



## COPPER

The Ghuardian's office was the last one at the end of the hallway. Ray grabbed the handle and jerked the door open, slamming it against the wall as he stepped inside. "Kai, we need to talk—"

His Alpha—the Ghuardian—didn't bother to look up, keeping his eyes on the stack of papers in front of him. "Did you forget to knock?" He pointed at the still-open door.

"Cut the crap, Kai, I'm here because I need to ask—"

The seemingly distracted male shook his head, signaling once more to the door.

Ray snarled viciously. He walked back to the door and knocked loudly.

"Yes?" Kai called out as he looked up. "Ray, what a surprise! What can I do for you?" He put his pen down and leaned back in his chair.

Ray watched his Alpha smile at him and wanted to growl in frustration. "Don't play the fool, Kai." Ray's eyes darkened as his anger rose. He made his way over to the large desk in front of Kai and sat down on one of the chairs in front of it. "I need you to stop the Leyum from finding me a mate. You're the Ghuardian. You should be able to stop them."

Kai's icy gray eyes stared at Ray. "No. You knew what you were in for the day you signed your contract as a Beta."

"I know what I signed, but this is ridiculous. If I want a mate, I can find someone on my own. I don't need the Leyum or anyone else to do that for me."

The Alpha sighed. "Every Beta turning thirty has to have a mate. If they don't choose one of their own accord, the Leyum step in and choose for

them. You had time, Ray. You were given two months' leave last year and the year before that, so you could look for someone. You always returned empty-handed. I will not fight the Leyum over this. Rules are rules."

"Well, I'm not going to play along." Ray's eyes blazed like fire.

"You will," Kai answered, his voice stern. He sat back up. "Or do you want to lose your rank? Stripped of everything you worked so hard for? You know they won't hesitate to take it away from you."

"You're the Ghuardian, Kai. You can fix it."

"No," Kai said. "There can be no exceptions. If I make one for you, then Bryan, Tala, and Spencer will show up in a few years and demand the same from me. I'm not fixing anything. Since you've proved yourself unable to find a mate, you're going to have to accept the Leyum's choice."

Ray rose from his chair, his lips pressed into a thin line. "Then make them find me someone decent. The first two candidates from their so-called pool were worthless."

Kai looked at him with a warning. "Calling females worthless, are we?"

"You know what I mean. They didn't match me on any level. If the Leyum sends me someone like the last two, then—" he paused for a second "—I'll kick her out the same day. My time won't be wasted again."

"No. You'll do the trial and you will complete those three months." Kai let his words sink in. "I was forgiving with the previous two candidates and convinced the Leyum to let it slide, but with the third candidate that won't be the case. You will be nice to her and you will try." Kai's eyes burrowed into Ray's. "You can't be alone forever, Ray. You need a mate."

Kai's aura was hard to withstand, his body vibrating with power and dominance in a show to remind Ray he was outranked. Ray fought to hold his ground, but struggled against his instincts, against the command of his Alpha.

His inner wolf was ready to roll over and expose his underbelly, but Ray wasn't as willing to do his Alpha's bidding and forced the words past his lips. "That depends, Kai." Ray's eyes flickered from Kai to the floor and back. "Tell the Leyum to find me someone who's compatible or you'll

have to look for a new Beta.” Without waiting for an answer, Ray stormed out of the office.

He made his way over to the garden, needing to clear his head.

A dense forest surrounded the mansion, marking their territory. While the estate housed the Guardian, the rest of the pack lived in the woods, alone or in scattered groups. Trampling across the grass, he pulled off his shirt. Upon reaching the tree line, Ray kicked off his shoes, dropping his shirt and the rest of his clothes in a small pile on the grass. Naked, he rolled his shoulder, hearing a satisfying pop.

Fur replaced skin as he shifted. Bones relocated, muscles stretched and reshaped. His body changed its structure to that of an ebony wolf with eyes like copper.

Landing on four paws, he shook out his fur. The thrill of changing always made him feel better. Ray dug his nails into the dirt and breathed in deeply. The scents of the forest hit him: pine trees, oak, birch, and maple; wildflowers and damp moss; and so much wildlife. All of it mixing together made his senses flare, giving him another thrill.

Ray made room for his wolf, giving the animal more control over their mind and body. His thoughts faded in an attempt to find some peace and to calm himself.

The wolf didn't need any encouragement from the human and took off. Leaping through the air for a long and challenging run. He left the mansion behind him and headed for the farthest part of the territory, where he was confident he would be alone.



## LETTER

A letter. That was all they'd sent her. No warning, no phone call, nothing.

Rajini held the single sheet of paper in her trembling hands, praying it would catch fire if she stared at it hard enough.

She scrunched the letter into a tight ball and threw it against the opposite wall of the kitchen. A grunt of frustration escaped her lips when it didn't have the impact she'd intended.

This wasn't the first letter she'd received from the Leyum. The first one had arrived on the day she'd turned eighteen to inform her she had been entered into the selection pool.

Panic filled her. She wanted to live her life here. This was where she belonged. Where she meant something.

Pacing back and forth in her mind, her wolf let Rajini know how much she disagreed with this news. They had fought hard to get where they were, and she wasn't about to let anyone take that away from them.

Rajini's nails dug into the tabletop, etching deep grooves into the smooth surface. She glanced around, glad she was alone.

The packhouse usually bustled with people, but this early in the morning there was no one in sight.

Her eyes darted back to the damaged tabletop. The mated females would have a fit if they saw what she'd done. Although the furniture was worn over time, everyone kept it clean and tried to preserve it as well as they could. Their funds didn't allow them any replacements.

"Rajini? What's the matter?" A deep voice echoed in the deserted kitchen. Adam, the Alpha of her pack, made his way toward her. While his

body was built for combat, the thin laughter lines around his eyes and mouth, together with the gray streaking his dark brown hair, revealed his age.

Rajini shrugged.

She heard the rustling of paper and Adam's sharp intake of breath. She should have burned the letter when she had the chance.

A painful silence followed.

Adam sat down next to her at the low kitchen table and placed the letter on it, covering the dents in the wood. His face devoid of emotion, he turned to Rajini.

Rajini swallowed. As one of his Betas, her rank was second only to his, but regardless of her status, when he looked at her like that, she felt like a juvenile all over again. His gaze burned straight to her soul—even her wolf quivered under its intensity.

“You have to stop this, Adam,” Rajini said the moment he parted his lips to speak. “Please.” She'd never asked him for a favor before or begged him for anything.

“You know I can't.”

Rajini heard compassion in his voice, but also certainty. There would be no room for argument. “I can't go against the Leyum.”

“But they can't tell me to leave my pack, my Alpha, my friends—for someone I don't know.”

“They can and they have.” Adam watched her closely. “If I were to ask them to stop this it would mean I was defying their decisions and questioning everything they do.” He paused, allowing his words to sink in. “Do you know what would happen if I did that?”

Rajini didn't answer.

“The Leyum would turn its back on us. We'd be cut off from resources and put into exile. Whatever they decide will happen. Ever since you received that first letter seven years ago, we've known there was a chance that this could happen. They picked you, Rajini, from the pool of candidates.”

“But...” Rajini tried to come up with an argument why Adam should give it a shot but found nothing. The word ‘exile’ rang in her ears. She couldn’t do that to her pack. They lived high up in the mountains, isolated. Without the help of the other nearby packs and the Leyum, they wouldn’t survive the winter.

“Rajini, I’m sorry. If the Leyum sends you a letter like this, and the Ghuardian has approved, there’s nothing that can be done. We have to do as they say and hope for the best.” Adam gave her a sympathetic smile.

“But maybe the Ghuardian didn’t approve? Look. This was written by the secretary of the Leyum. There’s no signature of the High Alpha on it, there’s nothing on there that indicates his approval,” Rajini said, pointing to the bottom of the page. “See?”

Adam sighed. “It’s a three-month trial. If things don’t work out, you can come home.” He smiled at her and he squeezed her shoulder.

Rajini knew he was trying to calm both her and her wolf with his presence, but it didn’t stop her mind from racing.

“We both know you’re not planning on taking a life partner here. This might be your chance to venture further away and find someone you can be with.”

Rajini eyed her Alpha, knowing in her heart he was right. Their pack was small and finding a suitable partner wasn’t easy.

“Besides, there’s always a chance you’ll like this Beta.” Adam chuckled. “The Betas of the Ghuardian are on a whole different skill level. Even I couldn’t take them on. Maybe you’ll like him?” He raised his eyebrow, a look of amusement on his face.

She gave him a roll of her eyes in reply, leaning back and crossing her arms over her chest.

“No matter how you put it, it’s a great honor to be selected as a candidate for a Beta of the High Alpha,” Adam said. “Few females get the opportunity. The Leyum must see something in you.”

“I don’t want them to see anything in me. I like it here.” Her hand reached out and pulled the letter away from him. “Adam, they’re going to

make me do trials there.” Her eyes darted back to her Alpha.

“I know you’re upset, but at least they arranged the travel for you.” He gave her another smile.

“That doesn’t make it better. I don’t even understand how they found me. We’re so isolated and far away from the main pack where he lives.”

“You know every unmated female between the ages of eighteen and thirty is eligible. No one is excluded. Not even you. I know your mind’s a mess right now, but it’ll work out—trust me. I’m sorry, Rajini. Whether you like it or not, the Leyum’s decision is final.”

He got up from his seat. Rajini understood the reasons behind his inability to help, but it frustrated her that she had no control over her own life. She was being ripped away from her home on someone else’s whim. And for what? A whimpering Beta unable to get a date.

Rajini’s wolf snarled and snorted in agreement.

“You’re going to be fine. You always stand your ground. Don’t let anyone change that, not even the Leyum with their trials.” Adam ruffled her long brown hair. “I’ll make the final arrangements for you with the Leyum. You need to get your stuff together and say your goodbyes. I think you’ll be leaving in a few days.”

Rajini wanted to say more, but Adam left the kitchen before she could get the words out. She sighed and stared at the table. This was it. She was leaving her pack and there was nothing anyone could do to prevent it.

What if the Guardian didn’t want her to be a soldier? As a Beta, people trusted her and asked her for help. She and her wolf lived for this life. She’d hoped the Leyum wouldn’t tear her from her pack if they knew she was needed here.

Rajini got up and snatched the letter from the table. Should she burn it or throw it away? Deciding to do neither, she left the kitchen and made her way outside—slamming the door behind her. The wooden frame shook from the force.

Her feet flattened the grass as she made her way across the field, leaving deep footprints in her wake. The center of the pack grounds was mostly

for everyday use. The houses and cottages were scattered around the territory. Her cottage wasn't too far away. She was glad no one was outside because she probably would've snarled at the first 'good morning' aimed in her direction.

"Hey, Rajini!"

Standing with one foot on her porch, Rajini turned. "Whatever it is, I'm not in the mood, Jonah."

"What's gotten into you?" Jonah asked as he ran his hand through his mess of blond hair.

"Nothing."

Jonah gave her a wink and leaned against the railing of her porch. "Not happy to see me? You normally always lighten up when I'm around." His eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Yes, well, not today." She stepped toward her door and away from him.

"Right." He tilted his head to the side and looked her over. "Anyway, Lana, Dennis, and I are going to the lake this afternoon. The summer won't last forever. Want to join us? Or are you too good for that now that you're one of Adam's Betas?" Jonah gave her a wicked grin, the tips of his fangs showing.

Rajini's gaze darted from Jonah to the paper still clutched in her hand. She should listen to Adam—pack her belongings and get ready to leave.

"Come on, Rajini. It'll be fun," pleaded Jonah.

She smiled at her friend. "I'll join you."

Jonah's face lit up. "Perfect." He looked at the paper she was holding. "What's that? A love letter?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You're only supposed to get love letters from me." He grabbed the letter from her fingers before she could respond. He opened it dramatically, scraping his throat as if he was readying himself for a speech, then his eyes landed on the content. "Rajini..."

"Don't, Jonah, not a word—I don't want to hear it." She snatched the letter back. "Let's go for that swim and, please, don't bring this up with

the others. I'll tell them, but not yet. I need to process this first."

"Okay." Jonah watched her reluctantly. "I thought that, with you being a Beta now, you'd be taken out of the pool of candidates."

"Well, apparently not."

"Did you talk to Adam? He might be able to stop it. You're his Beta. He needs you. Who's going to run security if you're not here? If he told the Leyum that, maybe they'd listen and let you stay."

Rajini shook her head. "He can't stop it. It would put the pack in a very difficult situation. And, as he put it, it's only for three months."

"That's still three months too long." Jonah sighed. "I'll get us some wine—I can see you need a drink." He leaned over the railing and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Don't worry about it, gorgeous. You'll be fine and if not, you call me and I'll come and kidnap you." With those words, he jumped off the railing and walked away with a wave of his hand.

Rajini watched Jonah disappear between the trees and rubbed her temples. She opened the door to her cottage, crumpled the letter, and threw it into the kitchen waste bin. The future could wait. Today she wanted to forget everything and have fun with her friends.