



TIRED

His limbs weighed him down, pulling him deeper into the mattress. He was suffocating, like his lungs were filled with water, yet at the same time, he felt like he was floating. He was unable to move; not a muscle responded to his will. No movement came, not even a wiggle from his toes, nor a twitch of his fingers. His body felt lifeless.

He tried again, but this time he attempted to open his eyes. If his limbs didn't want to work, maybe his eyes would. How hard could it be. He wanted to get rid of this darkness that surrounded and smothered him. Nothing happened, no matter how hard he tried. Everything remained pitch black.

His mind clouded over, and he was unable to think clearly or form decent sentences. He had no idea where he was or what he was supposed to do. There was only one thing he did know: He was tired.



HOME

She could do this. No. She *had* to do this.

Caitlin's knuckles turned white as she clenched the handle of her suitcase. Her eyes skidded around the pickup area of the airport. Why hadn't anyone shown up yet?

A human passed her; his foot hit her suitcase, and he walked by her with a grunt. Quickly, she took a step to the wall, dragging her suitcase even closer against her body. Car after car drove past her, but none stopped. Did they know what she looked like?

She rubbed the palms of her hands against her jeans in a failed attempt to dry them and ease the nerves that brewed in the pit of her stomach. Maybe she should contact someone.

A black car slowed in front of her, and a jolt of relief shot through her body. She grabbed her suitcase firmly and stepped forward.

The car sped off again, leaving black smoke in its wake.

"Fucking unbelievable." A human closeby threw his middle finger after the car, before turning to Caitlin. "What are you looking at?" He shot her a glare and strode off in another direction.

Caitlin stared after the male and leaned against the wall behind her. Humans passed her nonstop. Most of them were chattering, others shouted for a cab, and some carried crying children in their arms. If only the wall could swallow her whole.

A human with sleek, white hair calmly made his way towards the entrance of the airport. His back was hunched while his hand rested on a cane; a soft smile played on his lips when he shuffled inside the building.

How could someone be so happy while they could barely walk? She dragged her eyes away from the glass doors and focused again on the road in front of her. Another round of cars passed by without stopping.

How long had she been standing here?

She pulled up her sleeve and plucked some of the worn patches of leather away from the bracelet of her watch. They should've been here twenty minutes ago.

Caitlin looked around and saw a bench a few feet away. She sat down on it and placed her suitcase beside her. Her fingers grabbed the handle of her purse; it landed on her lap, and she rummaged through it. She pushed some basic first aid supplies aside, followed by a small umbrella, to finally reach her phone, which she flipped open. No texts or missed calls. She nibbled her bottom lip. Maybe she could find the Guardian's number online. She opened the web browser on her phone, then the screen froze. "Great. This is just great."

"Hi."

A female voice came from her right, and she turned her head.

"You're Caitlin?" A brunette stood next to her, a smile playing on her lips.

"Yes, that's me." Caitlin got up, nearly dropping her purse from her lap. She quickly placed it on the bench behind her.

"The name's Rajini," the woman said. "Sorry for the wait. I had to park around the back and walk here instead." She grabbed Caitlin's suitcase. "It's only a few minutes walk; I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, no. Of course not." Caitlin grabbed her purse and followed Rajini, who easily navigated through the humans. "I figured a Beta would be picking me up. At least Nikolai told me that a Beta would be coming to get me. Did something come up?" She picked up her pace to walk beside Rajini.

Rajini turned her gaze toward her and raised an eyebrow, then chuckled. "I thought everybody would know by now. I'm one of Nikolai's Betas.

The newest one to join the ranks. I guess I'm not what you expected of a Beta?"

Caitlin froze in her tracks before regaining her posture and catching up again. "No, of course not. It's nothing like that. I just thought that—"

"That I'd be a broad male with muscles all over and a whole load of testosterone to go around?" She grinned. "Sorry to disappoint you; I'm nothing of the sort."

Caitlin blinked. "Oh, I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry—"

"It's okay." Rajini halted and turned to her. "You're nervous, and I get it. I was the same as you almost a year ago." Her hand landed on Caitlin's shoulder, and she squeezed gently.

Caitlin felt a bit of the tension leave her body at Rajini's gesture, and she smiled back at her. "Thank you," she said. "I just thought you'd be a male. I always had this vision about the Betas, but I couldn't have been more wrong. I'm just anxious 'cause you were late, and I figured you'd forgotten about picking me up today."

"We didn't forget about you. I had to take a detour, and the drive took me longer than expected. We wouldn't want you to end up stranded at an airport on your own."

"Rather not." Caitlin smiled, then saw the way Rajini's lips tugged down. "Is there something wrong?"

"This just reminded me of something." Rajini shrugged and continued their walk.

Caitlin followed Rajini closely. "Can I ask what it reminded you of?"

"My first day here," she said. "I arrived at the airport as you did, but in my case, they didn't pick me up, so I had to make my own way to the pack after waiting for an hour. Let's say I didn't want that to happen to you."

"They forgot about you?"

"I'll tell you someday." Rajini took a left and stopped next to a dark gray pick-up truck. She pulled open the backdoor, put Caitlin's suitcase on the backseat, slammed the door shut, and opened the one of the passenger seat. "Welcome to our pack, Healer."

Rajini closed the door once Caitlin was seated and walked around the car to get in herself. She put the key into the ignition, started the car, and slowly maneuvered out of the parking spot.

“You haven’t done this a lot before, have you?” Caitlin saw Rajini’s eyebrows furrow while she focused on the road, her hands tightly clenched around the steering wheel.

“No,” Rajini said, and her eyes flitted to Caitlin before turning back to the road ahead. “I’m still learning, but Kai—Nikolai—is making me practice daily.”

Caitlin nodded and sat back in her seat, watching Rajini quietly. When they finally reached a straight and calm road, Rajini’s hands relaxed.

“You’re mated,” Caitlin said, seeing the marks along Rajini’s neck, and those which disappeared underneath her shirt. How many marks did she even have? “I don’t mean to intrude, but how is that for you?”

Rajini looked at her sideways.

“I mean—You don’t need to answer me, but you’re the first female Beta I’ve encountered and men, well, they’re males; they like to have the upper hand.”

Rajini snorted. “He can try, but trust me: He learned the hard way that getting controlled is not how I roll.”

Caitlin watched a grin spread over Rajini’s lips, the tips of her fangs showing. What kind of mate would a female Beta even have? She doubted it was a submissive wolf. “So, do you all live together?”

“We do.”

They slowly left the city behind them and entered a forest. Thick and dense trees glided by the window as they traversed the dusty road that zigzagged through the woods.

“We all live in a mansion,” Rajini said. “All the Betas and Kai. Your room is in the same building. It’s already made ready for you. There’s personnel who work and live there too, but they sleep in a different area, so they won’t hinder you. And, just a heads up, most of the staff is human, so don’t let that come as a surprise to you. I was in shock my first day.”

An ebony wolf showed up next to the car. Rajini waved her hand at it, and the wolf took off again.

“Really? Humans work here?”

“Yes. Kai told us you also have some knowledge of human medicine.”

“Yes, I do. We’re all pretty similar to each other, so why wouldn’t I study it?” It was rare for healers to expand their knowledge like that. Caitlin was one of the few to have attended a human school.

“We age differently, and we don’t get sick like humans do, so the differences are quite profound, if you ask me. But Kai was dead set on having someone with the right sort of skills, so that’s where you come in.”

“That’s true, but we can break a bone just like humans do. We might heal faster, so we’re less careful, but setting a bone is the same with humans and shifters.”

Her purse beeped. Caitlin zipped it open and rummaged through the clutter. She took out her phone and quickly replied to a text from her best friend, then turned to Rajini, who stared at the contents of her purse.

“Just some supplies,” Caitlin said.

“Supplies?”

“Yes, mostly first aid thingies.” She shrugged. “You never know if something will happen, and I like to be prepared.”

“I guess that makes sense.” She pointed ahead. “We’re here.”

Caitlin looked out the window and gaped at the house that rose in front of the car. She grabbed onto the dashboard as she stared at the mansion that belonged in movies rather than in a forest. The building was ginormous and well maintained.

Rajini drove the car to the side of the building, parked it, and turned off the engine. She faced Caitlin with a grin. “Welcome home, Healer.”



BLUE

Caitlin exited the car and stepped to the door of the backseat to grab her belongings. Rajini was in front of her faster than she could blink and snatched the suitcase off the seat. “I can carry that.”

“I know, but you need to save your energy for later. So don’t worry about it. You can carry your purse, which looks heavy enough.”

“Why would I need to save my energy?” Caitlin’s eyebrows furrowed while she followed Rajini to the grand double doors that made up the entrance to the mansion. “I know the Ghuardian wanted me to come here as fast as I could, but I didn’t get more details than that.” She hesitated for a moment, then grabbed Rajini’s hand. The skin contact made her wolf surge to the foreground, something Caitlin could rarely prevent. Her eyes shifted from a light gray to a deep piercing blue. Rajini, who had stopped in her tracks, stared at her. Caitlin’s fingers gripped Rajini’s hand more tightly, fueling her wolf. “You’re hurt.”

Rajini pulled her hand back like she had been burned.

Caitlin let go, and her eyes went back to their usual color. “Why didn’t you tell me? I can easily help you. It’s not a big deal; that’s what I’m here for anyway. I love to help.”

“It’s from two days ago, and it’ll heal up just fine given enough time,” Rajini said reluctantly. “Besides, I already told you that you need to save your energy.”

“Nonsense, your ribs are still not completely healed, and if it’s been two days already, it means you were hurt pretty badly. If you would just let me—”

“No.”

Caitlin blinked and then narrowed her eyes. Seeing someone hurt was not something she could deal with. “We’ll see about that.” Her fingers and soul itched to heal the Beta in front of her. The wolf inside of her pushed at her to do the same.

“Come, I’ll bring you inside. I believe Kai wants to speak to you first.” Rajini jerked her head towards the mansion and entered. She placed Caitlin’s luggage down by the massive staircase that took up most of the grand entrance.

Caitlin stared around her, watching humans who hurried around in all directions. They came and went through different doors. “You weren’t kidding about all the humans that work here.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Rajini chuckled. “Just a moment.” She turned to one of the maids that passed them. “Hannah? Could you please bring Caitlin’s luggage to her room?”

“Of course, Rajini.” Hannah smiled and curtsied. She grabbed the bags and brought them upstairs.

Caitlin looked after the human, but then her gaze was drawn to her surroundings. Old paintings covered the walls on all sides of the hall. She stepped over to the one that looked the oldest and ran her finger over the mahogany frame. Her gaze lingered on the painting; she took in every stroke, every color. Her hand clenched to a fist before she could touch the paint. “Who’s that?” She looked at Rajini, who had ended up beside her.

“From what I know, the person in the portrait is one of Kai’s ancestors. I have no clue about the name, though, but you could ask Kai. He knows all of them. Now, come on; I’ll take you to Kai. He’s waiting for you.”

Caitlin nodded and tore her eyes from the canvas. Rajini was already walking to the right side of the entrance hall, and Caitlin followed quickly, her attention wavering to all the artwork she passed along the way.

Rajini opened a door that led to a corridor and stopped in front of the room at the end of the hallway. “Boss’s office,” she said and knocked on the wood.

Caitlin stared at the door and swallowed. She had only seen Kai once or twice on TV, and she didn't know what she could expect from him. Her stomach twisted in a tight knot.

“Come in.”

Rajini opened the door for her, and Caitlin stepped inside a neat and clean office. She slowly took in the room. The office was close to sterile, not even a pen was out of line. How could anyone feel at home here? She couldn't even see a picture or something else that would indicate what the Ghuardian loved—

“Caitlin, welcome, and thank you for joining us on such short notice.”

Her gaze drifted to the male who spoke. He was tall with pepper gray hair, and he was impressive, to say the least. “Ghuardian,” she said and quickly bowed her head. She should have researched how to formally address him.

“No need for formalities.” He smiled. “You can just call me Kai, like everyone here does.” He walked around his desk and stopped in front of her. “It's really good to finally meet you. We can't wait for you to start working. The pack is in real need of your talent.”

“Yes, you are.” The words slipped past her lips faster than she could think. “Your Beta”—she looked at Rajini and turned to Kai again—“has fractured ribs, and she thinks it's smart to walk and drive around with those.” She heard a deep sigh behind her.

“Rajini?” Kai looked at his Beta.

“It's nothing, Kai. It's from the attack two days ago. The healing is a bit slower than usual given everything that happened the past few days.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “It's nothing to worry about.”

Caitlin knew she might have screwed up already with Rajini. The female might not like her anymore after this, but she couldn't let anyone walk around hurt, whether they liked it or not. “Rajini wouldn't let me heal her.”

Kai's gaze went from Caitlin to Rajini. “And why is that?”

“She needs to save her energy to help Tala, not spend it on me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, so you could get enough rest?” Kai raised his eyebrow. “What if we get another attack right now?”

“It’s fine, Kai. It just needs a few more days to fully heal.”

A small smile spread across Caitlin’s lips, the tension that had built up throughout the day slowly fading. “I can heal her. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

“Good.” Kai nodded. “Please do.” He returned to the chair behind his desk.

She turned to Rajini. “Can you please sit down for me?”

Rajini eyed Caitlin and then glared at Kai, her eye color changing to a pale green when she dropped herself on a chair—hard.

Caitlin winced, but Rajini didn’t even flinch. How that was possible, she didn’t know. “Lift your shirt for me, please.”

“Does your mate know you’re hurt?” Kai asked. His question was returned with a blank look. “I guess he doesn’t. You should tell him; you know that, right?”

Rajini lifted her shirt, revealing her stomach and ribs, which looked fine on the outside; her skin was flawless. “He doesn’t know. He’d get worried, and he’s already got enough on his plate.”

Caitlin grabbed an extra chair, placed her purse on the floor, and sat down next to the Beta. “Ready?” Her hands gently rested on the skin that covered the lower parts of Rajini’s ribs. Her wolf surged forward, changing her eyes to dark blue a second time that day.

She closed her eyes and cleared her mind, focusing her soul only on her hands and what lay beneath. She felt the fractures within Rajini’s body, felt the structure of the muscles around them. Her wolf reached out to Rajini’s and guided both wolf and body in mending themselves. Slowly, the fractures started to close and disappear. Caitlin withdrew her hands when everything was back in place. “There, all better.”

Rajini pulled her shirt back down. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Caitlin straightened her back, her fingers itching with the afterglow of the healing process.

“Perfect,” Kai said. “Rajini, you can go now. Thank you for picking up Caitlin and bringing her to me.”

With a nod, Rajini got up from the chair and left Kai’s office. The door fell shut behind her.

“Thank you for healing her,” Kai said. “She tends to be very stubborn, and she has issues accepting help.”

“I figured as much. It’s okay, though; she’s completely fine now,” Caitlin said. “Thank you for arranging the pick-up at the airport.”

“It’s no trouble. Now, I’d like to discuss a few things with you before we get started.”

Caitlin nodded and pulled her purse closer to her chair with her foot.

“One of my Betas is in a coma at the moment. He’s suffered substantial damage to his body and can’t seem to heal the injuries on his own. We had a healer here for a few days. She helped him as much as she could. He’s stable for now, but the healer had to leave for her pack again. This is one of the reasons that we require a full-time healer here and for the pack.”

“That makes sense. I’ve been informed this would be a full-time employment here on location.”

“It’s a bit more than that. You’d be similar to all the Betas here, which means you’d have to be available at all times of the day and live here for the rest of your life. There is no way out of it.”

Caitlin blinked. “So, what if I do want an out?” How could she say yes to something like that without thinking it through? What would happen if she were to find a mate? What would happen to him? Would he have to move here too? Or what if something happened—

“That’s the thing: There is no ‘out’. The Betas don’t have one either. The only way to disband is if there is a new Ghuardian, or when I die.”

“Why is that?”

“There are a few reasons. You’ll get a lot of sensitive information when you live here and work for me, and you’ll be a vital part of this pack. We need someone we can trust with our lives, and you need to be able to feel

the same about us. Not to forget that you'll also be connected to me and all the other Betas.”

“Connected? What kind of connection would that be?”

“One that ties you to me and the Betas. It’s a ritual that connects you to all of us, and it’s something that cannot be undone. It’s been done like this for centuries with every previous healer that worked for the Ghuardian.”

This was more than she’d expected. What if she didn’t like the people here? What if they didn’t like her?

“I can see you’re debating this.” Kai leaned forward and placed his elbows on his desk. “I know it’s a lot to take in and to ask of you, but I’d rather be blunt and straightforward from the start. If you were to find a mate, he or she will be allowed to move in with you.”

Caitlin knew this kind of opportunity only came once in a lifetime. What if she said yes? Or what if she said no? Would she be able to go back to her old apartment and leave it at that? She had studied with humans, she could be content with that, right? Or did she want to feel the closeness of a pack once more in her life? Her fingers fumbled with the bracelet of her watch. She wanted this, didn’t she?

“I—”

“You don’t need to answer me straight away,” Kai said. “How about you get a tour around the house and meet everyone else first, see how that feels for you, and then decide?”

Caitlin looked up at Kai.

“And then, if you say yes, we’ll arrange the contract and everything else that comes with it.”

Every word Kai said tumbled in her mind. If she said yes, everything would change. If she said no, everything would stay the same. Caitlin didn’t know which would be the better option.

Kai got up and held out his hand toward her. “Take your time with your decision. I know it’s a lot. Once you’ve made up your mind, let me know. For now, I’ll introduce you to all the others, alright?”

“Can I also meet your Beta who’s in a coma?”

“Of course.”

Caitlin rose from her seat and took Kai’s hand.

“I hope you’ll decide to stay,” he said.