

Choose Them All

by Ivy Marlowe

The pack said choose one. She said she'd take all three.

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Three months after Lyra moved into the old farmhouse at the edge of the valley, she stopped pretending she didn't know what her housemates were.

It happened like this: she came downstairs at two in the morning for water and found Dax standing in the kitchen with his hands braced on the counter and his shoulder blades doing something anatomically improbable, and he looked up at her with golden eyes in the dark, and instead of screaming she said, "Do you want me to heat something up?"

He blinked. The eyes faded back to their usual dark brown.

"I've got leftover stew," she said.

"...Yes," he said, after a moment.

She heated the stew. He sat at the table and ate it and gradually went from the posture of something that hunted to the posture of someone who was quietly embarrassed. She didn't say anything about the eyes.

The next morning, the other three — Rafe, Kieran, and Sol — were all in the kitchen when she came down, which had never happened before, and they all looked at her with the particular attention of people awaiting a verdict. She made four mugs of coffee. Set them on the table. Sat down with her own.

"Right," she said. "How does this work, then?"

The answer, it turned out, was complicated in some ways and simple in others.

They were a pack — not pack in the social sense, in the biological sense, the kind that formed bonds the way weather formed geography: inevitably, over time, with pressure. Dax was the oldest; he'd been at the farmhouse longest. Rafe and Kieran had arrived together, two years ago. Sol was the newest before Lyra, quiet and specific in the way of someone who kept careful accounts.

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The bond with a human was rarer. It happened when the human fit the pack in some way that was not entirely explainable and was entirely definitive.

"And you think I'm that," Lyra said.

"We know you are," Rafe said, in his straight-speaking way.

"How?"

The four of them exchanged a look she was getting better at reading.

"There is a pull," Sol said, which was the most he usually offered on any topic.

"For all of you."

"Yes," Kieran said. He was the one who managed social grace for all of them; he'd been a people-facing person before, presumably, and still moved through the world with a particular competence. "We're aware it's a lot to ask."

"You haven't asked anything," she said.

"We're asking now," he said. "Or—not asking. Explaining, and then you decide."

She looked around the table. Dax, who had accepted her stew at two in the morning with a relief that she now understood. Rafe, direct and still. Sol, watching her with those careful eyes. Kieran, who was watching her with warmth and honesty and the visible effort of a man trying very hard not to influence her answer.

She thought about the three months. The way the house had felt since she'd moved in — specifically safe, specifically hers, in a way that no place she'd lived had ever felt. The way she had stopped being lonely without entirely noticing. The way she slept here.

"I need a few days," she said.

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"Of course," Kieran said.

"I'm not leaving," she said. "I'm just thinking."

"We'll be here," Dax said. Simply. In the tone of something that does not move.

She took four days. During those four days she did research (limited and contradictory), had several long phone calls with her best friend who responded with questions that were surprisingly practical rather than alarmed, and paid specific attention to what she already knew.

What she already knew: that she had spent three months becoming necessary to four people and them to her in a way that felt less like falling and more like arriving. That she was drawn to each of them in different and equally real ways — Dax's steady solidity, Rafe's unflinching honesty, Sol's rare and worth-earning quiet, Kieran's bright particular warmth. That the idea of choosing one felt like the wrong question.

On the fourth evening she went back downstairs and they were all in the main room and they all looked at her, and she felt the pull that Sol had described as the understatement of several centuries.

"I have questions," she said.

"We'll answer them," Kieran said.

"All of them," Rafe added.

She sat on the sofa. They arranged themselves — Dax in the chair, Rafe on the floor against the bookcase, Sol at the far end of the sofa, Kieran beside her. She noted the spacing: close, but giving her air.

"The bond," she said. "It goes all directions."

"Yes," Kieran said. "You and each of us. And between the four of us, already. You'd be completing something."

"Does it—is there a physical element."

"There can be," he said. Careful. "If you want there to be."

"With all of you."

"However you want," Sol said, which was more than his usual allotment of words and therefore significant.

She looked at them. The thing about a pack, she was beginning to understand, was that it was not a competition. There was no pecking order in what they felt for her. It was simply true, four times over, and the structure of it was spacious rather than crowded.

"Yes," she said. "To all of it."

Kieran exhaled. Dax made a low sound. Rafe looked at the floor for a moment like he was steadying himself. Sol simply reached over and put his hand over hers, which was the most Sol thing he could possibly have done.

She kissed Kieran first, because he was closest and because he'd been the one managing warmth for months and it was time someone gave it back. He made a soft sound against her mouth and held her face in his hands with a gentleness that was specifically him.

What followed was unhurried and particular to each of them — Dax steady and present as he was at two in the morning, asking nothing of her except what she offered; Rafe direct and warm once the directness was turned toward this, which was something she had suspected; Sol last, and the quietest, and the most disarming because of it. Sol expressed in touch what he didn't in words, and she understood him better in that hour than in three months of careful sentences.

They were all there, which was not awkward in the way she might have expected, because a pack did not compete, it encompassed. She was the centre of something rather than the subject of four separate things, and the difference was significant. She said each of their names once. She meant it four different ways and the same way simultaneously.

Afterwards, the farmhouse was very quiet and very full.

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"The logistics," she said, eventually, into the dark.

"We'll figure them out," Kieran said, from somewhere to her left.

"There are precedents," Dax offered.

"Are there?"

"Fewer than ideal," Sol said, which made her laugh, which made Rafe make the sound she had recently learned was his specific laugh: low, private, hers.

She looked at the ceiling. Outside, the valley. The particular safe-specific quality of this place she had come to without quite knowing why.

"I still have questions," she said.

"We know," Kieran said.

"Lots of them."

"We know," Rafe said.

"Good," Sol said.

She closed her eyes. The house settled around her. Outside, wind in the valley trees. Inside: four heartbeats, hers, and something that had just become complete.