Chloe wasn't home anyway, and even if she were, that would have been the least of Faith's worries right now.

The door swung open, and they staggered through.

Faith kicked the door shut behind them, and they both slumped against it, breathing hard, with Tala's arm still across her shoulders.

"Kalyani, nemi," Faith whispered soothingly. "Everything's okay. You're safe now."

Tala blinked and stared at her. Gradually, her pupils returned to normal.

"I'm so, so sorry. I can't believe she threw that can at you!" Faith pulled her phone from her back pocket and swiped to unlock it.

"What are you doing?" Tala asked, sounding as if she was still struggling to form words.

"Calling the police, what else? She attacked you!"

Tala gripped her hand, stopping her from calling 911. "No. That rarely ends well for us Wrasa."

Before Faith could answer, Tala raised her upper lip and let out a sharp, menacing growl—but not at Faith. Her attention locked onto something in the hallway.

Faith jerked her head around.

They weren't alone! Jon stood in the hallway, glaring at Tala. "What the heck, Faith?"

With another growl, Tala tried to protectively step between Faith and her ex, but Faith didn't let go of her waist. She gave a soft squeeze and whispered, "Let me handle this, please."

A subvocal growl still vibrated against Faith's side, but finally, Tala gave a reluctant nod.

Once Faith had made sure Tala could stand on her own, she let go to face Jon.

He pointed at Tala as if he wished his index finger were a gun. "What is she doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" Faith shot back. "I gave you a key for emergencies only, not so you can snoop around when I'm not home!"

"I didn't snoop! Chloe had bad dreams all night, but she refused to take a nap unless we came here so she could nap on the couch with her glow-in-the-dark dinosaur blanket."

As if hearing her name, Chloe ran over from the living room. "Mom! You're back!"

"Hey, sweetie!"

When Chloe curiously glanced in Tala's direction, Faith quickly blocked Tala's bleeding temple from Chloe's view.

Jon caught their daughter before she could reach Faith. "Chloe, go to your room."

Chloe's bottom lip trembled. "But Mom is—"

"You can say hi to your mom in a minute," Jon said. "I have to talk to her first. Alone."

"It's okay, sweetie," Faith said in the same soothing tone she had used with Tala. "I'll come upstairs as soon as we're done here, okay?"

Chloe nodded, whirled around, and ran up the stairs to her room.

Faith strode toward Jon. "What the hell, Jon? You come to my house without so much as letting me know, and now you think you get to call the shots and send Chloe to her room when I haven't seen her in three days?"

“I’m protecting her, okay?” Jon shot back. “Or do you think it’s good for her to see her mother clinging to a shifter who’s dripping blood all over the floor? No wonder she has nightmares!”

Faith wrestled down a wave of anger at his tone when he talked about Tala. He was right about the blood; she had to give him that. A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed that Tala was, indeed, still bleeding. “Why don’t you go tend to the wound?” she said to Tala. “The bathroom is upstairs, first door to the right, and the first aid kit is in the cabinet beneath the sink. I’ll be right up to help.”

“Are you out of your mind? I’m not letting her go upstairs, where Chloe is!” Jon blocked her access to the stairs.

Tala pressed her shirtsleeve to the gash. “Save your breath. I’m not going upstairs. I’m not leaving her alone with you for even a second, asshole.”

“You pretend I’m a threat to Faith? That’s rich, coming from you, shifter!”

Faith had heard enough. “Stop it! Both of you.” She whirled toward Jon. “Tala can barely stay on her feet! She needs medical attention, and she needs it now! Unless you intend to help her, move out of the way and let her go upstairs!”

A vein in Jon’s temple pounded. His gaze flicked between Faith and Tala, who stood her ground, despite the blood staining the sleeve she pressed to her head.

The air seemed to crackle with the tension between them.

Finally, Jon stepped aside.

Tala hesitated, clearly unwilling to leave her alone with him.

“Please, Tala,” Faith said, her voice softening. “Go. He won’t hurt me.”

“Fine.” With one last growl at Jon, Tala stalked past him.

His jaw clenched, and for a second, he looked as if he would tackle Tala from behind, but beneath Faith’s warning glare, he didn’t.

He and Faith watched as Tala disappeared around the corner, then listened to the creak of the stairs. Twice, Tala paused—either to steady herself against the banister or to listen and make sure Jon was staying civil—then the bathroom door clicked shut behind her.

Jon turned back toward Faith. He squinted, then crossed the hall toward her. “What did she do to you?” He reached out as if to touch her cheek.

Faith turned her head away. “She didn’t do anything. I wasn’t paying attention and ran into a branch; that’s all.”

“I’ll kill her with my bare hands!” Jon ground out as if he hadn’t even heard her. His fists bunched.

“Would you stop it? I said she didn’t harm me. She and her family spoiled me the entire weekend. The only harm they did was to my waistline.”

“She’s manipulating you. It’s what they do.” Jon started pacing next to her.

“Stop it!” Faith said more forcefully. “It’s this kind of fear-mongering and hateful tirades that got Tala hurt. This is the consequence of what you and Dad are doing.” She pointed at the droplets of blood dotting the hardwood floor. With trembling fingers, she pulled a tissue from her pocket, bent down, and wiped at the spots as if that would fix what had happened.

Jon stopped pacing and studied her as if she were a stranger. Slowly, he shook his head. “You’re worried about her.”

*Of course I’m worried*, she wanted to shout, but then snapped her mouth shut and straightened. He hadn’t gone through the process of getting to know Tala and her family, hadn’t caught rare glimpses of the mischievous fox beneath the tough wolf. He didn’t understand.

“In fact,” Jon leaned closer, as if scrutinizing her under a microscope, “I’m starting to think you’re faking your feelings for her a little too convincingly.”

Heat swept up her chest and into her cheeks, and she knew she was blushing. She turned away under the pretense of tossing the blood-dotted tissue into the trash can. *Great*. Now Jon would jump to all the wrong conclusions.

But maybe they weren’t completely wrong. She hadn’t felt *nothing* when she’d kissed Tala. Despite the camera flashes going off all around them, she had lost track of why they were kissing and had been swept up in the sensation of Tala’s lips on hers.

Faith shook off the thought. One crisis at a time. First, she had to deal with Jon. She turned back toward him. “You’re seeing things that aren’t there. Not just between Tala and me, but with the Wrasa in general. They’re not monsters. Most of them are good people.”

“I’m not going to stand here and let you pretend they’re human.”

“I never said they were.” Faith struggled to stay calm. “But that doesn’t mean they’re evil.”

He still looked at her as if she were the one who didn’t understand. “Your ignorance will get you killed—and Chloe too. I’m not going to let that happen to my daughter.”

“*Your* daughter?” Faith repeated with an incredulous laugh. “I seem to remember giving birth to her. She’s *our* daughter, not just yours.”

“Then act like it!” Jon thumped his fist against the side of his thigh. “Right now, I seem to be the only one taking responsibility for her safety!”

“She is safe with Tala!” Faith paused.

Her words seemed to echo through the house.

*Wow.* She’d never thought that she would ever say that—and mean it with absolute conviction. All this time, she had been so determined to keep Chloe out of their scheme, to never let her daughter meet Tala or any other Wrasa, but now she realized how ridiculous her fears had been.

Jon stared at her. “What happened to you?” he whispered, his voice rough, and this time, he clearly wasn’t talking about the welt on her cheek.

Faith lifted her chin. “I started to think for myself instead of letting you or Dad shape my view of the Wrasa.”

“Fine.” His tone said something different, though. “Believe whatever you want. You’re an adult. But Chloe isn’t. If you won’t see reason, I’ll get her out of here.”

He took one step toward the stairs, but Faith quickly grabbed his arm and held on. “No! You leaving is a good idea, but Chloe stays here. There were four paparazzi out there not even ten minutes ago. They might still be around. Camille definitely is, ready to film you the moment you set foot outside the house. Chloe’s picture will be plastered all over social media and the tabloids if you take her with you.”

“I’m not leaving as long as that monster is in the house!” He stabbed his finger in the direction of the upstairs bathroom.

“Stop calling her a monster—and stop pretending you’re protecting me! I spent the entire weekend with her and several dozen members of her family, and I even—” Just in time, Faith caught herself before she could add, *Shared her bed.* That wouldn’t help calm Jon down. “I even went into the forest at night with them. You were fine with me staying with them when it served your and HASS’s purposes. And now you want to play protector?”

“I—”

“No, Jon. I’m done letting you and Dad make the decisions. This is my house, and you’re leaving—right after you give back the key to it.” She held out her hand.

Jon trembled with agitation. “You’re making a big mistake, Faith.”

Faith was done discussing this. She waved the fingers of the hand she held out. “Give me the key, Jon.”

## SHIFTING NATURE

“Your father will think so too,” he added, his tone threatening.

Faith closed her eyes for a second. She knew he was right. “Let me worry about that.”

Finally, Jon’s shoulders slumped. “You’d better protect her, Faith. If something happens to Chloe, I’ll never forgive you.” His voice cracked with raw emotions.

Faith lightly touched his shoulder, for a moment getting a glimpse of the deep-seated fear beneath his anger. “I promise she’s safe.”

His gaze seared into hers before he nodded stiffly and pulled out his keys. The jangle as he fumbled with the key ring echoed in the entryway. Finally, he slipped the silver key off the ring and clenched his fist around it before reluctantly handing it over.

“Thanks,” Faith said quietly as she pocketed it.

Instead of heading to the door, he tried to walk around her to the stairs.

“Hey!” Faith grabbed his arm. “Where do you think you’re going? Didn’t we just agree you were leaving?”

“Not without saying goodbye to Chloe,” Jon said.

Faith shook her head. “You can call her later. If I let you go upstairs, you’ll pick another fight with Tala.”

“I won’t,” he answered. “Not with Chloe around.”

She searched his eyes and finally gave in, hoping she still knew him well enough to trust his word. “All right.”

Together, they headed up the stairs.

## CHAPTER 3

TALA STARED INTO THE MIRROR above the sink and tried to make out how deep the gash on her temple was, but her reflection blurred before her eyes.

The pounding pain told her it wasn't something that could be healed with one of the *Hello Kitty* Band-Aids from Faith's first aid kit or a healing kiss from the woman who usually kissed Chloe's boo-boos better.

The thought immediately brought back the sensation of Faith's lips against her own. She still couldn't believe how easily Faith had unraveled her with a single kiss.

The fine hairs along her forearms tingled—partly due to a lingering effect of Faith's touch and partly a warning as she struggled to keep her fox leashed.

Scents and sounds hailed down on her overly acute senses, and reliving the kiss only added to the sensory overload.

"Stop thinking about it!" She snarled at her reflection and resolutely stuffed the first aid kit back where she had found it. "You're supposed to be pretending, remember?"

The words sounded slurred, as if her mouth was already stretching into a snout.

She paced the bathroom like a caged animal and strained to make out what was going on downstairs. Voices drifted through the door, and she could make out Faith's but couldn't understand the words.

Being forced to leave her with Jon was a worse kind of agony than the head wound. Every fiber of her being rebelled against staying in the bathroom. She wanted to rush back downstairs so she could protect Faith.

A burning ache spread through her joints and bones.

Groaning, she kicked off her shoes, which suddenly felt too tight.

## SHIFTING NATURE

Her fox clawed to the surface, and holding her back sapped all of Tala's energy.

It was tempting...so tempting to let go of her rigid control.

And maybe she should. A quick shift into her animal form and back would take care of the wound. Then she could rush downstairs to avoid leaving Faith alone with her asshole ex-husband for too long.

Plus if she healed the gash by shifting, Faith wouldn't have to take care of it. She would not need to step close to her in the tiny bathroom, gently touch her face, and—

Tala cut off the thought with a growl.

Avoiding temptation by not letting Faith play nurse was definitely a good idea.

With trembling fingers, she unzipped her jeans.

\* \* \*

Faith took up position in front of the closed bathroom door, feeling like a bodyguard as she waited for Jon to come out of Chloe's room.

She tilted her head toward the bathroom, trying to make out any sounds from within.

Was that a moan?

A shiver of concern raced through her. "Tala?" she called. "You okay?"

No answer came.

Before she could check on Tala, the door to Chloe's room opened, and Jon stepped out. "Promise me you won't let your guard down with the shifter for even a second," he said. "Call me if she makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable."

Faith didn't move an inch. "The only one making me uncomfortable right now is you, Jon."

"I'm just trying to keep you safe. I hope it won't be too late by the time you realize that." He studied her for a few more seconds, then shook his head and clomped down the stairs.

The moment the front door closed behind him, Faith sprang into action.

"I'll be right with you, Chloe," she called toward her daughter's bedroom.

A quick knock and she wrenched open the bathroom door.

Clothes were strewn all over the floor. There was no first aid kit anywhere—and no Tala. At least not in her humanoid form.

A fox stood next to the tub.



Before Faith could recover and close the door, it dashed past her and escaped the bathroom.

Faith lunged and tried to grab the fox by its ruff, but it let out a playful yip and agilely jumped out of reach. It...she turned toward the stairs, pricked her ears in that direction, and sniffed the air, as if making sure Jon was gone.

When Faith tried to take advantage of her distraction by sneaking up on her, the fox danced out of reach again.

Tala whirled around, cocked her head at Faith, and regarded her with a foxy grin.

“This is not a game, Tala.” Faith put both hands onto her hips and gave Tala the kind of look that had worked on Chloe even when she’d been going through her toddler tantrum phase.

Apparently, it didn’t impress foxes. Tala let out an excited bark, stretched out her slim forelegs in front of her, and lowered her body, with her rump still raised high and her bushy, white-tipped tail wagging.

It was clearly an invitation to play.

Faith didn’t have time for that. She stepped forward to capture Tala, but the fox dashed to the side again.

“Tala!” Faith stomped her foot.

The door to Chloe’s room creaked open a few inches, and Chloe peeked through the gap.

“No! Chloe, go back into your room and close the door!”

But it was too late. Chloe had already seen the fox.

Her face lit up, and she threw the door open. “A corgi!” She shot out of her room, launched herself at Faith, and threw her arms around her. “Thank you, thank you, thank you, Mommy! I’ve always wanted one!”

Faith stood frozen and hugged her daughter close. “Um, no, sweetie. She’s not a corgi.” A giggle escaped her. She could easily imagine the indignant look on Tala’s face if she’d heard that. Her fox form was longer and taller than a corgi, but admittedly, not by that much. “This is Tala. Do you remember her from the parade?”

Chloe let out a squeal that made Faith wince and the fox twitch her ears. “Tala!”

“Shh, sweetie. Not so loud or you’ll scare her.”

“Tala,” Chloe repeated in an awed whisper. Her eyes widened as she stared at Faith’s cheek, then the bandage on her hand. “You’re hurt!”

“Just a few scratches. I didn’t watch where I was going and ran into a tree.” Faith mimed bouncing off a tree trunk to make her daughter giggle and wipe that concerned expression off Chloe’s face.

It worked.

“I’ll kiss it better,” Chloe announced and planted kisses on her palm and then next to the welt on Faith’s cheek.

“Thanks, sweetie.” Faith caressed her daughter’s messy curls. “It’s all better now.”

“Good.” Chloe slid from Faith’s arms and walked toward the fox, her hand outstretched.

Faith’s heart beat faster. She hurried after her and pulled her back. “You can’t just walk up to her like that, Chloe. She’s not a pet. We don’t know if she wants to be touched.” Despite what she’d said about Tala not hurting her or Chloe, could she be sure the same was still true when she was in her animal form? Tala had told her the Wrasa didn’t think like humans once they shifted. Would Tala understand that Chloe was only a child and not out to hurt her?

Chloe’s face fell. “But, Mom, she knows me! She won’t be scared.” She bent forward to be closer to the fox. “Hi, Tala. It’s me—Chloe! We met at the parade, and you jumped really high and rescued my balloon when it flew away! Do you remember?”

According to Tala, the Wrasa didn’t understand human language while in their animal form, but the fox swiveled her ears in Chloe’s direction and cocked her head as if listening attentively. Carefully, she stretched her neck and stuck out her pointed snout.

“Oh, she’s trying to sniff you. Hold still, Chloe.”

Both of them held their breath.

The fox’s long, catlike whiskers fanned forward as she sniffed Chloe’s leg. Whatever Chloe smelled of seemed to meet her approval. Tala made a low warbling sound and rolled onto her back like a puppy begging for pets.

“Aww!” Chloe knelt next to the fox and glanced up at Faith. “See? She remembers me!”

“Apparently, she does.” Faith exhaled sharply. She knelt too so she could supervise as Chloe petted the fox.

Gently, Chloe touched the white bib extending down the fox’s chest, then ran her fingers over Tala’s exposed belly. “Ooh! Her fur is so soft! Like Mr. Snugglefluff!”

Faith bit back a chuckle at the comparison with Chloe’s stuffed bunny.

“Feel it, Mom!”

“Um, I...”

When Faith hesitated, Chloe took her hand and guided it to Tala’s fur.

Barely breathing, Faith touched the russet pelt along Tala’s flank. When the fox just looked at her with those expressive golden eyes, she slid her fingers along the white fur on her belly.

*Ooh.* Chloe was right. She was incredibly soft!

The fox’s lips curved back, revealing sharp teeth, but before Faith could pull back her fingers, happy chitters drifted up from Tala’s chest. It sounded almost as if she were laughing!

Chloe giggled along with her.

Their sounds were so joyful that laughter burst from Faith too.

Tala squeezed her eyes shut like a contented cat and let Faith stroke a spot beneath her white chin.

Chloe looked up at Faith, her gaze full of wonder. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

A lump lodged in Faith’s throat. “Yes, she is.” Even though Tala’s animal form was beautiful too, Faith wasn’t talking about the fox. But Chloe didn’t need to know that. Faith stared down at Tala and struggled to reconcile the cute fox with the woman she had kissed.

*God.* This would take some getting used to.

Not that she expected to ever kiss Tala again.

Chloe petted behind one of the black ears, then froze. “Mom, she’s hurt!” She pointed at the blood-matted fur at the side of Tala’s head.

Faith used her fingers to gently part the fur around the wound.

The fox lay still and let her do it, regarding her with trusting eyes.

Faith had been sure the gash would require stitches, but now she could see it had closed and was no longer bleeding. While it wasn’t completely gone, it had the appearance of a much older, almost healed wound.

“No, look, she’s fine.”

“But there’s blood!”

“She was hurt, but now she’s fine,” Faith said. “That’s why she shifted into her animal form, sweetie. The Wrasa can heal small injuries when they shift shape.” So far, she had always avoided discussing the Wrasa with Chloe, but now she could see how ignorant that had been. The Wrasa were part of the world Chloe lived in, and Faith would make sure she had accurate information.

Chloe’s eyes went round. “Like Max!”

“Um, Max?”

Chloe gave her a “duh” look. “Max, the unicorn from *The Magical Forest*. He can heal people with a touch of his horn.”

“Oh, that Max.” Faith chuckled. “Yeah, kind of. But the Wrasa aren’t invincible like Max. They can get injured, and if they do, they hurt just like us.”

“I’ll be very gentle with her, Mom,” Chloe said, a solemn expression on her face.

“Good. I’m sure Tala appreciates that.” Faith rubbed behind Tala’s ear. The sensation was soothing, and she could almost feel her adrenaline level dropping.

Something seemed to ripple beneath her fingertips.

Faith glanced down and froze mid-stroke. The russet fur was receding!

It took her a moment to fully comprehend what was happening, her brain struggling to catch up with what she was seeing.

Tala was shifting back!

“Chloe, can you get me my robe from the bathroom?” Faith said quickly. “Tala is ready to shift back into her human form.”

“But I want to see!”

“No.” Faith made her voice firm. She stood from her crouched position to give Tala some space and block Chloe’s view of Tala’s body with her own. “It’s like bath time, Chloe. No one is allowed to see your body without your permission. Tala deserves her privacy.”

“Okay,” Chloe grumbled. Unenthusiastically, she trudged to the bathroom and came back just as the fox’s limbs had turned into arms and legs.

Faith took the robe from her and covered Tala’s body with it, trying hard not to sneak a glance at all the bare skin on display.

“Mom, you’re looking!” Chloe said. “You said we’re not allowed to look!”

Faith’s cheeks burned. Had she just been caught checking Tala out by her six-year-old? “I’m not! I only peeked to see where I need to put the robe.”

“Look all you want,” Tala drawled as she sat up, slipped her arms into the sleeves of the robe, and tied the belt. She rose from the floor and sent Faith a confident smirk. “I don’t mind.”

The burning in Faith’s cheeks intensified. Quickly, she redirected her gaze to the floor.

Chloe hopped up and down, clearly oblivious to Tala’s innuendo. “Yay! Next time, I get to watch her shift!”

When Faith looked up, she noticed how tightly Tala's hands gripped the belt of the robe. Tala wasn't as casual about the entire incident as she pretended. Her flirty bravado masked a hidden layer of emotion.

Of course! Faith nearly slapped her own forehead. Tala probably felt very vulnerable—not because she'd been naked in front of them but because they had seen her in her fox form when she was still more comfortable being seen as a wolf.

Maybe she even remembered rolling over and showing her belly for scratches like a pet. By now, Faith knew Tala well enough to understand how embarrassing that might be for her, so she decided not to say anything.

She would just let her pretend it was no big deal at all—even though they both knew otherwise.

\* \* \*

Tala fought against the urge to pull the fluffy, light-pink robe up to her nose and sniff it. The terry cloth smelled like Faith's milk-and-honey scent, and it wrapped around her like a soothing embrace. To distract herself, she reached up and touched her temple to check on the wound.

*Good.* The gash was all but gone.

"That's so cool," Chloe whispered. "Look, Mom! It's all healed. Why can't humans do that? I had to go to the hospital when I fell off my bike and hurt my knee! That's not fair!"

Her indignant face made Tala laugh, which felt good after running on adrenaline and mutaline for what felt like hours.

"Humans have other skills that we Wrasa don't have," Tala said when Chloe kept looking at her, clearly expecting an answer.

"Like what?" the girl asked.

Tala feverishly tried to think of something. "Like...uh..."

"Modesty, apparently." Faith poked her in the shoulder.

Her playful attack didn't trigger any of Tala's defenses. How strange. The touch was casual, like that of a pack member who'd known her for years, yet it sent a spark through Tala. *Damn.* Her guard was slipping, and it wasn't just because she was hungry and exhausted.

Chloe burst out laughing, even though Tala wasn't sure she had fully grasped the banter.

"Well, if you think it's so easy, then *you* name something humans are better at." Tala flashed her a challenging grin.

"Lots of things," Faith said, her chin proudly lifted. "Like...um..."

“Yeah?” Tala drawled.

An answering challenge flashed in Faith’s brown eyes.

For a second or two, Tala thought Faith might say, “Kissing.” And, honestly, she wouldn’t have objected, because damn, Faith could kiss!

“Like...making a salad,” Faith finally said.

Tala lifted her eyebrows. “Making a salad? That’s your answer?”

Faith nodded sagely. “Your family obviously thinks potatoes with two pounds of bacon and about five thousand calories’ worth of mayo make a light salad.”

“Sounds about right.” At the mention of food, Tala’s stomach let out a noisy rumble. She pointed at her middle. “And that sounds like I’d better get myself home to feed the beast.” Not before she had thoroughly combed the neighborhood to make sure Jon, the Wrasa-hating neighbor, and the paparazzi were gone, of course.

Chloe giggled.

Tala walked toward the bathroom to get dressed. Truth be told, the thought of returning to her much-too-quiet apartment didn’t hold much appeal after spending the last three days with her pack.

*The pack. Yeah. That’s who you’ll miss. Right.*

“Um, Tala?” Faith called.

One step from the bathroom door, Tala turned. “Thought of something else humans are better at?”

“Actually...yes. Ordering pizza. Care to give Chloe and me a chance to prove it?”

Tala searched her face. She hadn’t suggested she go home only so she could raid the fridge; she had wanted to respect Faith’s wish to keep Chloe out of their scheme, which likely meant Faith would want to limit the time Tala spent around her daughter. “Are you inviting me to dinner?”

“Yes!” Chloe shouted before Faith could answer.

But Tala continued to look at Faith, waiting for her reply. The decision whether to invite her in had been taken from Faith earlier, but now Tala wanted her to have a choice.

“Yes, I am.” Faith sounded sure of herself. “In fact, I think you should stay the night.”

Heat flickered through Tala. *Stop it. Her pup is right there! She didn’t mean it like that...or did she?*

Faith’s cheeks flamed a charming red. “Um, I mean, the paparazzi might still be around, and we don’t want them to spread rumors if they realize

you're not sleeping over. Plus you might have a concussion and shouldn't be alone."

Right. That made sense. Well, not the concussion part because even if she'd had one, it would have been healed or at least on its way to healing after she'd shifted. But they definitely didn't want the tabloids to print a "trouble in paradise" story.

"You're right." She gave Faith a nod. "Staying the night is the reasonable choice."

"We're having a sleepover? Yay!" Chloe started an excited victory dance. "Can we have a giant blanket fort in the living room and all sleep there?"

Faith firmly shook her head. "You wouldn't sleep a wink if we did that, and you've got school tomorrow morning. No blanket fort. Everyone is sleeping in their own bed, and Tala will sleep on the couch."

On the couch. Was that a message for her? Of course, Tala hadn't expected an invitation to share Faith's bed.

"Sorry," Faith said with an apologetic shrug. "I don't have a guest room, but I swear the couch is super comfy."

No guest room? Faith's home was beautiful and cozy, but it wasn't as large or luxurious as Tala might have expected for Peter MacAllister's only daughter. Apparently, she had bought the house with her own money instead of relying on her dad's.

Tala's respect for her grew.

"But Tala can sleep with me, Mom!" Chloe piped up.

"No, Chloe. Your bed isn't big enough for an adult."

"She can shift and curl up into a ball and sleep at the foot of the bed, like Mr. Whiskers when I'm staying over at Grandpa's," Chloe replied.

*Um...* The kid hadn't just seriously compared her to a kitten, had she? Tala straightened and squared her shoulders to show how much bigger she was.

"No, Chloe, that's not a good idea," Faith said.

"But why?"

Faith sent Tala a look that pleaded for help.

"Because shedding season has started," Tala said. "I'm losing my winter coat and would leave chunks of fur all over your bed."

A grin dashed across Faith's face, and she gave Tala a hidden appreciative nod.

"I don't mind," Chloe declared. "I could brush you."

“Uh, thanks, but the couch is fine.” Tala turned back toward Faith and gestured discreetly at the dried blood on her face. “Do you mind if I take a quick shower while you prove your pizza-ordering skills?”

“No, of course, go ahead,” Faith replied. “There are fresh towels on the shelf next to the shower.”

“Thanks.” Tala escaped into the bathroom, glad to have a few minutes to herself to collect her thoughts and rein in her emotions.

She turned on the shower and let Faith’s robe slide off her shoulders. A contented rumble vibrated through her chest as she stepped beneath the gentle spray and let the warm water wash away the blood and the tension of the day.

Beneath the coppery tang of blood were two much more pleasant aromas. Faith’s scent and that of her pup were all over her.

Tala dimly remembered them scratching her behind the ears and chin and running their fingers through the fur along her belly—and she had rolled onto her back, lain still, and let them do it as if she were an obedient family pet!

So much for being a tough, scary alpha!

It was embarrassing. Or at least it should have been. Instead, the emotions the hazy memory evoked were more complex.

Letting Faith and her pup touch her like that felt strangely right, as if that was the way things were supposed to be. She found herself reluctant to scrub their scents off her skin.

The bathroom door creaked open. A wave of cool air hit Tala’s wet skin, making her shiver and tense.

The familiar milk-and-honey scent tickled her nose, and she instantly relaxed.

Her senses prickled, and she was acutely aware that just a thin, white shower curtain separated them. For a moment, her imagination ran wild, showing her flashes of Faith pulling back the curtain, running her heated gaze over Tala’s naked body, then tearing off her own clothes to step beneath the spray with her. She could almost feel Faith’s wet skin pressing against hers as steam swirled around them.

“Tala?” Faith’s voice was soft, barely audible over the sound of the water, but it was enough to wrench Tala from her fantasy.

*Great Hunter!* She had to get a grip! She was a Saru, not a teenaged pup ruled by hormones. Where had her rigid self-control gone?

“Yes?” Tala replied, trying to sound normal.



“I brought you some fresh clothes,” Faith said. “Yours had bloodstains all over, so I threw them in the wash. They’ll be all clean for you in the morning.”

“You really don’t have to do that,” Tala called over the patter of the water. She didn’t want to admit how good it felt to have Faith take care of her that way.

“It’s the least I can do after my neighbor attacked you.” Faith sighed, and the bitter notes of guilt and regret mingled with her fresh scent. “I’ll leave the clothes on the counter. Hope they fit okay.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” Tala said, although wearing something that carried Faith’s scent probably wouldn’t help her rein in her damn libido.

Faith lingered for a moment, as if she wanted to say something else. Then she cleared her throat. “All right. I’ll let you finish up. The pizza should be here soon.”

The door clicked shut behind her, yet her scent still lingered in the steamy air.

Tala closed her eyes, lifted her face into the spray, and turned the water to cold, hoping the chill would help clear her head.

\* \* \*

Faith bustled around the kitchen, getting plates and glasses out of the cabinet so they could eat as soon as the pizza arrived. She tried not to let her mind wander to Tala taking a shower, to the way the warm, soapy water ran down her flat belly and athletic legs...

The creak of the stairs announced Tala coming downstairs.

Faith snapped the cabinet shut, as if that would help keep a lid on her wayward thoughts. Tala was no longer her enemy; she was an ally and quickly becoming a friend she trusted, but getting involved with her for real would mean entering uncharted, dangerous territory. It could blow up her entire life in ways she wasn’t ready for.

A few seconds later, Tala stepped inside the kitchen as if sensing that was where Faith would be.

Faith turned around to face her.

Because of the aura of confidence and authority surrounding Tala, she always appeared larger than life, and Faith kept forgetting that Tala was actually three inches shorter and thinner than she was.

The sight of Tala wearing her clothes felt intimate...and unexpectedly sexy. The sweatpants Faith had given her hung low on Tala’s slim hips. She

had rolled up the legs, adjusting for her shorter stature. The T-shirt—which said *Chaos Coordinator* across the chest in a quirky font—draped loosely over her lithe body. It slipped off one shoulder, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of smooth skin. Her short, auburn hair, still damp from her shower, clung to her skull in tousled waves, emphasizing her high cheekbones and her piercing golden eyes.

Faith's mouth went dry. She swallowed hard, and the sound was much too loud in the silence of the kitchen. "Feeling more human now?" Faith asked to sound casual.

Tala chuckled and crossed the kitchen toward her. She moved with the confidence of a supermodel wearing custom-tailored clothes. "I feel more like myself. But even the most amazing shower in the world won't make me human."

A blush stung Faith's cheeks. "I didn't mean..." God, why was she suddenly as clumsy and awkward as a teenager? "It's just a figure of speech. I'm fully aware you're not human."

Tala was so close now that Faith could feel the heat emanating from Tala's body. "Is that a bad thing?" Her voice was low and intimate.

Faith's heart raced with Tala's closeness. For a moment, she didn't know what to say, caught off guard by the question and the intensity of Tala's gaze. "No," she whispered hoarsely. "I—"

The doorbell rang.

*Saved by the bell.* Faith blew out a breath as the charged atmosphere between them dissipated.

"Pizza!" Chloe ran over from the living room, where she'd been coloring the picture of a fox.

A few minutes later, they sat at the table in the dining area, with three large pizzas.

Chloe was chattering away as if she had known Tala for years, telling her about her favorite books, her friends, and her recent visit to the zoo and peppering her with a thousand curious questions.

"Chloe, slow down," Faith said for the third time. "Your pizza is getting cold."

Her daughter took a big bite of her slice. A bit of tomato sauce dribbled down her chin. "What's your favorite pizza, Tala?" she asked around a mouthful of pepperoni pizza.

"Don't know if I have a favorite." Tala popped a piece of pepperoni into her mouth. "I've never met a pizza I didn't like."

Faith laughed. “You’ve never met *any* food you didn’t like.”

“Not true. I can’t stand Brussels sprouts.”

“Me neither!” Chloe bounced in her seat as if excited to find something they had in common. She finished her slice and then fully focused on Tala. “Where does your tail go when you turn into a human?”

“Um, sweetie...”

Tala reached over and lightly touched the side of Faith’s thigh, sending a rush of heat up Faith’s leg. “It’s okay.” She widened her eyes and craned her neck as if trying to get a glimpse of her own butt. “Oh no! You mean it’s gone?”

A belly laugh erupted from Chloe. She turned toward Faith and said, “She’s joking,” as if Faith didn’t already know.

Faith decided to just sit back and watch them interact. It was interesting to see Tala’s goofy side come out, yet what amazed her even more was Chloe.

Her daughter had never had a shy bone in her body, but this was remarkable even for her. Faith especially marveled at how easy it seemed to be for Chloe to switch from treating Tala like a favorite pet to an adult she clearly admired—as if she didn’t struggle at all to accept both of Tala’s forms equally.

Maybe kids like Chloe really were the future. Faith hoped so.

\* \* \*

“Rhino Hero card!” Chloe shouted and pointed at the symbol on the roof card she had just placed on top of the two-foot card tower. “You have to place Rhino Hero on the dot!”

Human pups were loud! After several rounds of this card game, Tala was starting to get used to Chloe’s volume. Or maybe she was losing her hearing in the ear closest to the girl.

“That’s tricky,” Faith murmured, studying the tower.

“Nah.” Tala reached into the card structure, deftly pulled the rhino figurine from the lower story, and put it on top of the tower before building her own walls and adding a roof card with a flourish. “Not if you have nimble fingers.”

When she turned to flash Faith a triumphant grin, she found Faith’s gaze fixed intently on her fingers.

The lighthearted banter they had kept up throughout the game was gone—replaced by something that sent a rush of heat through Tala’s body.

Her hand tingled, and she fought the urge to reach out and cup one of Faith's flushed cheeks.

"Mom!" Chloe's impatient voice cut through her daze. The girl sounded as if she had repeatedly tried to get her mother's attention. "It's your turn!"

Faith blinked. Her gaze snapped back to the card tower. A shy smile tugged on her lips as she peeked at Tala out of the corner of her eye, then quickly away.

Tala's heart was still racing as she watched Faith carefully place her wall cards. A light tremor ran through her fingers as she put a roof card on top.

The flimsy card tower wobbled, then collapsed.

"Yes!" Chloe shouted. "You lose!" She turned toward Tala. "How many roof cards do you have left?"

Tala held up her last remaining card.

"Me too! Yay, winners!" Chloe held up her hand for a high-five, and Tala gently tapped it.

"All right," Faith said. "Now that you two have completely humiliated me...again, I think it's time for bed."

Chloe's face scrunched up into a frown. "But I want to stay up with Tala!"

"No, Chloe. It's past your bedtime. You'll see Tala tomorrow morning," Faith said, but Chloe still pouted.

When her mother didn't relent, she looked up at Tala with a hopeful expression. "Can you come read me a bedtime story? I have one with a fox, just like you!"

Tala stiffened. Lately, she hadn't minded as much when someone referred to her as a Rtar. People could assume whatever they wanted. But Chloe and her mother weren't *people*. She needed them to understand who she was.

Great Hunter, what was happening to her? Chloe was a six-year-old mini human. Tala shouldn't care what she thought.

"Um, sweetie. Tala is a Syak," Faith said before Tala could decide whether she should let it go. "A wolf-shifter."

"Nuh-uh. I saw her, Mom. Don't you know what a fox looks like?"

"What people are goes beyond what they look like, Chloe," Faith said. "Tala is adopted, like your friend Isabella. You remember what that means, right?"

"That her mommy didn't grow her in her belly, but she loves her just as much!"

“Exactly,” Faith said. “It means Tala is now part of a new family, who shaped her as much as her mother and father did.”

A tiny wrinkle formed on Chloe’s forehead as she seemed to think about it. Then she nodded eagerly, as if that made total sense to her. “And they’re wolves?” She glanced from Faith to Tala.

“Yes,” they said in unison.

“Scary ones?”

Tala waited for Faith to answer that one. No doubt the memory of the entire pack charging toward her in the dark forest was still giving Faith nightmares, so Tala wasn’t sure what she would say.

“Well,” Faith said, “she’s got a grumpy uncle and a very strict grandmother, and one of her brothers can be a bit of a brat...”

Chloe giggled.

“But they also bought breakfast ingredients just for me, patched up my hand when I fell, and included me in a very special family celebration,” Faith continued.

Tala released a long breath. It filled her with unfamiliar warmth that Faith remembered the pleasant moments from this weekend, not only the scary ones.

The corners of Faith’s mouth tugged up into a grin. “Oh, and one of them brought me a mouse.”

“Aww, mice are so cute!” Chloe squealed, obviously assuming it had been alive.

Tala kept a neutral expression. “What can I say? It’s a gesture of hospitality among my kind.”

“So they’re nice?” Chloe asked.

Faith nodded. “They’re nice.”

Tala couldn’t keep up her impassive mask. She stared at Faith. She knew Faith had made huge strides in overcoming her deep-seated mistrust of the Wrasa, but this? Telling her daughter that Tala’s pack members were decent people—that they could be trusted—was monumental!

“Good,” Chloe said in a “so that’s decided, then” tone. “Can we go visit them next weekend?”

Tala and Faith stared at each other, exchanging a “shit, how do we get out of this?” look.

If Tala introduced Chloe to the pack, things would get complicated. As her mother had said, most of the family would immediately adopt the

human pup. Everyone would start to form relationships, which would end abruptly when their scheme concluded and they officially split up.

For the first time, Tala began to understand why Faith hadn't wanted to involve her daughter in any of this.

"It's not that easy, Chloe," Faith finally said. "Syak are really private. We can't just invite ourselves."

Chloe's face fell. "But I want to meet them," she mumbled with her bottom lip jutting out.

"I know, sweetie." Faith lovingly swiped back a strand of hair that had fallen onto Chloe's face. "I promise we'll do something fun next weekend, okay?"

"Okay," Chloe said unenthusiastically. "Can Tala come read me a bedtime story? Please, Mommy!"

Faith held up her hands. "You'll have to ask Tala."

The girl turned toward Tala and looked up at her with big puppy dog eyes. They were the same color as Faith's, so Tala instantly had a hard time saying no to her. "Please?"

Tala had never been tasked with reading a bedtime story to her nephews, her niece, or any of her younger cousins because her job often kept her away from the pack. But she was a decorated Saru and had figured out the most complex of missions, so how hard could it be? "All right. Lead the way."

Eagerly, Chloe grabbed her hand and led her up the stairs, her fingers small and cool against Tala's.

Faith followed them and made sure Chloe brushed her teeth.

Once they had entered the girl's bedroom, Chloe went to her bookshelf and pulled out several books until she found the one she wanted. She carried it over to Tala and handed it to her.

Tala had expected a story about a fox, as Chloe had requested, but instead, the cover showed a cartoonish illustration of a wolf pup, its amber eyes big behind its glasses. Bold, yellow letters stretched across the top, spelling out the title *The Wolf Who Loved to Read*.

Chloe tapped the cover. "This is Winston. He's a wolf, like you, and he loves to read."

Maybe Tala had inhaled some of the fur she must have shed while shifting. It was the only logical explanation for that huge lump that lodged in her throat. "Winston?" she croaked.

Faith laughed. Her eyes twinkled in the low light of the lamp on the bedside table. "Not macho enough for a wolf?"

“Depends,” Tala said. “Is he an alpha?”

Chloe’s brow furrowed. “What’s an alpha?”

Tala searched for the simplest way to explain it in a way a human pup would understand. “He or she is the leader of a wolf pack. The one who makes sure everyone is okay, safe, and well-fed.”

“Like Mom?” Chloe asked.

Tala hadn’t expected that reply, but it made her look at Faith with a smile, which broadened when she saw Faith’s stunned expression.

“No,” Faith said, “more like Ta—”

“Yes,” Tala replied, thinking of the way Faith had stood up to her grandmother, her uncle, and the rest of the pack. “Kinda like your mom.”

Chloe scratched her nose. “I don’t know if Winston is like that.”

“Well, then let’s find out.” Tala carried the book over to the bed.

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# Shifting Nature

BY JAE

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)