

LOUISE CLEMENT



FATED
to the Rogue

PECULIAR **I** SHIFTERS

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to the Rogue

LOUISE CLEMENT

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AUTHOR NOTE

This is a re-release of a book formerly titled *A Peculiar Wolf*. No major changes have been made to the plot of the story.

Fated to the Rogue is the first book in the *Peculiar Shifters* trilogy. Each book can be read separately as stand alones, as each story follows a different generation of main characters. All of the books end with a happily ever after (no cliffhangers).

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PROLOGUE

*When one's ambition
becomes larger than reason
darkness overshadows light
To restore nature's balance
the moon must welcome the sun
and two wolves shall fight as one
In a battle that will last
from dusk 'til dawn
the fate of the world will be drawn*

She stood on the balcony of her castle in the sky, from where she could see all. Her feminine figure was delicate and ethereal, yet her strong aura revealed her godly power. With immaculate skin that glistened like silver and white eyes bright as moonlight, her beauty was glorious.

The Goddess of the Moon had many names, as she was worshiped by a variety of cultures and races. The one she preferred, however, was her mortal name, Diana.

She was known for her serenity and poise, but tonight, worry stained her features. It was great enough to force her to descend from her kingdom and roam the earth. She had to witness the scene from closer, for she could not believe the high treason of one of her thousands of children, whom she loved beyond limits.

“I am back to claim what should have been mine from the start, brother.” The huge beast, dark as a moonless sky, had a sinister grin on his face. Even in animal form, he could speak human words.

“Brother?” The man standing in the clearing, a good thirty feet away from the demonic creature, wore a look of utter disbelief. Somehow, he showed no fear. “What have you done?”

“I sought the help of those who answer to no god and reject the one who has forsaken me,” the wolf clarified, his tongue sticking out as he circled the human like a shark.

“Demons,” his brother muttered under his breath. “You sold your soul...” he concluded, his bewilderment turning into disgust. “Why? Why couldn’t you accept the fate she traced for you?”

“Because why should she get to determine who I will or will not be?!” The monster’s growl echoed through the forest, shaking trees. “I want to write my own future, and I conquered the power to do so. My story begins now, with the end of yours!”

In a single jump, the soulless creature reached his brother. He was stronger than common wolf shifters, faster. One blow was all he needed to take away the man’s life. Howls cut through the night as the leader’s death was felt. The pack was now lost without the guidance of an Alpha, but not for long, as the demon wolf marched towards their territory to take what he thought belonged to him.

As he left, Diana approached the lifeless corpse, crouching beside it. She had observed the whole scene close by, yet her presence was never noticed. With a heartfelt sigh, she hovered her hand over the dead Alpha’s forehead, absorbing his essence to guide the two souls who once shared the body towards the Kingdom of the Moon, where she would watch over them for all eternity.

“Two of my children were taken by darkness tonight, but justice will be served,” Diana whispered. Rising back to her feet, she knew what she had to do next. “The balance between good and evil is broken. The scales must be evened.”

With just one step, the Goddess entered a room in a house located in a pack seven miles away from where she had been an instant earlier. Not only had she teleported through space,

but also through time; in the mortal realm, a year had passed after the brutal event.

Diana turned her head to the left. As her hand rested on the wood crib, her gaze landed on a little baby girl - or better yet, a female pup. Looking to the right, her attention fell on a male pup sleeping in a different crib, in a different room, in a different land. Because she was omnipresent, she could stand in both places simultaneously, with half of her spiritual body in each of the locations.

The Goddess stared at one pup, then the other - the Chosen Ones. Both one-year-olds were dreaming peacefully, unaware of what destiny had in store for them. As she lifted her fingers up in the air, gathering her power, she felt a pinch of guilt for what she would put them through. It lasted less than a second though; she knew it had to be done.

Raising her head to the sky, Diana called upon the moon. In the blink of an eye, the two shifter pups were surrounded by an intense light. The next moment, the dormant wolf spirits left their respective humans' bodies, traveling through space like she had done just minutes ago. They would remain asleep for the following seventeen years, until it was time for the final battle.

The day the future of the world would be determined.

“Prepare, my children.” She planted a light kiss on each of their foreheads. “Only you can stop him.”

With those final words, the Goddess turned her back to the infants. She would return to her castle in the moon realm, where she was to wait patiently for her prophecy to be fulfilled - hopefully, before it was too late.

1 | LEADER

The thrill of the hunt sent adrenaline pumping through my veins. I could hear the paws of the dozen wolves thundering as they hit the ground. They were running in formation right behind me, but I wasn't dedicating my attention to them. A low warning growl echoed through the trees, and I immediately knew it belonged to the second-in-command leading the group.

As the heir to the Wind Howlers Pack, I was supposed to stay in the back and watch how the hunters worked together so I could learn how to lead them. After a lifetime of training, I was done observing. In the next 24 hours, I would turn 18 and officially step in as Alpha; it was about time I became more proactive.

Even though I hadn't gotten my wolf yet, I could hear better, see further, and run faster than a human. I'd had my heightened senses for a couple of months, but they were even sharper now since they enhanced as shifters neared the moment their counterparts would awaken.

My plan was a bit reckless, but I knew what I was doing. We had located a herd of deer, and judging by how strong their scent was, they couldn't be more than 200 meters away. The Beta wanted us to carefully work our way around them until they were surrounded on all sides, but the longer we waited, the higher the chances of our prey noticing our presence.

I had a better idea.

Using my enhanced speed, I easily dodged the trees in the shortcut I had taken. The wolves were too big to navigate through the obstacles in the path, but in human form, I had no trouble with it. The only problem was that deer were highly sensitive creatures. With how fast I was moving, my feet barely touched the ground. I doubt they would hear me, but they should be able to smell me, just like I did them.

Thankfully, the wolves of Wind Howlers were known for our signature strategy - using the breeze to mask our scent.

It was almost natural for us. Of course, we trained and perfected our unique skills as we aged, but even pups felt a strong connection with the wind and the sky, which is why outsiders often referred to us as “soaring wolves.” Without thinking, I quickly identified which way the wind was blowing. Running directly against it allowed me to not give away my scent. Not before my mission was accomplished, anyway.

I couldn't tell if I had been running faster than the hunters, or if they had simply stopped a few feet away from the herd to avoid scaring them. Either way, I had successfully gotten around our prey and ended up exactly where I wanted - right behind them. One of the deer lifted its head, probably sensing the danger, but it was too late.

“Owoooooooo!” I mimicked a wolf's howl, placing both hands around my mouth as I lifted my head to the sky to amplify the sound.

Fearful cries erupted through the herd as I scared the poor creatures. They immediately turned around and stampeded towards the opposite direction I had jumped from. When their instinct to flee kicked in, they failed to realize they were heading straight for my pack. The next second, wolves of different sizes and colors jumped from behind the trees, taking down the deers one by one until not a single one of them was left standing.

I couldn't help the proud smile that lit up my face as the wolves howled in joy, celebrating the success of our hunt. However, that pride soon dimmed when something big stood behind me, blocking the light generated by the last golden sun rays as it set behind the cliff. Then came a muffled growl, followed by a low, intimidating voice I was very familiar with.

“Do you realize what you've done?”

Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I turned around to face Beta Warrick with a cocky grin. The brown-haired man was a good six inches taller than me. Thankfully, he had

already gotten dressed in one of the random pairs of shorts we always leave scattered around the forest, so only his brawny upper half was exposed. Although it was common for wolf shifters to see each other naked, I appreciated not having to look at his dingle-dangle right now.

“I just secured our dinner,” I responded playfully.

His usually cool hazel eyes started turning red from his rage. “For the Light of the Crescent, Zephyr! You are the future leader of this pack! How can you be so reckless?” I opened my mouth to argue, but he went on. “Do you ever listen to a word I say?”

“Of course I do, Beta Warrick.”

“Then you should know you just got lucky today!” he roared so loudly my hair flew back. “You could have compromised the success of our hunt - or worse, gotten hurt! Without your wolf to heal you, a single kick from one of the deer would be enough to leave you crippled! How would you rule over the wolves in a wheelchair? Did you even think about that?”

I had to internally roll my eyes at how dramatic he was being. “I guess I just trusted the Goddess would protect me and my title.” My sarcastic smile only further annoyed him, causing him to frown harder. In the end, he sighed, massaging his temples as he backed away.

“Malin!”

“Yes, Beta Warrick.” In the blink of an eye, a boy my age rushed to us. That was Malin, also known as my best friend.

“You wish to be Beta after me, don’t you, son?” The older man stared intimidatingly into his eyes, almost making him freeze.

“More than anything in the world.”

“Good.” Warrick raised his head, lowering his tone just to raise it again immediately. “Then keep your Alpha in line!”

“Yes, Sir! Sorry, Sir!” Malin yelped, scowling at me the second the Beta walked past us.

I shook my head at my best friend's helpless reaction. There was nothing in the world he took more seriously than duty, but I couldn't blame him.

Malin was the youngest out of four siblings, and the only son of two Omegas. It was almost unheard of for wolves of his rank to grow to occupy the second highest position in our hierarchy, but he was the most determined guy I knew. Because of his naturally weaker bloodline, my best friend had to work three times harder than most to stand out among our warriors.

In addition to his tireless dedication, he was also extremely loyal, a quality indispensable to any Beta. Luckily, we had been in the same class growing up, otherwise I might have never recognized his potential.

Before becoming my right-hand man, he had always been a good friend first. Funny and humble, he was someone nice to be around, and he kept my feet on the ground. Not only did he have a great personality, he had also been blessed with his looks. He somehow turned out to be as tall as Warrick, and despite not having a naturally athletic build, his intensive training made him even more muscular than the man as well. His incredibly light blond hair, almost platinum, combined with his deep forest green eyes, were a chick magnet.

She-wolves would fall for him left and right, but he always turned them down, as he was saving himself for his mate. Ever since he got his wolf six months ago, he had been searching endlessly for his one and only.

"Alright, hunters! Let's head back to the territory." Warrick's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

Exchanging a quick glance with my best friend, I was ready to follow the command, but I stopped walking when my eyes landed on familiar, beautifully sculpted curves. Gina was among the wolves who tagged along for the hunt, but judging by her currently naked human body, it was obvious she had shifted back.

"I think your strategy was amazing, Alpha Zephyr." She batted her lashes at me as she slowly put on a dress in a

reverse strip-tease.

“*Future Alpha*,” Malin corrected, causing the grin on the female’s face to disappear. Forcing a smile, he tapped my shoulder with force before pushing me away. “Have you no decency? You shouldn’t lay your eyes on any she-wolf other than your mate!” he whispered-yelled.

“Really? I might be in trouble then,” I faked concern. “I mean, I’ve seen that girl’s body more than a couple times. And she’s seen mine.”

“Seriously, Zephyr! You’re a lost cause,” he scoffed as he continued to push me away, and I couldn’t hold back my laughter. Deep down though, I felt a pinch of pain in my heart. I’d like to say there were no secrets between Malin and I, but there was one thing I never had the courage to tell him.

For as long as I can remember, I have felt this...emptiness, inside of me. It was uncanny, as if I wasn’t really whole. It often drove me insane and made me feel miserable. The only way I could get momentary relief was through sex. It was the real reason why I never turned down a female, and because of my birth right, they came to me all the time. I knew Malin blamed it on my foolish and carefree behavior, and honestly, I’d rather have him think that than tell him the real reason.

About half an hour later, we arrived at the pack’s village. The familiar scent of dandelions, scattered throughout our entire territory, hit my nostrils. I drew a long breath as I glanced at the cozy white cottages and magnificent buildings, reminding myself that all of this would be mine after tomorrow.

With less than 200 members, Wind Howlers wasn’t among the largest packs in the country, or even in the state of Genoro. Still, we were known for having defeated enemies twice our size by using the signature strategy that gave us our name; because we used the wind to mask our scent, our presence was only ever noticed after we howled. Needless to say, a huge responsibility fell on the shoulders of Zephyr Wyndham, the prodigal son of Alpha Bertrand and Luna Delilah. I knew I had

big shoes to fill, but I was ready to dedicate my life to my people, hopefully honoring my father's name.

After making it to the town square, where Beta Warrick dismissed us to report the hunt to his leader, Malin and I headed to the public showers with the other male hunters. I quickly got rid of the sweat and dirt before grabbing my bag in one of the lockers, putting on the only outfit I had brought - gray shorts and a black v-neck t-shirt.

Once I was done getting dressed, I stood in front of the mirror to shave my light stubble beard. As a wolf shifter, my hair was constantly growing back, but I never stopped trying to get rid of it as I preferred a clean face. After fixing my hair, I took a good look at my reflection.

Modesty aside, I was quite good looking; it was no wonder the she-wolves didn't leave me alone. My strong muscles could be seen even through my shirt, making me look sexy as hell. Part of it was a consequence of my hard training, but it was mostly thanks to my genetics. True born Alphas usually had broad shoulders and muscular builds. The only detail that set me apart from them was my height - both my parents were fairly short, and as their son, I was only 5' 6".

However, what truly made me stand out among other males were my intense blue eyes, clear and vast as the sky. My wild, short jet-black hair was so black it looked navy underneath the moonlight. It contrasted with my naturally fair skin, which was usually painted a god-like golden due to the tan I got from spending hours training under the sun, making my eyes stand out even more.

"Falling in love with yourself again, Narcissus?"

I had to blink a few times to notice Malin's reflection beside mine. He had his arms crossed and a playful smile on his face. I mimicked his expression as I turned around to look at him.

"It can't be helped. I mean, have you seen me?" I gestured towards my own body. He just rolled his eyes in response. At that moment, I realized something - or better yet, someone -

was missing. I glanced around the place, now empty after the other hunters left. “Wait. Where’s Zach?”

Zachari Ackers was the son of Wind Howlers’ current third-in-command, and part of our trio. Although he was always with the two of us, he was pretty shy and quiet. As funny as it was, it wasn’t weird that it took me so long to notice he hadn’t tagged along.

“I don’t know. Probably hiding in his room playing video games. He’s been skipping training ever since the Gammas left town to visit his grandparents, so I’m not surprised he didn’t show up for the hunt.” Malin shrugged as we walked out of the public showers. “He’s going to claim the Gamma title tomorrow, for Goddess’ sake! How can he be so irresponsible?”

“Hey, it’s alright. You’re already the muscles of the group. As long as he remains the brains, we’ll be fine,” I observed. It was true; while Betas had to be as powerful as Alphas to ensure the safety of the territory, Gammas didn’t need to rely on their physical strength.

According to werewolf hierarchy, the members of a pack were organized in ranks. The four highest-ranking wolves, also called the Elite, were the Alpha, the Beta, the Gamma, and the Delta. Since our society values strength, Alphas were usually the strongest wolves of a pack, responsible for protecting his people and ensuring their well-being. Betas were the second-in-command, in charge of battle strategy, as well as warrior training. Gammas, or third-in-command, were problem-solvers who mainly took care of pack security, thus requiring them to be highly intelligent.

While the highest three positions were strictly reserved for males, the fourth-in-command were always female. Deltas were pretty much the managers of a pack, responsible for dealing with members and making sure everything runs smoothly at a detailed level so the Alpha could focus on the bigger matters.

After them, we had Zetas. The highest-ranking wolves aside from the Elite, they were usually the strongest warriors,

scouts, trackers or sentinels who had received medals for notorious acts. Then we had Kappas, members that had gone to college or university to get a higher education and used it to help the pack; they were teachers, engineers, doctors, and so on.

Lastly, we had the two lowest-ranking members. First, the Sigmas, who were retired Zetas and Kappas who chose to keep living on the territory; they were still respected for how useful they had been, but considering how werewolf society is guided by strength, they weren't of great value anymore. Omegas were the lowest rank, given to the weakest wolves of a pack. Incapable of fighting and lacking higher education, they worked as cooks, cleaners, lumberjacks, butchers, drivers, among other similar occupations.

“Alright. And what does that make you?” Malin glanced at me with a smartass look.

“Isn't it obvious? I'm the leader!” I laughed. Not even a second later, my best friend punched my shoulder. “Hey, I'm your Alpha! You better respect me!” I barked playfully, punching him back.

“What are you two pups fighting about this time?” A familiar feminine voice sounded behind us right before the woman wrapped one arm around each of our necks tightly, securing us in place.

Alexandra Loweman had been the Delta of Wind Howlers for five years now. In most cases, Elite members started working when a new Alpha took over, following the retirement of the old ones. Sadly, Alex was forced to step in after her mother, the former Delta, perished in combat when she was only 20 years old. Despite the pain and grief, she always exercised her function flawlessly, quickly earning the pack members' trust and respect.

With gorgeous greenish-hazel eyes, and very long, straight cinnamon hair - often dyed with red tips - she was a sight to behold. Unfortunately for every unmated male in our pack, she was already happily mated and marked. She had found Victor,

her fated partner, only a month after connecting with her wolf, Bellona.

“Alex!” Malin smiled. “I was just trying to keep Zephyr in line. As always.” He glared at me, and I frowned in response.

“Ah yes. It’ll be nice to have your help with that now,” the girl chuckled, finally releasing her grasp on us. “Anyway, Zee. Your father wants to see you in his office.”

“Thank you, Alex. I’m sorry you had to stop what you were doing to come fetch me. It’ll be so much easier to communicate with everyone after I get my wolf.” Members of the same pack could talk to each other through something we called mindlink, which was similar to telepathy. However, it only became active upon the awakening of our dormant counterparts.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s part of the job.” She winked at me.

“Did Dad say what he needed me for?”

“I think it has something to do with the Alpha meeting Wind Howlers will be hosting tonight.”

I was thoughtful for a moment. Even though I wasn’t officially leader yet, my father always informed me about everything going on with our pack. But for some reason, I hadn’t heard of this meeting until now.

“Well, I better not keep him waiting.” I waved at my friends as I ran up ahead. “See you tomorrow at training!”

As I headed towards the main building, I wondered what the meeting was about. Judging by how sudden it was, I had a feeling it couldn’t be good.

2 | TROUBLE

I drew in a long breath as I stood in front of the main building, taking a moment to organize my thoughts before heading into my father's office. Although I had been born and raised inside of this very house, it never looked less than majestic to me - an incredible three-story building located at the highest point of the hill at the heart of the village. It was entirely decorated in Wind Howlers' traditional colors; its forest-green shaded wooden exterior harmonized quite well with the tall, rectangular golden windows that allowed the sunlight to illuminate the many halls and rooms.

It was the center of all the action, as well as the home for the Elite members. While any pack member was allowed on the first floor, where they could gather and enjoy various entertainment options, the other two were for exclusive use of the four highest ranking wolves and their families. On the second floor, the two rooms on the left were reserved to the Gammas, and the two on the right were meant for the Deltas.

The top floor was divided in two wings, the left one consisting of the Alpha chambers, while the right one was designated to the Betas. The Alpha's office had also been built there; right above the large entrance door made of wood and glass.

Once I felt ready, I stepped inside and walked up the stairs until I reached the third floor. Out of respect, I knocked on the door, not bothering to identify myself; Dad could tell it was me just by my scent.

"Come in, Zephyr!" he yelled from the other side.

I promptly pushed the door open. "Alexandra said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Take a seat." He gestured towards the chair in front of him.

As I walked in, I noticed he wasn't the only one in the room. He was seated behind his desk, with his back to the golden floor-to-ceiling window. Beta Warrick was to his right, while my mother was to his left. She smiled sweetly at me, but my father simply kept his usual frown.

"There are a few things I want to discuss with you." Dad cleared his throat, raising his voice. "Beta Warrick said you disobeyed him in today's hunt. Have you forgotten your place in the hierarchy? You are my son, and the future of this pack! How can you be so reckless?" He clenched his teeth, trying to look more intimidating. I knew it was just a façade though; one that never lasted too long.

"Oh, my grumpy condor...don't be so harsh with him." My mother pouted, catching his attention by placing her hand over his. When her blue eyes, serene as the sea, locked on his dark brown ones, they melted into a caramel color.

From the day I was born, Mom had spoiled me rotten, which is why Dad was stricter with me, hoping to balance the way she constantly protected me. She was caring and kind-hearted by nature, but those qualities were a lot more intense towards me. Our strong bond could be explained by a tragic health problem she had right after giving birth to me, making her unable to bear any more pups. I felt for her because I knew she wanted to have many children, but I wouldn't complain about the extra attention.

"My sweet dove, he has to be punished for his behavior!" he whisper-yelled, as if I couldn't hear him. "He will be Alpha soon. How can he lead our wolves if he doesn't abide by the rules?"

"It was a one-time incident," Mom insisted. "You know Zeze has been training all his life for the Alpha position. He has always dedicated himself to his duties, not once slacking off when it came to the safety and well-being of Wind Howlers." My father squinted his eyes at me thoughtfully, but he couldn't keep his ruthless Alpha guise for much longer.

With a sigh, he continued. "Fine. Moving on..." He pulled a few papers from the top drawer of his wooden desk. "As you

know, because Beta Warrick has no heirs, you will be allowed to choose your second-in-command tomorrow after your First Shift Ceremony.”

The Elite titles were a birthright; they were always passed on to the current members’ first-born pup. Sadly, Warrick’s fated partner had passed away two decades ago, before they could have heirs. He could have taken a chosen mate, but he refused, remaining loyal to his deceased lover and her memory. For the first years after her death, his grief made him so weak he was constantly in and out of the hospital. But like the strong Beta he was, he managed to pull through and continued to serve our pack to the best of his abilities.

“Last time we talked, you said you wanted Malin Shepherd as your Beta.” Dad’s voice echoed through the room again, pulling me from my thoughts. “Is that your final decision?”

“Yes, father.”

“Despite his bloodline, the boy has potential. He’ll make a fine Beta.” Warrick nodded in approval.

“Alright. With that out of the way, let me tell you the main reason why I called you here.” My father handed me the papers, proceeding to explain what they were about before I even had a chance to read it. “A last-minute Alpha meeting was scheduled this morning, and Wind Howlers was chosen to host it. I think it’s important for you to come with me this time.”

“Why? What is it about?”

He glanced at his digital clock, immediately rising from his seat. “You’ll find out in a minute. We should get going.”

Dad placed his firm hand on my shoulder, guiding me towards the exit. Although Mom and Warrick would usually tag along in every important gathering, I noticed they remained in their seats. On second thought, it made sense for them to stay behind; since urgent meetings didn’t have a lot of time to be organized, only one representative from each pack was invited to come.

My old man stayed silent all the way to the Event Hall, located right beside the main building. Even though my curiosity was trying to get the best of me, I held onto my restraint, keeping all of my questions to myself.

As soon as we walked into the place, I quickly counted every single one of the Alphas already present - there were sixteen in total. Some of them I had met in the past, but most I had never seen. Normally, my father would introduce me to the other leaders before the meeting, but we had no time for that tonight. Instead, he led me straight towards the only two empty chairs.

“Thank you all for coming, gentlemen. And thank you, Alpha Bertrand, for agreeing to host our meeting with such short notice.” The oldest man in the room addressed the table before nodding at my father. I immediately knew he was an Elder, a member of our society who was above all other ranks. They had more affinity with magic as they had lived and practiced it for nearly a century. Unlike most other positions, they were respected because of their knowledge rather than their strength, though they were still powerful beings.

“It’s an honor, Elder Aegeus.” Dad bowed curtly at the Elder before we took our seats. It was a rare occurrence to see the leader of Wind Howlers lowering his head before someone else.

“Without further ado, let us begin.” The second Elder Aegeus sat back down in his chair at the head of the table, the room went completely silent. “All of you have been called here because your packs are established inside the state of Genoro, which is now considered a danger zone.” Shocked gasps could be heard, but no one dared interrupt the Elder. “Not long ago, the army of the Fallen destroyed yet another pack, and we have every reason to believe the shifters of Genoro will be their next target.” Shivers ran down my spine at the news.

The Fallen, as they were usually addressed, were an army of rogues who were supposedly stronger than normal. However, not a single one of them had been caught alive, and no one had survived one of their attacks, making it impossible

to know exactly what they were. The only information we had about them was that they were vicious, sneaky creatures, who could disappear as quickly as they had shown up without leaving a trace.

In the beginning, they weren't really considered a threat. They started by attacking small packs with less than 50 members in the country of Anadac. As they grew in numbers, they marched into the Integrated Nations, where we lived, slaughtering packs all across Hanstonwig, located just north of us. Now, it was suspected they were capable of taking down packs of more than 200 wolves.

“What course of action should we take?” one of the Alphas inquired.

“As of now, the I.N. Elder Council is still trying to gather more details about the enemy. It is too dangerous to launch an attack without knowing exactly who we're dealing with,” the Elder informed in a low voice. “We encourage leaders to come to us with any information they may have on the Fallen, and to those of you who do not wish to try your luck against them, we recommend you leave your lands.”

The suggestion caused whispers to burst through the crowd. Wolves were extremely territorial; they would gladly give their lives to protect their homes. Of course, most of them would never consider abandoning their territories. Without even glancing at my father, I knew we thought the same.

“The I.N. Elder Council will be offering aid to those who choose to migrate. Please let us know your decision by the end of the next week,” Elder Aegeus went on. “The topic of our debate must not be discussed until we make an official announcement. We have decided to warn you in advance to allow you the chance to prepare for what's coming, but we do not want to incite panic. Before I declare the end of our meeting, do any of you gentlemen wish to make changes to your current political relationships and pacts?”

From the context, it was easy to interpret what would happen next. I was taught from a young age that an Alpha must be stoic, never letting others read his true emotions.

Although my expression remained neutral, I was sure my rapid heartbeat could be heard as anticipation got the best of me.

There were only two other packs on the route from the last territory attacked by the Fallen to our home. Since neither of these pack leaders were present today, either because they couldn't come on short notice or because they were able to foresee the outcome of the meeting, it meant...

"Crimson Tail would like to terminate its alliance with Wind Howlers," one of the Alphas announced, locking eyes with my father.

"So would Lunar Pride," another followed.

"Black Fang will take the same position."

Out of our four present allies, three of them decided to sever our treaties. Cowards. They were choosing to hide with their tails between their legs while our common enemy destroyed our kin. Since they weren't among the first packs standing in the way of the Fallen, they would gladly stand by and watch from a safe distance. To my displeasure, there was nothing I could do but clench my fists in silence; it wasn't my place to speak, but even if it was, what was there to say?

Once the Elder documented the changes in relationship between packs, he declared the end of the meeting. One by one, the Alphas rose from their chairs. At the exit, my father shook each of their hands while I stood by his side, stone-faced as anger bubbled up to my throat. Two of our ex-allies even had the audacity to apologize, and wish us luck.

Luck, I scoffed. A great Alpha doesn't need luck.

"I'm sorry about your situation, Alpha Bertrand." A masculine voice caught my attention. Although it wasn't too familiar, I knew I had heard it a few times before.

"Wind Howlers is in a tough spot, but we will pull through." My father shook the man's hand. "Thank you for remaining an ally to us through these dark times."

"Silver Claw is grateful for all the aid your pack has offered us during the past few decades. We wouldn't leave you

to your own devices in the face of difficulty.” The other leader smiled.

“You will not regret your decision, Alpha Anders.” The words left my mouth before I even realized I was speaking; it seems I had held my tongue for too long. The two men looked at me with surprised looks on their faces, but instead of lowering my head, I raised it. “Once I officially step in as Alpha, I will direct all my efforts into defeating the Fallen. Wind Howlers will thrive, you can be sure of that.”

The leader stayed silent for a moment, but he soon grinned at my father as he patted me on the back. “Your boy’s fierce, Bertrand! Reminds me of you when you were his age.” He then turned to me. “I have no doubt you’ll make a fine Alpha, Zephyr. Know you can always count on Silver Claw for whatever you need.” I nodded at him, determination shining in my blue eyes.

After he left, the Elder approached my father to reassure him that the council would help us should we decide to leave. Despite the way Dad lowered his head and thanked the older man, I knew he would never consider abandoning our lands.

The very mountain we established ourselves on had been Wind Howlers’ home for seven generations. From the forest surrounding our borders, to the dandelion fields, every inch of our territory carried a small piece of our history. The wolves of our pack could feel a connection with these hills before they were even born; they could hear the wind calling their names.

But if we stayed, did we really stand a chance against a powerful enemy we knew so little about?

“Zephyr.” My father’s voice broke my concentration. I was so absorbed in thought I didn’t even notice we had already made it to the entrance of the pack house. Concern must have been written all over my face, because he placed both hands on my shoulders as he stood in front of me, staring straight at me. “You’ll have plenty of time to worry about our problem in the future, but tonight’s your last night as a 17-year-old. Either go out with your friends to enjoy it, or rest and get ready for tomorrow.”

I hesitated for a moment before finally sighing. “Yes, father.”

“Goodnight, son. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He flashed me a small smile, and I watched as he disappeared inside of the building.

I kept staring at the door for a few more seconds, pondering on what I should do. Hanging out with the boys would be a good distraction, but I felt like I needed to be alone with my thoughts for a while. I could follow my old man’s advice and head to my room, but the Alpha suite was far too big and empty. Whenever I was within those four walls, the hollowness inside of me became unbearable; I doubt I would be able to get any sleep, especially when there were so many thoughts running through my mind. Diving my hand into my front pocket, I pulled out the keys of my Ferrari and headed to the garage.

Once I got into my car, I took it to the cliff, parking right next to the river that ended in a waterfall. Tomorrow night, I will be here for my First Shift Ceremony, when I’ll embrace my responsibilities. For now, it was just a good place to get lost in thought.

My eyes were staring into the horizon, where the sky and the sea merged as one in a mix of blues. The waters mirrored the moon and stars, which seemed to dance as the waves rolled over. As mesmerizing as the view was, I couldn’t say I was truly watching it though. All I could see was the events of the past hour playing on repeat in my head as I tried to find a way to fix the situation I found myself in. While I believed what I told Alpha Anders, it didn’t diminish my distress. For a leader who was just taking over, I had quite a challenge on my hands.

“Zephyr?” I had to blink a few times when I heard someone call my name; I wasn’t expecting anyone to be out here at such a late hour. Turning my head to the side, I found Gina, the she-wolf who had gone hunting with us earlier, resting her arms on the open window. “What are you doing here...alone?”

“Just admiring the view.” She could probably tell I was lying, but I knew she didn’t really care about my feelings, which was fine by me.

“Would you like some company?” She lowered her voice, waiting for me to smile in agreement before she opened the door to crawl inside.

After her lips touched mine, it was only a matter of seconds until our clothes were gone. She climbed into the driver’s seat, straddling my lap. The sound of our ragged breathing filled the night, our groans muffling the music created by our bodies slamming against each other.

It was quick, but for that brief moment as waves of pleasure rolled over me, they numbed the emptiness I always carried with me.

3 | WOLF

My birthday had always been my favorite day of the year. Big parties were thrown to celebrate the life of the pack's heir, and they were a lot of fun. As an only child - an only *son* at that - my parents would also shower me with very expensive gifts, like the chrome gold Ferrari Portofino I had gotten when I turned 16. I usually got excited weeks before the date came, just thinking about the great time I would have.

This year, however, it was a bit different.

Although I couldn't deny I had been looking forward to the celebration, especially because turning 18 was a huge deal for wolf shifters, the meeting my father took me to the previous night had numbed my anticipation. Sex with Gina helped ease my mind, but only until I got back to my room, where thoughts flooded my mind again. My last night as a 17-year-old was a sleepless one. Needless to say, I was pretty much a zombie the next morning.

"Dude, are you okay? You look awful." Malin's remark brought me back to reality. We were at the cafeteria, having breakfast alongside the other pack members. I had to blink a few times to collect myself. We had just left morning training, evident from the new bruises my best friend had so kindly given me.

"Thanks, man. Didn't think you'd notice." I faked a smile, sighing soon after. "I'm still digesting the situation. We lost three of our allies right before my takeover, and the whole Fallen shit..."

"Hey, you're not alone. You have me," my second-in-command reminded me, sincerity in his eyes. "And Zach." He used his head to point at the boy seating to my left. Right. The future Gamma was there with us.

"Please don't ask me for help," Zach grunted.

Zachari's usual grumpy look was even more intense today, probably because his father had come back from his trip and scolded him for slacking off while he was away. His short, wild deep-brown hair was also messier than normal, and his sunglasses did a poor job at hiding the new black eye he had gotten - they did make him look a lot funnier though.

If it wasn't obvious by his poor state, my Gamma was a disaster when it came to fighting...or any physical activities really. The funniest part was that his parents had named him after Zachari Skies, the founder of Wind Howlers and one of the best warriors our pack had ever seen. If the former Gammas had hoped the name they chose for their oldest son would make him turn out to be just as strong and great, it seemed to have had the opposite effect.

I wouldn't change a thing about Zach though. Sure, Malin and I would often make fun of him, and he would curse at us in response, but our trio wouldn't be the same without him. Besides, he was undoubtedly the smartest of our group. He was also the tallest, slimmest, and youngest of us, having been born roughly two weeks after me. But the most intriguing detail about him were his eyes. He had a condition called heterochromia that caused his left eye to be a deep shade of blue, while his right eye was hazel.

"And you'll also meet your wolf today!" Malin chanted in a clear attempt to lighten my mood. "Let's hope he's not as much of a manwhore as you are."

His unexpected comment made me burst out laughing, and just like that, I forgot all about my troubles. A shifter's counterpart always either complemented their personality, or balanced it out. Since they were supposed to be the other half of the same soul, wolves were never complete opposites from their humans, but meeting your animal-self could mean learning about a different side to you.

"To your demise, I have a feeling he will turn out to be just as carefree as I am. I mean, Mint is a fucking prude, just like you."

“Mint’s not a prude!” Malin defended his wolf, as if he had taken it as a personal offense. “He even said he was okay with me having kissed that girl in eighth grade!”

“What a sin!” I teased, making him frown. The next second though, our eyes widened as the same thought crossed our minds, and we immediately turned to Zach with big smirks.

“Please don’t,” the Gamma muttered.

“How do you think your wolf will be, Zach?” My Beta giggled.

“If he’s anything like you, I bet he’ll be one hell of a horn dog, huh?” I teased, knowing it was the furthest thing possible from the truth.

“That’s it. I’m officially removing myself from this conversation,” he stated before crossing his arms over the table and resting his forehead on them to hide his face.

We would have continued to pester him until he exploded if we hadn’t been interrupted by the head cook, who placed a golden food tray before me without so much as a warning.

“Happy eighteenth birthday, Alpha Zephyr! May your future be filled with victories, joy, and love!” the older woman cooed happily.

Mrs. Robinson was almost 60 years old, but even as the wrinkles started to appear on her face, her gentle smile never faded. A wolf of Omega blood, she had worked passionately in the kitchen for most of her life. She was like a second mother to me, not because she spoiled me just as much as my mother, but because she would often babysit me when I was still a pup. I always loved being her little sous chef, though I suspect I made more of a mess playing with flour and cocoa powder than actually helping. Either way, she never complained.

“Thank you, Mrs. Robinson.” I returned her smile before glancing at the plate in front of me.

She would cook special dishes for every single one of my birthdays, but this year, she had gone all out by preparing a

full birthday menu. Even as a legal adult, I couldn't help but chuckle at the cute way she organized each element on the fancy plate; the pancake, the two eggs and a few bacon strips had been shaped together like a smiley face. There were also croissants filled with brie cheese and blackberry jelly, fruit salad, and the cherry on top - a giant cupcake with green and gold candles.

"It's my pleasure, sweet boy. Enjoy!" The cook bowed her head curtly as she turned around to leave, but she soon stopped dead in her tracks. "Oh! And for the millionth time, don't bother bringing us your empty plates. My staff will be here to collect them when you're done."

"But-"

"No buts!" she insisted. "You'll be officially Alpha after your ceremony tonight. You have more important things to worry about than your dirty dishes." I watched as she walked away, considering whether I should argue with her or not. In the end, I just realized doing so would only be a waste of time, because she wouldn't change her mind.

"How come you're the one who gets all of the attention?" Malin pouted, pointing at my croissant. "Are you gonna eat that by the way?"

I rolled my eyes, sliding the plate over to him. It was a wonder how he could still be in good shape when he was such a glutton. "Well, I'm the Alpha. Besides, what's there not to love about me?"

"That's not fair. The Beta and Gamma are just as important as the Alpha," he observed, ignoring my last sentence.

"I'm fine with being under his shadow. The spotlight makes my eyes hurt," Zach mumbled, finally lifting his head up again to remind us of his presence.

Malin stared at him in disbelief for a good while before shaking his head. "Alright, Lame Eagle. Let's go make our own plates since the cooks don't spoil us like they do the Alpha-to-be."

“For fuck’s sake, Malin! Stop calling me that!” my third-in-command growled at our friend, who was already heading for the line. Utterly annoyed, Zach followed after him.

A small laugh escaped my lips, and I smiled as I realized that Malin was right. I sure had a lot on my plate, but as long as I had these two with me, I would always find my way.

* * *

By the time I left the cafeteria, I was feeling a lot lighter. The weight of the responsibility I was about to take on was still on my shoulders, but I managed to ignore it for a while to allow myself to be excited about tonight. A flicker of hope also lit up inside my chest as I wondered if I would finally feel whole after my first shift.

My mother was the only one I ever felt comfortable enough to talk about the emptiness I felt. It had bothered me since I was a pup, until I couldn’t keep it in any longer. Mom told me it was normal for shifters to feel this way before they meet their counterparts, and her theory helped ease my worries. Although it didn’t seem like anyone else faced the same troubles as me, I held on to that possibility. I guess I would find out if she was right in a few hours.

A wolf’s connection with their human was fully established at their exact time of birth on their eighteenth birthday. Our counterparts remained asleep inside our minds until then, and for the few months preceding our birthday, our heightened senses gradually kicked in as they slowly left their hibernation. I was born precisely one minute before midnight, so by the time the clock turned twelve tonight, I would be standing in animal form before my entire pack. They’ll hail me, and I will lead Wind Howlers for the first time in a run across the dandelion fields.

It was around 2:00 p.m. when I returned to the Alpha suite to get ready after hanging out with the boys. Though my First Shift Ceremony would only happen late at night, there were a number of rituals I had to endure before it was finally time - bathing in special salts, meditating to help guide my wolf to the surface of my mind, cracking bones and stretching to physically prepare my body for the transformation. While the

entire pack arranged the details for the event, two Omegas were sent to my room to help me with all the fun activities I'd have to go through.

The best - and probably the only enjoyable - part of the first shift traditions was the special dinner. At ten o'clock, the kitchen staff arrived at the Alpha suite to set a large table with a variety of steaks, and I was to eat all of the dishes by myself. It was a common belief that the consumption of fresh meat triggered our animal side to come forth, which would help my wolf feel more active once he awoke.

After I was done, all there was left for me to do was get dressed. A very expensive outfit had been tailor-made for my ceremony, consisting of a green and gold camo tuxedo and dark green trousers. A golden bowtie around my neck and a single dandelion sticking out of the pocket on the left side of my chest complemented my look.

I was fixing my hair in front of the full-sized mirror when I heard a knock on the door. "Come in," I muttered, not bothering to turn around.

"Oh wow, puppers! You look handsome." Alex's voice took me by surprise.

I glanced at her in the mirror with a smirk. "If Victor isn't careful enough, I might just steal you from him."

"You wish." She scoffed, taking a few steps in my direction. When she was close enough, she turned me around and held me at arm's length to get a good look at me. "You've grown so fast. It seems like just yesterday when I would babysit you and your friends. Now, look at you...all ready to take on the Alpha role." The green in her hazel eyes turned brighter.

"You're not gonna cry, are you?" I said playfully. "You're not even that much older than us."

"Old enough to boss you around," she observed, laughing.

"Not for long though." I winked at her, making her roll her eyes in response.

“Anyway, just wanted to make sure you were ready. Gotta be at the front hall in ten.”

“I’ll be there. Thank you, Alex.” I nodded, and she returned the gesture before turning around to leave.

Ten minutes, I reminded myself. In ten minutes, my whole life would change.

I took a deep breath, not to calm my nerves down, but to focus. If I had been insecure since the meeting of the previous night, all of my doubts had now vanished. Even with the challenges I knew I would have to face, I was confident; I had been born for this, and I had been training my entire life to take over the pack. I was ready.

Once my time was up, I raised my head and stepped out of the room. When I reached the entrance hall, everyone was already there, waiting for me. Mom and Dad were standing arm-in-arm, wearing matching green and gold outfits. Beta Warrick was right behind Malin, both of them sporting gold suits. Zachari’s family was dressed in forest green, and my friend wasn’t even trying to hide the frown on his face, clearly displeased with his formal clothes. Alex and Victor were by the door, both wearing white.

“Zephyr. You’re here.” My father’s stern voice echoed through the hall. Letting go of my mother for a brief moment, he approached me, placing both hands on my shoulders. “Are you ready, son?”

“I was born ready,” I told him confidently. Despite how hard he tried to maintain a neutral expression in public, I could see the shadow of a smile lighting up his face. He nodded and stepped away, making room for Mom.

“Oh, my sweet Zeze!” She threw her arms around me, wrapping me in a hug. As soon as she pulled away, both her hands cupped my face. “You look so handsome, my boy. You’ll make a fine Alpha.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I smiled at her.

“Alright, everyone. Now that my son’s ready, let’s head outside with our pack.” Dad commanded, taking the lead. The

other wolves present lowered their heads as I walked past them, not hesitating to follow right behind me.

As soon as we left the building, we all hopped inside of the limousine parked right out front. The driver took us to our destination - the waterfall by the cliff. There, no more words were spoken. Malin smiled encouragingly at me while Zach gave me a thumbs up, and they both followed the others down the long stone stairway that led to a small beach. Taking a step near the edge, I could see all the members of Wind Howlers gathered at the narrow strip of sand, waiting for me to join them. Unlike the rest of the Elite, I wouldn't be taking the stairs though.

Our pack owed our success to the wind. Because of our strong relation with it, it was tradition at Wind Howlers for the new Alphas to jump down the waterfall into the sea during their first shift. While they fell through the skies, it was almost as if they were flying. They put themselves at the mercy of the breeze, trusting it to guide them safely to their destination.

It was quite the fall, and though it could be fatal for humans, it was hardly dangerous for wolf shifters. Not only did we heal faster, we were also more resilient. A lot of the members would come here and jump just to feel more connected with the wind; it brought us inexplicable peace. Looking down made my heart beat faster, but I couldn't deny I was excited to try it for the first time.

After taking a good look at the view, I glanced up at the moon. I didn't have a clock with me to know exactly how close it was to midnight, but I could feel the animal crawling inside of me as it tried to reach the surface. It wasn't painful; no, it was liberating. I didn't fight the feeling, closing my eyes as I embraced my true nature. And right before I jumped, tuxedo and all, a powerful howl broke through my chest.

While I fell down, my skin started itching and burning as thick fur sprouted from it. Next, the sound of cracking bones filled the air as my whole body adapted to my new form. The pain was excruciating, but I refused to scream. I became one with the wind as it embraced me, numbing my discomfort as its chilliness soothed me. It howled a calming melody, almost

as if it was letting me know I would be alright. By the time I hit the water, my transformation was complete.

There was only silence as I sank into the depths of the sea. After the quick, yet painful experience, it made me feel lighter. At first, it was weird to move with my new paws, but I soon got the hang of it. Guided by the light of the moon, I swam towards the surface and climbed to a spot where the water was more shallow to show my wolf in all its glory. As I emerged, I waited for the crowd to cheer before my powerful wolf counterpart.

However, the celebration I was anxiously expecting never came.

4 | SHE

Why was nobody celebrating?

The world looked different through my animal eyes, but there was no denying the sight before me. As I glanced at the almost 200 members of my pack, gathered at the small beach with the sole purpose of praising their new Alpha, I realized they all wore shocked expressions. Dead silence filled the air, broken only by the burble of the waterfall. There was no applause, no cheering. No one dared say a word.

Why were they all staring at me in utter silence? Was my wolf so ugly it disgusted them? My heart started beating faster at the thought, and the moment I lowered my head to inspect my reflection in the dark blue sea, I stopped breathing.

The first detail I noticed were my wolf's eyes - they were of a serene, lively golden color, intense and calming like the first light of day. Water dripped from its long, tricolor fur. Its cheeks, muzzle, and neck were bright caramel, forming a circular shape that resembled the sun. There were also warm shades of blond speckled over its coat, as well as a darker coffee color that was mainly present on the top side of its face, head, back, and tail. Its ears were rounder and shorter than most wolves' ears.

There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it. In fact, it was incredibly beautiful, especially if compared to the usual shades of white, black, and gray. But...

It didn't look like me.

Wolves were supposed to be a reflection of their human-selves. Most of them would even share common features with their counterparts, like eye or hair color. Why did my wolf look nothing like me? The longer I stared at my reflection, the more questions arose in my mind.

Soon, I realized that it didn't just look different than me - it *felt* different. It was almost as if I was in someone else's body. I didn't feel like myself. Come to think about it, I didn't even feel like a male anymore. Wait, what the-

"We meet at last, Zephyr." A silvery, yet powerful feminine voice echoed inside my head. *"Since I already know your name, it's only fair that I introduce myself. I'm Dawn."*

A...she-wolf? What the hell was going on?!

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions. I'll try to answer them to the best of my knowledge if you just-"

"Get the fuck outta my head!" I screamed desperately. I couldn't take this craziness any longer. *"Give me back control!"*

"If we shift back now-"

"Just do as I say!"

The she-wolf didn't argue with me anymore. She willingly retreated to the back of my mind, forcing my human side to come forth again. Because my body hadn't properly healed yet, the transformation took longer than the first time, and the pain was almost unbearable. I was aware that a werewolf should remain in animal form for at least half an hour after their first shift, but what choice did I have? I couldn't keep that creature out for any longer while my people stared at her.

With my mind blurry from the pain, I wondered if it had all been a nightmare. It had to be, right? But as shreds of my clothes, torn during the transformation, slowly landed at the surface of the water around me, I knew it had all been real.

Whether out of fear of facing the truth, or due to how weak I was after my forced premature change, my knees failed me and I fell onto the sand. I was panting and sweating as my mom approached me, her heart beating almost as loud as mine. She put a robe over my shoulders, and I clenched tightly onto its velvety fabric. Shaking, I didn't know how I found the strength to get back on my feet, but when I did, my gaze immediately landed on my father.

In his eyes, I saw confusion, as well as a hint of pity - the worst an Alpha could be offered.

The next second, his voice thundered as he turned to the baffled crowd. "Everyone! The run will be postponed. You may return to your homes now."

Dad's words might have sounded like a suggestion, but his authoritative tone left no room for misunderstandings. I didn't miss the sympathetic look Alex flashed at me before she helped lead the wolves out of the beach.

"Beta Warrick. Gamma Hudson." My father's elite team took a step forward as the other members dispersed. "To my office." Lastly, his rage-filled eyes turned to me. I could only pray his anger wasn't directed towards me. "You too, Zephyr. Let's go."

Despite the bloody mess of emotions I was at the moment, I tried to show no fear. In an attempt to keep my dignity, I struggled away from my mother's grasp and followed my father's command. As I walked past Malin and Zach, I noticed the concern in their expressions from the corner of my eyes, but they didn't say anything, and neither did I.

On my way to the Alpha's office, I tried to collect myself. But no matter how many breaths I took, my lungs never got enough air. No matter how hard I tried to focus, my vision remained blurry. My chest continued to move up and down as my heart continued to beat erratically. Why was this happening to me? Why was my wolf a female?

"Will you stop making a fuss already? I said I could-"

"Stop! Shut up!" I screamed louder inside my head when the she-wolf spoke again. I could feel her rolling her eyes, but thankfully, I didn't hear her voice again.

Once we reached the top floor of the pack house, my father opened the door to his office. He stood in front of his desk, his back to me as we walked inside. For the first few seconds, there was only silence, until he slammed his fist against his desk, easily splitting it in half. When I shuddered in surprise, my mother pulled me closer as her instincts to shelter me

kicked in. Not from Dad, but from what we were about to discuss.

“Something must have gone wrong...” he whispered, lost in thought. “This is a mistake. It has to be.”

“I’m sure we will figure it out.” Mom’s words were directed to my father, but her tranquil blue eyes were focused on me. “Zephyr, my boy, did your...wolf, say anything?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t let her. I forced her to retreat.”

“*You can’t force me to do shit, muttonhead!*” The she-wolf surprised me. I thought I was blocking her out; maybe I let my guard down in my distress. She scoffed. “*You’re pretty stupid for an Alpha, you know?*” This time, I just ignored her.

“Oh, honey, I can’t imagine how dazed you must be right now...” My mother ran her hands through my hair, offering me a sympathetic smile in an attempt to soothe me. “I know it must feel weird, but perhaps you should let her speak.”

Her suggestion made me hesitant. Everyone turned to me with expectation in their eyes. In the end, I sighed, realizing I wanted to get answers more than anyone else in this room. Taking a deep breath, I readied myself for what I had been avoiding until now.

“*Alright, mutt. This is your chance to explain what’s going on,*” I demanded.

“*You think I did this? I’m in the same boat as you are!*” I was taken aback when the she-wolf growled. “*Besides, I have a name, you know.*”

What was up with her attitude? She had just ruined the most special moment of my life; she had no right to be angry. As much as I wanted to take my anger out on her though, I realized arguing wouldn’t get me anywhere. In a second of clarity, I tried to remember what she had told me her name was.

“*Dawn,*” I uttered at last. Her ears fell back, denoting she was pleased with my change in attitude. “*Can you tell me why you and I have been paired together?*”

“I...” She looked away, lowering her voice. *“I can’t.”*

“Just like I thought, you’re full of crap.”

“Just listen, damn it!” Since I had no other choice, I did as she said. *“I can’t answer your question because part of my memory was wiped.”*

“By who?”

“By the Moon Goddess,” she revealed without hesitation. *“She doesn’t want either of us to know until it’s time.”*

“Time for what?” I asked, but again, she stayed silent. I immediately understood she didn’t remember that either.

“You and I, Zephyr... We’re part of something big. Bigger than either of us,” she whispered, mystery filling her voice. *“Diana meant for us to find each other. We were destined to be together.”*

“I can see that.” I clenched my fists as anger rose into my throat again. *“What I can’t understand is why the Goddess cursed me with you!”*

“What is she saying?” Dad’s question interrupted my conversation with my wolf. There was hope in his expression, and it hurt to know I would destroy all of it, but I couldn’t lie to him.

“She said there’s no mistake, that the Moon Goddess had every intention of pairing us together. She can’t tell me why though.”

His expression fell for a brief moment, but soon his usual determined look was back to his face. “Don’t worry, son. Everything will fall into place.” He squeezed my shoulder before turning to his team. “Warrick. I need you to arrange a meeting with the pack’s Elder as soon as possible.”

“Of course, Alpha.” The Beta nodded right before his eyes clouded over, indicating that he was mindlinking someone.

Then, Dad turned to his Gamma. “Hudson, I want you to work alongside Alexandra to prevent rumors about Zephyr’s first shift from getting out of control. Find her and fill her in on my decision.”

“Yes, Alpha.” The man bowed his head.

“The Elder said he will see us tomorrow at six,” Warrick revealed.

“In the morning?” I questioned. “That’s when training starts.” As irrelevant as it may seem, we take training very seriously at Wind Howlers. We spar two hours a day, five times a week. As the future Alpha, I always had to be the first to arrive to set the example.

“You are excused from training tomorrow. We have other priorities right now,” Dad insisted, and I didn’t have it in me to argue with him. Once the issue was settled, he turned to his men. “Thank you for your assistance, Beta. Gamma. You are dismissed. Before you leave, I must remind you - none of what we discussed here tonight leaves this room,” he ordered with utter seriousness in his eyes. “Also, what happened at the falls doesn’t change anything. Zephyr is still my heir and the Alpha to this pack, regardless of what gender his wolf is.”

My old man’s words honestly surprised me. He was in a much calmer state now than he had been when we arrived here, but still, I didn’t expect him to handle the situation with such clarity. It seemed he still had a lot to teach me about being a great leader.

As Warrick and Hudson left the office, I turned around to do the same, but the former Alpha stopped me by grasping one of my shoulders firmly. “None of this is your fault, Zephyr. Remember that and try to get some rest before we meet with the Elder tomorrow.”

Despite my exhaustion, I forced a smile. “Yes, father.”

“Good night, Zeze.” Mom returned the gesture. “Sleep tight.”

“You too,” I whispered before walking out of the room.

* * *

For the second night in a row, I couldn’t sleep. First, the threat of the Fallen, and now this? After all these years anxiously waiting for the moment I would finally meet my wolf, the other half of my soul...they turned out to be a

female. Thankfully, she remained quiet, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Out of all the troubles keeping me awake, the same question rang repeatedly in my head - what was our unexpected union supposed to mean?

I still hadn't thought of an answer when I watched the first rays of sun illuminate the village through the large windows. My night had been awful, but at last morning came, and with it, I would hopefully get some explanations. As I rolled out of bed to get dressed in the first clothes I found lying around the room, I just hoped most of the members would either be asleep or at training. I wasn't ready to face them after what they had seen at my ceremony.

By the time I made it to the entrance hall, my father was already there, alone. Beta Warrick was busy conducting warrior training, while Gamma Hudson was probably with Alex working damage control. At first, I thought Mom could be asleep, but knowing she wouldn't miss the chance to be by my side at such a difficult moment, I realized she was probably covering for Dad so he could come with me. We exchanged nods before walking in silence towards our destination, as no words could soothe our worries.

The small stone shrine, which was home to Wind Howlers' Elder, was located in the main square, right next to the pack house. Every pack was required to have at least one Elder; since they had more affinity with magic, they were needed to perform essential rituals. They were also in charge of reporting problems or irregularities to the National Elder Council - the highest authority in werewolf society.

A pack's Elder was also the only individual who was above the Alpha, holding the power to dethrone any leader he judged unfit to rule, which was why I felt quite anxious.

As soon as we stepped into the building, we lowered our heads before Elder Laelius. He was standing behind a stone pedestal, where a thick open book rested. It didn't take long for his hoarse, yet intimidating voice to echo.

"Alpha Zephyr Wyndham." I immediately lifted my gaze to look at him. "You claim to have been paired with a female

wolf counterpart during your First Shift Ceremony, correct?”

“Yes,” I replied without hesitation.

“Excuse me, Elder Laelius.” My father took a step forward. “Do you believe this could be some kind of mistake?”

“The Moon Goddess makes no mistakes,” the ancient man stated firmly before turning his attention back to the book in front of him. “As unusual as the situation is, there is no reason for us to believe your son’s union with his wolf was unintentional. After Beta Warrick contacted me last night, I was able to find some information on the matter.” My eyes glistened with hope as he flickered through the old pages. “It appears there have been reports of shifters being paired with animal counterparts who don’t reflect their physical characteristics, nor complete them. Is that how you feel, boy?”

“Precisely.” I couldn’t hide the anxiety in my voice.

“The first case dates back to over a thousand years ago. According to the tale, there were twin sisters whose wolves had been switched after birth. A few rare situations similar to this have been registered through the centuries.”

“Is that what might have happened to my son?”

The Elder nodded. “I think it is likely that Zephyr has been paired with another werewolf’s counterpart. Although I didn’t have time to further research the topic, I do believe it can be reversed.”

“How?!” Dad and I asked in unison.

“I’m afraid my current knowledge won’t allow me to answer your question.” As quickly as our expectation bloomed, it was cut at the root. “I will contact other Elders to see if they can assist me. Once I have more information, I’ll get back to you.”

My father and I exchanged hopeless looks before he turned to the Elder one last time, his voice low. “Thank you, Elder Laelius, but where does that leave my son?”

The man's cold gaze fell on me. "Zephyr Wyndham shall keep his title as Wind Howlers' Alpha, just as the Goddess intended."

The shadow of a smile crossed my father's stern face as he glanced at me. I should be happy, too. But for some reason, the Elder's words only made me more anxious.

How was I supposed to rule a pack with a female wolf?

5 | PECULIAR

A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I sat on the hood of my car, staring out at the view beyond the cliff. Wind Howlers didn't have the largest territory in the state, but I was convinced ours was the most beautiful. Whenever I was stressed, I would listen to the calming sound of the waves crashing against the rocks, but today, not even that could wash away my troubles.

After our meeting with the Elder, my father took me to his office, where we joined my mother to have breakfast in private. Although we had barely gotten any clarification on the problem, he was satisfied with the fact I could still lead. Mom was ecstatic when he told her, too. Sadly, as they discussed the next steps for my takeover, I couldn't share their joy.

There were two ways to rule over wolves - through respect or through fear. Either of them could only be achieved upon proving one's strength. As creatures who value power, they would only listen to the strongest among them, which is why Alphas passed their titles on to their sons before their old age started to weaken them. It was also the reason why males were usually the ones to become pack leaders; they're naturally bigger and stronger than females.

Despite the Elder giving me permission to claim my birthright, I knew it wouldn't matter once challengers started to appear.

"Let them come," Dawn roared confidently, clearly listening to my thoughts. *"I will gladly defeat them for you if you're too busy whining with your tail between your legs."*

Her brave words only made me scoff. *"As if I would ever let you out to battle anyone."*

"Why wouldn't you?" I had no intention of replying, but she continued before I could anyway, *"Oh, nevermind. I know"*

why. You're afraid of realizing that a female is stronger than you, huh? Classic Alpha male crap."

Damn, she knew how to get on my nerves. She would have gotten a rise out of me had a loud bark not interrupted our bickering. As I turned in the direction of the sound, I encountered a 6' 5" wolf standing close to my car. It had light blonde coat with white and gray markings. I recognized him by his unique eyes; they were a blue-ish shade of green, resembling mint.

"Goddess, this is so embarrassing!" Zach complained. I didn't even notice my friend riding the creature until he climbed down from its back. "Why couldn't we take the damn limousine instead?"

The next second, the wolf shifted back into his human form, revealing my Beta. "Because Mint could get us here faster," he replied, quickly putting on the shorts he had been carrying. Meanwhile, Zach tried and failed to get rid of the fur on his clothes. Once Malin was dressed, he turned to me. "You said it was urgent. Does this have to do with your talk with the Elder?"

"Yeah."

"How did it go?" There was a hint of interest in my Gamma's different-colored eyes.

"Not as well as I'd hoped," I confessed, massaging my temples. "Anyway, the reason why I called you here is because my father wants the Power Transfer Ceremony to happen tonight."

"Does that mean you get to keep your title?" Malin smiled. "Bro, that's awesome!"

"That's what everyone keeps telling me." I looked away, heaving a sigh.

"And yet you look less thrilled than I did when my father forced me to go back to training yesterday," Zach observed.

"Hey man, don't you think you might be getting a little bit ahead of yourself here?" My best friend's tone was quite positive, contrasting with my negativity. He seemed to easily

understand what I was thinking. “Wolves have to prove their strength to earn respect. Why don’t you let Dawn show you what she’s worth before you jump to conclusions? You might be surprised.”

“Listen to your Beta. He seems to be a lot smarter than you,” my she-wolf chuckled cockily.

“I have a feeling I’ll just get disappointed, and I definitely don’t need any more of that right now.”

Just as I finished my sentence, my ears caught the sound of a different voice. My eyes then landed on two young men a good distance away from us. Although I couldn’t really understand what they were whispering about, the way they were staring at me made it obvious. Hudson and Alex were working to keep the rumors from spreading, but I should probably avoid feeding them as well. With that in mind, I jumped from the hood of the car and opened the door to the driver’s seat.

“Get in.” I pointed at my Ferrari with my head. “Let’s continue our talk in my father’s office, where there won’t be any eyes on us.”

“If you didn’t wanna draw attention, maybe you shouldn’t have driven your shiny gold car,” Zach mumbled as he hopped onto the backseat, leaving my Beta to ride shotgun.

* * *

After the three of us returned to the pack house, I explained the whole conversation with the Elder and its consequences in more detail. I was sure they knew the procedures for a Power Transfer Ceremony very well, but with so much going wrong recently, I wanted to leave no room for error.

The ceremony would take place tonight, in front of the Elder Shrine at the main square. During the event, a magic ritual is performed in which the former Elite members pass their powers on to us, the new generation. That would legitimize our authority by granting us some benefits exclusive to the highest-ranking wolves. In my case, I would inherit my father’s Alpha tone - a special ability that allowed a leader to

command other wolves of their pack by force - while Warrick would share some of his strength with Malin, making him as powerful as a born Beta.

The rest of my day was spent inside of my room, both because I wanted to avoid questions I didn't know the answer to, and because I needed some time alone to organize my thoughts. Well, not really alone, since I now had a mutt who could read my mind all the time. She at least restrained herself to scoffing or silently rolling her eyes at my concerns, which was annoying, yet certainly not as stressful as our pointless bickering.

Time passed by quicker than I would have liked, and before I managed to find any solutions to my wolf problem, the sun set, allowing the moon to shine bright in the navy sky. I was finishing getting dressed when I heard my phone beep on the bedside table. Glancing at the lit up screen, I noticed a message from Alex that read: *Everything's ready for the ceremony. Tried linking u but couldn't reach into ur mind.*

I blinked a few times, realizing I hadn't tried mindlinking anyone ever since I got my counterpart the night before. Instead of texting the Delta back, I decided to test my new ability for the first time. To my surprise, all of my attempts at establishing a connection with her failed. Thinking she might have a block up, I tried to link Malin, only to be faced with the same result. I thought it would be natural for me to communicate with anyone in my pack because of the magic bond that tied us. Could I be doing something wrong?

"You're not doing anything wrong." Dawn's voice startled me as she suddenly crawled up to the surface. *"We just can't link them."*

"Why the hell not?" I spat, tired of her games.

"Our souls are tied, yet there is no bond between us. If you keep pushing me away, you'll only make yourself weaker."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

Unfortunately for me, I realized I wouldn't be getting an answer when she remained silent. There was no point in

arguing with her; she was probably just being stubborn, as always. Not willing to stress myself out more than I already was, I decided to just let it go. I could try again later when she was in a better mood, if that was even possible.

Just like I had done the night before, I met with my friends and the former Elite members at the entrance hall, hoping tonight's ceremony would have a better outcome. We exchanged a few words before heading outside together. When we arrived at the main square, all eyes landed on me, sending a chill through my bones. Apparently, my first shift experience had traumatized me. The gathered pack members cleared a path, allowing us to walk up to the front of the Elder Shrine. The moment my father raised his hand, the crowd went completely silent.

"Members of Wind Howlers Pack..." His voice was loud and imposing, demanding respect. "You are here today to witness the rise of your new Elite members. After the confusion of last night, Elder Laelius determined that my son, Zephyr Wyndham, is still fit to exercise his duties as your next Alpha." Alex probably informed them all about the ceremony, judging by how everyone remained quiet at the revelation. "Our traditional run, however, will be postponed while we look into his...peculiar wolf situation." He lowered his tone at the last part, and I found it hard to keep my head high.

"I don't like this..." There she was again.

"What?" Why was I even paying attention to her?

"The run is important to help strengthen our bond with our pack; avoiding it will only make it harder for us to rule."

"Us?" I scoffed. *"Funny you should say that considering the only thing threatening my title right now is you!"* She lowered her ears at my aggressive tone, but still squinted her golden eyes in anger. For some reason, speaking to her in such a harsh manner made me feel a pinch of pain in my chest, but I shook it off. *"You are the problem. The faster I get rid of you, the sooner I can focus on the real issue - the Fallen."*

"And what makes you think I can't help you with that?" she finally barked back. *"You're so damn arrogant!"*

“That seems to be the only thing we have in common.”

“Without further ado, let’s begin,” Elder Laelius announced, putting an end to my internal debate with my she-wolf. He turned away from the crowd, stepping closer to me and my father, who were standing side-by-side at the center.

Dad and I exchanged side-glances before stretching our right hands out in synchrony. A silver dagger with a wolf sculpted at the end of the hilt hung from the rope belt around Elder Laelius’ waist. He carefully wielded the weapon, bringing it closer to the former Alpha’s palm as he placed his hand right under it for support. The blade easily cut my father’s skin, the silver preventing the wound from immediately healing so the blood could flow from his veins.

The Elder then proceeded to do the same to me. I didn’t wince; not from the pain, nor from the burning sensation caused by the holy metal. I watched the thin crimson river stain my palm for a brief second before I noticed my father turning to face me, and I mimicked him. With our eyes locked, we grasped each other’s bleeding hands.

“Vetus descendet ut nova oriri possit,” Laelius chanted repeatedly as our blood mixed and dripped down our hands, hitting the grass and almost instantly being absorbed by the soil. I couldn’t understand the magical ancient tongue, but I knew what was happening - I was being tied to my new responsibilities and my land. By the time the ritual was over, both of our cuts had already healed. “Rise, Zephyr Wyndham, new Alpha of Wind Howlers Pack!”

At his command, I took a deep breath and straightened my posture. I glanced at my people, my followers, as I threw my fist into the air. The members all fell to one knee, lowering their heads in submission. They were accepting me as their leader. The moment should have felt empowering, but a single thought prevented me from fully enjoying it - how long would their loyalty last?

The same ritual was performed with Beta Warrick and Malin, then with Gamma Hudson and Zachari. Alex stood there with us the whole time, but because she had already been

officially made Delta five years ago, she didn't need to go through it again. At the end of the ceremony, my Elite team and I took a few steps forward to present ourselves to the pack, while the Elder recited a speech about how the old would set with the sun and the new would rise with the moon.

After the Power Transfer Ceremony, the wolves would all celebrate with a run through the dandelion fields, but since we decided it would be best to postpone it, the Elder simply dismissed us. My parents congratulated me and invited me to dine in the city with them, but I politely refused. My friends, the new Elite members, certainly deserved to be thrown a party where they could enjoy their new power. However, as much as I wanted to celebrate with them, I needed to dedicate my attention to the issues keeping me up at night.

Instead of opening bottles of beer by the cliff, I called my friends to the Alpha's office. I ran my fingers over the wooden desk with golden detailing, my eyes scouring through the room as I realized it was technically mine now. My gaze eventually landed on my father's dark green chair. As I hesitantly sat on it, I felt powerful; it was curious how an inanimate object could hold so much meaning.

"Our first official meeting," Malin observed, his tone slightly amazed as he too felt the grandiosity of the room. In the end, he turned his attention back to me. "What is it about? Is anything wrong?"

"A lot of things. Everything seems to keep going wrong lately." I sighed at how pathetically pessimistic I sounded. How could I be hopeful in face of the recent events though? "I'm sorry I've dragged you here after such an important moment in your lives."

"I've dreamed about being Beta for a long time, and I always knew what it meant. Our duties are more important than parties." My best friend had an even more serious look than usual on his face.

"I hate parties anyway." Zach shrugged.

I widened my eyes at their reaction. A smile spread over my lips as I was reminded of what my Beta had told me the

day before - I was not alone in this. Part of my insecurities washed away, and I allowed myself to relax against my chair.

“If that’s the case, please take your seats.” Damn, I was really calling the shots now. My two friends nodded as they followed my command, waiting in silence for me to go on. “As I have already told you, we have a big problem on our hands - aside from my female wolf situation.” I frowned, quickly shaking my head before I let the issue distract me. “The Fallen army has been growing in numbers, and they’re marching in our direction. There are only three packs standing between us and them now. The council still has little information on who they are or what they want, and we have lost three of our allies. We can’t know for sure when they will get to us, or if they will be stopped before then. For that reason, I want to make sure we will be ready to deal with them if they come.”

“What’s your plan, Alpha?” Malin grinned playfully.

“I’m glad you asked, Beta,” I replied, matching his tone. “First, I want you to reach out to other packs and try to establish new alliances. Wind Howlers isn’t big, but we have a lot to offer.”

“Warrick has been teaching me about negotiations. I’m sure I can get us a deal or two.”

“That’s just what I needed to hear.” I smiled, a bit more relieved. “It might be worth it to focus your efforts on getting a treaty with a larger pack. It’ll be harder than trying to convince smaller packs, but if we get the right Alpha on our side, it could be enough.”

“I’m on it.” Malin nodded confidently.

“What do you have for me?” Zach leaned forward, showing a little bit of curiosity, which was rare.

“I need you to take a look at our current defense system and see if it can be improved to keep the Fallen away. I know you don’t have a lot of experience with that yet, but-”

“I’ve been watching my father for years.” He furrowed his brows, apparently offended by my remark. “I know what to

do.”

“At least you did your research on the days you skipped training,” Malin teased.

“I’d just rather use my time in more practical ways.”

“Of course you would.”

“Alright, guys.” I caught their attention before they started fighting for real. “Can I trust you to do that?”

“Yes, Alpha,” they both replied in unison, with a naturalness I wasn’t expecting.

“If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to come to me. You’re dismissed.”

They rose from their seats, bowing their heads at me before turning around to leave. We were young, and we surely still had a lot to learn, but seeing their determination made me feel a little more confident.

Now, I just had to take care of my other...personal problem.

6 | WEAK

As a leader, I tried to remain positive in the face of difficulty, but every time the sun set, it carried away part of my hope along with it - and unlike the golden star, it was never reborn with a new dawn.

Five days had gone by since the Power Transfer Ceremony. Because all of my nights after I officially stepped in as Alpha were spent at the library, I hadn't gotten any sleep. It would have been worth it had I found any information regarding why I had been the first wolf in history to get an opposite-gender counterpart. But sadly, that wasn't the case. Elder Laelius hadn't reached out to me either, which could only mean his research so far was turning out to be just as fruitless as mine. To my detriment, my problems didn't stop there.

My Delta was still doing her best to keep the rumors from spreading even after Zach's father retired, but you can only hide shit from wolf ears for so long. Whenever I wandered through the common area of the pack house or the gardens in the main square, I would hear members whispering about my she-wolf. I often felt like Dawn was purposely directing our heightened hearing toward them just to spite me, but it was probably my own fault, as I couldn't stop thinking about what they were saying about me.

Eventually, what my father feared the most ended up happening. Another one of our allies sought me with the purpose of breaking our alliance, claiming to have heard about my female counterpart. Honestly, I couldn't blame him. Our chances in a war against a powerful unknown enemy were already slim, and the news about me - the Alpha whose soul had been tied to a female wolf - didn't help turn the odds in our favor.

The females who used to constantly surround me were now keeping their distance as well, so I hadn't gotten laid

since my birthday. It might seem stupid considering the other major issues I had in my hands, but sex was my only escape. Without it, the emptiness I felt inside was slowly growing, driving me insane. I found their behavior odd at first, until I caught some of the girls whispering about how I must be gay.

That wasn't even the worst of the rumors. Pack members left and right were theorizing about possible reasons why I had been cursed with a female counterpart. The one I heard the most was that I probably didn't deserve a male wolf because I wasn't fit to rule; that my she-wolf reflected my inner weakness. Well, the Elder did say the Moon Goddess makes no mistake... Maybe he was right. Maybe everyone was right.

Perhaps the reason why she had paired me with a she-wolf was because I was weak.

"Of course they think that!" The voice I had dreaded since the first time I'd heard it echoed inside my head. *"Wolves need someone strong to guide them, and right now, you're a weak leader. You think you're a mighty Alpha wolf, but you act like a scared kitten!"* Her words stunned me. *"All you do is whine all day! How can you expect respect when you keep throwing yourself pity parties? You bow your head to some stupid rumors, you let everyone talk behind your back!"*

I had a feeling she would go on all day if I didn't interrupt her. *"How can I defend myself when they're right? I'm a freak. All because of you!"*

"Me?! You think you're the only victim here?" She raised her tone as anger consumed her - I could feel it as if it was my own. *"What do you think it's like being locked in your closed mind? It's freaking claustrophobic here! You never listen to me. You haven't let me out since we met. I've been caged for almost a week!"*

I opened my mouth to counter, but a pinch of pain struck me and the words got caught in my throat. As much as I wanted to say she was wrong, I knew she wasn't. I had been taking all of my anger out on her, but I failed to see the other side - she didn't choose to be with me either. Was I really a

bad counterpart? No... I was awful. I treated her like shit from the moment we met.

“All because I’m a female,” she concluded.

My lack of sleep seemed to intensify my emotions. I was mostly enraged, but when guilt overshadowed everything else, I felt the urge to apologize to Dawn. Sadly, before I could figure out where to start, I heard a knock on the office door. After taking a moment to collect myself, I muttered ‘come in.’ Confusion hit me when my eyes fell on Alpha Anders of Silver Claw, one of our oldest allies, standing right beside my father. As an ally, he could enter our territory as he pleased, but I wondered why he hadn’t notified me first.

“Alpha Anders.” I stood up from my chair to shake his hand. There was something about his aura... It was different than it had been on the night of the meeting. I looked at my father in search of answers, but he seemed just as clueless as me. Shaking my head, I turned my attention back to the man. “Please, take a seat. I wasn’t expecting your visit. Are you here for a formal meeting? Let me call my Beta so we can-”

“No,” he cut me off, clearing his throat soon after. “No, that won’t be necessary, Alpha Zephyr. I don’t wish to take up your time.”

Tension filled the air, and I instinctively took a step back. “What would you like to discuss with me?”

“Zephyr. Bertrand.” His gaze shifted between my father and I. “Wind Howlers has helped my pack many times. We could never repay the debt we owe you...” There was hurt in his expression as he struggled to get the words out. “Which is why it pains me to do this. Unfortunately, I’m afraid I have no other choice.” He took a deep breath, raising his head to show confidence in his decision. “Silver Claw would like to break its ties with Wind Howlers.”

As shocked as I was, I fought to keep a neutral expression. The same couldn’t be said about my father though; whether his age was making him softer, or if he just felt comfortable around an old friend to show his true emotions, he didn’t try to hide it when his face fell.

“May I ask why, Anders? If the problem is the Fallen and the imminent battle, I-”

“No.” The man shook his head. “It’s the whole situation. I heard about your son’s... Well, it’s rather unusual for an Alpha to have a female counterpart. In fact, it’s unheard of. I can’t begin to understand the Goddess’ reasons, and I don’t want to sound sexist here, but...I fail to see how a she-wolf could win this war.”

I couldn’t tell if the feelings boiling inside me at his explanation were mine or Dawn’s, but for the first time, I felt angry instead of ashamed.

“Please, I ask you to reconsider,” my father’s voice broke through the silence. “I promise you, we’re looking into it. Soon-”

“No.” My firm voice echoed through the room as I clenched my fists, catching their attention. “Alpha Anders has made his decision, and I respect it.” I approached the man again, forcing a smile as I stretched my hand out to him. “I just hope you don’t live to regret it.”

The way he simply stood there in the center of the room, eyes wide as I turned my back to him, let me know he wasn’t expecting my reaction. Honestly, I didn’t know what had gotten to me either; I guess the sudden betrayal by one of my family’s closest friends had deeply annoyed and hurt the born leader inside of me. Actually, it seemed to have ignited my desire to prove him wrong.

My father remained in the office with us as I prepared the papers for the severance of the treaty between Silver Claw and Wind Howlers. It was my first time handling those kinds of documents, but I had studied for long enough to know how it was done. Once the bureaucratic part was over, the three of us headed to the Elder Shrine, as only an Elder could officiate any changes in pack relationships. Dad accompanied his so-called friend to the borders, where he would never be welcome again, while I returned to the office.

The second I closed the door behind me, a rage-filled bellow broke through my chest. The shame, the fear, the

anger... I had kept them bottled up for too long. It actually felt good to let it all out. Unfortunately, I couldn't enjoy my privacy for more than a minute. As I sat down at my desk finally, I heard another knock.

"Bad timing?" Malin flashed me an apologetic smile as he poked his head through the door. Because he was my Beta, I had given him a spare key so he could come here if I wasn't around. He always knocked first though.

"Just don't tell me you have more bad news for me." I sighed heavily, letting my head fall backwards as I relaxed in my chair.

"Bro, I feel offended. As your right hand, I would never let you down." His words actually made me do a double take, and when my eyes landed on him again, I noticed his grin had gotten even bigger. "Guess who's just managed to convince the Alpha of a larger pack to meet with us?"

"What?" I leaned forward on the desk. "What pack?"

"Dune Drifters."

"Isn't that the one from Galensoles?" The city of Galensoles was located in the state of Crafalion. It was about a two and a half hour flight from here.

"Precisely." Before I could ask any more questions, he went on, "Alpha Ruben has invited us to a meeting in his territory. It's set to happen in three days."

"Three days?!" I yelled in shock. There was a lot going on at the moment. We would also have very little time to prepare for what would probably be one of the most important meetings of our lives, as establishing an alliance with them would be of enormous help. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to find the calm I had been lacking for the past few days. "Okay. Text Zach and Alex. We must start the preparations now."

"Yes, Alpha." My best friend bowed his head before disappearing into the hallway.

* * *

It was past ten when we finished organizing the preliminary details for our upcoming trip that night. My Beta, Gamma, and I had agreed to meet again first thing after training to discuss our negotiation strategies. After almost an entire day spent confined within four walls, I was extremely tired, but my animal side also craved a little freedom. I spent a few seconds pondering over whether I should just go straight to bed to try and get some rest, or head outside for a walk to clear my mind. In the end, I decided for the latter. What was another sleepless night for someone who hadn't slept in the past six?

Despite the whole howling at the moon stereotype, wolves are not nocturnal by nature, but crepuscular, meaning we are mostly active during dusk and dawn. Following the pack's routine, most members were already asleep, as they had to wake up early for work or training. Finally, I would have the privacy I had been seeking. I also felt a heavy weight lift off my shoulders as I realized I wouldn't have to deal with all the whispering either.

However, there was something else troubling me.

My day had been a rollercoaster of emotions, but Dawn's words were the one thing still ringing in my head. Did I really need to be so cruel to her? The Elder had yet to reach out to me with more information on our situation, but if he was right about my she-wolf actually being someone else's counterpart, then our days together were numbered. Maybe I could try being nicer to her.

"Now's a good time to start, you know." I kept forgetting she could hear my thoughts. *"I would really love to go for a run through the dandelion fields."*

"No way. I can't risk anyone seeing-" Again, I was reminded of how she felt, and I couldn't bring myself to finish the sentence. *"Okay," I sighed at last. "But be quick. The last thing I want is to feed the damn rumors."*

"Fine, dick."

"I have a name, you know?" I mocked her, making her roll her eyes.

“You’re an annoying prick, Zephyr.”

“Thank you, Dawn. I thought you’d never notice.” Our brief exchange made me smile for the first time in a while.

I could feel my she-wolf crawling with excitement underneath my skin as we approached the dandelion fields. The view was usually prettier at sunrise or sunset, when the flowers blended in with the golden skies, but it was exceptionally beautiful tonight. The wind was strong, blowing away the white puffballs seed by seed, which in turn glistened like fairy dust as they were struck by the moonlight. It looked nothing short of magical.

After thoroughly scouring through my surroundings twice to make sure there was no one around, I quickly removed my clothes and threw them carelessly on a small rock. I took a deep breath to erase my traumatic first shift experience from my mind before I allowed Dawn control for the second time in my life. And she didn’t hesitate to come forth.

The transformation became less painful and faster the more a werewolf shifted in and out of their animal form. Since I had only done it once before, the process still took a good few seconds, but the discomfort caused by the rearranging of my bones didn’t bother me as much. In the end, the coffee-and-caramel she-wolf was standing in the exact same spot my feet had been touching a moment ago.

The shock and confusion of my first shift didn’t allow me to fully experience what it was like to become a spectator inside my own mind as a different part of me took control. It was definitely weird, but also liberating in a way. Dawn’s immediate reaction was to fill her lungs with the subtle, bittersweet fragrance of the citrusy flowers. She dug her paws deeper into the soil, eager to feel it underneath her. I felt guilty about keeping her from experiencing the raw, simpler pleasures of life, but the sensation quickly went away as she bolted through the field.

“Goddess, slow down! You got the zoomies or something?” I gasped in surprise.

“I just needed to feel it.” Her voice was barely a whisper as she embraced all life could offer her in that moment. *“Can’t you feel it too?”*

I had to blink a few times to understand what she meant. She closed her eyes, causing her other senses to become stronger. Through our connection, which I had been fighting against ever since it was established, I finally felt it - the wind brushing through her long, silky fur. It tickled her skin, making her chuckle in pure joy. Because our souls were tied, we shared the same emotions, and I had to smile with her.

“I am an Alpha, Zephyr, like you are. I’m meant to be free,” she continued. *“We are meant to be free. Don’t let your insecurities become a prison. Break free.”*

As if her words were a command, I let myself enjoy the moment. For the first time, I welcomed our peculiar bond. The anger I had been constantly feeling slowly vanished as we sprinted through the tall grass, racing against the dandelion seeds as they floated in the wind. And as I focused on our connection, I could see the world through different eyes - through *Dawn’s* eyes.

Once my negativity stopped blinding me, I realized that my counterpart wasn’t as bad as I’d thought. Judging by her perspective on the situation, she seemed quite smart and very bold. She was also extremely beautiful, more than any other she-wolf I had ever seen.

I couldn’t begin to understand why, but for a brief moment, being tied to Dawn didn’t feel like a curse anymore. Suddenly, I felt light as a feather, and as the wind enveloped us, I finally gave in to my exhaustion. I was drained, but also comfortable enough to relax for the first time in five days.

And as the wind howled her name, I fell asleep, allowing my she-wolf full control.

INTERLUDE I

Dawn

Godess, it felt good to be free again. Most humans are fine with being confined their whole lives. They buy houses in big cities, where skyscrapers reach so high they can barely see the clouds. In fact, if they were questioned about the sky's color, I wouldn't be surprised if their answer was red, since the heavy pollution they live in causes the calming blue to turn into a hateful crimson.

Some people don't even leave their houses to go to work, but when they do, they are content with staying inside their small cars, either listening to awful news on the radio or the noise of loud car horns when they're stuck in traffic. When the working day is done, they are sure to return to the suffocating safety within the four walls they call home. If they manage to find some free time in their busy routines, they might watch shows on one of their multiple screens or even read a good book - those are the only ways they can escape their own prisons.

Werewolves, despite technically being part human, can't adjust to their cramped lifestyle. A few larger packs have resorted to infiltrating their surrounding cities; some even run them, carefully camouflaging among the humans, since it's hard to hide a gigantic territory from non-shifter eyes. In most cases though, groups of wolves live far from any cities, usually in forests, or any land they can find that hasn't yet been stained by mankind. Our animal side craves the green. The soil. The freedom.

After hibernating for eighteen years, it was awful to remain trapped inside Zephyr's mind, especially when he was such a terrible host. However, I knew it was better to bend than break. Humans are foolish, but wolves are not; although I couldn't comprehend Diana's intentions, I trusted her decision.

I would never whine or try to run from my destiny. Even if I didn't fully understand it, I would face it. In the end, I managed to convince my annoying counterpart to listen to me.

Well, at least once.

Yes, I was mad about the way he had treated me from the start; who wouldn't be? But I couldn't bring myself to hate him. The moment our connection was established, I was granted access to all of his memories. I could feel every emotion he had ever experienced. Because we shared the same mind, I knew he wasn't a bad person, but rather someone who was reacting out of fear. While I was asleep, he was battling against a dreadful feeling of emptiness. I knew how miserable it was, since I could feel it as if it was my own; sometimes, I caught myself wondering if it actually was. Our bond made it hard for me to tell my emotions from his.

It didn't matter, though. Wolves don't care about the past; we only live in the present. And right now, nothing was more important than the welcomed feeling of freedom.

Werewolves have amplified emotions; we love harder than any other living creature, we smile brighter, and we hurt greater as well. As I ran through the beautiful dandelion fields, I was flooded with so many sensations it was almost overwhelming. The connection I felt with this territory - *my* territory - was as strong as the pull I felt towards the moon. The wind here called for me in the exact same way the stars spelled my name. Every time my paws touched the ground, I felt as if I was one with these lands. Deep in my bones, I knew this was my home. How could my counterpart expect me to hide instead of claim it?

I easily lost track of time as I allowed myself to focus solely on the moment. It must have been at least an hour before my muscles started aching and I finally slowed down. With my eyes closed, I let my body drop onto the tall grass so I could joyfully roll all over it. My rough movements caused even more dandelion seeds to detach from their stems, and as they flew around my nose, I couldn't hold back a sneeze. I must not have looked like the Alpha I was in such a puppy-

like position. Thankfully, as Zephyr wanted, there was no one around to see me. Wait...

The thought made me realize my overly-irritating human had been silent pretty much since he let me out, which was definitely unusual. My eyes slowly opened again, and I immediately stopped rolling around to lie on my belly. Had his perspective about me really changed? Could he have stayed quiet just to allow me to enjoy the short freedom I had been granted? A sigh left my lips before they curled into a small smile, and I readied myself to let him take over our body again.

“Thanks, Zephyr. This was wonderful.” I waited a few seconds, but when he didn’t reply, I noticed something was wrong. *“Zephyr?”* My brows furrowed as I decided to dive deeper into our shared mind to try and make sense of the situation. When I finally realized what was going on, I couldn’t help but giggle.

He had fallen asleep.

Well, considering how he had barely been able to rest for the past week, it wasn’t surprising. The grin never left my face as I shook my head, pondering over what I should do. I basically had two options - either wake him up to give him back control, or let him sleep and relish in my freedom for a little longer. Since I didn’t know when he would be willing to let me out again, I decided on the latter.

I managed to happily explore my lands a bit more before exhaustion finally caught up with me. While the unexpected opportunity to leave the dark mind I was cloistered in provided me a boost of energy, I couldn’t deny that I was just as tired as Zephyr, which was only natural since we shared the same body. Once I found a nice, cozy spot under a tree at the bottom of one of the many hills surrounding the dandelion fields, I curled myself up into a ball as the soft grass hugged me.

Before long, I drifted off to join my counterpart in the land of the dreaming.

7 | FIGHT

Whether it was because my plentiful life as an heir left little room for me to wish for more, or because the void I felt could only ever give me nightmares, I normally didn't dream when I slept. After I set Dawn free, however, I had the most peaceful dream.

In my sleep, I imagined my she-wolf galloping through the dandelion fields of my home with such vivacity, as if she had just been set free after spending her whole life in a cage. Well, I guess that was exactly it. It flooded me with serenity to watch her rolling on the grass, sneezing every time the puffy seeds tickled her nose. Her carefree attitude reminded me of what I was like when I was younger, back when there were no duties; back when the sole problem I had was the hole in my heart, which only grew with time. I caught myself hoping life could go back to being that simple again.

The next morning, I woke up with the sun shining through my window, and I cursed myself for forgetting to close the curtains again. At least I *thought* that was what had happened, until the intense light forced me to open my eyes - or better yet, Dawn's eyes. The sight of the flowers dancing swiftly in the morning breeze was not what I expected to see. I stopped breathing when I realized I had never gone back to my room.

"What're you scared of now, kitty-cat?" my she-wolf teased, though I doubt she needed an answer. After all, she had access to my every thought.

"Shit! We're still out in plain sight!"

"Calm down." She rolled her eyes before focusing her gaze on the wide fields. *"No one's around."*

I was starting to relax when she looked up at the sky and something else hit me. Judging by how high the sun was, it should be around nine in the morning, which meant I had missed training. Fuck! I was going to be in so much trouble!

“Maybe the way you’ve been acting made you forget that you’re the Alpha,” she pointed out. “You don’t have to answer to anyone. Besides, who cares if you skip training once?”

“It’ll be more reason for the pack to think I’m a weak leader!”

“Your behavior is the only reason why they think you’re weak, not your training. Can’t you see that?”

I was ready to retort when the sound of footsteps made me freeze. A large shadow cast over Dawn, and she instinctively lifted her head to find a wolf standing on top of the hill, right above her. I didn’t stop to identify who it was; knowing there wouldn’t be enough time for me to shift back, my immediate reaction was to give my counterpart a single command.

“Run!”

She didn’t seem to share my worry though. *“How long are you going to keep running from who you are, Zephyr?”*

“For the love of the Goddess, Dawn! Quit being stubborn and do as I say for once!” I yelled frantically.

Probably not wishing to destroy the small progress we had made in our relationship, my she-wolf followed my instructions despite clearly not agreeing with me. She finally stood up, not wasting a second before bolting towards the forest on the outskirts of the territory. I thought I had seen her run yesterday, but I didn’t realize just how fast she was until now.

I hoped her speed would be enough for us to escape our pursuer, but a howl sounding from behind us let me know I was wrong. With my heart beating faster, she tried her best to gain some distance. When she did, she jumped behind a thick bush, lying down to hide herself better. Even if she was camouflaged, I knew it would be a matter of seconds until they picked up on our scent. Not throwing away the advantage she had gained, she carefully poked her head over the leaves to take a better look at the wolf who had been following us.

When I recognized him, I heaved a sigh of relief.

“It’s just Mint.”

“*You’re such a drama queen,*” Dawn scoffed as she stood back up.

Relief flashed in the blond wolf’s green eyes when we revealed ourselves. The creature’s fur started to retreat through his pores as he quickly shrunk in size, and in a matter of seconds, my best friend was standing in front of me. He stared at my she-wolf for a brief moment before his voice echoed through the forest.

“Goddess, man! You scared the shit out of me!” The worry in his tone was palpable. “What were you doing in the dandelion fields? And why were you running away from me? I tried to link you, but I couldn’t establish a connection. What’s going on?”

Dawn gave me back control without me even asking, aware that it would be impossible for me to communicate with my Beta without the mindlink as long as we stayed in wolf form. My transformation was quick, and though it was still a little painful, it was already a lot better than it had been on my birthday. As an Alpha - a pure-blooded one - I got used to the process a lot faster than lower-ranking wolves; it could take Omegas more than a year to stop feeling the discomfort caused by shifting.

As soon as I was back to my human form, I glanced around in search of my clothes, only to remember I was far away from where I had left them the night before. Since Malin didn’t seem to have brought any clothes with him either, it looked like we would be having this conversation fully naked. As embarrassing as it seemed, the situation was actually quite common for shifters.

“My mindlink doesn’t work,” I blurted out, earning a look of pure confusion from my best friend. Unwilling to stress over it, I continued before he could ask me questions I didn’t know the answer to, “And I was running because I didn’t know it was you. Dawn begged me to let her out last night, but I was so tired I ended up passing out on the grass. Why are *you* here though?”

“Looking for *you*...” he replied as if it was obvious. “You’re the Alpha, in case you’ve forgotten. Everyone started losing their heads when you didn’t show up for training this morning. And then no one could find you-”

“Shit! Training!” It had slipped my mind with the whole chase situation. “My father will be so disappointed. And what will everyone think of me? An Alpha who doesn’t show up for training! How could I have let that happen? I should have kept my guard up. I-”

“Chill, dude. No one cares that you skipped training once,” he cut me off.

“*See? Told you,*” Dawn huffed.

“They were just worried about you,” Malin went on. “Hell, I was too.”

“Why? Oh wait, I know - because an Alpha with a female wolf would never be able to protect himself,” I spat, my anger rising again.

“Goddess, Zephyr, stop feeling sorry for yourself!” He pushed me in the chest, bringing me back to my senses. I blinked a few times, surprised by his reaction. Judging by the way he immediately stiffened, he was too. Moments later, a heavy breath escaped his mouth as he closed his eyes and massaged his temples. “Look, this must be tough for you. I can’t even begin to imagine what it must be like to be the first werewolf in history with an opposite-gender counterpart...” He finally straightened up to look at me again. “But you might not be looking at this from the right angle. I don’t think you’re giving Dawn enough credit here. You say she’s a curse, but she was chosen by the Moon Goddess to be your partner for some reason. I’m quite sure she’s a blessing, even if we can’t understand how yet.”

It was my turn to look away. “I don’t think anyone else agrees with you.” A frown stained my expression as I raised my voice. “I hear the whispers, man! I’m sure you do too.”

“Yeah, I do. I just don’t understand why you let them talk.” His words sounded so similar to my she-wolf’s, I wondered if

they had been speaking lately. “Listen, man. I can’t believe I even have to tell you this, but having a female counterpart doesn’t make you weak. What makes you weak is acting like a scared kitten instead of an Alpha wolf.”

“At least your Beta is smart!” Dawn chanted teasingly. *“Good job, Zephyr! It seems you made one right choice in your life.”*

Normally, her taunting would have started an endless bickering between us, but I didn’t have it in me to bark back. Not when she was right, as was my best friend.

For the first time since I had shifted, I actually stopped to think instead of jumping to conclusions. I had been so focused on figuring out what was wrong with me, I never tried to find a way around adversity. In the midst of my pity parties, I started to believe what everyone was saying about me, while failing to realize they were only talking because of how I was acting in the first place. An Alpha confronts his problems head on, yet all I had done until now was run from them.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all along, stupid! Would’ve saved us both a lot of time if you had just listened to me!” Despite Dawn’s harsh words, I could tell she was in a much lighter mood than usual.

I clenched my fists. Maybe I had forgotten who I was for a moment, but I remembered it now.

“Dawn said the same thing. I guess you’re both right.” I looked at Malin again. “It’s just...this whole thing is so confusing.”

“I’m sure it’s a lot to take in. But hey, you’ll be fine,” he reassured me, stepping forward to tap my shoulder. “You just gotta do what you do best and keep your head up.”

“Thanks for the advice, man.” I smiled sincerely.

“Don’t thank me. I’m your Beta, remember? That’s what I’m here for.”

“You’re right...” I looked away, hiding the playfulness in my expression before I went on, “I should be thanking myself.

I was the one who had the brilliant idea of naming you my right hand.”

“I never thought I would say this, but I’m glad smart-ass Zephyr is back.” He punched my arm, not giving me any time to complain as he continued, “Now, let’s go back so we can get dressed. I’m not paid to stare at your naked ass.”

“You should be paying though. This is some high quality ass right here!” I glanced over my shoulder to wink playfully at Malin before allowing Dawn to come out again. It was a good walk back to the dandelion fields, and she could travel the distance much faster than me.

* * *

“Oh, Zeze! Your father and I were worried sick about you!” my mother cried out, her arms wrapped tightly around me. No matter how hard I struggled in her embrace, she refused to let me go.

“I was only away for a few hours! What did you think happened to me?” I argued. She finally allowed me to breathe, pulling away to look into my eyes. Her lips parted as if she wanted to answer me, but they sealed shut the next second. Pain flashed in her expression before she showed me a relieved smile.

“All that matters is that you’re safe.”

“No.” My father’s strong voice caught our attention. Judging by his trembling frown, I could tell he was trying hard to keep up his stern-parent posture. “He skipped training without a valid reason, and he must be punished for it.”

“My grumpy condor, you know he’s had a lot on his mind. There’s no need to be so tough with him.” Mom left my side to cup my father’s cheek. His façade immediately melted under her touch. “He’s still just a boy.”

“No, I’m not,” I chimed in, taking a deep breath. I couldn’t keep hiding behind my problems to avoid my responsibilities. Stepping forward, I stared straight at my father. “I will accept whatever punishment you have for me.”

“Very well.” Dad tried to sound angry, but the shadow of a smile playing on his lips was proof he had failed. “Since your Beta is in charge of conducting training, he should be the one to define an appropriate punishment for you. Talk to him to see what he has in mind.”

“I will. May I leave now?”

“I’m no longer the Alpha, boy. You are,” he reminded me. “You don’t need to ask anyone for permission to do anything.”

“Why do I have to justify skipping training then?” I asked playfully.

He frowned again, while Mom chuckled. “There are still rules even an Alpha has to follow. You have to set an example.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I nodded before heading out of my parents’ room.

As soon as I closed the door, a familiar voice surprised me. “How did it go?” Malin was standing in the hall, leaning against a wall as he waited for me.

“They can be so dramatic sometimes.”

“Well, you’re they’re only son. And the Alpha.” He shrugged. Fair enough.

After climbing down the stairs, we walked outside together to go to the cafeteria for brunch. I was telling him about how he should come up with a way for me to make up for the training session I missed. He was rejoicing in having more power than me in at least one situation when my ears twitched. It was them again - the whispers. There were a few wolves scattered around the main square, and for the first time, the way they dared to stare directly at me actually bothered me. I stopped dead in my tracks, my fists clenching as my werewolf hearing helped me understand what they were gossiping about.

“A male with a female wolf... You think he’s gay or something?” one girl whispered to another.

“Totally,” her friend scoffed. “I can’t believe I had sex with him.”

Fucking hypocrite. I still remembered how she screamed my name while I pleased her, and I was sure she remembered too. A low growl reverberated in my chest, but before I could confront her, another voice caught my attention. This time, it was a male.

“Are we even safe here? How can he defend us against rogues and other enemies?” There was disdain in his tone. “An Alpha is supposed to be the strongest wolf of a pack, and I’ve never heard of a female who could defeat a male.”

“Right? Maybe I should challenge him. I could make a better leader,” another man replied. I recognized him as Thomas, one of the warriors. “Besides, I also take my responsibilities more seriously than him. Did you notice he skipped training today? I bet his she-wolf didn’t wanna get her claws ruined!”

“*Oh, screw you!*” Dawn growled at the bastard inside my head before addressing me. “*If you don’t put this guy in his place, I’ll gladly do it for you!*” I could feel her crawling underneath my skin as rage filled us both. She had been right before, so I decided to trust her instincts again.

It was time to stop running.

With my werewolf speed, I closed the distance between me and Thomas in the blink of an eye. As an Alpha, my reflexes were a lot faster than lower-ranking wolves; before he even knew I was coming, I had my hand wrapped around his throat. My fingers dug into his skin, my claws threatening to come out as I lifted him into the air. The disgust-filled gazes of the members surrounding us had now turned into terrified ones. His face started turning red as he desperately tried to break free, but he was no match for my strength.

My strength... It didn’t disappear, despite the gender of my counterpart.

“You think you can beat me?!” I roared ferociously, my canines protruding as Dawn pushed forward. There was a look of pure fear in his eyes. “Go ahead, then! Fight me!”

I released my grasp, dropping the warrior to the ground. He coughed frantically, his lungs searching for air again, but he didn't move. His head was low, as it should have always been. He didn't dare look into my eyes anymore. I growled louder, and that was all it took to make him crawl back towards his friends.

"That's what I thought," I spat, taking a moment before turning to the rest of the members of the pack - *my* pack - who stood frozen in their spots. Like Dawn pointed out, I hadn't been standing my ground, but now was as good a moment as any to remind them of who was in charge, and why. "Is everyone listening? My wolf might be a female, but I'm still the strongest of this pack! Anyone who disagrees, please, challenge me!"

With my arms open, I slowly spun around, inviting any challengers to come forward. I couldn't say I was surprised when no one did.

"No one, huh?" A satisfied grin lit up my face as I raised my voice again. "Until I'm defeated, I am still the Alpha. I do not wish to impose my power by force, but I will if I must. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Alpha!" the crowd answered without hesitation.

"Show your Alpha some respect!" Malin demanded as he joined me. Because he was mostly a sweet and kind guy, it impressed me to see him act so bold and authoritative. He had only officially been second-in-command for a week, but he already sounded like he had a lot of experience.

"Yes, Alpha! Yes, Beta!" One by one, every single one of the wolves around us immediately dropped to their knees.

Alpha Zephyr was back, and they all knew it.

8 | TRIP

After my public demonstration of power at the main square, it seemed I had taken over the reins of my life once again.

It was relieving to wander through my lands without hearing any more whispers and rumors. Not only had pack members stopped talking about me, they would also bow their heads whenever I walked by them. I might have momentarily forgotten who I was, but I got my confidence back as soon as everyone started treating me with the respect a great Alpha commands.

That didn't mean my troubles had gone away though. Ever since my first meeting with Elder Laelius, I still hadn't heard back from him regarding my wolf situation. Considering that my research nights at the pack library weren't useful either, I guess there was nothing I could do but wait.

Fortunately, my bonding time with Dawn allowed me to see her as more of a friend than a problem. She was quite funny, and when she wasn't being stubborn, she actually gave good advice. Of course, I was still eager to learn more about why we were paired together and if there really was a way to reverse the situation. However, there were more important things I had to worry about.

Monday, the day scheduled for our trip to Dune Drifters Pack, finally rolled around.

Over the weekend, my team and I had worked hard to make sure our business meeting would be successful. Since it was standard for both the Alpha and Beta of a pack to be present during important negotiations, Malin and I would be flying to Galensoles with the proposition we had carefully planned in advance. Dad and Warrick agreed to come along to assist us since it would be our first time attempting to establish an alliance after stepping in as the new Elite. Meanwhile, Zach

would be in charge of Wind Howlers, and as Delta, Alex would stay to support him.

And after having breakfast alone in my office, I headed downstairs to talk to our golden girl.

Since I couldn't mindlink anyone for reasons not even Dawn could explain, I had to either text pack members or go around searching for them if I wanted to contact them. Fortunately, I was familiar with my Delta's routine. As expected, I found her in the kitchen, discussing the week's menu with Mrs. Robinson.

"How are my favorite girls doing?" I smiled as I smoothly interrupted their conversation.

"Oh, Alpha! I'm not a girl anymore. Haven't been for a few decades!" The head cook chuckled.

"Is there anything I can help you with, Alpha Zephyr?" The brunette turned to me, holding the clipboard closer to her chest.

"Just wanted to make sure everything's ready."

My Delta nodded. "All's in order with your tickets and the driver has been notified. The car taking you guys to the airport should be out front in fifteen minutes."

"Thanks, Alex. You sure you and Zach will be fine taking care of the pack all by yourselves?"

"With all due respect, Alpha, I've been in charge of Wind Howlers longer than you have." She winked playfully at me.

"Fair enough. But if you need anything-"

"We'll be fine," she insisted. "Just relax and enjoy your visit to Dune Drifters."

"I'll try." If only there wasn't a major meeting I had to attend, maybe I could relax. "I'll be on my way then."

"Oh!" I was about to turn around to leave when Mrs. Robinson suddenly ran to the countertop. She returned with two paper bags, both carrying something warm, and held them out to me. "Have a safe trip, Alpha Zephyr."

Her sweet surprise made me blink a few times before I could react. “You didn’t have to, Mrs. Robinson...”

“Nonsense! I heard this will be a very important negotiation trip, and you can’t do business with an empty stomach. These snacks will hopefully help keep your bellies full until your arrival.”

A smile played on my lips. The old woman had always been kind and caring, but her sweetness still melted my heart. “Thank you. I will miss your cooking every minute I’m away.”

“I’ll make sure to prepare a special meal for your return.” She bowed her head at me, and I waved goodbye to the two women.

After leaving the kitchen, I decided to text my friends and wait for them at the entrance hall. I was done packing and had already brought my suitcase downstairs to save the Omegas the trouble of doing it for me, so it wouldn’t hurt to use these last few minutes to review our plans. Before long, Malin and Zach were standing in front of me.

“Alright, I’m ready to go!” my second-in-command chanted excitedly.

“I’m ready to stay. And finally have some peace,” the Gamma muttered the last part in a lower tone.

“Alex will keep up with her daily tasks, but I also told her to assist you with whatever problems you might face.” The moment I rested my hand on Zach’s shoulder, he stepped away.

“Problems?” he scoffed. “You’ll only be gone for a day. What do you think will happen?”

“You never know.” I shrugged. “Make sure you answer every phone call in case another Alpha tries to contact us, don’t forget to check the reports I left on the desk, and-”

“I know, I know! You think I can’t handle being Alpha for a day?”

“Just wanted to remind you that it can be a lot of work.” A smirk lit up my face. “You might even have to skip training

tomorrow morning if there's too much to do..."

His eyes widened as he returned the gesture, which was extremely rare - Zach was mostly seen wearing his usual frown, or a neutral face at best if he was in a good mood.

"Sure, but only if I have no other choice. Wouldn't wanna miss training for no reason, you know."

"You boys ready?" I immediately recognized my father's voice. Turning around, I realized he was standing at the foot of the staircase with his Beta by his side. Mom was holding his left arm so tight, his skin was turning red.

"I'm going to miss you so much, my grumpy condor!" She pouted at him, her eyes watery.

"I'll be back before you know I'm gone, my sweet dove. I promise." He mimicked her melancholic tone, leaning closer to her.

Caught off-guard, I almost couldn't fight the urge to stick my tongue out in disgust when Dad kissed his Luna. Why were mates so anxious being apart from each other, even for small periods of time? All of my relationships so far could be considered one-night-stands, and I never felt any desire to see the girls I slept with again, let alone date them. I was always up for a good time, but other than sex, I wanted nothing to do with them.

"*Such a manwhore,*" Dawn spat.

Her disgust amused me. "*Don't tell me you're a prude like Malin and Mint.*"

"*There's a lot of room between being a prude and sleeping with every creature who has two legs.*"

"*And a pussy,*" I completed.

"*Gross!*" she yucked, instantly retreating to the back of my mind. I couldn't help but laugh at her reaction; I had recently discovered that teasing her brought me great joy.

"Car's here!" my best friend announced, pulling me back to reality. As I looked through the window, my gaze

immediately landed on the white limousine parked in front of the pack house.

“Let’s go, then.” I gestured toward the exit with my head before glancing at Zach over my shoulder. “See you tomorrow!”

“Good luck at the meeting. Don’t screw it up, Alpha,” he joked - at least I think he was joking - and gave me a curt nod.

Once we stepped outside, we hopped straight in the car while Mom bade us farewell. It was roughly a 40-minute drive to the airport, but it went by in the blink of an eye. As I set foot in the huge, crowded building, I was greeted by a feeling of familiarity. Although I hadn’t left the packlands in a couple of years, I had been traveling alongside my parents since I was a pup. I knew Malin had never been on an airplane before since his family couldn’t afford to pay for the tickets. But even if I didn’t know that bit of information, it was easy to tell by the way his eyes glistened as he looked around.

“Damn, this place is big!” He was dazzled by all the movement, the different shops, and the sound of the planes taking off.

“I don’t see the appeal,” I confessed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, my liege,” he said sarcastically. “I’ve forgotten you’ve been here so many times, it isn’t fun anymore. Please, do forgive me.” He ate the last bite of his croissant Mrs. Robinson packed for him. Not even a second later, his eyes darted to the bag I was carrying. “Are you gonna-”

I shook my head, chuckling as I shoved the snack against his chest. “You can have it.”

We had to undergo a bunch of bureaucratic steps before we finally got to board the plane, but instead of relaxing, the nervousness I was already feeling only intensified. Even the first-class seats we had booked were cramped, and most shifters tended to hate small spaces. Our animal side craved freedom; taking trains, flying, or simply riding in the car for over an hour would make us feel caged. It was common for

our wolf counterparts to howl anxiously and desperately try to claw their way out of our minds, resulting in terrible migraines. Even Malin, who had been bursting with excitement since we walked into the airport, had gone quiet, tightly grasping the armrests as he sat next to me.

Thankfully, the flight to Galensoles should only take around two and a half hours. It was still a lot in my opinion, but considering international flights could take up to 24 hours, I was fine with my situation. Still, just the thought of spending so long stuck in such a tiny space filled with passengers, who were mostly human, made my skin crawl.

“It’s not that claustrophobic. I mean, compared to your small, enclosed mind, this place seems like a mansion to me,” Dawn said with seriousness, yet the smirk on her face gave her away.

“Hey, I’ve been letting you out every night since your little tantrum!” I argued.

“Will you also let me see Galensoles through my own eyes?” Her golden eyes glistened with anticipation.

“Only if you don’t give me a hard time until we arrive there.”

“Deal.” The way she wagged her tail in excitement made my heart flutter. Wait, what? *“Have a nice flight, Zephyr.”*

As she retreated to the depths of my subconsciousness, I could hear her humming a sweet melody. It was like background music, very low, but also calming in a way I couldn’t explain. At first, I was planning on watching a movie to help time pass by quicker, but I quickly changed my mind. Her soothing song brought me such peace, I couldn’t fight it when my heavy eyelids insisted on closing. I ended up falling asleep before the plane took off.

* * *

“Goddess, when is this headache gonna stop?” Malin complained, pressing his hands against his temples in an attempt to minimize his pain.

“The next time you let your wolf out,” Beta Warrick replied as he massaged his back.

“What?! No way!” my best friend cried out. I noticed his eyes widening as they fell on me. “Wait. Why do you look fine?” He arched an eyebrow, his shock growing. “Actually, you look more than fine. You seem more relaxed than you were before we even boarded the plane! How?!”

“Alpha blood, maybe?” I shrugged.

“I doubt it,” Dad chimed in, a deep frown staining his face. “Ebert didn’t shut up for a single second. He seems to grow more anxious every time we fly.” He sighed. “You must have taken after your mother. Long trips never really bothered her.”

“Not fair.” Malin pouted.

I threw an arm around my best friend’s neck. “Brighten up, gloomy. We’re in Galensoles, the city of marvelous beaches and famous movie stars!”

“Oh, yeah!” A huge smile lit up his face as my reminder seemed to temporarily numb his headache, and he raised his fists in excitement. “City of Stars, here I come!”

The moment we exited the airport, we met the driver Alpha Ruben had sent to get us. The middle-aged man was holding a white sign that read: ZEPHYR WYNDHAM AND FAMILY. He held his head low to greet us, not wasting a second before opening the doors for us. I spent most of the hour-long ride laughing at Malin’s amusement. I could understand it, though; the landscape was truly beautiful. The territory we grew up in was located close to a small city. It was nothing compared to the vivacity of the largest city in Crafalion, and the second largest in the country.

At some point, we drove off the highway and onto a wild sandy trail, which soon turned into a straight-up desert. The further behind we left the movement of the big city, the easier it was to tell we were getting closer to our destination. When we neared a fairly high dune, I thought our car would get stuck in the sand, but to my surprise, it didn’t. Of course, it would

make sense for a pack located in the middle of the desert to have vehicles adapted to the terrain.

And as soon as the car came to a stop, I was flabbergasted.

“Welcome to Dune Drifters,” the driver greeted, opening the door for us.

The three-story packhouse was massive! I immediately asked myself how they could stay hidden when their main building was so expansive, but it didn't take me long to realize how well its cream, gold, and brown color scheme camouflaged with the sand. Its luxurious exterior resembled Moorish architecture; instead of walls and pillars, it had tall, beautifully-sculpted arches. Two marble curved staircases with golden railings rose above a large pool that resembled an oasis in the middle of the desert.

“Alpha Zephyr! It's a pleasure to have you here.” A male voice broke the spell I was under. The man was in his mid-twenties. He was fairly tall, with a slim, yet muscular physique. His light brown hair fell in angelic locks just over his shoulders. He had delicate, androgynous features, combined with the powerful aura of a leader. I barely had time to shake his hand before he turned to the rest of my team. “Welcome, Beta Malin. Alpha Bertrand. Beta Warrick.”

“Thank you for having us, Alpha Ruben.” I smiled at him. “You have a lovely pack house.”

“You're too kind, Alpha Zephyr. I majored in architecture. This is my proudest creation.” He waved his hand toward the main building.

I had to blink a few times to process his words. It was uncommon for wolves to go to pursue a higher education. Aside from Kappas, most of us rarely left the pack. Since most Alphas started working at the age of eighteen, it was even rarer for one to leave to go to college. Before curiosity got the best of me, another man approached us.

“This is my Gamma, Amell Kimbel,” the leader revealed.

“Please, allow me to show you to your rooms.” The third-in-command bowed his head politely.

“Make yourselves at home while you’re here. As soon as you’re done getting settled, Gamma Amell will take you to my office so we can get into what brought you here in the first place.”

The Alpha turned around, disappearing into the first floor of the pack house, while his Gamma led us up the stairs towards the second floor. The interior was just as luxurious as the exterior, with diamond patterns decorating the walls and floor, and crystal chandeliers. First, we stopped by the guest Alpha suite where my father would stay with Warrick, which was located right beside the one Malin and I would be sharing.

After the two of us were done unpacking our belongings, we changed into more formal clothes and reunited with Amell, who was waiting for us outside. As we went up another flight of stairs, I instinctively glanced at Dad’s room over my shoulder. Although Alpha Ruben had allowed the former Elite members of Wind Howlers to tag along, only the current Alpha and Beta could be present during a business meeting. My stomach turned as I realized the success of our trip would be up to me this time, but I took a deep breath. We were well-prepared. I could do this.

Gamma Amell opened the office door for us, where Alpha Ruben and his Beta were, and lowered his head before leaving the four of us alone.

“Please, take your seats.” The leader gestured towards the two chairs placed in front of his desk.

“Once again, thank you for agreeing to listen to us,” I said as I sat down, my best friend following my lead.

“Of course. I’m curious to hear about the deal you’d like to offer.” A gentle smile played on Ruben’s lips as he interlaced his fingers over his desk.

I exchanged glances with my Beta, soon clearing my throat. “I am familiar with Dune Drifters’ unique fighting style. The wolves of your pack are known to silently ambush enemies by camouflaging with the sand. As impressive as it is, I noticed one flaw in your strategy.”

“Oh?” The Alpha raised his brows, appearing genuinely curious.

“By blending in with the desert, your members might be out of sight, but their scent can still be detected from a closer distance, thus giving away their hiding spot.” I made a brief pause, mentally revising what I had to say next. “As you probably know, at Wind Howlers we learn how to mask our scents from a very young age. I believe if we teach you our secrets, Dune Drifters will become even more powerful than it already is.”

“Interesting. And what would you like in return?”

This was the moment - it was now or never. “You’re surely aware of the common enemy threatening our kind. The National Elder Council believes they will be reaching our territory some time in the next few months. Wind Howlers doesn’t plan to back down, but we recognize we will need help to defeat them when they come,” I clarified. “We will be glad to teach you our secret technique if you agree to offer your full support in the war against the Fallen.”

“A very generous offer...” He side-eyes his Beta, remaining in silence for a moment before his voice filled the room once again. “Or perhaps a desperate one.” *Shit!* I tried my best to keep a neutral expression, but that didn’t sound good at all. “I am sorry, Alpha Zephyr, but I’m afraid I cannot accept your deal.”

9 | BELIEVE

When silence filled the room, I clenched my fist underneath the table, hoping it would be enough to keep my foot from tapping against the marble floor. I kept staring at Alpha Ruben, unable to utter a word for Goddess knows how long. Although my eyes were locked on him, my mind was elsewhere entirely. Why would he dismiss my proposal?

Yes, it was unusual for a larger pack to establish an alliance with a smaller one, and Dune Drifters was more than twice our size. I knew it would be hard to convince their leader. Whether it was money, warriors, food, or territory, they surely already had a lot more resources than us. However, it was extremely rare for packs to share their secret strategies. My team and I had worked day and night to come up with a deal they wouldn't be able to refuse.

There were only two reasons I could think of to explain the Alpha's quick, unexpected decision: either he was afraid of the Fallen like everyone else, or he had somehow learned about my-

"It would be foolish of me not to recognize how powerful Dune Drifters would become if our signature technique could be improved. Still, I think it would come at too high of a price," Ruben continued after my long silence. "No one has ever survived a Fallen attack, let alone defeated one of the members of their army. Don't take this the wrong way, Alpha Zephyr, but I get the feeling not even you believe you can win this war."

"You're right. I'm not ambitious to the point of thinking I can defeat them alone. But with your help-"

He shook his head. "I don't think you understand what I mean." When his eyes landed on me again, I felt as if he could read deep into my soul. "I'm not much older than you are, but there are a few things I have learned during my time as Alpha,

things I can see you have yet to learn. Your determination and courage are admirable, but you lack confidence. How can I put my faith in a doubtful leader?" For a moment, I forgot to hide my emotions and allowed my brows to furrow, showing my confusion as I tried to process his words. "I truly am sorry, Alpha Zephyr. This isn't our war to fight...at least not yet. I wish I could help you, but I must prioritize my people's safety."

I hesitated for a moment, forcing a smile before finally replying, "I understand."

"While you're here though, please make yourselves at home. Lunch will be sent to your rooms at 12:00 p.m. sharp, and a special welcome dinner will be served later to celebrate your visit. Feel free to spend the day at the pool, or my Gamma could show you around if you'd like."

"Of course. Thank you for your hospitality." I nodded at him, trying my best to conceal my frustration and disappointment as I rose from my seat. Malin did the same, following silently behind me.

His Gamma, who was waiting outside, opened the door for us, probably after being given the instruction to do so via mindlink. We were about to leave when Alpha Ruben's voice echoed through the room again.

"By the way, Alpha Zephyr..." I stood still, but I didn't bother looking at him. I could feel the grin on his face, though it seemed more amused than mocking. "Are the rumors true? Is your wolf...a female?"

"I don't see how this is relevant-" My Beta was ready to defend me, but I held my hand up to stop him before he could turn around. He seemed confused, but didn't argue.

"Yes, my wolf is a female," I revealed at last, finally turning to face him with a defying smile. "But if you think it makes me weaker, it doesn't. A great Alpha thrives in the face of difficulty. If anything, it makes me stronger, whether you believe it or not," I stated, not waiting for a reply as I left the office.

As soon as I climbed down the first step, the feminine voice sounded in my head, *“That was one hell of a show you put on back there!”* Dawn chuckled excitedly. *“I wasn’t expecting that at all.”*

“I wouldn’t have to put on a show if it wasn’t for you!” I tried to sound annoyed, but couldn’t hold back my laughter.

“If that’s the case, you should thank me. I like that version of you a lot more than scared-kitten-Zephyr.”

“Okay, you can stop calling me that now.”

“Aw, but it took me so long to come up with a sweet nickname for you. Plus, it suits you so well!” she giggled. As usual, I was ready to rise to her bait, but a punch in the arm from Malin interrupted our conversation.

“Dude, what was that?!” His eyes were wide with surprise as he closed the door to the guest room we were sharing. “You left him speechless! Where did that even come from?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged, throwing myself onto the mattress. Sinking my head deep into one of the pillows, I slowly let my nerves calm down. “I guess I just had enough of people talking crap about me because of my wolf’s stupid gender.”

“I’m shook.” My best friend crossed his arms in front of his chest, a playful smile lighting up his face. “You’ve changed, scared kitten.”

“Alright!” I shot up in bed to glare at him. “What is it with you and Dawn always calling me that? I’m still your Alpha, you know!” I huffed.

“Wait, does she call you scared kitten too?” He bellowed a laugh. “Maybe she’s my wolf, not yours!”

“You can have her. Tell Mint he can switch places with Dawn if he wants to,” I joked.

“He says he’d rather be skinned alive. Oh, and he offers his condolences to her for being stuck with you.”

“Damn, Mint! Didn’t know you could be such a savage!” I place my hand over my heart, faking offense. My best friend

rolled his eyes in response.

“Anyway, what should we do now?” His mood darkened a little as he reminded me of the tough spot we were in.

“It sucks that we didn’t get the alliance we needed, but we won’t be home until tomorrow.”

“Should we accept Ruben’s offer and go to the pool then?” He smiled. “It might help clear our heads, you know.”

“Sure.” I half-laughed, sighing soon after. “But we should go see my father and Warrick first. Tell them how the meeting went.”

Malin nodded, and after I gathered enough courage, we headed to the former Elite members’ room. They weren’t any more thrilled than us to learn about how what could be our highest chance at defeating the Fallen had failed, but being more experienced, they insisted we stay calm and try to think of a new plan when we returned home. Once the issue was settled, the two older wolves decided to accept Alpha Ruben’s invitation to take a tour around Dune Drifters’ territory, while my best friend and I followed through with our plan to relax in the pool.

A week ago, I would have felt guilty about taking some time off after failing yet again, but I guess I had been so stressed lately I actually embraced the opportunity. As the sun went down, Malin and I returned to our suite to get ready for dinner. Although it wasn’t an actual party, it was still a festive occasion, so we got dressed in semi-formal attire before leaving the room. Since Dad and Warrick were still resting after their tour, they told us to go ahead without them.

“My stomach is seriously hurting right now. I always feel hungry after stressful situations,” Malin complained as we walked down the hall.

“Cut that shit. You’re always hungry, regardless of the situation.” I shook my head.

“True.” He shrugged. “But aren’t you excited to know what they’ve prepared for us? I’m already drooling just thinking about it. Let me see...” He closed his eyes, pointing

his nose up and sniffing the air attentively. “Oh, looks like we’re gonna have lamb! The steak also smells delicious. And...” He stopped suddenly, his eyes bursting open again. “Do you smell that?”

I inhaled deeply. “Yeah. Smells like wagyu.”

“Not that.” He waved me off. “It smells...sweet. And creamy...like chocolate. But also wild and refreshing and floral like raspberries.”

“Are you describing cake? Since when do you care more about dessert than the main course?” To my shock, Malin simply ran into the dining hall without offering me any kind of explanation. “Dude, wait!” I yelled as I followed behind him, afraid he would toss himself over the buffet table. The scene I was faced with the moment I stepped into the room was definitely not what I expected to see though.

Despite how crowded the place was, it was easy to find my Beta. The hungry look on his face was nothing like I had ever seen before, and I had watched him devour lunch after skipping breakfast once. To add to my bewilderment, I realized he had a girl pinned against the wall. Her wavy, dark blonde hair fell over her shoulders, and her clear blue eyes were filled with confusion. She was indeed beautiful, but Malin had never shown any interest in random girls before. All he cared about was finding his... Oh, wait.

“Your name?” Thanks to my werewolf hearing, I could understand his words even though he was a good few feet away. Judging by his deeper voice, I guessed Mint must have been fighting his human for control.

As surprised as the she-wolf was, she didn’t seem the least bit scared. I watched as my best friend gently traced the freckles on her cheeks. A lust-filled growl escaped his parted lips when her eyes locked on him.

“Amaya,” the woman revealed.

“Amaya...” he hummed her name as if it was the sweetest melody he had ever heard.

“What the hell...” I thought out loud, but before I had the chance to ask him what was going on, a large shadow jumped in his direction, immediately yanking him off the girl and knocking him on the ground. Only then did I realize the guy who attacked him was Gamma Amell.

“Get your dirty paws off my sister!” the Gamma growled.

“Mate!” was all Malin yelled in response, his eyes glowing a more vivid shade of green as his wolf pushed closer to the surface.

Oh, shit!

Both men were so blinded by rage, they didn't even acknowledge the poor girl begging them to stop. I was still thinking of what I could do to prevent the white floor from turning red as a fight threatened to break out, when Alpha Ruben suddenly walked into the dining hall. Every wolf immediately took their seats, leaving only us standing in the middle of the room.

“Gentlemen, what is the meaning of this?” he asked calmly. After two seconds went by and he hadn't gotten a response, he frowned. “Stop this savagery right now!”

It was evident he had used his Alpha tone when his Gamma instantly let go of my friend to lower his head at Ruben. His body was still shaking with anger, but his wolf couldn't fight a direct command from his leader. On the other hand, Malin didn't seem too willing to listen to someone who wasn't his Alpha. He was about to pounce on the man when I realized things would get ugly unless I stepped in.

“Stand down, Beta!” My roar echoed through the room.

For a moment, he just stood frozen in his spot. I could tell Mint wanted to fight me off for getting in his way, but in the end, he had to obey me. Malin turned to face me before dropping to his knees. The situation was finally under control.

“Care to explain what the fuck is going on?!” I demanded. How could he behave so impulsively when we were guests in another Alpha's territory?

“M-my m-mate...” he stuttered, taking a deep breath before continuing. “Amaya is my mate, Alpha.” As soon as the words left his mouth, Amell growled.

“Gamma,” Ruben called serenely, catching his friend’s attention. “That is no way to treat our guests. Especially your brother-in-law.” He scowled, causing the man to shrink in his place before approaching the she-wolf. “Is Malin Shepherd your fated mate?”

“Malin Shepherd...” she repeated, tasting my best friend’s name. He groaned as he looked at her. “Yes, Alpha.”

“It seems like our issue is settled then.” Ruben gestured for Malin to rise again, but he only did so after I nodded my approval. And the second I did, he jumped to his feet and ran towards the woman as if they were lovers who had been kept apart for decades.

There was no doubt in my mind he was ready to have his first kiss, but Gamma Amell interrupted him by clearing his throat. The glare my Beta flashed at him was honestly scary.

“Isn’t love beautiful?” the Alpha chuckled before turning to the crowd who was still staring at us. “Alright, ladies and gentlemen, there’s nothing to see here. Let’s feast!”

* * *

After the whole situation, dinner was...awkward, to say the least. Shortly after the commotion, Dad and Warrick arrived, and I proceeded to tell them what had gone down in their absence. Ruben invited us to join him and his team at the Elite members’ table, where Malin and Amaya kept exchanging glances. Gamma Amell made his discontentment *very* obvious by glaring at my best friend the entire time, yet the scolding he had received earlier made him behave. As soon as the newly-found mates finished eating, they excused themselves, and I went back to the guest suite alone.

Well, I guess it was nice to know our trip wasn’t in vain - at least one of us wouldn’t go back home empty-handed.

I was lying in bed when I heard the door open. Malin was glowing as he walked into the room, and a smile played on my

lips.

“Finally, huh?”

“She was totally worth the wait.” He sighed dreamily. “Dude, she’s perfect! Like seriously. She’s smart and sweet and kind...”

“You’ve only known her for a couple of hours.” I laughed.

“Yet it feels like I’ve known her for a lifetime,” he cooed as he started carelessly stuffing his belongings back into his suitcase.

“Wait, where are you going?” I arched an eyebrow at him.

“I’m sleeping in Amaya’s room. She needs help packing and preparing to go back to Wind Howlers with us tomorrow.”

“Oh.” I blinked a few times before forcing a smile. “Of course.”

It was common for females to move packs once they found their mates, especially if they were of lower rank than their male partner. A bit misogynistic if you ask me, but that’s how our society works; our feral side values power, so the strongest make the rules. That being said, Amaya would be flying back to Genoro with us tomorrow, so it was only natural for Malin to support her as she said her goodbyes to everyone. It was definitely a big change in her life, and I sometimes caught myself wondering how she-wolves did it.

“See you in the morning, man.” He disappeared out the door as quickly as he had come, allowing me no time to reply.

And as soon as he was gone, I realized I would be alone for the rest of the night, and I immediately regretted not bringing a book or something to keep myself busy. I thought it would be a boys trip; just my best friend and I tearing Galensoles down.

“Are you jealous, Zephyr?” Dawn teased. “That’s cute. Afraid to lose your boy?”

“No, I’m happy for him,” I replied honestly. *“I just...”* I made a brief pause. My thoughts made me feel pathetic, but considering my she-wolf could hear them either way, I knew

there was no point in trying to hide them. *“I just wonder if I’ll ever find my mate, like he did. Maybe if I do, the emptiness I feel will finally go away.”*

She lowered her ears, looking away. *“I don’t think that’s quite the reason why you feel that way. I’m sorry, I know how terrible it feels.”* Of course she did; we shared the same feelings after all. *“I’m sure you’ll find a way to feel whole though. And for what it’s worth, until then, you’ve still got me.”* Her sweet smile warmed my heart. *“In the meantime, I know what could keep us busy. Let’s go for a run in the desert!”*

I was hesitant at first. I was feeling more comfortable setting her free at home, but this was different. The wolves here didn’t know about my secret... Or at least I hoped they didn’t. On second thought, the territory was fairly large, and most wolves should be getting ready for bed. Besides, I could really use a run to blow off some steam.

“Yeah!” Dawn cheered as I hopped out of bed before I could change my mind.

As expected, the hallways were mostly empty. There were still a few members enjoying the early night outside, but the further away we ventured from the main square, the less people we came across. When I reached an area where there was nothing aside from the endless dunes, I allowed Dawn to take control. As she set off running, my troubles momentarily disappeared.

“The wind here feels so different than it does back home,” she observed, howling into the night.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you ever stop and just appreciate the world around you? Humans are so weird,” she scoffed.

At last, I decided to follow her suggestion, and it didn’t take me long to realize she was right. The sand underneath our paws was warm, yet the wind caressing our face was cold. It was also rough due to the sand particles it carried, not in an unpleasant way though. After a while, she climbed up one of

the dunes, bathing in the moonlight as she took in the view before her. I got distracted doing the same, but I was soon reminded of why I shouldn't let my guard down when a familiar voice took me by surprise.

"She's beautiful." When Dawn turned around to find Alpha Ruben standing at the foot of the Dune, I froze.

"Is this dude flirting with me?" She cocked her head to the side, but I could barely hear her words as fear took over me. No one outside of my pack had ever seen my she-wolf.

"Don't worry. I don't think you're a freak. Quite the contrary," the leader continued, taking a few steps towards us. "You shouldn't be ashamed of your counterpart, Alpha Zephyr."

"Damn. He's good at reading auras."

"What do you mean?"

"He sensed your insecurities earlier, even though you were hiding your emotions perfectly," she clarified. *"You're scared now because he found us, but all he sees is me, and I'm not showing any kind of apprehension. He can read your feelings even when you're in animal form."*

Before I had time to process the information, the man's voice sounded again. "You came here seeking my help. I can't offer you any of my warriors, but I can give you a piece of advice." He stopped moving only a few steps away from my she-wolf, his eyes piercing through me. "Don't let rumors determine who you are. If anything, let them become fuel for you to prove them wrong. Oh, and remember - if you don't believe in yourself, no one else will." He showed me his characteristic smile before turning his back to me. "Have a good night, Zephyr."

All I could do was watch as he walked away, completely stunned by his words.

10 | NEW

My bonding time with Dawn was great to relieve some stress, but it caused me to lose precious sleep hours. It also didn't help that my weird encounter with Alpha Ruben kept me awake all night, his words playing on repeat inside my head. In the end, I had probably gotten around four hours of rest before the alarm went off. I thought I would have gotten used to the lack of sleep as it seemed to have become a habit, but as soon as my best friend burst through the door of the guest suite, I was sure my looks said otherwise.

“Good morning, sunshine! Time to rise and-” Malin’s voice made me shoot up in bed. His eyes widened in horror the second they landed on me. “Holy Goddess! You look like utter crap! What have you been doing all night? Cause you sure as hell weren’t sleeping!”

“You’re trying really hard to destroy my self-esteem lately, aren’t you?” I massaged my face with both hands in a subconscious attempt to rub the tired look off of it. When I opened my eyes again, a question instantly popped in my head. “Where’s Amaya?”

“She’s with Dune Drifters’ Elite Team and Elder.” Just the mention of his mate’s name made his eyes glisten. Was he aware of the fact that he looked like a lovesick puppy? “They’re cutting all her ties to the pack so she will have no trouble joining Wind Howlers once she heads back with us.”

I instinctively glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “Fuck! We have to be at the airport soon. Let me just shower and-” When I jumped out of bed, he stood in front of me, stretching out his arm to block my path. In return, he earned a quizzical look from me.

“Don’t worry. There’s no need for us to head there.”

“Please don’t tell me our flight got canceled.” With the amount of stuff I had to take care of at home, I really didn’t

need any more setbacks.

“You are such a pessimist. You know that?” He smirked. “The reason why we don’t have to go to the airport is because Alpha Ruben has agreed to let us fly on his private jet.”

“His what?!” Shit, I knew the dude was rich, but I never expected him to have his own, personal plane.

“Sick, right?” Malin didn’t even bother hiding his excitement. “Thank Amaya later. He insisted we take it because she’ll be flying back with us.”

“She was already on my good list, but this might just turn her into my favorite person,” I joked.

“Okay, slow down.” He glared at me, but it didn’t take long for another bright smile to light up his face. Was he swooning? “Now that I’ve delivered yet another piece of good news, I’ll go find my shining star. Don’t take too long getting ready! She’s excited to see her new home and I don’t wanna keep her waiting!” As soon as he finished his sentence, he rushed out, closing the door with a loud bang.

Did he just call his mate a *shining star*? Yuck. Hopefully, I won’t be like that when I find my destined partner. I don’t think I’d be able to stand myself.

“*How much worse can you get though? It’s already hard enough to stand you as it is.*” There was my bratty she-wolf again with her snark, doing what she did best - annoy me.

“*Good morning to you too, Dawn. Did you sleep well? You sound even more irritating today.*” I showed her a sarcastic smile.

“*Why, thank you, Zephyr! I’m flattered.*” She batted her eyelashes at me before diving back into the depths of my mind. I shook my head at her silliness, but the smile never left my face as I got ready to return home.

The second I finished packing my only suitcase, I got a text from Malin saying he and Amaya were waiting for me and the former Elite members downstairs. I was about to knock on my father’s door when he opened it up, so we headed to the first floor together. Aside from my best friend and his mate,

who was saying her final goodbyes to her Gamma brother, Alpha Ruben and his Beta were also there.

“Thank you for coming, Alpha Zephyr.” The other leader took a step in my direction to shake my hand. “I hope you enjoyed your stay, as short as it was.”

“We did. Thank you for having us, Alpha Ruben.”

“It was my pleasure. I truly hope we meet again in the future.” He gave me a curt nod before turning to Amaya. “This will always be your home. Please come visit us every once in a while, okay?”

“I will.” The blonde girl smiled, soon returning to her mate’s side.

“The car will take you to our private airstrip.” Ruben waved his hand towards the limousine parked only a few feet away from us. “Have a safe trip.”

As if it was a command, the driver opened the door for us. We all hopped into the car, and as we drove off, I was once again amazed by how large Dune Drifters’ territory was. Amidst all my troubles, I briefly wondered if I would ever be able to make Wind Howlers grow as much under my leadership.

Despite how everything had to be done on short notice, the flight crew was ready to receive us at the runway. They promptly helped us carry our baggage into the private jet, which was a lot smaller than a commercial plane. Surprisingly, its interior was quite spacious, as well as very well decorated, with shiny white plastic tables, cream-colored leather couches and comfortable seats, and golden pillows.

“Dude, we need to get one of these,” Malin whispered to me as soon as we took our seats.

“Way ahead of you,” I replied with the same excitement.

“I trust the two of you will make better use of the pack’s savings.” My father poked his head over my seat, almost giving me a heart attack.

“We were just joking, Dad!” I rolled my eyes at him.

“No, you weren’t,” Dawn chimed in.

Just then, the plane started moving, and we all went silent to listen to the flight attendant’s instructions. As we departed, I noticed how weird it felt not having my best friend by my side. He was seated in front of me with his mate instead, which was only logical. Since we had a couple hours until we landed in Genoro, I decided to try and get to know Amaya better. She would become Beta Female of Wind Howlers after all, and I wanted her to feel welcomed in her new home.

“So, Amaya,” I called, startling her. “We haven’t been properly introduced yet. I’m Zephyr.” I offered her my hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alpha Zephyr.” She lowered her head in respect as we shook hands.

“Please, just Zephyr. We’re family now,” I insisted.

“Of course.” She showed me a sympathetic smile. “Are you the one with a female wolf? Alpha Ruben said he met you out in the desert yesterday and-” She seemed to notice how her question caught me off guard, because she suddenly turned red when I stiffened. “I’m sorry, that is a very personal question, isn’t it? I shouldn’t have-”

“No, it’s alright. I’m just...still getting used to the idea,” I clarified, sighing. “Yes, Dawn is a female, and my counterpart.”

There was silence for a moment before her face lit up again. “Oh my Goddess, that’s so amazing!” I blinked a few times in confusion. Thankfully, she didn’t hesitate to explain, “I mean, if Deltas have to be strong enough to take on other males, imagine what an Alpha she-wolf can do! Dawn must be super powerful if she ended up with you.”

“Oh, I don’t care that we just met this girl, I fucking love her already!” my she-wolf cooed.

“That’s what I keep telling him!” Malin yelled.

The three of us continued to chat throughout the flight. I told her about our life at Wind Howlers, and she explained a little more about herself. Despite how much she loved the lands she had grown up in, most of her friends had moved out

after finding their mates. She said she was ready to start fresh in a new place and make her own story instead of hearing about others' experiences.

Apparently, she was very close to her brother, who was quite hesitant to let her go - which was understandable, considering the threat our pack was facing. Either way, he was happy for her. And most importantly, she seemed happy. As nauseating as it was to watch my best friend's public displays of love towards his mate, their romance had a hopeful energy. We needed that kind of positivity with everything going on back home.

Time flew by, and before we even noticed, we had landed. Our driver was waiting for us at the entrance of the airport. The ride home was fairly quick, and as soon as we crossed the borders of our territory, Amaya was speechless. Wind Howlers wasn't nearly as big as Dune Drifters, but our lands were incredibly beautiful. Malin pointed at the main landmarks through the window as we drove by, giving his mate a quick preview of what he would show her later.

Although I wish I could have had more time to explore Galensoles, it felt good to be home again. Sure, it was impossible to ignore the problems I would have to take care of now, but if anything, taking in the view reminded me of why I wanted to fight to protect these lands. I would do whatever it took to ensure my pack would thrive, with or without help.

Absorbed in thought, I barely noticed the car come to a stop until the driver opened the door. "Welcome back, Alpha Zephyr."

The moment I hopped out of the vehicle, my gaze landed on my Gamma and Delta standing in front of the main building, ready to receive me. Their neutral expressions turned into surprised ones as they watched my Beta climb out of the car holding hands with an outsider. Intelligent as they both were, it only took them a second to understand the situation, which is why I didn't even bother explaining anything as I approached them.

"Gamma Zachari. Delta Alexandra."

“Alpha Zephyr.” They lowered their heads before me.

“First of all, this is Amaya Kimbel, Malin’s mate.” I waved my hand towards the blonde girl. “I trust you will give her the warm welcome our future Beta Female deserves.”

“Nice to meet you, Gamma. Delta.” She greeted them with a shy smile.

“I’m sorry to ask with such short notice, Alex, but can you please put together a dinner celebration for her tonight?”

“You got it, Alpha.”

“Malin,” I called, and the next second, my second-in-command was standing by my side. “Link the Elder to see when we can perform the joining ritual.”

“On it.”

As his eyes clouded over, I turned to Zachari. “Our priority is to organize everything for Amaya’s arrival, but there are a few issues we must discuss regarding our trip. Get ready to meet us at the Elder chapel. After that, I’m calling a meeting in my office. Did you leave the pack reports on my desk?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

“Great. Thank you.” I squeezed his shoulder. “How did you enjoy being Alpha for a day?”

“Your job is too easy.” He frowned, and I couldn’t contain a small laugh.

“Zephyr.” My best friend caught my attention. “Elder Laelius said he’ll be ready to see us in an hour.”

“That’s how long we have to get ready then,” I observed. “I’ll be waiting for you there.”

* * *

Returning to my room should feel relieving, but the big space only ever reminded me of how empty I felt. Thankfully, I only needed to stay there for a short time. After taking a quick shower to make sure I looked presentable for the joining ritual, I put on a navy button-up shirt and black trousers. Although I preferred mixing light and dark tones, it would be

smart to stick to darker colors, since my clothes could get stained by blood in the process. As heir, I had more than enough money to buy new outfits, but I loathed shopping as much as Zach did training.

My hair was still damp when I rushed back outside, headed to the Elder Chapel. I was a few minutes early, but my team wasn't far behind. It felt weird not seeing my father or his friends among them. It was a formality for all Elite members to be present during most rituals, but I hadn't yet gotten used to the fact that we were the new generation. Only then did I also realize it would be my first time officially welcoming a new member into the pack. I wasn't nervous though; I had watched my father perform it enough times to know exactly how it worked.

“Are you ready to become part of Wind Howlers?” I flashed Amaya a bright smile.

She exchanged looks with her mate before nodding excitedly. “Yeah. I'm already in love with this place.”

“Glad to hear. Let's not waste any more time then.” I pointed towards the entrance with my head, taking the lead as they all followed behind me.

The Elder was standing behind the pedestal in the center of the room, a silver goblet placed over it. We bowed our heads at the older man, who gave us a curt nod.

“Shall we begin, Alpha Zephyr?”

I glanced at Malin, almost as if to get permission before asking for Amaya's hand. She took a deep breath before allowing me to lead her closer to the pedestal. Laelius pulled out the same silver dagger he had used at our Power Transfer Ceremony and handed it to me.

“Amaya Kimbel, former member of Dune Drifters Pack,” the Elder addressed her. “Will you break all of your ties with your previous home, swearing your loyalty to Wind Howlers and its Alpha, Zephyr Wyndham?”

“I will,” the girl answered promptly.

“Do you swear to exercise your duties as Beta Female to the best of your abilities, offering your heart and your soul to our pack?”

“I do.”

“Then by blood you shall be bonded to Wind Howlers.” He waved his hand in my direction, gesturing for me to go on.

I held the dagger firmly in my hands as I turned to face Amaya. Without hesitation, I dragged the blade over my skin, opening a thin cut on my palm. I then turned to my best friend’s mate, taking her hand in mine to repeat the process with her. As gentle as I tried to be, she still winced when the silver burned her skin. A low growl from Malin let me know he wasn’t pleased about his mate’s pain, but he knew it had to be done.

Once we were both bleeding, I pressed my palm against Amaya’s. With our hands locked over the goblet, I watched the shades of ruby mix as our blood dripped into the recipient. By the time our wounds healed, the goblet was half full. As soon as I let go of her hand, she wrapped her finger around the goblet’s thin stem. Since Malin had probably explained the ritual to her previously, she knew to carry it outside as the Elder and I followed her.

With another deep breath, Amaya quickly waved her arm, tossing the mixture of our blood in the air. A surprised gasp escaped her lips as she watched the red liquid turn into shiny particles that were carried by the wind. The next second, she started looking around as if she had seen - or heard - a ghost.

“What was that?” she asked with shock.

“The wind called your name, didn’t it?” I chuckled.
“Welcome to Wind Howlers, Beta Female Amaya.”

She barely had time to understand what had happened when her mate threw his arms around her. “Welcome to my home, my shining star.”

I couldn’t help the smile on my face as I watched the two of them. With the ritual complete, I was about to remind them of our meeting when Laelius touched my shoulder.

“Alpha Zephyr. While you were away, I continued to research your peculiar situation. I believe you would like to hear the information I have gathered.” His voice was low, but it was obvious everyone had still heard him as they turned to me with expectant looks.

My heart skipped a beat at the unexpected news; I had been itching to learn more about why Dawn and I had been paired together. I only took a second to think before I turned to my friends.

“Malin. Zach. Wait for me here. I’ll be right back,” I commanded before heading back into the chapel with the older man.

“Please, Elder Laelius, what did you find?” I didn’t bother hiding my anxiety. My stomach turned with nervousness waiting for him to explain.

He slowly walked behind his desk in the corner before answering me. “As I told you before, there have been reports about werewolves with switched counterparts.” He pulled out a book from one of the drawers, flipping through its pages. “Despite none of them being recent, I might have found someone who could shine a light into the situation.”

“Who?” I took a step forward.

“Upon contacting the National Elder Council, I learned that they work with an experienced 400-year-old witch, who has apparently performed one of these wolf-switching rituals.” I opened my mouth to ask yet another question, but he was faster. “They have reached out to her, and she has agreed to come to Wind Howlers in three days to evaluate your case.”

My eyes widened with relief, and I was momentarily speechless before I could form words again. “Thank you, Elder Laelius.” He nodded at me. I lowered my head in respect before excusing myself.

“*Do you think she can separate us?*” Dawn asked quietly as I walked towards the exit.

“*I hope so,*” I replied without thinking. My she-wolf stiffened, and so did I as a weird feeling washed over me.

Did I really want to get rid of her when we were just starting to get along?

I shook my head. Of course I did, and she did too. Right?

“How did it go?” Malin pulled me from my thoughts, making me realize I was already standing outside. I also noticed his mate wasn’t there anymore, and neither was my Delta.

“We have more important issues to discuss now.” I felt bad for cutting him off, but I needed some time to digest the news. “Where’s Amaya?”

“Alex took her back to our room to help her unpack while we have our meeting,” my best friend clarified.

“Where do we start?” Zach chimed in.

I gestured for them to follow me towards the pack house. “We have to discuss a new plan to prepare for the Fallen attack. But we’ll get to it soon.” The topic demanded discretion; I knew better than to discuss it outside, where anyone could hear us. “First, I managed to take a quick look at the suggestions you made to our defense system, Zach. I’m honestly impressed. I’ll study them in more detail later, but I believe we can start implementing the changes,” I informed him, turning to my Beta soon after. “Malin, we also have to talk about your days off.”

“Days off?” He flashed me a quizzical look.

“You have found your mate. It’s only fair that the two of you have some undisturbed time to get to know each other better,” I clarified. “What do you-” Before I could finish my sentence, a strong headache hit me.

The sudden pain forced me to shut my eyes, and when I opened them again, I wasn’t in Wind Howlers territory anymore.

11 | VISION

There was no one around me, nothing aside from tall trees and thick bushes. I blinked a few times, taking in my surroundings. Nothing here was even remotely familiar. Where was I? I could hear my heavy breathing, muffled by the sound of the rain thundering as it hit the ground. It hadn't been raining a moment ago, but that's not what confused me most.

My heart was beating fast, pounding in my chest. Was this... fear? No, this was more than fear. I was terrified. It had been a long time, surely more than a decade, since the last time I felt scared. I was taught from a young age that Alphas shouldn't fear anything. So why was I shaking?

Before I could make any sense of the situation, I bolted through the forest at lightning speed. There was nobody chasing me; I was running from myself. From the dread I felt. My large paws crashed against the wet grass, sinking into the mud with every step I took. The thin leaves couldn't prevent the downpour from drenching my coat, making me feel heavier. My eyes nervously scoured through the area as I desperately tried to spot any clues regarding my whereabouts. Nothing.

“Stop!”

A man I had never seen before jumped in front of me. I almost ran him over, my massive weight making it harder for me to come to a full stop, especially since the earth was slippery from the rain. Thankfully, he wrapped his arms around my neck, using all of his strength to push me back. As my eyes landed on the stranger, I noticed that he looked to be around his fifties. In his light brown, I saw empathy. He was quite short for a werewolf. Or was I suddenly bigger? Dawn didn't seem to be this tall in the previous times we had shifted.

“Calm down. It's okay. It's gonna be okay...” he whispered, caressing my muzzle softly in an attempt to soothe me. I didn't know why, but I felt safe with him. “You just can't

let them see you like this. Promise me you will stay hidden.” His tone grew more serious. “When they start asking, you have to tell them you are wolfless. If they ever find out the truth...” he warned, horror evident in his expression. What ‘truth’? “Now, shift back. Before anyone sees you like this.”

Wait, what was going on? How did I end up here? Who is this man? Who...

Who am I?

I didn’t have time to seek an answer to any of my questions. Darkness consumed me yet again as another wave of pain rolled over me. I forced my eyes to open, but when I finally got my vision back, there was no forest, no rain, no man. My gaze fell on the huge building in front of me, and I knew I was back.

“Zephyr! Zephyr!” my friends yelled frantically.

It took me a few seconds to get back to my senses. As I tried to move, I realized that I had one arm around Malin’s shoulders, the other wrapped on Zach’s neck. They were both staring at me with a mix of confusion and shock. My legs were weak, but I fought to stand on my own two feet.

“W-what happened?” I struggled to speak.

“We should be the ones asking you that question,” Zach observed.

“You just passed out, dude,” Malin revealed, standing in front of me as he proceeded to check if there was anything visibly wrong. “And you look pale as a ghost. Are you alright? What was that?”

Good question, I thought to myself. I wish I knew the answer to it. In a moment of clarity, I decided to ask Dawn if she had any idea what we had just gone through. To my surprise, not only did she not acknowledge me, she also simply kept pacing around my head in utter distress. It was almost as if she was in a trance. What the fuck?

“Zephyr?” Malin called again in a demanding tone.

I breathed in, looking away. “I...I haven’t been getting much sleep lately. I’m just exhausted, that’s all.” As silence filled the air, I could feel their doubtful gazes on me. I had never lied to either of them before; we were the new Elite of Wind Howlers, and there should be no secrets between us. Honestly, I didn’t know where such an instinct had come from. Whether it was out of fear of them thinking I was slowly going insane, or simply because I was still confused about the vision I had just had, I decided I couldn’t tell them the truth. At least not yet.

“You’re an Alpha, but you’re not invincible. You should go get some rest.” Malin’s suggestion was almost an order.

“As soon as we’re done with this meeting,” I insisted.

At that exact moment, I felt something light hit my head, then my shoulder. Slowly stretching my trembling hand out, I understood exactly what was falling over me.

Rain.

“Let’s be quick then,” my Beta rushed.

I clenched my fist before shaking my head. Whatever the hell had happened, I already had too much to worry about.

* * *

For the first night since sleeping out in the open in the dandelion fields, I actually managed to drift off without a problem. It was impossible for me to feel relaxed after the recent chain of events, but I had gotten some help.

Once the meeting was over, Malin apparently contacted my mother to let her know about my condition. She knocked on my door as I was getting ready for bed and offered me her classic Passionflower and Lemon Balm tea. Although I hadn’t tasted the warm drink in a while, Mom would often prepare it for me when I had trouble sleeping back when I was still a pup. It always worked, and this time was no different.

In the morning, I tried reaching out to Dawn again, only to be ignored in the same way I had been the day before. She was still restless, even more so than me. Part of me wanted to stay in bed and digest the vision - if I could even call it that - but I

didn't want to skip training again. Plus, sparring usually helped get my mind off my troubles, and with the madness of the past two weeks, I could really use some clarity.

Unfortunately, the training session didn't last long enough for me to unwind. While the warriors headed to the cafeteria to fill their empty stomachs, I decided to stay at the training grounds for a little longer. It was hard to dismiss my best friend, but I managed to convince him that the episode of the previous night wouldn't repeat itself, emphasizing how I could benefit from the extra exercise.

It was around ten when I decided to take a break. My muscles were sore, but at least my mind was more at ease compared to how anguished I had been when I woke up. I left for the public showers, hoping the water would wash away the remainder of my worries. What I didn't expect was to have company.

"Zephyr?" A feminine voice called - it took me a moment to realize it was Gina's. Her eyes found mine as I was leaving the shower stall with only a towel wrapped around my waist. She didn't bother hiding the way she openly ogled me.

"This is the second time you've found me when I'm alone. Are you stalking me?" I joked, recalling the time she had found me in my car by the cliff on the night before my first shift. It was easier to mask my distress with humor.

"Us wolves of Wind Howlers know how to mask our scents; if I didn't want you to notice me, you wouldn't have."

"Fair enough."

"I saw you walk in here by yourself, and I couldn't help but worry. Hasn't training been over for a couple of hours?" As she continued, I turned around to go get my clothes in my bag. The next second, I stiffened as I felt a pair of arms snake around my waist from behind. A low groan reverberated in my chest when soft hands caressed my stomach. "I won't ask any questions unless you wanna talk. But I thought maybe you could use a...distraction." Her fingers tugged on the towel, and I gladly let my head fall backwards.

Because of the stupid rumors, it had been a while since I had last gotten laid, and her idea didn't sound half-bad. I glanced around just to confirm we were the only ones there, but I doubted anyone would walk in on us since training was over. Maybe I could-

"Don't even think about it." Dawn's stern voice echoed inside my head, startling me.

"There you are," I called out, annoyed. *"Are you done ignoring me?"*

"I thought you wanted me to shut up. Isn't that what you said the first time we met?" Her words stung me. Yes, my she-wolf had always been full of snark, but she had never been this harsh.

A pinch of guilt struck me. *"Dawn, I-"*

"What do you say, Alpha Zephyr?" Gina cooed, reminding me of her presence.

I shook my head. *"I did everything you asked me to. I'm letting you out every night. I'm listening to you. You had your release, so why can't I have mine?"*

"Release?" Dawn scoffed. *"This isn't release! This is you being a reckless asshole! How do you think your mate will feel when she finds out about the dozens of women you took to the bed you're supposed to share with her?"*

Fucking Crescent, what was wrong with this she-wolf? This wasn't just her usual anger. I thought I could sense a hint of...jealousy? Why the fuck would she be jealous of a random female?

"Zephyr?" Gina asked again, confusion in her expression. I had to blink a few times to bring my focus back to her. After a few long seconds of staring at her in silence, I sighed.

"Sorry, I have to go." I broke free from her grasp, turning my back to her once again.

Not bothering to get dressed, I exited the public showers wearing only my towel, leaving a baffled - and likely angry - Gina behind. I could really use a good fuck right now, but it

wasn't worth pissing off my rather unique counterpart when we were just starting to get along. It was surely something I would have to discuss with her later though.

After getting dressed in the restroom on the bottom floor of the pack house, I took the stairs up to the top floor, heading straight to my office. There was a lot I had to take care of, but between the bizarre vision and my she-wolf's weird behavior, it wasn't easy to concentrate. Instead, I decided to take in the view of my lands through the huge floor-to-ceiling windows.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get our last exchange out of my mind. For some reason, I felt...bad, for the way I'd acted. Despite what Malin always told me, I don't believe I should be ashamed of sleeping around when I hadn't even found my mate. Still, it kind of felt like I was disrespecting Dawn. And I had probably done enough of that.

"Dawn?" She didn't reply, but I could tell she was listening. Although her anger was subsiding, she still seemed pissed. Running my hands through my jet-black hair, I went on, *"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have considered having sex with Gina. Not before we figure out a way to fix our situation. It would probably be weird for you to watch us."*

"That's not-"

"It's alright. I know I'm a dick to you 90 percent of the time." A sad laugh broke through my lips. *"At least if the witch Laelius mentioned can help us, you won't be stuck with me for much longer."*

The brown-and-blond she-wolf lowered her ears and opened her mouth, but before she could reply, I heard the door burst open. As I turned around, I found my best friend standing at the entrance.

"Malin?" I arched an eyebrow as I started towards him. "I thought you were off for the next few days?"

"We have last-minute visitors." His clarification only further confused me. "Alpha Ryder of Silent Rivers Pack has requested a meeting with you."

"When?"

“Now.”

My Beta pushed the door open wider, revealing two other men who were following behind him. They both had very similar features, but while one of them looked to be around my age, the other one seemed to be in his late forties. I glanced quickly at them before focusing on Malin once again.

Judging by the concerned look on his face, I took it that there was more trouble coming our way.

12 | CHALLENGE

I blinked a few times as I tried to process the situation. For an Alpha to show up at another leader's territory without warning was...unusual, to say the least. A feeling of uneasiness flooded me, maybe because my she-wolf was projecting it onto me. Dawn had her head lowered and her ears up in alert, as if she was readying herself for...what, exactly? I cleared my throat, realizing there was only one way to find out.

“Alpha Ryder.” With my gaze locked on the young man, I removed my hand from my back pocket, stretching it out towards the chairs placed in front of my desk. “Please, come in. You are welcome to join us, too, Alpha Rhys.” I recognized the former Alpha of Silent Rivers from one of the meetings I had attended with my father when I was younger.

Silent Rivers was a fairly young pack located not too far from our lands. It was also quite small, considering it had just under 200 members. Despite its size, it was quite notorious. According to the books I had to read about pack politics, it had grown extremely fast under its first leader's rule, going from roughly a dozen wolves to its current numbers in less than a decade. However, Alpha Rhys - the founder of Silent Rivers - stopped conquering other packs before his heir, Ryder, reached the age of ten.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Alpha Zephyr. I truly hope we aren't interrupting anything.” Ryder shook my hand, showing me a big grin.

“We heard your hands have been full lately,” his father added as he walked past me. I could swear I had sensed a hint of irony in his voice, but I shook it off.

Before I turned around to go back to my seat, I noticed my Beta's eyes clouding over. I wondered who he was linking, but I didn't dwell on it for long. There were far more important questions I wanted answers to.

“Would you like a drink? Coffee? Whiskey?” I asked politely as I got comfortable in my chair. Malin soon joined my side.

“No, thank you. I do not wish to take too much of your time,” the young Alpha insisted.

“Alright. What brings you here with such...urgency?”

The two men exchanged glances before Ryder leaned forward. “I’ll cut to the chase, Alpha Zephyr. I’m here to challenge you for your pack.”

The confident smile on his face grew as silence filled the room. On the outside, I was calm and collected, but on the inside, I was freaking the fuck out. Deep down, I suspected that was the reason why he had come without warning, allowing me no time to plan a response, but it still caught me off guard.

Shit! How was I supposed to face an Alpha wolf in combat when my counterpart was a female? My mind was running a million miles a minute as I tried to analyze my options before my time was up and I had to give them an answer. At first, I considered trying to come up with an excuse to postpone the challenge until I managed to talk to the witch who would hopefully shine a light on my situation, but I knew it would be impossible. In the end, there were only two paths for me to follow: I could accept Ryder’s challenge and fight him in front of my whole pack, or refuse it and let him take over my home without even trying to defend it.

Either way, I lose.

“Speak for yourself,” Dawn scoffed. *“You might not think you can beat him, but I know I can.”*

Before I had time to retort, the visiting Alpha’s voice sounded again. “What do you say, Alpha Zephyr? Do you accept my challenge?”

“Wait!” My father burst through the door, which Malin had probably left unlocked. His sudden arrival surprised us all, except for my Beta, who had most likely warned him about our guests. The concerned expression he wore only made me

more anxious. “Zephyr has just stepped in as Alpha. He can’t be challenged during the first year of his rule.”

“Not unless he is challenged by another Alpha who has also been leading for less than a year,” Rhys pointed out. “Which happens to be the case with my son.” Only when I noticed the sinister grin on the man’s face did I realize his true intentions.

They must have known the Moon Goddess had paired me with a female wolf.

At first, I was confused about why the Alpha of a smaller pack would impulsively challenge the leader of a larger one. Because bigger packs had more enemies, and more followers to keep under control, it was natural for their rulers to be genetically stronger to be able to protect their title. Besides, it was uncommon for young leaders to challenge each other, since they usually had little experience in battle. Of course, it wasn’t a rule, but I couldn’t deny that Ryder seemed a little too confident. Now I knew why.

“So?” the bastard pressured me again.

“*Accept it,*” Dawn ordered. I couldn’t say I fully trusted her, but what other choice did I have?

“I accept your challenge,” I replied at last, forcing a smile. Our two guests didn’t hide their satisfaction, but I noticed the way my father and my Beta held their breaths. Before they could interfere, I continued, “Beta Malin, please notify Elder Laelius about the challenge. It shall take place in the clearing right outside of the territory to prevent the destruction of houses and other buildings. Tell Delta Alexandra to let the members know whoever wants to witness our fight is welcome to come with us.”

My best friend could only stare at me in silence for long seconds. At last, he bowed his head at me. “Yes, Alpha.”

I stood up from my chair, turning to our guests. “My Beta will lead you to the battlegrounds. I will be joining you there in a minute.”

Malin flashed me one final quizzical look before doing as I said. "Please, follow me."

"I'll be anxiously waiting for you, Alpha Zephyr." Ryder nodded, and I returned the gesture as I watched him disappear through the door along with his father.

As soon as they were gone, the heavy sigh I had been holding broke through my lips. I raised my head higher when I noticed my father's worried gaze on me, soon stepping towards him.

"Zephyr..." he uttered quietly. I could tell there was a lot he wanted to say, yet he lacked an answer to my problems.

"I've got this." I patted his shoulder as I walked past him, trying to sound as confident as possible even though I didn't really trust my own words.

As I slowly climbed down the stairs, trying to lengthen the time where I still hadn't lost everything, panic overwhelmed me.

"You really are a scared kitten!" Dawn mocked. How could she stay calm? *"Don't worry, we're gonna send that little pup running with his tail between his legs."*

"Really?" It was my turn to scoff.

"Yeah. I'm gonna kick his ass." She shrugged. *"Easy peasy puppies defeaty."*

"Please, enlighten me on how you plan to beat an opponent who's larger and stronger than you!" I started losing my patience, but just then, my mind cleared as I realized exactly what I had to do.

Of course, how did I not think of it sooner? All I had to do was face Ryder in human form. According to werewolf law, both the challenger and the challenged were allowed to shift, but we weren't required to. I could fight my opponent without my wolf if I so desired. Sure, it would make the battle way harder, but I had always been a good warrior. I would go as far as to say I had a shot at knocking out Ryder's counterpart before he murdered me. Even if I didn't, it'd be less

humiliating than to have my whole pack watch my she-wolf being forced into submission by an outsider.

“You can’t be serious. You’d rather die than give me a chance to prove my strength?” She flashed me a disgusted look. *“And I was starting to think you were becoming less of a dick! Seems like I was wrong.”*

Part of me wanted to argue with her, but I decided I was already too stressed; I needed to focus if I wanted to stand a chance against my adversary. Ignoring her, I continued making my way towards the place where we would face off.

The rules of an official challenge were quite simple: if proposed in person, it was to happen immediately, and with an Elder as witness. While it didn’t require the presence of any members, not even the Elite, it was common for wolves of the challenged pack to gather around to support their Alpha. I took the empty town square as a sign that I was right.

It was no surprise to find a crowd in the clearing where the challenge would take place. Alpha Ryder was already there, obviously, along with his father and my team. My Mom and Dad arrived seconds after me. Elder Laelius was standing in the center of a circle - the makeshift battlegrounds - as expressionless as ever. My gaze quickly found my opponent’s, and we stepped together into the circle.

I took the last seconds before the fight started to straighten my posture and collect myself. *I can do this*, I repeated inside my head. I had to do this.

“Alpha Zephyr of Wind Howlers Pack...” The old man’s voice echoed through the forest, causing everyone to go silent. “You have been challenged by Alpha Ryder of Silent Rivers Pack. Do you accept the challenge?”

“Yes, I do,” I replied without hesitation.

The next second, he turned to the crowd. “If Alpha Zephyr wins, he will have the right to take over Silent Rivers. If he loses, he must give up his pack, and Alpha Ryder will have permission to either banish him or put him down.”

My stomach turned as I understood what was at stake, but the Alpha in me refused to give in to fear. I remained strong, refusing to look away from my opponent. Whoever broke eye contact first would have already lost the psychological battle before the physical one even started. The longer I stared at him though, the more I realized I wasn't scared of him; not in the slightest.

I was afraid of disappointing the people who put their faith in me.

“The challenge ends when one of the parties submits or dies. May the best Alpha win,” the Elder continued, holding out a small bell that was tied to his rope belt. Sounding it, he officially declared the beginning of the challenge. “You may begin!”

Before Laelius finished his last sentence, Ryder had already given his brown beast control. The predator kept the same wolfish grin his human had been wearing since he voiced his challenge to me. It was evident he had been anxiously waiting for the moment I would set my she-wolf free so he could laugh at me. Unfortunately for him, I wouldn't allow him that satisfaction.

“Are you seriously following through with your stupid idea?!” Dawn screeched. *“This is why females live longer than males!”*

Once again dismissing her, I got into a fighting stance and stared straight into the creature's eyes as I yelled, “Come on!”

The brown wolf cocked his head to the side in confusion, looking at me as if I had gone mad. Maybe I had. Shocked gasps could be heard around me as the crowd realized what I was doing, but I didn't tremble. After a few seconds, my opponent shook his head, getting rid of his bewilderment to focus solely on his target - me.

When Ryder's counterpart started sprinting towards me, I didn't move. During the brief second it took for him to close the distance between us, the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The silence was broken by a choir of horrified wheezes as my head was nearly bitten off, but my move had

been carefully calculated. At the last moment, I used my werewolf speed to dodge the razor sharp teeth, while wrapping my arms around the animal's neck.

I knew I would never be able to knock my adversary down with only my strength, as he was twice my size and a lot heavier, which is why I decided to climb on his back instead. My unexpected strategy clearly took him by surprise. I used the opportunity to close my fists around his ears, pulling them back with all my force. It would take a lot more to cause him actual pain, but it annoyed him enough to throw himself on the ground in a desperate attempt to dispose of me.

That was the exact reaction I wanted.

Moments before the wolf hit the ground, crushing me with his massive weight, I jumped off. When his belly was facing the sky, I landed right on his face, punching his muzzle in a powerful blow. It was hard enough to draw blood, but the creature, at last, cried out in pain. A smile lit up my face as I allowed myself to be proud of my great start despite my clear disadvantage, but I was soon reminded that I would never manage to defeat a wolf while I was in human form.

In the blink of an eye, Ryder's counterpart was back to his feet. Judging by his snarl, it seemed I had angered him. Not thinking twice, he jumped in my direction yet again. This time, I was barely able to escape, his teeth grazing against my skin as he missed me by an inch. I was foolish to think I had avoided his attack though.

The brown beast proceeded to swing his huge paw at me, his sharp claws opening three large cuts across my chest, from my shoulder to my hip, as they made contact with my frail human skin. A groan escaped my lips as I was sent flying a few feet away, only to release another gasp when my back hit the ground with a loud thud. I knew I couldn't remain exposed and on the ground for long, but before I could pick myself up again, the creature climbed on top of me, pinning me against the dirt. No matter how hard I struggled, I couldn't push him away from me.

This would be the end of Alpha Zephyr.

“Are you done with your stupid show, you stubborn mutt?!” Dawn roared. *“Let me out!”*

I wanted to give her a chance. I really did. But I was too proud to do it. If I was killed like this, I would go down in history as the brave Alpha who didn't back away from a fight in which he was at a clear disadvantage; the man who stood his ground in a fight against a wolf. It would be better than being remembered as the pathetic Alpha-freak who hid behind his female counterpart, only to have the same fate.

“That doesn't even matter if you're dead anyway!” she insisted. *“Swallow your fucking pride and let me finish what you started!”*

“Shift!” I heard a feminine voice shout.

My eyes instinctively scanned through the crowd, and I was surprised to find Amaya, my best friend's mate, cheering for me. She barely knew me or my wolf, but she was as confident as Malin was that Dawn was special. Her initiative was followed by the crowd, and before long, dozens of wolves were begging me to let my counterpart out.

I barely had time to be impacted by their support when Ryder's wolf growled again, catching my attention. Like the Elder stated, there were two ways to end a challenge: first, by forcing your opponent to submit, or second, by finishing him off. Judging by the look in his feral yellow eyes, I was quite sure he was going for the latter. But to be fair, I wouldn't bow my head to him if he gave me the chance.

“For Goddess' sake, Zephyr! You might not want to live, but I do!” Dawn's tone was getting more desperate. *“By not letting me out, you're killing me too!”*

“Fine!” Whether it was her insistence or my unwillingness to admit defeat, I agreed.

As my eyes closed, I finally gave her control.

13 | STRENGTH

A millisecond before the large beast carved a hole in my chest, Dawn took my place. As soon as she entered the battlefield, she pressed her front paws against the enemy's shoulder, both preventing him from closing his monstrous jaws around her neck and pushing him off her. I had been the one fighting up until now, but it seemed the adrenaline was also rushing through her veins.

The crowd went completely silent as my she-wolf quickly jumped to her feet, but once their surprise was gone, they burst into cheers. Although I was honestly shocked by the support she was receiving, she didn't let the noise distract her. Her sunrise-golden eyes were locked on her opponent as she attentively waited for his next move, whilst taking a moment to collect herself.

Dawn was panting, blood dripping on the ground from the wound caused by the blow I had taken a moment ago. It was evident that Ryder's counterpart was in better shape than her, as I had barely been able to hurt him. Still, she wasn't the least intimidated by her adversary, even with him standing taller than her. On second thought though, she wasn't that much smaller compared to him; not nearly as small as I thought she was. In fact, she was almost as big as him, which was quite uncommon for a female. How could I not have noticed it before?

"Now, sit back, shut up, and watch," Dawn snarled.

As if the brown wolf had managed to hear her words, he lunged in our direction with his mouth open wide, ready to snap it shut around her. To his bewilderment - and mine likewise - she nimbly dodged his attack with impressive agility. I had seen her run before, but now, she was moving as though she was one with the wind. It was beautiful, actually, and it made me forget that we were fighting for a second, until

the opposing Alpha's screams filled the air again, bringing me back to reality.

I could only process what had happened when Dawn's fury rose, fueled by the taste of the enemy's blood soaking her tongue. She had her teeth sunken deep into his right thigh, and when she finally released him from her grasp, a limp made it harder for him to struggle away from her. Probably aware that he wouldn't be able to gain a safe distance before my she-wolf landed her next blow, he resorted to the offensive.

The impulsiveness with which he attacked Dawn could be compared to that of an injured animal instinctively trying to escape death. It was unexpected enough that he managed to scratch my she-wolf's cheek with his teeth as he swung his head in her direction, but it also left him recklessly exposed. And, of course, it made her angrier, which was not good. At least not for him.

Her eyes locked on the target right in front of her - the beast's jugular. In a swift movement, she closed her mouth around his neck. A whimper of fear and pain escaped his throat as he was thrown to the ground. By tightening her grasp on him, she secured him in place. It wasn't long before the once powerful-looking beast started coughing as it choked.

"I really wanna murder this bastard," she stated the obvious. *"The real question is... Should I?"*

"Why not? He was ready to kill me," I retorted.

"Think, kitten. If we end him now, he won't cause us any more trouble." She read my thoughts. *"But if we spare him and force him to go rogue, he will live to tell the story, thus ridding us of yet another rock in our shoe."*

My eyes widened when I realized what she meant. The suddenness of everything pointed to Ryder having decided to challenge me upon learning about my she-wolf. He most likely thought it would be an easy opportunity to claim my pack, and he certainly wasn't the only Alpha who had come to that conclusion. As the rumors spread, others would surely take me for a weak leader. They could doubt what happened if we killed him, but they wouldn't be able to deny the living proof

that Alpha Zephyr Wyndham's wolf was powerful despite being a female.

"There you go. You're not as stupid as I thought!" Dawn faked amusement, making me frown. *"Now that we're in agreement, let me finish this."*

When my she-wolf growled, Ryder's counterpart closed his eyes, clearly anticipating a death blow. Instead, she let go of his neck to bite his stomach, making him cry out in pain one last time. The wound she left on him was nasty enough to declare her victorious, but like any other shifter, he would heal.

The Elder approached us, waiting for any signs that the challenging Alpha was still able to fight. Dawn's cold glare seemed to intimidate him though. Fear was evident in his eyes as she roared one more time, demanding an answer from him. Still heaving, he whimpered like a little pup, letting his tail come between his legs as he lowered his ears in submission, acknowledging defeat.

"Alpha Zephyr Wyndham wins the challenge. Aside from keeping his pack and title, he also earns the right to claim Silent Rivers," Laelius announced, causing the crowd to go wild.

Too weak to remain in wolf form, Ryder was forced to shift back into his human form. He stayed on the ground though, pressing both hands to his injury in a very ineffective attempt to stop the bleeding as he moaned in pain. After finishing what she had come out to do, Dawn offered me back control. As soon as my transformation was over, Elder Laelius offered me a traditional green robe before stepping closer to the loser.

"Ryder, you will be stripped of your title. Your destiny is now in Alpha Zephyr's hands," the old man turned to me again.

I didn't even blink. "Since I'm a merciful Alpha, I'll let you live to regret your terrible mistake for the rest of your days," I declared, holding my head high as I glanced at the fallen bastard. "In the meantime, you can tell everyone about

how powerful Alpha Zephyr's wolf is." Feeling my people's gaze on me, I turned to them. "You hear me, Wind Howlers? You've just witnessed what my counterpart is capable of. Her name is Dawn, and you are to respect her as much as you do me!"

"Yes, Alpha!" the crowd replied in unison.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Ryder's father shaking with anger. Disgust was written all over his face as he stared at his son lying pathetically on the ground. He had probably been the one to instruct the young Alpha to challenge me, but there was nothing either of them could do now; I had defeated Ryder in fair combat.

"*I defeated him,*" Dawn gladly pointed out. "*You nearly killed us both.*"

"*Sorry about that.*" I flashed her a sheepish smile. The next second, a question popped up in my head. "*Where did you learn to fight like that? I never let you out during training to spar with the other wolves.*"

"*It's instinct. I'm an Alpha, just like you are; I will fight tooth and nail to defend what's mine.*"

I was still absorbing her answer when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Turning around, I found Malin standing right behind me, his arm around his mate's waist. Both of them were wearing radiant smiles.

"Good job, man. I knew you could do it." I nodded at him, glancing at Amaya soon after. "Thank you for the encouragement."

"Your wolf deserved a vote of confidence. I'm glad you let her prove her strength." She returned the gesture.

"We should celebrate..." my best friend continued, but he made a brief pause as his eyes fell on my chest, where the green had been stained by a growing pool of crimson. "After you get checked by the pack doctor." He frowned. I rolled my eyes, but I knew there was no arguing with him.

* * *

“Everything seems to be in order, Alpha Zephyr,” Dr. Peter reassured me once he finished wrapping my entire torso in bandages.

The medical staff had been slightly alarmed upon my arrival, but it seemed my injuries appeared to be worse than they were in reality. Although Ryder’s claws had cut deep into my skin, a few stitches and some antibiotic cream were enough to get the job done. According to the doctor, there was nothing I should be worried about. Still, I’d have to stay away from training for two days to prevent my wounds from opening again. If I managed to have a speedy recovery, which was very likely, it wouldn’t even leave a scar.

“Thank you.” I nodded at him as I carefully put on a plain t-shirt one of the Omegas had kindly fetched for me.

“You don’t need to thank me for doing my job,” he promptly replied. “If you’ll excuse me, Alpha, I must check on another patient.”

“Of course.”

The man bowed his head at me before turning around. As soon as he opened the door, he was surprised to find someone else standing on the other side - more precisely, my father. The former Alpha’s eyes darted at me, and even as he greeted the pack doctor, we never broke eye contact. His unexpected presence was confusing enough, but what shocked me the most was his expression; it was full of emotion.

Full of *guilt*.

Once the doctor left, closing the door, utter silence filled the room. My old man kept staring at me for long seconds before a heavy sigh escaped his lips, and he finally approached me.

“Congratulations on defeating your first challenger, son.” He flashed me a small smile. “Your she-wolf,” he started hesitantly. “*Dawn*,” he corrected. “Dawn is stronger than you thought. Stronger than *I* thought.” There it was - the reason for the look of remorse on his face.

“Yeah...seems like it.” My words came out slowly as I tried to make sense of the situation. I didn’t need to rack my brain for long though.

“I’m sorry, Zephyr. It’s my fault. I...I’m the reason why you started losing your confidence.” He lowered his gaze in shame.

“What? No, Dad...” I shook my head. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“Yes, it does. After your First Shift Ceremony...you needed my support, and I wasn’t there for you.” I opened my mouth to argue, but he prevented me from speaking by continuing, “I taught you that an Alpha must be scared of nothing, yet I projected my own fears onto you. I should’ve known better than to doubt your counterpart’s strength. I should’ve known better than to think you’d break in the face of adversity.”

Once again, my lips parted, but I couldn’t form sentences. My father and I had always been close, but whereas my mother spoiled me rotten and showered me with love, he raised me with a firm hand. To make sure I learned that a great leader must never let on his emotions, he never let me see his. For the first time ever, he was opening up. He was letting his heart talk instead of his brain.

“I told you that powerful Alphas have to face their demons head on, but you don’t have to do it alone.” He placed both hands on my shoulders, lowering his head to look straight into my eyes as I sat on the hospital bed. “I made a mistake; one that will never repeat itself. I want you to know you can count on me, for whatever you need. You can always talk to me.”

After digesting his words for a moment, I realized the best response I could give him was a sincere smile. “Thank you, Dad.”

“I believe I owe Dawn an apology too.”

“*Hell yeah, you do! You can start by apologizing for raising a dickhead!*” my she-wolf chided, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Believe me, Dad, it’s cool. She’s more forgiving than I am,” I reassured him.

“*And smarter, too. Not to mention prettier.*” She raised her head proudly.

“Good to know.” My father smiled. A moment later, he cleared his throat, raising his arms awkwardly. “Can I...?”

I rolled my eyes at him, but tossed my arms around him nevertheless. At first, he stiffened, but it didn’t take him long to tighten his grasp around me. I couldn’t recall hugging him since I was ten or so. It used to make me feel safe, but now...it felt different. It was evident he wasn’t trying to protect me, but rather he was showing me something - respect. And it was all I could ever want.

After our father-son moment, we left the hospital and parted ways. He insisted I talked to my mother too, and I agreed to come see her later after I found out what the boys wanted. Malin texted me to meet with him, Amaya, Zach, and Alex by the cliff once I was released, probably to drink some beer and celebrate my victory. Everything turned out alright in the end, but it had still been a stressful day and I could use a moment to unwind.

As I was crossing the main square, I noticed pack members frequently stopping to look at me. Hearing them whisper caused the hairs on the back of my neck to bristle as I was instantly reminded of the shit they used to say behind my back. As I listened closely though, I was baffled. I was still their topic of discussion, but they weren’t theorizing about me being cursed or weak. Quite the opposite, actually.

“I can’t believe you didn’t see Alpha Zephyr in action today,” a girl told one of her friends.

“I know! Everyone says it was awesome!”

“It was more than awesome! First, he started by facing Ryder in human form, and he was actually winning! I mean, how fucking brave was that?”

“And hot!” a third girl added.

“Then, his wolf came out, and she made that little pup piss himself! She’s so powerful!”

“You mean, like, Luna-powerful?”

Girl number one shook her head. “More. She’s powerful like a true Alpha.”

They must have noticed I was staring, because they soon stopped talking to turn to me. A second later, they didn’t giggle and wave in an attempt to flatter me. They blushed and lowered their heads before me.

“It took them a while to learn to show their Alpha some respect,” Dawn observed. *“But like I told you, wolves recognize strength when they see it. You should have let me do that sooner.”*

“I didn’t think it would matter. There haven’t been female Alphas in a long time because our society believes males are stronger.”

“That’s only a human thing, you know?” I cocked my head to the side, not fully understanding what she meant. *“In regular wolf packs, both the strongest male and female are Alphas; there’s no Luna. They both hold the same respect, and they both rule, side by side.”*

As simple as it was, her observation blew my mind. I shook my head, smiling as I continued on my way. *“Maybe you can make our society see that.”*

She returned the gesture. *“Will you help me, Zephyr?”*

“After what you did today, Dawn, you have my full support.”

14 | CLAIM

Although I was forced to take some time out from my duties to recover, the morning following my victory was extremely busy.

I now had to deal with the consequences of the challenge, which were very urgent - as if my hands weren't already full before. Our Elder had reported the results of the match to the National Council. In turn, they issued a notice giving me three days to absorb Silent Rivers into Wind Howlers, taking its territory and resources, or else a new leader would be appointed among the current members. It was a huge responsibility to take care of in such a short time, but I knew why it couldn't wait. Wolves need an Alpha to guide them; without one, their feral instincts will come forth. They'll start in-fighting to decide who should take the crown, unleashing chaos.

Despite how stressful the whole situation was, my mood was surprisingly lighter. Whether it was the pride I felt after my first win, or the inner peace that flooded me upon strengthening my bond with my wolf, I wasn't overwhelmed by it all. It also helped to have supportive friends who were more than willing to work their hardest. Before sunrise, my men and I gathered in my office to discuss our best course of action. Three hours into our meeting, we managed to orchestrate a solid plan.

“Okay, let's review.” I cleared my throat, standing up from my seat for the first time since I entered the room. “We will head out to Silent Rivers at 1:00 p.m. sharp. If the pack members don't resist the merge, we can start moving them to our territory this evening, where we can keep a closer eye on them and make sure they get familiar with our rules and traditions. We will use their lands for farming until we can study a more suitable function for all that space,” I concluded, turning to my best friend. “Malin?”

“I will update Alexandra on what we discussed here, let her know to prepare the pack for the arrival of the new members. I’ll also be conducting a second sparring session to teach the Silent Rivers wolves our secret technique and fighting style, as well as get them used to our training schedule,” he reported promptly.

“Zach?” I glanced at my third-in-command.

“I will work with Delta Alex to ensure all new members will have proper accommodation for the time being. I’ll also look into Silent Rivers current defense system and develop a new one to make sure our new lands won’t be attacked by rogues.”

“Good. And I will take care of the papers. Looks like we’re all set...” Both men rose from their seats with my statement. “But before I officially end our meeting, there’s another important issue I want to discuss.”

At first, they were confused. Slowly, my Beta seemed to catch on to what I meant, and once knowing smirks lit up both our faces, my Gamma too realized what was going on.

“Don’t.” His empty threat didn’t scare me.

“We have a birthday boy today!” I chanted, watching with amusement as the frown on his face deepened. “You’re finally getting your wolf today, and we need to decide how we’re gonna celebrate.”

“I already have plans,” Zach blurted out.

“Staying in and playing video games all day is not a plan.” It was Malin’s turn to scrunch his eyebrows. A moment later, his usual smile was back on his face as he threw his arm around the Gamma’s neck. “I was thinking we could hang out by the waterfall and have a guys night!”

“Great idea!” I encouraged him.

“No fucking way!” Zach struggled free from the Beta’s grasp, crossing his arms soon after. “What are you even still doing here anyway? Shouldn’t you be far away, enjoying your days off by chasing rainbows with your cupcake or something?” he mocked.

“My *star*,” my best friend corrected as I held my laughter. I was with Zach on this one; I didn’t get why mates felt the need to give each other pet names. “And well, I talked to Zephyr and we decided to put off my little vacation. I wouldn’t miss your birthday for the world, you know. Cheer up, man. It’ll be fun!”

“You know what would be fun? If a hunter stabbed you in the heart with a silver dagger. I’d make sure to be there to twist the blade,” the raven-haired man muttered gloomily.

“Wait, Zach. I think you’re missing the silver lining.” I stepped between the two, knowing just how to convince my Gamma. “It’ll be just the three of us tonight. No girls allowed. Which means...”

His eyes widened as realization hit him. “If one of the females of our pack is my mate, my wolf won’t be able to sniff her immediately.” A sinister smile crossed his face. “On a second thought, I’m down for that.”

My third-in-command had been terrified of girls for the past six years. When he was twelve, he had a crush on a girl named Simone, who used to be in our class despite being a little older than us. One day, he brought blooming dandelions to school and declared his love for her, only to be turned down in front of everyone. Since then, he got stuck with the nickname “Lame Eagle,” which was a play on the title of the warrior Zachari Skies, whom he was named after - The Great Eagle. As an introvert, he had always been quiet, but he became even more reserved after that incident.

“Awesome.” I tapped his shoulder as I walked past him. “Now, go get ready. The sooner we get this out of the way, the faster we can focus on our ‘Fallen’ problem.”

“Wait. You know what I just realized?” I turned around to find Zach with a thoughtful expression. It looked vaguely positive. “After we absorb Silent Rivers, Wind Howlers will be the largest pack in Eastern Genoro. Not only does that mean we will have more warriors to help us defend our territory against the Fallen, but it will also make it easier for us to make new alliances.”

For a moment, all I could do was stare blankly at him. Everything was happening so fast, that fact must have slipped my mind. Zach was right though. If we finally managed to find allies to fight alongside us against our common enemy, it could mean the beginning of the end of our problems.

I opened my mouth to express my relief, but Dawn caught me by surprise. *“Your Gamma is a genius, I’ll give him that. He’s still hella weird though.”*

“You’ve known him for what, two weeks?” I stared at her in confusion. *“How come you’re only forming an opinion about him now?”*

“It’s not my fault if he just mutters and mumbles around. Prior to today, I didn’t even know what he sounded like.”

This time, I couldn’t control myself. Her explanation made me burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Zach’s usually barely audible voice brought me back to reality.

“Sorry. Dawn just told me a joke.” A tear slid from my eye, and I wiped it away with my finger as I tried to collect myself. Glancing at my friend, I realized he didn’t seem to buy my poor excuse, but he didn’t say anything. “You’re right. The odds might have just turned in our favor, but it’s still up to us to make sure we don’t blow our chance. Let’s hope nothing goes wrong with uniting the packs.”

The guys exchanged serious glances before nodding at me. I returned the gesture, finally exiting the office with them following right after me.

* * *

By the time we finished having lunch, the limousine was already waiting outside to take us to Silent Rivers territory. Alex came to wish us a safe trip, and I took the opportunity to make sure she had everything under control. It wasn’t necessary though; my Delta had always been magnificent at her job. In the meantime, Malin struggled to say goodbye to his newly-found mate. They would only be apart for a couple hours, maybe less, but I knew how dramatic my best friend

could be. Usually, I would have invited Amaya to tag along, but since wolves can be wary of outsiders, we decided it would be best to avoid making the situation more complicated than it needed to be; the less people, the better.

It was only a 30-minute ride to our destination, as our territories weren't too far apart. Still, I spent every single second of my journey wondering about how the takeover would go. From the moment I defeated Ryder, I earned the right to claim the land and men he led, but that didn't mean I would be successful in doing so.

Since werewolves are loyal creatures by nature, it wasn't uncommon for them to show reluctance in accepting a new leader. If some of the members didn't deem me worthy of their respect and obedience, I would be given two choices - either force them to go rogue, or execute them. Although rare, there have been cases of entire packs being wiped out after refusing to submit. Like my Gamma pointed out, it was crucial for us to have as many warriors as possible on our side, which is why I was ready to put on a show if that's what I needed to do to convince them to follow me.

My thoughts were only interrupted by the sight of the landscape as soon as we crossed the borders of my newly acquired pack. I had never set foot in these lands; all I knew was that this territory was crossed by two large rivers that ran quietly and smoothly, thus granting them their name. However, as I glanced at the trees rolling through my window from the corner of my eye, I was struck by a strange feeling of familiarity. I lifted my head up, dedicating all of my attention to studying the forest surrounding us. For some reason, it felt like I had been here before.

"It's just a bunch of trees. You're obviously confused," Dawn observed, though I could feel the same estrangement emanating from her.

Before I could dwell in the matter, I noticed the car come to a stop. As the driver opened the door for me and my friends, I decided to shake off the weird sensation. I had come here on a mission that required full focus; I wouldn't let a minor distraction get in my way.

“Alpha Zephyr.” As soon as I hopped out of the limousine, I was greeted by a very tall man who looked to be in his nineties. I immediately knew he was Silent Rivers’ Elder. Once I bowed my head to him, he turned to my friends. “Beta Malin. Gamma Zachari. Welcome to our territory. I am Elder Cassius. I’ll take you to the main square, where the pack is already gathered and waiting for you.”

It didn’t take us more than five minutes to get there. The moment the wolves noticed our presence, they started eyeing us with caution. It was evident the only reason why they allowed us to walk past them was because they were familiar with our laws, and the consequences of disrespecting their possible future Alpha. The former Beta and Gamma, who were standing before the crowd, looked even more distrustful of us. I shook their hands out of respect, not missing the way the older second-in-command grasped it a little too tight.

As soon as the Elder gave me the signal, I held my head high and looked at the crowd to recite the speech I had prepared.

“Members of the former Silent Rivers Pack, thank you for welcoming me here today.” I greeted them with a nod. “I am Alpha Zephyr Wyndham of Wind Howlers Pack. As most of you probably already know, I was challenged by your former leader and won. According to our laws, I have the right to claim you and your home. I am no tyrant though; I promise to take your wishes into consideration to make adjustments as comfortable as possible for you all. I believe our union will make us stronger. Follow me, and together, we will thrive.”

As I waited for their reaction, I could hear them gossiping. Those were the same whispers that made me think I was weak when I first took the position of Alpha, the rumors I had grown to hate. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck bristle as Dawn begged me to let her out so she could prove them wrong. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying not to lose focus.

“For any of you who might have heard the rumors, let me confirm them for you,” I spoke once again. “Yes, my wolf is a female, but she was strong enough to beat your old Alpha.

Please, take that into consideration before challenging me. I'd like to keep the bloodshed to a minimum." I faked a smile, trying to conceal my anger.

"Alpha Ryder was immature and unprepared, and his father was too ambitious for his own good." I was surprised to hear the voice of Breno, the former Beta of Silent Rivers. "I strongly advised them not to propose a challenge."

"Yet the way you look at me suggests you would like to make the same mistake he did," I pointed out, staring right back into his eyes.

He didn't back down either, taking a step forward instead. It was clearly a challenge. "I will be damned if I let this pack fall in the hands of an outsider."

"Alpha Zephyr has defeated Ryder in fair combat. You cannot demand a new challenge before he even claims Silent Rivers," Elder Cassius, who was standing right behind me, chimed in. The displeasure in his expression spoke volumes. "Unless Alpha Zephyr shows you mercy by banishing you, your only choices right now are to submit or die a traitor."

"I choose death." Breno didn't even stutter, his cold gaze still locked on me.

"Alpha Zephyr, you may execute him as you please," the Elder commanded, and I froze.

I knew it could come to this. But was I really ready to kill another man?

"I'll do it," Dawn affirmed without breaking a sweat.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "*Don't you see the way the members look at him?*" I took a moment to try and understand what she meant. "*They look up to him. He seems to have more influence over the pack than that moron of an Alpha did. Let me out, and tell him to shift. If we defeat them in fair combat, we will earn the pack's respect. They'll submit to us, and we won't have to kill anyone else.*"

"Don't you think you're getting a bit cocky?"

“Are you scared again, kitten? I thought you said you’d trust me.”

With a sigh, I shut our connection, closing my eyes. I took a deep breath to collect myself, and when I looked at the second-in-command again, I was back in Alpha-mode.

“My wolf will do it,” I told the Elder. “Beta Breno, you can shift, too. I’ll give you the chance to defend yourself.”

The man’s confidence flickered away for a moment as confusion hit him, but he quickly shook it off. He exchanged looks with the Gamma, who proceeded to instruct the crowd to back away to allow enough room for our clash. Breno took a few steps back too as he prepared himself. I was ready to do the same when I felt a hand grasping my arm.

“Dude, you can’t fight yet. The doctor told you to rest until tomorrow!” Malin reminded me.

“I’m fine. So what if it leaves a scar? We have more important things at stake here,” I reassured him. Reluctantly, he let me go.

“Whenever you’re ready, Alpha Zephyr,” Elder Cassius called from a distance.

My skin itched as Dawn readied herself to come out, and I didn’t fight her. The second our transformation started, Breno followed our lead, also releasing his beast like I had instructed him to do. His wolf was a dark shade of gray with white markings. He was not as tall as Ryder’s wolf, being just a few inches taller than Dawn, but he still eyed her with disdain. My she-wolf growled in response, gesturing for her opponent to move first. He immediately did.

As I had learned from our previous combat, Dawn was incredibly fast. She had no trouble dodging the adversary’s headbutt, proceeding to push him down with her paws. The wolf fell to the ground, but before she could strike, he jumped back to his feet. Although he was seething with anger, it was clear he was a lot more prudent than his former Alpha.

And a lot more intelligent too, as he proved with his next move.

Expecting another attack, Dawn gained some distance from the male to better defend herself. However, we both failed to see he had already realized that he was no match for her speed. When my she-wolf dodged him, he was quick to bite her neck, forcing her to release a gasp in surprise.

Getting a grasp of the opponent's neck was considered game over, as it made it almost impossible for the prisoner to escape. That alone made the crowd explode with cheers, thinking the battle had been won. I could feel Dawn's pain as blood dripped from her open wounds, but she was resilient. I knew she would never give up so easily.

My caramel blonde she-wolf started fiercely kicking her opponent with her hind legs, opening large, deep cuts with her sharp claws. The pain seemed to distract Breno's wolf, causing him to release Dawn's neck. She immediately pivoted and kicked, sending him away from her. Even angrier than before, the male wolf lunged at her again. Swiftly, she dove underneath him, successfully dodging his attack and sinking her teeth into his underbelly.

The male wolf let out a painful howl as blood poured from his open bites, but Dawn didn't stop there. With impressive strength, she knocked her opponent down. Before he even had a chance to react, she went straight for his jugular. My she-wolf only allowed him a second to look into his eyes, and judging by the fear I saw in them, I noticed he had realized his mistake.

Without hesitation, she snapped her jaws shut, offering him a quick death.

The loud crack of the creature's neck being broken was the last sound I heard before the world went completely silent. I could see a pool of blood forming around Dawn's paws, drops of crimson splashing onto her fur as she let the corpse fall to the floor. It was tough to watch Breno's body transform back into his human form one last time, knowing I had taken his life.

"It's part of our harsh reality. In doing so, you spared everyone else." Dawn's words offered me a little bit of

comfort. *“I’ll leave the rest to you.”*

My she-wolf gave me back control, and I held onto it. Just then, my Beta stepped closer to offer me a robe. I put it on and took a few more breaths to straighten out my own thoughts before continuing what I had come here to do.

“I am a merciful Alpha, as I have proven both by allowing Ryder to live, and by granting Beta Breno a painless departure...” I addressed the crowd again. This time, when I looked into their eyes, I couldn’t find distrust in them anymore. “But I do not take disrespect lightly. Submit to me now, and I promise to take care of every single one of you. You will live an honorable life at Wind Howlers; you will lack nothing.”

At first, the wolves remained silent. It didn’t take long before, one by one, they all dropped to one knee in front of me. Lastly, the Gamma did the same. If I had been shaken a minute ago, I was now filled with pride again. It was a powerful sight to see.

The Elder nodded his head as he approached me, and together, we performed the ritual to unite the two packs. It was very similar to a joining ceremony, only it took more of my energy. Once it was done, I could feel the magical bond forming between me and the new wolves.

“Silent Rivers no longer exists,” I announced calmly, acknowledging the fact myself. As I raised my head, I raised my voice too. “You are now members of Wind Howlers. Together, we will thrive!”

“Yes, Alpha!” they all replied in unison, lowering their heads to bare their necks in submission.

“Good job, man.” My best friend smiled proudly at me.

And with that, we were ready to return home.

* * *

“It’s almost time... Happy birthday, kid!” Malin cooed, smacking Zach’s head.

After the stressful event at the former Silent Rivers territory, we rode back to Wind Howlers, where I was congratulated by my parents and scolded by the pack doctor. As he had warned me, the wound in my chest had opened during the fight, and he had to stitch it back up again, as well as tend to my new injuries. He reinforced how important it was for me to rest so Dawn could heal our body, and this time, I had every intention of listening to him.

With the recent union between the two packs, there was a lot I needed to take care of, but everyone encouraged me to put it off at least until the next morning. I didn't have the physical or mental strength to fight them. So, I hopped into my gold Ferrari with my boys, and we headed to the waterfall to wait for Zach's first shift.

"Ouch!" my Gamma complained. "And what do you mean 'kid'? I'm only a few months younger than you! Shit, I'm less than two weeks younger than Zephyr." He frowned.

"No wolf, still a kid," my Beta joked, leaving our friend even more furious. I could see his face turning red with rage, so I stepped in to prevent bloodshed.

"Let's calm down, alright? There's been enough murder today."

"There can never be enough murder. Especially not as long as this public nuisance is around!" Zach argued, making Malin laugh.

"Why are you so mad, Lame Eagle?"

"Okay, look here!" I caught their attention by holding up a glistening bottle in my hands.

"Is that Hennessy?!" My best friend's eyes widened with amusement when he saw the whiskey in my hands.

"Yeah. It was my birthday gift, and it's time for me to pass it on to the next shifter." I kneeled dramatically, handing the bottle to Zach.

"You two are the dumbest people I know." My Gamma rolled his eyes, but I could see the hint of a smile crossing his face. "Come on, let's get this over with." To my surprise, he

grabbed the liquor from my hands. “I only have a few more minutes ‘til I’m cursed with an annoying drooling dog. Might as well drink my sorrows away while I have time.”

Following his lead, we started drinking and talking away. When there were only 15 seconds left before Zach’s official birth time, he dove among the crashing waves in only his shorts while Malin and I started a countdown. Werewolves were magic beings, and getting our counterparts was just like a spell - that’s why we all shifted at the same exact time we turned 18. And, as soon as my Gamma’s time was up, his beast jumped out of the sea.

My youngest friend’s wolf was quite intimidating, with spiky fur that was mainly dark gray, and his piercing gaze. Despite his human’s heterochromia, both his eyes were a light shade of gold that glowed as intensely as the moonlight. His tail was definitely shorter than most wolves’, and also spikier. His black muzzle had an arrow marking between his eyes pointing towards his forehead that looked similar to a crow’s beak.

“Dude, your wolf looks sick!” Malin’s mouth was wide open.

“Not bad at all,” I agreed, laughing. “Ask him what’s his wolf name!” I punched my best friend, already used to the fact that I couldn’t mindlink anyone.

My Beta’s eyes clouded over before he revealed, “He said it’s Talon.” A smile lit up his face before he stood up, taking his shirt off. “Talon, meet Mint!” In the blink of an eye, the light blond wolf was freed.

“*Well, I guess it’s our turn,*” I told Dawn as I watched the two beasts play in the water.

“*Are you really forcing me to socialize with the boys?*” My she-wolf rolled her eyes, but smiled nonetheless. “*Let’s be quick then.*”

I allowed my wolf control and she eagerly came out, immediately howling to call the other two’s attention. Now that they were standing right beside her, I was shocked to see

that Dawn was indeed the same size as they were, which was pretty uncommon for a female. My friends were right - she really was special.

Before I noticed, the sun had set. Eventually, we each returned to our rooms in the pack house. After my turbulent day, I couldn't wait to go to bed and have a good night's rest.

Little did I know, my dreams would keep me awake.

15 | DREAM

Werewolves are violent creatures by nature. While humans had established democratic relationships to prevent nations from declaring war against each other, like they did in the past, our laws allowed - and even encouraged - us to defend what was ours by force. Packs could also ask for permission to launch attacks against other wolf colonies, and most of them were almost immediately approved by the National Elder Council, as it was a means of ensuring only the strongest of our species would thrive.

Although Wind Howlers was mostly a peaceful pack, I knew my time to take someone else's life would come. All Alphas had blood on their hands, whether it was due to them punishing a traitor to ensure the safety of their followers, or to defend their lands from rogues looking to steal food and resources. With a war lurking like dark clouds over us, I knew I wouldn't be able to escape such fate for long.

The time for my first kill had come even sooner than I had anticipated. I would like to think I was ready for it, but I don't believe anyone ever is. The pride I felt over defending my title and proving my strength, as well as gaining new warriors to fight beside me, did help mask the memory of the lifeless Beta lying beneath me, but it still lingered in the corners of my mind. Once I was alone in my room, I expected it to come haunt me.

To my surprise, no nightmares came to visit me at night - though the dream I had was just as unsettling.

I was in wolf form, standing in the center of a clearing. It reminded me a lot of the area where the vision I had had a couple days back had taken place, although I could easily notice a few differences: the forest wasn't as dense, it wasn't raining, and I sure as hell wasn't alone.

My loud growls echoed through the trees as my eyes shifted from side to side, my attention divided between the

three dirty beasts surrounding me. They were all smaller than me, and judging by their rotten scent, I assumed they were rogues - wolves who had been banished from their original packs, and whose human conscience had vanished upon them turning feral. Why were they attacking me?

Before I could make sense of the situation, my paws moved as if they weren't my own. One strike was all it took to put the filthy creature down, but it also offered the other two an opening to lunge at me. They jumped straight on my back, pain shooting through me as they pierced my skin. Dawn could have easily dodged their move, but for some reason, she seemed slower than usual. It wasn't until I turned around to pull one of them off me that I saw it - her caramel brown coat was now pitch black.

I was in wolf form...but not as Dawn.

My mind was racing a million miles a minute, yet I still managed to take care of the other two wolves in the blink of an eye. I thought the situation was already confusing enough, but the next second, it became even weirder.

"I'll protect you..." The voice I heard...it sounded a lot like me. I could have sworn it *was* me talking, but I knew those thoughts weren't really mine. *"I'll keep you safe, just like I promised. You can come out now. The sun is about to rise."*

And as the wolf closed its eyes, I opened mine.

"Shit!" I screamed as I shot up in bed.

The first light of day shone through my window, illuminating my room. Wait... *My room*. I had to take a minute to make sure I was really at home and not in the forest I had been in a moment ago. My next reaction was to look at my shaking hands. The sheets were covered in sweat, but I was definitely in human form. There were no signs of me ever having shifted either.

What the fuck was that? This was too real to have been a dream.

“Dawn? You there?” I asked instinctively. Although she didn’t answer, probably startled by my sudden awakening, I could feel her presence. She was here, with me, in my room.

There was no forest. No rogues. No pitch black wolf.

I was still trying to catch my breath when my alarm sounded, followed by the sound of Dawn’s voice echoing in my head. *“We should probably go to training.”*

“That wasn’t just a dream, was it? What’s going on?” I completely ignored her.

“I don’t know. You can’t catch a break lately. It must be taking a toll on you.” She shrugged, but I sensed no confidence in her tone. *“Today’s probably gonna be another long day...”* I immediately knew she was talking about the witch coming over to hopefully shine a light on our unique pairing situation. In the middle of everything, I had completely forgotten about that. *“Maybe training can help clear your mind before we dive into that.”*

A low grunt reverberated in my throat as I rubbed my face with my hands. In the end, I nodded in agreement, finally forcing myself to get out of bed. Without giving it much thought, I grabbed a random pair of workout shorts from my closet, not hesitating to rush outside. There was a good chance my she-wolf was right about me not being in my right mind, and staying inside my big empty room only fed the hole inside of me, which wouldn’t help distract me at all.

When I made it to the training grounds, I had to do a double take as I saw our former Beta, Warrick, standing where my best friend usually was. It took me a few seconds to remember Malin had left early this morning to visit his family’s farm, where he would be spending his days off with his mate. It would be weird not having him around, but at least he would be back in four days. By then, the former members of Silent Rivers will have all moved to the main part of the territory.

After sparring with Zach, I headed to the cafeteria to grab a quick bite before going back to my room to shower. As soon as I was done putting some new, clean clothes on, I got a text

from Alex saying the witch sent by the National Council had already arrived and was waiting for me at the Elder Chapel. I mindlessly made my way there, but as I stood in front of the stone building, only a few steps away from the entrance, I hesitated.

From the moment I learned I had been paired with a female wolf, I longed for answers. In the beginning, I was convinced that she was a curse; one I would do anything to be freed from. But as the days went by, I started getting used to hearing her voice. She was sassy and stubborn, but she gave good advice. And the more time we spent together, the more I was convinced that we actually made a great team. They say if it ain't broke, don't fix it. So did I really want to know more about the mysterious reason why our souls were tied, possibly throwing myself into an even bigger mess?

"I thought you were ready to get rid of me," the she-wolf joked, though I could sense a hint of hurt in her voice.

"I'm a little concerned about what we might find. Some things are better left alone," I replied honestly.

"Just go in already, scared kitten. We'll be fine," she reassured me.

Inspired as ever, I recovered my confidence and bravely walked through the large doorway. Once I stepped inside, my gaze instantly landed on a woman standing in the center of the room. She had olive skin and short straight hair darker than night. The second her piercing emerald eyes fell on me, I froze. Her clothes were all black, except for a moss green cardigan that tried to hide her voluptuous curves. She looked to be around her thirties, shocking me considering she was a witch whom I was told was over 400 years old.

"Alpha Zephyr." The old man nodded at me.

I broke eye contact with the stranger for a moment to address him. "Elder Laelius. Thank you for having me."

"So you're the famous Zephyr, huh?" The woman approached me, stretching her hand in my direction. It felt odd to hear someone call me by my first name without using my

title, but judging by the way she didn't bow either, I assumed witches either didn't know or didn't care about werewolf customs.

"That would be me." I forced a smile, still getting used to the feeling of being near a witch. The magic flowing around her, emanating from her being, was quite distracting. "Thank you for coming all the way here, uh..."

"Cassiopeia. Cass, for short." She finally shook my hand. I expected all witches to be gloomy and short-tempered, but she seemed rather nice.

"What do you say, Cassiopeia? Can you help the Alpha?" I didn't miss the hint of curiosity in the Elder's voice as he interrupted us.

She took a moment to eye me from head to toe before replying, "Let's find out." I stiffened when she stepped closer, circling me slowly. "You say your Goddess paired you with an opposite-gender counterpart."

"Yes," I answered, trying to follow her with my gaze.

"Okay." She made a brief pause, standing in front of me. "This might feel a little weird."

"What-"

I couldn't begin to understand her intentions before she quickly lifted both hands up to my face, grasping the sides of my head tightly. My eyes were forced to cloud over, much like what should happen during a mindlink session. The next second, a wave of the most uncanny sensation I had ever experienced rolled through me. It was like something had entered my body through my belly button, turning my insides over, and exiting through the same place it had come in.

"Goddess! The fuck was that?!" I panted as soon as I recovered my senses.

"I was looking into you and your counterparts souls," she clarified with a blank stare, though her clarification made little sense to me. When she released her grasp on me, taking a step back, I almost sighed in relief. "You're right, Zephyr. Dawn is definitely not your wolf."

“How do you know her name is- wait, what did you say?” My eyes widened in confusion.

“Exactly what you heard.” Cass crossed her arms in front of her chest, arching an eyebrow at me. “I bet you can’t mindlink anyone from your pack either, can you?”

“No... I... How...?”

“Sit down, wolfie.” A snap of her fingers, and an accent chair magically appeared right beneath me. She opened her hand in front of my chest, causing a wave of invisible energy to hit me, forcing me to obey her command. “Alright. Breathe in, breathe out. Listen to me. It is almost unheard of for this to happen, but sometimes, wolves can be mistakenly switched when they come to Earth with their humans. There are many reasons why it can happen, though I’m inclined to think your case is different than any other.” She offered a few seconds to digest her words before she continued to spill them. “In every other case I’ve studied, there was no sort of bond between the wolf and the human. Some couldn’t even shift. You, on the other hand...” She pointed her index finger at me. “You do have a connection with your she-wolf.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked in utter bewilderment.

“Like I told you, most wolf switches are mistakes. In your case, however, I believe it was intentional.” Her eyes were staring deeply into mine, almost as if she was trying to read my mind. “There was a prophecy about two true Alphas who would get opposite-gender counterparts. Though I can’t remember the details now, I’m almost sure there was something about a battle that would last from sunset to sunrise.”

“Are we to believe that an old legend is the reason for Alpha Zephyr’s uncommon situation?” Laelius furrowed his brows, clearly displeased. Elders were known for holding a lot of knowledge and strongly base their decisions on science and religion.

“Unlike your kind, witches are a lot more tied to magic, so yes, we do believe in prophecies.” Cass turned to the old man,

returning the gesture. Not long after, she looked back at me. “But I cannot prove that legend is tied to you in any way. At least not yet. For now, focus on finding whoever has your actual wolf.” I was sure that was supposed to be advice, but at this point, I was barely understanding a word she was saying.

“My actual wolf? Are you saying that someone out there is linked to the wolf that was supposed to be mine, while I have theirs?” My mind was a total mess.

“Precisely,” Cass answered coldly. “I can perform the switching ritual once I know who has your wolf. Call me when you find them.” She turned on her heel, presumably to leave, but I stopped her.

“What’s your phone number?” Did witches even use cell phones?

“That’s not what I meant.” She burst out laughing, losing her composure for the first time. “You’ll have to summon me. Here.” She offered me a small card with some kind of ancient writing on it. “Just say my name out loud while you cut this card in half, and I’ll instantly appear wherever you are. But only call me when you find your wolf.” There was her seriousness again.

“Okay,” was all I could mutter.

“Nice meeting you, Zephyr. We’ll see each other again soon.”

Cassiopeia blinked at me before turning to face a wall. She moved her hands in front of her body in a circular motion, almost as if she was trying to open a safe, but really fast. In the blink of an eye, what seemed like a portal opened up, and she jumped straight into it. She left without a trace. Once the portal disappeared, it was as if she had never even been here in the first place.

“We hope Cassiopeia’s visit helped answer your questions, Alpha Zephyr,” Elder Laelius said, gesturing for me to leave as well.

Answer my questions? If anything, I had even more of them now.

“Of course. Thank you for your time.” I forced a smile and bowed my head, leaving without uttering another word.

My head was all over the place as I made my way back outside. Unable to go straight to my office, where I actually should be, I hid inside one of the stalls in the public bathrooms and prayed no one would come in. I was shaking with anger, and to add to my stress, the same old emptiness inside of me seemed to have just grown larger. Did I always feel that way because the other part of my soul was with someone else, while I had a random shifter’s wolf? And what the witch said about the prophecy and switching wolves... I never thought I would say this, but even if Dawn wasn’t mine, I wasn’t ready to let her go.

“Calm down, Zephyr. Take deep breaths,” my she-wolf instructed me in a calming voice. Only then did I realize that I was hyperventilating. *“Everything will fall into place when the time is right.”*

Then, it clicked.

“You know,” I whispered in realization. *“When I got you, you said you knew what was going on, but you couldn’t tell me. Please, Dawn, I need to know.”* I had never begged for anything in my life. Alphas don’t plead; they demand. But at this point, I was just straight up desperate.

“I never said I knew what was happening. I said that there was a reason for it all because that’s what the Goddess told me the last time I saw her. Sadly, she also erased my memories, so I’m afraid I can’t clarify anything.” She lowered her ears in shame. *“I swear I would tell you if I knew, Zephyr. I’m sorry.”*

All I could do was close my eyes. I instinctively massaged my temples in an attempt to get rid of my pounding headache. Nothing made sense, and it seemed like that wouldn’t change any time soon, which was definitely not relieving. My thoughts were deafening - at least until I started hearing Dawn humming a serene melody inside my mind. Little by little, it became louder, silencing every other sound. For a second, my mind went clear.

I took a few deep breaths, letting my head fall back against the cold bathroom walls as I focused on regaining my composure. Prophecy or not, I was an Alpha, for Moon's sake! There were more urgent matters that required my attention, and I was done wasting my time feeling sorry for myself. I was tired of being a 'scaredy cat,' like my she-wolf used to call me.

"Now that's more like it. Go get 'em, big bad Alpha," Dawn said playfully.

"Oh, that has a nice ring to it. I like it," I played along.

"Don't get used to it though." She rolled her eyes right before her expression softened again. *"Just remember, Zephyr, I'm with you. You're not alone in this."*

There was something about her words...they spoke directly to my heart, making me feel warm inside.

"Thanks, Dawn." She nodded at me, slowly retreating to the back of my mind as she went back to singing her sweet melody.

And somehow, it gave me the strength I needed to get through the rest of the day.

INTERLUDE II

Malin

Four days had gone by since I found my perfect mate, but I still couldn't believe it. Even as she rode shotgun while I drove the old truck my parents had passed on to me before they left the pack, I had to constantly take my eyes off the road to make sure she was really there beside me. It was too good to be true. She was too beautiful to be real.

“Why do you keep doing that?” Just the sound of her euphonic voice sent shivers through my whole being. And the way she smiled at me...

“What?” In my trance, I was completely oblivious to what she meant.

“That!” She giggled, and boy, did it make the butterflies in my stomach go crazy. “With the way you keep glancing at me, I'm afraid we might not make it to your family's farm in one piece.”

I shook my head to snap out of my daydream, focusing on driving. “I'm sorry, my star. I'll pay more attention.”

“I was just playing with you.” The second her velvet fingers touched the side of my face, I melted. Was she testing me? Because it was hard as hell to keep my focus when the sparks of the bond struck me. “You don't have to apologize for anything.”

“Sorry,” I blurted out instinctively, immediately cursing myself. “I mean, I... If I'm being honest, I'm just a little nervous.” From the corner of my eye, I noticed her cock her head to the side. With a sigh, I continued, “You're of pure Gamma blood. You come from a wealthy family. You used to live in the most beautiful city in the country. My parents are Omegas, and the money I earn as a Beta is sent to them to cover the expenses of the farm. I wish I had saved some to

take you to a more interesting place. I'm afraid their little house off the dirt road won't meet your expectations."

"Hold on." She placed her hand over mine as I grasped the gearstick. This time, I couldn't help looking into her beautiful clear blue eyes, just for a second; when I did, I realized they were sparkling with sympathy. "I thought we had already talked this through. I don't care about some stupid bloodline or where it puts you in our society. You're my mate; that's all that matters to me." I glanced over at her again the moment she smiled, and all my troubles vanished. She looked away for a minute, gazing into the green fields rolling through her window. Through our bond, I could sense a change in her aura. "Besides, I'm the one who should be nervous. I'm meeting your parents! What if they don't like me?"

"Are you kidding? They'll love you!"

"You think so?" She turned to me again, shyly shrinking into her seat.

"I know so," I corrected her, a radiant grin playing on my lips. "You should have heard how excited they were over the phone when I told them we were coming to visit. As Omegas, they're very simple people. The mate bond is what they value the most in life. They've loved you from the second I told them your name."

"Okay. That makes me feel a little more confident."

"Good, because we're almost there." I winked at her, soon turning my attention back to the path ahead of me.

Two hours after we left our home in Wind Howlers, we finally reached the dirt road I was very familiar with. It was only a 15-minute ride to the farm from there. Once my parent's house appeared on the horizon, I noticed my mate's mouth form the shape of an 'O' in awe.

"This place is so much more beautiful than I had imagined!" Amaya smiled at the view in front of her as we approached the main building.

Honestly, it was prettier than I remembered too. It had been a few months since I last visited the small house. Its

rustic exterior was mainly made out of wood logs, with a few pillars surrounding the porch. The front wall of the house was decorated with cobblestones, as was the chimney. It had multiple gray roof peaks to add to the farmhouse style, but the tall windows with moss green frames added to its rustic charm. There were three cows calmly grazing in an enclosed pasture right beside the building, as well as a dozen chickens pecking and scratching the front lawn.

I parked the truck a few feet away from the house. Still, the animals all trotted away from us as soon as we hopped out, except for one of the cows.

“Did I scare them?” My mate watched as they disappeared, a hint of guilt on her face.

“We did.” I quickly took her hand, leading her up the stone driveway. “Most animals can sense what we are. They know we’re predators, so they’re usually afraid of us.”

“How come your parents are farmers then?” She furrowed her brows together.

“Because they raise their animals from the day they’re born,” I clarified. “Even a wolf can be seen as a mother by the chicks she kept warm.” As we neared the fence, I stretched my hand out to the white-and-brown cow who hadn’t run away, soon encouraging my star to do the same. “This is Charlotte. She’s the oldest here, and she’s known me since I was twelve. I used to help care for her back when she lived in our pack.”

“She’s so sweet.” Amaya gave Charlotte a good scratch in the face, earning a happy ‘moo’ in response that made her giggle.

My beautiful mate was so distracted with Charlotte she didn’t even notice me moving behind her, until I snaked my arms around her. A surprised gasp escaped her lips, and I couldn’t resist the urge to kiss the top of her head. She shifted gently in my embrace to face me. The moment our eyes locked, I was lost in her clear blue oceans of joy.

Only the sound of the door bursting open brought me back to reality.

Without letting go of my girl, I turned to the entrance of the small farmhouse to find both my parents there. Judging by their concerned expressions, I imagined they had heard the commotion outside and probably feared their animals were in danger. As soon as their eyes landed on us though, their expressions filled with joy.

“Are you the famous Beta Female Amaya?” my mother asked, her eyes sparkling with happiness.

“We’ve heard so much about you, my dear.” My father bowed his head at her - a habit he just couldn’t leave behind after being at the bottom of the hierarchy in a pack for more than 40 years.

Mom used to have beautiful blond hair. Even if it was now fading to gray, it was still charming with her classic bob cut. She put on a little weight ever since she left the pack and, if I had to guess, I’d blame it on her marvelous raspberry pie. My father, on the other hand, was still thin as a stick, and though he had the same short grizzled hair as before, he seemed to be now trying to sport a beard. His deep green eyes shone when he turned to me.

“It’s nice to see you too, Mom and Dad.” I scoffed playfully as I finally took a step back to allow my mate some space, yet the smile never left my face.

“Oh, don’t be jealous, my boy. You know we miss you. But today we have a more-than-special guest with us!” my mother chuckled, mimicking my father’s gesture. “We’re honored to meet you, Amaya.”

“Please, Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd,” Amaya greeted both my parents. “The honor is all mine.”

“No need to be so formal, my dear. You’re family now,” Mom reminded her. “I’m Anastasia, but you can call me Ana. And this...” - she waved her hand towards Dad - “is Franklin.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Malin has waited anxiously for you, and so have we.” My father flashed her his signature smile before gesturing towards the house. “Please, make yourself at home!”

Once inside, the four of us sat at the kitchen table to devour the delicious welcome breakfast Mom and Dad had prepared for us. Of course, my parents didn't hesitate to tell Amaya all about the most embarrassing moments of my childhood. At first, I noticed my star was a little more shy than usual due to her nervousness. Thankfully, in less than an hour, I could tell she was already starting to feel like part of the family.

After filling our stomachs, we went outside to enjoy the beautiful day. While my mother and I listened to some random football match on the radio, which was kind of our thing, my old man showed my mate how to approach the chickens and milk the cows. I thought she might be thrown off by the country lifestyle, but to my surprise, she seemed to be fascinated by it.

By noon, my father sat by the grill to prepare his classic barbecue, and again, we continued our conversation as we ate. Once we were done, we went to the cozy living room to rest on the couch, relaxing to the sound of a wildlife show on television.

* * *

It was around 4:00 p.m. when my parents left for the local market to buy fresh ingredients for dinner. Alone with my mate, I decided to show her my favorite thing about the farm.

"Here we are!" I chanted as I gently opened the barn's double door.

As soon as I did, the two creatures munching on hay inside lifted their long necks to study us with curiosity. Although both mares were brown, it was easy to tell them apart by a few details unique to each of them. The youngest one was tall, and her coat was entirely of the same color, except for a white stripe on her muzzle. The oldest one was visibly shorter, and speckles of gray covered her short fur. She was the first one to approach us.

"You didn't tell me your family owned horses!" Amaya whisper-yelled, admiration in her eyes. It was evident she had never been near one of those creatures, but she stood still

when the mare sniffed her arm. She was quickly learning how to behave around the farm animals.

“I wanted it to be a surprise.” I smiled, gesturing with my head to encourage her to pet the mare. “This is Daisy. She’s a pony.”

“Really? She isn’t nearly as small as I’d expect.” She arched an eyebrow, but her expression softened the second she touched Daisy.

“Well, any horse less than 14.2 hands tall are considered ponies,” I explained, approaching her. “Would you like to ride her?”

Amaya’s eyes widened as she turned to me. “Will she let me?”

“Of course. Daisy’s really calm,” I reassured her as I kneeled beside the mare, knotting my hands together to help my mate get on.

“Wait. Shouldn’t we saddle her first or something?” There was a mix of confusion and hesitation in her voice.

“Riding bareback is much more fun.”

Noticing my star’s hesitation, I decided to change my method. In a swift movement, I pulled myself back up, wrapping my arms around her waist. She screeched as I lifted her off the ground, placing her safely on Daisy’s back. She was obviously startled at first, but when she realized the mare didn’t mind her presence at all, she started to relax.

“How does she know where I want her to go?”

“Don’t worry, she’ll follow me,” I reassured her, stepping closer to the other mare, who moved her head up and down in challenge. “This is Aurora. She’s a little more feisty due to her young age, but she’s used to me.” I looked straight into the creature’s eyes. “Come on, girl. Don’t make me look like a fool here.”

When Aurora snorted, I knew she wouldn’t take it easy on me. So, I resorted to a more assertive approach. I threw my arms around her neck, causing her to neigh as I startled her.

She reared up and struggled to break free from my grasp, but I held on tight. When she lowered herself back, I didn't miss the opportunity to jump straight on her back, tying my fingers around her mane for support. She reared once more, hoping to make me fall. When she failed, she finally relaxed.

“Alright!” I panted a little, smiling at Amaya. “Ready?”

She blinked a few times, shock written all over her face. “Uh...”

“Just hold on tight and don't let go!” I pressed both legs against Aurora's belly, commanding her to move forward. This time, she didn't fight me.

I started with a slow trot so my mate could get used to Daisy's pace. She was having a little bit of trouble keeping her balance initially, but as she followed my instructions, she started getting the hang of it. Once I noticed she was feeling more comfortable, I gave Aurora another gentle kick, and she immediately started cantering.

“Woah!” Amaya screamed, shaken up by the sudden change of pace. “Malin, she's going too fast! How do I make her stop?”

“Don't fight the feeling; embrace it!” I laughed, letting go of my mare's mane to open my arms wide. “Become one with her. Feel her movement. Feel the wind.”

“I'm scared!”

“Don't be.” I turned around to shoot her a reassuring glance. “You can do this, Amaya. Just let the wind guide you.”

It was beautiful to watch her slowly let go of her fear as she put her trust in me. She kept her grasp on Daisy's mane, but she allowed herself to close her eyes and take a deep breath. Before long, a wide grin lit up her face. It filled me with pride.

“What does it feel like?” I finally asked.

“It feels... It's like I can hear the wind calling my name!” She giggled, keeping her eyes shut.

“Welcome to Wind Howlers, my star!” I chuckled. Her joining ceremony had been performed the day she arrived at our territory, but only now had she become one of us.

On my command, Aurora stopped once we reached the top of a small hill, and Daisy mimicked her. There was not a soul around us, only the birds and the sky watching over us. I got off the mare, petting her as a ‘thank you’ for the ride, before walking towards Amaya to help her down. She immediately threw her arms around me, pulling me in for a breathtaking kiss - I knew that was *her* way of thanking me. I wanted to dwell in her taste for an entire lifetime, but it seemed she had other plans. Pulling away, she took a good look at her surroundings.

“Everything here is so amazing. I wish we could stay here forever.”

Her words made my heart skip a beat. “We’ll still be here tomorrow, and we can come back whenever you’d like.”

A shy smile crossed her face as she went on, “Do you think we can let Pepper and Mint meet for the first time here?” Pepper was her wolf’s name, and I loved how it matched my counterpart’s. They truly completed each other.

“*Yes! I wanna meet mate!*” Mint howled in joy at her suggestion.

“We can do whatever you want. But yes, Mint would definitely love that.”

It was hard to fight my beast as he tried to take over, but I couldn’t let him recklessly shred my clothes during the transformation - I would prefer not to return to my parents’ home buck naked. Thankfully, I managed to hold him off long enough for me to undress, and Amaya did the same. A desire I had never felt before urged me to spy on her as she got rid of her clothes, but I held on to my control. I wanted to respect her privacy.

The sound of bones cracking was the cue for me to turn around. When I did, I found the most mesmerizing she-wolf standing where my mate had once been. Well, technically, she

was my mate, too. Pepper had shiny auburn-red fur, which made her vivid blue eyes stand out even more. Her vixen stare got me feeling like I was her next meal, but when she lowered her short, round ears, I knew she was just eager to meet her mate. And suddenly, my strength wasn't enough to keep Mint at bay anymore.

The second my blond wolf was freed, he bolted towards the female. If Pepper had been anxious to be with him a moment ago, she now didn't think twice before running away from him, starting a play chase. The two kept playing for a good half an hour until he finally managed to catch up to her, immediately tackling her to the ground.

As we stood on top of our star, the atmosphere suddenly changed. As the wolves' eyes locked for the first time, the innocence was replaced by something...raw. Like a small flame slowly growing, readying itself to devour an entire forest.

At the same time, we both shifted back without uttering a word.

Amaya and I had spent two nights together since we met each other, but we hadn't...done it yet. I loved spooning with her, but this was the first time I was completely naked, and on top of her. The sensation of her warm skin against mine was better than anything I had ever experienced before. It was doing something to me. I was completely still, frozen by the tension in the air, yet part of me was moving.

Hardening.

“Amaya...” My chest expanded as I panted, pressing against her voluptuous breasts in a tantalizing way.

“Yes, Malin?” she breathed out, never breaking eye contact.

I don't know if it was me or Mint, but the question I was dying to ask simply slipped out of my mouth.

“Can I have you?”

“Goddess. I thought you'd never ask!”

My Beta Female was quicker than me. She let her fingers tangle in my hair, applying pressure at the back of my head to force my lips against hers. Our kisses usually started slow, passionate. This one, though... It was the hottest we'd ever shared. Her hunger was evident in the way her tongue hastily explored my mouth, ripping lustful groans out of me.

As I felt her hands slowly slide down the back of my neck, then my bare back, I stiffened. I wanted to touch her, too. I wanted to feel her. However, my nerves made my stomach turn. What if I got too excited and made a wrong move? I didn't want to ruin our first time by making it awkward. My train of thought was broken when I felt her elongated canines scratch against my bottom lip, threatening to draw blood. A hiss escaped my lips, both from the anticipation, and from a crucial realization - she was so in control.

And I seemed to have run out of time.

"Is something wrong?" The concern in Amaya's voice shattered me as she pulled away to look into my eyes again.

"No, not at all. It's just... I'm a little nervous," I confessed, hoping she wouldn't think I was a fool.

"Wait." She pressed her elbows against the grass for support, staring at me in bewilderment. "Have you never had sex before?" I shook my head. It was that obvious, wasn't it? For a reason I couldn't quite figure out at first, her face fell. "Oh, Goddess. Malin, I... I'm not a virgin anymore. I'm sorry."

The shame staining her features didn't sit right with me. Yes, the simple thought of her with another man made my wolf growl with jealousy, but to be honest, her confession didn't come as a surprise to me. At 22, Amaya was four years older than me, and with how beautiful she was, I didn't really expect her to have kept her virginity. Judging by her reaction, she probably thought I would be angry.

"You have nothing to apologize for," I reassured her, brushing her cheek with the back of my hand.

"But you waited for me. I should have done the same for you." She tried to look away, but I held her in place by holding

her chin with my thumb and index finger.

“It’s a decision I made for me. I won’t judge you for what you did before we met, and I sure as hell won’t think less of you for it,” I told her sincerely. “You’re perfect for me, my star. You’re mine. Will you let me claim you?”

She took a moment to absorb my words. “Yes. Claim me,” she repeated right before I went back to tasting her.

The turn of events made me feel a little calmer, but part of me was still unsure of what to do. Mint was begging me to take control so he could show me how to please our mate, but if I did, I knew he would eat her like the wolf he was. I was planning to make love to her instead; even if I didn’t exactly know how.

To my relief, Amaya seemed to sense my struggle. She placed her hand above mine, and I supported myself with my other arm to let her to guide me. First, she led me to one of her breasts. Giving in to my deepest desires, I trusted my instinct and squeezed it lightly.

The realization of how she fit perfectly in my hand made my erection throb, pressing harder against her. In response, she lifted her hips, grinding into me softly. A sonorous groan reverberated in my throat as the beast inside of me awakened. As I kneaded her breast, I allowed myself to get familiar with her curves, her size, her texture. My fingers eventually found her hardened nipples, and I didn’t hesitate to pinch them, earning a moan from my mate.

“Is this how you like it, my star?”

“Fuck, yes!” she breathed against my lips.

A little more confident, I finally broke our kiss to trail kisses down her shoulders until I made it to her nipple. My lips replaced my fingers, sucking her hungrily. My hand traveled down her stomach, stopping at her entrance. I could already feel her arousal, but I had no idea how wet she was until I slid my thumb between her folds. Goddess, she was so ready for me. I couldn’t keep her waiting.

My body moved purely out of instinct as I used my legs to spread hers apart. She used her hands to help position me in front of her entrance. The butterflies in my stomach took flight again, making me hesitate, but the way Amaya pressed herself against me encouraged me to go on. The moment I filled her, inch by inch until she had taken in all of me, fireworks went off inside my chest.

Damn. I thought she tasted good, but the way she felt... I knew I would crave her every day until my dying breath. I let go of her nipple to take a deep breath as I dwelled in the most amazing sensation I had ever felt. It wasn't long before her walls tightened around my member, begging me to caress them. I couldn't find it in me to deny her wishes.

Amaya pulled me in for another kiss as I started moving inside her, stretching her with my entire length. The whole experience was too overwhelming, in a maddening way. The music of our hearts beating in sync, our hot breaths mixing with the evening breeze, the warmth of her enveloping me as I covered myself in her scent. It was a lot to take, and I knew I wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

"You can't come before she does!" I heard Mint's angry threat, but I was in too much of a trance to actually listen to him. *"If you can't do it, then I will!"*

I didn't have time to understand what he meant before he hijacked my body. I could feel the fire building up inside of me as my wolf forced our fangs to elongate. Without warning, he made me sink my teeth on the spot connecting Amaya's neck and shoulder, causing her to release a cry of pain and pleasure.

Before I knew it, my mate did the same to me. All of the emotions I was already feeling were intensified when our bond was completed, finally making the pressure in my lower stomach too great to bear. Relishing the taste of each other's blood, we reached our release together in a magical moment. Her body started shaking as I exploded inside of her, coating her in my seed. Our final groans mixed in an erotic melody, slowly dying out until only the sound of our panting breaths remained.

Too weak to support my own weight, I pulled out of my mate to lay beside her on the grass. I had a feeling it would take me a few minutes to come down from my high, but I couldn't wait for my mind to de-fog before saying what my heart urged me to say.

So, I did.

"I love you, my star. I don't care if it's too soon to say it. I love you," I spilled, gazing into the orange and purple sky. To my shock, what bothered her about my confession was the last thing I would expect.

"Why do you call me star?" From the corner of my eye, I noticed her roll to the side to face me.

Turning my head to look into her eyes, I didn't hesitate to reply, "Well, because you're the light that guides me through the darkness, and I met you in the City of Stars. It was only fitting."

"I love that." The smile that spread over her lips made my heart beat faster. "And by the way, I love you too."

16 | ROGUE

The last day without my Beta was spent mostly inside of my office. Aside from my usual Alpha duties, there was a lot I needed to take care of due to the recent merge between Wind Howlers and Silent Rivers. My hands were even fuller since I also had to take on some of Malin's responsibilities while he was absent. He was adamant about postponing his little vacation yet again knowing how overloaded I would be, which is why I almost had to command him to leave. Despite our chaotic situation, he had finally met his mate after waiting for her for a lifetime; he deserved some free, undisturbed time to get to know her.

However, I would be lying if I said I was having a great time.

I locked myself in my office right after warrior training, where I spent the entire morning going through and signing all of the documents regarding my takeover. To optimize my time, I had some Omegas deliver lunch in my office, and finished revising everything while I ate. Next, I called Alex to check how the new members were adapting to the move. She also filled me in on a few problems they were facing, which I begrudgingly added to my list of never-ending tasks.

As soon as my Delta left, Zach came over to drop the security reports, as well as discuss our next course of action to deal with the Fallen. We talked for almost two hours, and once we had a list of packs he agreed to reach out to with alliance proposals, he excused himself to carry on with his duties. Alone again, I finally got to go over the stuff Malin would usually take care of. It was almost 6:00 p.m. when I was done. I lifted my gaze to look out the floor-to-ceiling window, noticing the sun was already setting. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks; only then did I feel just how exhausted I truly was.

At least my busy schedule prevented me from thinking about the things that had kept me awake the previous night.

Ever since my talk with the witch, I felt uneasy. I thought having proof that Dawn wasn't my real wolf would be relieving; after all, she was the main reason why my life had grown so complicated. Or at least that's what I wanted to believe in the beginning. I should feel ecstatic knowing that my actual counterpart was out there, and if I was being honest, part of me was really looking forward to meeting them. Yet another part couldn't help but dread the possibility of my she-wolf and I going our separate ways.

What bothered me the most was not knowing *why* I felt that way. I had known Dawn for less than a month, and we had loathed each other for a good portion of that time. But once my childish ways and my frustration stopped blinding me, what I thought was a curse became a friend; maybe even more. Dawn may not be the representation of my wolf-self, yet she still completed me in a way. She was kind, strong, and fierce. She was smart and powerful like a true Alpha. She made me see the world through different lenses.

And I wasn't ready to lose her.

"Are we done yet?" my she-wolf grunted, interrupting my thoughts. *"I can't believe we spent the whole day confined here. I never thought I would say this, but this office actually feels more cramped than your tiny mind."*

"Is that a compliment? If so, thank you." My incredibly sarcastic tone made her roll her eyes. With a loud groan, I stood up from my seat for what felt like the first time that day and threw my arms behind my head, in desperate need to stretch my muscles. *"I think we can take a break."*

"Finally! I feel like I could run six marathons! I can't wait to feel the wind in my fur again..."

"Who said I was gonna let you out?" I teased.

She stayed silent for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was darker than ever. *"Don't play with me, Zephyr. I*

could howl until you're deaf. I swear, I will give you the worst headache you've ever experienced. I will-"

"Alright, alright! Goddess, someone's in a mood today," I said playfully, further annoying her. *"How about a sunset run through the dandelion fields? Would that make you feel better?"*

"Very much so."

"Let's go, then."

* * *

Just as I could feel how restless my she-wolf was from being kept within four walls all day, I could feel her tension slowly fade away as she bolted through the plains, inviting the fuzzy dandelion seeds to chase behind her. It was soothing to feel the warmth of the earth through her paws, hear the wind singing in her ears as she galloped, and watch our lands embrace the dusk through her sunrise eyes. The first few times we shifted, letting her out made me uneasy. Now, she set my soul free.

There was a lot I still needed to do, and there was a lot still troubling me. But for however long she was in control of our body, I allowed myself to forget about my problems. Maybe it was a wolf thing, but whenever she was out, she made life seem so simple. I wanted to feel all of that simplicity, to live in it as long as possible.

After two hours of running and rolling around, Dawn decided she had tasted enough of the freedom I had granted her. Her usually shiny coat was covered in dandelion pappus and shredded grass, which made her look more like an energetic puppy than a powerful Alpha. Every other time I let her out before, I forced her to shift back before we reached the main part of our territory, fearing that pack members would see her and whisper about it. This time, I let her roam our lands as she pleased.

"It's nice to walk around here with my own paws. To be among the other members of our pack," she observed as she wandered through the cottages. Every time other wolves spotted us, they would stop what they were doing to bow their

heads in respect for her. *“I’ve wanted this for a long time. Thank you, Zephyr.”*

“You shouldn’t thank me. It was your right to do it all along. I’m sorry I kept it from you until now.” The longer I dwelled on those thoughts, the more I felt like a fool for thinking the way I used to.

“Wolves don’t live in the past. You shouldn’t either.” As always, her wisdom and understanding took me by surprise. *“I’m glad we’re fully understanding each other now. It did take you long enough though,”* she joked, making me laugh.

“Tina? Tina, is that you?” A voice I had never heard before startled us both. Confused, Dawn turned around to see who it was.

My she-wolf’s eyes immediately landed on a middle-aged man. I was sure I didn’t know him, which led me to believe he was probably a former member of Silent Rivers, yet he still felt awfully familiar. Initially, I thought maybe he wasn’t talking to us, but then I noticed he was staring directly at us. There was a look of disbelief on his face, as if he was seeing a ghost. I watched it turn into horror and embarrassment as Dawn gave me back control. We kept looking at each other in silence for a few more seconds until he dropped to his knees, shaking with fear.

“Pardon my mistake, Alpha Zephyr. Your w-wolf reminded me of a-an old f-friend of mine. A friend I re-recently lost,” he stuttered, his neck exposed in submission as his gaze locked on the ground.

“A...friend?” Dawn repeated.

I shook my head. What the hell was going on? “Who are you?” was all I could mutter.

“My n-name is Vincent, Alpha. I used to be a member of the f-former Silent Rivers.”

The second he told me his name, a sharp headache struck me, causing me to grunt. Then, it was gone as quickly as it had come. Shit, it seemed the consequences of my exhaustion were finally kicking in.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I told him as soon as I collected myself. My words clearly surprised him, as he lifted his head at once to look at me with wide eyes. “I hope everything’s going well with your move into Wind Howlers.”

“It is, Alpha,” he breathed out, still bewildered. “Thank you for your kindness.”

I nodded at him before turning around to continue on my way.

Unwilling to walk inside the pack house completely naked, I stopped by the public showers to grab a pair of shorts. As I climbed up the stairs to the Alpha suite, I couldn’t stop thinking about the weird encounter I’d just had with that random man. He called me Tina... Did he think I was a girl? Well, I did have a female wolf as my counterpart, so his assumption wasn’t absurd.

As soon as I opened the door to my room, my eyes landed on my bed and I was immediately reminded of how much I still had to get done before I could at last lie in it. The bizarreness of the event from minutes earlier was momentarily forgotten, replaced by the weight of my responsibilities. I wanted to enjoy what was left of my self-proclaimed break, but as I walked into the shower, it was impossible not to mentally go over the items I still had on my list. Mostly the usual paperwork, but I also intended to address at least some of the issues my Delta had presented to me earlier before calling it a day. If I had been calm a moment ago, I was now as stressed as I had been throughout most of the afternoon.

“Just relax, Zephyr. The day is almost done, and Malin will be back tomorrow morning,” Dawn recalled before retreating to the back of my head.

As she did, I could hear her humming her characteristic serene melody and it instantly calmed me, the same way it always did. I didn’t know how she did it, nor if it was something every wolf was capable of. My mother said she used to play classical music for me when I was a baby, so maybe Dawn’s melody subconsciously reminded me of those times.

A good 20 minutes under the shower later, I was as close to ready as I could be to get done with work and call it a night. I put on some comfortable clothes, and was ready to head back to the office when I heard my phone ring; considering my friends didn't call me unless it was urgent, I stiffened.

“Zach?” I asked with caution as I picked up the phone. “It's late. What's wrong?”

“Our sentinels have spotted a rogue male lurking near our borders,” he stated without ceremony.

“Was he dangerous? Did we lose anyone?” My heart started beating faster.

“No. He submitted as soon as he was captured.” I frowned in confusion. Rogues were feral creatures who would attack anything and anyone just to get scrapes of food. This didn't make any sense. “I think you're gonna wanna see this. Come to the South Gate.”

I heaved a sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I'm on my way.”

Like I said, my list of problems never ceased to grow.

Since I was already clean and ready for bed, I decided to take the Ferrari rather than let Dawn run there. It was a bit of a hassle to get the keys and head to the garage, but it would hopefully save me some effort when I was finally able to go to sleep. Because I couldn't navigate through the houses and trees at full speed, it took me around 10 minutes to get to the South Gate.

The instant I hopped out of the car, my eyes fell on the rogue wolf bound by silver chains, and I suddenly forgot how to breathe.

“Great, you're here. Like I said, he didn't put up a fight, but he refuses to shift. Judging by his scent, he's definitely a rogue, though the rotten smell is faint on him. He's probably been away from his pack for a week at most. And as you can see, he's a lot bigger than the average rogue...” My Gamma's report went on and on, but as I stood there, frozen, I tuned him out entirely.

And the trespasser seemed as shocked as me.

The wolf lying on the floor between the two sentinels had short, thick spiky fur. His coat was entirely black, darker than a starless night; the glow of the moon shining on it almost made it look blue. His wide, piercing eyes were a bluish-lilac color; it reminded me of the sky moments before the night took over. His facial features were sharp, his ears were very long and pointy.

And most importantly, he reminded me of *me*. He looked *exactly* like me.

Drawn to the wolf, my feet moved towards him without my command. Staring at him was like staring into a mirror. Neither of us broke eye contact as I approached him.

“Careful, Alpha. We don’t know when he might snap,” one of the sentinels warned me, but in my trance, I completely ignored him.

And as I stood only inches away from the beast, I ordered, “Shift.” He didn’t hesitate to do as I said.

To my shock, once the transformation was over, there wasn’t a man kneeling before me, but a woman.

17 | MATE

Time seemed to stop the second our eyes locked.

The young woman right in front of me was probably the same age as me. She had flawless porcelain skin, brighter than the moon, and it angered me to see it covered in dirt. Her shiny, wavy caramel blonde hair with golden tips flowed like a waterfall of the sweetest honey, falling over her shoulders and covering her exposed, perfectly-round breasts. Although she was kneeling on the ground, I could tell she was probably two or three inches taller than me, judging by her willowy figure. She had delicate face features, with a straight nose and thin eyebrows. Her hazel eyes glowed golden when struck by the moonlight, drawing me in.

She was a work of art; easily the most dazzlingly beautiful female I had ever laid my eyes on. Hell, she was drop-dead gorgeous. And for some reason, she looked mesmerizingly familiar, as if I had known her my whole life. That, however, was definitely not the only intriguing detail about her.

My body moved without command; I was lured in by the goddess in front of me as if she had me under a spell. When our faces were inches away, I closed my eyes to take a deep breath of her exquisite scent. It was intoxicating, and it instantly set my insides on fire. The best way to describe it was as the first breeze of spring, so fresh and green, carrying the sugary scent of the blooming flowers. It was warm like the sun, yet revitalizing like the wind. It had a hopeful, inviting overtone.

At first, it was hard for me to identify why she made my heart beat faster. I thought maybe her breathtaking beauty was the reason why it was suddenly hard for my lungs to find air. When I touched her face with the back of my fingers though, causing sparks of electricity to run through my body, there was no denying it.

“Unchain her,” I ordered calmly, never taking my eyes off the mysterious rogue girl.

I could feel the confusion in the air before one of the sentinels decided to break the silence. “Alpha, we don’t know how dangerous she could be. You’ve seen her wolf. It would be safer to-”

“She’s my mate, and your future Luna!” I announced with a fierce growl as I stood back up, glaring at the men. “Unchain her, now!”

The revelation, combined with my reaction, petrified them. It only took them a minute to process my words though. After exchanging glances, they proceeded to do exactly as I said. I watched my mate wince as her cuffs were removed. Once freed she immediately used her arms to cover her naked frame. That’s when I realized my fated partner, the one who was supposed to be mine, was exposed to the gazes of the three men around me.

Without thinking twice, I quickly took off my shirt, offering it to her. She hurriedly put it on, and just as my rage started subsiding, I noticed the burn marks on her wrists caused by the silver. It drove me mad to think my men had hurt her. A fearful gasp brought me back to reality, leading me to realize my aura had probably scared her. Shit, I had to keep my emotions at bay; the situation was probably scary enough for her, and I didn’t want to make it worse.

As I offered her my hand, I whispered to her, “You’re safe. No one will harm you.” She hesitated for a moment before allowing me to lift her up. “I’ll take you to one of the guest rooms in the pack house, where you can shower and put on some clean clothes. Would you like that?” All she did was nod, still too shocked to speak. As I led her to my car, I turned to my friend and the two sentinels, who were staring at us with wide eyes. “The situation must not be discussed until further orders. You’re dismissed.”

Opening the door of my Ferrari for my mate, whose name I didn’t even know yet, I gestured for her to hop in. As I climbed into the driver’s seat, I was struck by a wave of

emotions. I was obviously happy to have found my other half, yet the bizarreness of the circumstances under which we had met prevented me from truly enjoying the moment. Moreover, I couldn't shake the confusion as I tried to understand why her male wolf felt so much like me. I had a feeling Dawn would have some answers to my questions, but she had been completely silent since we arrived here.

It seemed like the puzzle pieces of my life were finally starting to come together.

* * *

“How are you feeling?” I asked my recently-found mate, offering her a hot cup of tea.

After taking her to a guest room, I asked Alex to lend her some clothes, and called the pack doctor to check on her. Although she had no visible bruises, being alone in the wild for Goddess knows how long could be dangerous, which is why I needed to make sure she was unharmed. In the meantime, I tried to reach out to my she-wolf, but she remained quiet, simply pacing around in my head. Once my fated partner was clean, fed, and feeling more comfortable in my home, I asked Alex to show her the way to my office so we could get to know each other in private.

As she sat in the chair in front of my desk, I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was in a deplorable state when I found her, but now, she looked even more stunning. Every fiber of my being urged me to touch her, to taste her, to claim her. Not willing to scare her off, it took all of my strength to hold onto my control. Judging by the way her hazel eyes constantly scanned her surroundings, it was easy to see she was still a little wary. For that reason, I decided to take my place behind my desk to give her some space.

“Better, Alpha Zephyr. Thank you.” She looked down, taking a sip of her drink as the most hypnotizing voice I had ever heard invaded my ears. It was shy and gentle, yet I didn't miss the hint of an inner assertiveness begging to come forth.

“Just Zephyr will do,” I insisted, trying to keep my voice as low and serene as possible. “There's no need for formalities

between us.”

Still holding the cup with both hands, she peeked up at me. Our gazes met for a brief moment; long enough to ignite the flame burning inside of me. I had to clench my fists over the table to fight back the growing desire to reach for her. Fuck, this was hard. Double fuck because now, so was *I*. Thankfully, she couldn't see the bulge in my pants beneath the desk.

“I'm sorry. You look so familiar.” Her words pulled me back from my thoughts. Blinking a few times, I noticed she was now staring at me with a mix of confusion and curiosity. “Have we met before?”

“Maybe in your dreams.” I smiled playfully, hoping to lighten the mood. The dimples that appeared on her face in response let me know it had worked. “May I have your name, mate?”

“Valentina Quill,” she obliged without hesitation.

“Valentina,” I repeated, testing the way her name sounded on my tongue. A groan reverberated in my chest as I tried to hold it beneath my throat. There were so many questions I wanted to ask her, but I knew I should start with the one making my blood boil. “Why have you gone rogue?”

“I...uh...” Noticing how reluctant she was, I leaned forward on the desk, encouraging her to look at me. I didn't want to startle her by touching her, but I hoped the reassurance in my eyes would be comforting enough. In the end, she sighed. “I was born an Omega with traitor blood. My parents were executed after trying to take down the Alpha. Because I was only four at the time, I was allowed to stay in the pack. Another Omega took me in and raised me. He was with me the first time I shifted, and when he saw my...peculiar wolf, he told me to lie and say I was wolfless. The pack was already not too fond of me because of my background, so he was afraid of what would happen if they found out about my male counterpart. I followed his advice, and when the Alpha asked me if I had shifted a week after my birthday, I told him I hadn't. He told me I was useless without my wolf and banished me.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.” By the end of her story, my heart was aching. This time, I couldn’t resist the urge to take her hand in mine. She stiffened, probably surprised by the electricity that erupted from our contact, but I soon felt her relax. “What pack were you from?”

“Silent Rivers.”

Her answer made my skin crawl. I was sure my eyes flickered black for a moment before I looked back at her. “So, Ryder forced you to go rogue,” I spat the name as if it was poison. “You might find some peace in knowing I defeated the bastard after he challenged me and have given him the same punishment he gave you. Only, he deserved it.” I shook my head, trying to clear it of the rage I felt. “Either way, you’re safe now. Wind Howlers will be your new home.”

She suddenly pulled away, a shocked expression staining her beautiful face. I was afraid I had said something wrong, until she spoke again, “You’re letting me...stay?”

“Of course.” I furrowed my brows. Wasn’t it obvious? Then, my face fell as a consideration crossed my mind. I couldn’t hide the hurt in my voice as I whispered, “I mean, unless you don’t want to.”

“I do. It’s just... You’re an Alpha.” I cocked my head to the side, not fully understanding her statement. “I...I thought you wouldn’t want an Omega as your mate,” she clarified, lowering her head. Her insecurity broke my heart. “Let alone a freak like me.”

“Whoa. Hey.” I had to rise from my seat to get just a little bit closer to her. Stretching my arm, I let my fingertips gently touch her cheek. My heart skipped a bit when she closed her eyes, leaning into my hand until I was fully cupping the side of her face. “I don’t know what life was like at Silent Rivers, but here, members are treated equally regardless of their position. My Beta is a born Omega, for example. You’ll have a chance to meet him tomorrow when he returns from visiting his parents. I definitely don’t have a problem with you being my Luna either, especially when I know you were made for me.” Her eyes burst open to stare into mine as the honesty behind

my words clearly stunned her. “And don’t ever call yourself that again. You’re not a freak, Valentina.”

“I am,” she insisted, her voice barely a whisper as she looked away. “Who else do you know that has an opposite-gender counterpart?”

“Me,” I replied without hesitation. My revelation caught her attention. “I know it’s late, and you must be tired, but... there’s something I need to talk to you about. Can you come outside with me for a moment?”

When she nodded, I led her downstairs, grabbing a robe from a box near the entrance before walking outside. There was no one in sight, probably because most wolves were already asleep. With a deep breath, I reluctantly let go of her hand, taking a few steps back.

“*Dawn? You there?*” I tried to reach out to my wolf. She hadn’t uttered a word since Valentina showed up, but I could still feel her presence in my mind. “*I need you to come out.*”

“*You’ve figured it out already, haven’t you?*” There was confusion in her voice, but also clarity. She could read my thoughts, so she knew what I was thinking. “*She’s me, Zephyr. I have no doubt about it.*”

“*I just need to make sure she feels the same way.*”

Dawn lowered her ears in understanding. I braced myself as I allowed her to come forward, and she hesitantly took control. The second our transformation was over, she opened her sunrise eyes; through them, I saw Valentina’s flabbergasted expression. For the first minute, the girl just stood there, frozen. Little by little, her courage built up, and she stepped closer to my she-wolf. Her hand slowly reached out to touch my counterpart’s forehead. She only made contact for a brief instant before pulling away with a terrified gasp.

“She’s...she’s me. B-but how?” Her voice was shaking just as much as she was.

I didn’t have to ask Dawn to give me back control; she knew she needed to retreat. I quickly put on the robe before approaching my petrified mate.

“I thought the same when I saw your wolf,” I revealed calmly.

Her eyes widened even more. “This is why you feel so familiar. This is why everything here looks so familiar.” She took 360 spin, analyzing her surroundings carefully. “I’ve visited this place before...in my visions.”

It was my turn to be surprised. “What visions?”

“I’ve been having this thing where... It’s like I’m daydreaming, but it feels so real. They took me here, and to a beautiful dandelion field...”

I grabbed both her shoulders, forcing her to look into my eyes. “When did they start?”

“About three weeks ago.” Around the time I first shifted.

“When did you say you turned eighteen again?” I had to ask.

“Uh...two weeks ago.” Around the time *my* visions started.

Could we have been seeing through each other’s eyes?

“Listen, Tina, this is gonna sound insane.” I tried to keep my voice low and calm, but that was hard when I was finally getting some answers for the first time in three weeks. “I think we have each other’s wolves.”

“W-what do you mean? How...how is that even possible?” Her eyebrows shot up in shock, although her tone wasn’t filled with confusion; it was filled with fear.

“A witch was sent here to shine a light on my situation. She said there’s a prophecy about two shifters having their wolves switched after birth.”

“Why?” I could sense her despair as she clung onto me, her hands grasping my forearms tightly.

“I don’t know.” It pained me to let her down. “I know you want answers, and I do too. But for now, we should rest. We’ll perform the joining ritual tomorrow to officially welcome you into our pack. We’ll get you settled, then we can talk to the

witch and see what we can learn about our wolves. How does that sound?"

"Good." She forced a smile. "Thank you for...taking care of me."

"You're my mate. I intend to do just that for the rest of our lives." I never imagined myself saying those words to any girl - it was crazy how powerful the mate bond was. "Would you like to sleep with me in my room? Or would you rather stay in the guest suite?"

"I..." Valentina was thoughtful for a moment, until her eyes met mine again. "I feel safe with you. Can I stay with you?"

I had been holding myself back, fighting the pull I felt towards her in fear of moving too fast. When I heard her response, however, I couldn't control myself any longer. I pulled her in for our first hug, wrapping my arms around her before she had time to complain. Once she was secured in my embrace, her face resting on my shoulder, I inhaled her scent deeply, hungry for her. Finally, I pressed my lips against her neck, tasting the cotton texture of her skin for the first time.

"I'd like nothing more."

18 | REVELATIONS

Meeting a mate is always an emotional experience. It's safe to assume mine was more overwhelming than most.

First, there was the mix of shock and anger of seeing a huge black wolf, who looked and felt like me, shifting into the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on, dirty and bound by chains. Later, rage consumed me when I learned about what her former Alpha had done to her. But then, I felt whole upon finding someone who understood the struggles I had faced for the past few weeks. I was finally at peace for getting to hold her in my arms.

Valentina and I spent the night together in my room. Even if nothing remotely sexual happened between us, it was heaven to simply have her near me. Her presence helped me sleep serenely until the sun came up, something that hadn't happened in a while. However, waking up to realize she wasn't in bed with me anymore almost made my heart stop. My calm was gone the second I opened my eyes and didn't immediately see her. I was only able to relax again when I sat up, finding her staring out the window wall with her back to me.

If she heard me shift in bed as I got up to approach her, she didn't react to it in any way. At first, I was afraid she could be mad at me for some reason, but when I noticed how concentrated she was gazing into the dandelion fields, I understood she was just too oblivious to her surroundings to notice me. She let out a short gasp as I snaked my arms around her. I took that as a victory, considering she didn't wince at my touch like she did the previous night.

"Is the bed not comfortable enough? Or is your company the problem?" I whispered playfully, though somewhere deep inside of me I truly worried she might not have felt comfortable with me.

My mate turned her head to me to show me a small smile. I instantly realized it was the best sight to wake up to; I knew it would be my new favorite thing.

“Good morning.” Her melodic voice echoed in my ears before she focused her attention on the landscape again. “My thoughts were too loud to let me sleep.”

“What’s on your mind?” With everything I had told her, I knew it was a dumb question, but it slipped out anyway.

“You. Me. Our wolves,” she confessed without hesitation, a sigh breaking through her lips. Through her reflection in the glass, I noticed a hint of fear in her expression. “It’s so surreal, and... I don’t know. I’m scared,” she whispered the last part, almost as if she was afraid to sound weak. My grasp around her tightened as a protective instinct I didn’t know I had rushed through me.

“I know. I’ve been there too. At least you don’t have to figure it out on your own anymore. Neither of us do,” I reassured her. Although our bond wasn’t complete, I could still sense her fear slowly subsiding. “I suppose it makes sense, to a certain degree.”

“Does it?” She raised an eyebrow, skeptical.

“Well, you’re my mate. If anyone should keep a piece of my soul, it’s you.”

“That’s one way to see it.” She chuckled. “I guess you’re right. In a way, I feel like I’ve known you my whole life.”

“Exactly.” I kissed her cheek before pressing my index finger to her chin, encouraging her to look into my eyes. “If you’re anything like Dawn, I’m sure you’re fierce, strong, and determined. You never give up, no matter how hard of a challenge you’re facing.”

“*Oh, so now that you think I’m your mate, you’re trying to flatter me!*” My she-wolf scoffed.

Ignoring her, I went on, “She can be a little stubborn at times, but she gives great advice. She’s a natural born leader, and clearly made to be Luna. Hell, I think she’d make for a powerful Alpha, too.”

“Wow... Is that so, Zephyr?” Dawn rolled her eyes at me.

“Really? I suppose it kinda sounds like me...in a more than positive light.” Valentina laughed; it was the most enticing melody I had ever heard. “Dusk is like my guardian angel, always looking out for me. He’s powerful and imposing, eager to make himself be heard. He doesn’t take disrespect lightly, although he knows how to be merciful. With me, he’s loving and caring, even if he tends to forget that I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“That does sound like me...in a more than positive light,” I played, receiving yet another laughter in response. “So, his name’s Dusk?”

“I guess it makes sense for our wolves to have matching names,” she observed.

“See? It’s all coming together!” My silliness earned me an eye roll from Tina, but I would take it. She seemed to be in a lighter mood than before, which was all I could ask for.

Once I had made sure her troubles were gone - at least for the time being - I ordered room service for the two of us, as well as new clean clothes for my mate. She said she had really missed showering while she was living as a rogue, so I let her use the suite bathroom first. It was hard to resist the urge to follow her inside, and even harder to get rid of my erection after I accidentally pictured her naked.

I changed out of my pajamas, and by the time Tina was ready, our food had already arrived. Over breakfast, we talked some more about the visions we had, hoping to understand more about our peculiar situation. It was bizarre and fascinating to listen to her recall things Dawn had done in detail while she was out. However, she didn’t seem to have seen my first shift, like I had seen hers. Apparently, her vivid dreams had only started two weeks ago, after her counterpart awaked.

As soon as we were done eating, I got a text from Zach letting me know Malin and Amaya had returned home safely. I was immediately reminded that I hadn’t talked to my Gamma since my mate’s appearance. Since I needed to inform both

him and Malin about what had happened, I decided to call a meeting in my office.

My best friend was certainly confused to see the blonde, unknown girl standing hand-in-hand with me, but I didn't hesitate to tell him everything, from how I had found her - or rather, how she found me - to how I believed our wolves had been switched.

"Wow. I was only away for two days, and all of this happens?" To say Malin was shocked was an understatement. "You should have defeated that Ryder bastard sooner. Would have made things easier."

"I should have fucking killed him." I clenched my fists. "If only I had known what he had done when he challenged me..."

"Wait. You said he challenged you. And you won?" My mate's questions confused me, but I nodded nevertheless. "What happened to the members of Silent Rivers?"

"They were absorbed by Wind Howlers. They've all been slowly moving over here for the past couple of days," my Beta answered before I could.

"Vincent!" The joy in her voice as she chanted another man's name made my skin crawl with jealousy. I was about to ask her who she was talking about when she turned to me with a grin. "He's the Omega I told you about. The man who took me in."

"Oh." I blinked a few times to hide how stupid I had been to even consider she could be talking about a love interest. Then, it hit me. "Did you say his name was Vincent? I think I met him yesterday."

"I have to see him. He needs to know that I'm okay," she insisted.

"Whatever you want." Lifting her hand up to my lips, I planted a soft kiss on the back of it before turning to my best friend. "Malin, can you link Alex? Have her locate Vincent and send him here."

“Right away, sir.” He saluted playfully before his eyes clouded over.

“Thank you for your time, guys. You may go back to what you were doing now.” I nodded at the Beta, his mate, and my Gamma. The three of them returned the gesture before exiting the room.

While my Delta took care of contacting Valentina’s adoptive father, I decided to introduce my mate to my parents. She was a little nervous at my suggestion, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to hide her from them for very long.

It only took Mom and Dad a few minutes to get to my office after I called them, and just as I expected, they didn’t mind at all that my mate was a rogue Omega. In fact, they loved her immediately. The four of us talked for around half an hour; the whole time, I made sure to stay right beside Tina to ensure she wouldn’t feel uncomfortable.

When there was a knock on the door, I asked my parents to leave so my mate could have a little more privacy for her reunion with the man who raised her. As I opened the door for him, my suspicions were confirmed; he was definitely the wolf who had stopped me the night before. He was shaking when he arrived, afraid he had gotten into trouble for approaching the Alpha recklessly, but as soon as his eyes landed on my mate, his expression changed.

I watched as they hugged, and much like Valentina feared, Vincent was worried sick about her. After he made sure she was fine, he proceeded to apologize for his mistake the first time we met, and thank me for reuniting him with his adoptive daughter. I felt awful for having to separate them again, but I had scheduled a meeting with Elder Laelius and we couldn’t keep him waiting. The male Omega gave my mate the number of his house, telling her to stop by whenever she wanted to.

As the two of us climbed down the stairs together, I couldn’t help but notice how Valentina was a lot more serene than ever. Certainly, having a familiar face in her new home would help her adjust. It was all such a huge coincidence, but I was really happy for her.

By the time we made it to the Elder chapel, my team was right outside waiting for us. There were smiles on their faces as we walked past them on our way in; they were happy for me. Once we stepped inside, I noticed Laelius had everything ready. I led Tina towards the center of the room, where we started.

The ritual was exactly the same as the one I had performed with the Beta Female following our return from Galensoles. I had briefed my mate exactly on what she should expect from the process, but I was still proud of how well she handled it. She didn't wince when the silver blade sliced her skin open, even though I knew she had felt the discomfort caused by it. In fact, she held her head high in a gesture not very common among Omegas. The more time I spent with her, the more I realized how similar she was to my brave she-wolf.

"The ritual is complete!" The Elder's voice echoed through the stone walls, loud and clear.

As my friends clapped and cheered, I held my mate closer to whisper in her ear, "Welcome to Wind Howlers, my Luna." She smiled in return, touching her nose to mine.

Then the next second, a terrible headache struck me, ripping a groan out of me.

And suddenly, I felt my connection open to all 400 members of my pack.

"Zephyr?!" Tina called in distress. It took me a moment to collect myself after the unexpected experience.

"Zephyr?!" This time, it was a male voice echoing in my head. More precisely, my best friend's voice. "*Holy shit! Can you hear me?*"

"Fuck, yes, I can," I responded out loud, shooting him a glare. I'd be a lot more excited if I didn't just have hundreds of people connect to me all at once.

"*Hey, your mindlink works now,*" he continued.

"*I noticed.*" I sent him a telepathic message for the first time, testing how it worked. "*Dawn? Care to explain?*"

“I...I don't know. As soon as the joining ritual was over, I sensed our connection to our pack opening. All I had to do was establish the bridges to allow communication.”

A single question popped in my mind - could the two events be connected, or was it yet another inexplicable coincidence?

“What happened?” my mate asked again after my long silence.

“I'm not sure...but there's someone who might be able to help us figure it out.”

Diving my hand into my pocket, it didn't take me long to find what I was looking for - the small, rectangular paper card Cassiopeia gave me on our first encounter. After finding my mate and discussing our wolf situation with her, I asked for the Elder's permission to reach out to her again. He suggested we did it following Valentina's official welcome, and now I was sure the timing couldn't be more perfect. I examined the object for a few seconds before turning my attention to Tina again.

“Are you ready, my Luna?” I could see the hesitation in her eyes, but she nodded nevertheless. “Elder Laelius, may I summon Cassiopeia?”

“Whenever you're ready, Alpha Zephyr.” The man gave me a curt nod.

I took a deep breath, but didn't allow myself enough time to start second guessing my decision. In a sharp movement, I ripped the card in two while chanting the witch's name. The torn paper pieces dispersed into fairy dust, disappearing before it even hit the ground. Only a few seconds later, the raven-haired woman appeared right in front of us.

“Oh.” Cassiopeia's first reaction was to raise her brows in surprise. She then took a quick glance around. “Hi, everyone. Nice to see you again, Zephyr. I take it you found the one who has your wolf-self?”

“I believe so.” My future Luna and I exchanged one long glance. I held her hand tight as I turned back to the witch. “This is Valentina. She's my mate.”

“A mate, huh? Things just got interesting!” An amused grin lit up her face. “Let’s see if you’re right. If you can just let me peek inside your heads for a moment...”

The three-centuries old woman didn’t wait for our consent to proceed. She placed one hand on the side of my head, and the other on Tina’s. Her eyes became misty, just like they had when she came to see me a couple of days earlier. I also felt the same bizarre sensation I had experienced, as if she was digging around my deepest, darkest secrets; exposing them. When her emeralds went back to normal, disbelief was written all over her face.

“I knew it!” Cass raised her index finger into the air. “Your case is not like the others. You’re different. Unique.”

“Different how?” I instinctively pulled Tina closer to me when I felt her body tense up.

“Do you remember the prophecy I told you about? I researched it when I returned home.” All this shit was nothing short of *utterly bizarre* to me, and judging by the look on my mate’s face, she agreed with me. The witch, however, had her lips curled in an excited grin. “A true Alpha pair, whose wolves have been switched, must fight as one in a battle that will last from dusk ‘til dawn.”

“What is that supposed to-” I started, but my mate didn’t let me finish.

“Dusk and Dawn. Those are our wolves’ names,” she breathed out, completely horrified. “What is a true Alpha?”

Finally, a question I knew the answer to. “It’s a shifter with pure Alpha blood, who has been conceived by a pure-blooded Alpha couple. Basically a wolf who has two direct lineages of Alphas, both maternally and paternally, in their family tree.”

“Precisely,” Cass agreed.

“That prophecy isn’t about me then.” Tina almost sounded relieved. “I’m a born Omega. My parents were executed for treason against their Alpha when I was still young, but I know for a fact they were Omegas.”

The witch's face fell. "Are you sure?" My mate nodded confidently. "I see. Well, it could be something else then. I'll look deeper into the matter. Once I have more conclusive evidence, I'll get back to you." She was about to turn around to leave when she suddenly stopped, her eyes darting to my girl beside me. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Uh, Valentina. Valentina Quill."

"Nice meeting you." With those final words, Cassiopeia snapped her fingers and disappeared into thin air.

When I looked back at Tina, she seemed to be in the same state I was in the first time I met Cass. The confusion of not knowing who you are, combined with the fear of what awaited you in the future... I was familiar with those feelings. At least now, I had someone who could understand what I was going through; I could only hope such a thought brought her as much peace as it brought me. Turning to face her, I moved a strand of her hair away from her face to look straight into her eyes, and found myself repeating the words Dawn had once spoken to me.

"Everything will fall into place when the time is right." I grabbed her face with both my hands, soothing her. "Until then, we'll be together. It'll be fine," I reassured her with a smile. She tried to return the gesture. "Tell you what. I'm gonna take the day off to give you a tour around the pack, and get you acquainted with your new home. We can just unwind and get our minds off this mess."

Judging by the way her hazel orbs glistened golden, I took it that she liked my idea. Still, I could sense her reluctance. "Don't you have work to do? I don't wanna get in your way."

"I'm sure the world won't end if I run away for a few hours." I shot a glance at my best friend, who nodded in understanding. No words were needed for me to know he would gladly cover for me.

I wished I could take a couple days off to escape with my mate, like Malin. To a world where all that mattered was us. With a heavy sigh, I shook my head, knowing that wasn't my

reality. Sadly, time off was one of the few luxuries most Alphas couldn't afford to have.

But, as always, I would make it work.

INTERLUDE III

Valentina

The past few days had been the craziest of my entire life. I wasn't upset about being banished from Silent Rivers; in fact, I felt like the chains that bound me had been broken at last. Because of my past, they never treated me as one of their own. However, they had offered me a roof, clothes, and food - enough for me to live, anyway. I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared to be left to my own devices for the very first time.

In a way, I had always been alone. No one wanted to mingle with the daughter of traitors, the lowest of all Omegas. I had no friends, no family, which would explain why I felt void inside. The only two souls who ever showed me compassion were Vincent, the widowed father who had lost both his daughter and wife during childbirth, and more recently, Dusk. I was frightened the night I met him, but it didn't take me long to realize my unexpected counterpart was a blessing.

The black wolf, dark as the day during a full solar eclipse, had sworn to protect me from the very moment our connection was established. He took the same oath when I was banished, and he lived up to it, fighting against dangerous, wild creatures as he subconsciously made his way to Wind Howlers territory. I warned him to stay clear of other packs' borders, but he insisted he was drawn to these lands, so I trusted him. And I was glad I did so, although the information I had found here was hard to take in.

It was unsettling enough to have a male wolf as my counterpart. It was even more bizarre to learn that my fated partner's wolf was not only a female, but a clear reflection of myself. I couldn't begin to understand why it felt like the she-

wolf held a piece of my very soul, before I was thrown into an even bigger mess, with witches, and prophecies, and battles.

For the first time, I was away from the only home I had ever known, where the one person I could trust was my mate, whom I knew little about. My life had been turned upside down. I should be panicking, but somehow, I felt safe.

Zephyr Wyndham made me feel safe.

Whether it was the unlikely situation we both found ourselves in or the weird feeling of having known him for forever despite the fact we had just met, I wasn't the least wary of him. On the contrary; something deep inside me told me everything would be fine as long as he was by my side. He had shown concern and sympathy towards me from the moment I arrived at his territory, not once judging me based on my past or my rank. While everyone I used to know disrespected and underestimated me, he accepted me for who I was.

The rest of our day following the disturbing conversation with the witch was surprisingly wonderful. *Zephyr* took me on a tour around the pack, making sure I became familiar with every inch of the lands where he had grown up. When we were approaching the waterfall, I could have sworn I heard the wind calling my name, as if I belonged here. By sundown, he led me back to his room - well, our room, as he insisted - where we watched silly cartoons and had dinner in private.

Aside from kissing me, not once did he try to take things to another level. Thanks to my heightened werewolf senses, I could smell his arousal whenever I was too close to him, yet he never pressured me. Although it was evident he wanted me, he was letting me set the pace in our unusual, sudden relationship, which I really appreciated. Most mates couldn't keep their hands off each other; from the moment their eyes locked, it was common for their beasts to take over. I couldn't deny the pull I felt towards him, nor my own desires. Still, I barely knew him; I wanted to get to know him better before deciding whether I could really trust him.

After our nice, relaxing evening together, I fell asleep in his arms. However, when I woke up in the morning, I realized I was alone in the spacious bed. Before I could start wondering where Zephyr had gone, I spotted a tiny piece of paper lying beside me over the cotton sheets. I rubbed my eyes before reading the message on it: *Left for training - link me if you need anything.* It immediately made me smile. Despite his kind and caring nature, my mate didn't strike me as a romantic man, yet his gesture was cute.

"He seems to have a soft spot for you." Dusk's deep, imponent voice sounded in my head.

"Like you do?" I teased.

"You're an amazing counterpart, Tina. I know I made your life harder. I just wanna make sure our bond won't cause you any more harm." The guilt in his voice pained me.

"That's not true, Dusk. If anything, you saved me," I tried to reassure him. He didn't look too convinced, but he didn't argue anymore.

Setting the matter aside, I stretched my arms and rolled out of bed. It was almost eight, which meant warrior training should be ending soon. Not willing to stay in and wait, I decided to go meet Zephyr outside.

I resisted the temptation to shower, heading straight to the small closet where the clothes Delta Alexandra had kindly lent me were hanging. As I scoured through my few options, I couldn't help but be grateful for how well I was treated at my new home. Wolves were usually wary of outsiders, especially rogues, yet my mate's team had welcomed me with open arms. His second-in-command was the happy-go-lucky type, humble and funny, while the Beta Female was a little shy, but just as kind. The Gamma was quiet and grumpy, but I could tell he had a good heart.

In the end, I decided on a simple yellow backless sundress with a rounded skirt, finishing the look with old gold sandals. I brushed my hair, but didn't waste a lot of time styling it, as I preferred to wear it down. Once I was ready, I rushed downstairs, taking a moment to remember where the gym was.

It was the first time I walked around without the Alpha, and it didn't take me long to be reminded of why I shouldn't have allowed myself to be comfortable here just yet.

At first, I felt eyes upon me. Then, I heard them talking.

I had learned to live with listening to other wolves speak ill of me. After a while, it stopped bothering me. Maybe because I wrongfully expected my restart at Wind Howlers to be different, it was actually hard to keep a straight face as I continued on my way. My smile faded as I heard the members whispering about how a rogue wasn't fit to be Luna. Some, probably my old pack mates from Silent Rivers, added that I was also an Omega and wolfless. The more they talked, the more I found myself agreeing with their arguments.

"You know better than to care about what others say," Dusk reminded me, feeling my insecurity. *"Especially wolves who don't even know you."*

"I don't care when they spread lies or insult me...but they are right. I'm not Luna material." For some reason, my heart ached as I said the words.

"You're so much more than a title, Tina," he whimpered, feeling my pain, before a low growl broke through his sharp teeth. *"If you don't believe me, let me out! I'll put them in their place for talking shit about you!"*

"It's fine, Dusk. I have to deal with this by myself." Noticing he was about to snap, I took a deep breath and held him back. Letting my new pack find out about my male wolf now surely wouldn't help my case.

"Tina?" The unexpected sound of the masculine voice I had loved from the moment I first heard it pulled me back to reality.

Lost in thought, I hadn't even noticed I had already made it to the outskirts of the training grounds. The sight of my mate dressed only in black shorts, with his muscular stomach exposed, confirmed that his sparring session was over. Drenched in sweat, his messy hair looked even darker despite his attempts to dry it with a white towel that rested around his

neck. As my eyes helplessly scanned his delicious body, my heart skipped a beat. Yet for the first time, his presence also made me nervous.

“Is something wrong?” he whispered in my ear after closing the distance between us with his werewolf speed.

We couldn't possibly know each other well yet; still, the concern in Zephyr's voice suggested that he must have noticed the change in my expression. Looking past him, my gaze landed on his Beta and Gamma, who were both staring at us in confusion. Unwilling to draw unwanted attention, I shoved my insecurities aside to force a smile.

“No, nothing. I just thought I could come here to see you,” I finally replied, trying to keep my tone as calm as possible. Judging by the way my mate eyed me with suspicion, I realized I had failed to fool him.

He didn't direct another word to me before turning to his friends. “You can go ahead without me. Meet me in my office after breakfast.” After they nodded in response, his gentle blue eyes fell back on me. “Let's go.”

Zephyr's fingers intertwined with mine, and he dragged me all the way back to the pack house. On our way there, I couldn't help but notice the wolves who had just been gossiping about me were now silent, yet their judgy eyes were still glued on me. Had they been looking at me the same way since I arrived? Maybe I had been too lost in my fantasy to notice it from the start.

Once we got back to the Alpha suite, my mate linked one of the cooks to order us breakfast, then headed into the bathroom to take a quick shower. When he came out, he was dressed in only a pair of black trousers. They matched his hair perfectly, causing the intense blue in his eyes to pop out even more. As I dove into them, I almost forgot about what had been troubling me.

“Okay. Talk to me,” he muttered in a sweet tone, sitting beside me on the edge of the bed. When his fingers brushed against my cheek, it sent goosebumps all over my body. “Is the Luna Ceremony what's making you nervous? I know I said I

was going to announce it tonight at dinner, but we can postpone it if you need more time.”

“No. I mean, yes,” I blurted out. What a great way to start this conversation. Taking a deep breath, I shook my head to try again. “Do you really plan on making me your Luna?”

Zephyr’s brows creased as he cocked his head to the side. “You’re my mate. Who else would be my Luna?”

“I don’t know. It’s just... Why would the pack accept me, an outsider and a rogue, as their Luna? I heard...” Part of me wanted to be honest about what they were saying about me, but I held my tongue when I realized how pathetic I would sound.

“You heard the whispers, didn’t you?” he concluded as if he could read my thoughts. A gasp broke through my lips as I lifted my head to look at him, just in time to catch his eyes flickering from their serene blue color to a rage-filled gold. In less than a second, they were back to normal. He huffed as a small smile played on his lips, and it was my turn to be confused. “It’s hard to ignore them. I would know. But rumors don’t define who you are, Tina. The pack will accept you as soon as they see your strength. It was the same with me.”

“That’s the problem, actually. What strength do I have?” I’ve never opened up to anyone other than my adoptive father. It never crossed my mind that I would just let my walls down around someone I had just met. Yet, with Zephyr, the words just flowed naturally, as if he was drawing them out. “I’m an Omega. I only have a highschool education because Vincent was friends with a teacher; I don’t have any experience with ruling a pack. And it’s definitely not in my blood.”

“You’ll learn,” he insisted with such confidence, I found it hard to disagree with him. “Tina, I don’t care what your bloodline says. The Moon Goddess hand-picked you to be my Luna for a reason...” He held me closer, running his hands up and down my back slowly as he touched his forehead to mine. “And I’ve recently learned that the Goddess makes no mistakes. I fully trust her plan. Maybe you should, too.” He pulled away suddenly, startling me. Then, I noticed his eyes

glisten as a genius grin lit up his face. “How about you come with me to the office today? You’ll get to know the Elite members better, and you can get acclimated with your new role in the pack.”

“That actually sounds perfect.” I found myself matching his level of excitement as I returned his smile. And just like that, my insecurities were long gone. “Thank you.”

“When will you stop thanking me? You don’t have to. Just promise me you’ll never let something like this bother you again. You’re perfect, Tina.” His lips touched mine, making fireworks explode in my chest.

I resisted the urge to thank him again and allowed myself to get lost in his taste. Sadly, we were interrupted before I would have liked. Zephyr grunted, pulling away as he heard a knock on the door.

“Seems like our food is here. Shall we eat, my Luna?” He flashed me a playful wink, making me giggle.

“Sure. I’m starving.”

By the time we sat down to eat, I didn’t feel small anymore. Once the negativity stopped blinding me, a single thought, loud and clear, echoed in my mind. All my life I had been alone...unwanted. There was a hole inside my heart, as if a piece of my very soul had been taken away when I was too young to remember. Yet now, here, I finally felt like I belonged.

And in a way, *that* made me feel whole.

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“Members of Wind Howlers Pack,” I called in a loud, firm voice, immediately catching everyone’s attention. With one hand, I raised a glass of champagne in the air, while my other arm was wrapped around my girl’s waist, pulling her closer to me. “It is with great joy that I formally present to you my mate and your future Luna, Valentina Quill!”

Even if some of the members were still unsure about Tina, the crowd immediately burst into applause at my announcement. It was common knowledge that a leader could not reach his full strength until he had his Luna by his side. Therefore, a pack would only be at its best once the Alpha couple had found each other. Considering the turbulent life we were living at the moment, with a huge threat coming towards us and the loss of valuable allies, my mate couldn’t have arrived at a better time; she was the hope we all needed.

With the help of the Elite members - especially my Delta - we had managed to put together a dinner ceremony, where the entire pack was present. Events like these would usually be held in the Dining Hall, but after our recent expansion, we didn’t have enough space to fit everyone there. Thankfully, the Event Hall was large enough to accommodate every single one of our nearly 400 pack members simultaneously.

It was Valentina’s first time standing before that big of a crowd, which is why I was doing my best to ensure she wouldn’t feel overwhelmed. To my surprise, when the loud sound of clapping and whistling filled the venue, she didn’t tremble. Instead, she held her head higher, taking a moment to eye all of the wolves present. I was in awe; if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed that the strong woman standing by my side had been insecure only a few hours ago.

“Thank you for the warm welcome, Wind Howlers.” The members ceased their noise the second my mate’s silvery, yet

powerful voice echoed. “We don’t know each other well yet, but I hope we can get along well. I might not have been born here, but I am one of you now. I heard the wind whistling my name, and it sounded like home.” She made a brief pause, inhaling deeply. We had rehearsed her speech, yet she recited it with such a natural ease, it seemed like she was just pouring her heart out to our pack - maybe because she believed her every word. “I will take my oath as your Luna next Friday at sundown, but I promise I’m here for you from this moment on.”

My team, Valentina, and I had gathered in my office to decide on a date for her Luna Ceremony; it was the first issue we discussed in the meeting after breakfast this morning. Because of the importance of the event, which would officially tie her to her new duties, thus strengthening her bond with the pack, we knew it would be best to organize it as soon as possible. Still, I knew my mate’s life had been turned upside down, and I’d hate to rush her. Since today was a Wednesday, we all agreed setting the ceremony to happen next Friday would grant us a little over a week to prepare.

“I expect you all to be there so we can celebrate together,” I added, addressing the crowd once again. I turned to my Luna with a smile before continuing, “Without further ado, let’s feast!”

While the pack members rose from their seats to serve themselves at the buffet, my friends and I sat back down, waiting for the waiters to set our table. We ate over a nice conversation, and I was happy to see my mate fitting in so well. She had only been here for a couple of days, yet she felt so comfortable it seemed like she had always been part of the team.

“You know what, Tina? I think you’re just what we needed - someone who can keep our hot-headed Alpha in his place,” Malin joked, making me roll my eyes at him.

“*He’s not wrong, puppies.*” I was surprised to hear Alex’s voice inside my head. “*Your mate’s a keeper. Don’t screw this up.*”

“*I won’t*,” I replied with a smile. Once my eyes defogged, I realized she was staring straight at me.

“You know what I just realized?” My best friend’s voice caught my attention again. I instantly understood his intentions when I saw the mischievous grin on his face. He was holding Amaya close to him, yet his gaze was focused on Zach. “There’s only one last member of our trio left unmated... Of the entire Elite team actually. How long do you think it’ll be before the lucky girl comes along, Zach?”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up,” the Gamma ordered, frowning at my Beta.

“What’s your type, Zach? How do you imagine your perfect she-wolf to be?” Malin paid no mind to Zachari’s warning. The poor boy was already red as a tomato, shrinking into his chair as if he hoped to disappear. I was about to join the teasing when the Beta Female chimed in.

“One thing’s for sure, we definitely need more female energy here.” Amaya scowled at her mate, who flashed her an apologetic smile. “I say we should have a girl’s night.”

“I’m in!” Alex quickly agreed. “Tina?” She turned to my mate with one brow raised.

“Sure, let’s do it!” My Luna giggled.

“Eager to get rid of me already?” I pouted, mocking offense.

“Didn’t know you were the needy kind, Zephyr,” she said playfully.

“*You’re damn right he’s needy*,” Dawn agreed. “*And desperate for attention.*”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me yet...” Valentina stiffened when I dove my nose into the crook of her neck without warning. Her reaction made me chuckle before I whispered for only her to hear, “But I intend to change that soon.”

* * *

Maybe my mate had been trying to escape her whole life; maybe she was just naturally determined. Either way, I was impressed by how quickly she was adapting to the changes destiny forced upon her. Still, deep inside of me, I knew it was too soon to claim her. I wanted to be a gentleman for once and give her time, but how much longer could I keep fighting the attraction I felt towards her?

Every night spent beside her was both paradise and torture. Her scent was calming, yet addictive like a drug. It lured me in, inviting me to come near, but the closer I was to her, the harder it was to control the raw urges I felt. Her body called for mine, and it was painful not to respond. I managed to survive another night, but I had the feeling it wouldn't get any easier.

The morning after her dinner party, I had to rush into the bathroom before training. My dick was rock-hard, and my tension needed to be released. Thankfully, Valentina didn't seem to be the early-bird type, which meant she most likely didn't notice my absence. She had just woken up when I came back from my sparring session. This time, she suggested we had breakfast at the cafeteria with everyone else.

Once we were done eating, I led her to my office. The previous day, I started introducing her to the basics of pack management, and today, she was excited to continue from where we had left off. She was doing outstandingly well, especially for someone who hadn't worked alongside higher-ranking wolves before. I wasn't surprised anymore though. Not that I had ever doubted her capability, but at this point, it was clear to me that she was meant to be Luna.

“Before we start, let's review what I taught you yesterday.” I spread a map of Genero over my desk. My mate was sitting right beside me. “Do you remember which packs have been our allies in the past?”

“Hmm let's see...” The way she bit her bottom lip when she was concentrating drove me crazy. I found myself mimicking her while I wished it was my teeth tasting her flesh. “These two, and...this one. Then there's also these three to the right.” She pointed to the different areas on the map.

“Mm-hmm. And our enemies?”

“That’s easy. Wind Howlers never had many enemies. There’s just these-” She stopped abruptly to look at me. “Zephyr?”

I hadn’t even realized I had my hand on her thigh until that moment. My eyes widened at first, but I soon noticed that she wasn’t pulling away. Her cheeks turned red as she went back to biting her lip. It was a clear sign for me to go on, though I knew I should tread carefully.

My fingers traveled a little further up, lifting the hem of her sundress, while my other hand cupped her face. I moved some loose strands of hair out of the way before slowly pressing my lips against hers. A quiet moan from her let me know I was doing everything right, and the victorious sensation made me release a low growl. My tongue traced the seam of her lips leisurely as I grasped her thigh firmer.

Then, Tina took me by surprise. She brought her hand to the back of my head, tangling her fingers in my hair as she deepened our kiss. Another one of my growls - this time, hungrier - was muffled by her mouth. When my fingertips dug into her skin, I knew I was letting go of my control; but for once, I didn’t care. My hand moved from her face to her other thigh, and I was ready to lift her onto my lap when a third voice echoed in the room.

“Whoa! Bad timing?”

My mate immediately broke our heated kiss, and we both turned to the door. It hadn’t been open a moment ago, yet now there was a more-than-shocked Malin standing right in front of us. Valentina gasped, straightening herself in her seat. She looked away from my best friend as she muttered an apology. All I could do was face-palm.

“And this is why you knock before walking in.” I frowned at him.

“I’m so sorry, Alpha. Luna.” He bowed his head at us both. My mate’s embarrassment was replaced by surprise the second

she heard her title - it was the first time someone other than me addressed her like that.

I rolled my eyes at my Beta. "Come on, sit down. We have a lot to discuss. Where's-" Before I could finish my sentence, Zach appeared behind Malin, wearing his classic sunglasses. I didn't miss the way Tina raised an eyebrow at him, unfamiliar with his peculiar tactic to hide a black eye. I lost my poise, unable to hold my laughter. "Great. Now that we're all here, let's dive into it."

Once my friends took their seats, we started discussing the issue that had been troubling us for almost a month. The week hadn't gone as planned with me finding my mate, and the news about our wolves possibly having been switched for a reason we couldn't begin to understand. I wish I had time to get to know her; to solve the mysteries revolving around us. However, I couldn't be so selfish when my entire pack relied on me.

We hadn't heard about the Fallen since the Alpha meeting that took place in our territory, but I knew better than to believe they were gone. Considering how cautious they had been until now, I was sure they were simply lurking silently in the shadows, waiting for the next opportunity to strike. And since we learned about them coming to Genoro, we had barely been able to make any advancements.

Changes had been made to our defense system, but that was about it. The sole meeting we managed to arrange with another Alpha didn't yield any fruits. Thankfully, some of the leaders Zach had reached out to agreed to meet with us to discuss possible alliances. We spent the rest of the morning, as well as part of the afternoon, organizing a plan to visit them and coming up with fair proposals. Although Tina mostly listened to us, she also made a few good points.

The clock had just struck 4:00 p.m. when we finally finished. In the end, I was confident in our plan, and amazed to see how much my friends had grown since they stepped into their positions. I dismissed them earlier than usual to enjoy what was left of the day. Malin excused himself to go find

Amaya, while Zach simply bolted towards his room, probably to lock himself in and play video games until dawn.

And once again, I was alone with my mate.

“What should we do now?” Tina asked, organizing the many papers of our latest meeting.

“I was thinking...” I stood up from my chair to offer her my hand. “Maybe we could let our wolves meet for the first time.”

“Is that safe? I’m afraid if pack members see Dusk, they might become even more wary of me.”

“They’ll find out sooner or later.” I sighed, realizing how similar her concerns were to mine when I learned about my she-wolf. “Anyway, I don’t think there’ll be anyone in the dandelion fields right now.”

“I guess we can try.” She showed me a sweet smile as she took my hand.

“This is gonna be interesting...” Dawn cooed inside my head. *“Although I have a feeling I already know my mate well enough.”*

“Oh, right. Because wolves are paired before they’re sent to Earth with their humans,” I concluded.

To my confusion, she shook her head in disappointment as she groaned, *“You’re straight up oblivious sometimes.”*

I didn’t understand what she meant, but noticing how she retreated to the back of my mind, I knew I wouldn’t be getting any answers. So, I just let it go.

Once we made it to the fields, we got rid of our clothes and hung them on one of the trees before letting our wolves out at the same time. Their initial reaction could be compared to mine during my first encounter with Dusk; they just stood there, staring at each other in shock. The black beast tilted his head to the side, while my caramel wolf raised hers in awareness, though her ears soon fell back strangely.

In the end, Dawn took the initiative to approach the male, who remained still as she analyzed him. I could sense the

novelty and foreignness that affected her as if it was my own, though it also came with a weird feeling of familiarity. Her eyes scoured through every inch of his dark fur as if she was searching for any details that could set him and me apart. It was only my second time seeing Dusk, but the realization of how similar we were was still as bizarre as it had been the first time.

“You do look alike,” my she-wolf agreed. *“The question is: is he as much of a dick as you are?”*

“Hey!” I barked, although I knew her well enough to tell she was teasing me to hide her own insecurities.

At the same time, the black beast lowered his ears, almost as if he had heard Dawn’s words - or better yet, felt them. She took a step back, seemingly regretting accidentally hurting him. With a slight nod, she allowed him to come closer. I wasn’t the only one who was surprised when he simply rubbed his head against her neck, making her stiffen. Her reaction didn’t stop him from deepening his wolf hug as he not-so-discreetly covered her in his scent. I thought Dawn would growl as the fierce, untamed Alpha she was; instead, she leaned into his touch. In a minute, her concerns were gone as she finally relaxed in his presence.

Next thing I knew, she set off running, inviting him to chase after her. Dusk was visibly confused at first, but it didn’t take long for a wolfish grin to light up his face as he accepted the challenge. I felt goosebumps all over my skin when I noticed how similar our facial expressions were.

They didn’t stop there. In her carefree run, my she-wolf eventually tripped, causing the male to catch up to her. She closed her eyes to brace herself, thinking he would jump on her. However, all he did was touch her shoulder with his huge paw before bolting off, transforming the chase into a game of tag. Dawn stayed still for a moment, lying in the grass, until her wolf mate stopped a good 30 feet away from her.

Dusk flashed her a sassy wink, and we were both struck by the same realization: it was the exact same habit I had. The male didn’t seem to notice the shock in her wide sunrise-eyes,

as he continued to frolic through the plains. Eventually, the she-wolf huffed happily, giggling like a pup. This time, only I was surprised. I had heard her signature laughter many times, yet it hadn't dawned on me until now - it sounded just like Valentina's.

Our wolves played for almost an hour until they decided to lie down under the shade of the tree where our clothes were. They cuddled for a while, and when Dawn looked into Dusk's bluish-violet eyes, I could have sworn I saw a piece of my soul inside of him. It was nothing short of surreal.

Yet at the same time, it felt so...right.

In the blink of an eye, the huge black wolf disappeared. Lying on the grass in the exact same spot where the beast had once been was now my caramel-blond Luna, her hazel eyes glowing a vivid shade of gold as they were illuminated by the last rays of sun. Without warning, my she-wolf retreated too, forcing me to take control of our body once again. And somehow, Valentina and I ended up naked beside each other.

It was the first time I could actually admire her entirely exposed body. As my eyes traveled up the body until they locked on hers, I searched in them for any signs I should stop. When I didn't find any, I quickly shifted in my spot, supporting my weight with one elbow to allow my free hand to trace her collarbone while my mouth crashed against hers.

I didn't care that we were in the middle of an open field, hidden only by the foliage of the tree we were under. All that mattered was her.

"Fuck... You're so beautiful, Valentina," I whispered, moving my lips away from hers to trail kisses down her chin. "You're the most magnificent woman I've ever had the pleasure to meet." My fingers leisurely drew circles around her stomach, and she released sharp breaths with my every move. When I noticed her reaction, I couldn't help but ask, "Will this be your first time?"

I stiffened as I immediately regretted my question.

“Y-yes,” she replied breathlessly, still shivering. “I assume the same doesn’t apply to you.” Knowing what was coming next, I froze.

“Yeah,” I chuckled nervously, hoping it would be enough to stop her from digging deeper into the matter. Yet as she cupped my cheek, forcing me to look into her eyes, I knew I had already been caught.

“How many have you been with?” There it was - the million dollar question.

“D-does it matter?” I stuttered, my mind racing as I helplessly tried to find a way out of the situation I put myself into.

“Only because it seems like you’re avoiding answering me.” She frowned, and I didn’t have it in me to lie to her.

“I-I don’t know...uh... I...I think like...maybe half the girls in the pack?” Oh, it sounded so much worse when I said it out loud.

The lust that had been previously glistening in her eyes was gone the second the words left my mouth, replaced by the rawest, most intense rage.

“You *think*?” she growled. “You don’t even know the number?!”

“Was I supposed to be counting?” I yelled back in a terrible attempt of defending myself, which only made me sound like more of an idiot. Why couldn’t I keep my damn mouth shut?

“Unbelievable!” She shoved both hands against my chest, pushing me off her. Before I could protest, she used her werewolf speed to get up, wasting no time to fetch her clothes from one of the branches. “You might look like Dusk, but you’re nothing like each other. He’s sweet, and caring; definitely not a manwhore like you!” Her words shot like an arrow going through my heart, tearing it apart.

“Wait, Tina!” I tried, but it was useless. She was already gone.

And I was left alone, lying naked in the dandelion fields like the fool I was.

“I told you she’d get mad,” Dawn kindly reminded me.

Shit! How do I even fix this?

INTERLUDE IV

Valentina

I could still remember the heavy rain on the night of my first shift. It was hard to tell the difference between the roaring thunder and the drum beating inside my chest as panic overtook me. I had never been more scared than at the moment I discovered the truth about my counterpart's identity. A girl tied to a male wolf... I felt like an aberration.

Even then, Dusk vowed to protect me.

Despite our incomprehensible gender difference, a situation unheard of in the werewolf world, we had always gotten along well. With his size and strength, he was a menace; an unstoppable beast. It had been terrifying to watch him tear the rogues we came across to shreds. However, even when his dark fur was covered in blood, the way his eyes melted into a serene shade of lilac-blue made me feel safe. To my enemies, he was a demon, but with me, he was an angel. He never showed interest in any other females. To him, I was his world.

When my so-called mate revealed the truth about his manwhore ways, there was only one thought inside my head: if he and my wolf were supposed to be the same, how could they be so different?

As I made my way back to the village in the quiet of the night, I had to fight back the tears already misting my eyes. Not at all out of sadness, just seething anger. Ever since my mother and father were executed for treason, I swore to myself that I would never cry again, as I thought nothing could be more heartbreaking than losing your parents. I was kicked around a lot in my miserable pack growing up, but Vincent had taught me to keep my head high and ignore the things that were out of my control. Yet here I was, pathetically struggling

to keep a straight face because of the poor decisions made by a man I had just met.

Good job, Zephyr Wyndham - you were the first one who managed to get to me.

“I’m so sorry,” Dusk kept whining on repeat inside my head, a mix of regret, despair, and anger in his voice. “If it’s true... If I really am Zephyr’s counterpart, it means his actions are my own. I’m sorry for what he’s done. I never wanted to hurt you, Tina. I’m so sorry. If I had been with him instead, I would’ve stopped him.”

“Whatever craziness is going on between our four souls, I don’t blame you, Dusk. Whether you’re his wolf or not, he made his own choices,” I reassured him. “Besides, I’m grateful for having you as my counterpart.”

“I’m the reason why your life has turned into a living hell,” he whispered, lowering his ears in shame. “You had no other choice but to hide because of me. The lies you had to tell forced you to leave your home and go rogue.”

“They hated me even before you came along. Silent Rivers was never my home,” I insisted. “Sooner or later, they would’ve found a reason to banish me. It’s because of you that I survived.”

“You never needed me for that.” For a moment, his sorrow was gone as a proud smile played on his lips. “You’re stronger than you know, Tina. You were bound to blossom into the Alpha you were always meant to be.”

His words confused me. *“Don’t you mean Luna?”* But before he could reply, our conversation was interrupted.

“Tina, wait!” The voice that usually sent tingles through my body now made my skin crawl. The Alpha must have used his werewolf speed to get to me, because I didn’t notice him approaching me until he wrapped his fist around my wrist. *“Where are you going?”*

“That’s none of your business!” I immediately struggled away from his grasp. I could feel his pain at my rejection even without looking at him. Stupid mate bond.

“Please, go back to our room. I won’t stay there if you don’t want me to, I just... I just don’t want you to feel like you don’t have anywhere to go, especially when I was the one who hurt you.” The truth in his words soothed my heart, but the anger boiling inside of me still spoke louder.

“I don’t need your damn pity!” I growled at him with a boldness I didn’t know I had; Dusk’s fury was probably mixing with my own. “And I might be an orphan, but I do have a place to go,” I concluded before turning away. This time, he didn’t dare say anything else.

When I couldn’t hear his footsteps behind me anymore, I assumed he had finally stopped following me. It took me a few more minutes to get to my destination - a small wooden cottage located a little further away from the town square. By the time the older man opened the door, I was shaking.

“Tina?” Vincent’s tone was filled with concern as his eyes landed on me, taking in my poor condition. He didn’t hesitate to move out of the way, inviting me in. “What happened? Where’s your ma- the Alpha?”

“I couldn’t care less,” I spat, heading straight to one of the chairs around the small table placed in the center of the combined kitchen and living room.

“Has he...hurt you?” he murmured fearfully, carefully closing the door behind him. Considering how our former Alpha treated Omegas, I could understand his worry.

“Not in the way you’re thinking.” A heavy sigh broke through my parted lips. I crossed my arms over the table, leaning forward a little as I supported my own weight. “I’m just disappointed. He’s not who I thought he was.”

“Mates can surprise us, for better or for worse. We can’t always understand the Goddess’ reasons, but we must trust her plan for us.” As he sat in front of me, he calmly recited the phrase I had heard so many times since I started living with him. “What unpleasant news did you learn tonight?”

“Apparently, Zephyr has been with most of the she-wolves in the pack.” Saying it out loud made Dusk growl inside my

head.

Werewolves weren't like humans. It was understandable for the latter to have habits of sleeping around, as they could never know when they would find their soulmates, if they ever would. In our society, it was different. The great majority of wolves were bound to find their mates at some point in their lives; most of them met within a couple of years after turning eighteen. If Zephyr couldn't wait, it would have been fine for him to try it with one, maybe two other girls. But half of the pack? That was just an insult.

"I see where you're coming from. That's certainly not the most noble attitude." Vincent rested both elbows on the table, propping his chin on the back of his intertwined hands. "But Tina, darling, I don't think you should judge him based on what he did before he met you." I widened my eyes at his response, slightly shocked. "Wolves don't live in the past. You shouldn't either." His words gave me a *déjà vu* moment. Where had I heard them before?

I sighed. "You're right." Maybe I had been too quick to judge my mate. I didn't even allow him a chance to explain himself. Not that he needed to. Like my adoptive father pointed out, what Zephyr does from now on is what counts. "It still makes me mad though."

"Ah, yes. Our emotions aren't always rational, but you shouldn't be ashamed to feel some kind of way about it. It proves you haven't lost your humanity despite the ravenous beast living inside of you." He chuckled, clearly remembering how intimidating Dusk was.

In the end, I could only smile at him. "Thanks for listening to me, Vince."

"I'll always be here for you. I can only hope you'll still care about me after you become a busy Luna," he joked.

"I'd never forget you and everything you've done for me," I reassured him.

"How about a good ol' cuppa tea to help you calm down a little?" he asked, already getting up to head to the kitchen

counter.

“That’d be great.”

Once he was done preparing us some tea, we sat on the couch to watch cartoons like we used to when I was little. It was scary starting anew in a different pack, but I was glad I still had him with me, and I sure was happy he got to move into a better home with me. I stayed with him for a couple hours until my anger subsided. After thanking him again, I got up to leave. I had just made it through the door when an unexpected voice echoed in my mind.

“*Valentina,*” the mighty Alpha’s voice was barely a whisper, shy and guilty. “*Are you still mad at me?*”

“*Yes,*” I scoffed. There was silence for a moment before I remembered my talk with Vincent, taking pity on my poor mate. “*A little bit.*”

“*I’m sorry.*” Again, the honesty in his voice made my heart skip a beat; I could literally feel his regret. “*I know I have no right to ask this of you so soon, but... Can you come to the dandelion fields?*”

I arched an eyebrow at his sudden request. “*Uh...okay?*”

“*I’ll be waiting for you.*” He sounded a little more cheerful before he cut our connection.

With a sigh, I braced myself and started back towards the place where I had been only a few hours ago. I was not ready for what awaited me there.

* * *

From the top of the hill, I could already see Zephyr standing next to a scarlet satin picnic blanket. Fancy snacks were scattered all over it, as were white rose petals. How long did it take him to put up all of this? As I made my way down to him, I couldn’t help but admire his outfit; he was dressed in a traditional black and white suit, a red rose sticking out of his pocket. He was also holding a bouquet of colorful flowers in his hands. It was enough to make my heart melt.

Zephyr waited patiently for me, his eyes glistening as they took me in. He remained rooted to his spot, allowing me to make the first move. However, as I finally stood in front of him, I was at a loss for words; I wasn't expecting such romantic scenery. It was a little overwhelming. The moment my eyes darted to the picnic blanket, he decided to break the silence.

"It's a moonlit picnic," he clarified, flashing me an apologetic smile.

"I...figured as much," was all I could mutter.

"Valentina," he called dreamily, catching my attention at once. "You have no idea how awful I feel for disappointing you. I'd like to think I have no regrets, but if I could take back those meaningless nights, I would."

"Zephyr-" I tried to interrupt him, but he didn't stop.

"I can't change the past." He looked away in shame before his eyes filled with determination as they met mine again. "But I promise you, Tina, I will live to make you the happiest woman in the world. You're the only one I ever needed; the only one I'll ever love. Can you please forgive me?"

"Of course, I forgive you. You didn't have to do all this." As I stared into his eyes, it was impossible not to shake my head in defeat, stepping closer to him. "I'm sorry too, Zephyr. It was very immature of me to hold your past against you. But when Dusk's rage mixed with mine, I guess I just lost it."

"You had every right to be angry. I shouldn't have put you through this." He took a deep breath, as if to gather his courage. "I promise you, if you take me back, I'll live my whole life trying to make up for it."

"If I take..." My heart broke a little as I realized what had been on his mind. "Zephyr, did you think I was gonna reject you?" He didn't answer me, but he didn't need to; his silence was the proof I needed to know I was right. "Oh, you silly wolf! I would never reject you over something like this. I just needed some time to think."

My response made his eyes sparkle with joy. Next thing I knew, he dropped the flower bouquet he'd been so carefully holding to wrap his arms around my waist, lifting me into the air. The second his lips crashed against mine, I realized what a fool I had been; everything about us felt so right. Giving in to the mate pull, I hugged him with my legs for support. I tugged on his jet-black hair, pulling his head back to deepen our kiss. My reaction caused him to release a lustful groan, and I relished the way it echoed inside my mouth.

In the blink of an eye, he dropped to his knees on top of the picnic blanket with me still on his lap. The sound of clinking glass led me to believe he was recklessly shoving away the dishes he had brought. For a moment, I felt guilty for wasting fresh food, but the feeling was gone as soon as he laid me down on my back to stay on top of me.

“Valentina...” he breathed out, lost in lust. The way he savored my name in his lips was enough to make me moan in delight. His eyes were still closed as he planted wet kisses on my chin.

“Take me, Zephyr,” I begged once he reached my neck. The words that slipped out of my mouth surprised us both, considering I had left him alone and naked not too long ago.

“What?” He finally opened his eyes to study my face in disbelief.

I swallowed dry, holding on to my newly-found braveness. My hands moved up to his face, my fingers caressed his skin gently before my thumb stopped at his lip. He stayed still, staring deeply into my eyes in confusion and hope.

“I want you to claim me. Now,” I stated firmly, my heart beating faster than ever.

“Good,” he replied at last, going back to shower me with kisses. “I wanted our first time to be here.”

“Why?”

He didn't hesitate to answer me. “This is the place where I disappointed you for the first time, but I don't want either of

us to remember it like that. Instead, I'll do my best to turn it into the place where I earned your trust again."

I didn't protest when he lifted my dress up to my stomach, though the exposure caused me to instinctively cross my legs. With a chuckle, Zephyr moved his hand to my inner thigh, encouraging me to relax. He patiently pulled my legs apart again, just enough so his fingers could find the most sensitive spot in my body. I couldn't contain a gasp of surprise as his thumb pressed lightly against my clit, moving up and down in a tortuously slow motion. As inexperienced as I was, I felt the urge to return the favor.

It didn't take long for me to find his hard member, enclosed within his trousers. Then, it was his turn to release a rapid, shocked groan as he was caught off guard. Eager to feel him, I squeezed him timidly. His cock throbbed in response, and it was the confirmation I needed to know I was doing it right.

We continued caressing each other until we felt that our clothes were starting to get in the way. I moved first, sloppily helping him remove his suit. After struggling to open every single one of the buttons of his white long-sleeved shirt, I worked on freeing his erection, at the same time he continued to lift my dress. In the end, I was lying naked underneath him, sparks of electricity rushing through my body as our bare skin rubbed against each other.

I thought I was ready to have him, but I felt my stomach turn when he positioned his tip at my entrance. A chill ran down my spine when I felt the need to open my eyes to watch what was about to happen. The Alpha was shorter than me, but I soon realized the inches he was missing had definitely been reallocated to his huge dick.

"Zephyr..." I panted hesitantly.

"Shh..." He pressed his lips against mine in an attempt to calm me. "I was told it might hurt a little, but I'll be as gentle as I can, okay?"

Instead of trying to come in immediately, he allowed me a moment to breathe, lifting himself up on his knees to take a

good look at my exposed body. I'd never been naked in front of anyone else, but for some reason, I didn't feel the need to hide as his eyes carefully studied every inch of my skin.

“Goddess. You're a flawless work of art.” He ran his hand through his hair as his jaw dropped. “Shit. I never imagined myself saying this, but...I love you, Tina,” I wouldn't have believed his words if he hadn't spoken so loud and clear. “You are the dawn of a new day after a sleepless night, the light after the darkness. You're my hope, and you shine a light on the best parts of me.” He lowered himself again, holding my chin between his thumb and his index finger. “You're my sunrise.”

I had always found it silly how mated couples felt the need to give each other nicknames, but the way he called me his sunrise...it was just perfect. I bit my lip, but I couldn't suppress a purr of approval. Goddess, what was this man doing to me?

“If that's the case, then you're the moonlight,” I found myself replying. “You found me when I was lost. You shine the way through the darkness. You're *my* moonlight,” I repeated, getting used to the idea.

Zephyr smiled brighter than ever. “We're perfect for each other,” was the last thing he whispered before his lips crashed against mine one more time.

And with that, he finally pushed himself in.

One inch at a time, he filled me until he was about halfway in. My walls were forced to expand to welcome him, and I had to admit, it was painful. I thought he was going to keep moving, but to my surprise, he stopped. Short, ragged breaths kept breaking through my lips as I tried to ignore the pain, and he carefully captured every single one of them with gentle pecks. Once the discomfort became bearable, my desire overtook me again. I wrapped my fingers around his hair, touching my forehead to his to signal for him to go on.

Staying true to his promise, he continued moving ever so slowly, careful not to hurt me. He pulled in and out of me a few times to help my body get used to his intrusion, reaching

just a little bit deeper each time. By the time I was able to take his entire length, my hips were moving without my command, rocking against him as they begged for more.

Zephyr didn't fail to deliver. If he had been gentle a moment ago, he was now letting his inner beast take control. He started thrusting harder, ramming his dick up my sore core mercilessly. To my surprise, his aggressiveness seemed to ease my pain; I wondered if that was exactly what he was aiming for.

As he let go of his control, he started picking up the pace. The sound of our bodies slapping against each other combined with the sensation of his hard cock stretching my walls was maddening. The faster he moved, the louder I screamed his name. Matching his level of savagery, I dug my nails into his skin, dragging my fingers all the way down his back. He roared both from pain and pleasure as I made him bleed like he'd made me as he took my virginity. The wildness of the moment enticed me, and I didn't have time to question my sanity before heat started building up inside of me.

"Don't fight it, Valentina. Give it to me!" Zephyr demanded, clearly noticing the way my legs were shaking as I approached my orgasm.

And my body responded immediately, obeying his direct order.

An animalistic moan echoed through the dandelion fields as the ecstasy of my release made me see stars. In my waves of pleasure, I could feel my pussy tightening around Zephyr. It seemed to do it for him, as it wasn't long before his body too started shaking, pressing harder against mine as he struggled to support his own weight. The feeling of his warm seed coating my walls, spurt after spurt, only intensified my high.

With my vision hazy from the bliss, I watched as his canines elongated. I knew very well what he was about to do, and I was ready for it. Lying back, I waited for his fangs to sink into my skin, but they never did. Instead, a frantic Dusk disturbed my peace, filling me with fear.

"Stop him! Don't let him mark you!" my wolf ordered.

When I opened my eyes, I found Zephyr staring at me with a horrified expression.

20 | MARK

After my mate ditched me - for good reason - I lost it. I was angry at myself, sad for disappointing her, afraid I was going to lose her. The worst part was, I had no idea how to let my feelings out. As an Alpha, I had been taught that showing emotion was a sign of weakness, and the first time I really wanted to scream and cry, I didn't know how to do it. Instead, I locked myself in my room, where I just laid on the floor to stare at the ceiling for a good half an hour.

It took Dawn, Malin, Amaya, Zach, and Alex to make me realize not all hope was lost yet. In need of guidance, I called my team into my office, where they proceeded to say I deserved it after ignoring their many warnings. The only one who stood by me was the Beta Female, which shocked me. She also gave me the most useful piece of advice: instead of focusing on my past, I should prove to Valentina that I could be a better man in the future. So, I left to prepare the best date setting in the shortest time possible.

I finished putting everything up in roughly two hours. It took me a few deep breaths to gather the courage to mindlink my mate. Cold sweat dripped down my forehead as I waited for her, but as soon as I laid my eyes on her again, my fears immediately vanished. I was over the moon when she granted me her forgiveness.

My joy soon turned into lust as I got the chance to admire her beautiful naked body over the crimson blanket. The moon shining onto her skin, white and delicate as the most precious lotus flower, as the dandelions danced with the wind around her, was a sight to see. I wanted to paint the image to make sure I would never forget it, but my instinct urged me to claim her.

It wasn't until I finally had her that I realized how boring sex with other women was. Making love to her was an incomparable experience, and I knew it would become my

favorite pastime. Valentina Quill was a drug, and one taste was enough to get me addicted to her. As I was coming back from my high, I wanted nothing more than to sink my teeth into her skin; brand her as mine forever.

Yet before I could, I was stopped by my she-wolf's screams, warning me not to mark my fated mate.

"Why the hell not?" I didn't bother trying to hide the annoyance in my tone.

Marks were sacred among our society, and they could only be placed with the moon-chosen partner's consent; it couldn't be forced, as it would heal like a normal wound if it wasn't accepted. It was how other wolves knew someone was taken, but it meant a lot more than just staking a claim over one's mate. A fated couple couldn't be fully connected until they were properly marked. Needless to say, I was more than intrigued to know why I shouldn't go through with it.

"I...I don't know." Her words almost made me scoff, but it didn't take me long to realize she was genuinely confused. *"It just...It doesn't feel like it's the right time for that yet."*

"Seems like the perfect time to me."

"Trust me," she insisted. It was probably the hardest decision I had to make in my life, but since she had been right every time before, I reluctantly forced my canines to retract.

As soon as my conversation with Dawn was over, I noticed Tina watching me with wide eyes. "Dusk said we shouldn't mark each other," she whispered at last.

"Dawn strongly believes so too," I sighed. There were enough mysteries regarding me, my mate, and our counterparts. For now, I just wanted to celebrate how I had earned Valentina's trust back and the completion of the mating process. Everything else could be ignored. "Whatever. I'm more than happy that you have given yourself to me, mate. The marking can wait."

I smiled against her lips, kissing them one last time as I finally pulled out of her. She gasped at the sudden emptiness, and that alone made me want to fill her again. Fighting back

my urges, I slowly rose back up to my feet, offering her my hand to help her do the same. Only after making sure she was dressed and steady did I let go of her to put on my trousers.

“We should go back to our room. It’s late, and I don’t wanna risk anyone seeing what’s meant to be mine.” A low rumble echoed in my throat, and I was taken aback by the sense of possessiveness I didn’t know I had.

“Technically, I’m still free game until you mark me, Alpha.” A smart-ass smirk spread over my mate’s lips as she stared defiantly at me.

“Don’t tease me,” I warned her, growling into her ear. My hands traveled down her back to grasp her ass tightly. She moaned, and I joined her with a groan as I realized how perfectly she fit into my hands. “There are other ways I can stake my claim on you. Test me, and I’ll make love to you until my scent is so deep into your skin, all other wolves will know exactly who you belong to from a thousand miles away.”

“We wouldn’t want that, would we?” She chuckled, staring straight into my eyes. No one had ever challenged me like that; of course, my mate would be the first. My mate, who had been pure until a moment ago, yet now seemed infected by an insatiable flame.

“Room. Now,” I ordered, though I wasn’t sure I’d be able to let her sleep any time soon.

It felt different to wake up next to Valentina the next morning. Of course, sleeping with her in my arms had always been comforting since the first night we had spent together, but I felt much more connected to her now. I could hear her heart beating as if it was my own, feel her every breath as if it filled my lungs too. If just the completion of the mating process had provided such an intense change, I wondered how it would be once we got to mark each other. Hopefully, our wolves wouldn’t hold it off for too long.

Since my mate was still a little sore from our first time, I decided to ask Mrs. Robinson to bring up our breakfast while I

prepared a warm bath for Tina. Once the food arrived, I actually joined her in the bathtub, where we ate together; not the most traditional place to have a meal, but everything was amazing as long as I was in her company.

As I was getting dressed after we left the bathroom, I linked my Beta to ask if he was ready for the long day ahead of us. We usually didn't work on Saturdays, but a few leaders from other packs had agreed to see us, and we were running out of time to find ourselves some new allies. First, we would be heading to Golden Lake Pack, which was about an hour away from our territory. From there, we would stop by two other packs on the way to our final destination for the day - Blue Creek Pack. They were all smaller than us, but since we didn't have any luck with larger packs, we figured it would be our best shot.

After talking to Malin, I reached out to Alex to make sure the car was ready. As soon as our connection was cut, my eyes landed on my mate, who was sporting one of the Delta's long dresses. Since she was a bit taller and curvier than my fourth-in-command, the fabric gripped her body really tight. I frowned in frustration as I was reminded of how my Luna didn't even have her own clothes yet.

"We should go shopping tomorrow," I suggested, catching her attention. "It's about time we fill your closet with proper attire."

"Oh." She blinked a few times, shifting her gaze between me and her outfit. "Is that your not-so-subtle way of saying I don't look very Luna-like?"

I widened my eyes. "What? N-no, that's...that's not what I-"

"Relax, scared kitten." She chuckled, stepping closer to me to cup the side of my face with her hand. "I'm just messin' with you." She winked before walking right past me, heading towards the door.

Shit, she'd gotten even sassier since the previous night.

“*Yup, she’s definitely me!*” Dawn barked in approval inside my head. Sadly, I didn’t share the girls’ amusement.

“What’s up with the *scared kitten* shit? Why’s everyone always calling me that?” I huffed as I opened the door for my mate. “Is there a secret *I hate Zephyr* club or something?”

“Damn it, Tina! You weren’t supposed to tell him about it!” Malin was standing at the end of the hallway with Amaya, right in front of the Beta suite. He must have overheard our conversation thanks to his werewolf hearing. “We’ll have to erase his memory now!”

“I’m surrounded by fucking idiots.” If I had been surprised to see my Beta, I was even more shocked to notice Zach leaning against one of the walls, hidden in the shadows. “I’m so glad you’re gonna be far away from here today. Some peace, at last.”

“Well, good morning to the two of you too.” I rolled my eyes at them. I tapped my best friend’s shoulder as I walked past him. “Come on, let’s hit the road. We ain’t got time to waste.”

Malin’s smirk faded as he entered business-Beta mode. Amaya and Zach followed us downstairs, where we said our goodbyes before getting in the car. Usually, only the two highest-ranking members of a pack were allowed to participate in official meetings, but I decided it would be good for Tina to tag along so she could learn about pack politics first-hand.

Although the Luna was considered to be the heart of the pack, holding as much power as the Alpha, they weren’t required to take part in decision-making. Still, I wanted my mate to be as involved with everything as I was - after all, she was my equal, and Wind Howlers was as much her right as it was mine.

Unfortunately, our business day didn’t start as well as we had hoped for, with the first leader we visited rejecting our deal. Alpha Robert was a kind man who welcomed us with open arms. However, he was only willing to lend us ten of his warriors, which wouldn’t be of much help. Like most other leaders in Genoro, he had little faith in Wind Howlers - or any

pack, for that matter - winning a war against the Fallen without Elder intervention; he was more comfortable watching his own kind be murdered while he waited for someone else to solve his problem.

Fear was the reason why our following two business meetings didn't yield any fruits either. As we were about to leave the third pack's territory, Dawn suggested I challenged the leaders who refused to establish an alliance with us. She claimed she could easily take them on, and though I believed her, I doubted her idea was the best way to solve our problem. It was unusual for young leaders to go around challenging other Alphas, especially in such a short time span. Although it would grant us the warriors we so desperately sought, it would draw more unwanted attention to us, and we definitely didn't need any more of that.

We were exhausted when we made it to Blue Creek, our last stop. Desperate to get at least one deal, we were willing to double our initial offer - an entire month's worth of prey caught at our territory. However, at only 21 years old, Alpha Wyatt was just as bold and proud as any new leader. As beneficial as the treaty would be for him, he wasn't willing to shake hands on it. We were in his cozy office, renegotiating the terms of a possible agreement for the fifth time.

"You see, Alpha Zephyr..." He leaned forward over the table, a clever smirk on his face. "We have 106 warriors here. If I let you borrow 50 of them, we're basically down to half of our defenses." As Wyatt looked at me, I couldn't shake the feeling that he was trying to take advantage of me. "If my men die fighting your battle, we'd be out of hunters as well, as they would have to occupy the position of those we lose. In order for this deal to make sense for us, we'd need to have enough to feed the rest of our pack for at least five months while we replace the fallen ones."

"That's literally five times what we offered you in the first place," I replied, overly annoyed. I was ready to go on, but I held my tongue back when I noticed my Luna taking a step forward. She had been silent until now, but judging by her aura, she was just as pissed as I was.

“I would like to believe you’re not trying to make fools out of us, Alpha Wyatt.” Valentina’s voice echoed through the room, surprising us all. The young leader opened his mouth to speak, but my mate didn’t let him. “Hunters can easily be temporarily replaced by female Omegas and a month’s worth of food would give you more than enough time to train new men to replace your warriors,” she stated, leaving Malin and I speechless. How did she know all of that? “You’re deliberately trying to rip us off.”

Wyatt frowned at her, letting his displeasure show before he turned to me with a fake smile. “My, your Luna has a sharp tongue, doesn’t she? This is why we’re advised to keep women out of negotiations.” His sexist comment made the hairs in the back of my neck bristle. Dawn was growling inside my head, ready to rip out that man’s throat. “Well, *Alpha Zephyr*,” he went on, clearly excluding my mate from our conversation. “I’m sure you know everyone’s talking about Wind Howlers, the pack whose Alpha has a female wolf and an Omega as a mate. A wild *rogue*, at that.” He grinned, leaning back against his chair victoriously. “You should be thankful that I’m offering you a deal at all.”

As I stood up from my seat abruptly, the sound of my chair rapidly scraping the floor made the room go silent. My palms splayed against the desk, and I stared straight into Wyatt’s eyes. I was trying my best to keep my elongated canines from showing, as baring your fangs to another Alpha was a clear sign of disrespect. But then again, he started it by speaking ill of my mate. I was about to let Dawn take control and pounce on the bastard when I felt Valentina’s hand brush against my arm. My muscles immediately relaxed, as if she was draining my anger.

“Relying on rumors rather than actual proof shows exactly what kind of leader you are, Alpha Wyatt. I do hope you have a reliable source of information regarding your enemies and your allies,” Valentina held her head up as she too gracefully rose from her chair. I couldn’t believe she had been an Omega her entire life. She was clearly a born Luna. “It would be a pity to watch this pack fall due to decisions made based on tittle-tattle.”

“Is that a threat, *Luna*?” The man sneered, but remained seated.

Valentina shook her head calmly, behaving like a real queen. “Just friendly advice.”

“I think we’re done here,” I announced, feeling the tension rise. “Let’s go.” I gestured towards the door with my head, and Malin didn’t hesitate to follow us. We left without as much as saying goodbye to the young leader, who didn’t utter another word either.

The three of us headed straight back to the car, ready to make our way back home. We should arrive at Wind Howlers by nightfall, and I couldn’t help but feel like we had wasted the day. Since larger packs were too far away from us, they lacked a reason to get involved in our situation, and smaller packs were too afraid to fight beside us.

There hadn’t been news about a Fallen attack in almost a month, but I knew it was only a matter of time until they showed up again. With only three other packs standing between us and them, they would get to us sooner than later, and I was getting more and more concerned about what we could do to stop them. No one had been able to take down a single Fallen soldier so far; I failed to see how we could do it, especially when they will probably grow in numbers by the time they make it to our territory.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come,” Tina’s guilty whisper pulled me back from my thoughts. “The things people think about me... My presence must’ve only made it harder for you to get a deal,” she sighed, looking down.

“Are you kidding?” Malin chimed in with an amused smile. “If what you did back there didn’t show you’re not to be messed with, I don’t know what would.”

“He’s right,” I agreed, kissing my mate’s forehead sweetly. “If anything, you proved to him you’re not just some Omega who happened to become *Luna*. You’re powerful and worthy of your title,” I reassured her. She flashed me a small smile, and I knew the issue wouldn’t bother her anymore.

* * *

We rode in comfortable silence until we made it back to Wind Howlers, more tired and disappointed than we had ever been. We decided to head to the dining hall together, hoping a family meal would help us forget about our unsuccessful day.

By the time we were done, I led Valentina back to our room. She was tired, so I tucked her in and kissed her goodnight before going to my office to take care of the remaining tasks for the day. There'd be three more meetings on Monday, but I wasn't hopeful about gaining those packs' trust. I needed to call Zach so we could discuss new ways to defend our territory without any additional help, but I decided not to dwell too much on the matter when I was already exhausted.

I had already turned off the lights and was about to close the door to go back to my mate when I heard the landline phone ringing. I was immediately confused - the only people who called me on that phone were Alphas, but what would any of them need at such a late hour? After hesitating for a few seconds, I picked it up.

"Alpha Zephyr, I'm sorry about the late call. I had a busy day and this is the only time I found." The voice on the other side sounded strangely familiar, but I couldn't decipher who it belonged to.

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

"Oh, forgive my manners. It's Alpha Ruben, from Dune Drifters." My eyes immediately widened, and I held the phone closer to my ear. "I've heard you've defeated your first challenger. Congratulations."

"Thank you..." *I guess. Was he really calling just to congratulate me?*

His words only made me more confused, but he soon went on. "This proves you've grown since our last meeting. I assume your she-wolf has finally made you see what you couldn't fully believe then, which is why I've changed my mind." He made a suspenseful pause, causing my anxiety to grow. "I'd like to propose a new deal. I'll offer you a hundred of my best men."

“That is... Wow. That’s more than I could ask for, Alpha Ruben,” I replied sincerely, still flabbergasted. “What would you like in return?”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Alpha Zephyr. Your debt to me will be paid once you defeat our common threat.” He was such a mysterious man, but I didn’t get bad vibes from him. At the moment, I could only feel ecstatic. “I’ll be over at Sapphire Pond tomorrow. It’s about a half-hour drive from your territory. Can you meet me there?”

A huge smile lit up my face before I remembered something. “Actually, I already have plans for tomorrow. Would it be a problem if I sent my men instead?”

“Not at all,” he reassured me in a calm tone. “I look forward to meeting your Gamma, and seeing your Beta again. Tell him to bring Amaya along.”

“Of course. Good night, Alpha Ruben.”

“Good night, Alpha Zephyr.”

As soon as I hung up, relief washed over me. At last, it seemed like the tides were turning for us.

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Since it was late when I left the office after my brief call with Alpha Ruben, I decided to wait until the next morning to tell everyone the news. The first person I talked to was Valentina, obviously. A late-sleeper, she wasn't too pleased when I woke her up before sunrise on a Sunday, but she put her irritation aside once I explained everything. She also insisted our trip to the shopping mall could wait if I thought it would be better for me to go in person; she said she understood that my duties should come first, and that she fully supported me as my Luna. I reassured her it was fine, as we needed to get her proper clothes before her ceremony anyway. Besides, we hadn't had a day-off since we met, and I didn't wish to postpone our first date.

After filling my mate in, I knocked on both my Beta's and my Gamma's door to wake them up. Like me, Malin was ecstatic when I told him about the opportunity we were being offered. He was also a little nervous about representing me for the first time, but excited at the same time. Zach, on the other hand, was less than thrilled when he learned that he would have to tag along.

It wasn't uncommon for an Alpha to send his Beta in his place if he couldn't make it to important meetings. Official negotiations and the establishment of treaties required the presence of at least two Elite members from each pack though, which meant my Gamma would have to act as second-in-command for this trip. Zach knew of his duties, and he usually followed them religiously. However, he had his boundaries. Ever since he connected with his wolf, Talon, he had refused to leave the pack grounds.

There was nothing in the world my introverted Gamma feared more than meeting his mate; he would avoid them like the plague for as long as he could. Initially, he was afraid of finding his fated partner in one of the she-wolves of our pack,

but when that didn't happen, he decided he wouldn't leave the pack territory if it was on fire. Although I couldn't begin to comprehend why he was so scared of the mate bond, I did feel bad for ordering him to go with Malin when he was clearly against it. In the end, I just shrugged it off; it wasn't my fault he had been born a Gamma.

Once that issue was resolved, I linked my Delta to ask her to get everything ready for the boys' trip. I wasn't surprised to notice Alex was already up. She wasn't the least worried about handling the pack all by herself for an entire day, and neither was I. Sundays were mostly calm, though I'm sure her mate and my parents would be glad to help her if she was facing any difficulties. I would also be less than an hour away if she needed me, so everything was under control.

As soon as I had made sure everyone was well-informed and ready to take on their last-minute responsibilities, I went back to the Alpha suite to grab Valentina so we could have breakfast before leaving for the mall. Imagine my surprise when I noticed she wasn't alone in our room.

My mother was sitting on the edge of the king-sized bed, right beside my mate. Laughing and giggling like teenagers, it took them a moment to notice my presence.

"Oh! Good morning, Zeze!" Mom smiled sweetly at me, rising to greet me. "I came here to suggest we have some family time today thinking you'd be free for once, but Tina told me that's not quite the case. I'm glad you at least managed to get Malin and Zachari to cover for you so you can enjoy the day with your lovely Luna."

"Yeah..." I muttered apologetically. "We can try doing something when I'm less busy. Maybe in my next life?" I joked.

My mother just rolled her eyes. "Make sure you find some time to be with your father too. He misses you, though you know he'd never admit it." Her expression suddenly changed, and I knew it could only mean she'd had an idea. "Oh! Maybe I could take Luna Valentina to the mall, and you can spend the day with your father. You hate shopping anyway."

“Nope. Not gonna happen!” I shut her down quickly. The way she chuckled let me know she never expected me to agree to her suggestion. “Thanks for keeping my Luna company while I was away though.” I glanced at Tina, almost melting when she graced me with one of her radiant smiles.

“Have fun, the two of you. Alpha Zephyr. Luna Valentina.” Mom bowed her head to us both as she turned to leave. It wasn’t the first time she’d done that, but it still felt weird to see her address me with such formality.

“Thank you, Luna Delilah,” my mate said politely.

“Oh, I’m not Luna anymore!” My mother waved her off, winking at her over her shoulder. “You are, my dear.” With those final words, she finally left us.

“Wanna go get something to eat?” I offered Valentina my hand, and she didn’t hesitate to take it.

“Yes, please! I’m starving.”

Together, we went downstairs to join the rest of my team at the Elite members’ table in the dining hall. I suspected Valentina and I would be spending the entire day out with the amount of shopping we had to do, while Malin and Zach should return the next morning. As soon as we were done eating, we bid each other farewell as the guys got into the limousine. My Luna and I headed to the garage, where my gold chrome Ferrari was waiting for us.

Once we got into the car, I let her pick the music for our one-hour drive to the city. On the way there, we finally had the chance to learn more about each other, chatting to pass the time. Before we noticed it, we arrived at our destination.

“Alright, what do you wanna do first?” I interlaced our fingers as we walked into the building.

“I honestly don’t know,” she uttered, shifting her gaze between all the different stores. “There are so many options.”

“Hmm... How about we start with casual clothes? Some comfortable pieces you can wear every day.”

She nodded in agreement. Since my knowledge in women's clothing was limited, I simply strolled with her, letting her check the shop windows. Whenever she found something she liked, we would get in and she would take a look at whatever piqued her interest. When she was done, I'd pay for everything with my credit card.

At first, Valentina was reluctant about me spending so much money on her. I reassured her that, as an Alpha's son, I had earned a large allowance since I was ten. Not having a lot to spend on - well, not until now - I had saved most of it, and I would gladly use it to spoil her. It took her a while to get used to the idea, but she eventually went from choosing one or two pieces per store, to getting everything she needed. And, of course, I'd usually push her to take some more.

It was around 1:00 p.m. when we decided to take a break for lunch. My initial idea was to take her to the food court and let my mate pick her favorite one, but to my surprise, she had never tried any of the available fast food restaurants. Well, I guess it wasn't really common for Omegas to leave pack territory, especially because they usually didn't make enough to spend at the mall so freely - they usually got everything they needed from the pack. In the end, I decided to introduce her to my personal favorite, Wendell's.

Once our stomachs were full, we went back to our shopping spree. Three hours later, both of us were carrying more bags than we could count. Aside from clothes, we had also gotten her shoes, fancy makeup, and a few decorative items to add her own taste to our room. Contrary to what I thought, spending the day at the mall wasn't awful; in fact, it was perfect, just like everything I did with her.

"Okay, this place is amazing!" Valentina cooed, sighing. Her golden eyes glistened when she turned to me. "Thank you for coming with me."

"I should be the one thanking you, sunrise." I smiled at her. "You turned my shopping nightmare into a sweet dream."

Oh, the way she blushed as she looked away. "Are you ready to go back home?"

“Not yet.” I winked playfully at her, causing her to arch her eyebrows in confusion. “There’s one last store we need to visit.”

I picked up the pace, inviting Tina to follow me. She asked me questions as we rushed through the crowd of humans, and I refused to answer them until we made it to the store I had been looking for.

“Time to get your ceremonial dress,” I revealed at last.

“Oh.” She blinked a few times. I chuckled at how she had forgotten the main reason why we had come to the mall. “Is this where we’ll be looking for it? This place looks rather expensive.”

“We won’t be looking, actually.” I surprised her one more time, gesturing for her to walk inside. “Luna dresses must be handmade. I already took care of everything.”

“When-” She was ready to continue her interrogation when we were approached by a kind saleswoman.

“Good evening, sir. Miss,” the woman greeted us with a wide smile. “How can I help you today?”

“My name is Zephyr Wyndham. I’m here to pick up a dress I ordered.”

“Right away, sir.” She nodded at me before turning to my mate. “I suppose the dress is for you, honey?”

“Uh...I guess so,” Valentina replied hesitantly when I remained silent.

“Great. If you can follow me, please. The seamstress is here to make the final adjustments.” The woman gestured towards a door in the back, and we followed a few steps behind her.

“I can’t believe you, Zephyr. This must’ve cost a fortune!” my mate whisper-yelled at me.

“It’s rude to ask for the price of a gift,” I teased her, a silly smile on my face. It made her frown harder.

“I’m not asking. I’m stating.”

I had to laugh. “I’ll only ever give you the best, my Luna. You better get used to it.” I gave her a quick kiss, enjoying the way she shivered at my touch.

Before I could continue to shower my mate with my love, the saleswoman returned with the dress on her hand. I already knew what it should look like as I had sent the design to the store myself, yet I was still surprised to see it with my own eyes. Valentina’s jaw dropped the second her gaze landed on it, and it was all I needed to know she loved it.

“Would you like to change now, miss?” Although my mate’s mouth was open, she didn’t seem capable of speaking, utterly awestruck. I loosened my grip around her waist, resting my palm on her back to gently push her forward in an attempt to encourage her.

“Go on. I can’t wait to see how beautiful you’ll look in it.”

Tina exchanged nervous glances with me one last time before following the woman into the changing room. As I waited anxiously outside, it seemed like hours had gone by when I heard her step into the room again. The second my eyes fell on her, it was my turn to be speechless.

The one-shoulder long-sleeved dress exposed just enough of her flawless porcelain skin to emphasize her beauty in an elegant, non-vulgar way. The upper-half of the dress was tighter, hugging her breasts, waist, and hips to highlight her curves, becoming a little more loose towards the hem to flow freely around her feet. It consisted of a double-layer piece with a nude lining and a delicate, but empowering emerald green leavers lace overlay. It was complemented by a removable mulberry silk tail of the same color that pooled over the floor behind her, tied around her waist by a thin strap.

It was safe to say, she was the most magnificent work of art to ever roam the earth.

For a good while, we just stood there in silence, staring at each other. I was eating her with my eyes, fantasizing about the moment I would get to tear her out of the dress I hadn’t even paid for yet. I watched as she broke eye-contact to

admire herself in the mirror. In the end, she turned back to me with rosy cheeks, and the most wonderful smile on her face.

“Zephyr, this is...”

“Perfect?” I chuckled. “I try.”

“Wait. Did you design this yourself?” Valentina questioned in disbelief, her eyes widening.

“Well, my mother helped me a little.” She squinted her eyes doubtfully. I saw no other choice but to throw my hands in the air in defeat. “Alright, she helped me a lot. I basically picked the color, and she did the rest. It still counts though, right?”

“You’re cute,” was all she said, touching my face with her velvety hand. What was that even supposed to mean?

“*That you’re a dork,*” Dawn huffed, making me frown. She seemed rather pleased with my reaction.

“The seamstress is here, miss. Are you ready?” As kind as the saleswoman was, I had to admit her interruptions were starting to annoy me.

Valentina stepped away to acknowledge her. “Yes. Thank you.”

After the gown’s final adjustments were made, we headed to the cashier so I could pay with my black credit card. My mate tried to look at the price, but I stood in front of her to block her view. Once we were done with everything we had come here to do, we hopped in my Ferrari so I could drive us to our final destination for the day - *Ke Kai*, a top seafood restaurant. I would like to take her to a Michelin 3-star restaurant someday, but since there were none in the city of Daltpron, or in the whole state of Genoro, I’d have to wait until our next trip.

The moment I parked in front of the place I had chosen, Valentina flashed me a confused look.

“It’s our first official date. Please allow me to at least treat you to dinner,” I clarified, stepping outside to pull the door open for her.

“Are you not tired? We can have dinner at home.” She took my hand shyly.

“I’ll never lack the energy to be around you, sunrise,” I reassured her, planting a soft kiss in the back of her hand before intertwining our fingers to guide her inside. “Besides, I think you’ll love this place.”

“Have you ever been here?”

I shook my head. “My parents used to come here all the time; it was their favorite. I never got invited to their dates though.” I pouted playfully, making her laugh.

As soon as we climbed up the last step, a waiter stood in front of us to take us to our seats. *Ke Kai* had an outdoor area by the water with candlelit tables and an outstanding view of the city skyline. It definitely had an amazing atmosphere, and the food was simply delicious. While it was true that wolves usually weren’t picky eaters, we had heightened senses and could easily smell and taste the difference of top quality food. I chose the snapper fish plate, while Tina decided on the classic ceviche. We also ordered wine, but since they obviously didn’t have the werewolf variation, it was pretty much like grape juice for us.

“So, what did you think?” I asked once I was done paying the bill.

“Amazing. The whole day was amazing.” My mate smiled sweetly, reaching for my hand over the table. “I really enjoyed our day. Than-”

“How many times do I have to say it? You don’t need to thank me, my sunrise.” I looked straight into her eyes, leaning forward. “I love being with you. Thank you for being my date.”

I could tell she wanted to argue, but she restricted herself to casually rolling her eyes, and we shared one more passionate kiss before leaving the restaurant. There was still a two-hour drive ahead of us and I wanted to get Tina home as quickly as possible so she could rest. On our way back, she fell asleep in the front seat and I had to try my best to stop

admiring her beauty, and keep my eyes on the road. As I drove through the highway with a serene smile on my face, I forgot about all of my problems and wished we could have many more days like this.

After my first break in a while, I wondered how Malin and Zach were doing without me.

INTERLUDE V

Zachari

I was going to kill Zephyr if it was the last thing I'd do. I didn't care that he was my Alpha. He knew how much I hated the possibility of finding a stupid mate, and still he made me leave the safety of our pack so he could go rainbow hopping with his Luna. So much for a fucking Alpha. He even dared say *I* should honor my duties as Gamma. *Hypocrite.*

As Malin, Amaya, and I made our way to Sapphire Pond in the pack's limousine, I could only think of the options I had to avoid my 'other half,' in case she was part of Sapphire Pond Pack. I knew the Beta couple were talking, but I blocked out every noise to allow my very analytical brain the peace it needed to work quickly. Then, a light bulb went off in my head.

"Punch my nose," I uttered out loud.

The two other passengers immediately turned to look at me, as Amaya asked, "What?"

"Punch my nose," I repeated, louder, staring straight at Malin.

"What the fuck, man?" My friend's eyes widened in horror.

"Just fucking do it, damn it!" I snapped in distress.

Malin continued to look at me as if I was insane for a good five seconds before his confusion turned into realization. He slowly unfurrowed his brows, blinking a few times to process if I was being serious.

"Dude, even if I did break your nose, it'd heal in less than an hour."

“Not if you punch me again before it does.” Judging by the way he raised an eyebrow at me, remaining silent, I took it he wasn’t willing to help me. “Fine!” I scoffed.

The ride had been long enough for me to calculate more than one way to minimize my chances of finding my mate. A broken nose was my first option as it would make me physically unable to scent other she-wolves, but I did have a plan B. It was less painful, though not as effective, and it would make me look stupid. Well, I guess desperate times call for desperate measures. Without giving it a second thought, I slid my hand into my pocket to fish for the one thing that would keep Talon from sniffing his fated partner.

“You can’t be serious.” I heard Malin state in disbelief as I placed the nose clip on top of my nose. “Where did you even get that?!”

“Forewarned is forearmed,” I replied, my voice sounding nasally. I turned my head to stare through the window, hoping it would be enough to put an end to our conversation.

“Leave him be,” Amaya whispered to him, although I could tell she was trying to hold her laughter.

“No way! This is an important business meeting,” he argued. “I’m sorry, Zach, but I won’t let you make us look like fools in front of two other Alphas.”

Distracted, I didn’t see what was coming until it was too late. Malin jumped on me, and I screeched helplessly as I tried to stop him from plucking the clip from my nose. All poor Amaya could do was yell at us to stop, as if we would ever listen. Engrossed in our individual missions, neither of us noticed the car come to a stop until the driver opened the door for us.

“We’re here, Betas and...Gamma?” The man’s smile immediately faded as his eyes landed on us, the Elite members, all over each other. “I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

Malin glared at me one last time before removing himself off me to straighten his clothes, officially giving up. “Thank

you, Oscar.” He forced a smile. The driver nodded in response, moving out of our way.

Saved by the bell.

“Come on.” The Beta pulled me by the collar of my shirt, throwing me out of the car. The next second, he stretched his hand out to his mate, helping her out. Such a gentleman.

As soon as I set foot in the new territory, I took a quick glance around to scan my surroundings. I had never been here before, but I had seen pictures of these lands in books back when I was studying about every wolf pack in the Integrated Nations. With around eighty members, Sapphire Pond was a relatively new pack. They weren’t famous for any particular battle strategy, but their hunters were known for being great bird catchers.

It didn’t take long for the Omega who would lead us to the pack house to appear. As we followed him through the cottages into the main part of the territory, I was relieved to realize my nose clip was working; I couldn’t smell a thing. Now, I’d just have to wear it until the next morning, when we would finally be out of here.

“Take that shit off already!” Talon growled angrily inside my head. *“Wolves need their noses to identify new places.”*

“And she-wolves, huh?” I pointed out, making him squint his eyes furiously. *“I know what you want, and I won’t let you have it! Not on my watch, Talon!”* Not pleased at all, he retreated to the back of my mind.

“This place is adorable.” Amaya’s voice pulled me back from my thoughts. Her eyes were locked on the simple wooden pack house. It wasn’t nearly as big as ours, which was expected, and definitely more rustic. “The village kinda reminds me of my home.”

“Missing us already?” A voice I had never heard echoed through the woods. I soon realized it belonged to a tall man standing right at the door.

“Ruben!” the Beta Female exclaimed, running into her former leader’s arms. Malin had a bent nose as he watched his

mate share a hug with another male, and I couldn't help but chuckle in amusement. So pathetic.

“Welcome to Sapphire Pond Pack,” another man, standing next to Alpha Ruben, stepped forward to greet us. He had onyx hair, light blue eyes, and pale white skin. “I'm Alpha Sanders. It's a pleasure to meet you all.” He shook Malin's hand, then his mate's, before turning to me.

“I assume you're Gamma Zachari,” Alpha Ruben guessed.

“Precisely. It's an honor to meet you, Alpha Ruben. Alpha Sanders.” I bowed my head at both men. When I lifted my gaze again, I realized they were staring weirdly at my face.

Shit! The nose clip!

“Please, forgive the Gamma. He has a very sensitive nose, which can be quite overwhelming for him at times,” Malin chimed in.

“Oh. I see.” Sanders nodded at me, but his light chuckle made it obvious he didn't buy it.

“*Thanks, dude,*” I mindlinked.

“*That's what friends are for,*” he replied exhaustedly, but with a smile nonetheless.

“If you can please follow me. I'll show you to your rooms, then we can get the negotiations started.” Alpha Sanders gestured towards the entrance, and the three of us quickly obliged.

The two leaders led the way as we roamed the narrow hallways of the two-story packhouse. We stopped by the guest suites to drop off our belongings before heading to the office, located on the top floor. We quickly took our places in front of the desk, while the Alpha of Sapphire Pond sat behind it in a fancy chair, right beside his Beta.

“Alpha Ruben. Since you were the one who called this meeting, would you like to get it started?”

“Sure thing.” The leader of Dune Drifters smiled, crossing his legs before turning to us. “Just like I informed Alpha Zephyr over the phone, I would like to assist Wind Howlers in

your battle against the Fallen, should they enter your territory. I'm willing to offer you a hundred of my best warriors."

"We appreciate your kindness, Alpha Ruben." Malin nodded with impressive spontaneity. Since he was representing our leader, it was only natural for him to conduct the negotiation, but I wasn't expecting him to behave so... Alpha-like. "May I ask what you'd need in return?"

"Just to be on good terms with Wind Howlers," the man replied casually. Noticing our shock, he didn't hesitate to clarify, "I might be young, but I recognize a strong leader when I see one."

"Yet you refused Alpha Zephyr's deal when you met with him personally. What's changed?" I inquired curiously.

"Good observation. You do think like a Gamma." Ruben smiled amusedly. "During our meeting, I could tell Alpha Zephyr was conflicted. He insisted he was strong, but he didn't believe in himself at the time. I have a feeling he's grown to be who he said he was."

"Why?" I couldn't help but ask, earning myself an elbow in the ribs. Malin was clearly displeased by my attitude.

"A very reliable source of information told me that your Alpha has not only defeated another Alpha in combat, but also said Alpha's Beta." We turned to Amaya, who lowered her gaze guilty while a subtle smile lit up her face. "That leads me to believe he fully trusts his she-wolf now."

"Very well," Malin chimed in before I could ask any more questions, putting an end to the interrogation.

Just as I thought the issue was settled, the two Alphas exchanged glances. In the end, Sanders cleared his throat. "I would also like to propose an alliance between Sapphire Pond and Wind Howlers. We can't afford to send a meaningful amount of warriors to train with you, but we live close enough to help you in the event of an attack. Should the Fallen strike, we will all fight by your side, myself included."

Malin shot me a side look. We certainly weren't expecting that, but we wouldn't miss the opportunity. "Name your

price.”

We spent the next two hours determining the essential points of our treaty and signing documents to enact it. By the time we were done, we agreed to celebrate the success of our meeting over lunch, but my plans changed the very moment Alpha Sanders opened the door for us to leave his office. Standing right outside of the room was an exotic creature - something deep inside of me would dare say she was beautiful.

The dazzling female had an athletic build like most warriors, and she was just as tall as me. Her straight, messy onyx hair was short, reaching just above her shoulders. The features of her heart-shaped face were powerful, whilst still embracing her femininity. She held her head tall like an Alpha, yet the second her huge baby-blue eyes met mine, a breath helplessly escaped her plump lips.

I stormed through the door, running past her as fast as I could.

“The fuck are you doing, dingbat?! Get back there now!” Talon’s roars echoed in my head, but I kept fighting him off. It was a good thing I had the nose clip on; had he been able to catch the scent of her unique fragrance, he would easily overpower me and track her down.

When I finally made it to my guest suite, I locked the door behind me, pressing my back against it with arms wide open to make sure it wouldn’t open. Talon was still growling like a ravenous beast inside my head, which led me to decide to block him out. Once he was silent, the only sound rocking the walls of the room was my heart drumming in my chest as I panted frantically, adrenaline rushing through my veins.

Taking one of my shaky hands off the wall, I used it to press the clip harder against my nose. All I could do now was stay here, plotting how I would murder Zephyr; if I left the room, I’d be doomed. I knew this was going to happen. I fucking knew it!

Why, oh why, Moon Goddess, did you have to pair one of your children with me? Why couldn’t you leave me in the shadows, away from your light?

A loud bang on the door interrupted my thoughts, almost making my heart stop.

“Zach! Open the damn door!” I was somewhat relieved to hear Malin’s voice outside.

“Never!” I shouted back adamantly.

There was silence for a moment. I thought I was winning, until he yelled again, “Either you open it, or I’ll knock it down. Your choice!”

Part of me wanted to believe that the straight-laced Omega-turned-Beta would never damage another pack’s property, but another part was too afraid to test him. Unwilling to let him destroy the one thing that kept me away from my downfall, I allowed him to come in at last. When he did, the furious expression on his face made me think he would drag me outside. Instead, he took a deep breath.

“This has gone too far, Zach. You’ve even still got that dumb thing on your nose!”

“If I take it off, Talon will stop at nothing. I won’t be able to fight him any longer.”

“Why do you wanna keep fighting him?” He studied my terrified expression for a moment. Then, it dawned on him. “Is this because of Simone?”

I looked away from him. He didn’t understand it; no one did. Malin didn’t go through what I did. Yes, most she-wolves wanted a piece of him, but he always turned them down. He didn’t make the same mistake I did. Like him, I should have stayed away from them. I should have never trusted them enough to confess my feelings.

Simone was the first and last female I had a crush on. I was twelve at the time. Although I was a lot more confident back then, I was still unsure of whether I should tell her how I felt. My mother, however, convinced me to do it, insisting that no she-wolf would reject the future Gamma. Well, Simone did, and she did it in front of the whole class. Since then, everyone started calling me “Lame Eagle,” until my father put an end to

it. After enduring such humiliation, I was scolded for not demanding respect from my fellow classmates.

“Women are evil,” I whispered, breaking the long silence.

“Unbelievable,” my friend scoffed. Holding me by the shoulders, he forced me to look at him. “That happened six years ago, man. It’s time to move on. Your mate is not Simone. In fact, if you stayed two seconds later, you would have found out she’s the Alpha’s sister!”

“Oh, Goddess! High-ranking females are even meaner!” I cried out.

“You’re smarter than any of us, Zach, but you’re being irrational.” Malin shook his head in disappointment. “Look at me and Amaya, or Zephyr and Tina. We’re happier than ever because we found them! Don’t let one immature girl ruin what could be the best thing in your life.”

“I...I don’t wanna talk about this right now,” I stuttered, struggling away from his grasp to turn my back to him.

“Fine,” he scoffed. “Reject her then. Spare her the pain. It’s the least you could do.”

“No!” I shouted, clenching my fists at his suggestion. I was immediately taken aback by my reaction. But when I looked at him, he didn’t seem as surprised.

Why did the thought of breaking the bond I never even wanted in the first place sound so agonizing? I had always been alone and I was fine with that. I never felt like I needed someone else. But now that destiny was forcing it upon me, part of me wanted to know what it’d be like to love somebody. Was it really me or was Talon poisoning my mind, preventing me from thinking clearly?

“Alright. Hide out here all you want.” It was Malin’s turn to walk away. “I’m having lunch with the Alphas. Don’t expect me to bring you a plate.” He slammed the door on his way out, leaving me alone again.

However, his words kept ringing inside my head.

The hours flew by as my thoughts ate me alive. I decided to take a cold shower to ease my mind, and as soon as I stepped out of the bathroom, the Beta linked me to let me know it was almost time for Sapphire Pond's bird catching festival, which I had to attend. Refusing their invitation would be disrespectful, and it could risk everything we had achieved today. With a heavy sigh, I put on my clothes before walking outside.

I made my way through the hallways slowly, carefully poking my head around each corner before making a turn. Thankfully, my scary mate didn't seem to be anywhere near here, which made sense; she was probably getting ready for the festival. The moment I exited the pack house, I was greeted by the Beta couple, playing on the grass in wolf form.

They stopped as soon as they noticed me, and it didn't take long for Malin's voice to echo in my mind. "*Alpha Sanders said it was tradition for wolves to shift during the festival.*" My eyes widened as I realized what that meant. I was ready to turn around and run back to my room when Mint grabbed me by the shirt with his mouth. As I stared straight into the wolf's green eyes, Malin went on, "*Just give her a chance. If you don't like her, you can reject her.*"

"*If you reject her, I'll kill you!*" Talon growled, breaking the block I had put up earlier.

"*What if she rejects us? In front of the whole pack!*" I barked back.

"*She won't,*" my wolf responded with enough confidence for the both of us. "*She was made for us.*"

I wish I was as optimistic as him.

Mint stood there staring at me, probably waiting for me to let Talon out. I took one more look around, trying to find any way out, but there was none. I guess if there's anything that Zephyr taught me, it was that I can't keep running from my problems. I hesitated, but eventually let my wolf take over.

The first thing my black beast did when he was freed was stick his nose up in the air, sniffing it excitedly. It didn't take

long for him to pick up on the most mesmerizing scent I had ever smelled - it was floral, but at the same time citrusy and tropical, like passionfruit. Talon closed his eyes, purring in delight as he let the fragrance alone guide him. The closer we got to our mate, I realized it also had a hint of mint, making it refreshing like an exotic cocktail. When my wolf reopened his eyes, our mate was standing in front of us.

Just like everyone else attending the festival, she had already shifted. Her wolf was even darker than Talon, her coat shiny like the rarest black pearl. A single white stripe ran down her chin, neck, and belly, emphasizing her beauty. Her ears were long and fluffy, as was her silky fur. The most hypnotizing detail about her were her eyes, electric like sapphires, that twinkled when she spotted us.

The second our gazes met, all my fears were thrown out the window.

Suddenly, she lowered her head with hurt in her eyes, and it killed me. Was she sad because I ran away from her? Did she really want to be with me? Talon crouched as he let out a low whimper, approaching her slowly in hopes of fixing my mistake. My mate seemed surprised, but she didn't move. My wolf took the opportunity to rub his muzzle under her chin gently. The black-and-white she-wolf chuckled at him, licking his face in return. Talon proceeded to do the same.

I thought I would be disgusted by their show of affection. Instead, I found it...cute. And utterly calming, in a way. It was eerie that we were having our first interaction in wolf form without being able to properly communicate, yet it also felt somehow magical. It was almost like a blind date.

Being that close to her, I couldn't even remember the reason why I spent so many years afraid to meet her. It was evident that she was sweet and kind. Maybe it was too soon to tell, but somewhere deep inside me, I knew she would never hurt me. I wanted to talk to her, apologize for my childish behavior, but all I could do was watch as Talon tried to show her without using words instead.

I couldn't tell how much time had gone by before our extraordinary interaction was interrupted by the sound of flapping wings. Turning in the direction of the sound, I watched as a bird landed by the pond at the center of the territory to quench its thirst. All the wolves around us took cover behind bushes and trees, and so did my mate.

A few minutes later, dozens of birds had gathered around the lake. In a coordinated move, the members of Sapphire Pond launched an attack against the flock, who noticed the predators too late to escape their fangs. Of course, not all wolves succeeded in catching prey, but my mate was among the proud hunters who did.

To my surprise, instead of eating her catch by herself, she dropped it at Talon's paws, flashing him the sweetest wolfish smile. Then, without warning, she started transforming back into her human form. I was compelled to do the same. Once both our beasts retreated, the most alluring woman I had ever seen stepped closer to let her fingers brush against mine.

"Hello, mate." Shit, her smile was even more radiant in human form. And her voice... It was soft and gentle like a breeze. "Are you running from me again?"

In my mind, I was forming a coherent response, but all that left my mouth were unintelligible sounds. I struggled to breathe in her presence, fighting to stand still despite my weak knees. Was this what it felt like to be near your mate? How did Zephyr and Malin nail this every time?

"I'll take that as a no." She giggled, and I had to fight back a purr. I noticed her bite her lip as her gaze traveled down my chest and stomach, stopping on my...

Shit!

How could I have forgotten that I was still naked? As my face flushed red, I turned around in a swift movement, using both hands to cover my erection. Goddess, why was I hard? What were these damn hormones doing to me?!

"*Let mate see you. She likes it!*" Talon stated in a husky voice, and I promptly ignored him.

“You’re a shy one, huh?” She chuckled, and I heard her step away. A few seconds later, something soft touched my shoulders - a robe.

I immediately put it on before turning to her again. A minute staring into her calming blue eyes was enough to ease my tension.

“I...I don’t know your name,” I uttered timidly.

“Nisha. And the she-wolf you just met is Twyla.”

“*Our names have the same initials!*” Talon chanted like a happy pup.

“My wolf is called Talon,” I revealed. It was slowly becoming easier to breathe. “My name’s Zachari.”

“Zachari...” The way she repeated my name almost made me faint. “Like the great warrior and founder of Wind Howlers?”

“You know our history?” My eyes widened in surprise.

“I had to learn a few things as an Alpha’s daughter,” she clarified, and for some reason, it turned me on. Not only was she beautiful and kind...she was also smart.

I tried to smile, but by the way she laughed, I could tell I was failing hard.

I should be tense hearing another woman laugh at me but I couldn’t compare Nisha to my first crush. She had an enjoyable laughter, not an ‘i’m making fun of you’ laugh. Actually, it made me feel safe.

“Well, I see the two of you have gotten yourselves acquainted,” I hear Alpha Sander’s voice as he touched my shoulder. “Glad you didn’t run away from my sister this time,” he joked.

“I’m sorry about my childish behavior. I wasn’t expecting to meet my mate and just panicked,” I tried to explain myself, but I only sounded like more of a fool.

“That nose clip of yours tells me you were quite prepared for that possibility,” he said with a frown and I immediately

froze. Seconds later, he burst out laughing, “I’m just messing with you, kid. I know Nisha will be in good hands. Please, enjoy the rest of the festival!” he said as he took his leave.

My mate and I spent the rest of the night together and, little by little, I started to unwind. In the beginning I was still tense, but the longer I talked to her, the more I realized she was not an evil witch - on the contrary. She was actually even sweeter and calmer than Amaya and Valentina, who were more outgoing. I still had no experience and wanted to take this relationship slow, for which Nisha was truly understanding.

When the night came, we went back to my room. We slept together and cuddled, but that was as far as we went. The next morning, she left to pack her things, as she would be coming back to Wind Howlers with us. As I was organizing my things and fitting them in my small backpack, Malin came into the suite where I was staying with a mischievous grin on his face.

“Good morning!” he chanted cheerfully. “So...did you do the old *Devil’s Tango*?” He had such a perverted expression on his face that it almost made me laugh, but I just frowned.

“No.”

“What? Come on, man, give me the details! Did you two kiss at least?” He meant it as a joke, but when I didn’t answer, his eyes widened. “Oh my Goddess, you’re more of a prude than me!” he yelled. “I can’t believe I just said that out loud.”

“Leave me be, for fuck’s sake!” I growled.

“I’m just happy for you.” He came closer and wrapped me in a bear hug without warning. I struggled to get out, but he was way more buff than me and could easily hold me in place. “You’re finally a man!”

“Yeah, whatever you say.” I rolled my eyes at him, but couldn’t hide the smile on my face. As much as I thought Malin and Zephyr were jerks, they were still family.

“Hey, I’m ready whenever you are, Zach,” I heard Nisha’s voice as she walked into the room. “Oh, good morning, Malin.” She smiled at my friend.

“Good morning, Nisha.” He waved at her. “Now that you’re here, Zach can finally stop being the seventh wheel!” he stated, referring to the fact that all of the Elite members of Wind Howlers had found their mates.

Nisha took my hand and we headed outside to meet the others at the pack house’s entrance. We said our goodbyes and hopped in the limousine, ready to bring the good news to our family. As we made our way back, I couldn’t help but feel pleased about all the good things that happened the day before.

Now, I’d only have to get over Zephyr’s teasing, which would definitely be the worst.

22 | LUNA

“I hate you,” my third-in-command muttered under his breath after I told him I had made the right choice by sending him to Sapphire Pond with Malin. Despite his usual vexed expression, his voice sounded slightly softer.

“No, you don’t. You love me!” I laughed amusedly.

“I wanted to murder you.”

“*Wanted?* As in don’t-want-to-anymore?” Malin’s eyes widened in fake amusement. “Yep, you’re definitely in a good mood.”

“It’s alright, man. You can thank me later.” I smiled as I patted Zach’s shoulder, making him release an annoyed growl in response.

It was Sunday morning. My Gamma and Beta had arrived from their short trip an hour ago, and I was surprised to see them return home with yet another female. And she wasn’t the only good news they brought. At first, I was shocked to learn that, aside from sealing the deal with Ruben, they also established an alliance with a neighboring pack who was willing to help us for a very fair price. Moreover, I was overjoyed to see my introverted friend come back with his mate. I made a mental note to call the Alpha of Dune Drifters later to thank him for arranging a meeting that proved so fruitful, but first, I wanted to celebrate with my boys.

The three of us popped a bottle of champagne in my office while they filled me in on every detail regarding their business trip. Malin told me all about how Zach had run away from his mate at first, and of course, I didn’t miss the opportunity to tease him. I would make it a point that the event went down in Wind Howlers history; every future generation would know about the legend of Zachari, the Great Fleeing Eagle.

After we were done celebrating, my men went back to their mates, and I did the same. Valentina was also thrilled to

learn there was a new girl in the family. While she went off to greet our Gamma Female like the perfect Luna she was, I sought out Alex to ask her to prepare the welcome dinner for Nisha.

In the evening, I performed the joining ritual, tying Nisha to our pack and to her duties. Later on, we gathered at the dining hall. We toasted to our new alliances. To the winds of change. To our recently-completed family.

That night, we celebrated like we hadn't in a while, for at last we had hope again.

* * *

The week went by in the blink of an eye as my team and I focused on the preparations for my mate's Luna Ceremony. Invitations were sent out to our remaining allies, guest rooms were vacated and cleaned for their stay, a special gourmet menu was organized, and the high quality ingredients we would need to cook the luxurious meal for the event had already arrived. Everything was ready for my Luna's night to be unforgettable.

When Friday finally came, I rushed to the Alpha suite after training, anxious to hold her in my arms. As usual, she was still asleep when I left early in the morning, but to my surprise, she wasn't there anymore when I returned. I tried to mindlink her, only to find out she had a block up. Thankfully, my Delta knew her whereabouts and told me where to find her before I could start worrying.

I made my way to the pack hospital in the same hurry. The building was now much larger after its expansion was completed. It was one of the many structures that required construction work following the recent growth of our pack. Since werewolf builders were stronger and more resilient than humans, they also worked a lot faster. Now, the medical building was prepared to accommodate the needs of our 400-member pack. We also got ourselves a second doctor, who was previously part of the pack we absorbed, and she happened to be mated to our current doctor.

After roaming through the maze of white hallways, I eventually arrived at my destination - the maternity wing. I tracked down my mate's unique scent until I found the room she was in, but as soon as I noticed that my mother was with her, I had to do a double take. Once I realized what was happening, I fought my desire to run into Valentina's arms, deciding to stop by the door to silently watch her.

"You have a beautiful little girl, Isabella. Congratulations," my Luna whispered to an Omega lady who was laying down on the bed. I recognized the thirty-year-old male sitting beside her as her mate.

The couple exchanged joyful smiles and I couldn't help but mimic them as I watched Tina carefully rocking the newborn baby in her arms, humming the sweetest melody to him; it reminded me of the times Dawn would quietly sing inside my head. Maybe it was instinct, but I immediately found myself fantasizing about what a good mother she would be. The thought of her bearing my pups was heart-warming, and at the same time, it filled me with lust.

"Does she have a name yet?" Mom's voice pulled me from my daydream.

"Yes, my Luna." The Omega turned to her mate, who nodded reassuringly at her, before facing my mother again. "We will call her Marsha."

"A powerful name. Great choice." Mom showed them a serene smile, touching Valentina's shoulder soon after. "Now, you bless her, my dear."

My mate looked into the pup's eyes, drawing in a long breath. "I, Luna Valentina, welcome you, Marsha Baker, to Wind Howlers Pack. May the wind follow you wherever you go, lifting you higher towards your dreams." She lowered her face to touch her lips to the newborn's forehead. "You have a bright future ahead of you. I'm sure of it."

"Thank you so much, Luna Valentina." The Omega bowed her head, her eyes tearing up as my mate returned her pup to her arms.

While the couple went back to showering their first born with love, Tina finally seemed to notice me. Her nose picked up on my scent before her golden hazel eyes met mine, causing a smile to light up her face. She excused herself, leaving my mother with the pup's parents, and made her way towards me. At last, I got to hold her in my arms.

"Good morning, sunrise," I whispered close to her ear, brushing my lips against her skin.

"Have you been watching me this whole time, my moonlight?" She flashed me a scolding gaze, but the soft chuckle that escaped her lips proved she was far from reprehensive of my stalker tendencies. "I'm sorry for disappearing without a warning. Luna Delilah called me last minute, and I figured it would be best for me to put up a block so I could properly focus. It was my first time blessing a newborn pup and I didn't wanna mess it up."

"Don't worry," I reassured her, moving a strand of her caramel hair away from her face. "And you nailed it perfectly."

Her lips parted, and I could see her holding back her habit of thanking me. "Anyway, what did you need me for?"

"Do I need a reason to wanna be with you?" Eager to relish in her taste, I leaned forward to give her a quick kiss. "I wanted to enjoy the short time we have before the maids steal you away. Once they do, I'll only see you again at the party. They say it's bad luck for the groom to see his bride in her dress before the ceremony."

"It's not our wedding, Zephyr, and you've already seen me in my dress." She rolled her eyes at my silliness, but smiled nonetheless. Despite her reaction, she soon rewarded me with another kiss. When she pulled away, there was a hint of hesitancy in her expression. "I'm a little nervous about the preparation rituals. I've never done anything like this."

"It's not as scary as it seems, I promise. A bunch of people will come to our room to pamper you, and as soon as you're done, I'll be right back with you." I took her hand in mine,

gently brushing it with my thumb. “How about we have breakfast with the others before you have your princess day?”

“Sounds good.” She smiled in approval.

Upon leaving the pack hospital, we headed straight to the cafeteria. My friends were just finishing their meal, but they gladly stayed with us while we ate. Although Nisha had been with us for less than a week, she was fitting in pretty well with my Luna and the Beta Female, and I was also happy to see Tina connecting with them. Once we were done, we parted ways. I took my mate back to our room, and almost had to be kicked out by the maids because I was taking too long to leave her.

For the first time since Tina and I met, I had to spend the day alone at my office. At least I had work to distract me, and Dawn to keep me company. My irritating she-wolf sure had some sass, but she also had a fun side. She made time pass by quicker, and before I knew it, it was time for me to get ready too.

The sun had just set when I climbed down the stairs towards the guest suite where I would be getting dressed. Since Valentina was preparing for her ceremony in our room, I had some Omegas bring the stuff I would need to one of the spare rooms on the bottom floor. Tonight was my mate’s time to shine, so my outfit was pretty simple. It consisted of a three-piece forest green vicuna suit, with a white button-up shirt underneath, and a golden tie to finish the look.

Just as I was done taming my wild jet-black hair, there was a knock on my door. I put on my pale gold shoes before leaving. Malin was standing right outside, sporting a silver-gray suit and an emerald green bow tie. He had his golden hair combed back as usual.

“Ready to go get our girls?” My best friend had a huge grin on his face, his eyes twinkling at the simple thought of being with his mate.

“You’ve probably been with Amaya all day.” I rolled my eyes, walking past him to lead the way.

“Correct. But that doesn’t mean I wanna see her any less.”

“Where’s Zach and Nisha?” I asked the moment I noticed the Gammas weren’t with him.

“Already at the party. They didn’t bother waiting for us,” he huffed.

As soon as we made it to the top floor, Amaya stepped out of the Beta suite. She was wearing a silver dress that matched Malin’s outfit, which wasn’t surprising; it was traditional for Elite members to wear color-coordinated outfits according to their ranks. My Beta ran up to his mate the second he laid eyes on her. Unwilling to stay and witness their PDA, I told them to go ahead without me and continued on my way towards my room.

In front of the Alpha suite, I took a minute to breathe in Valentina’s enticing fragrance, which I had missed dearly throughout the day, before knocking on the door. As soon as she gave me permission to walk in, I obliged. The moment I saw her, standing mere feet away from me, all of the air suddenly left my lungs.

It was true that I had seen her in her marvelous gown before, but everything else was new to me. Valentina looked even more stunning with her caramel blonde hair styled in a loose waterfall braid that cascaded down her shoulders and back. Her gold and brown makeup enhanced her facial features perfectly, making her eyes pop and her cheekbones stand out.

I thought my drop-dead gorgeous mate couldn’t look any prettier, but here she was, redefining the meaning of perfection.

“You’re gonna catch flies, Alpha,” she chuckled. Only then did I realize my jaw had literally dropped.

I cleared my throat, promptly collecting myself. “Are you even real? You look like an angel.”

My feet moved towards her without my command; I was drawn to her like a werewolf to the full moon, and I swear she shone even brighter than our Goddess. I needed to touch her,

to feel her, to taste her. However, when I lifted my hands up to her face, she stopped me by wrapping her delicate fingers around my wrists.

“Careful. You’re gonna ruin the maids’ work,” she whispered, pointing to the Omegas behind her. I instantly noticed that they were all frowning at me. Reluctantly, I took a step back, and she released me from her grasp. “I’ve never worn anything like this. Expensive clothes, jewelry, makeup...” She turned to inspect her reflection in the mirror. “It feels a little weird.”

“It suits you. You were born to shine, sunrise.” I slowly snaked my arms around her stomach from behind, taking advantage of her distraction to plant a hungry kiss on the crook of her neck. She smiled sweetly at me as I pulled away from her to offer her my hand. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” When she held her head high, I struggled to believe she had once been an Omega; she was just as badass as Dawn, and my she-wolf was far from belonging at the bottom of our hierarchy.

Arm-in-arm, we exited the pack house and marched towards the Event Hall. The closer we got to the venue, the more stunned I was by the decoration. There were arches entirely made of green and white carnations over the stone walkway leading to the entrance, as well as two fancy mini fountains on each side of the double doors.

The interior was illuminated by yellowish-green lights, and a big golden chandelier hanging from the ceiling. More than 200 round glass tables were scattered around the room, all covered with forest green tablecloths and a white candle that floated inside of a water bowl for centerpieces.

As soon as we stepped inside, leaders from ally packs stopped to greet us. Among them was Sanders, with whom we had a quick chat about our recent alliance; it was our first time meeting in person. A few minutes later, Zachari and Nisha joined us. Valentina complimented their matching black outfits, which I had to admit suited them both well.

As the time for the beginning of the ceremony started, we left Alpha Sanders and the Gammas. On our way towards the center of the venue, we bumped into Alex and her mate. I thanked my Delta for the effort she put into organizing everything, and just as I was done talking to her, Elder Laelius linked me to inform me he was ready to begin.

I squeezed my mate's hand lightly before leading her through the back towards the big stage. A spotlight lit up above our heads the second we reached the center, where the Elder was waiting for us. I expected Tina to feel a little shy with the number of people looking at her, but she didn't. Her posture was impeccable, and the aura she emitted was that of a queen. I took a quick breath before turning my attention to the crowd before us.

"Members of Wind Howlers and honored guests, thank you for your presence tonight." The sound of my imponent voice echoing through the open space made the crowd go silent. "Today, I present to you my fated mate and your Luna!"

With elegance, Valentina took a step forward, taking the spotlight for herself. "It is with great honor that, tonight, I vow to defend you with all of my power. I promise to fight for a future of greatness, to ensure we keep growing together," she professed, making the wolves go wild once again.

As I stayed back, Elder Laelius approached my mate. "Valentina Quill, you were not born from our soil, but you've heard the wind sing your name. Our lands welcomed you with open arms, and tonight, we ask you to leave your old life behind and fully accept us, too." He grasped both her hands tightly, but she didn't move. "Here and now, standing before me, a direct messenger of the Moon Goddess, you must vow to become the mother of this pack. You must swear to put your children's safety before your own, assisting your Alpha in always doing what's best for the pack."

"I vow to do so," she replied without hesitation, loud and clear.

With a nod, the man turned to the crowd, lifting my mate's hand in the air. "Wind Howlers, show your new leader, Luna

Valentina, the respect she deserves! Accept her as she has accepted you!”

“Long live the Luna!” everyone said in unison as they fell to their knees, exposing their necks in the clearest sign of submission.

A hint of surprise flashed in my mate’s eyes for the first time as she witnessed her people hail her. With a proud smile, I walked up to her, interlacing our fingers. I brought her hand up to my mouth, kissing it gently before helping her climb down the stairs of the small stage.

“What do we do now?” she whispered to me.

“Enjoy your party.” I pressed my lips against her cheek.

The rest of the night went smoothly. We greeted some pack members who gave her their best wishes, drank fancy cocktails, and chatted with our friends. She seemed to be having the time of her life and it made my heart skip a beat to watch her so joyful and lively. Everything was perfect, as I expected; as Valentina deserved.

Until the doors of the Event Hall suddenly burst open, shortly after midnight.

“Help! Please!”

The desperate echoes of a feminine voice caught everyone’s attention. The room went silent as every head turned to two unknown girls who had just crashed our party. They were naked, covered in blood that was oozing out of deep wounds, and seemingly too weak to be standing.

Before any of us could react, their limp bodies dropped to the floor.

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Even the music seemed to have stopped, the deafening sound of the victims crashing onto the floor making it impossible to concentrate on anything else. In a matter of seconds, the white marble around them turned into a sea of maroon. I had never seen anyone lose such an alarming amount of blood so quickly, and it shocked me. Initially, all I could do was stand, frozen in my spot, confused and horrified by the sudden turn of events.

Then, it clicked for me - the party was over.

“Beta! Gamma!” My two friends seemed to have teleported, coming out of nowhere with how quickly they appeared in front of me. I turned to my second-in-command first. “Malin, get them to the hospital and make sure they receive the treatment they need. We take care of them first, find out who they are later.”

“Yes, Alpha.” He nodded his head at me, not wasting a second to gather a group of four Omegas who promptly carried the two unknown she-wolves out of the venue.

“Zach.” My third-in-command lowered his head the moment I looked into his eyes. “Double the amount of sentinels securing our border. Make sure no one else gets in. I wanna know how these two got past security, and I wanna know now!”

“Yes, Alpha!” He too nodded at me before disappearing out the door.

For the first time since the bizarre intrusion, I turned to glance at my Luna. She still looked radiant in her gown, though her light, cheerful expression was now stained by signs of worry. It killed me to see her special night ruined in such a tragic way. I lifted my hand up to her cheek with the intention to soothe her, but she gently wrapped her fingers around my wrist. A nod was all I needed to know she understood what

had to be done, and a small smile was proof she wasn't upset about it.

"Everyone," she called loud and clear as we faced the crowd, trying our best to exude some sort of calm. The last thing we wanted or needed was to incite panic. "I'm afraid our party will have to be cut short. Thank you all for coming. Please exit calmly and make your way home now. Guests, please return to your suites. Omegas will be by to ensure you have all that you need for the night. Thank you."

The pack members immediately did as she said, filing out of the Event Hall. They were followed by our guests, who addressed us politely on their way back to their suites. Alpha Sanders was very supportive, offering to help with whatever he could before heading back to Sapphire Pond the next day.

As I watched everyone leave, I was overcome with a wave of emotions. I was definitely mad at the abrupt way my mate's ceremony had ended; tense about what the visiting Alphas and Betas would think of us, having two outsiders infiltrate our lands on a very important night, when our security should have been at its highest. Moreover, with the threat of the mysterious Fallen right around the corner, I was concerned about how effective our defense system truly was if we hadn't even been able to stop a couple of injured girls from barging in.

"Do you need any assistance, son?" My father's hand on my shoulder took me by surprise. I had to blink a few times to get back to my senses. Once I did, I returned his gesture, giving his shoulder a light squeeze.

"Everything's under control, Dad. You and Mom should rest," I reassured him.

"Very well." He bowed his head as he walked past me.

"Good night, Luna Valentina. You looked lovely tonight," my mother complimented my mate, who smiled at her before she wrapped me in a quick hug. "Good night, Zeze."

After they left, it was only Alex and her mate left standing near me in the middle of the empty hall. My Delta was silent, but posted, just waiting for my orders.

“Alex, can you please get some cleaners to take care of this?” I gestured towards the pool of blood. “I know it’s late, but we can’t leave it like that until tomorrow.”

“Right away, Alpha.” I expected her to playfully salute me as usual. Given the gravity of the circumstances, she simply lowered her head.

After making sure the primary details had been taken care of, I interlaced my fingers with Valentina’s, tugging on her hand gently to lead her out of the venue. As soon as we stepped outside, I was sad to see the flowers plucked out of the arches, probably destroyed in the wolves’ hurry to get back to the safety of their houses. There was also a trail of blood staining the stone pathway. It was tragic to witness how the beautiful decoration had been ruined in the span of a few minutes, and it made it impossible for me to contain a melancholic sigh.

“I’m sorry your Luna Ceremony had to end like this,” I whispered, too pained to look into my mate’s eyes.

“The night was wonderful, and I had a lot of fun,” she insisted, surprising me. “But there’s more important things to take care of now. No party is worth more than two lives.” The wisdom behind his words struck me, and I had to glance at her.

“I still need to meet Malin and Zach in my office, see what information they could gather,” I informed her. “Let me accompany you to our room first.”

She suddenly stopped, forcing me to face her. “I’m staying with you,” she stated determinedly.

“You must be tired. I don’t want you to stress anymore over this.”

“Tonight, I was officially announced as Luna of Wind Howlers,” she recalled, standing her ground. “This issue concerns me as much as it does you. I won’t be able to sleep well not knowing exactly what’s going on.”

Her insistence ripped a smile off me. “Thank you, my Luna.”

“How many times do I have to say this? You don’t need to thank me,” Tina mocked playfully. Only she could make me laugh at such a time. She pulled me in for a kiss before we continued on our way towards the pack house.

We stopped by our room to change into more comfortable clothes before heading to the office, where my Beta and Gamma met with us a few minutes later. They’d only had roughly an hour to gather the information I asked of them, but I knew they wouldn’t disappoint.

“You first, Malin.” I waved my hand towards him as I leaned against the wall. Valentina was on her chair, right beside mine, but I was too stressed to sit. “What are the girls’ conditions?”

“One of them didn’t make it,” he announced regretfully. Werewolves were pretty violent creatures; we were used to having losses. Still, it didn’t make the news of a death easier for us. Even if these she-wolves didn’t belong to our pack, I couldn’t help but feel sorry. “Dr. Peter said she was already dead upon her arrival.”

I remained silent for a moment, digesting the fact. “What about the other one?”

“She’s in surgery as we speak, but the doctors aren’t optimistic about her chances of survival. She’s lost too much blood.”

“Poor girls,” Tina sobbed. I instinctively grasped her hand tighter, as if I could take her pain.

“Do they have any idea what could have happened to them?” I continued.

Malin shook his head. “It could be many things. Maybe rogues,” he suggested, but the look he flashed at me let me know he had his own suspicions, the same as mine.

“Thank you. What about you, Zach?” I turned to my Gamma.

“There are 60 sentinels on patrol right now. I also assigned a team of a dozen scouts to our borders. Nothing will get in or out without their knowledge.”

“Good. Have you figured out how two outsiders managed to walk in unnoticed?” I couldn’t hide the anger in my tone.

“Kinda,” he answered in a low voice, knowing that was not what I wanted to hear. “The sentinels that were on duty at the time said they didn’t see or hear anything. The girls might have come in through an entrance distant from the area they were patrolling, but there’s no way our guards wouldn’t have been able to scent them,” he made a brief pause. “The interesting part is, all of our men claim to not have smelled a thing. Either our entire team has a terrible sense of smell, or...”

“The girls masked their scent before crossing our borders,” I concluded thoughtfully.

The most common way a wolf could prevent others from scenting them was to drink a scent-masking potion. Those were quite expensive and hard to come by, unless you had specific contacts. There were two main possibilities why they could have felt the need to hide their presence: either they were being hunted, or they were more dangerous than we thought. Whichever the case, they were certainly in no condition to cause us any harm right now.

“Malin, make sure someone keeps a close eye on the patient should she recover. That is all for now,” I announced. “Thank you for your help, guys. You can go back to your mates.”

My two friends nodded at me before turning to leave. Once the issue was settled, my Luna and I returned to our room as well. As tired as we both were, we were also terribly concerned. Still, we found comfort in each other’s embrace and somehow managed to get some sleep.

The next morning, we didn’t even get breakfast. As soon as Tina woke up, shortly after me, we headed straight to the pack hospital. The second we stepped into the place, the heavy atmosphere let me know we wouldn’t be getting any good news. My suspicions were confirmed when we finally came across Dr. Peter, standing behind the counter with his mate, Dr. Bliant.

“Alpha Zephyr. Luna Valentina.” The man lowered his head before us. “I’m sorry. We did everything we could, but...”

“It was too late. She was too weak,” his partner continued.

I exchanged glances with Tina, who was holding back her tears. “Thank you for trying to save her. The two of you should take the day off.” I could only imagine how traumatic it was to have someone die in your hands; it was part of their job, but it still felt right to let them rest. “Have you been able to find out who they were?”

“Yes,” Peter quickly replied, typing something on his laptop. A second later, he showed it to me. There were two medical records on the screen with pictures of both she-wolves. “Their names were Agatha and Sam, and they were sisters. It appears they were from Nightwalkers Pack, located north of here.”

“Thank you. I’ll see if Elder Laelius can help us get in touch with their family,” I told them before leaving with my mate.

We headed to the Elder chapel as soon as we were out of the hospital. After filling Laelius in on what had happened, he wasted no time to reach out to Nightwalkers’ Elder. In order to act quickly in the event of emergencies and maintain order within each individual pack, Elders had a direct mindlink channel, allowing them to easily communicate with one another.

To our shock, no matter how hard Laelius tried to establish a connection with the Elder from the deceased girls’ pack, he simply couldn’t. We only found out why after he decided to reach out to the Elder of Raven Woods Pack, located between Wind Howlers and Nightwalkers. He informed us that the latter had been entirely decimated the previous night.

After our interesting and horrifying find, I called yet another meeting in my office. This time, I invited Alpha Sanders to join us, as I believed he too should be aware of what was happening.

“No survivors...” my Beta repeated after Tina and I finished explaining everything to him, Zach, and Sanders. “Are we assuming it was the Fallen?”

I nodded “That’s what everyone believes so far.”

“It matches their M.O.,” my Luna went on. “They left no trace behind, and only the bodies of pack members were found. The time frame also matches their attack plan so far, considering they tend to lay low for a month or so before moving on to destroy another pack.”

“There’s only Raven Woods standing between you and them now, right?” Alpha Sanders asked me.

“Yeah,” I replied reluctantly, trying to steady my anxious heartbeat.

“That means you have around two months to prepare, should they stick to their schedule,” the ally leader observed. “Raven Woods has half that time. It’s not my business to say what you should do, Alpha Zephyr, but maybe you could try establishing an alliance with them.”

“I tried, but Alpha Nolan refused it vehemently,” I revealed.

“That was before we defeated Ryder,” Dawn pointed out. “Like every other leader, he must have doubted our strength. With the threat of the Fallen knocking on his door, he might change his mind.”

Well, I guess it was worth a try. “Gamma Zachari, see if you can arrange another meeting with Alpha Nolan.”

“Will do,” he casually replied.

“I believe there’s nothing else we can do for now.” I turned to our guest to shake his hand. “Thank you for your time, Alpha Sanders. I assume you’re ready to return home. We will let you know if we have any more news regarding the matter.”

“Thank you for having me, Alpha Zephyr.” The taller man smiled politely at me. “And congratulations again, Luna Valentina. I hope to see you soon.”

“Have a safe trip home.” My mate returned his gesture.

After our guest left, I gave my Elite members a few more instructions before dismissing them. As frustrating as it was, all we could do was wait until we had more information to start planning our next move.

24 | NATURAL

Over a week after the incident at Valentina's Luna Ceremony, my team and I were still working hard to ensure the safety of our pack. There was technically no reason for Wind Howlers to be attacked before Raven Woods, considering our enemy had been traveling in a straight line down the coast. However, I wasn't too comfortable blindly trusting that. We knew very little about the Fallen, and their path of destruction could very well be a coincidence. Besides, I was pretty appalled since the two she-wolves managed to sneak in, and it was better to be safe than sorry.

My Beta - along with his mate, who was always happy to help him - was working twice as hard in training our new warriors, including the men Alpha Ruben had lent us. Aside from arranging a meeting with the leader of the only pack standing between us and the Fallen, which was scheduled for next Friday, my Gamma also proposed a few changes to our current defense system. He had spent the weekend perfecting it, making sure to protect the blind spots our sentinels couldn't cover.

Today was Monday morning, and I decided to go down to the city before training to buy the materials Zachari would need to build the new traps. Tina insisted on coming with me to keep me company. She was slowly getting used to waking up early, though she wasn't too pleased to rise before the sun. I could only hope the surprise I had planned would...inspire her, and make her efforts worth it.

"Catch!" I yelled, throwing the car keys in her direction as soon as we made it to the garage. The jumpscare itself made her eyes widen. Thanks to her werewolf reflexes, she grasped the object right on time.

And the first thing she did was raise her eyebrows as she lifted the keys at eye-level. "What am I supposed to do with these?"

“Drive, obviously.” I smiled playfully, but she clearly didn’t find it as funny.

“Oh, hell no!” She tried to toss the keys to me, but I threw them right back at her. “Zephyr, no! No way! It’s 4 a.m. for Goddess’ sake!”

“Come on, you said you don’t drive. It’s ‘bout time you start learning,” I encouraged her.

“Are you trying to get us both killed?!” She stared at me in horror before her gaze landed on the car. “How fast does that thing go? Does it even have insurance?”

“Don’t call Thor a ‘thing.’ You’re gonna hurt his feelings.” I pouted, jokingly petting my Ferrari. “And of course he has insurance.”

“Thor?” She gave me a blank stare before a chuckle escaped her lips. “Don’t tell me you named your car. After some superhero movie, at that!”

“Hey, Thor is a God in Norse mythology!” I defended, adding in a barely audible voice, “What’s the problem with superhero movies though? I think they’re pretty cool.”

My Luna rolled her eyes at me. At least, our interaction seemed to have made her forget about her fear to drive. She hopped in the driver’s seat and I instructed her on what to do from the start. Like any beginner, she was very careful at first, but she was a quick learner. By the time we reached the highway, she was driving at...well, an acceptable speed.

“Don’t be afraid!” I told her over the noise of the fast-blowing wind. My hair was all over the place, and I was sure I would look like a gremlin once we arrived at our destination.

“I’m not!” She scoffed, but her lie was evident in the way she gripped the steering wheel as if her life depended on it. She slowed the car to a stop. Because of how early it was, there was no one else on the highway with us, which probably helped her feel more relaxed.

“Don’t think too much about it. Just enjoy the moment, Wind Howlers’ style!”

Valentina looked at me like I was insane, but for some reason, she decided to trust me. I watched as she took a deep breath, allowing herself to close her eyes. Little by little, she loosened her grip on the steering wheel. When she opened her eyes again, she sucked in another deep breath before sinking her foot deeper into the gas pedal, flooring it down the highway. A huge smile spread over her lips, and I swear it was brighter than the sun.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I chanted, lifting my head up to the sky to release an enthusiastic howl. Again, she flashed me a look of disapproval. “Come on, sunrise. You’re one of us!”

“You’re crazy!” she yelled, yet the smile never left her face. “And I fucking love you!” The next second, she joined me in my broken melody.

“Well, that’s another item I can add to the list of things I can do better than you,” Dawn joked.

“Too bad you can’t drive a car, nor fit inside of one!” I teased back.

My mate and I continued to enjoy the feeling of freedom until we made it to the city. I was ready to drive the car back home, thinking Tina must’ve had enough adventure for a day, but to my surprise, she asked to do it herself. When we arrived, she skillfully parked my Ferrari right next to my father’s Porsche. Once we hopped out, I ran upstairs to leave the stuff I had bought in my office before heading into my room to change.

I was putting on my shorts when my mate’s voice caught my attention. “Since I’m already up, can I join you and the guys in training?”

“What?” I immediately turned around to find her standing behind me in her own workout clothes. “Why?”

“I just...I’ve been thinking lately.” She sighed, running her fingers up her arm. “With the destruction of Nightwalkers Pack and the whole Fallen issue, I...I wanna be able to defend our pack. To fight beside you.”

A couple of days after the two sisters snuck into our territory, the I. N. Elder Council made an official announcement, deeming Nightwalkers Pack officially extinct. All of the bodies, including those of Agatha and Sam, had been identified, confirming that there had been no survivors. They also declared the attack as work of the Fallen. I could understand her worry, but...

“I can’t have you sparring with the men,” I determined without thinking. “I understand that you’re worried, we all are. But you’re the heart of this pack, Tina. You’re the Luna.” Taking a step forward, I closed the distance between us. “You don’t belong on a battlefield.” I wanted to wrap my arms around her, bring her closer to me, but she backed away before I could.

“You said it yourself. I’m the Luna.” She held her head up, glaring at me with a braveness no other wolf ever had. I had seen that look on Dawn’s face a million times, and I knew she wouldn’t take no for an answer. “I’m not a damsel in distress, Zephyr. It’s my duty to protect this pack as much as it is yours.”

She had a good argument, but my heart still throbbed at the idea of her getting hurt. It wasn’t common for Lunas to fight beside their Alphas; their job was to keep the pack together should their mate perish in combat. They weren’t supposed to fight.

“Have you learned nothing in the past month?” Dawn chimed in, clearly frustrated. *“First, you refused to let me fight because you thought being a female made me weak. Are you gonna repeat the same mistake with your mate?”*

“That’s not it,” I dismissed her.

“Yes, that’s exactly it.” She put her foot down. *“The witch said Tina and I are the same. If that’s true, she should be more than capable of defending herself, don’t you think?”*

The frowns of my she-wolf and my mate combined were too much to take. In the end, all I could do was acknowledge defeat.

“Fine.”

Her stern expression immediately melted into a smile. “Thank you, my moonlight.” She gave me a quick peck on the cheek before walking past me to lead the way. “And thank you, Dawn.”

“How did you-” I began, but soon shook my head. “You know what? Nevermind.”

These two she-wolves would be the death of me.

By the time we made it to the gym, training had just started. My Luna had a confident posture as she walked past the warriors, who stared at her in utter confusion. I went straight to Malin to tell him about Valentina’s desire to join us, and he had no problem with it. Amaya, who had been helping my Beta conduct training for a while now, even flashed her an encouraging smile.

Since I obviously wouldn’t allow my mate to spar with anyone else, I took her as my partner. That was actually good; it meant Malin would be able to focus solely on training the others, as he wouldn’t have to spar with me. We were all ready to start, but just as my best friend was done explaining his plan for today’s session, someone broke the silence.

“Excuse me, Alpha.” I turned around to find it was one of our older warriors. His gaze was low in a sign of submission. “Are you sure it’s a good idea for you to spar with the Luna? I mean, you’re the Alpha, and she has no fighting experience.”

I was ready to handle the situation on my own when my mate took a step forward. “I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“I’m Zeta Alfred, my Luna.” The man bowed his head politely at her.

When Tina’s voice sounded again, she took us all by surprise. “Do you take your Luna for a weakling, Zeta Alfred?”

The Zeta’s eyes widened, and once he was done processing her question, he started shaking his head frantically. “N-not at all, Luna!”

“It’s settled then.” I smiled at him before winking at Tina.

“Well, let’s start!” Malin clapped his hands, and no one else dared utter another word.

From the moment training began, I was positively surprised by my mate’s performance. She lacked the technique, which was natural, but for someone who had never sparred before, she was actually pretty good. During the first hour, she was dodging more than actually trying to hit me, and she complained when she noticed I wasn’t giving it my all because I was afraid of hurting her. It seemed like she was only warming up though. Towards the end, she showed me her true strength. She even managed to land a few good blows.

Once training was over, I assembled a group of hunters right outside the training grounds. I would usually go straight to the cafeteria, but news of a horde of deer near the north border forced me to ignore my hunger. We were running low on meat, and we couldn’t lose the opportunity to get some easy prey.

Again, Tina asked me to tag along, and I was a lot less reluctant this time. There was little chance of her getting hurt during a hunt; the biggest problem we could face were rogues, but with our increased security, they shouldn’t pose a threat. Besides, it would be a good chance to introduce my Luna to our pack’s signature strategy.

It was my first time leading a hunt. Aside from concentrating on giving instructions to the other wolves on how to ambush our prey, I was trying to focus my attention on showing my mate how to feel the wind and use it to mask her scent. It usually took pups who were born at our pack weeks to master the technique.

Yet Tina decided to astonish me for the second time today when she nailed it on her first try.

Dusk, her black beast, managed to successfully approach the deer without being noticed, despite his huge size. After her wolf’s clean strike, the rest of our group took care of the remaining animals. And when they were done, they all howled in unison, celebrating her.

“*That was fucking impressive,*” I mindlinked my Luna, still in wolf form. Dawn was licking the blood off her lips, her paws still holding her prey against the ground after she took it down.

Dusk cocked his head at me a millisecond before Tina’s voice echoed in my mind. “*Beginner’s luck, I guess.*”

“*No. There’s no way this was luck,*” I insisted. My she-wolf flashed her mate a wolfish grin. “*You’re a natural, my sunrise.*”

We worked together to bring our prey back into our territory, where a group of Omegas was waiting to take them to the storage. There, they would be prepared before going to the kitchen and ending up on our plates. The amount of deer we managed to catch would last for at least another week and a half.

For some reason, seeing my mate succeed at both training and hunting turned me on like crazy. I ordered breakfast in our room, but neither of us bothered eating it. Upon our return to the Alpha suite, I immediately took her to the shower so we could get rid of the sweat and dirt, but we stayed there for another hour. With how busy we had been lately, I hadn’t gotten the chance to worship her body as properly as I would have liked. It was about time I made up for the time loss. And my mate sure deserved to be praised.

After our brief moment of pleasure, we went back to my office as usual. Valentina was now better acquainted with business, and she had been helping me greatly. Two hours into work, Zachari asked me to deliver some materials he had forgotten to him at the south border. I was ready to call an Omega to do it, but my Luna offered to do it herself, claiming she would enjoy a short stroll outside.

I was finishing checking some reports when my head suddenly throbbed, and for a moment, my vision went black. When I could finally see again, I wasn’t in my office anymore. I had teleported to another area inside my pack; judging by my surroundings, it seemed I was somewhere near the pack hospital. I instantly understood it was one of my visions.

It had been a long time since I last had those weird out-of-body experiences; more precisely, since I met Valentina. Early on, we found out that both of us had those visions, where it seemed we were able to see through each other's eyes. We could never figure out what triggered them, although we came to the conclusion that they usually happened when one of us was under distress. The thought alone made my heart beat faster.

A second later, I nearly fainted when I saw a large, ravenous wolf standing a few feet away from where I was - or better yet, from where my mate was. The last thing I witnessed before the vision ended was the creature lunging at her.

25 | SCENT

My heart stopped as realization hit me - Valentina's in danger. I didn't think twice before jumping from my chair and storming out of my office. Dawn was restless inside my head, though she was not nearly as frightened as I was. As I rushed down the stairs with my werewolf speed, not caring who I bumped into, I tried to analyze the situation. Despite my anxiety, my brain had been trained to always search for the best course of action when it came to protecting my pack, or in this case, my mate.

Initially, I tried to gather as much intel as I could about the enemy. The wolf I had briefly seen through Dusk's eyes was definitely not a member of Wind Howlers. Its dirty coat also led me to believe it wasn't part of another pack either. It could be a rogue, but his abnormal size suggested it wasn't a normal one. Although its eyes lacked humanity, the creature still seemed to have some form of consciousness; it wasn't completely feral. Maybe it was a former high-ranking wolf, recently turned rogue.

As soon as I stepped outside, I knew I needed to warn someone about the event. It was obvious no one had any idea of the threat, or else they would have contacted me. I had only seen one wolf, but there was no guarantee that there weren't more of them. Under normal circumstances, I would take the lead myself, but my priority was to protect my Luna.

Still running, I reached into my Beta's mind. *"Malin, we're under attack! Send reinforcements to the pack hospital!"* I didn't wait for his response before cutting our connection and letting Dawn out.

Without a command, my caramel blond she-wolf bolted in the direction where we had last seen the intruder. As we approached the pack hospital, we could already hear the characteristic snarls and growls of the fight, and it only fed my nervousness. We found Dusk and the supposed rogue right

behind the medical building, both creatures rolling over each other as they tried to get a grasp of their opponents.

As the tunnel vision formed, everything else became blurred; all we could see was our mate in danger. Dawn made a dash to the combat, jumping on top of the enemy. She had no trouble grabbing a hold of his scruff, ripping a yelp of alarm and pain out of him as she sank her teeth into his skin. Using all of her strength, she managed to yank the fucker off Dusk, despite how much larger and heavier he was compared to her. And while he was on the ground, her eyes darted to the black beast.

At that moment, I had a chance to analyze Dusk's condition. He had a few superficial wounds on his back and thighs, thin streams of blood running down his spiky fur. His tongue was out, his breathing heavy, but he didn't seem to be in pain. Still, his state concerned me.

"Tina, are you okay? How hurt are you?" I asked, panic evident in my voice.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me." Her sweet voice echoed in my head as Dusk rose back to his feet, relieving my fears - at least a little. *"Zephyr, stop him!"*

When Dawn turned to look in the direction our mate was facing, we realized the rogue we had thrown to the ground a moment ago was now running towards the hospital. I was confused by his unexpected decision, but there was no point in trying to understand him. Instead, my she-wolf followed my Luna's command. Her heavy paws thundered against the ground as she chased the bastard, running as fast as she could, Dusk following close behind.

The creature kept running as he approached the back of the building. We were only capable of reading his intentions when he headbutted the concrete wall, opening a hole big enough for him to go through. He wanted to enter the hospital, but why? Dawn shook her head, a fierce growl escaping through her sharp teeth as she followed right after the intruder.

"I've never seen a rogue do that," she observed.

“Me neither. I’d dare say he might be as strong as an Alpha,” I agreed.

“Or stronger,” she added. *“There’s something off about him.”*

Once we stepped inside, I realized we were at the morgue. I had only been down here once in my life, to accompany the doctors in bringing the bodies of the girls who had fled the massacre at Nightwalkers Pack and died in our territory. It was a cold, morbid place, but the heavy atmosphere didn’t bother me as much now that I was on a mission.

With her superior speed, Dawn was soon able to catch up with our enemy. She closed her jaw around his thick tail to stop him. He let out a warning snarl as he turned around, tearing the skin on my she-wolf’s right thigh with his teeth, but she didn’t let go of him. She quickly dragged him by the tail, tossing him against one of the walls. I expected him to stay down for at least a couple of seconds after the crash, but his resilience was astounding. As he rose to his feet, he used his hind legs to propel him forward.

Dawn released her first cry as the creature scratched her eyelids with his sharp claws, and her vision went dark as she forced her eyes shut from the pain.

“Shit! I can’t see!” she yelled desperately.

“You have to open your eyes! He’s gonna attack us again!” I panicked too.

“You think I don’t fucking know that?!” she snapped, the heat of the moment making her lose her cool.

Then, it happened again. Dawn’s eyes were still closed as she tried to recover from the blow, but I could suddenly see again. I could see my she-wolf pawing her face in an attempt to get rid of her discomfort, yet it wasn’t like the way I could see her in my mind. It was as if I was observing her from a different perspective - from *Dusk’s* perspective. Could I be seeing through his eyes again, like what apparently had happened during my visions in the past? Like what had happened minutes ago?

“Zephyr! Look out!” Valentina’s voice echoed in my head again, and as if her words were a command, I saw what I had to do.

“Dawn, he’s coming for you! From the left!” I warned her.

My she-wolf followed my order without giving it a second thought. She turned around in a swift movement to protect her wounded face from the enemy, standing on her front paws to kick him away from us like a mad horse. Clearly not expecting our reaction when we were blind, I witnessed the creature widen his eyes as he was hit on the chest. She probably knocked the wind out of him, judging by how he fell to the floor with a loud gasp.

Dawn managed to reopen her eyes just in time. Although her vision was still pretty blurry due to the blood, it was enough for us to watch Dusk bounce onto the rogue, landing a killing blow. One snap of his jaws on his target’s neck was enough to break it, ending his life at once.

As soon as the threat was neutralized, Valentina shifted back into her human form. Mimicking her mate, Dawn too gave me back control, and I contained a bellow as my already broken body was put through the pain of the transformation.

“Oh, Goddess. I...I’ve never murdered anyone before.” My Luna’s voice was shaky due to the adrenaline as she kneeled in front of her victim. She slowly turned her head to look at me, probably looking for guidance. Her reaction made me realize I was in worse shape than I thought. *“Zephyr!”* I could feel her pain as she ran up to me.

I was about to fall, slightly dizzy, when my beautiful mate offered me her support. The gash on my thigh made it hard for me to stand still. In an attempt to see her clearly, I used my arm to wipe the blood off my face. It wasn’t as effective as I had expected, considering more blood continued to drip down my injured eyelids.

“I’m okay. I’m sure it looks way worse than it actually is,” I tried to placate her. There was some truth to my words though; in wolf form, the fur made blood harder to see, whereas it would stand out against human skin.

“Shit! What went down here?” A third voice caught me off guard. Turning in the direction of the sound, I found my best friend glancing in through the hole in the wall, an army of warriors behind him.

Zach was also with him, and he proactively jumped inside to offer us robes that we quickly put on to hide our nakedness.

“Just in time, Beta,” I said sarcastically, still holding onto my mate. His question reminded me of the lifeless creature lying on the terrazzo floor, only a few feet away from us. “This thing - whatever it is - was dead set on getting into the hospital for some reason. But most importantly, can someone please explain to me how the hell outsiders keep getting past security?!” I growled, filled with rage. Thank the Goddess, everything turned out fine, but my mate could have died because of the guards incompetence.

“I have no idea, Alpha,” Zach muttered with his head low.

“Our defenses are your responsibility, Gamma!” I roared in his face. I didn’t like yelling at him, but I was too fucking pissed to act rationally. “I want to know where you’re failing!”

“I honestly don’t know. I implemented all of the changes we agreed on. I was just finishing setting up the last traps.” I had never seen Zachari so lost, and it triggered something in me. It couldn’t have been his fault. There was something very wrong about this whole situation. “All I can do is talk to the sentinels and see what they have to say.”

“They better have answers. My Luna was injured because they were slacking off at work!”

“Wait, Zephyr...” Dawn’s voice caught my attention. *“You said it yourself. Something’s not right here, and I don’t think it has anything to do with our team’s capability. Don’t you think it’s weird how you heard the sounds of the fight before you scented the intruder?”*

As if Valentina could hear my she-wolf’s thoughts, she observed, “Zephyr, the rogue we just took down...it doesn’t have a scent.”

As my eyes landed on the creature's body, I realized she was right. Rogues had a very strong, characteristic scent. Once their ties to their original pack were cut, they lost their specific fragrance that helped their pack mates identify them. With time, the human soul usually died, taken over by the animal side, which made them smell rotten. Dead.

Everyone went silent as I tried to make sense of the bizarre situation. The realization that my Luna was still bleeding as she stood beside me was what brought me back to my senses. I looked deeply into her eyes, touching my forehead to hers before pulling away to look at the crowd.

"Nisha," I called our Gamma Female after spotting her among the other wolves. "Will you please take my Luna to see the doctor?"

"Of course, Alpha." Zach's mate jumped through the hole, offering Tina her hand.

"What? No. I'm staying with you," my mate whispered to me.

"Please, sunrise. I can't focus unless I know you're okay." I could see her reluctance, but in the end, she sighed in defeat. "Thank you, Nisha." I nodded at the Gamma Female as she led my mate upstairs.

"What about you, man?" Before I knew it, Malin was right next to me. "Those wounds seem pretty deep. We can clean up the mess while you-"

"I'll heal," I interrupted him. Despite the hesitation in his eyes, he didn't push the issue. "There's more important things I have to take care of right now. Zach, did you find out what happened?" I turned to my Gamma.

"I just linked every single one of the 60 men that were on duty. They claim not to have smelled nor seen a thing." He still didn't look me in my eyes, probably afraid I'd snap at him again.

"Exactly like in the night the girls barged in," I analyzed. "Something's clearly wrong here."

“Like the fact that the rogue is still in wolf form?” Malin’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I turned to look in the direction my Beta was pointing and saw a few warriors around the fallen wolf’s body. His wide open eyes had lost their vivacity, and he was definitely not breathing. He was soaked in a pool of his own dark red blood. His wounds had clearly been fatal.

Malin had a point; when werewolves died, our bodies would magically shift one last time into our human forms. It was a safety measure to prevent humans from finding out about us. So how come this lifeless rogue was still in wolf form?

“Take him to the Elders chapel. Now.” Nobody hesitated at my command, quickly moving towards the intruder’s body to lift him up off the floor.

Even with werewolf strength, six men were necessary to carry the big gray wolf to the main square, which was a ten minute walk from where we were. Once we got there, my vision was thankfully better as my wound had almost completely healed, but I was still limping a little. I didn’t even bother changing into clothes, since the blood would stain them. We were werewolves, so I was sure no one would mind it, especially because I had just gotten out of a fight.

“What is this?” Elder Laelius asked when we dropped the rogue’s body in front of the chapel without warning.

“This rogue managed to sneak past security. He wanted to get to the hospital.” He furrowed his brows in confusion at my revelation.

Without uttering a word, the Elder started circling the huge wolf’s body, examining it thoroughly. I was getting impatient, eager to get back to my mate and make sure she didn’t have any grave injuries. I knew she was in good hands with Nisha, and that, as Alpha, I had to take care of this situation. But it didn’t diminish my desire to have her in my arms, where I could protect her.

At last, Elder Laelius finally stood up to look at me and the expression on his face immediately made me uneasy.

“Alpha Zephyr. It’s too soon to tell, but I’m inclined to think this isn’t a normal rogue,” he affirmed. “We might’ve just been the first ones to catch a wolf from the Fallen army.”

Everyone else around me was astonished, but it was almost as if I had been expecting that. And hearing the Elder confirm it made me growl in fury.

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The next morning, I was fully recovered from the fight; not a single scar had been left to tell the bizarre story.

Lower-ranking wolves would probably need around three days to heal from injuries like the ones I had, but my Alpha blood sped up my recovery. Thankfully, Valentina was also feeling one hundred percent better. Despite being an Omega by birth, her wounds had been gone since last night, as she had only gotten a few scratches.

Once again, my Luna joined us at training. The event from the previous day seemed to have motivated her, as she was a lot more focused when she sparred with me. After we were dismissed, we had breakfast with the rest of the team in the cafeteria. I left her with Amaya, Nisha, and Alex, figuring she could use the girl-time as a distraction, while the boys and I rushed to my office.

There was a lot we needed to discuss.

“We’re facing a serious threat,” I began, facing my two friends as I sat in my chair behind the desk. “In the past ten days, three wolves managed to get into our territory unnoticed. There’s an evident breach in our security that needs to be fixed to ensure the safety of our pack. Zachari,” I called.

“Yes, Alpha.”

“I want you to increase the number of men patrolling our borders again. Instead of 60, I want 80 sentinels on duty at all times,” I ordered, and my Gamma nodded in response, taking mental notes. “Instruct them in the best way you can think of. They will continue to be your responsibility. If it’s true that our enemy has no scent, they are to keep their eyes peeled and their ears open at all times.”

“I’ll make sure they know not even the slightest crack should go unnoticed. Not even the fall of a leaf shall be overlooked,” he assured me with determination.

“Good. Thank you, Zach,” I told him sincerely. “I understand how frustrating the situation is. Your hard work is appreciated.” The corner of his lips turned up in the shadow of a smile, which was a quite rare sight to see. Returning the gesture, I turned to my Beta. “The reinforcements at our border are only a palliative measure. We can’t keep the majority of our warriors out on patrol forever. We need to understand how these outsiders are sneaking in, but until we do, Malin, I want you to conduct evening training sessions three times a week in addition to the daily morning sessions. That way, the men on-shift who can’t attend training won’t be completely out of sync with everyone else.”

My best friend nodded at me. “I’m on it.”

“Before I dismiss you, I’ll leave you with another task. As you know, the I.N. Elder Council will be here in two hours to check the supposed Fallen we caught. Assist Alex in whatever she needs to make sure we are ready to receive them.” Normally, Alex would have no problem taking care of that on her own. However, these visitors were way more important than the ones we usually had, and having so little time to prepare, I figured our Delta could use the extra help.

“Yes, Alpha.” Both my friends bowed their heads, waiting for my signal before rising from their seats to leave.

Once our quick meeting was over, I made my way down the hallway towards the Alpha suite, to where my mate had probably returned. As expected, I found her looking out the window as soon as I pushed the door open. The sound made her glance at the entrance over her shoulder, and when her eyes met mine, she flashed me a small smile before turning her attention to the view once again. For some reason I couldn’t quite figure out, she had always felt drawn to the landscape.

I approached her slowly from behind, snaking my arms around her waist as I had done many times. “What’s so special about the dandelion fields?” I breathed into her ear, smiling as I noticed the hairs on the back of her neck bristle in pleasure.

“It gives me peace.” She shrugged. “How was the meeting?”

“As good as it could have gone.” I sighed, not bothering to hide my distress.

Despite all of my training, ruling over Wind Howlers had proved to be a challenge since day one. Shaking the negativity off, I swiftly turned my mate around to face me, surprising her. With my index finger, I swooped a strand of her hair away from her face to get a clear view of her perfect features. Closing my eyes, I pressed my lips gently to hers, enjoying the way her heart beat against my chest, our breathing synchronized. She was the clarity when nothing else made sense.

I smiled as I pulled away from her. “We still have a couple of hours before we dive into this madness again.”

“And how do you plan on spending them, my moonlight?” She smirked.

A gasp broke through her lips when I grasped the back of her thighs, lifting her off the ground and closer towards me. “With you, obviously,” I answered before crashing my mouth against hers one more time.

* * *

After two hours in paradise, I descended back into the chaos to wait for the I.N. Elder Council in front of the Elder shrine with the rest of the Elite. Despite how stressful the whole situation was, I was a lot more relaxed after having made love to my delicious Luna. She stood elegantly by my side as we watched our guests’ vehicle stop not too far from where we were, and I was surprised when a familiar female stepped out of the car.

“Cass?” I raised an eyebrow, struggling to believe my eyes.

“Nice to see you again, Zephyr. You too, Tina.” The witch waved at both me and my mate. “Sadly, I have no news about your case yet. I’m just here to check on your recent find,” she clarified, an amused smile playing on her lips.

“Since no one has ever caught a Fallen soldier, dead or alive, we believe Cassiopeia is the only one with enough...

expertise to opine on the matter,” Laelius clarified.

The werewolves of the I.N. Elder Council followed soon after the woman. As they approached us, I made sure to respectfully welcome each of them. While packs were only required to have one Elder living on the territory, the national council was constituted by five Elders - the most powerful individuals of our species.

“Our time is limited,” one of the visiting Elders spoke in an intimidating voice. “Please take us to the body so we can get going.”

“Right away.” I took the lead, gesturing for the rest of the wolves to follow me.

We had been keeping the carcass in a deposit, which was the only place the large wolf could fit in. As soon as we got there, the five Elders, together with Cassiopeia, started circling the dead rogue, examining him and taking notes. After about 15 minutes, they had found everything they had been looking for and came forth to give us a report.

“We believe your initial assumption to be correct, Alpha Zephyr,” the head of the council stated emotionlessly. “Although none of these creatures had been found thus far, this specimen matches the characteristics we expected them to have.

“Yep. This rogue was definitely part of the Fallen army,” Cass concluded casually.

“How would you know that?” I had to ask.

The witch took a step forward to look into my eyes. “Do you know why they are called ‘Fallen,’ little Alpha?” She didn’t wait for my response. “It’s a metaphor hinting at their origin - *the wolves who fell from the moon*. Everything started almost two decades ago, with a wolf who didn’t accept his place in the hierarchy. He accused your Moon Goddess of being a cruel deity for pairing him with a weak counterpart.”

“*Huh. Now where have I heard that before?*” Dawn mocked, but I was too focused to give her the attention she wanted.

“Enraged, he sought help from demons to break his ties with Diana and reject her. Once he did, his original wolf died, being replaced by a stronger one, born from darkness. Legend has it the creature is as strong as two wolves combined,” Cass continued. “After finding the power he craved, he returned to his pack to kill the Alpha. He wanted to take over, but even after the fall of the leader, his followers refused to follow a beast who denied the Moon Goddess. So, he executed them all. In hopes of building his own army, he left his lands to roam the world and gather followers.”

“Wait. You said the first Fallen was the one who traded his soul for power, but it’s believed that the wolves who compose his army are more powerful than common wolves. This one certainly was.” I pointed at the creature with my head. “Why?”

“Good question, wolfy.” Cass winked at me. “As you know, the bite of a werewolf is a gift from the Goddess, allowing your species to turn humans, much like vampires can. Upon forsaking Diana, the original Fallen lost that ability. Instead, his bite became a curse; he is capable of sharing his power with the bitten, binding their souls to his in exchange. That’s why he went after rogues who had nothing else to lose.”

“It also explains why they have no scent.” The head of the council stepped forward, joining our conversation again. “A wolf’s scent is special. It allows others from their pack, as well as their fated mate, to identify them. Once they reject the Goddess, they lose their scent along with those privileges.”

“That must be how they manage to destroy entire packs and vanish without leaving a trace,” the words slipped out of my mouth as I put the pieces of this puzzle together.

“It all makes sense now...” my Gamma chimed in, a look of realization on his face. “On the night of Valentina’s Luna Ceremony, the two she-wolves who walked into our territory were covered in blood. We assumed it was their own, and most of it probably was, but...what if their blood mixed with that of a Fallen during the massacre of their pack? It would explain how none of our sentinels caught their scent.”

“Okay, but one thing still doesn’t make sense,” I spoke again. “Why would a Fallen barge into our territory alone?”

“Easy.” Zachari turned to me. “No one ever survives their attacks, which makes it easy for them to hide their tracks. They must have noticed that the two girls managed to sneak away after the battle and tracked them to our pack. There was no way they could possibly know they didn’t make it. That’s why he was desperate to get into the morgue, where the body of one of the victims is.”

“They assumed they were alive, and decided to send a single soldier to finish the job,” I concluded, my eyes wide.

“Because of the curse, they also have enhanced abilities,” another of the Elders continued. “Even if your sentinels couldn’t smell the girls, they certainly could. Still, if your theory is correct, it would probably take them a while to catch their scent when it was mixed with their own. That’s likely why the beast only attacked yesterday. His plan must have been to sneak in, get rid of the girl who was the only evidence of their most recent bloodbath, and leave before he was seen. He knew he was strong enough to eliminate any pack members who got in his way, but he probably wasn’t expecting to face the Alpha and Luna.”

“The two of you having been able to kill him might just give us enough information to figure out a way of stopping them,” the head of the council observed. “Thank you, Alpha Zephyr and Luna Valentina.”

“We must leave now and will be taking the body with us so we can investigate further,” another Elder said. “We trust you’ll make good use of the information we gave you, Alpha. However, try not to worry too much, as there is no reason for any more attacks to happen. For now, at least,” he finished, walking past me with the rest of the council behind him.

“I’ll be staying a little longer,” Cass announced, taking us all by surprise. The head of the council frowned at her, but didn’t argue as he continued to make his way to the car. Then, she turned to me. “I believe I have something that might be of

your interest, Alpha. Can we go somewhere more private to talk?”

I exchanged quick glances with my men and my Luna before facing the witch again. “Let’s go to my office.”

After seeing our illustrious guests out, the five of us headed to the top floor of the pack house. I opened the door to my office for them, and just as I was locking it, Cassiopeia’s voice echoed from behind me.

“What kinds of traps do you have around your borders at the moment?”

“That’s classified information,” my Gamma promptly replied, scrunching his eyebrows.

“Zach!” I yelled, but all I got from him was a *what?* face.

“Fine. Just answer yes or no then.” She approached him. “Do you have any magic-detecting traps?”

Zach looked at me, and I nodded at him. “No.”

“Thought so.” Cass smirked. At the snap of her fingers, a very peculiar device magically appeared in her hands. “I’ve invented this trap specifically to catch supernatural beings. It’s basically an alarm that will stun whatever magical creature steps within its range by emitting an ear-piercing sound combined with a blinding light. I mostly sell them to human clients, since it has a relatively large range. It would be counter-effective for you to have it in your lands, since your own pack would trigger it all the time.”

“Your point?” Zach arched an eyebrow at her.

“A nervous one, aren’t ya?” she scoffed. “Now that we have the DNA sample of a Fallen, I can definitely adapt this trap to only be activated by them. It won’t stop them in the long run, but if used by the packs we suspect will be targeted - like yours, young Zephyr - it should take away their main advantage by giving you time to act.”

My Beta and I immediately looked at each other with wide eyes before asking in unison, “Where can we get those?”

“I make them myself. If I can modify them by tonight, I should have at least 30 ready for you by tomorrow,” Cass explained. “But I must warn you, they’re quite expensive to make.”

“Money’s not a problem,” I reassured her.

“Alright. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. The total is a million,” she informed casually.

“*Dollars?!?*” Zach exclaimed, eyes wide.

I had to do a double-take when I heard her price. Malin choked on his own saliva, while Tina’s jaw dropped. When Cassiopeia said it would be expensive, I didn’t expect the value to be astronomical. After we absorbed Silent Rivers, we pretty much doubled the amount of money in our pack bank account, since we inherited everything that previously belonged to them. Still, what she was asking for was half of what we had in total.

“The pack’s treasury is supposed to be used to protect the pack,” Valentina’s voice echoed in my head, as if she could read my thoughts. *“After what we saw yesterday, I think these traps would be game-changing.”*

“*I agree, but damn, that’s a lot,*” I told her, ending the mindlink before turning to face Cass. “Alright, deal.”

“Great. I’ll have the traps sent to your office as soon as they’re ready,” the mysterious woman promised as she moved her hands in a circular motion to open a portal in the middle of my office.

“Wait! Should we pay in advance or...?”

“I’ll take the payment once you’re satisfied with your product. I’m sure the Elder Council won’t mind me borrowing some of their funds on behalf of the survival of your species,” she said playfully.

“Do we have to sign anything?” I couldn’t help but ask. It was my first time making negotiations with a witch, and it was different from any pack treaties I had ever signed.

“I’ll take your word for it, Alpha.” Cass winked at me in what was proving to be a recurrent habit. “Wolves tend to be trustworthy; it’s foxes I’m usually concerned about.” With that last line, she took her leave.

For the next few seconds after the witch disappeared, the rest of us just kept staring at the spot where the portal had closed in silence. It took us all a moment to process everything that had gone down since the National Elder Council’s arrival, from the mind-blowing information we got, to the discovery of an item that could be our hope in a war against the Fallen.

“Well, I guess you’re dismissed.” I turned to my Beta and Gamma. “I’ll call you later once I’ve organized my thoughts so we can discuss our next course of action.”

As soon as my friends exited the office, my Luna approached me. “What should we do now?”

“I don’t know. I need a break,” I told her honestly.

“It’s okay. We’ll figure it out.” Tina cupped my face with her gentle hands. Closing my eyes, I felt my tension wash away, as if she was draining it from me.

“As long as I have you, I’ll have no doubt about that.” I smiled, leaning in to kiss her.

INTERLUDE VI

Valentina

Mealtime was the moment I treasured the most out of the entire day. In my old pack, I didn't have many friends and spent the majority of my time alone. I guess that's why I was so fond of being around my new friends and family. The simplicity of these times when I could sit at the table with the other ranked members - my friends and family - talking and laughing away just made my day brighter.

As Zephyr and I made our way through the dining hall, hand-in-hand, a few of the warriors sitting at the long tables stopped to greet me respectfully when I walked past them. I had been attending training everyday, and even if most of the men didn't seem too fond of my presence in the beginning, they were starting to warm up to me. In fact, I think they admired me after I showed them I could be a great fighter. Considering my lack of experience, I'd be lost if I didn't have Dusk to guide me, but I wanted to learn nevertheless.

"I only explain what you should do. You're the one who's doing all the fighting," my wolf's deep voice echoed inside my head. *"I'm merely a teacher, and I refuse to take credit for the things you've accomplished on your own."*

"Don't be so humble, Dusk. You've been helping me become stronger from the day we met," I recalled, making him smile.

"How was training today?" Nisha's question pulled me back to reality as we sat across from her at the Elite members table.

When I didn't find Zach beside her, I assumed he was busy with the tasks Zephyr had assigned to him. Following the visit of the National Elder Council yesterday, the boys stayed up late in the office discussing measures to defend our pack

against our enemy. I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried about an attack, especially after I'd witnessed what they were capable of, but it also killed me to see my Alpha so stressed.

"It was great. Your Luna is proving to be just as fierce as my best men." Zephyr flashed me a proud smile, though he couldn't hide the tiredness in his eyes. "It's a shame your mate wasn't there to watch."

"You know him. Always glad to skip training. In the name of duty, of course," the Gamma Female added playfully.

"Of course," my mate laughed.

"Mornin', guys." Amaya soon joined us, placing her plate on the table.

"Hey girl," I welcomed her with a grin. "Where's Malin?"

"Oh, he wanted to stop by the Alpha's office to drop today's training reports. He should be here in a minute," the Beta Female clarified, looking into my eyes as a smile lit up her face. "He said he's impressed by how quickly you're improving."

I was about to reply to her compliment when Malin suddenly appeared next to the table. Judging by his rapid, convulsive breathing, he had probably used his werewolf speed to get here. That, combined with his shocked expression, caused my mate to rise from his seat, alarmed.

"Dude. Did Cassiopeia come here?" the Beta asked.

"Today? No." Zephyr arched an eyebrow at him.

"There's dozens of those traps she said she would get us scattered all over your office," he revealed, the look of bewilderment never leaving his face.

"Shit! That's not what I expected when she said she would have them delivered to me." Zephyr glanced at me before his attention fell on the plate filled with food in front of him. With a sigh, he shoved it away, leaning down to plant a quick kiss on my cheek. "I should probably take care of that ASAP."

"Would you like me to meet you in your office later?" I placed my hand over his, holding him off a little longer. He

didn't smile as he brushed my skin gently with his thumb.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, sunrise," he whispered with a heavy heart. "Today's gonna be a pretty long day...just like all of them. The boys and I will be running around the territory to place those traps. We'll likely only be done by nightfall."

"Oh. Okay." I tried my best not to let my disappointment shine through, knowing he would dismiss his duties to stay with me if it did. "Hope the three of you have a good day."

"Try not to miss me too much." He winked playfully at me before turning around to leave with his Beta.

As I watched them leave, I drew in a long deep breath in hopes of taking in what was left of Zephyr's scent. It was known that mates smelled different to each other than they did to the rest of their pack. Usually, females would smell sweeter to their partner, while males tended to smell more earthy.

To this day, I still couldn't quite figure out what Zephyr's unique fragrance reminded me of. His scent was cool and pure. Like a pungent rain smell, it was sweet, refreshing and zingy. It was so easy to breathe, yet it always left me feeling breathless. He smelled of the night, but also of the warmth of the moonlight as it protected the earth from the darkness. It was weird, but his scent reminded me more of a sensation than an actual fragrance.

"They've been so busy lately." Only when Nisha's voice broke the silence did I realize I had been staring at the exit door for Goddess knows how long.

"Yeah. Since I started helping Malin conduct training to take some of the load off his shoulders, that's basically the only time we get to be together," Amaya revealed sadly. "I know they have a lot on their plates with everything that's been going on, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss him."

"The worst part is that they're stressing a lot because of this situation. I mean, they should be worried for sure, but it's killing me to see Zach so tense. Well, more than he usually is, anyway," the Gamma Female confessed.

“True. Zephyr has barely been able to relax, which concerns me, since he’s usually pretty easygoing,” I joined their melancholic conversation, feeling the need to vent. The three of us remained silent for a few seconds, until an idea suddenly hit me. “You know what I’m thinking?” They both lifted their gazes to look at me. “Maybe we can throw them a little surprise party.”

“Tonight?” Amaya asked, and I nodded.

“Like a triple date!” Nisha smiled. “Oh, I’m in!”

“Girl, you’re a genius!” The Beta Female soon mimicked her reaction. “They’ll be out for the whole day today, which will give us enough time to prepare. They won’t suspect a thing.”

“It’s settled then.” A huge grin lit up my face. “Do you have any ideas on how we should do it?”

“Maybe I can help with that...” The moment I saw the smirk on the Gamma Female’s face, I knew she already had it all figured out.

After Nisha explained her idea to us, we divided the tasks equally among us. We decided it would be best if I took care of our dinner, since the two of them were high-ranking females in their previous packs, and therefore never learned how to cook. Amaya volunteered to take Malin’s car and drive to the nearest city to buy us some bottles of werewine. Lastly, Nisha would be in charge of picking the perfect spot for our dinner party and preparing the decorations. She said she used to be the one who organized events back at her old pack, so she had the most experience in that department.

Once we had everything carefully planned, we set out to get our daily duties done so we could get into the party preparations. Amaya would be leaving for the city as soon as she was done helping Malin with the extra afternoon training session. Since Nisha had promised to instruct the new sentinels while Zach was away at the border, she could only start organizing the details for our little event afterwards. Meanwhile, I had agreed to meet a single mother who had moved into the main part of the territory after the merge; she

was having trouble adjusting to her new home. It wouldn't take long, which meant I would be free to prepare our menu all afternoon. Perfect!

* * *

To get a better understanding of the pack member's problem, I arranged to meet her at her house. It was only a five-minute walk from the town square, heading towards the east border. Once I arrived there, I found her sitting on a wooden bench outside, rocking her two-year-old boy in her arms. The moment she saw me, she stood up abruptly, causing the pup to whine a little.

"Good morning, Luna Valentina." The young woman immediately lowered her head in respect. "I'm so sorry for troubling you."

"It's no problem...Jennette, right?" She blinked twice, clearly surprised that I knew her name, before nodding. "And who's this handsome boy?" I slowly leaned forward to take a closer look at the pup, who had turned his head to study me. When I smiled at him, he soon returned the gesture.

"I Mileo!" the little kid giggled.

"It's Elio, my Luna," his mother corrected, flashing an apologetic smile at me.

"It's a pleasure to meet you two," I chuckled. "Well, Jennette, what's bothering you about your new home?"

"The house is perfect, my Luna. We are grateful for your hospitality and the Alpha's. It's just... Elio has been having trouble sleeping since we moved." The fatigue evident in her expression let me know she wasn't getting much sleep either.

"I see. Do you miss your old home, little guy?" I asked, and the pup nodded. "It's alright. I'll make sure your momma and I can make you comfortable here, okay?"

"I've tried everything," Jennette went on. "I've moved all of his toys, decorated the new room exactly like his old one. I've also kept the old blankets so they smell familiar to him. I've even taken him to the doctors, but he had allergies from the sleeping pills they prescribed."

“There are natural products that can help wolves sleep,” Dusk pointed out. *“They are less likely to trigger allergic reactions. I’m surprised the doctors haven’t tried them first.”*

“Shamans are the ones who study naturopathy, but they’re hard to find these days. Pack doctors have started going to university over the past decades in order to occupy the position. That’s likely why they opted for medication,” I clarified. *“But why do you say that? Do you have any ideas?”*

“I think so. Ask her if she tried giving him passionflower and lemon balm tea.”

“What?” His unexpected suggestion left me confused. *“Where did that even come from?”*
“I...I don’t know. But I have a feeling it might work.”

At first, I hesitated, but since my wolf usually gave me great advice, I decided to give it a shot.

“Have you tried calming tea blends?” My attention fell on the young mom again.

She cocked her head to the side. “No. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“I’ll be back in a moment.” Showing her one last smile, I turned on my heel to leave.

Trusting my wolf’s idea, I rushed back into the packhouse and headed towards the kitchen. Two cooks immediately stopped what they were doing to greet me. Worried that I might be hungry, they tried offering me a variety of snacks. When I managed to tell them what I needed, they exchanged looks of confusion, but didn’t question me. In five minutes, they were done preparing my order. I thanked them before making my way back to Jennette’s house.

Once I arrived, I explained about how the tea had been prepared, and its calming properties, following what Dusk had told me. The she-wolf was a little skeptical about it first, but she soon offered it to her pup. Thankfully, Elio really enjoyed his warm drink. He finished his cup in just a few minutes. Then, his mom put him down to play with some of his toys in the front garden.

I insisted on staying with them for a while to see how the little boy would react to the tea. In just under an hour, the pup asked his mother to pick him up again. Surprisingly enough, it didn't take him long to fall asleep in her arms. She went inside to lay him on his bed before coming back outside, where I was waiting for her.

"I can't believe it. It's not even lunch time yet, and he's really asleep," Jennette chanted in awe. "I thought he might wake up when I took him to his room, but he's really out. Thank you so much, Luna. That tea truly is miraculous." She bowed her head at me. "What did you say the ingredients for it were again?"

"Just passionflower and lemon balm," I repeated with a smile. "I'm glad it worked. I'll have someone deliver the ingredients to you so you can prepare the tea whenever Elio has trouble sleeping."

"You are too kind, Luna. I can't thank you enough."

"Please," I took her hand in both of mine, "Elio's well-being is our priority. Let me know if it stops working and we can try something else."

"Thank you, Luna. Have a great day!" She waved as I turned to walk away.

On my way back to the town square, I mindlinked Delta Alex to let her know about the single mother's situation, and she told me she'd have someone send the items to her immediately. It was almost noon, which meant most pack members would be heading to the dining hall. Thankfully, I didn't have to worry about Zephyr and the guys finding me there; they packed lunch so they wouldn't have to waste time coming back to eat.

I arrived at the kitchen through the backdoor, sighing in relief when I noticed most of the cooks were just washing dishes. Since lunch was served at 12:00 p.m. sharp, they were already done with all the cooking. I recognized Mrs. Robinson, the head cook, as she would often come to greet Zephyr and I during our meals. As I approached her, I hoped I wasn't disturbing her.

“Hi, Mrs. Robinson,” I greeted with a smile.

“Oh, Luna!” The older lady was definitely surprised to see me. “I wasn’t expecting another visit from you so soon. Sorry about the mess. We’ve just finished cooking.” She gestured towards the dozens of dirty pots and pans in the sink.

“Don’t worry about it. I hadn’t even noticed it,” I answered honestly. “I was just wondering if I could borrow your kitchen for a moment.”

“Of course! But,” she replied promptly. “I won’t let my Luna cook. Just tell me what you want, sweetheart, and I’ll have it done for you.”

“Back in my old pack, Omegas used to do a little bit of everything, so I’m used to cooking. In fact, I have to admit I miss it,” I told her. “I wanted to cook a special dinner for the guys. They have been working hard lately and I think they deserve a little break.”

“What a wonderful idea, Luna.” She smiled sweetly at me. “But let me help you, at least. I can’t rest knowing you are doing all the cooking by yourself.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Robinson. I appreciate it,” I replied wholeheartedly.

The hours flew by without me even noticing it. Although we were only cooking for six people, it took us almost six hours to get everything ready. As tiring as it sounded, I actually had a lot of fun; cooking was a pretty relaxing hobby. Mrs. Robinson and I were just finishing getting the dishes properly plated when the sound of Zephyr’s voice inside my head made me gasp in surprise.

“Hi, sunrise. We managed to set all of the traps, but I still have some paperwork to go over. Can you come to my office?” Oh, shit! He wasn’t supposed to be done so soon!

“I...uh...I’m kinda busy right now,” I answered quickly, instantly feeling his sadness. I almost wanted to tell him the truth. *“I’ll probably be done in an hour. Can we meet then?”*

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah, that’s...that’s fine.” His tone was so miserable it made my heart ache. *“What exactly are you-”* he

started to question, but I knew better than to let him finish.

“Okay, see you later! Bye!” I said hurriedly before closing our connection.

That should hold him off for a while. Thankfully, it was almost time for the surprise, so I wouldn't have to lie to him for too long. After I helped Mrs. Robinson wash the dishes - very much against her wishes - I decided to check in with the girls and make sure they had everything ready.

“Hey, Nish. How's the decoration coming?”

“Oh, it's incredible! I've just finished it,” she informed me excitedly. *“Amaya just came back with the werewine too, and the stuff she got is amazing!”*

“That's awesome,” I sighed in relief. *“I'm done cooking as well. Do you think the two of you can help me carry everything?”*

“Sure thing!” She made a brief pause before she spoke again. *“Amaya and I will be heading there in Malin's truck. See you in a few,”* she told me before closing our connection.

Once the girls got to me, we carried everything into the truck and headed to the dandelion fields. What I saw when I got there made me lose my breath; the decoration was stunning.

In the center of the fields, a wooden archway with colorful roses led the way into a gigantic blue picnic blanket. There was a little plastic table over it and half a dozen white beach chairs scattered around. The sun had already set, but the place was illuminated by bamboo torches placed on the ground around the blanket.

“Wow.” I was speechless. *“You've really gone all out!”*

“I know, right? I told you, Nish - you killed it!” Amaya clapped proudly. *“When Malin and I get married, you'll be in charge of the decor!”*

“Girl, you know I'd be more than happy to do it!” Nisha agreed immediately. *“I'm glad you two like it. I hope the boys will, too.”*

“You think we should call them already?” I asked.

“Why not?” Amaya shrugged.

After linking each of our boys, we decided to hide behind the chairs while we waited for them. As soon as they arrived, they froze in their spots when they saw the set-up - that’s when the three of us jumped up screaming, “Surprise!” By the smiles on their faces, we already knew our idea had been a success. We greeted them with hugs and kisses before we all sat down to enjoy dinner and drink the night away.

“Thank you so much for this, sunrise,” Zephyr whispered in my ear, sending pleasant tingles down my whole body. “I love it. Your dinner was amazing.” After I smiled in response, he continued, “So, how was your day? Aside from all the cooking.”

“It was nice. I talked to a single mom whose son was having trouble sleeping since they moved into their new home. I suggested giving him some passionflower and lemon balm tea. It worked! Can you believe it?”

“I can, actually.” I was surprised when he replied to my rhetorical question. “My mom used to prepare that for me whenever I couldn’t sleep. It’s still the only thing that works for me to this day.”

“Oh my Goddess.” My hand moved to my mouth to cover a gasp of realization. “That’s how Dusk knew!” I concluded, leaving Zephyr confused.

I proceeded to explain what had happened to him. Once I was done, we shared a good laugh. We spent a couple hours talking and drinking wine with our friends. When everyone was a little dizzy, the couples started disappearing, and it was obvious from my mate’s expression he was considering doing the same.

“Do you want to run away too, my sunrise?” Zephyr asked in a husky tone as he leaned over me on the picnic blanket.

“I’d love to, my moonlight.” I chuckled. “But I was thinking... What if we let our wolves spend some time

together too? I feel a little bad that Dusk doesn't get to spend much time with Dawn."

"Hm, Dawn's been a little naughty lately. I'm not sure she deserves it." I furrowed my eyebrows at him, and he burst out laughing. "Alright. Let's do it!"

We both shifted into our wolves, and I was mesmerized by the way Dusk looked at his caramel blonde mate - it was the same way Zephyr looked at me. They approached each other and my black wolf didn't hesitate before sticking his muzzle into Dawn's neck, making her giggle. As I watched them cuddle and play together, I couldn't help but realize something.

My whole life had been pretty confusing, and it didn't seem like things would start making sense any time soon. But as long as I had Zephyr, we would make everything work.

27 | ORIGINS

After the relaxing evening the girls had prepared for us, my Elite members and I could finally start letting our guards down. All of the enchanted alarm traps had been placed across the border of our territory, which made us feel a lot safer. I decided to also keep the temporary measures, such as sending triple the usual amount of men on patrols and the extra training sessions, but it was possible to see the pack starting to calm down. Even if there was no reason for a new attack - at least not for now - we had done everything we could to ensure we were well-protected.

Sure, the boys and I were still busy with a few details, but the atmosphere in my office was lighter. After making a public announcement in the morning to inform the pack about the recent incident involving the Fallen we were able to catch, my team and I had lunch, then headed straight to my office.

The first thing we needed to do was call our newest allies, Alpha Sanders of Sapphire Pond Pack and Alpha Ruben of Dune Drifters Pack. We told them about the rogue's break in, as well as let them in on what we had discovered about the Fallen upon the National Elder Council's visit.

With that out of the way, my Gamma proceeded to offer us some insight on our current situation. He had been spending more time at the borders since the tragic incident during my mate's Luna Ceremony, studying the strengths and weaknesses of our security system.

“So, the I.N. Elder Council estimates that the Fallen army consists of around 300 enhanced rogues at the moment. I know we decided not to focus on numbers for now, but I couldn't help myself. Either way, I believe the data I've found upon my analysis to be quite relieving, which is why I wanna share it with you.” Zach slid a tablet across the table we'd been standing around. On its screen, we could see a digital spreadsheet. “After the merge with Silent Rivers, Wind

Howlers currently counts with the strength of precisely 203 warriors. If we add the 100 men Alpha Ruben lent to us, as well as Alpha Sanders' 54 wolves, including him, that leaves us with 357 warriors. The Fallen are strong, but we still outnumber them. With just the right traps, we should be protected from early attacks."

"That's a really great insight." I sighed in relief.

Zach continued to fill us in on other important details regarding the new traps he had set up to cover our blind spots. An hour flew by as the three of us discussed changes and made suggestions, until a knock on the door caught our attention. A second after I told them to come in, Nisha poked her head around the door.

"How's everything going?" she asked with a serene smile.

"We were just finishing up. You're welcome to join us if you'd like," I invited her.

"Oh, don't worry about it, Alpha Zephyr. I was just wondering how long it'd be until you were done for the day..." Although it seemed like she was talking to me, her dark eyes were fixated on my Gamma.

"I'll be free in a minute, my little magpie," Zach whispered. She nodded in response, biting her bottom lip to hide a smirk, as she closed the door.

"*Little?*" Dawn snorted. "*It's funny he'd call her little when he's clearly got his hands full with that one.*" I was so surprised that I just couldn't hold my laughter.

"Why do you always laugh randomly when I'm around?" My Gamma turned to me with a frown.

"You just make me *so* happy, man," I joked.

"I hate you," he replied quickly, turning his back to leave. "You too, Dawn."

"*I guess you were caught,*" I informed my she wolf.

"*Meh. He'd figure it out sooner or later.*" She shrugged, making me laugh even harder.

Just then, my Beta's phone rang. "Shoot. It's time for today's evening training session. I guess I should go."

"We'll just continue from where we left off tomorrow." I nodded at him.

"Good. That means the Great Lame Eagle can get into action sooner!" Malin teased, a big grin forming on his lips as he faced Zach.

All my Gamma did was frown. "Fuck off. Both of you." He made a brief pause, glaring at me. "All three of you," he corrected, including my she-wolf in his black list.

"Please leave before you kill each other. I don't want your blood staining my rug. This shit was expensive," I said playfully as I pushed them away. "Oh, and don't forget our meeting with Alpha Nolan early tomorrow."

After dismissing my Beta and Gamma, I remained in my office to go over some papers in my never-ending pile of documents. Since we had finished a little earlier than usual, I'd decided to use my alone time to hopefully kill some of the more boring tasks I had to take care of. Unfortunately - or fortunately, actually - my plans were interrupted by yet another knock on my door.

At first, I thought one of my friends could have forgotten something in the room, but it didn't take long for the most intoxicating fragrance to poison the air. A groan reverberated in my throat as I allowed myself to take a deep breath, inhaling my favorite scent. Before I could get up to open the door for my Luna, she casually walked in. If her malicious intent wasn't obvious from the way her eyes targeted me as if I was her next prey, she carefully locked the door behind her, letting me know that she was up to no good.

"Missing me already?" I broke the deafening silence, staring right back at her.

"You know I always do, my moonlight."

In a slow, sensual walk, Valentina closed the distance between us to sit on my lap. My hands grasped her waist tightly, attracted to her magnetic body. Eager to inhale her

exotic fragrance from the core, I dove my face into the crook of her neck, making her giggle. The gracious melody alone made my dick throb in my pants.

“Hmm... What was keeping you busy, my Luna?” I asked her, already trailing kisses along her collarbone, left pleasantly exposed by the thin straps of her sundress.

“I was checking in on the single mother and her pup...” Her soft hands moved to my face, forcing me to look into her eyes again. “And once I was done, I decided to check on you. What about you?” Her fingertips traced my jawline, feeling the texture of my ever-growing light stubble. “Were you fantasizing about me, my Alpha?”

“There’s not a single second of the day when I don’t,” I replied with a smile.

“Well, you don’t have to fantasize anymore. I’m right here,” she whispered in a sensual tone, leaning close enough for her lips to brush against mine in a tortuous manner.

“Don’t tempt me, my princess,” I warned her. “I won’t hesitate to bend you over this desk and take you a thousand times. I don’t care if we ruin all of the pack’s documents.” I pointed at the mess of the papers on my desk with my head.

“Oh, we wouldn’t want that to happen.” She faked concern as she bravely dragged her hand over the paperwork that was resting on my table, pushing all of it to the ground. “Whoops. I guess there’s nothing standing in your way anymore.”

A mischievous smirk lit up her face, and I couldn’t hold myself back any longer. In a swift movement, I rose from my chair, lifting her by her thighs. Without a second thought, I let her ass smash against my desk at the same time I crashed my lips against hers. She moaned into my mouth in both surprise and delight, encouraging my tongue to continue its assault.

Valentina wrapped her arms around my neck for support as I continued to push her further down into the wooden surface. Resting one of my forearms on my desk, I let my free hand travel down my mate’s throat and between her breasts, until I reached her most sensitive spot. It was obvious she’d have

underwear on, but it still annoyed me that my fingers couldn't immediately enter her. At least the realization of how warm and moist the thin fabric felt was just as rewarding.

"You're always so wet for me, my sunrise," I whispered into her ear.

Without warning, she grazed the top of her bare foot against my erection, making me groan. "Just like you're always so hard for me," she retorted fiercely.

"You're right." I smiled against her lips. "But before I ram it up your delicious pussy, I wanna taste you first."

I pulled away slightly, just to look into her eyes. Never breaking eye-contact, hungry for the way she devoured me with her sexy gaze, I slowly lowered myself. Resting my face between her legs, I placed wet kisses on both sides of her thighs. At last, I pressed my lips against her folds over her underwear, causing her to release yet another moan. She wrapped her fingers tightly on my wild hair, pushing me closer to her.

"Ah, Zephyr..."

"Are you going to watch me go down on you, my sunrise?" All she did was nod, already too lost in her daze to form a vocal answer. "I'll make sure to put on a show for you, then."

My fingers played with the straps of her panties, but before I could tear them off, the sound of someone clearing their throat made me freeze.

The door to my office was locked. I saw Valentina lock it with my own eyes. How could anyone have gotten in? The situation only started making sense when I lifted my head over my mate's legs, at the same time that she jumped off the desk in horror after turning around to find none other than...

"Cassiopeia?" I asked calmly. From the corner of my eye, I saw Tina's cheeks flush red.

"Uh...bad timing?" The witch arched an eyebrow, flashing me an apologetic smile.

“You could’ve knocked, you know!” my Luna yelled, still in shock.

“Sorry. Witches don’t tend to have that habit.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I have something very important to tell you.”

“I would hope so, as you’ve just interrupted something equally important.” I frowned at her before a thought crossed my mind. “Is this about the traps? Because we finished placing them yesterday, and-”

“I hope you’re not doubting the efficiency of my magic, little Alpha.” She too scrunched her brows. “They work fine. I’m here because I promised I’d come find you if I found more information on you and your mate’s wolves.”

Tina and I immediately looked at each other. She seemed a little worried, but the determination in her eyes proved that she was just as eager as I was to understand what was going on. I was finally at peace with Dawn, and Valentina never seemed to have problems with Dusk. Still, we couldn’t deny that we both felt...incomplete. If there was anything Cass could tell us to help us make sense of our unusual situation, then we were ready to hear it.

“Go on,” I told her, pulling my mate closer as she sat on her chair next to mine.

“Last time I was here, Valentina told me her parents were Omegas. At first, I thought that maybe I was wrong. It’d been a long time since I’d heard of that prophecy, so I started looking into the details to try and sort out the discrepancies. Just like I’d thought, I was right; the prophecy involves two true Alphas.”

“So you’re here to tell us this prophecy is *not* about us?” I cocked my head to the side.

“Have a little more patience, little Alpha. I was getting there. You waited nine months to be born, didn’t you?”

“Four, actually,” I corrected her.

“Oh, right. Because you’re a wolf.” Cass was thoughtful for a moment before shaking her head. “Anyway, you can wait

another minute while I finish the story.” She took a deep breath. “At that point, I was ready to let it go, *but...*” she emphasized, “the bond I felt between you and your wolves was nothing like any other case I’ve ever studied. That’s why I decided to dig into your past.” She pointed at my mate, who was utterly confused. “And what I found was rather surprising. Valentina, your parents were indeed Alphas, as were your grandparents. You are a true Alpha, just like Zephyr.”

I widened my eyes in surprise, but Tina spoke before I could say anything. “That’s impossible. I don’t know what you think you’ve learned about my origins, but you’re clearly mistaken,” my mate’s tone was calm, but skeptical. “Though it’s true that I was young when my parents were executed, I was old enough to remember them. They were Omegas, without a doubt. I even remember them plotting against Alpha Rhys of the former Silent Rivers Pack.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t know the truth. Your parents hid you well, and so did Rhys, even if it wasn’t his intention.” Cass flashed my Luna a sympathetic smile. With a snap of her fingers, an open book magically appeared in her hands. She didn’t hesitate to hand it over to Tina, pointing at the picture of a couple. “Are these your parents?”

“Yes,” Tina answered without hesitation.

“These may be the people who took you in, but they’re not your parents. These are your aunt - your mom’s sister - and your uncle.” The witch flipped a few pages, pointing at a different couple. I held my breath; the resemblance between them and my mate was striking. “*These* are your birth parents. They’re also the former Alpha and Luna of Diamond Stream Pack. Rhys challenged your father for his pack and killed him in combat. I believe your mother left you under your aunt’s care before trying to avenge her mate. Unfortunately, she also died. Your aunt must have raised you as her own to protect you; it would explain how you never found out about it, and why she was plotting to take her Alpha down. I couldn’t find what pack Rhys previously belonged to in any books, nor why he changed your pack’s original name, but that’s not important.”

By the time Cass was done explaining, Valentina's eyes were wide open, just like her mouth, yet she was speechless. Feeling my mate's despair, I wrapped her in a side hug. I could only imagine what she was going through. It was already a lot for me to take in, but it was definitely ten times worse for her. Understanding that her whole life had been a lie had to be a hard pill to swallow.

"It's... That's not possible... It can't be true." Valentina was distraught. Her face was pale as if she'd just seen a ghost. It killed me to see her that way.

"It's okay, sunrise. You're here with me; you're safe. None of that matters now," I reassured her, running my hands carefully up and down her back in an attempt to comfort her.

"It kind of matters, actually," Cass interrupted us again, approaching my mate. "Valentina, I know it's a lot of information, but this proves you're a true Alpha. That means the two of you are the Switched Pair mentioned in the prophecy!" she concluded excitedly. I had no idea why she was so happy about it, but my mate was upset, and her behavior was starting to make me angry.

"Why should we even believe any of that shit is real?" I frowned. "Who even wrote about that stupid prophecy?"

"All prophecies are real," Cass said simply. "Prophecies are magically created by the Gods, usually to maintain balance. If a dark force becomes too strong in an unnatural way, a new light force is created to match it, and vice-versa. This is how the higher powers ensure that there is never too much good, nor too much evil in the world."

"So we're supposed to be the good ones?" I scoffed. "And what kind of greater evil have we been created to balance?"

"The Fallen," Valentina stated decisively. Her usually vivid green eyes were darker and colder.

"Precisely," Cass agreed before continuing. "The Switched Pair is supposed to be the strongest wolf couple to ever exist. If anyone can defeat the Fallen army, restoring life's balance, it's the two of you."

Goddess, I felt like my head was about to explode. As if me ending up with someone else's wolf wasn't bizarre enough, I had just been told that my mate was actually an Alpha by blood, and we were destined to...fight the bad guys? It sounded too crazy to be true.

"Say we believe it..." I started, still frowning. "How exactly do we defeat the Fallen? No one's been able to stop them so far."

"Well, you were the first to catch one of them. And now you know they have a few singularities that make them stronger, but so do you." Cass smiled again and I braced myself for whatever craziness she still had in store for us. "The Switched Pair is composed of the Darkbringer and the Lightbringer. You have your own special abilities."

"Like seeing through each other's eyes?" Valentina's voice was filled with disbelief, but when she turned to me, her expression was a mix of horror and realization. "Zephyr... It makes sense! The dreams we used to have and...the rogue! You said that when Dawn was blinded, you saw him coming at you through Dusk's eyes!"

"Yeah...but that's probably only happening because our wolves have been switched." I shrugged.

"In the cases I studied, no other shifter with a switched wolf could do that. That's gotta be one of the special abilities mentioned in the prophecy," the witch concluded.

"*One of them?! You mean there's more?!*" I asked in awe.

Out of the blue, Valentina broke free from my grasp, jumping off her chair to storm out of the office. Even if we hadn't marked each other yet, I could feel every single one of her overwhelming emotions: pain, fear, rage, confusion. I should've known that it was becoming too much for her to take. I should've told Cass to stop. But I didn't, and now my mate was hurting.

"Look, Cass, thank you for...whatever the hell *that* was," I waved my hand in her direction, still frowning. "We need

some time to think.” I stood up and turned around to leave, but stopped when I felt the witch hold my arm.

“You don’t have much time, little Alpha. The leader of the Fallen doesn’t know you exist yet, or else he would’ve come to kill you.” She stared straight into my eyes. “But he will find you two, and you must be prepared when that happens. You have to start mastering your abilities now.”

For a few seconds, I just stood there looking at her. Eventually, I shook my head and left the room without saying another word. Tina needed me, and that was my priority right now.

28 | ABILITIES

Valentina's emotions were louder than the clashing of my shoes on the wooden floor as I rushed down the hallway towards the Alpha suite. As soon as I burst into our room, I wasn't surprised to find her staring out the window. Not willing to stress her even more, I collected my breath before approaching her calmly, hoping to transpire serenity.

Once I got closer to her, I managed to see her reflection in the glass. My heart sank deeper as I noticed that she looked like she wanted to cry, though no tears fell from her beautiful golden eyes. I carefully ran my fingers through her hair, placing a long kiss on the back of her head before cocooning her with my arms in an instinctive attempt to shield her from the world.

"I'm here if you wanna talk about it," I let her know. Even when she remained silent, still in my embrace, I stayed as close to her as possible.

Ever since I was a pup, it always bothered me seeing the ones I cared about sad, mostly because I didn't know what to do to help them. I wasn't a big fan of saying things like "it'll be alright." How could I be sure of that when I didn't truly understand what the person was feeling? It always seemed wrong to pretend I knew what they were going through. Everyone fought their own battles; I had no right to judge how hard or easy it was. So, I usually resorted to simply staying quiet and offering them a friendly shoulder.

After a long time, my mate's words echoed in my ear, low as a whisper, "Why can nothing ever feel right in my life?" A sob threatened to escape her lips as her voice cracked, but she quickly recomposed herself. "I tried to make friends, but I never fit in with the other Omegas. While they were happy bowing their heads and doing what they were told, I didn't feel like that was my purpose. Then, I got a male wolf, and that seemed like the major confirmation of what a freak I was..."

She made a short pause, struggling to continue. “Even now that I know why my soul was tied with Dusk’s, I’m still so confused. For once in my life, everything was starting to make sense. But now... Now I’m just as lost as I’ve always been.”

“I can’t say I understand how you feel...” I held her tighter, breathing into her hair as I literally felt her pain. “Growing up as the Alpha’s son, I was adored by everyone. I never questioned my place in the world, as my life had already been decided for me before I was even born.” I gently spun her around, bringing her to face me. “But I know what it’s like to feel empty and lost. We’ll find our way, together. *That* I can promise you.” I brought my hand up to her face, but she stopped me.

“How can you promise me that?” she whispered, overcome with sadness and doubt. “I just found out that my whole life was a lie. When I was four, I mourned the loss of my parents, who were actually my aunt and uncle. At their funeral, I swore to never cry again, because nothing could be worse than losing your parents, right?” The look of despair on her face was heartbreaking. “Except now it’s like I’ve lost them all over again. What’s worse, I don’t even know who they were this time!”

“I can’t begin to imagine what that must feel like...” I told her sincerely, struggling to hide the ache in my own voice. “But rest assured, I will never judge you, Valentina. You’re safe with me. Cry if you feel like it.” Her eyes widened as the truth behind my words surprised her. “All my life, I heard that Alphas shouldn’t show emotion, as they believed it made them weaker. But, now, looking at you...I realize that’s bullshit. It’s easy to hide and suck it up, but to face your demons without fear, that takes balls.” I let out a sad laugh as I rested my forehead against hers. “So, if you wanna cry, do it. Hell, I might even join you.”

For a long while, Valentina just stood there staring into my eyes. It was as if she was trying to reach into my soul to search for evidence that she could really trust me. In the end, she gave in, burying her face in my chest. Hugging her as tightly as I could, I tried my best to numb her pain.

When I felt her warm tears through the fabric of my shirt, I felt miserable. My precious, golden sunrise had been through so much. It hurt me to see her pouring her pain out, but in a way, it also felt liberating. It was relieving to know she was freeing herself from everything she kept bottled up because of a promise she'd made to herself. It was impossible not to be reminded of the many times I did the same, and for what? To sustain some stupid stereotype? For once, I wanted to feel all what I had been blocking since I was a pup. So, I did.

It was hard to tell how much time went by as we, the unbreakable Alpha and the girl who never cried, shared tears with each other in silence. At first, it seemed a little ironic. But on second thought, I guessed that was exactly what mates were supposed to do - free you from pain, turning you into a better version of yourself.

And I was damn grateful for having found my sunrise.

After Goddess only knew how long, Valentina glanced up at me. Her face was swollen and red, but there was fire in her bright golden eyes. Despite my initial surprise, a smile lit up my face as soon as I understood what was on her mind.

“Thank you for this, Zephyr. I won't spend another minute feeling sorry for myself,” she vowed, both to me and to herself. “I'm done wasting time. If it truly is our destiny to stop the Fallen, then we must do it. I refuse to sit by and watch them destroy our pack, and a thousand more to come until they wipe out our species.” She wiped away the remaining tears on her cheeks and mine, straightening up soon after. “Cassiopeia said we should start training as soon as possible, whatever that means. I say we do it now.”

The whole situation still felt surreal to me, but if my mate believed we should dive head first into this madness, then I would gladly support her. “Okay. How do you wanna do it?”

“We're free for the rest of the day. Let's go to the dandelion fields. We can shift there and see if our wolves can help us figure our abilities out.” Her suggestion was more of an order, and I couldn't help but find her commanding attitude

hot. The powerful aura surrounding her was hypnotizing; I'd do anything she told me to.

"Sounds like a plan." I stepped away from her, still holding her hand, and gestured for her to lead the way.

* * *

To get to the fields faster, we hopped into my Ferrari and I drove us there. Once we arrived, we took off our clothes and left them in the car to prevent them from getting destroyed during our shift. Taking one last deep breath together, we let our wolves out to test the witch's theory. From the moment Dawn was freed, I could sense her desire to be with her mate, but like Valentina, she seemed determined to find out what we could do.

"Do you have any clues where to start? Since you're supposed to be a special wolf and all," I asked my she-wolf first.

"The fact that I've been able to stand you this long alone proves I'm special. I doubt any of my other skills will be as impressive," she joked, and I had to roll my eyes at her.

"I'll take that as a no." Momentarily closing our connection, I mindlinked my Luna. *"Would you like me to call Cass? Maybe she can give us some direction."*

"No," she answered promptly as Dusk shook his massive head. I immediately cursed myself. She obviously wouldn't want to see the witch after the rush of emotions she'd just put us through. *"I wanna try this with you alone first. If we can't make progress, we'll talk to her."*

"Alright," I replied. Dawn sat down, scratching her ear with her hind foot while I tried to think of a starting point. *"Let's see... We know we both had visions where we could see through each other's eyes. If we can understand what triggered that, we might learn how to control it."*

"Well, that's not too hard. Every time it happened, at least one of us was in wolf form. Last time with the rogue, both our wolves were out at the same time, so that could be a requirement."

“Makes sense,” I agreed. “We were also either conflicted or afraid in most cases. Maybe we projected these visions to each other as a call for help. But more importantly, all the times it happened were when we-”

“When we had our eyes closed,” Tina concluded. “Let’s start off with that.”

Our wolves nodded at each other before taking a few steps back and turning around. Dawn closed her eyes, and we stood there, completely in the dark, for a good few seconds until we realized that we were doing something wrong.

“Zephyr.”

“Yes?”

“If we both close our eyes, neither of us will see a thing!”
My mate’s laughter echoed inside my head.

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” I cleared my throat, trying to hide my embarrassment. *“You go first, then. Close your eyes and tell me what I’m seeing.”*

I waited anxiously for her response, just as curious to know if our first attempt at it was going to work. It seemed like it wasn’t going to work, but then I heard Valentina’s voice again.

“There’s a brown bird...a robin? It’s about 15 feet away, hopping between the dandelions, and...it’s gone.”

“Yep. It just took flight!” I had to admit I was a little skeptical at first, but hearing her describe exactly what Dawn was seeing was nothing short of extraordinary - magical, even. *“Good job, sunrise.”*

“Awesome! Your turn now,” my mate cooed, at the same time that her male wolf barked excitedly.

“What should I do?”

“Just try to clear your mind and focus on Dusk. He’s supposed to be you, so just be you.”

Taking her advice, I told Dawn to close her eyes. The whole time, I tried my best to concentrate on seeing through

Dusk's perspective. At first, there was only darkness, as I couldn't figure out exactly how to reach out to my real wolf-self. Instead of trying to analyze and understand the process, I eventually decided to simply stop overthinking. Next thing I knew, I could see again, even though my she-wolf's eyes were still closed.

"You're admiring the view you've loved from the moment you came here," I told her, unable to hold back a smile.

"Yes! You did it too!" my mate cheered while Dusk howled in joy. *"You know what? Learning with you makes this a lot less scary."*

"I'll always be with you, my sunrise," I reassured her. At the same time, Dawn approached her mate, rubbing her muzzle against his chest in a wolfish hug. *"Wanna practice some more?"*

"Yeah!" Tina giggled.

The hour flew by as we tried to connect with our individual wolves to better understand our newly-discovered skill. Training our special ability - well, at least the one we already knew about - was actually quite interesting. However, it was also very draining. By the time we decided to call it a day, we both had headaches. Agreeing that it would be best not to overdo ourselves on our first try, we returned to the pack house to dine. Once we were done, we headed straight to our room.

I was glad that we were learning how to use our special abilities, but there was something more important I needed to focus on for the time being. We were just about to meet the Alpha of the last pack standing between us and the Fallen, and if we convinced him to form an alliance with us, it could change everything.

* * *

"Are you ready for this, man?" Malin asked, rolling the limo's windows down to let some fresh air in.

"For another 'no,' you mean? Yeah. I think I've gotten pretty good at nailing those kinds of failures," I replied, half-

joking.

“Let’s not forget that we managed to get a deal with a large pack from Galensoles, and an alliance with Sapphire Pond,” my Luna recalled. “Just stay positive.”

“We also have two of their high ranking females mated to our Beta and Gamma. I’m afraid we’ve run out of single men to help us close a deal.” My joke earned me a punch in the arm from my mate.

The day following my private training with Valentina, we woke up early in the morning to get dressed in formal clothes and get moving. Since Raven Woods Pack was located just past our territory’s northern border, it only took us about 20 minutes to get there.

Raven Woods was about the same size as Wind Howlers used to be before the merge. They also had almost the exact same number of members. Alpha Nolan, their leader, used to have an alliance with us, but he terminated it when he found out about me being paired with a female wolf. He was quite honest when he said he thought that made our pack weak, and that he needed to direct his resources towards finding stronger allies. Knowing that the Fallen would attack his lands sooner or later, he was just as worried as I had been.

As soon as we hopped out of the limousine, we walked past a couple of cottages before we made it to the packhouse. It was very modern with rounded edges and its snow white and midnight blue color scheme, though what truly made the building stand out was its many glass walls.

Alpha Nolan was already waiting for us at the entrance with his Beta by his side. He was wearing a tired expression, which led me to believe that he had his hands full with the preparations for a war he’d soon have to fight. After a long sigh, I forced a smile as I stepped forward to greet them.

“Good afternoon, Alpha Nolan.” I shook his hand, gesturing towards my mate right after. “Allow me to introduce you to my mate and Luna, Valentina Quill.”

“It’s good to see you again, Alpha Zephyr. I’ve heard you’ve become a fine leader.” Despite his genuine tone, I couldn’t believe his words; after all, he did end our alliance just because of my counterpart’s gender. “And it’s an honor to meet you, Luna Valentina.” Since he already knew everyone else, he simply addressed them briefly before welcoming us to follow him inside.

I kept one arm wrapped around my Luna’s waist at all times as we made our way to his office on the third floor. As soon as we were comfortably seated, his Beta kindly offered us a cup of coffee. I denied it, as my body never reacted well to caffeine, but Valentina was quick to accept it; she had been looking a little tired since our training session the previous day.

“What brings you here, Alpha Zephyr? I hope everything is going great with Wind Howlers. Heard you conquered Silent Rivers recently. Congratulations!” Alpha Nolan smiled at me.

“Turns out my weak she-wolf was actually stronger than another Alpha. Who would’ve thought, huh?” His face fell as he tasted the poison in my words, almost as if he’d just realized his mistake.

“Calm down, kitten,” Dawn warned me. “I want to rub it in his face as much as you do, but you need to remember what we’re here for. We want him on our side.” There she was, being the voice of reason again.

I sighed. “Anyway, I’m here to propose a new deal. I’m aware that you thought Wind Howlers wouldn’t be of great help in a fight against the Fallen, but we’ve pretty much doubled in size since our severed alliance. I believe that we’ll be stronger together, which will grant us a better chance at taking down our common enemy for good,” I explained, looking into his eyes with complete honesty.

“Please, believe me when I say that I completely agree with you...” He paused for a second as his expression was filled with concern. “But I’m afraid I can’t afford any more treaties. With the news of the Fallen approaching Genoro, I traveled around the country to establish alliances with the

strongest packs. As you must know, quality has a price...and I was willing to pay whatever amount I was asked to ensure the safety of my pack.” Nolan massaged his temples in utter distress. “In doing so, I’ve completely emptied the pack’s account.”

Although I tried to maintain a neutral expression, I couldn’t stop my eyes from widening at his shocking revelation. As I had told Malin earlier, I wasn’t hopeful about us getting a deal with Raven Woods, but out of all the excuses their leader could offer me, I wasn’t expecting that. Alliances were more bureaucratic than deals, and they usually involved high-value transactions. That way, if one of the parties didn’t fulfill something that had been agreed upon, they were forced by werewolf law to let go of a large sum as compensation.

I believed an alliance with Raven Woods would benefit both of us. I wanted to help Alpha Nolan, and I was certain it would be great to have his support, too. Sadly, I couldn’t risk making a deal with him without any kind of contract. It could potentially be harmful for our pack, and taking into consideration the situation we were facing, I couldn’t take any more risks.

After my long silence, he went on, “It was the only way out I could find. I honestly don’t know how we’ll survive after the war, but I’m taking things one step at a time. At least I know I’ve done everything possible to make sure we were prepared.” He forced a smile. “Rest assured, Alpha Zephyr, we won’t be the next victims of the Fallen. We have over 500 warriors and they’re all exceptionally trained. The enemy won’t have a chance.” Despite his attempt to sound confident, I didn’t miss the slight shakiness in his tone. He hoped he could defeat the threat, but he was clearly scared of what would happen if he didn’t.

“Yes, of course.” I mimicked his smile as I stood up to shake his hand. “Can I just ask something of you before we take our leave?”

“Sure.” Nolan waved his hand, gesturing for me to proceed.

“The National Elder Council has the assistance of a witch. She developed special traps to target the Fallen.” I pulled one of the devices out of the box my Beta was carrying, handing it over to the other Alpha. “As you must have read in the latest report issued by the Council, the Fallen are scentless, which gives them the upper hand during an attack. This trap can identify them regardless of that and will send out an alert to give you a chance to fight back.”

“Interesting...” Alpha Nolan examined the device curiously, but put it down soon after and sighed.

Knowing what he would say, I continued before him, “I want you to take it as a gift.” His eyes immediately widened in surprise. “I’ve already secured my borders with a bunch of these. I’m sure you’ll make good use of this one,” I insisted.

Nolan was speechless for a moment. “Thank you, Alpha Zephyr. I will not forget your help,” he reassured me.

“It’s no problem at all.” I smiled sympathetically before turning around to leave, but the Alpha stopped me one more time.

“There’s just one last thing I’d like to say,” he whispered, looking away from me. “I’m sorry for doubting your she-wolf’s capabilities. It was foolish of me as a leader, but I was desperate. I hope you can accept my sincere apologies.”

“You’re forgiven.” I nodded at him. “I wish your pack all the luck in your fight against the Fallen.”

Despite my honesty, a single thought couldn’t leave my head as we made our way back to our pack: unfortunately, apologizing wouldn’t restore our alliance with Raven Woods. All I could do was pray that Nolan was right, and that with the help of his army, they would be able to defeat the Fallen before they got to us.

INTERLUDE VII

Zachari

All my life, I thought I was fine with being alone. No one could understand me anyway, or so I had told myself following my failed love confession, when I decided I should start keeping everything to myself. Aside from Zephyr and Malin, whom I hated to love, I didn't have any other friends. Not that I wanted any more anyway; I already had my hands full with those two.

I didn't realize that there was something better than loneliness until my mate came along. Although I was constantly noticing that, it became even more obvious when she was accompanying me on my daily duties, like right now. While the Beta and the Alpha couple were away at a meeting in Raven Woods Pack, Nisha and I drove Malin's old truck around the borders of our territory in comfortable silence.

Before leaving, Zephyr assigned me the task of checking the traps we had recently placed to ensure they were still working. I would normally roam the perimeter once a week, when I would also talk to our sentinels and scouts to know if they had noticed anything out of the ordinary. However, in face of the recent events, we would rather be safe than sorry. It was fine by me; I got to do the job that I loved while also enjoying the company of the only female who didn't look at me like I was a weird nerd.

The more time I spent with Nisha, the easier it was to realize how much of a fool I had been to fear her. She was the life of the party, but she never tried to drag me out of the shadows I lived so comfortably in. Despite being of Alpha blood, she showed interest in my job as a Gamma, which most of the other wolves just found boring. We were complete opposites, yet somehow, she was perfect for me.

Nevertheless, not even my fated partner could change my shy nature. I trusted her with my life, and I knew she would never purposefully hurt or make fun of me. Still, that didn't rid me of my fear of making a fool of myself by saying or doing something wrong. I had no idea how to behave in a relationship. Dating simulators were the only games I could never beat, and I kind of regretted not having invested more time trying to figure them out.

Thankfully, Nisha had made it clear to me that she had no trouble waiting. Unlike Talon, she was willing to take things slow and let me move at my own pace.

“What’s bothering you, my handsome crow?” I didn’t realize I had been staring blankly at my mate until her strong, melodic voice brought me back to reality.

Even if we hadn’t known each other for long, Nisha could easily notice the smallest changes in my expression. She could tell the differences between my neutral frown, my happy frown, my angry frown, and my confused frown. It was only obvious she had noticed that there was something on my mind.

Ever since I was a pup, I had a terrible tendency to overthink. My mind was constantly running a million miles a minute, yet whenever my eyes landed on Nisha, my head just...cleared. It was as if she could use her angel wings to blow away all that was irrelevant.

“Nothing, my little magpie.” As I cleared my throat, I made sure to get my eyes back on the road. Malin’s truck has roamed the Earth since before the dinosaurs, but he would still kill me if I crashed it into a tree. “We’re almost done for the day. Is there something you’d like to do once we get back to the main square?”

“Hmm, let’s see...” She pressed her index finger against her bottom lip, while her nose twitched in the same way it did whenever she was thoughtful. “Oh! How about tacos and videogames? I swear I can beat you in Super Smash Sissies this time!”

“We don’t always have to do the things I like to do, you know...” I said in a barely audible voice, shrinking in the

driver's seat. I knew I wasn't like the other guys. The idea of a perfect day for me was locking myself in my room with enough fast food and games to survive for a week. However, the last thing I wanted was for her to feel that our dates always had to go my way. I'd try anything for her. "We can go out, if you'd like. Maybe catch a movie?"

"Hey, it's okay, Zach." Nisha flashed me one of her dazzling smiles. "I enjoy a cozy afternoon in bed every once in a while. But if you're up for it, I might just drag you to the next party I can find." There was playfulness in her tone, but I was dead serious when I answered her.

"Whatever you want, little magpie." I nodded at her, stopping the car as we reached our destination. "This is our final stop for the day."

I hopped out and went straight to the place where I knew the last trap should be. Despite how well it had been hidden, I had a pretty good memory, and since I helped set them up, it wasn't hard for me to identify their exact location. I climbed up the tree just enough to check on the device. As soon as I made sure everything was in order, I jumped back down. After my feet hit the ground again, I turned around to head back into the truck, but stopped when I realized Nisha wasn't in her seat anymore. She must have gotten out of the car while I was working. Quickly scanning my surroundings, I found her leaning sideways against a tree trunk, looking down at our territory from the hill where we stood. Her position gave me a clear view of her voluptuous behind, and my gaze immediately locked on it. Lights! What is wrong with me?

My feet moved against my will, inching towards my mate, who was only a few feet away. During the entirety of my short journey, my eyes never left her assets. I couldn't help but analyze those perfectly round melons stretching her tight jeans. It would be so easy to free them with my claws. Just thinking about seeing her naked made me drool and my fur bristle. What a wonder it would be to finally taste her skin, take a good lick at her... Wait. Those weren't my thoughts.

"*You!*" I growled at Talon. Shit! How could I have been so careless as to let him steal control like that?

Before I could realize what was going on, the sharp sound of a slap cut the silence. Nisha turned around abruptly, a shocked expression on her face. The situation didn't make any more sense to me than it did to her...until I felt something deliciously soft against the palm of my hand. It was the most amazing texture I had ever had the pleasure to feel. It was semi-dense, firm, yet malleable, and...

Oh, Goddess, my hand was on her ass!

As I stared right back at Nisha in horror, I cursed myself for what I had done. How did that even happen?! Then, a mischievous laugh echoed in the depths of my mind, allowing me to finally put two and two together.

"Thank me later, kid. I knew you would never have the balls to do it!" His laughter ended with a purr of satisfaction.

"My dirty crow..." My mate's sensual voice immediately pulled me from my conversation with my wolf; it was huskier than ever. "If you wanted me, you could have just said so."

Next thing I knew, her electric blue eyes, hungry as that of a starving lioness successfully ambushing her prey, locked on mine. Her predatory gaze alone stunned me, like I was an injured animal about to become her meal. When her hands rested on my chest, which was heaving up and down due to my erratic breathing, I couldn't move. All I could do was stand there, petrified, as her skilled fingers traveled down my stomach, eager to reach the waistband of my pants. The lower she got, the more my erection sprung into notice.

Oh, Goddess! How far was she planning on going? I was already hyperventilating. At this rate, I would probably pass out in a minute. This was too much. I wasn't ready for this yet!

"For the Light of the Crescent! You're a disaster, Zach." My wolf touched his face with his paw, shaking his head in disapproval. *"I have to save this sinking ship before you embarrass the both of us. Watch and learn, kiddo!"*

A wolfish grin lit up Talon's face. It was the only warning I got from him, but it was already too late. In my panic attack, I had accidentally lowered my guard down again. Such a fact

became evident a second later, when my wolf forced its way towards the surface, freeing himself. My situation seemed bad enough as it was, but I should have known it could always get worse. When I saw the shreds of my clothes floating in the air around me, I almost lost it.

“What the fuck, Talon! You destroyed my clothes!” I yelled in horror.

“For crying out loud Zach, calm down. You won’t be needing them now anyway.” He chuckled. Amidst my despair, I frowned. Even my wolf enjoyed messing with me.

“Oh! Hi there, my handsome grackle. What a pleasant surprise it is to see you,” Nisha cooed the moment her eyes landed on Talon. Her attention alone made a low rumble reverberate in his chest. When she finally touched him, diving her hand into his rough coat, he wagged his tail like a pup. “Is this how we’re doing it, then? I’m all for it. I’ve never tried doing it in wolf form.”

Doing what?! I barely had time to think. In the blink of an eye, Twyla came out to stand in the exact same spot her human-self had been an instant ago. Without hesitation, she hopped in Talon’s direction. In a gentle manner, she touched his muzzle with the tip of her nose in a quick kiss, but my beast wasn’t as tender. He started biting the scruff of her neck, careful not to pierce her skin, but hard enough to make his intentions of pulling her down clear. With a high-pitched, continuous bark, she mimicked him, trying to catch his ears.

Suddenly, Twyla dropped to the floor with a thud. Her back hit the grass as she rolled from side to side, keeping her belly exposed as if she was calling her mate. Of course, Talon didn’t dismiss her invitation. He crawled on top of her, and as his fur rubbed against hers, I felt a rush of desire roll over me.

Was it fucked up that I was getting turned on watching two wolves get intimate with each other?

“We are one and the same, kid. As are Nisha and Twyla.” Talon’s voice echoed in my head again. *“You feel what I feel, and vice-versa. Human or wolf, you love Twyla as much you love Nisha. The same goes for me.”* Another feral-sounding

growl rumbled up from his chest as he turned his attention back to the she-wolf underneath him. *“But the only time I get to have some fun is when her animal side comes out to play.”*

As if to prove his observation, my wolf rubbed his face against his mate’s neck rather roughly, covering her in his scent. His gesture made her purr happily. When he was satisfied, he backed up just enough to be able to lick the white stripe on her chest. Her soft fur tasted like cotton candy on his tongue. Little by little, he made his way down her body. I held my breath when he reached her lower stomach, where her fur became thinner, allowing him to feel her skin.

I knew exactly where Talon was headed. Seeing through his eyes reminded me of the first time I watched porn, only now it had a...furry twist. Twyla’s cries of pleasure when he started licking between her legs were an enticing melody, though they didn’t drive him as crazy as the taste of her nectar did.

“Hmm,” my wolf growled lowly as he sniffed his mate’s fragrance from the core. *“This is your last chance, kid. If you’re not ready to claim her yet, I gladly will.”*

“Give me back control, Talon! Now!” I demanded bravely.

“Alright. I’ve made the job a lot easier for you,” he pointed out as he climbed off Twyla, making her whimper at the sudden loss of contact. *“She’s hot, wet, and ready. Don’t fuck this up!”*

Staying true to his promise, Talon retreated to the back of my mind, allowing me to come forth again. Once the transformation was over, I was completely naked with my hands and knees on the floor, copying my wolf’s stance. Twyla’s gaze immediately locked on my hardened member, and despite my uneasiness, I didn’t hide from her. She rolled onto her belly before her dark fur started to retreat through her pores. I sat up on my knees as I watched in awe as she transformed back into the most angelic woman I had ever seen.

“Talon is a tease, but I want you now,” Nisha said in a low voice, walking towards me. As I got lost in her blue eyes, one

of her hands grasped my chin firmly, holding me in place. “Do you want me too, my handsome crow?”

“Y-yes,” I stuttered, still somewhat reluctant. I knew what my body wanted, but I was too self-conscious to give in.

“*Stop fighting your instincts!*” Talon growled at me. “*Allow yourself to feel it, kid. Let the mate pull guide your body, like the wind guides your soul.*”

Nodding at him, I inhaled deeply to collect my ragged breath. Soon after, I looked straight into Nisha’s eyes, knowing only the sight of her could stop me from overthinking. A moment later, my muscles stopped shaking. My wolf lent me his power so I could let out my deepest desires in the form of a lustful roar.

“Yes!” I repeated, louder, my canines protruding out. “I want you, little magpie. I want to make you mine!”

Her eyes widened in surprise. Before I could second-guess my decision, I pulled her down and pressed my lips against hers. My tongue invaded her mouth feverishly while my hands traveled along her curves, exploring every inch of her perfect body. Initially, my palms were drawn to her huge breasts. When I touched her hardened nipples, the beast inside of me urged me to take them between my lips. So, I did.

Nisha let out a pleasant moan the instant my tongue flicked over her nipple, while my thumb rubbed her other nipple. Just then, I gasped as I felt her grasp my erection. Once she had adjusted her grip around me, her hand started moving up and down, caressing me softly. Desire grew within me. Knowing full well she had control over me, she slowly pushed me to the ground, climbing on top of me. Fuck, what a sight to see.

“I wanna ride you, Zach,” she stated in a husky voice, her eyes never leaving mine as she positioned herself on top of my hardened cock. “I’ve been dying to know what you feel like ever since we met.”

Without hesitation, Nisha bounced down. A howl of pure pleasure erupted from me as she took my entire length in at once. While I was deep inside of her, she started grinding on

me, rotating her hips around my dick. It was the first time I was inside of a woman, and the sensation was mind-blowing. Her heat, combined with the way her tight walls squeezed me, easily drove me mad. I throbbed inside of her, and I immediately knew that if she kept going, I wouldn't last very long.

"Take care of her too, kid. Make her come before we do," Talon instructed me.

Looking up at my mate, I watched her breasts bounce up and down wildly with her every thrust. Remembering how she enjoyed it when I touched her earlier, I lifted my hands to knead them. Nisha moaned as I pinched both her nipples simultaneously in a risky move. I realized I was nailing it when she started riding my dick faster, but I could also feel myself getting close.

Afraid of getting scolded by my wolf again, I desperately slid one of my hands down her beautiful body until I reached her clit. The very second I touched her, her body spasmed, letting me know she liked it. I pressed my thumb firmly against her bundle of nerves, massaging it slowly, while my other hand worked on her nipple. Her walls were clenching around me, and my dick was getting harder by the second.

"Oh, yes, Zach!"

Nisha let out a breathless scream as she slammed her pussy down on my dick one last time. When her core tightened around my member in her release, that was it for me. I let out a loud groan as I spurted my seed inside of her, gasping every time her walls squeezed me in her never-ending waves of pleasure. The sun was still high up in the sky, yet somehow, I was seeing stars. I wanted nothing more than to lie on the grass and take in the marvelous scent of my mate's juices dripping down my cock, but another one of my wolf's commands echoed in my mind.

"Claim her!"

Out of pure instinct, I gathered what was left of my strength to sit back up with Nisha still on my lap. I wrapped my arms around her before biting down deep into the spot

connecting her neck and shoulder, making her release her final moan of pleasure. A few seconds later, a sharp pain struck me as she did the same to me. As soon as the initial discomfort was gone, I was over the moon. When I could see clearly again, I started licking away the blood around the mark I had left on her, sealing the wound shut and officially branding her as mine.

“Did I...do okay?” I whispered into her neck.

“You did amazing,” she chuckled before removing herself from me to lie beside me on the ground.

We stayed there naked on the grass for Goddess knows how long, just taking each other in. Our first time together was so sensational, I couldn't stop scolding myself for taking so long to mate with her. But as the ecstasy of my orgasm melted away, I started realizing the situation we had gotten ourselves into.

“Shit! Our clothes!” I shot back up, staring at the pieces of fabric surrounding us.

“Fuck!” Nisha sat up as well, and when our eyes met, we both started laughing. And at that moment, I was extremely surprised - I never thought someone would actually be able to make me laugh.

“Malin should be back by now. Let me see if he can bring us some clothes,” I told her before my eyes clouded over. “*Hey man, are you back yet?*”

“*Yeah, dude. We just arrived.*” He made a brief pause, and I could feel his frown. “*Did you crash my truck?*”

“*What? No!*” I scoffed. “*I was wondering if you could maybe...you know...bring me some clothes?*”

“*What?*”

“*Or a robe. Two robes.*” I facepalmed. “*I'm over by the southeast border.*”

“*Why would you need clothes?*” He stayed silent for a while as he put the pieces together. “*Wait. Don't tell me you and Nisha-*”

“Just bring them here, please!” I cut our connection.

Thankfully, we didn't have to wait long before Malin got to us. He was alone, and the moment he noticed us hiding behind his old rusty truck, a huge smile crossed his face.

“I can't believe it! You actually did it!” He jumped up in excitement.

“Just toss me the goddamn clothes!” I hissed, and he obliged.

As soon as we got dressed, we hopped in the truck and made our way to the main square. Of course, Malin harassed me the entire way back, but I didn't care. I was now one with my little magpie. Nothing else mattered.

29 | WITCH

A few days after my unsuccessful negotiation with the Alpha of Raven Woods, the dust was starting to settle. Valentina had come to terms with her origins, and we were practicing our unique ability for a couple of hours every day. Our private training sessions never stopped feeling surreal as we improved, but I was starting to accept that, whatever our destiny was, there was no escaping it. Perhaps I should have listened to Dawn on the day we met when she told me we were part of something bigger.

Magical madness aside, I was getting to spend a lot more time with my mate, since I had no more business meetings to attend. My two friends were also helping relieve some of the workload. Malin was happy to conduct the extra sparring lessons by his Beta Female's side, while Zachari seemed to be having fun monitoring our defense system; maybe too much fun, even. From what I heard, my second-in-command had to pick up the Gammas last time, and apparently, he found them both naked.

My team and I were also hanging out outside work. For over a month, we had been frying our brains most of the time we were together. It had been so long since we'd been able to loosen up that I had almost forgotten what it felt like to just have a relaxing evening with my friends. We had gone downtown to watch a movie over the weekend, and we were now in the game room on the bottom floor of the pack house. Although it was a Tuesday, we finished our tasks for the day earlier than expected and decided to organize a game night.

"I still can't believe Zach and Nisha marked each other before you and Tina," Malin uttered in disbelief as he tossed his card over the round center table.

"You really can't get over that, can you?" Zach's usual frown deepened. He was sitting on the other couch, opposite

from us, with Alex and Victor on his left. His mate was also beside him, and she chuckled at his reaction.

“Believe me, it’s not because we don’t want to.” For once, I matched Zach’s level of enthusiasm. Taking a sip of my beer, I went on, “For some reason, neither of our wolves were too thrilled about it.”

“Really? That’s weird. From the moment I laid eyes on Amaya, Mint was insistent about us marking her.” Malin exchanged loving glances with his mate, who rolled her eyes at him.

“Talon annoyed the fuck out of me, too,” Zach added.

“Dusk and Dawn seem to agree that it’s not the right time yet.” My Luna shrugged, playing her own card after the Beta Female’s turn.

“That sounds like karma at its finest to me,” Alex chimed in, flashing me a wise smirk. “You’re lucky Dusk didn’t try to bite your balls off.”

“True,” Tina agreed casually.

“Hey!” I glared at her, making her laugh.

“I win.” Zach caught our attention with his announcement. Only then did I realize he had successfully emptied his hand of all his cards.

In a fit of rage, Malin slammed his remaining cards over the pile on the table. “Again? Come on! You’ve gotta be cheating!”

“Ah, yes. Stupid people always call the cheating excuse when they lose to someone who’s smarter than them,” Zach observed.

“It’s not an excuse! You’ve won six times in a row! It’s a game of luck. What can I even do to beat you?”

“Do better,” my Gamma answered emotionlessly. In response, Malin rose abruptly from his seat, a huge frown on his face.

“Are you really gonna make me get up to stop you from murdering each other?” The Delta arched an eyebrow at my best friend. His gaze switched between the brunette and the onyx-haired boy a few times before he sighed in defeat.

“Since the game’s over and you’re already up...” I started, getting comfortable on the couch. “We’ve finished all the beers. Care to fetch us some more?”

“Why would that be my problem?” Malin scrunched his brows at me.

“Because you’re my Beta.” I pouted playfully.

“Oh, of course. Foolish me.” He shook his head, slapping the back of my head as he walked past me. “Should’ve read the job description carefully before taking the position,” he mumbled as he left the room.

The rest of us engaged in a casual conversation while we waited for Malin to return with our drinks. At some point, Amaya, Nisha, and Tina started arranging to have a girls night out. Though the thought of being away from my mate, even if just for a short time, made me slightly anxious, I couldn’t deny that I was happy to see the three of them bonding. With everything going on, we were only now getting the chance to get to know each other better.

“Hey, don’t you think Malin is taking too long?” There was a hint of concern in Amaya’s voice as she suddenly changed the subject.

I soon realized she was right though. “Yeah. Let me try to-” Before I could finish my sentence, my best friend’s voice echoed in my head.

“Zephyr!”

“Speak of the devil,” I quipped. “Is everything alright, man?”

“No!” His affliction immediately contaminated me, making me tense. “Dude, you’ll never believe what just happened. I was in the kitchen grabbing a few packs of beer when...poof! That crazy witch appeared out of thin air! Scared me shitless!”

“Wait. Cassiopeia is here?” I cocked my head to the side in confusion.

“Yeah. She said she wants to talk to you.”

“I’m on my way.”

As soon as I cut our connection, I realized all eyes were on me.

“Is everything okay?” Amaya’s voice broke the silence. She leaned forward in her seat, clearly agitated.

“Yes. Malin just ran into Cassiopeia.” A sigh of relief broke through her lips at my revelation.

“Isn’t that the witch who works for the National Elder Council?” Nisha pondered.

“Yup. I gotta go check why she’s here. Feel free to carry on without me,” I told them as I turned around to leave, but before I could, Tina’s gentle fingers wrapped around my wrist, pulling me back.

“Do you want me to go with you?” my mate whispered.

Remembering how distressed she was the last time we talked to Cass, I shook my head. “No need. I got this.” Showing her a smile, I brought her hand up to my lips, planting a soft kiss on the back of it. “I’ll be back soon.”

Rushing out of the pack house, I quickly made my way to the dining hall in hopes of figuring out the reason behind Cassiopeia’s sudden appearance. The cooks’ shift had ended an hour ago, but the cleaning staff was still finishing tidying up the place. The atmosphere in the kitchen was tense, and when I noticed the cleaners’ gaze focused on our unexpected guest, I understood why.

“Oh, hello, Zephyr!” The witch greeted me first, stretching her hand out to me.

“Hi.” I reluctantly shook her hand, still a little confused about the whole situation. “I’m sorry. May I know why you’re here?”

“She seems to have a liking for jumpscaring unknowing wolves,” my best friend complained. He was leaning against the refrigerator, his eyes locked on Cass.

“I won’t confirm nor deny that,” she teased him before her attention fell back on me. “Perhaps we should talk in private, little Alpha.”

Not again, I thought to myself. A second later, I forced a smile. “Sure. Come with me.”

As I guided the witch into the pack house and towards my soundproof office, I changed my mind and decided to mindlink Valentina. My initial intention was to solve the issue quickly without getting her involved, but it seemed like that wouldn’t be possible. Since she was my Luna, I would rather have her by my side during all important meetings. After Cass and I arrived there, I waited for Tina to get there too before locking the door.

“Alright, shoot.” I sighed, running my hands through my hair in distress as I addressed our guest. This time, I didn’t even bother sitting down.

“Don’t look at me like I’m a bad omen, little Alpha. I bring good news for once.” The mysterious woman smiled playfully. Judging by my mate’s stoic expression, she wasn’t too convinced. “I’ve talked to the council about the prophecy, and we all agreed it will be best if I spent some time here, training the two of you.”

Shocked, I remained silent for a moment, processing the information. “Uh...I appreciate your initiative to assist us, Cass. I really do. It’s just that, decisions like this-”

“You’re welcome to stay with us,” Valentina interrupted me. I widened my eyes at her, both surprised by the way she abruptly took charge of the situation, and a little concerned.

“Are you sure?” I whispered, looking straight into her eyes. After she gave me a determined nod, I turned to Cassiopeia again. “Okay then. I’ll tell my Delta to get one of the guest suites ready for you. While your room is being prepared, would you like to have dinner with us?” Thinking

quickly, I figured that would be a good way to let my Elite members know about the sudden news.

“That’d be nice,” she agreed with a satisfied smile.

Upon our return to the game room, I proceeded to tell my friends about Cassiopeia’s indefinite stay. Aside from asking Alex to clear a room for our guest, I also asked her to organize a formal lunch the next day, where I would inform the pack about our visitor. Since werewolves could be wary of witches, I wanted to avoid unnecessary conflict, especially when the tension was already high at Wind Howlers.

Although we had eaten shortly before the start of our game night, wolves were always hungry. We put together a quick meal to welcome Cass. By the time we were done, Alex let us know that the guest suite was ready. While my friends went back to their rooms, Tina and I accompanied the witch to her room.

After unlocking the door, I pushed it open, gesturing for Cass to walk in. “Hope it’s good enough for you.”

“It’s spacious. A bit too bright, but I do like the forest green walls,” she observed, taking a look around. In the end, she spun around to face me again. “Mind if I redecorate it a little?”

“Uh...no, not really. Make yourself at home.” I shrugged, definitely not expecting what was coming next.

Cass snapped her fingers, and in a blink of an eye, everything changed. The white sheets covering the queen size bed turned black, the previously empty shelves were filled with a bunch of colorful potions, and four thick books appeared on the bedside table. Needless to say, Valentina and I were speechless. It would take us a while to get used to all of the magic for sure.

“There we go. Much better.” She sighed proudly, blowing the tip of her finger as if it was a gun.

“Whatever works for you.” I shook my head. “Anyway, we’ll leave you to get settled. Good night, Cass.”

“Good night!” She waved at us. Just as we turned to head to our room, her voice sounded again. “Don’t forget that our training starts tomorrow. You better be well-rested!”

All I did was exchange glances with my mate as we continued down the hall.

* * *

“Okay, not bad!” Cassiopeia’s voice echoed through the indoor gym after we finished detailing how much progress we had made since Tina and I started training by ourselves.

The morning following the witch’s arrival, we met her at the indoor basketball court after warrior training to have our first lesson with her. At first, I suggested we practiced at the dandelion fields like we had been doing, but she insisted we shouldn’t let anyone see us. I thought I was paranoid back when I refused to let Dawn out in front of other pack members, but when it came to this prophecy thing, Cass was ten times worse.

“Let’s review,” she went on, checking the pages of her magical notebook. It was quite hard to pay attention to her when there was a pen floating in the air, writing down everything she was saying. I guess this was a normal day in our lives now. “So far, you can intentionally see through each other’s eyes for short periods, but you can only do it when you close your eyes. If that’s a condition to trigger your ability, you should be able to see glimpses from the other’s perspective just by blinking.”

“That makes sense,” Tina replied thoughtfully. She was utterly focused.

“Does it?” I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Let’s start with that then! Chop, chop!” Cass clapped her hands in a signal for us to shift.

My mate was determined to make this work, but I simply released a sigh as I allowed my counterpart to take control. Once they were freed, Dusk and Dawn briefly greeted each other before turning around, getting ready for another day of craziness.

I took a deep breath, not knowing exactly where to start. Thanks to our daily hours of training, Tina and I were now able to trigger our ability almost immediately. Still, it was hard to do it in the blink of an eye, quite literally. Despite how hard I concentrated, I couldn't seem to achieve any results.

"Is it working yet?" the witch asked a few minutes later.

Frustrated, my she-wolf shook her head. Soon after, her eyes widened in surprise as the black beast stepped forward, barking and nodding in confirmation.

"What the hell? How did you get the hang of it so fast?" I asked Valentina through mindlink, not bothering to hide my shock.

"It was hard in the beginning, but once you understand how it works, it becomes quite natural," she stated. *"Focus on it, but try not to think too much about it. Does that make any sense?"*

"Not at all," I replied. *"But I'll see what I can do."*

Think about it, but don't think about it, I repeated to myself before taking a deep breath. Once again, I did everything I was used to doing to establish a connection with my actual wolf-self. When I still wasn't getting anywhere, I was suddenly reminded of an exercise my father had taught me when I was younger and had trouble concentrating on something.

"Dawn, can you run in circles?" I asked her.

"Are you trying to make me look even more like a fool here?" She scrunched her brows at me.

"What? No!" I shook my head. *"Just trust me."*

She continued to stare at me quizzically, but being as frustrated as I was, she was willing to try it. While she focused on her task, the essence of the challenge the witch proposed was still in my mind, but I wasn't actively concentrating on it. Then, I finally saw it; it was just a flicker, but for a brief moment, I got a glimpse of Dusk's perspective. My she-wolf stopped running immediately to turn her attention to the witch, wagging her tail and barking cheerfully. It was weird not being

able to communicate properly with Cass, but she seemed familiar enough with wolves to understand Dawn's reaction.

“Good. Our main focus in the beginning will be mastering this ability.” The witch smiled proudly. “But don't forget that this is just one of your powers. You should have your own individual abilities, unique to each of your wolves and their role in the prophecy. I want you to think about that over the course of the next week so we can figure out exactly what they are.” She made a brief pause. “For now, let's continue. We have no time to waste.”

Despite Valentina's usual determination regarding the crazy situation we found ourselves in, Dusk flashed a look of uncertainty at Dawn. A quick glance was enough for us to communicate our feelings to each other.

We knew we had a wild ride ahead of us.

30 | FAMILIAR

Another couple of days went by in the blink of an eye following the arrival of our new, unexpected coach.

Aside from our daily duties, Tina and I had been dedicating most of our free hours to our training. As frustrating and confusing as it was in the beginning, I had to admit that I was having fun. My Luna's dedication was inspiring, and with every day that went by, it became more evident to me that she truly was an Alpha by blood.

By now, I had also formally disclosed the news about Cassiopeia's stay to our pack. I could see that most members were still careful around her, but thankfully, they trusted me enough not to question my decision despite how vague my reasons were. Had this happened shortly after my First Shift Ceremony, things would have been a lot different.

At the end of the third day of practicing my skills, I was in my office with my boys, wrapping up for the evening. Most times, Valentina would be here with us, but she had decided to leave earlier to discuss new training methods with Cass. An unlikely turn of events, considering how reluctant she was about spending time with the witch after their previous encounter. It only proved how her fears didn't stop her from growing.

"Did you hear about the night out that the girls are planning?" Malin's question broke the silence as Zach and I finished organizing some documents.

"Yeah," my Gamma replied, emotionlessly as ever.

"I think it'll be nice for them to do some...girl stuff together." I shrugged as an inconvenient thought made me stop. "Do you think they'll talk about us?"

"Don't worry. The 'I hate Zephyr' club is boys only." Zach rolled his eyes at me, making me frown.

“You know what I was thinking?” My best friend threw his arms around both our necks. “It’ll be a good opportunity for us to have another guys night!”

“After our last one, I’d rather stab myself in the face with a silver fork,” my Gamma concluded, not even bothering to struggle away from the Beta’s grasp.

“Aren’t you the life of the party?” Malin said sarcastically, letting go of us.

“Talking about parties...” I glanced at the digital clock on my table, realizing it was just past five. “It’s still early. How about we have another game night?”

“I’m down,” my second-in-command promptly replied as he led the way out of the room. “I can call Alex to see if she and Victor can make it.”

“Good idea.”

I was about to lock the door behind us when an unexpected noise made us freeze in our spots. It was a loud, continuous beep. There was also a small red dot blinking in the darkness. The second I realized what it was, my heart stopped.

“Is that-”

“The trap operating board,” Zach finished the Beta’s sentence, a mix of confusion and shock in his tone.

The operating board had been delivered together with the traps Cassiopeia had delivered to us roughly two weeks ago. The device had 30 lights, each corresponding to one of the alarms. They were supposed to turn on, whilst emitting a characteristic noise, whenever one of the traps was set off. At first, I thought that maybe another Fallen rogue could be trying to sneak into our territory, but it didn’t take me long to identify which trap the shining light represented.

“Raven Woods!” the three of us yelled in unison.

As unsettling as the situation was, I couldn’t afford to panic. A switch flipped inside my head, and I immediately entered Alpha mode.

“Malin, gather the emergency unit! Zach, find Alex and let her know about the attack!” I turned to them with only determination in my eyes. “We’re heading to Raven Woods to hunt some Fallen.”

With the same purposefulness, they nodded at me before vanishing down the hallway. I barely had time to take a single step as I watched the door to the Alpha suite open. Out came my Luna, worry written all over her face. When our eyes met, her emotions seemed to become even louder, and she rushed over to me.

“I sensed your uneasiness. What happened?” She cupped my face with her hands. For once, her touch didn’t do much to soothe me.

“Raven Woods is under attack,” I revealed, placing my hand over hers to hold it tightly.

“The Fallen?” Her eyes widened as I nodded once. “Oh, no.”

“I’m heading there now with the boys and a small team. I doubt we’ll be able to help Alpha Nolan, considering how quickly the Fallen are known to appear and disappear. But if we manage to catch another one of them, it might help us learn more about them,” I explained briefly, placing a kiss on her temple as I let her go. “Find Amaya and Nisha. Stay with them inside the pack house, where it’s safe.”

I had just walked past Valentina when her voice made me stop again. “I’m coming with you.” It wasn’t a request; it was an order. “Our ability only works if we’re together. I won’t let you fight alone.”

“Please, Tina. We don’t have time for this.”

She remained silent, completely still. When I turned to face her, I was met with that look again.

It was the same expression I often saw on Dawn’s face when she was adamant to get her way.

A growl reverberated in my throat as I cursed myself, and I pulled my mate close again. “You will stay close to me at all times. We don’t know what we’ll find there. If you get hurt-”

“The same goes for you,” she interrupted me, squinting her eyes. With that last warning, she turned around to lead the way.

By the time we made it outside, I was slightly relieved to find that everyone was ready and waiting for me. Malin was standing in front of the emergency unit, a team of 20 specially-trained warriors. They were always ready to leave with us to aid ally packs against surprise attacks, while also being the first line of defense to protect our territory. Aside from being skilled wolves, they carried a set of weapons specifically made to neutralize werewolves - wolfsbane arrows, crossbows, and tranquilizer darts containing silver.

“There’s no time to take cars,” I observed, addressing my men. “We’ve gotta shift and run there now!”

At my command, every single one of the wolves before me promptly shifted. Mint took his position ahead of the troops to lead them, while Talon ran behind them. When I turned to Valentina again, hoping to try to convince her to stay one last time, she had already shifted into her huge black beast. All there was left for me to do was sigh in defeat as I let Dawn take over our body.

Both of our wolves caught up with the rest of our team in no time. At full speed, it took us 15 minutes to get to our destination. As soon as we crossed the border that separated our territories, the view before us forced us to slow down; nothing could have prepared us for what we were seeing.

It was a bloodbath. There were corpses scattered everywhere, houses had been reduced to rubble, the once fresh green grass had been painted crimson. Maybe it was too soon to tell, but there didn’t seem to be any survivors. I suspected we wouldn’t arrive in time to help, yet I surely didn’t expect to face such a heartbreaking scene.

From the corner of my she-wolf’s eyes, I caught a glimpse of Dusk. His hackles were raised in alertness and anger, as was his bushy tail. Despite the flames dancing in his bluish-purple eyes, his expression seemed somewhat void, likely reflecting Tina’s feelings. Dawn instinctively walked closer to the male

in hopes her presence would comfort him. Exchanging glances, they both raised their heads towards the sky to sing a melody of grief.

“May their spirits find their way into the Kingdom of the Moon. The Mother of All shall welcome them with open arms, and they will be at peace,” my she-wolf recited inside my head.

After our moment of silence, Dawn turned to face our Gamma. *“Zach, check for survivors. Take half of our men with you. Help those who can be saved...if there are any,”* I instructed him, watching Talon bow his head in understanding. Then, she looked at Mint. *“Malin, keep leading the rest of the troops. We’re heading north to see if we can find any of the culprits. Perhaps we can catch some still trying to flee.”*

As hard as it was, we all shook off our sadness to keep moving. Nothing we did could bring back the poor souls we had lost tonight, but we could still try to make a difference to ensure there would be no more victims. As we set off on our individual missions, Dawn glanced at her mate. Dusk was now seething with rage, ready to make someone pay. The second my she-wolf touched him with her muzzle mid-run, he seemed to be brought back to a calmer state.

As we ventured further into Raven Woods territory, I noticed a few of the bodies laying around were still in wolf form. Since the Fallen didn’t transform back into their human form upon dying, as we had recently discovered, that could only mean that Nolan’s warriors must have succeeded in taking down part of their army. At least his restless efforts to gather more wolves to defend his pack hadn’t been in vain.

I couldn’t help but wonder if the situation would have been different if Raven Woods and Wind Howlers had joined forces to fight against our common enemy. However, realizing that not even the best warriors from some of the strongest packs in the country had been able to defeat them, there was a darker possibility in my mind.

“Had Nolan never ended our alliance, this could have been us.” Tina’s dreadful observation echoed in my mind.

Despite the chills running down my spine, I had to stay strong. *“But it’s not us,”* I recalled as Dawn looked into Dusk’s eyes. *“We’re safe, and we’re here now. We just need to-”* My sentence was cut short when my she-wolf came to an abrupt stop.

Ahead of us were exactly five rogues who were definitely part of the Fallen. Judging by their weirdly calm demeanor, they must have stayed behind to get rid of any evidence that could lead back to them. As expected, they were all huge; two of them were even bigger than Dusk. Their coats were of dark, dirty colors, and one of the bigger ones looked slightly familiar. Dawn was trying to sneak closer to take a better look at them when Mint’s commanding howl cut through the night, breaking my concentration.

Most of the men belonging to our emergency unit had shifted back into their human forms. They were now firing at the fleeing rogues, while my Beta and Gamma chased after them. Valentina and I only had to exchange one look before bolting towards the action.

Thanks to Dawn’s incredible speed, she easily reached our target. Without hesitation, she jumped in the air, successfully falling onto the back of the strangely familiar rogue. Her weight alone caused him to stumble and crash into the ground, while we landed a few feet in front of him. After shaking off the dust, he lifted his head to see what had hit him. He was surprised at first, but it only took a second for his bright yellow eyes to become filled with horror. It was then that I realized just who he was.

“It’s that Ryder bastard!” Dawn growled ferociously.

I found myself mimicking her. *“I told you we should’ve killed him when we had the chance!”*

“Don’t worry. I never make the same mistake twice.”

Rage aside, I was shocked to meet the exiled Alpha of Silent Rivers. When did he join the Fallen? Despite how badly I would like to have an answer, I knew there was no time to think.

Wasting no time, Dawn attempted to close her jaws around the former leader's neck, but before she could get a tight grip around it, he easily shoved her away from him with his massive paws. He was definitely stronger than I remembered, which made sense, considering who his new friends were. My she-wolf had beaten him once, but would she still be able to win a battle against him now?

In an attempt to buy herself some time to figure out what to do, Dawn jumped back, keeping a safe distance from our opponent. Unfortunately, Ryder seemed to understand her intentions. Not willing to let her think, he promptly chased after her, using his sharp claws to scratch her shoulder. The sudden pain made her clench her teeth, but she was a quick thinker.

Dawn managed to take advantage of the enemy's proximity. Reading his next move, she ducked to avoid his fangs, sinking her own teeth deep into his front paw. A second later, I heard the sound of bones cracking. Ryder's beast howled in agony, struggling to back away with a broken paw. It didn't take long for him to start growling again. Instead of intimidating my she-wolf, his condition made her smirk.

The opponent's limp would make it easier for Dawn to dodge his movements, while making it harder for him to avoid her blows. Cockily, he tried to tackle her and knock her down, but she quickly escaped him by jumping to the side. Next, she tried to snatch his hind leg, and to my surprise, she failed.

Ryder acted quicker than we both anticipated, delivering a strong kick to the underside of my she-wolf's chin. The blow caused her to lose balance and fall over. Before she could get up, he climbed on top of her, sinking his teeth into her neck in a swift move.

As pain consumed me, I was scared that Dawn wouldn't be able to break free. I should have known she would never give up so easily, yet her strength surprised me when she pushed through the throbbing pain to try and get him off of her. She started kicking him repeatedly, pressing her claws against his skin and causing deep lacerations. Sucking in a long breath,

she struck him one last time, finally succeeding in throwing him to the side.

After that, Dawn didn't waste another second. Although her gleaming caramel coat was drenched in her own blood, that didn't stop her from attacking with deadly precision. One snap of her jaws broke Ryder's neck, finishing him for once and for all.

As I watched life fade from his eyes, trying to collect my breath, I couldn't keep a loud thought to myself. *"Shit. I thought he had us."*

"You worry too much, kitten." Dawn rolled her eyes. She turned her attention to her wounds, ready to start licking herself to stop the bleeding, when a loud whimper caught her attention.

Not too far away from where we were, Dusk had his own adversary pinned to the ground. While the rogue struggled at his paws, he tried to get an opening to land a finishing blow. In one of his attempts, the creature managed to scratch his face, distracting him for a mere second. It was enough time for the Fallen to break free. An enraged growl left Dusk's throat, and before he started running, his eyes met Dawn's.

"That's Ryder's father!" Valentina announced through the mindlink. *"I didn't notice it at first, but I'm sure it's him!"*

"Fuckers!" I spat angrily. *"I gave these bastards a chance to live, and this is how they repay me!"*

Dawn joined Dusk, and they decided to combine their forces to hopefully take Rhys down. Considering that his wolf was larger than his son's, I knew it wouldn't be an easy fight. Besides, both of our wolves had already been hurt, and I didn't know how much more they would be able to take. Regardless of that, they both jumped forward to try and catch up to their new target. But before they could, a familiar voice sounded in both our heads.

"Get down!" When I saw Mint with the troops right behind us, I didn't hesitate to do as Malin said.

Next thing I knew, there were arrows flying through the air. As soon as they pierced the rogue's skin, they poisoned him with wolfsbane. The former Alpha cried out when the substance entered his system, causing his veins to protrude as it burned him from the inside out.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Dusk and Dawn stood back up to lunge at the enemy, pinning him to the ground. Since he kept struggling under our grasp, Mint and Talon soon joined us, making sure the rogue couldn't move. Little by little, the poison started to weaken him, until he was forced to shift back. Once the threat had been contained, we all transformed into our human forms as well.

"What's the report?" I immediately asked, spitting blood as soon as I finished my sentence. I instinctively slid my hand over my neck, and I was surprised to see how much blood there was in my palm. Damn, that son of a bitch had really fucked up my neck. At least the adrenaline was still high in my bloodstream, making the pain bearable.

"No survivors," Zachari informed me with his head low.

"We killed the other three Fallen. We couldn't find any more of them," Malin added.

"And I killed Ryder." Everyone widened their eyes at my announcement. The one I expected to be shocked the most though, didn't even seem to care.

I lowered my gaze to stare into Rhys' eyes, but he was too weak to utter a word. "That leaves you, fucker." With a single kick to the head, I knocked him out. Satisfied, I turned to my Gamma. "Zach, tell Alex to inform the I.N. Elder Council about what happened. For now, we're taking Rhys to Wind Howlers, and we'll squeeze every drop of information out of him."

31 | ANSWERS

After our Fallen hunt, my team and I were definitely worn out. Aside from the emotional exhaustion, most of us ended up with a fair share of new wounds. Unfortunately, it would still be a while until we could rest.

Once we returned to Wind Howlers territory, Malin immediately took our prisoner to the dungeons, Zach went straight to my office to write a report about what we had found at Raven Woods, and Alex notified the National Elder Council about the attack. Meanwhile, Valentina and I headed to the pack hospital together to get our wounds checked. Since we had fought the strongest of the remaining rogues, our injuries were naturally worse.

Thankfully, my Luna's condition was far better than mine. She had a deeper wound on her shoulder that should take about a day to heal, but most of her cuts and bruises were already fading by the time the doctor was done patching her up. As for me, the gash on my shoulder needed quite a few stitches, and it would definitely leave a scar. At least it wasn't hurting anymore. I even refused the pain killers I was offered, despite the nurses' insistence.

As soon as we were discharged, we went to the dungeons to meet with my Beta. I could feel my mate's anger through our bond the second her eyes landed on the unconscious rogue Alpha sitting on the floor inside his cell. Despite how enraged I was earlier, I now felt utterly calm. I blamed it on the serene melody Dawn had been humming inside my head ever since we left the battlefield; it seemed to be her favorite way of clearing her mind during stressful situations.

"What's his condition?" I asked Malin. He was keeping an eye on our prisoner along with half a dozen guards.

"He started moving a couple minutes ago. The wolfsbane must be leaving his body," he promptly replied. "Want me to wake him up now?"

“Yes, please.”

“Wait!” A third, unexpected voice surprised us all.

Needless to say, I was confused to find Cassiopeia standing behind us. “How the hell did you get in here?”

“I teleported. Duh.” She shrugged, shaking her head a moment later. “Anyway. I wanna check him. We have no idea if we’ll ever catch another Fallen alive. This might be our one shot to collect critical information on them.”

“Sure. As soon as I’m done interrogating him,” I determined.

“What? No! You can interrogate him later!”

“Look, Cass, I’m thankful for your assistance in our training. But from what you told me, you came here out of your own free will, not under the order of the National Council,” I reminded her. “While you’re a guest in my territory, you’ll play by my rules.”

The look on her face let me know she wasn’t the least bit pleased, but she didn’t argue with me any more. “Fine.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “But let me at least stay here to watch.”

“That I can allow.” I nodded at her before turning to my Beta. “Malin?”

My Beta bowed his head at me, pushing the cell door open as he followed through with my previous order. He stared coldly at the unconscious man for a few seconds before slapping him with all his might. The sharp, sudden pain caused the pathetic creature to jolt awake with a cry almost as loud as the blow he had taken. He tried to stand up to defend himself, but he couldn’t do much while he was chained to the walls.

“Rise and shine, fucker.” Malin crouched beside the still disoriented prisoner, flashing him a mocking smile.

With a sigh, I turned to my mate, whispering close to her ear, “Are you sure you wanna stay? Things are about to get pretty nasty.”

“I know. I’ll be the one making sure of that,” she replied firmly. A smile lit up my face at her boldness.

I kissed my mate’s forehead quickly before turning to Rhys with a frown. “The I.N. Elder Council will be seeing you in the morning, but I’m sure they won’t care if I go ahead and start interrogating you.” I looked down at him as I approached him. “Let’s start with a simple question. When did you and Ryder become part of the Fallen?”

“What makes you think I’ll answer any of your-” Before he could finish his sentence, my Beta struck him with a wolfsbane-infused whip.

Rhys’ screams could probably be heard all across the territory as the poison burned his flesh. In just a few seconds, the skin around the welt left by the whip looked like a second-degree burn. I was pretty sure Malin had never tortured anyone before, yet his attitude could easily make me believe he had been doing it for years. Considering how sweet-natured he was, it was quite surprising to see him so ruthless.

“Are you ready to answer me now? Or do you need more incentive?” I spat, at the same second Malin raised the whip again.

Despite the discomfort Rhys was certainly under, he growled. “I told Ryder to make a pact with the Fallen after he was defeated by your *bitch!*” His choice of words made my she-wolf stop humming to snarl at him, letting anger get the best of her.

“Is that when you joined them, too?” I asked, not missing the way he only mentioned his son.

This time, it didn’t seem like he was going to say anything. With Dawn now growling inside my head, I was starting to lose my temper. Thankfully, Malin didn’t need a command to act. His nails turned into claws and he dug them into Rhys’ neck without hesitation. The bastard groaned loudly as his blood oozed out of the wound, flowing down his chest. Although the pain certainly wasn’t comparable to the whipping he had gotten, he knew we had way worse torture

methods; that was just my Beta's friendly reminder that he should start talking.

"No," Rhys replied at last, a sick smile playing on his lips. "I changed sides a long time ago. You were still wearing diapers when I sold my soul, foolish boy!"

"Alright. When exactly did that happen?" I tried my best to keep an unamused tone after his shocking revelation.

"Seventeen years ago." His grin grew wider as I furrowed my brows. "I was the first rogue to be recruited by the original Fallen."

"Why would you do that?"

"To take over Silent Rivers Pack." To my surprise, the one who answered me wasn't him, but rather my Luna. When I turned to her, there was a mix of fury and realization in her golden eyes. "Or rather, Diamond Stream Pack."

"Smart little girl!" Rhys laughed. My stomach turned as I watched him scan Tina with his eyes. "What's your name again? You look familiar." My mate remained quiet until his voice broke the silence again. "Oh, that's right. You're the daughter of those traitors. You see, I used to be an Omega, just like you are. I'm sure you know how enraging it is to be the lowest of the low. The Goddess thought I would clean floors and bow my head in silence for my entire life, but she was wrong. I was meant for greatness!"

"How did you find the original Fallen?" I continued, clenching my fists to contain my desire to punch his face after hearing how he dared speak to my Luna.

"It wasn't easy." His eyes darted to me again. "I searched for him for almost an entire year after I heard about the man who denied the Goddess and chose his own destiny. When I found him, it turned out he was also looking for someone like me."

"What do you mean?" I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Like I said, I was the first wolf he ever recruited. Back then, he didn't know what his bite would do to a shifter. He needed someone with the right ambition."

“Someone with nothing to lose, you mean,” I scoffed. As a thought occurred to me, I shot a side glance at Cass. “The bite of the original Fallen is supposed to bind your soul to his, yet it seems to me you were living your life freely until very recently. How?”

“We made a pact when I agreed to be his experiment. He let me go, saying he’d call me back when the war began. So, I left to conquer and leave my own legacy.” Rhys puffed his chest proudly. I wondered how he could be so confident when he was bound by silver chains, being tortured by a man who was half his age.

“And your target was Diamond Stream...” I observed thoughtfully. “Why?”

He shrugged. “It was a small pack without heirs. No one would care what happened to their Alpha. I killed him and his Luna, then changed the pack’s name, just to be safe. Didn’t wanna risk having anyone looking into my past.”

“If you wanted power, why didn’t you claim other packs as well?” Tina asked with fury in her eyes, her fists shaking with wrath.

“Because I’m not dumb,” he huffed. “The news of an unknown rogue going around dethroning Alphas would spread like wildfire. I did work to expand Silent Rivers, but slowly. The real growth was supposed to start with Ryder, but he lost his first battle to a female!”

“You seem to have thought about everything, Rhys. Except you were wrong about one thing...” Valentina’s aura was so strong, even I was intimidated. Still, her voice was calm. “The real Alpha and Luna of Diamond Stream Pack did have an heir.”

“What? That’s impossible!” The prisoner laughed, thinking that she was joking. “I killed them both. I would know if they had pups,” he argued, but my Luna’s impassive expression was slowly draining him of his certainty. Frustrated, he asked the one question he should have kept to himself, “What would an Omega know anyway?”

That was it.

Before I could even react, Valentina used her werewolf speed to close the distance between her and the murderer of her family, shoving me out of her way in her blinding rage. Her fist closed around Rhys' neck, her black claws coming out to pierce his skin. He started coughing, struggling to breathe, as his crimson blood ran down her arm. She had his life in her hands, and she had kept her thirst for vengeance bottled up for too long.

"I'm no Omega! Even though you made me believe so my whole life!" I could see the reflection of her sharp canines in Rhys' terrified eyes. "I'm an Alpha by blood, and the true heir of Diamond Stream Pack!"

"It can't be... You carry traitor blood! I had your parents executed for treason, but I let you stay in my pack! I fed you and gave you a home!" he snapped, only further angering my mate.

"My aunt and uncle weren't traitors; they were trying to reclaim what you stole from me! Diamond Stream was my birthright!" She growled fiercely. Her claws sunk deeper into Rhys' skin as her grip around him tightened. His blood oozed down his entire body like a scarlet waterfall. "You never *gave* me anything, you *took* everything from me!" Her golden eyes shone light purple due to Dusk coming forth.

"Tina, wait!" I tried to stop her, but Cassiopeia was faster.

"Stop! I need him alive!"

From ten feet away, the witch sent what seemed like a telekinetic wave of energy in my mate's direction, yanking her off of Rhys. If I hadn't stepped in on time, she would have likely continued flying backwards until she hit a wall. Holding her tightly in my arms, I shot daggers at Cass, baring my fangs at her.

Amidst the chaos, we failed to notice the prisoner somehow breaking the silver cuffs. The sound made me turn my attention back to him. A wicked smile lit up his face, making him look just like the monster he was. Out of instinct,

I pulled Valentina behind me, standing between her and the man to protect her. But to my surprise, she wasn't his target.

Once Rhys freed himself, I thought he would fight tooth and nail to escape. I never expected him to dig his claws into his own chest. His cries filled the underground chambers at the pain he inflicted to himself.

"You're no Omega, and you're not wolfless." With his dying breath, he turned to my Luna with realization in his eyes. "You have a male Alpha wolf, and your mate has an Alpha female. You're the Switched Pair." Even in terrible pain, he smiled proudly at his discovery. "The original Fallen knows about your existence. He'll soon figure out exactly who you are, and he'll destroy you!"

Rhys growled one last time as he pushed his hand further into his chest. None of us could do anything to prevent him from pulling his beating heart out of his body, dropping to the floor a second later. All we could do was watch in disbelief as a pool of the rogue's blood formed around his corpse. I remained silent, horrified by the sudden turn of events, until my Beta broke the silence.

"How did he break free? The silver should have weakened him!"

"Yet there aren't even burn marks on his wrists..." my Luna uttered, still shaking in my arms from the rush of emotions she had just gone through.

"Of course. That makes sense..." Cass stepped forward, circling the dead rogue. "When werewolves were created, they had no weaknesses. It was only a matter of time until your kind started destroying the world, and nothing could stop them. Recognizing how dangerous her children had become, Diana made a sacrifice. She made all werewolves weak to her holy metal, silver. Upon rejecting her, the Fallen also lose that weakness."

"But why did he kill himself?" Malin asked in shock.

"He might be immune to silver, but he still had wolfsbane in his system. He wasn't at full strength, and he knew it. When

he realized he wouldn't be able to fight us to escape, he decided to erase the evidence," I concluded. "His soul was still bound to the original Fallen, which meant he certainly believed in the Fallen's ideals. He didn't mind being just another pawn, as long as he could help his leader accomplish his goals."

"He knew that if he was still alive by the time the Council got here, they would've made him talk. It would've been the end of the Fallen." Cassiopeia's words caused a pinch of guilt to strike my chest, but her glare was even worse. "Good job, Alpha."

"He wouldn't have broken free if you didn't push me away from him!" Valentina countered, releasing herself from my grasp. She was drenched in the rogue's blood, staring ferociously at Cass, who didn't seem the least intimidated.

"You would have killed him if I didn't!"

"At least he would've gotten what he deserved! He usurped my pack and stole my future! He should've died by my hands!" my mate screamed angrily.

I had never seen her so furious, and I immediately knew it was Dusk talking; his Alpha aura was all over the place. In an attempt to calm her down, I approached her slowly, carefully wrapping her in an embrace. As I sensed her relaxing, I turned her around to face me.

"None of that matters," I told her calmly. "One way or another, you became the leader of Diamond Stream. Our packs have been united, and you are my Luna. This is your pack as much as it's mine." I watched as she let go of her reluctance to nod in agreement. "It doesn't matter how he died. He got what he deserved."

"But we didn't get what we needed," Cass' voice echoed again.

The witch's observation made me stiffen. Despite how hard I was trying to mask the whirlpool of emotions inside of me, I couldn't hide my nervousness. After one hell of a long day, I'd still have to face the National Elder Council and tell

them that the only Fallen ever captured alive had taken his own life under my watch.

32 | BLEED

For the first time in a while, I couldn't sleep well. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw Rhys' sinister smile, reminding me of how foolish I had been. If I could turn back time, there were so many things I would have done differently. In the heat of the moment, I acted impulsively, eager to take matters into my own hands.

Aside from the guilt, my nervousness also kept me awake. As an Alpha, I should be fearless, but I would be lying if I said that the rogue's last words didn't send a chill to my bones. It wasn't his empty threat that worried me, but rather the confirmation that the enemy knew more about us than we did them. Shit, they probably knew about what Valentina, I, and our wolves could do more than we did. And we were running out of time to prepare for their inevitable arrival.

When morning came, my mate and I headed to the shower to get ready to welcome the Elder Council and deal with the aftermath of last night's incident. She helped me lather before removing the bandage on my neck to clean my stitched-up wound.

After leaving the bathroom I put on a pair of shorts, while Tina got dressed in one of my t-shirts. I sat on the bed with her by my side. She wasted no time to start rebandaging my wound with the help of the medical supplies she had been able to gather around my room. As I watched her closely, I was reminded of the poor state she had been in after the interrogation. The experience had definitely taken a toll on her.

There was no doubt in my mind that Valentina was strong - probably stronger than me - but there was only so much anyone could take. Not only did she listen to the unrepentant confession of the man who murdered her entire bloodline, but she also couldn't get the answers she wanted. I couldn't help but curse myself for allowing her to go through this. As much

as I thought she had the right to interrogate Rhys with me, I shouldn't have let her.

“Look. It's not bleeding anymore.” My Luna's sweet, soothing voice pulled me back to reality. “It should be completely healed by sundown.” When her warm golden eyes met mine, they melted my heart. But I couldn't find it in me to smile back at her.

With a heavy sigh, I brought my hand up to her face to caress her cheek gently with my thumb. “I'm sorry.”

“What for?” She leaned into my touch, closing her eyes. I could only hope my touch would give her the closure she needed.

“I can't imagine what you're going through,” I said at last.

It was her turn to sigh as she opened her eyes again to face the floor. “It is exhausting. I'm constantly trying to figure out who I am, yet it feels like the more I learn about my past, the less I know.” She inhaled deeply, raising her head to look into my eyes again. At the same time, her hands reached out to mine and she interlaced our fingers. “But it's not your fault, Zephyr. Just like it isn't your fault that Rhys managed to break free. None of us knew about the Fallen's resistance to silver.” I furrowed my brows in confusion. She was my mate, and she knew me better than anyone else. But it still surprised me every time she read my thoughts. “You don't have to take the blame alone today. Like you said, we're both leaders of Wind Howlers. We share the joys and the pains that come with the position.”

“I guess you're right,” I chuckled, leaning closer to allow our noses to touch.

After a few more just taking in each other's presence, Valentina and I got up to change into work clothes. I was hoping to get a few more seconds alone with her to fully clear my mind, but plans changed. We were just putting on our shoes when I heard Malin's voice inside my head.

“The Council has just crossed the borders. They should be up front in five.”

“Coming.” Instead of immediately closing our connection, I made a brief pause. *“Let’s see what they’ll do to me once they find out about the suicidal mutt.”*

“At least you figured out another one of their weaknesses. Or non-weaknesses, I guess.” Classic Malin. Always seeing the bright side.

“Someone needs to make up for your lack of positivity, Mr. Gloom,” Dawn joked. As much as I hated to admit it, her silliness made me feel a little lighter. *“You said I was your ray of sunshine. I suppose I do balance your twilight-bleak essence.”*

“I said that about Valentina. Not you,” I corrected her, huffing playfully.

“Potatoes, potahtos.” She shrugged, retreating to the back of my mind.

Once I told my mate about the arrival of our guests, she accompanied me downstairs, where the rest of my team was. The Elders were just hopping out of the car when we stepped outside. I sucked in a deep breath, blocking my feelings to face them with nothing but neutrality. After greeting each of them, I proceeded to tell them everything that happened up until the moment we left the destroyed Raven Woods. They analyzed the bodies of the four Fallen we had taken down, searching for new evidence. When they were done, the head of the council asked the million dollar question.

“Where is the Fallen you managed to capture alive?” His tone was emotionless as he stared at me with nothing but seriousness.

“Funny story,” Cassiopeia deadpanned, earning a glare from me.

“We took him to our dungeons and kept him chained with silver cuffs in a cell.” I held my head high. Not too long ago, I had learned it was foolish to try and run from the consequences of my actions. *“Unfortunately, we were underprepared. It seems the Fallen are resistant to silver. Rhys*

managed to set himself free when we lowered our guards. He ripped his own heart out, killing himself.”

For long seconds, there was only silence. I was ready for the head of the council to yank my head off, but in the end, all he did was sigh.

“That’s truly unfortunate. Having one of them alive could finally lead to the end of this massacre.” I bit my lip, realizing how stupid I had been to underestimate Rhys. “Either way, the corpses should be of great help for our research as well.”

“We will be heading to Raven Woods territory as soon as we’re done here, so we can investigate what happened. We need to verify if the pack has been wiped so we can take it off our registers,” another member of the council continued. Elders were known to be even more expressionless than Alphas, but at that moment, I swore I saw a flicker of sorrow in his eyes.

“There’s also another issue we would like to discuss with you, Alpha Zephyr.” The head of the council took a step forward, and my blood ran cold. Then, I noticed him shoot a side glance at the witch, who was right behind me, before his eyes landed on me again. “Cassiopeia insists that you and your Luna are the Switched Pair mentioned in the prophecy, and we trust her judgment.” I fought the urge to raise my eyebrows in surprise. Elders seldom believed in magic. They were the wisest of our kind, and they usually relied on science or religion.

“It is believed that Wind Howlers will be the Fallen’s next target,” a third Elder chimed in. “I’m sure you have done your fair share of preparing, Alpha Zephyr. As the National Council, we’ve been encouraging other packs to fight by your side. Sadly, no incentive has been enough to convince any of them. We are enforcers of Werewolf Law, but we cannot use our power to force any leaders to join you in this fight. Nonetheless, we thought of another way to help you defend your pack when the time comes...” He gestured for the witch to come forth, which she gladly did, with a pleased smile. “Over the past few days, Cassiopeia has been reporting the development of your abilities to us. She’s impressed by your

growth, and she's adamant about training you until the time comes for you to face the enemy. For that reason, we've decided to suspend her from her duties at the council to stay at Wind Howlers and focus on helping you progress."

I quickly looked at my Luna, then at Cass. But we barely had time to process the information before the head of the council spoke again.

"Furthermore, Cassiopeia has decided to directly assist you during the war. We all believe the skills of a witch can be of great assistance. Work with her to come up with new battle strategies; take advantage of her magic." He made a brief pause before revealing, "Of course, we will be covering the costs of her service."

"This is the best way in which we can support you, Alpha Zephyr," a fourth Elder added.

This time, I couldn't prevent my eyes from widening. Having Cass to shine a light on the confusing situation my mate and I found ourselves tangled in was already very helpful, but having a witch to aid us in such a big battle... It was monumental. The possibilities of offensive and defensive methods we could combine with her magic were infinite. If seeing the mass destruction at Raven Woods had made me lose hope, Cass' promised help replenished that hope once again.

"Thank you so much." I lowered my head before the Elders, recomposing my neutral expression. "We will undoubtedly make the most of your kindness."

"Just win the war, Alpha Zephyr," the head of the Council said with a serious expression. As if it was that simple.

After everything was settled, Cass was asked to put a cloaking spell on the bodies of the Fallen we had brought to our territory. That would ensure the Elders would be able to transport them to their headquarters without major problems. We accompanied them to their vehicle, and before they left for the now desolate Raven Woods territory, they reminded me that, this time, the enemy had waited less time in-between attacks. Instead of the usual one month and a half, they

showed up again only four weeks after the destruction of Nightwalkers.

Four weeks. That was a short amount of time left for me to ensure the safety of my pack - or less, considering they seemed to be growing quite quickly in power. What if they were ready to come for us sooner than we were all anticipating?

I couldn't afford to lose another second.

"Okay. Since this is taken care of, let's get going." Cassiopeia's voice pulled me from my dreadful thoughts, as if she was reading my mind.

"Going...where?" My Luna arched an eyebrow at her.

"Training, obviously," the witch answered promptly, her eyes locking on Tina. "We have 30 days left - probably less - to figure out what your other skills are, *and* you still have to master them."

My mate flashed me a hesitant look. I nodded at her in encouragement before stepping in front of the two women to lead the way. "Let's go."

Once we made it to the indoor gym, Cass proceeded to remind us about the prophecy and the role our wolves were supposed to play in it. Now that we were more confident in our ability to see through each other's eyes, she insisted we focused on discovering our other unique abilities. Instead of shifting immediately, as we had done every other time, we spent a few minutes racking our brains, trying to awaken our inner powers.

"It's likely your unknown abilities are related to the nature of your wolves' titles," Cass explained. "As the Darkbringer, Dusk should be more offensive. He's probably physically stronger than most wolves. By contrast, Dawn's skills should be more defensive. The Lightbringer is supposed to be very resilient and agile."

"Well, that's correct. Dawn can definitely move at the speed of light," I observed before turning to Tina. "And Dusk is quite powerful in combat, too." She nodded in agreement.

“Good. That can be our starting point.” Cass tapped her chin with her index finger. “Have either of you noticed anything else about your wolves related to what I just told you?”

I barely had time to think when my she-wolf’s voice echoed inside my head. *“When we took down that first Fallen who snuck into our territory, they were bleeding pretty badly from Dusk’s bite. Similarly, the most superficial cuts he inflicted on Rhys weren’t healing, not even hours after the battle was over.”*

“In Rhys’ case, I thought it was because of the wolfsbane...” I furrowed my brows thoughtfully. *“But that wouldn’t explain what happened to the other rogue. Do you think maybe Dusk can slow a shifter’s healing process?”*

She shrugged. *“I think it’s worth considering.”*

Without a second thought, I opened my mouth. “Dawn thinks Dusk’s bite might make other wolves unable to heal.”

My mate shot me a quizzical stare, while Cass simply smiled at my suggestion.

“That would make sense,” the witch agreed. “Why don’t you call your Beta here so we can test her theory?”

“What? Why would we need him? We could just test it on me,” I pointed out.

Cass rolled her eyes. “Remember what I said about the Switched Pair countering each other’s abilities? If the Darkbringer really has the ability to slow healing, the Lightbringer will likely have abnormally rapid healing. That means Dawn will probably heal either way, nullifying Dusk’s ability.”

“Oh. Okay.” As confused as I was, I didn’t ask any further questions as I established a connection with my best friend.

Only a few minutes after I linked Malin, he showed up at the gym with a puzzled expression. We explained what we had been discussing, and though he seemed a bit wary of being our test subject, he agreed to help. Taking one last breath,

Valentina let her huge black wolf out. My Beta stood still as the beast approached him.

“Alright, Dusk. Take it easy on me.” The man stretched out his arm, offering his hand to the creature.

If Dusk wanted to, he could easily bite Malin’s arm off. But as his massive head got closer to my Beta, all he did was open his mouth slightly, just enough to let one of his sharp canines show. With a gentleness unexpected from a creature his size, he carefully pierced a shallow hole in Malin’s palm. A low hiss left the man’s lips as he retracted his hand to analyze the damage caused by the bite.

And we were all surprised to see that, as superficial as the wound was, the blood kept flowing out non-stop.

“Seems like Dawn was right!” Cass celebrated.

“That’s awesome.” Malin immediately turned to her with a frown. “But what am I supposed to do now? Bleed to death from a puncture wound?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. You still have enhanced healing. Even if the wound takes longer to heal, your body can still take care of such a small wound. I’d advise you not to get on Dusk’s bad side, though.” Cassiopeia shrugged, the shadow of a smile playing on her lips.

At the snap of her fingers, a cute little band aid with a very feminine flower pattern materialized out of thin air, sticking to my Beta’s skin to cover his injury. Seeing his unamused face, I tried my best to hold my laughter. Dusk didn’t bother showing him a wolfish grin though.

“Ha ha. You witches have one hell of a sense of humor.” The annoyance was palpable in Malin’s tone. “Is that all you needed me for? I have more important things to do as Wind Howlers’ Beta, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah. You can go, lab rat.” Cass waved him off. He shot me a glare, and I offered him a wide grin as he turned to leave. The next second, the witch’s gaze fell on me. “You were right, Zephyr. Your mate - or better yet, your actual wolf

counterpart - does have the ability to interfere with a shifter's healing."

Walking past me, Cass took a few steps in Dusk's direction. Without warning, she grasped each side of the wolf's muzzle with her hands. He did nothing aside from gasping in surprise as she forced his mouth open. Seemingly having no value for her life, she poked her head between her jaws to take a good look at his teeth.

"I'm no vet, but if I had to guess, I'd say Dusk's saliva must produce a different enzyme that inhibits blood-clotting. Very interesting." The smile never left her face despite the bizarre situation she put herself in. The black beast's discomfort was evident in his eyes, until she finally released his muzzle to look at him. "Anyway, how it works really isn't important. Just know that, when you need to kill Fallen, bite them as hard as you can." I was quietly observing the scene when Cass turned to me with a sinister grin, making me freeze. "Now, it's time to figure out what Dawn's capable of."

However, before I could say anything, my eyes clouded over. When I opened them again, they fell straight on the witch.

"We'll have to take a rain check on that," I announced. "My Gamma needs us all in my office right now."

33 | HELP

Our coach wasn't exactly happy about our training being cut short, but she understood why we had to do it. Since the Elder Council was willing to cover the costs for the witch's magical aid, my Gamma decided to take a look at our current defense system and check how it could be improved. Once he came up with a few ideas, he called Valentina, Cassiopeia, and I to the Alpha's office to discuss which of them would be feasible in practice.

By the time we made it to the top floor of the pack house, where Zach was, he was scribbling on a huge map of our territory that was spread on the desk. He was so absorbed in what he was doing, he barely noticed us walking in. I greeted him before sitting in my chair, with my Luna by my side. Cass preferred to remain standing.

"Alright, what's the plan?" I leaned over the desk, trying to make sense of my Gamma's jottings.

"I only studied magical defenses very briefly during my years of training, so I tried to stick to what I learned. Feel free to correct me if I'm wrong, Cass," Zach addressed the witch, never taking his eyes off the paper. She, in turn, took a few steps forward. "This line here represents Wind Howlers' territorial outline." Using his index finger, he traced the area on the map. "In addition to the enchanted alarm traps, spread all across our borders, we also have a few common traps placed in our territory's main entrances. Those are effective against normal rogues, but I doubt they will present much of a challenge to Fallen. Which made me think..." He finally lifted his head to look at the woman in front of him. "Cass, do you know how to cast barriers that only keep away certain supernatural creatures?"

"Yeah. That's pretty basic," Cass answered, annoyed, seemingly offended by Zach's question. "However, those can only be used to protect small areas. Lifting a veil around the

entire territory would demand too much energy and time, which we don't have."

"I know. That's not how I planned on using them," he went on. "I know barriers can be used to keep enemies away, but can they be used to trap them inside an area instead?"

Cass raised her eyebrows. "You mean like a reverse trapping spell?" My Gamma nodded. As I listened to their exchange, I barely understood a thing they said. "I can do that. Wildfire circles should work, and they aren't too complicated to cast. Plus, they are very effective at imprisoning specific targets."

"Can you have more than one of them active at the same time?" Zach's eyes glistened. He was obviously excited about the idea he had had.

"How many are we talking about?"

My Gamma proceeded to circle the five main entrances to our territory. "We'd need them in these locations. In the event of an attack, I believe the Fallen would try to march into our lands through one of these areas, since they have grown to become a fairly large group. These are the easiest access points to our territory, where the forest isn't as dense and there's little to no geographical obstacles, like rocks, hills, and lakes."

Cass was thoughtful for a moment before a smile lit up her face. "Yep, that's doable. It won't stop their attack completely, but..."

"It'll be enough to slow them down, since they'll have to search for other entrances, while also reducing their numbers," Zach concluded.

"Dude, that's genius!" I chimed in at last, stretching my arm in my friend's direction to pat his shoulder.

He didn't seem thrilled by the physical contact, but he straightened his posture proudly at the compliment. "I also took the initiative to contact Alpha Sanders and Alpha Ruben, since their men will be fighting alongside us. They agreed to

come over in three days to help us discuss other battle strategies.”

“Good job, man.” I smiled at him, crossing my arms behind my head as I leaned against my seat. “That’s why I made you Gamma.”

Zach frowned. “I was next-in-line to be Gamma. You didn’t make me shit.”

“Well, I didn’t even try to appoint someone else for the position, because I knew you were perfect to occupy it,” I continued, playfully.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed my Luna rolling her eyes at me. “What Zephyr’s trying to say is, thank you, Zach.”

My friend glared at me before bowing his head to Tina. “It’s my pleasure, Luna.”

I had to laugh at his reaction. Despite how stressful the previous night had been, I couldn’t deny that my mood had just become a lot lighter. We had quite the challenge on our hands, but with how efficient my team was, the Fallen would also have to hit us with their best shot if they wanted to take us down. Once again, hope was on our side.

“On your command, *Alpha...*” Cassiopeia’s voice caught my attention, and I turned to her in time to watch her give a mocking bow. “I will start preparing the spell. If things happen according to plan, I should have everything ready to activate the wildfire circles in less than a week.”

“You have my permission, Cass.” With a smile, I gestured towards the door, excusing her.

* * *

As promised, our new magical defenses were up and running in precisely three days following the meeting with my Gamma. On Thursday, my team and I woke up early to accompany Cassiopeia as she set up the wildfire circles first thing in the morning. With the information she had access to, thanks to the research done on the Fallen that had been caught so far, she enchanted the traps to ensure only said enemy would activate them. Should they try to sneak into our territory

through its main entrances, they would be trapped until we decided to release them.

On the days that had gone by, our secret training sessions, as well as the quest to discover Dawn's unique ability, continued. Sadly, we hadn't made any progress on the latter. As tirelessly as we tried to figure out what kind of superpower my she-wolf could possess, all of our efforts were fruitless. I was starting to consider that maybe not all details about the prophecy were right; maybe the so-called *Lightbringer* didn't have any magical skills. Dawn, on the other hand, was adamant that she had been blessed by the Moon Goddess, even though she seemed just as clueless as us regarding the matter.

After ensuring the trapping spells were placed and working correctly, Cass teleported us back to the main square just in time for training. Once our two hours of sparring were over, we joined the girls at the Elite table in the cafeteria for breakfast. They were discussing their girls day out, which was set to happen the following day, but the subject changed not long after we took our seats.

"Have you heard anything from Alpha Ruben and Alpha Sanders?" my Luna asked me as I took the first bite of my scrambled eggs.

"The driver we sent to get them has just left Sapphire Pond. They should be here in less than half an hour," Malin kindly answered for me. "I'll gather the warriors they lent us as soon as I'm done with my plate."

"You can finish eating calmly." Amaya touched her mate's arm, which caused him to immediately stop devouring his food like he was a starving animal. Then, she flashed him a sweet smile. "I can gather the warriors for you."

Returning her gesture, my Beta gave her an eskimo kiss. "Thank you, my star."

"I'll help you," Nisha volunteered. "I can get my brother's men, while you get Alpha Ruben's." Amaya nodded at her in silent appreciation.

The next second, I heard Valentina whisper close to my ear, “Would you like me to accompany you during the meeting?”

“Of course, my sunrise.” I dropped my fork to squeeze her hand under the table, looking into her eyes. “You’re welcome to join us, as long as you wanna be there. I always love having your insights.” The corner of her lips turned up in response.

By the time we left the cafeteria, my Delta informed me that our guests had just crossed the borders. Amaya and Nisha were ready to go fetch the warriors, but knowing how excited they were to be reunited with their former Alphas, I told them to come with us. They could take care of their duties afterwards.

A few minutes after the Betas, Gammas, my Luna, and I made it to the front of the pack house, we watched the limousine drive up to the town square. As soon as the car came to a stop, our driver hopped out to open the door for our guests, politely welcoming them to our pack. I took a step forward to greet them first.

“Thank you for coming, Alpha Ruben. Alpha Sanders.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Alpha Zephyr...” Ruben shook my hand before turning to my Luna. “And it’s an honor to finally meet you, Luna Valentina.”

“Likewise, Alpha Ruben.” My mate nodded at him, a warm smile on her face.

Soon enough, Ruben’s eyes landed on Amaya. “Now, how’s my favorite girl been?”

Malin exchanged encouraging glances with his Beta Female, letting go of her hand to allow her to greet her former leader and old friend. Meanwhile, Alpha Sanders approached us before walking up to his little sister and her mate.

“Has *runner boy* been treating you well, sis?” I had to contain my laughter as I heard him ask. A teasing grin played on the man’s lips. Judging by my Gamma’s frown, he wasn’t as amused.

My Beta had told me the full story about Zach's reaction upon meeting his mate. Hearing it was funny enough, but damn, I wish I could have been there to witness the scene myself.

"Why do I have a feeling none of you will ever let me live this down?" Zach muttered, a little more annoyed than usual.

"He's been wonderful, bro. Leave him be." Nisha stepped in front of her mate to defend him. Once she touched his hand, he became peaceful as a dove. Sanders raised his hands in defeat, but even after getting scolded, he didn't hesitate to give his sister a hug.

"Shall we head inside?" I suggested once we were done with the formalities. The other two leaders promptly agreed.

While Amaya and Nisha excused themselves to gather the warriors that had been lent to us, I led the visiting leaders all the way up to my office, along with my Luna and my men. Although it was tradition for Alphas to bring their second-in-command along for business trips, Ruben and Sanders had come by themselves since our meeting wasn't formal; it would be more like a meeting of the minds - exchanging advice and offering opinions from different perspectives.

Once we made it to the office, I took my place behind the desk, with Tina on my right. My Beta and Gamma got comfortable in their seats on my left, while our guests took the two empty chairs in front of us. I asked Zach to spread the map of our territory over the desk, and Malin took out the training reports to give the Alphas an overview of the strategy we had developed thus far.

With the help of my men, I proceeded to explain the traps that were part of our current defense system and their strategic placement. Then, I briefly mentioned our plan to use Wind Howlers' signature scent-masking technique to ambush the Fallen once they set off the alarm traps. My Gamma also added that he had heard back from the Elder Council, which was news to me too. They estimated there to be around 250 rogues in the Fallen army after counting the deaths in the most recent attack.

For once, it really looked like we were at an advantage - on paper, at least.

“You have a solid plan; there’s no arguing about that,” Sanders was the first to speak. “But it seems to me that your safety bunkers might be a little underprotected.”

“I agree,” Alpha Ruben joined him, pointing to the main square on the map. “I wouldn’t normally worry about that when confronting another pack, but the Fallen have no morals. They don’t abide by Werewolf Law,” he wisely observed. “If you succeed at ambushing them at the beginning of the attack, their leader might notice that they’re at a disadvantage. And there’s an easy way he could turn the fight to his favor again...”

“By attacking those who can’t fight to destabilize the warriors. Essentially, their mates and children, who would be hidden in the safety bunkers,” my Gamma concluded. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“In that case...” I was surprised when my Luna chimed in, leaning over the large piece of paper. “How about we secure the bunkers with magical barriers? Cass should be able to help us with that, right?” While the men pondered about her suggestion, she went on, “Aside from wasting our enemy’s time, that would force them to fight us, all while ensuring the safety of the other pack members.”

“Good idea, Luna Valentina,” Ruben complimented her.

“Indeed, but I doubt Cassiopeia will be strong enough to have the wildfire circles and the barriers around the bunkers active at the same time,” Zach analyzed. “In order to protect the bunkers, we would have to give up on securing the main entrances.”

“How about the usual trapping pits?” Sanders proposed. “Since they’re commonly used to protect pack borders, I suspect the Fallen would be careful to avoid them. But they definitely wouldn’t expect them around the bunkers.”

“They’re not too complicated to escape from, but if you cover the bottom with some kind of poisonous substance, it

should weaken them enough to prevent them from climbing back up,” Ruben continued. “Fallen aren’t weak to silver, but does wolfsbane still work against them?”

“It does,” I revealed before turning to my Gamma. “Let’s do that.”

“Right away, Alpha.” Zach nodded at me as he started taking notes.

The next half-hour was spent reorganizing our plan and polishing our strategy. When we were done, I was confident that we would be able to defend ourselves perfectly. Now, we’d only have to make sure our warriors were ready for battle; keeping the extra training sessions for the next couple of weeks should do the trick.

After leaving the office, Ruben and Sanders followed me outside to where Amaya and Nisha had gathered their men. They made sure their warriors were well-adjusted before I accompanied them to the main square once again.

By sunset, everything had been taken care of, and I was more than thankful for their help. Ruben and Sanders said their goodbyes to the females that had once been part of their packs before climbing back into the limousine. When the car was about to leave, I was surprised to see the tall man with golden curls rolled down his window.

“I wish you all the luck in your battle, Alpha Zephyr. I’ll be praying for your victory.” Ruben looked me straight in the eye. “When you do win, Dune Drifters will be happy to have Wind Howlers as an official ally.”

All I could do was stand there, blinking, as I tried to absorb what he had just said. I was suddenly flooded by a feeling of utter conviction. If we managed to defeat the Fallen, there was a high chance our pack would be in bad shape afterwards; an alliance with such a large, powerful pack would definitely help us get back on our feet.

And even more so, it would be of great assistance to ensure our future growth.

INTERLUDE VIII

Valentina

The morning following the visit of the two Alphas, I went to the gym for warrior training as usual; only today, I was a little more excited. It was the day the girls and I had agreed to hang out in the city. Although it was still Friday, and most wolves still had to work, the three of us had taken the day off. Well, technically. Despite holding the same power as our mates, females of the Elite - save for the Delta - weren't required to perform any specific jobs.

Regardless of that, we liked helping our men out in any way we possibly could, especially considering how full their hands were at the moment. As Luna, I was happy to discuss major decisions with Zephyr, and I also enjoyed talking to pack members to ensure their concerns were heard. Nisha often used her Alpha knowledge to assist Zach with his tasks, while Amaya was always present at training.

“Good job, Tina! That was an impeccable strike!”

The Beta Female stood a few feet away from my sparring partner and I, occasionally encouraging or correcting us, as she did with the rest of the warriors. It seemed she had witnessed the blow I had landed right on Alex's ribs after spotting an opening.

“You do learn quickly, don't you?” A half smile lit up the Delta's face as she lifted her head. She was still panting a little from our combat. “Nice move, Luna.”

As adamant as Zephyr was about me only sparring with him, he made an exception for Alex when she asked him to take me as her partner a few days ago. At first, I was a little nervous about training with her. I had heard too many stories about how fierce of a fighter she was. It truly was hard to keep

up with her, but in the end, I noticed that I started improving a lot faster since we started sparring together.

“Thank you,” I replied at last. “I didn’t hurt you too bad, did I?”

“Nah.” She waved me off, playfulness shining in her eyes. “But you do hit harder than most men here.” A second later, I heard a few of the males scoff. Only then did I realize that was exactly what she wanted, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Alright, training is over. You’re dismissed.” At Malin’s announcement, the pairs immediately broke apart from each other. “You better come back with more energy on Monday! You were fighting like grandmas today!” It was funny how he played the “bad cop” role, while his mate was clearly the “good cop.”

I would usually wait for Zephyr before leaving the training grounds, but I was so entertained in a conversation with Amaya and Alex, it completely slipped my mind. The girls and I had already discussed the details for our day out, we didn’t mind going over them again as anticipation consumed us. Our plan was to go to Pines Amusement Park, then make a final stop at a renowned shifter restaurant downtown before heading back home.

“Hey girls! Ready for our date?” Nisha’s voice caught our attention as we made our way back to the pack house. She rushed over to us, an excited grin on her face.

“You bet! We were just talking about that,” I told her.

Amaya turned to Alex. “You sure you can’t come with us?”

“I’d love to, but there’s too much I have to do ‘round here.” The Delta smiled apologetically. “Fridays are always busy. There’s a bunch of reports I need to prepare following the end of the week.”

“Deltas work too hard,” I observed. “You don’t get enough recognition for everything you do.”

“True. I love the job, though.” Alex shrugged. We knew that she meant it; no one was more passionate about their

position than she was.

“Maybe we can catch a movie tomorrow? We can use the cinema room,” Nisha suggested.

“That’d be cool!” the Delta agreed. “There’s this new Tom Cruise movie I’ve been dying to watch.”

“Did you know he’s a werewolf?” I whispered, as if it was a big secret. When the three women stopped, looking at me with wide eyes, I immediately knew the answer.

“What? No way!” Nisha yelled in disbelief.

“That actually explains why he’s still so hot even though he’s supposed to be in his sixties. He doesn’t age like humans do,” Amaya pointed out.

“Who’s hot?” An unexpected masculine voice sounded behind us.

I glanced over my shoulder to find a frowning Malin. Zephyr was right by his side. He looked like a greek god with his wet jet-black hair glistening blue underneath the sunrays, as beads of sweat dropped down the tips of his messy strands onto his exposed, muscular chest. I held my breath, unaware of how I was blatantly ogling his half-naked body. A smirk played on his lips when he realized it before I did.

“Were you eavesdropping?” Amaya broke the silence as she turned to her mate. She slowly approached him, causing his frown to fade the second she intertwined their fingers.

“Werewolf hearing,” the Beta recalled.

“Sure,” his mate chuckled. “Since you’re here, I wanted to ask - can we take the truck today?”

“Why don’t you take the Ferrari?” Zephyr chimed in. He placed a quick kiss on my temple as soon as he reached my side.

“Can we?” I asked.

“Of course.” He leaned into my ear to whisper, “If you promise to take good care of Thor.”

I had to laugh. “I will.”

“Good. I don’t like the idea of you driving around on that ol’ truck. That thing hasn’t been safe for the past decade.”

“Hey! The truck works perfectly fine!” Malin growled, playfully punching his best friend’s arm. Zephyr backed away from me to fight him back. They looked like pups trying to dodge each other’s moves as they went on ahead of us, but it was nice to see them so relaxed.

“We’ll wait for you at the cafeteria!” my Alpha announced as they disappeared into the public showers. I shook my head at their childish behavior, but a smile still lit up my face.

“Who’s Thor?” Nisha raised one of her eyebrows.

“That’s what Zephyr calls his car,” I revealed, fighting the urge to facepalm.

“Our Alpha named his car after-”

“Just drop it,” I cut Amaya off. “I still can’t make sense of it to this day.”

Once we made it to the main building, the four of us went our separate ways. But we were only apart for a few minutes to shower in our own rooms before we met again in the cafeteria. We joined our men at the Elite table to eat, and when it was time for them to go to work, we went to the dandelion fields to let our wolves out to play.

The rest of the morning and the beginning of the afternoon went by in the blink of an eye. After lunch, I went back to the Alpha suite to get ready for our girls trip. I scoured through my closet for a few minutes, still overwhelmed by the amount of clothes Zephyr had gotten for me, until my eyes landed on a casual autumn long-sleeved knee-length dress. It was a dark burgundy shade with an orange-and-yellow flower pattern. Aside from looking quite comfortable, it seemed to be a good fit for the weather; days were warmer, tending to get cooler towards the night.

“*Go for it,*” I heard Dusk’s voice inside my head. “*You’ve been waiting for the right occasion to wear that one since you got it.*”

I didn't hesitate to follow his advice. After trying it on, I played with hairstyles for a little bit before deciding to just let it loose. I spun around in front of the mirror, pondering on whether I should put on some makeup or not. When I noticed Zephyr's reflection beside mine, it almost gave me a heart attack. I hadn't heard him walk in.

"Goddess," my mate breathed out, his eyes dark as he made his way towards me. "You look like an angel, sunrise." His lips touched my neck, ripping a small moan from me as he snaked his arms around my stomach from behind. "I'm gonna miss you so much while you're out."

His words made my heart skip a beat. Still gazing at our reflection, I lifted my hand up to his face to caress his light stubble. As excited as I was about my time alone with the girls, that was enough to make me second guess my plans.

"Are you sure you don't need me here? I can stay, you know."

He shook his head. "I'll be fine. You should go." He gently spun me around, looking into my eyes. "Have fun with the girls."

Despite his insistence, I didn't miss the reluctance in his eyes. It was weird, but I was hesitant about leaving him too. The mate bond made it so hard for us to be apart, even just for a few hours. But I took a deep breath, forcing a smile. It would be nice to have some bonding time with the girls, as we rarely had the opportunity to hang out without our men.

"Thank you, moonlight. I'll see you later..." I placed a kiss on the corner of his lips teasingly. "And I'll make up for my absence."

A growl reverberated in his throat. "I'm counting on that."

After saying our goodbyes, Zephyr handed me the keys to his car. I linked the girls to check if they were ready as I left the Alpha suite. I wasn't surprised when they said that they were in the front hall waiting for me; no matter how hard I tried, I was usually running a few minutes late. I rushed down the stairs, greeting Amaya and Nisha before leading the way

towards the garage. We got into the car, and as soon as we hit the driveway, I hit the pedal just like my mate had taught me.

“Woah! This thing’s really fast!” Amaya yelled in an attempt to be heard over the noise of the fast blowing wind.

“I know, right? I love it!” I confessed. “But don’t tell Zephyr I said that!”

“What happens in the girls trip stays in the girls trip!” Nisha joked, making us all laugh.

It took us just under an hour to make it to the city. The sun was still bright in the sky by the time we arrived at Pines Amusement Park. Nisha was basically our guide, since she was the only one who had visited the venue before. She and Amaya wanted to go on as many roller coaster rides as possible, and though I had never done anything like that, I quite enjoyed the rush.

We chatted throughout the day as we waited in lines, took a bunch of silly pictures, and overall had a lot of fun. We even saw the sunset from the top of the tallest roller coaster, which was magical. I would be lying if I said I didn’t miss having my mate around, but I also loved hanging out with my new friends.

By nightfall, we were tired and hungry. Thankfully, Nisha had made reservations for us in a nearby restaurant called *Wolf’s Howl*. It was frequented exclusively by supernatural creatures, which allowed us to be a little less secretive about our true nature. We could joke around and talk about our werewolf side without fear of being heard, and the food was also amazing.

The three of us were having so much fun, we barely noticed time fly by. Before I knew it, our night was over. We hopped back in the car to make our way back home. During our night drive, I felt grateful for having been granted a fresh start in a new pack with such amazing people. As crazy as life was at the moment, with dangers lurking around every corner, prophecies, hidden pasts and switched wolves, I felt lucky to have found a new family.

It was past 11:00 p.m. when we made it back to Wind Howlers. Exhausted, we were ready to head straight to our rooms, but an unexpected sight just as we entered the pack house made us all stop. Standing in front of us were the Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, dressed in... robes?

“Good evening, ladies,” Malin was the first one to speak, his eyes locked on his Beta Female.

“We couldn’t stop thinking about you while you were out...” Zephyr’s husky voice was music to my ears. His predatory stare as he undressed me with his eyes was enough to set my insides on fire. “So, we decided to prepare a little surprise for you.”

My Alpha and his Beta exchanged glances. Their hands traveled to the ribbon tied around their waists that secured their robes shut, keeping their bodies hidden. My heart raced in anticipation, but before they did anything, their eyes landed on the Gamma standing between them.

“Come on, Zach!” Malin elbowed him.

“I’m not doing it!” his friend hissed.

“Oh, yes, you are!” Nisha stepped in, jumping into her mate’s arms and ripping his robe off herself. The other two men shrugged before turning to us again, and the next second, my jaw dropped.

Beneath the thin silk robe, Zephyr was dressed only in black boxers and suspenders. A white bow tie around his neck finished the look. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that Malin was wearing a similar outfit, but my gaze was locked on my delicious mate. Goddess, he was dressed as a male stripper! I had no idea what was going on, but boy, did I love what I was seeing.

I barely had time to react before my mate inched closer, dancing sexily around me. I froze in my spot, focused on simply watching him, but he wanted more. He grabbed both my hands, bringing them up to his bare chest. Heat pooled between my legs the second I felt his skin underneath my palms. He wrapped his strong arms around me, pulling me

closer. Just then, a gasp escaped my lips as his erection pressed against me. Instinctively, my eyes traveled to the bulge in his boxers.

“You like what you see, don’t you, sunrise?” he whispered into my ear, sniffing the air hungrily. A second later, a growl let me know he could already smell my arousal.

I turned around and noticed that both of my friends, as well as their mates, had already disappeared. Our girls night had taken a sudden turn, but I wasn’t complaining. Once the shock of the surprise was gone, I threw my arms around Zephyr’s neck, allowing myself to enjoy the moment.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I demanded, not bothering to hide the fire he had ignited inside of me.

“Anything for you, my Luna,” he replied before lifting me in his arms, kissing me passionately as he carried me to our room.

I wish all nights could end like this.

34 | TRAP

There's nothing better than waking up next to my beautiful mate on a Saturday morning, when there's no rush to get out of bed. I loved that she was a late riser, as it allowed me a moment to simply watch her sleep.

Drawn to the precious sight before me, I moved closer to her as slowly as I could, diving my nose into her smooth caramel blonde waves. Inhaling her heavenly scent was the best way to start the day; it filled me with serenity and cleared my mind. My arms were wrapped around her, feeling the thin fabric of the white button-up shirt she had borrowed from me. I was only wearing my underwear, and I craved to feel her skin on mine, but I didn't have the heart to wake her up. She looked so peaceful.

Still, I couldn't resist the urge to subtly slide my hand under her only piece of clothing. A groan echoed in my chest at the feeling of her soft skin under my fingertips. I slowly caressed her waist and stomach, drawing circles around her belly button. I knew I should let her rest after the wild night we had, but at the same time, I couldn't wait for her to be up.

It had been my idea to dress provocatively and wait for her return the night before. Malin was eager to join me, and we somehow convinced Zach to do the same. Valentina had only been gone for a few hours, but I missed her so much. When I saw the hunger burning in her golden eyes, I couldn't control myself. I would have taken her in the front hall had she not insisted we go up to our room.

When I threw her onto the bed, I remembered the outfit I was wearing - the outfit I had donned just for her. That's when I decided to not let it go to waste and embodied the character. I told Valentina to keep her hands off me while I sensually danced for her, and though she wasn't too fond of the idea at first, I was more than sure she enjoyed the show. As I recalled the way she begged me to take her, I couldn't help but get hard

all over again. Out of instinct, I squeezed her thigh, immediately feeling her move in surprise.

Her alarmed expression soon turned into a playful one. “Well, good morning to my favorite stripper. Can’t keep your hands to yourself?”

“After last night, can you really blame me?” I reminded her, nibbling on her earlobe.

“Fair enough,” she chuckled. “By the way, you are quite a skilled lap dancer,” she said teasingly.

“I’m dying for you to return the favor. When will you be dancing for me, my sexy Luna?” I asked, unable to hide the expectation in my voice.

“Definitely not now,” my mate replied quickly, making me frown. “You know we have to get up now. We have training.”

It took me a moment to understand what she meant. There was no warrior training on weekends. Then, I realized she meant our private training sessions with Cass, which had been happening every day since she started living with us. Once we mastered the ability to see through each other’s eyes just by blinking, the witch insisted we learned other variants of our vision switch. We were currently trying to project images to each other willingly. And, of course, we were still on the never-ending quest to discover Dawn’s elusive superpower.

“Let’s skip it.” There were a thousand other things I’d prefer to do, and 999 of them included my precious mate. I leaned in to kiss her, but she quickly dodged my move.

“You know we can’t, Zephyr!” She laughed, detangling herself from my embrace so she could get up. “Come on, we don’t wanna be late.”

“I do!” I argued, but followed her nonetheless.

“You don’t even wanna show up in the first place!” she scoffed, still smiling. “If you behave, I promise to take your lap dance request into consideration.”

“Okay!” Without a second thought, I bolted to the bathroom to get ready as quickly as possible. With an

incentive like that, I would gladly spend the whole day training, or doing whatever else my mate wanted me to do.

Once we were ready, the two of us headed to the gym, where Cassiopeia was waiting for us. We sparred in wolf form so Dusk could practice his biting skills. Since Dawn healed faster than normal wolves, she wouldn't bleed out from her mate's bite.

At the end of training, we continued to work on figuring out Dawn's unique ability, with no luck. Honestly, I was ready to accept that she didn't have one. We did find out that her unusual speed and rapid healing were somehow connected to her prophesied name, just like Dusk's super strength, but that was pretty much it.

"Maybe Dawn's ability just isn't as obvious as Dusk's," Tina guessed as we left the gym. "But we'll learn what triggers it eventually."

"Doesn't really matter." I shrugged. "Dawn's pretty strong as it is. She doesn't need anything else." My wolf rolled her eyes at my ironic comment as I repeated what she usually told me.

"Are you jealous that my wolf has powers and yours doesn't?" Tina fake-teased.

"Okay, let me stop you there. You *stole* my magical wolf. I got stuck with your commoner."

"*Ouch, asshole,*" Dawn complained. "*Now I'll make sure not to tell you what my powers are once I do figure them out.*"

"Anyway," I said out loud as I ignored Dawn's empty threat, turning to Tina. "Since it's Saturday, and we rarely have peaceful days, I was hoping to take you on a date before shit hits the fan again."

"A date, huh?" She raised her eyebrows in surprise, wrapping her arms around my neck to close the distance between us. "And what are we doing, my moonlight?"

"I was thinking of something a little more rustic, you see..." I leaned in, touching my nose to hers. "There's another waterfall in the middle of the woods, not too far from the

territory. It's more secluded than the one in our lands. It would allow us some...privacy," I whispered suggestively. "It'd be just you, me, the water and the wind."

"Sounds pretty romantic," she replied, seemingly interested in my idea. "When are we going?"

"After lunch," I revealed, having already planned everything out. "We can let our wolves out and run there. I thought it'd be nice to let Dawn and Dusk have some time for themselves, too. They don't get a lot of that aside from training."

"Wow, narcissistic Zephyr is thinking about someone other than himself? What is happening?" my she-wolf chimed in, sarcastic as ever.

"You must be poisoning my thoughts," I replied in the same tone, making her laugh. She didn't miss the opportunity to stick her tongue out to me though.

"Alright. I'm down." Valentina's voice pulled me back to reality. With a smile, I pressed my lips against hers, sealing our deal with a kiss.

* * *

After lunch, we rested for an hour before heading out. We shifted at the borders, and Dawn left carrying a small bag with clothes and snacks. She was supposed to lead the way to our secret paradise, but I let her stray off the path a few times so she could chase rabbits with Dusk. They were definitely making the most out of the free time we had.

The deeper we got into the forest, the more aggressive our wolves' playtime got. Before I could even think about what was going on, my she-wolf rolled down on the ground, leaving her belly exposed. The invitation was enough to make a hungry-looking Dusk pounce on her. I pretended not to see what happened next; it was weird as hell watching my female counterpart make love to another male, especially when that male was technically me.

"Oh, stop being such a puppy!" Dawn laughed at me after she was done with her business, going back to casually

walking the trail in her mate's company. Now that they had their release, both seemed a lot calmer. "*I watch you having sex with Valentina all the time, and you never hear me whining about it. Grow some balls!*" I couldn't help but laugh. She had a point.

A few minutes later, we finally made it to our destination. Even though Dawn had already seen the waterfall from my memories, she took a moment to analyze the landscape with her own eyes. Hidden behind the dense vegetation, a stream flowed from tall rocks, covered with the greenest plants, into a natural pool of clear blue water. The pool was surrounded by pebbles of different sizes, and the bottom was covered with sand. Beside her, Dusk was mesmerized.

Although not too wide, the pool seemed deep enough to reach my she-wolf's shoulders, which she confirmed as soon as she jumped in. The black beast didn't hesitate to follow right after her. By the time we re-emerged from beneath the water's surface, our counterparts had given my mate and I back control, and I was free to admire her naked beauty.

After watching our wolves get it on, I had to worship her in human form too. Our bodies danced to the sound of her echoing moans, muffled by the crashing water. It was a melody I would never forget, as the new memories we were making would be imprinted on my mind forever.

When we were done, I hugged her from behind, resting my back against the rocky side of the pool. For a while, we just rested, enjoying the peace and quiet of our little piece of Heaven. We only stepped out of the water to eat the sandwiches I had packed earlier to restore our energy. The moment we finished, we went back to the pool, where we stayed until the sun just started to set, when it became too cold for us. As we were getting ready to head back home, Valentina ran up to me, surprising me with a kiss.

"Thank you, Zephyr. Our date was amazing." The honesty behind her words made me shiver.

One of my hands pressed against the small of her back, pulling her near, while the other one traveled up to her face to

remove a strand of her wet hair out of the way. “It makes me so happy to know you enjoyed it, my mate.”

“Can we come back here some other time?”

“Whenever you want to. This will be our secret haven,” I reassured her, and she nodded in silent understanding.

We cuddled for a little longer before giving our wolves back control. This time, they followed the path back home rigorously, although still glued to each other. The two of them kept walking carefreely until we were about halfway through our journey. At that point, Dawn suddenly stopped to sniff the air. I watched Dusk do the same before they exchanged suspicious looks.

Because we shared the same thoughts, I immediately knew what Dawn was thinking: the place smelled like dead prey, but something was off. Neither of the wolves were able to figure out exactly what it was. However, since we were traversing a forest that was home to carnivores and herbivores, the scent of dead animals wasn't really alarming. In the end, they just shrugged and continued walking. That was definitely a mistake.

As soon as Dusk took his next step, a metal net, large and strong, came out of the ground. In the blink of an eye, the large black wolf was trapped and lifted into the air by the net that hung from a thick tree. Dawn's first reaction was to turn around, growling, in search of incoming threats. Before she could spot any enemies, a whimper coming from her imprisoned mate made her turn to him again. When she did, her heart sank.

The net wasn't made of any metal - it was made of silver, and it was burning Dusk's skin.

“That isn't a regular trap! It was made to catch werewolves!” my she-wolf observed.

That was strange. After we took over Silent Rivers, our pack was the only one living near this forest. Who could have set a werewolf trap here? I saw through Dawn's eyes as she looked around desperately, trying to understand what was

happening. She was usually quite calm and rational, even in stressful situations, but for the first time, I watched her panic as she paced in circles around her mate, not knowing what to do. I realized it wasn't the time to ask questions; if I didn't act fast, we could be in grave danger.

"It's hurting him! How can we get him out?!" she cried out. My mind was racing, but as much as I wanted to give her an answer, I couldn't find it myself. *"Shh, it's okay. It's gonna be okay,"* she whispered inside my head, trying to soothe him.

Closing her eyes, Dawn sat down in front of the black wolf. The next second, she started humming the same melody she usually hummed when either of us was stressed. I realized that Dusk had stopped whimpering, but Dawn was too engrossed in her song to notice. Then, I heard the sound of rustling metal. When my she-wolf opened her eyes again, her mate had somehow freed himself.

"What...what happened?!" I asked Tina through the mindlink while Dawn tackled Dusk, showering him with licks.

"I don't know. When Dawn started singing, the pain was gone," my mate revealed, as shocked as I was.

"He bit through the metal because the silver stopped burning him," Dawn continued, her relief momentarily replaced by confusion.

"How?"

"That must be Dawn's power!" Tina answered before my she-wolf could. *"When she hums, she can take others' pain away!"*

"I can?" Dawn blinked a few times in disbelief.

"Wait, Tina's right. I never connected the dots before, but every time you hummed that song in the past, I was in some kind of discomfort, and listening to you made me feel better again," I realized.

There were so many questions in my head, and I was certain that my wolf shared the same confusion. But as I was reminded of where we were, I knew there were other answers

we needed to find at the moment. With a deep breath, Dawn agreed with me.

“We have to figure out what the hell is up with this place, and who put a werewolf trap here,” I told my mate, watching her black wolf nod at Dawn. *“Stay close, and be careful. There might be other traps.”*

I tried to sense if there was anyone around, any remotely different smells or signs that we were being watched. When I was sure there was nothing out of the ordinary, I shifted back. Tina stayed in wolf form as we started exploring our surroundings. Daylight was fast disappearing, so we tried to be quick but careful. I found some bigger rocks and tossed them in front of us to make sure we wouldn't step into any more traps. In our search, we set off two more silver nets and made it to what looked like an abandoned camp.

What we found was rather revealing, and definitely alarming. There were remnants of campfire ashes, fur too big and thick to belong to normal wolves, and a few decomposing animal bodies laying around. We were shocked to find a human body laying among the leftover prey, which was pretty concerning. Werewolf law was extremely strict about harming humans; so much so, it was punishable by death. Even rogues usually wouldn't want to risk doing it, since it could threaten to expose our species. However, what was more intriguing was that there was strong evidence of the presence of shifters, but no scent.

“I'll mindlink Malin to bring Cass over here immediately.” I informed Tina before establishing a connection with my Beta.

This couldn't be good.

35 | HIDDEN

The second I contacted my Beta, he immediately dropped everything he was doing. After fetching the Gamma and the witch, he hopped in his old truck and drove as fast as he could to get to the location I had sent him over the phone. When they arrived, they were just as surprised about the discovery as we were.

While Zach explored the area in search of any revealing evidence, I explained to Malin how we had stumbled upon what seemed to be a Fallen camp. From the corner of my eye, I watched Cass draw a large circle in the dirt with the tip of her shoe. Already having gotten used to her witchcraft shenanigans, I tried my best not to be bothered by her, until she started reciting something in an ancient language.

“Cinis veritatis, revela praeterita ambulantium in terra ista.” Her voice was loud and clear.

We all watched curiously as she pulled out a small velvet pouch. With her eyes shut, she poured what seemed to be ash into her open palm, closing it before sprinkling the dark powder across the circle she had drawn on the ground.

I took a step back in surprise when a small explosion occurred, sending a fast-expanding wave of circular purple energy throughout the area. As the magical energy burst - spreading to a 50-foot radius from where we were standing - it revealed peculiar glowing particles. I watched in awe as they gathered to form the shape of big wolves, which soon started moving around the place.

“What the...” I breathed out, slowly spinning around to watch the figures roaming the place.

“The magic I just cast is a revealing spell. It shows who was at a place and what they were doing exactly 12 hours prior to this moment,” Cass clarified. “What you’re seeing are projections of real events. Since I used a simple version of the

spell to save energy, it'll end in 60 seconds, but it should be enough to figure out what we need to know."

As I carefully listened to the witch's every word, my eyes were fixated on the scene playing around me. I managed to count nine rogues in total, all of which never left their animal form. Some of them were chasing small prey or gnawing on the bones of their fresh kill, while others were sleeping. Two of them were up and alert, seemingly patrolling the area.

Exactly one minute later, the particles dispersed, disappearing as though they had never been there. It was too soon; I wanted to see more. But like Cass said, it was enough to at least answer the most important question.

"So, this truly was a Fallen camp." When my eyes darted to the witch, I was sure they were filled with concern. "You said they were here 12 hours ago?"

"Maybe less," my Gamma's voice caught my attention. He was crouching beside a rabbit carcass, carefully examining it. After rubbing his index finger over one of the open wounds of the carcass, he brought it closer to his different colored eyes. "Blood's still a vivid red on this one. It's probably been dead for three hours at max."

His observation only added to my wariness. "We need to scout the area and make sure none of them are around anymore. Malin and Zach, you two stay together. Going in pairs will prevent us from being easy targets." They promptly nodded at my command. "Cass, come with me and Tina."

"Yes, Alpha!" She saluted me mockingly. Even after living with wolves for two weeks, she still found our customs way too funny.

Fighting back a sigh of reproof, I turned to my friends again. "You take north, we'll take south. Meet us back here when you're done. If you find anything, howl."

I watched my men free their beasts and disappear between the tall trees. After exchanging one last glance with my mate, we did the same. Cass followed closely behind us as we carefully traversed the forest, but she wasn't nearly as cautious

as we were; being a centuries-old witch, she probably knew how to take care of herself.

Half-an-hour into our search, we hadn't been able to find anything relevant. We set off a few more traps, and spotted traces of scentless blood sprinkled over the grass, which suggested that the Fallen rogues likely fought amongst themselves. Sadly, nothing we came across helped us understand what they had been doing here, or where they had gone after abandoning their camp. It was a dead-end.

Or so I thought, until a sharp howl cut through the wind.

“*Talon!*” I immediately identified the voice of my Gamma's wolf. Tina's black beast turned to Dawn with wide eyes, hearing me through the mindlink. “*We have to get to them!*”

“Wait, where are you going?!” Cass shouted behind us as we bolted in the direction the sound had come from. I couldn't afford to shift to explain what was going on. She seemed to understand that, as she quickly started running after us.

Never ceasing her movement, Dawn pointed her head to the sky to let out a yowl, letting our friends know we were on our way. I couldn't tell how much time had gone by as we dodged the trunks and boulders blocking our path until we finally made it to our destination. There, I was shocked to find Mint and Talon trying to defend themselves against four dirty beasts, all standing at least six inches taller than them.

My friends' wolves both had a few superficial wounds, but that didn't keep them from snarling fiercely as they backed away, trying to keep a good distance from their savage opponents. They knew they were at a disadvantage, and so did the rogues. Reading the body language of one of the creatures, I realized it was about to pounce on Mint, and the rest of his crew would surely follow.

Without thinking twice, Dawn lunged at the attacker, sinking her teeth deep into his neck. Dusk soon appeared beside her, keeping the other creatures away to allow her to return to safety after injuring one of the bastards. Growls were heard, but they stayed back, giving me a moment to think.

“What are we doing here, man? Fighting or retreating?” Malin’s voice echoed in my head. He had opened his connection to the three of us simultaneously, making it easier for us to communicate.

“It’s four on four,” I observed, but I immediately cursed myself for making such a statement so quickly. It didn’t take long for two other scentless beasts to jump into view from behind the dense foliage of the forest. Three more followed. *“Shit!”*

“Zephyr, we need to go! There’s no way to know how many more of them there are!” Tina was right. Cass’ spell showed us nine rogues living in the camp, but there could be more; we weren’t able to see everything in one minute.

“We can lead them straight to the traps in our borders,” Zach suggested. *“That way, we can get rid of them while possibly avoiding direct confrontation.”*

“Alright. Retreat!” I ordered as Dawn’s gaze focused on my friends. *“Hide your scents with the wind to slow them down! Malin, link our warriors! Make sure they are ready to fight should we need their help!”*

“On it, Alpha.” Mint nodded, waiting for me to lead the way.

Through my she-wolf’s eyes, I scoured my surroundings in search of Cass; I couldn’t leave her out here with those hungry beasts. It was foolish of me to think she needed rescuing.

“Lux quae excaecat!” Dawn raised her ears as we heard the witch’s unintelligible words, only to find the crazy woman sitting on her back. The next second, a blinding light took over the area, stunning the enemies for a moment. *“Come on, wolfie, run! Now!”*

Dawn blinked a few times to focus her vision again. With another powerful howl, she signaled for our friends to follow us as we dashed towards our territory. Once we identified which direction the wind was blowing, we ran in its same course, making it harder for our pursuers to track us. Aside from giving us a speed boost, the strong breeze also carried

our scent with us instead of blowing it behind us, as what would have happened if we had decided to run against it.

At full speed, it took us less than 15 minutes to make it to our territory. Dawn slowed down, allowing Talon to run ahead of us so he could lead us safely between the traps. Our sentinels were all in position, as were the majority of our warriors - hopefully, if my Gamma's plan worked, we wouldn't need them.

Running further into the territory, we stopped beside our army to catch our breath. We were at an advantage now; all we had to do was wait. Only a few seconds later, the first four rogues marched into our territory, getting in range of the alarm traps. The high-pitched sound forced them to stop at once, causing them to drop to the ground, stunned.

The other five rogues who were falling behind were lucky enough to not be affected by the magical trap. We watched as they avoided coming near the source of the sound, taking a different route. A grin lit up my she-wolf's face as she anticipated what would happen. By dodging one of our traps, they fell right into another one - the wildfire circles. It was fascinating to watch the green flames magically rise to the night skies, trapping the enemies in a fire vortex.

I began to relax, only to realize it was still too soon to celebrate. After two minutes of peace, another dozen Fallen appeared on the horizon. Followed by another. And another. More of them fell into our traps, but some managed to get past them. Dawn and Dusk started growling at the enemies coming in our direction, while the other wolves around them took a step back, horrified. I was worried too, of course, but I needed to be strong to ensure the safety of my pack.

"There weren't just nine of them..." my best friend observed. *"This might be their entire army."*

"Malin, send the front line in to contain their advance! I want the emergency unit in the back to weaken them!" I ordered, watching as Mint quickly recomposed himself. With a single howl, the warriors promptly followed him. *"Zach, I want you to contact the rest of our sentinels, check if there are*

rogues coming from any other directions. Once you're done, join us!"

"Right away, Alpha." My Gamma's voice sounded inside my head before Dawn's eyes landed on her mate.

"Are you ready to fight, sunrise?" I asked Tina.

"Only we can stop them," she replied confidently.

"Stay near me at all times. I need to know you're not in danger," I pleaded.

"Even if you can't see me, all you have to do is blink," she reminded me as our wolves shared one last hug. They howled in unison to assemble another group of warriors, not hesitating to lead them onto the battlefield.

My heart was racing in my chest. This was the moment I had been preparing for since I stepped in as Alpha, yet I would be lying if I said I felt ready. I wasn't afraid for myself, but I couldn't bear the thought of any of the members of my family getting hurt. If anything went wrong...

"Nothing will go wrong," Dawn reassured me. *"We can do this."*

Trusting her, I tried to clear my mind and focus solely on the battle. With a quick glance, I tried to analyze the fight we were about to jump into. The warriors who had gone ahead under Mint's leadership had already been injured, scratches scattered around their bodies. Thankfully, there seemed to have been no losses yet. I also noticed that none of the rogues present were nearly as big as Ryder and his father. It led me to believe that lower-ranking wolves who had been turned into Fallen weren't as powerful, though they were definitely still stronger than us.

Dawn wasn't the least bit intimidated by the thought though; she had already taken down two Alpha-blooded Fallen after all. Without hesitation, she fiercely pounced on the first enemy we came across, knocking it to the ground. As she ripped at his throat, I used our special ability to get a glimpse of what Dusk was up to whenever she blinked. I realized that he was protecting Tina just fine, masterfully using his 'bleed-

out bite' to weaken his opponents before finishing them off. Feeling calmer, I allowed myself to concentrate on mine and Dawn's fight.

Full of energy, my she-wolf continued to take down other beasts with ease. She was faster than them, and she didn't let the superficial wounds they inflicted on her slow her down. It also helped that we had practiced daily since we fought our first Fallen. However, we were both aware that this wasn't training anymore; this was real life. It was kill or be killed, and I knew exactly which one my counterpart was going for.

As Dawn closed her jaws around her fourth opponent, causing him to suffocate on his own blood, I saw a flash of a dirty gray wolf coming at us from behind. Tina had probably been able to project the image she was seeing to us.

To the sound of her previous enemy taking its last breath, Dawn quickly turned around. Lifting herself up on her hind legs, she used her front paws to wrap her opponent in a fatal hug, taking him by surprise. The two wolves thrashed their muzzles against each other as both tried to injure the other with their teeth, but my she-wolf ended up prevailing. While her claws dug into the filthy creature's shoulders, she sank her fangs into his neck, making him cry out in pain. As the rogue fell to the ground, Dawn stayed on top of him, securing him in place to wait for him to stop breathing, but before he did, another beast came to his rescue.

My she-wolf was sent rolling on the floor after she lost balance when the second rogue rammed into her side. She didn't stay down, though. Shaking the dirt off her fur, she roared at the creature, making him lower his ears when she revealed her Alpha aura. She immediately jumped on the coward, but as soon as she knocked him over, the other enemy she couldn't finish off came for her again. With no time to react, Dawn couldn't prevent him from piercing her skin with his canines as he grabbed a hold of her scruff.

"Two against one..." Dawn huffed as she struggled to break free, caught between the two abnormally strong beasts. *"These fuckers like to fight dirty, huh?"*

A wolfish grin shone on her face through her pain, letting her bloody teeth show, but she knew she was in a complicated situation. She hissed when she felt claws on her left thigh, then jaws on her shoulder. Despite her speed and fast healing, it would be hard for her to win against two Fallen.

“I got you, Alpha!” A familiar voice echoed in my head, a moment before a dark gray wolf with bright yellow eyes showed up in front of us, promptly knocking down the beast on top of us. It was Bellona, my Delta’s wolf.

Grasping the opportunity she had been given, Dawn jumped away, gaining some distance to prepare her next move. While Bellona took care of one of the rogues, Dawn made sure to strike the other one with a fatal attack. She pushed him to the ground, pressing her paws against his chest to tear it open with her claws. The agonizing sounds of the creature were disturbing, but she had no mercy. Once she set eyes on her target, she used a powerful bite to rip his beating heart out of his chest in a not-so-clean, but very effective move.

“Shit! That was brutal,” I joked.

“These bastards asked for it,” Dawn snarled.

Once the situation was under control, she closed her eyes to get a better view of Dusk’s perspective. Her heart fell when she realized that he was up against three Fallen, and I found myself sharing her despair. We had barely survived fighting two at a time. Opening her eyes again, Dawn scoured through the battlefield in search of the huge black wolf, needing less than a second to find him.

She raced towards her mate without a second thought. Neither of us had a plan in mind; we just wanted to get to Dusk and Tina before something bad happened to them. But just before we reached them, a peculiar sight made us stop.

Dusk’s hackles were raised, making him look even scarier. His growls were loud as he stared into each of the enemies’ eyes, his own orbs glowing in a piercing, icy shade of blue. The soulless creatures, who had been snarling and baring their fangs until now, all froze in their spots. Initially, I thought that they were submitting to Dusk’s powerful aura, but the next

second, all three beasts dropped to the ground. They started writhing in utter agony as their ear-piercing cries filled the air.

“What’s happening to them?” I projected my thoughts to Valentina, hoping she would have an answer. Dusk hadn’t laid a finger on his opponents, yet the three of them were acting as if they were on the brink of death.

“I...I don’t know. Dusk’s angry...” was all my mate managed to utter back.

“It’s like he inflicted pain just by staring at them,” my she-wolf guessed. *“Like some form of psychological torture. The pain seems to be only in their minds.”*

“You think that could be related to his powers as the Darkbringer?”

She didn’t have time to answer my question. My friends didn’t hesitate to jump into action. Mint took care of one of the creatures agonizing on the ground, while Talon landed a clean strike on another. Lastly, Bellona appeared to finish off the remaining rogue. Shortly after, I couldn’t hear any more snarls or growls.

“Looks like it’s over now.” My she-wolf sighed in relief.

Through her golden eyes, I watched as the light from the rising moon shone onto our territory, highlighting the dozens of corpses scattered over the crimson-painted grass. I was tense at first, afraid I would find familiar faces amongst the dead shifters, but in the end, I could only spot enemies. The fact that there were only wolves strewn across the ground meant that we hadn’t lost any of our own - if we had, they would have shifted back into their human forms, as normal werewolves did. Moreover, everyone would have felt the losses, since the magical ties that existed between members of a pack would have been severed.

At last, I sighed in relief, and Valentina ran into my arms as soon as Dawn gave me back control. I held her closer than ever, overjoyed to have her close again. So much had happened in the last few hours, with us finally discovering Dawn’s ability to take pain away, then the Fallen attack much

earlier than we expected, and Dusk seemingly unlocking another unique ability that caused the opposite effect of Dawn's. Yet none of that mattered now.

"We did it," my Luna whispered, proud as I was. "We actually did it!"

"We did, sunrise." I touched my nose to hers, closing my eyes to enjoy the moment as I smiled against her lips. I didn't care that we were both naked and covered in the blood of our enemies.

"Uh, sorry to interrupt, but..." Zach's voice disturbed our moment, bringing me back to reality and forcing me to open my eyes again. "Maybe we shouldn't celebrate just yet."

I furrowed my brows, unable to understand what he meant at first. Then, I took another good look around, stiffening when I noticed something I hadn't before.

"They're not nearly as many Fallen as we estimated there to be in their army," I concluded, clenching my fists in frustration.

"Some of them were caught in our traps," Tina recalled, unwilling to believe my Gamma's insinuation.

"True. But something's still off. I don't think they came at us at full force," my friend insisted. As much as I hated it, I found myself agreeing with him. It was too easy.

I didn't even have time to feel happy about our victory. Just when I thought my problems were over, they kept coming. Valentina sensed my worry and wrapped her arms tighter around my body, trying to calm me down. Unfortunately, the only thing that could bring me peace was figuring out what was going on.

"There's heavy dark magic emanating from their bodies." This time, I was surprised to hear Cass' voice. I noticed she had disappeared from Dawn's back as soon as we made it to Wind Howlers, but I had no idea where she had teleported to. Now, she was crouching next to one of the dead Fallen.

"I thought they all did?" I raised an eyebrow at her.

“It’s stronger on these ones than it was on the ones I studied before,” she revealed, feeding my anxiety. I watched as she forced one of the rogue’s eyes open, and her expression was immediately filled with dread. “A spell was cast on this rogue. On all of them, most likely.” She stood up abruptly, turning to face me. “These weren’t sent to slay your pack, Zephyr. These were spies. Their eyes were enchanted to work as cameras. They came here to show something to someone.”

“Show *what* to *who*?” Blinded by exasperation, I struggled to make sense of the situation.

“Their leader,” Tina concluded. Her neutral expression didn’t change in the slightest, but I could feel her worry through our bond. “They came here to show their leader who the Switched Pair is.”

I held my breath. If she was right, and this hadn’t been their final attack, we were now more screwed than ever.

36 | FATHER

My mate's words played on repeat inside my head as I glanced at the bodies surrounding us. A minute ago, I thought that this hell would be over for once and for all. Now, I've just learned that it's barely begun. It was too much to take, even for an Alpha.

"That's impossible. They couldn't have figured out who we are." I shook my head, completely in denial. "They didn't see us shift, nor could they possibly tell that we were using our abilities. Nothing about us physically changes when we see through each other's eyes."

"It's possible though, Zephyr!" Tina's tone became slightly more high-pitched as she started to lose her cool. "They saw us dodge attacks that we couldn't possibly know were coming otherwise. Then, there's...there's the thing that Dusk did! No ordinary wolf can do that!" she insisted, making me tense up. "Rhys told us that his leader knew about our existence. It makes sense for him to send spies to learn our true identities."

"Well, anyway, it doesn't matter. We killed them all, didn't we? No one will be returning to deliver the message, right?"

"Wrong." I was learning to dread Cassiopeia's voice. She was always the bearer of bad news. "The spell that was cast on these rogues works as a livestream. It transmits everything they're seeing to the caster in real time."

"So he's also working with a witch?" Could our situation get any worse?

"Looks like it." Cass shrugged. "I don't think we should worry too much about it though. To cast such a powerful spell, and on so many individuals, the leader of the Fallen must've given everything he had in exchange for this. We already know he sold his soul, so this probably cost him any other resources he had."

"That sounds like a desperate move," Malin observed.

“It’s pure strategy, actually,” my Gamma chimed in. Goddess! Always the damn voice of reason. “If he knew about the prophecy, he knew the only ones who can stop him are the Switched Pair. From the rumors, he must have figured out that you were members of Wind Howlers, which means his attack against us could be his last. By sending spies, he not only found out about the two of you,” - he pointed at my Luna and I - “but he also learned what our defenses are. He wanted to maximize his chances of winning.” He made a brief pause before delivering the bottom line, “Either way, it proves that these minions were expendable to him.”

“Which means that the leader of the Fallen expects to defeat us with the strength his army possesses,” I concluded, finally swallowing the bitter pill. “He must be ready to come for us now.”

As hard as it was to acknowledge it, it seemed that we had hit rock bottom. My team and I had worked so hard. Endless days and nights had been spent carefully planning every little detail to ensure we would have an advantage when the time came for us to face the Fallen. Has it all gone to waste? I failed to see how we would manage to pull a rabbit out of a hat now.

“Zephyr...” My mate’s quiet voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I instinctively took a look around, realizing that a lot of pack members were now staring at us. There was no doubt they had heard everything. Their expressions were filled with horror as they waited to know more, to be given any hope of surviving. That’s when I realized what a terrible mistake I had made; I should’ve never started such a discussion in public. It only added to their stress. I sighed, mentally scolding myself.

“Okay everyone, this is not the time, nor the place,” I told my team. “Find your mates, go to your rooms, take a nice shower, and meet me in my office in 30 minutes. We’ll figure out where to go from there.”

They all nodded their heads at me, taking robes that an Omega had brought for us before heading towards the main square to do as I said. I heaved a sigh as I flashed Tina one last

tired glance. Wrapping one arm around her shoulders, I pulled her closer to kiss her temple, and we too walked to the pack house.

A ten-minute shower wasn't enough to wash away any of my worries, but it was all the time I could afford to waste. At least I managed to get rid of the blood staining my skin. Dawn had already taken care of most of my superficial wounds, while also stopping the bleeding of the deeper ones. Thankfully, Dusk had once again proved himself excellent at protecting Tina. She had barely gotten a few scratches that had long disappeared by the time we left our room, fully clean and properly dressed.

And when we stepped into the hallway, precisely 30 minutes after I'd last seen my Elite members, they were all waiting at the door of my office.

"Alright, we have a lot to discuss and zero time to waste," I began, hurriedly, as I let them all in. "Let's start by laying down everything we know so far. First, we have to assume that the original Fallen now knows about our defenses, as well as the fact that Tina and I are the Switched Pair mentioned in the prophecy."

"Since they were the ones who surprised us today, they still don't know about our strategy to have part of our men hide at our borders to ambush them from behind," my Beta added.

"The Elders' estimate regarding the numbers in their army was likely wrong. If they had 50 minions to *spare* for this mission, they're probably ready to launch their final attack any day now," my Gamma continued.

"And they'll probably come for us sooner rather than later," Alex chimed in. "They obtained the information they needed. Waiting too long would give us time to rearrange everything, thus rendering their losses from today useless."

"Great insight, guys," I encouraged them. "Anything else?"

“They didn’t get to the main part of our territory, so they don’t know about the trapping pits surrounding our bunkers. We can still use them to our favor,” my mate observed.

“Good thinking.” I squeezed her hand gratefully. “Now we know what our advantages are, as well as our disadvantages.” Our organization and my team’s proactiveness made me realize that hope wasn’t completely lost yet. We could still turn this around. “Zach, I want reports on what traps were set off. We’ll need to rearrange them as best we can. Coming up with new, easy-to-implement strategies will be your job as well.”

“Yes, Alpha.” He gave me a curt nod.

“Alex,” I called, and my Delta immediately raised her head to look at me. “Our priority is to avoid an inner commotion. It’ll be your responsibility to ensure everyone stays calm. I will be doing a public briefing tomorrow morning after breakfast. Let the entire pack know.”

“Right away, Alpha.” She bowed before taking her leave.

“The rest of us will stay in this office until we make sure there is no way we will lose this fight. We can do this, guys,” I told them confidently. Malin smiled at me, while Zach tried to do the same. Before I knew what was happening, they went around my desk to wrap me in a triple hug. “Hey, hey! What’s this about?” I raised an eyebrow at them.

“You’re an amazing Alpha, man,” Malin said as I struggled to break free, but he never let go of me.

“I know I say I hate you all the time, but I do love you...a little bit,” Zach added.

A sincere smile lit up my face. “I love you too, guys.” As they stepped away, I cleared my throat, straightening my clothes. Tina just laughed at my reaction. “Well, uh...we need to concentrate on this.”

Even when faced with adversity, we still had each other. I was thankful for the amazing people surrounding me. They gave me strength to keep going.

For them, I would continue marching forward.

* * *

“My family and friends, members of Wind Howlers Pack. Thank you for being here today on such short notice.” I opened my speech as I did most of them, eyeing each of the wolves in front of me to ensure they felt seen.

My night had been awful. For once, lying in bed with my mate wasn't enough to ease my tension. Not even Dawn's healing melody could soothe my soul from the stress I was under. But the two strongest females I knew still gave me strength to get up and head to the makeshift stage in the center of the town square, where I now was.

“As you all know, our pack was attacked yesterday. We believe that the threat that's been lurking over us for the past few months is now closer than ever.” Shocked gasps were heard at my revelation. Before they could start whispering, I went on, “You must not fear though. The odds are in our favor, as was made clear by the fact that none of our own succumbed to the Fallen yesterday.” Even if it was obvious the crowd was still hesitant, it was possible to see that my confident statement had calmed them down. “I know tomorrow is Monday, but none of the warriors will be required to attend training. Until the final battle, I want you to be with your loved ones, for the future is uncertain.”

“Alpha Zephyr and I will be here to answer any questions you may have,” my Luna, who was standing right beside me, went on. She shared the same worries as me, but when she addressed the pack members with her serene voice, she kept her troubles well hidden behind a gentle smile. “These are difficult times we are facing, but I have no doubt that we will prevail. You must not forget: a wolf's strength relies on its pack. Together, nothing can stop us. Are you with us, Wind Howlers?”

“Yes, Luna!” the shifters all answered as one. “Yes, Alpha!”

Once the message had been delivered, I thanked them for their presence one last time before climbing down the stairs, arm-in-arm with my beautiful mate. As the crowd dispersed, I leaned closer to her, tenderly pressing my lips against hers.

Our kiss was brief, but powerful. It was an unspoken promise that, whether to rise or to fall like the sun and the moon, we would remain together.

“You were wonderful, my sunrise,” I whispered, resting my forehead against us.

“As were you, my moonlight.” She slowly pulled away to cup the side of my face with one of her hands. “It’s amazing to see how much confidence you transpired to the pack. They really trust you.”

“I’m glad I managed to earn their loyalty in the end.” It was impossible not to think about where I was now, and where we had started. I could only hope the Moon Goddess would give me time to grow more. “Are you coming back to the office with me?”

“Of course.” She smiled sweetly as ever, taking my hand. “By the way, are you free tonight?”

“I’m never free,” I huffed playfully. “But for you, I’ll always find time.”

“Vincent invited us for dinner at his house tonight. He wanted us to spend some time together before...you know.” She shrugged.

I brought her hand up to my lips, planting a kiss on her soft skin. “Sounds awesome, my Luna.”

“Zephyr!” An unexpected voice coming from behind me made me stop dead in my tracks. I calmly turned around to find my father staring at me, his expression softer than I remembered. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, son.”

“You’re not, Mr. Wyndham,” my mate replied, since I was still too stunned by his sudden approach.

“Did you need something, Father?”

He looked away, as he did every time he searched for the right words. “I know you’re busy, especially with everything going on, but... I was thinking... Do you have a minute, son?”

“I, uh...” I was thoughtful for a moment. I still had a few things to take care of. Clearly sensing my concerns, Tina

tugged lightly on my hand. When I looked at her, she flashed me a reassuring glance. I immediately knew she was telling me she could cover for me. “Yeah, sure,” I replied at last, forcing a smile.

“Good. I won’t keep him for long, Luna Valentina,” my old man told my mate.

“Don’t worry about it. You two take as much time as you need.” She nodded politely. “I’ll see if Luna Delilah could use some company.”

“She would definitely love it.” My father smiled warmly at her before turning his attention to me. Then, he gestured with his head towards the path ahead of us. I didn’t hesitate to follow him.

We walked in silence until we reached the hill standing between the main square and the dandelion fields. My father had never been good with words, but I could tell he was struggling now more than ever. As he faced the lands lying before him, I decided to help him a little.

“Admiring the pack you helped build?” I finally broke the silence.

He turned away from the view for a moment to smile at me. “It’s a lovely home, isn’t it?”

“I promise I’ll take good care of your legacy” I reassured him, misreading his concerns.

His expression became serious. “You already are, son. In fact, you’re starting to build your own.” He took a step towards me, turning to stand right in front of me. “Zephyr, I know I was strict with you growing up; maybe too strict sometimes. The title comes with great responsibility, and I wanted to make sure you’d be strong enough to carry it. I was afraid that, if I was too lenient, you’d start slacking off.”

“I know, Dad. You raised me well.” I fought the urge to cock my head to the sides, yet I couldn’t prevent my brows from furrowing as I tried to understand where he was going with this. Sure, he was firm with me for as long as I could remember, but he never punished me severely. He never made

me fear him. Instead, he showed me that a great Alpha rules with the respect of their people.

“No. I was wrong,” he admitted. As a sigh broke through his lips, they curled up in a proud small smile. “Yes, my lessons helped shape you into the man you’ve become, but I have to give you most of the credit for it. What you have cannot be learned. It’s in you, Zephyr.”

“What?”

“Your strength,” he revealed, yet again catching me off guard. “You’ve been through a lot more than most young Alphas. When I think about what you overcame... Hell, I don’t think I would have made it!”

“I wasn’t alone. Dawn, Tina, my friends...” I made a brief pause, looking into his eyes. “And you. You all kept pushing me forward when I wanted to give up.”

“Yet you never did.” He shook his head. “A great leader is not someone who believes they can do everything on their own. They’re the ones who see the true potential of their followers, and know they need them in order to do great things.” His words struck me so deeply, they filled me with faith. “You believed in your people even when they didn’t believe in you. That’s what makes you a great leader. I have no doubt you’ll go far in life.”

“It’s not over yet though,” I recalled, turning to face the sky with opposing emotions. Part of me felt uneasy, while another was ready for whatever should come. “The last challenge will be the toughest of them all.”

“Perhaps. And you’re right to be concerned,” my father agreed. “But if I’m being honest, I’m not scared. Even if I was conflicted for a second, I now know who you are. You’re tenacious, wise, and strong.” He rested both his hands on my shoulders, and as he uttered his next sentence, time seemed to stop. “I’m proud of the Alpha you have become. I’m proud of *you*, son.”

I had never seen my father cry, but right now, his eyes were tearing up. He came closer to embrace me, and this time,

I didn't hesitate to hug him back. The stress had been weighing on my shoulders for a while now. After another stressful day, this kind of reassurance was all I needed. We enjoyed our moment for a few minutes before I slowly pulled away, noticing as Dad tried to hide the single tear that fell down his face.

"You'll fly high, Zephyr. I have no doubt about that," he stated sincerely.

"If I do..." I glanced at him with the same certainty and love. "It's because you're the wind beneath my wings."

* * *

"Thank you so much for coming, Alpha Zephyr." Vincent bowed before me, so low his face almost touched his stomach. "I bought better quality ingredients for tonight, though I believe they still don't taste nearly as good as what you're usually served."

"I'm sure it's amazing, Vincent. I should be the one thanking you for your invitation." I smiled awkwardly, a little overwhelmed by how much respect he was showing me. "Please, don't worry about formalities. It, uh... It feels a little weird for my mate's adoptive father to treat me this way."

"With all due respect, Alpha Zephyr, it wouldn't feel right for me to treat you any differently," he insisted, finally standing back up straight. He still refused to look me in the eye though. "As you can see, the table is not too large--"

"It's large enough for the three of us, Vincent," my mate reassured him. He opened his mouth to argue, but decided to drop it. A little reluctant, he guided us to our seats at the rustic wooden table.

"Would you like me to serve you, Alpha Zephyr?" The man gestured towards the stock pot filled to the brim with a delicious-smelling chicken stew.

"You're the cook. You should serve yourself first," I calmly told him with a smile, hoping to make him feel a little less tense in my presence.

To my surprise, he stiffened. “Actually, Alpha, the Luna helped me. I’m sorry for allowing your Luna to work. I begged her not to, but she commanded me and-”

“I wouldn’t dare go against her wishes either. Just between us, she can be a little scary when she’s determined to get her way.” I winked at Tina. She just rolled her eyes playfully in response.

Thankfully, my attempt to lighten the mood worked. “That is true.” Vincent smiled.

“Come on, Vince. We’re not here as the Alpha and Luna. Tonight, I’m just Tina...” My sunrise looked at me, taking my hand in hers. “And my mate, Zephyr. Can we try that?”

Again, the Omega seemed a little unsure. In the end, he nodded. “Very well, Al-” he started, but immediately corrected himself. “Zephyr and Tina. I hope you enjoy the stew I helped prepare for you.”

Once Tina convinced Vincent to relax, the atmosphere became a lot more cozy. It was surely a change in scenery for me, but one I actually loved. Not only did I get to learn a little more about my mate’s past, I also managed to feel like I wasn’t the center of attention, which was very appreciated in a time when the fate of over 300 wolves was in my hands. After my previous stressful night, although still in the middle of chaos, I knew I would get to sleep well.

INTERLUDE IX

Malin

It was definitely weird to wake up on a Monday morning and not have to conduct warrior training. I had only officially taken up the Beta role a couple months ago, yet I had already gotten used to my routine. Subconsciously, I felt as if I was slacking off when I remained curled up in bed with my mate after the alarm rang, but what else was I supposed to do? Zephyr had given us time off to stay with our loved ones, and I wasn't one to question my Alpha's orders.

Although it might seem reckless to step away from duty when the bomb was about to go off, we had reached a point where there was nothing else we could do. After the surprise attack on Saturday, we spent almost the entire Sunday in the office, making small changes to our defense system and making sure that we were as prepared as we could be. Now, all we could do was wait.

The situation we found ourselves in was quite scary, but I couldn't say that I was afraid. Somewhere deep inside of me, I had faith that Wind Howlers would win, even if I knew that some of us would not make it. It was fairly common for werewolves to give away their lives in combat, especially for the Elite members, who were always on the front line. I was ready to die to ensure our pack's survival.

Or at least I thought I was. Every time I glanced at my precious shining star, only to be met with the most radiant smile, capable of lighting up the farthest galaxies, I started second guessing myself. Would she be able to get over the loss of her mate, should I perish in combat? Would she still smile after that? The choice between love and duty... It was the hardest choice a man could make, but there might come a time when I'll have to make it.

I shook my head. The Fallen could attack us any time now. Zephyr had ordered us to spend the day with our families, for it could be our last. I wouldn't spend it feeding the doubts in my mind.

“Good morning, my love.” My mate's groggy voice immediately pulled me from my thoughts. I had to blink a few times to realize that she had opened her eyes, and was now staring right at me.

A serene smile played on my lips as I leaned in to give her a kiss. “Morning, my star. I ordered us breakfast in bed. Mrs. Robinson should be here soon.”

“Oh. So we're not joining the others at the cafeteria?”

“I thought we could do things a little differently today,” I explained.

“Interesting. What else have you got planned?”

“You'll see.” I winked at her, and she rolled her eyes at my mysteriousness in response.

I wanted to take her to my family's farm again and to spend some time with my parents. However, we weren't allowed to leave pack territory; we didn't know when the Fallen would strike, and we had to be present to fight against them. Instead, I decided to prepare a special day with Amaya.

Once the head cook arrived with our food, we helped her set everything up on our table. After we ate, we went back to bed to spend a few more minutes just cuddling and kissing before getting up again. We headed to the dandelion fields to allow our wolves some time together too. Pepper and Mint had the time of their lives, running around and simply enjoying each other's presence.

It was around noon when they finally got tired and searched for the shade of a tree to cool off. When we started getting hungry, we shifted back into our human forms to dive into the picnic basket I had brought.

“Malin, these sandwiches you made are amazing!” my star chanted as she took her first bite. “What did you put in here?”

“It’s a classic recipe my mom used to make.” I smiled, happy to have pleased her. “It’s just garlic butter and Italian sausage.”

“Sounds fancy to me,” she giggled.

“I’m glad you like it,” I confessed, momentarily taking my eyes off her so I could admire the beautiful day.

“What are we doing next?” she wondered.

“I have a few things in mind...” I teased before looking at her again. “But is there something you’d like to do?”

“Hm...” Amaya pursed her lips as she studied my question. I loved the face she made when she was trying to think of an idea. “Oh, I know! Let’s make some ice cream!” she suggested. I cocked my head to the side in confusion. “It’s something my brother and I used to do when we were younger. I know it sounds a bit random, but I promise it’s a lot of fun!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at how cute she looked when she was excited. “Alright. I’m down,” I replied, leaning in to kiss her lips once more.

After we were done with our meal, we headed to the kitchen to follow my mate’s request. Thankfully, there was no one there, which meant that we had the place to ourselves. Since lunch had already been served, and the Alpha had cut the workday in half for all essential workers, I suspected no one would interrupt us.

Amaya’s family recipe for ice cream was pretty standard, consisting of just milk, ice and fruit. We had two blenders to use, so we decided on two flavors: raspberries and vanilla. I couldn’t understand what was so funny about this until my mate took a spoon full of her mixture. Instead of tasting it, she tossed it on me in a swift movement, and it landed straight on my face. Not even my werewolf reflexes were enough to help me dodge.

“Hey! What was that for?” I asked her, faking irritation. When she let her guard down, I took a spoon full of my own blend and tossed it on her, hitting her exposed shoulder. I guess we were having an ice cream fight.

“That’s the fun part!” she revealed, laughing.

Amaya jumped in my direction and, without warning, licked the frozen dessert off my face. I followed her lead and did the same to the ice cream that landed on her shoulder, sucking lightly on the spot after I was done.

“Hmm...tastes amazing” I murmured, brushing my cold lips against hers. “The ice cream too,” I joked, and she instantly chuckled.

We played a bit more, hoping no one would walk in on the Beta and his mate acting like little pups. When most of our skin was sticky from the sugary treat, we had already laughed so much we needed to stop to catch some air. We finished eating our homemade dessert the boring way, with a bowl and a spoon. After we were done, Amaya found her way into my arms and looked straight into my green eyes, whilst gently stroking my hair.

“Let me come with you,” she whispered.

At first, I couldn’t understand what she meant. “Where?”

“To the fight.” My face fell.

“You know I can’t let you.” It broke my heart to refuse her request. I couldn’t imagine what it felt like to be in her place, watching her mate risk his life without being able to do anything. Unfortunately, I couldn’t jeopardize her safety like that. “The Fallen aren’t a normal pack. These rogues...they’re bigger, stronger. It’s almost like an army of Alphas,” I tried to explain, but I had the feeling that nothing I said would convince her.

“So what? Valentina will be fighting!” she argued, pulling away from me to cross her arms and give me the stink eye.

“Valentina’s wolf is an Alpha male,” I countered.

“Besides, she and Zephyr are the Switched Pair. They have to be together for their abilities to work. They have to be together to defeat the original Fallen.”

“What about Alex? I’m a born Gamma, which means I’m one rank above her!” I had to admit, that was a pretty good argument. But not enough to change my mind.

“Your bloodline might make your wolf naturally stronger than hers...” I acknowledged before continuing, “However, you were never meant to take the position of Gamma. You’ve never had to fight in wolf form. Alex has trained her entire life.”

“That’s not fair!” I caught a glimpse of the mist in her eyes before she turned away from me. It killed me. “You’re my mate. I should have the right to fight beside you,” she whispered.

“I know you’re upset...” I hugged her from behind, hoping she wasn’t too pissed to not want me close to her. When she didn’t move, I rested my chin on her shoulder, right on the spot I had marked her. “Believe me when I say, I want to have you with me at all times. But I can’t. The pack needs me. If you get hurt...I don’t know if I’ll be able to fight on.”

“What if *you* get hurt and I’m not there to help?” She turned around to face me with nothing but sadness.

“I promise I’ll come back to you in one piece,” I reassured her. When the day started, I had convinced myself not to think about this, but talking to her, I ended up making up my mind. She would *always* come first. A smile lit up my face, and I watched as her tension faded away. “Come on, let’s just enjoy the rest of our day together.”

Reluctantly, Amaya nodded. “Okay.”

I kissed away each of her tears before we got out of the kitchen. I would try my best to make her smile again during the short time we still had.

* * *

Zachari

When Zephyr announced that we wouldn’t have to work on Monday, the only thing I knew was that I wanted to spend the day with Nisha. Well, I also knew that I didn’t wanna leave the room. Since no one was allowed to leave pack territory, I was sure every single place we could possibly go would be

crowded. So, when my little magpie suggested we stayed in to have a romantic dinner and play games, I eagerly agreed. She was becoming more of a gamer with each passing day, and I couldn't deny that I also enjoyed trying some of the things she liked.

Ever since Nisha and I had sex for the first time, I've started to loosen up. I still wasn't too keen on talking to other people about our private life, but I had learned that I didn't need to be ashamed of my feral side - or Talon, to name names. My mate loved it when I talked dirty to her, and I always made sure to discover new things she liked in bed. I never imagined myself doing those things - hell, I never thought I'd ever share my life with someone else - but that's just what mates do. They help you change and grow.

As much as I would have loved to spend the entire day alone with Nisha in my room, my parents - especially my mom - insisted we had lunch together at one of the picnic tables in the town square. I was a little frustrated, but I felt bad for constantly avoiding them. My mate also seemed excited to go, and I couldn't bring myself to say no to her. I almost regretted my decision when I noticed how busy the place was.

Thankfully, lunch wasn't too bad and Nisha seemed to have had a great time, which was enough for me. I'd never had the best relationship with my father, since he had always been too strict with me growing up. He was closer to my older sisters; I, on the other hand, connected a lot more with my mother.

Despite that, my old man seemed proud of my accomplishments in my first months as Gamma, and happy for me having met my mate. Of course, he didn't miss the chance to bring up the way I ran away from Nisha the first time I saw her, but I was starting to get used to it. I had come to terms with the fact that people wouldn't drop this for a long time.

In the end, it wasn't too bad to spend some time with my parents, but I was happy when we headed back to our room. I sat down in one of the blue bean bags in front of my gigantic TV, while Nisha took her place beside me. She picked Super Smash Sissies for us to play. It had easily become her favorite

game, even if she rarely beat me. I tried to let her win sometimes, but if she noticed I was going easy on her, she'd complain about it. But on our seventh round of the day, I was surprised to watch her destroy me.

“Ha! I finally did it!” she cheered, lifting her controller in the air.

“How?” I whispered in awe. A moment later, I shook my head. “I mean, uh...congratulations. That was amazing, little magpie.”

She rolled her eyes at me, but eventually answered my first question. “I was talking to Zephyr the other day, and he mentioned that he used to play this game with you when you were pups. He told me what character to pick to counter your favorite one.” I immediately turned to her with a look of betrayal. “I also practiced pretty much the entire day yesterday while you were out checking the traps.” A guilty smile accompanied her confession. “But hey, I beat you. Doesn't matter how!”

Nisha went back to shoving it in my face, but I only smiled at her happiness. I had always been pretty competitive, and I hated losing. Right now, however, I still felt like a winner. I might have been defeated in a stupid game, but I got the ultimate prize - my little magpie's joy. Not too long after though, her celebration was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Must be our food,” I guessed, getting up to check.

My suspicions were confirmed when I opened the door, noticing Mrs. Robinson behind a 3-tier food transport trolley. I gestured for her to come in, and she helped me set the table.

“Thank you, Mrs. Robinson,” I told her as she was about to leave.

“Why are all of my boys ditching me today?” The older lady pouted, referring to the fact that Malin and I didn't join the pack for our meals. “Only Alpha Zephyr came to visit me. He's such a sweet young man!” she cooed.

“We know he’s your favorite,” I stated the obvious, frowning. The cook faked offense.

“I have no favorites! I love you all the same,” she insisted. “Have a nice dinner, Gamma Zachari. Gamma Nisha.” She bowed her head at us before closing the door behind her.

“Wow. Smells delicious.” My mate turned her attention to the gourmet dinner on the table. “Looks good, too. What did you get for us?”

“I don’t know a lot about cuisine, so I just asked Mrs. Robinson to get us something fancy.” I shrugged. “She said it’s Seared Scallops with Brown Butter and a homemade bread basket. And for dessert, we have...” I paused as I lifted the cloche to reveal what was on the silver plate. “Berries and Cream Crepes.”

“Ordering room service has its perks, huh?” Nisha chuckled as I pulled the chair for her to sit. “Thank you, my handsome crow.” She pulled me closer by my chin and planted a soft kiss on my cheek.

“Wait, that’s not all!” I told her with a wide grin. My mate was the only one capable of making me smile like that. “I know champagne’s your favorite, so...” I lifted a white towel that was covering a bucket of ice. Inside was a bottle of *Veuve Clicquot*, especially made for werewolves. “Thought this would go well with our dinner.”

“Oh my Goddess, Zach! Is that *Cave Privee*?” Her eyes widened and I nodded. “How did you get that?”

“The pack has a secret stock of fancy alcohol for special occasions. Regular pack members have no access to it, but being Gamma...” I shrugged nonchalantly, making her laugh.

“Okay, fancy pants, let’s enjoy our dinner. I’m starving.” She closed her eyes to take a deep breath of the freshly cooked food.

None of us knew when the next and final attack would happen, but we knew it was close. Aware that things could take a tragic turn, I was happy to have this amazing time with

my mate. It gave me confidence and strength to make sure I would come back to her in one piece once the war was done.

37 | LAST

There was not a cloud in the sky on this Monday morning. Most wolves in Wind Howlers were either lying in bed with their mates, or out to enjoy the beautiful day in their company. I had no doubt that my friends were doing the same.

It was in times like these that it sucked to be a leader.

After waking up early to do a round across our borders, talking to our scouts and sentinels to make sure everything was in order, I returned to the main square only to lock myself in the gym with Valentina and Cassiopeia. Our coach insisted that it would be good for us to continue our training until the day of the attack, especially after we figured out one of Dawn's abilities and discovered yet another one of Dusk's.

Since we needed living creatures to test our skills on, a few Omegas volunteered to help us. While Dusk practiced his ability to inflict psychological pain just by staring at the wolves, Dawn would immediately hum her healing melody to take their pain away. I would obviously be rewarding them for it, although they insisted they were happy to do it just to increase our pack's chance of winning.

By lunchtime, Cass finally decided to give us a break. "Well, that was pretty good. You two have made great progress in the short time we've had. Good job," she congratulated us. "I believe Dawn should have at least one more ability, which should counter Dusk's bleed-out bite in some way. It's a shame we couldn't figure it out. But I'd say you're prepared to face the Big Bad Wolf."

I wanted to scoff at how she mentioned the original Fallen and his army as if they were an irrelevant threat. Like they hadn't just slain a dozen packs in the span of a few months. In the end, I just stepped forward to shake her hand.

"Thank you for your help, Cass."

“Having you here was...enlightening, for sure,” my Luna added, mimicking me.

“Don’t thank me.” She waved us off before flashing us a serious stare. “Win.”

I exchanged glances with Tina, and we both nodded at the 300-year-old woman. Once the coach dismissed us, we headed straight to the dining hall, ready to fill our stomachs after our tiring morning. The place wasn’t half as full as it usually was. It was even weirder to see my friends’ seats at the Elite members table empty.

Mrs. Robinson brought us our food only minutes after we arrived, thanking me for having come personally to the dining hall. At first, I didn’t understand why she was so happy to see me, until she left our table, mumbling something about Malin and Zach ordering room service. I laughed at the situation before trying the mushroom risotto with steak and shrimp that she had prepared. Just like everything our cook made, it was amazing.

When we were done, we met with my parents at the main square. My mother shared stories with my mate about her time as Luna, and I got to talk to my father a bit more. It was nice to see him more relaxed after the conversation we’d had the previous day.

While Tina was distracted, I also took the opportunity to link my Delta and fill her in on the surprise date I wanted to prepare for my Luna. Although I had given Alex the day off, she was more than happy to set up a few things for me. In less than an hour, she contacted me to let me know she was done. That’s when I called my mate to go up to our room and shower.

I told Tina that I wanted to spend the evening with her in the dandelion fields, but I didn’t tell her exactly what we would be doing. Once we were clean, I decided on a light blue slim fit tuxedo, and I told my mate to put on her favorite dress. Even if we weren’t going anywhere fancy, she didn’t question me; in fact, she seemed to like the idea of dressing up just for the hell of it.

As soon as we were ready, I grabbed my Ferrari keys and we drove to our destination. The last rays of the setting sun were still visible on the horizon, painting the darkening blue sky a calming lilac color. I watched my Luna closely as we drove down the small hill into the flower fields. Her eyes widened the second she noticed the huge projector screen in the center of the plains. It was a few feet away from a large, black-and-white checkered picnic blanket, on which was a small, round wooden table with a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses.

Before my mate could ask any questions, I started answering them. “I’m sorry I can’t take you to a five-star restaurant in the city, but I wanted to have a romantic date with you anyway. I thought a classic picnic and a movie could be a fun alternative.”

“Oh, Zephyr...” She sighed as we parked the car near the set up. “I love this more than the idea of a downtown evening.”

After hopping out myself, I opened Tina’s door for her and stretched my hand out to her to help her climb down. Then, I moved to the back of the car. Aside from setting up the screen and the blanket, Alex had also packed a small generator, a projector, my laptop and portable speakers, and a cooler with different cold cuts and cheeses in my trunk. My Luna’s eyes never left me as I adjusted the projector on top of the hood of the car, hooked it to the speakers and the laptop, and then finished organizing the food.

“What are we watching?” she asked as I led her to the blanket.

“I knew it had to be something romantic. So I thought, how ‘bout *The Vow*?”

“Oh, I’ve been wanting to watch that!” She smiled as I poured her a glass of our werewolf wine.

“I know.” I chuckled. “And I wanted to watch it with you.”

We got comfortable on the picnic blanket, nibbling on the food as the movie started playing. The romantic atmosphere of

the night made our experience that much more enriching. The glorious moon shone above the dandelion seeds, twinkling like fireflies as they drifted in the wind. As Tina and I cuddled, we fought the urge to make out so we wouldn't miss any scenes. Though it was impossible not to give her small pecks every now and then, we managed to make it to the credits without getting too lost in each other.

The movie was about a married couple who had just started their life together when they got into a tragic car accident. The woman was in a coma for some time, and when she finally woke up, she had no memory of her husband. The story goes on with the man trying to make his wife fall in love with him all over again, and it had us both cheering for them to end up together. By the time the movie ended, my mate was bawling her eyes out.

“Why are you crying?” My heart throbbed as I pulled her closer, using my thumb to gently wipe away her tears. “It was a happy ending. Why are you sad?”

“I'm not sad, silly,” she huffed a strangled laugh as the waterworks continued to fall. “It was a beautiful movie. I'm emotional, that's all.”

“Goddess, you got me worried there for a second. I'm glad you liked it though,” I confessed, heaving a sigh of relief into her hair. Her tantalizing scent filled my nostrils, and I instinctively tightened my grasp around her. “I love you, Tina. I love you forever.”

“I love you too, my moonlight,” she said back, finally lifting her head to look at me with her pools of melting gold. “Nothing will ever change that. No accident or whatever could make me forget you.”

“I'd never let you get hurt.” I don't think I'd ever said anything with such confidence before. Moving a strand of her hair away from her face, I went on, “Tina, I'll die before I let anything happen to you.”

Her expression immediately changed. “Don't say that.” She pulled away just slightly to hold my face with both her

hands. “Zephyr, when the time comes and we have to fight, promise me you won’t do anything reckless.”

I hesitated for a couple of seconds. “I won’t, my sunrise. I promise I’ll live to make you the happiest woman in the world.” She continued to study me, doubting the honesty behind my words. Before she could insist on the matter, I decided to change the subject. “Since we’re talking about promises, and we’re both surviving this...” I slowly lied down, inviting her to do the same. “What are your plans for the future?”

My beautiful mate remained silent for a moment as we both just gazed into the stars. They seemed to shine even brighter tonight.

“This might sound silly, but... I’ve always wanted to learn French.”

The suddenness of her answer caught me off guard. “What?”

“I don’t know. I just think it’s beautiful.” She shrugged.

“Well, they do say it’s the language of love.” I chuckled, interlacing her fingers with mine.

“What about you?”

“Me?” I blinked a few times, taken by surprise by her question. “I...I guess I never stopped to think about it.”

“Aren’t there things you’d like to do? Places you’d like to visit?” she insisted.

“Hmm...I think it’d be cool to go somewhere tropical someday.”

“Like those islands with paradisiacal beaches?” I nodded. “Interesting. I think I’d like to go somewhere really cold, with snow-covered landscapes, you know? Imagine seeing the Northern Lights dance in the sky. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah.” A smile played on my lips before. It was sweet to fantasize about our future together. And in doing so, a question suddenly crossed my mind. “And, uh...” I cleared my throat. “What about pups?”

“Pups?” Just from her tone, I could sense her startlement. It wasn’t long before she started to relax though. “I wanna have three.”

“Three?” I turned to look at her.

“What? Is that too many or too few?”

Again, I smiled. “I think it’s perfect.” Leaning closer, I gave her a long, yet delicate kiss. When I pulled away, I sat back up. “Well, *ma chérie*...” As I rose to my feet, I offered her my hand to help her do the same. “There’s one last thing I wanna do before we call it a day.”

I let go of her to reach for my laptop. It took me less than a second to find a file I had previously downloaded. As soon as I hit play, the song *Take Me Dancing* by *The Maine* started playing. It was one of my favorites, and it had become one of Valentina’s too.

“Wait...what...” A cheerful grin lit up my mate’s face as she realized what was happening.

“May I have this dance, my Luna?”

She giggled as she took my hand. I led her towards our grassy dancefloor, where we could enjoy each other’s company, and pulled her closer to my chest. My grip was firm around her waist, while both of her arms wrapped around my neck. Thankfully, the instrumental introduction of the song was pretty long, which gave us enough time to prepare before the lyrics came in. We twirled and spun around, never taking our eyes off each other as we danced together in the dandelions. When the chorus started, I playfully mouthed the words at my mate.

“You’re so silly,” she whispered against my lips, her smile growing wider.

“Yet you love me,” I stated in all seriousness.

When our lips crashed, there was no war, no problems, no fear. We enjoyed every single second of the song until it came to an end. Not ready to dive back into reality yet, we kept slow dancing to no music for a while.

No matter what came next, I was grateful that we got to share this moment.

38 | DARK

My night with Valentina had been amazing. During the brief hours when we were out in the dandelion fields, we both managed to live in a world where there was no danger. However, the lingering feeling that our bubble of happiness would soon burst was always there, in the back of my mind. Somewhere inside me, I couldn't deny that the calm wouldn't last, and the breeze of hope would soon be replaced by a raging storm.

It was around ten when we reluctantly returned to our room. Tina was so tired that she passed out in my arms almost immediately; I, on the other hand, wasn't as lucky. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't shut my wide open eyes. I feared that, if I lowered my guard, someone would come to take her away from me. Dawn shared my anxiety, never ceasing her pacing in circles in my mind. It was almost as if we could sense that things would take a tragic turn sooner than later.

I wanted to be wrong so badly, but when the emergency alarm sounded, waking up the entire pack house, I knew I was right.

My mate, who had been peacefully asleep, instantly jolted awake beside me. It took her less than a second to realize what was going on. I was surprised to see her golden eyes shine with determination as she turned to me. She gave my hand a reassuring squeeze and we both got up to leave the room in a rush.

As prepared as I was, I still felt my stomach flip when I found the pack in a panic. The atmosphere was heavy, and there were wolves running everywhere. I took a deep breath, scanning the crowd in search of my friends as soon as I stepped outside. A breath of relief broke through my lips when I saw Malin gathering the warriors in front of the main building. Zach stood beside him, revising war strategies, while

Alex worked together with my mom to guide the members who couldn't fight towards the safety bunkers.

Never letting go of my Luna's hand, I turned to face my men with my sternest expression. "This is not a drill. The war has reached us!" Every single one of the wolves standing before me went silent to listen to me. "You have trained vigorously for this moment, and you are prepared. Do not back down! The pack is relying on you. Will you fail them?"

"No, Alpha!" they answered without hesitation. As tense as the situation was, their readiness helped calm my nerves.

"Good. Now, let's go out there and protect our home!"

"Yes, Alpha!"

In the blink of an eye, torn pieces of fabric flew through the air as hundreds of beasts took over my men's bodies. Malin had already shifted, and he led the army into the battlefield with Talon in the back. I watched as Alex's gray wolf, Bellona, together with my father's dark brown counterpart, Ebert, joined the others.

Suddenly, the smell of freshly spilled blood hit my nostrils, bringing me back to reality. There was no time to lose. I glanced at Tina one last time, and we both nodded at each other in encouragement and comfort before shifting. We didn't need to waste words, as we had already said everything we wanted to say the previous night.

Our wolves sprinted through the grass, catching up to the rest of the army in no time. When we were feet away from our borders, we came across the sentinels who were on duty. They managed to slow the rogues down, but they had gotten badly injured. I gestured for them to retreat, while the front line promptly took their places.

"I contacted Alpha Sanders. He's on his way with backup." Malin's voice echoed through my head, and I realized that Mint was on my right.

"And I talked to the guards." Zach's voice followed, as Talon jumped to our left. *"They told me that at least 50 Fallen were caught by the new traps we placed. They avoided the*

ones they knew about, but it still forced them to split up and look for new entrances.”

“Good job, both of you.” Dawn nodded at the two wolves. “We’ll take down as many of them as we can while we wait for Sanders to get here. Then, we’ll follow through with our plan to ambush them from behind and surround them.”

The very second I cut our connection, I spotted the huge soulless beasts in the distance. They were bigger than most of my warriors. I estimated there to be at least 200 of them, coming at us from the right and the left. Since we were already expecting them to try and surround us, we quickly divided our army to cover both sides and prevent them from reaching the main part of our territory. Malin, alongside Beta Warrick, Zach, and his father, commanded the first group. Valentina, my father, Alex, and I took the lead of the second group. That was all the time we had before the battle began.

Since we, the strongest wolves of the pack, were on the front line, we managed to injure the rogues we came across first, leaving them to be finished off by our warriors. It wasn’t as easy as their previous attack though, since the spies they disposed of were probably the weakest of their army.

While me and my team were more resilient due to our bloodline, we could endure a few blows and continue fighting. Sadly, the same thing couldn’t be said about the rest of my warriors, who seemed to be having a little more trouble. I could sense the sickening rusty smell filling the air, and because the blood of our enemy was scentless, I could only assume that some of our men had already been taken down.

That realization, along with the tingles of pain caused by the breaking of the bond between me and the members who had fallen, built up the fury inside of me. It turned my she-wolf into a feral beast. As leader of Wind Howlers, the death of her kin fueled her anger, causing her strikes to become even deadlier.

Dawn grabbed the next rogue that crossed her path by the scruff of its neck, forcing it to the ground with a roughness I had never seen from her. Dusk arrived moments after,

promptly immobilizing the creature with his sheer strength. A single blow was enough for him to carve a hole in the enemy's chest, making him bleed to death in a matter of seconds. And the Switched Pair didn't stop there.

Dawn was quick to headbutt another Fallen who flew in her direction, causing him to stumble and fall. She gave the pathetic creature no time to stand back on its feet before she sank her teeth deep into its throat. Again, Dusk arrived to help his mate, grabbing a hold of the rogue's waist and lifting it up with his mouth as if it weighed nothing.

The caramel blonde she-wolf and the jet-black beast started pulling their victim in opposite directions, viciously shaking it. The rogue howled and whimpered in excruciating pain as his skin was torn and his body was stretched, until he eventually went silent. It was as if Dawn and Dusk's prey was a flimsy stuffed animal as they shredded it in half, making it rain red.

From the corner of Dawn's eye, I caught a glimpse of Bellona. The cream-white bits of her fur had turned crimson, but judging by her vitality, it seemed she was covered in the enemy's blood. In order to become Delta, Alex's wolf had to be just as strong as any other Elite member, so I trusted she could hold her own. Nevertheless, she had Ebert to cover her back whenever she needed a little assistance. My father's counterpart had many scars from his years of fighting; they were trophies that proved how powerful he was.

I could only watch them for a brief moment though. With Dawn seeing red, I lost count of how many Fallen she injured and killed. The fight seemed to be going on for forever, yet at the same time, it only felt like a minute.

Eventually, the rogues stopped coming. By then, my she-wolf looked like a beast. She was growling fiercely through her panting breath, her beautiful fur entirely drenched in scarlet. She took a few seconds to regain her composure, looking around to make sure that she was momentarily safe. Most of my Elite only had a few scratches, but I knew we'd had quite a few losses on our side; we were probably down to

two thirds of our original numbers. It was honestly better than I had expected, but it wasn't time to celebrate yet.

Dawn's ears perked up when a deep howl cut through the skies. Immediately turning to the horizon, her eyes widened as she noticed a new wave of rogues approaching us. There were probably around a hundred more of them. While it was less than the first wave, we also had less men, and the ones who could still fight were getting tired.

Then, a chill ran down my spine as I noticed a dirty, dark brown and black beast standing tall in front of his army. He was much bigger than us - much bigger than the others.

"The original Fallen," my she-wolf spat, raising her hackles.

"Zephyr!" Malin's thoughts were loud inside my head as Mint ran up to me. *"Sanders is here with his men!"*

"Just in time," I said lowly before raising my voice for the next order. *"Remember our strategy! Tell our men to go around and surprise the Fallen from the back, while Sapphire Pond faces them head on!"* I watched the light blonde wolf nod before howling a command to his warriors. *"Alex,"* I called, and the next second, Bellona was standing beside me. *"Make sure no one comes near the original. Tina and I will take care of him."*

"Will do," she replied as her wolf bowed her head to me.

With a deep breath, I turned to my mate's wolf. *"Are you ready, sunrise?"*

"We were literally born for this." Dusk's eyes were fixated on our target, and he looked even more menacing than Dawn.

Once the hollow eyes of the leader of the Fallen fell on us, he started walking calmly in our direction, not minding the fact that his army was going the opposite direction as they viciously chased after our warriors. Dusk and Dawn both bared their fangs, taking an offensive stance, but the soulless beast wasn't the least intimidated. When he was only a short distance away from us, I realized that he looked even bigger. I should feel scared, or at least worried, yet all I felt was rage.

This monster's selfish pursuit of power had taken too many innocent lives.

I would make sure that this is where it ended.

"Ah, the Switched Pair..." Dawn lost her posture for an instant when an unfamiliar voice echoed through my mind. It was deep, hoarse, and unsettling. *"I've been dying to meet you."*

Wait...was that the Fallen leader talking? It resembled mindlink, but that wasn't quite it. His connection with me seemed to be established in a telepathic way, as if he was forcefully reaching into my mind; a bond between us was unneeded.

"Did you know that to get rid of you both, all I have to do is kill one of you?" My thoughts were poisoned by the same uncanny voice again. *"You see, since you have each other's wolf, by slaying one of you, I'm also destroying half of the other as well. Shifters cannot live without their counterparts. Easy enough, huh?"* A sinister grin lit up the creature's face, but neither of us backed down. *"So, who wants to go first?"*

Both of our wolves looked at each other before lunging at the enemy in a synchronized movement, gladly taking his invitation. Dawn went for his feet at the same time that Dusk jumped onto his back. The opponent got distracted by my she-wolf, and as he tried to strike her, he let his guard down. At that moment, Tina's black wolf managed to sink his sharp teeth into the enemy's shoulder, making him howl in discomfort. He dropped to the floor, forcing Dusk off his back. Even if the wound hadn't been as deep as we hoped for, landing a bite was good enough. After all, the Darkbringer's ability would stop him from healing either way.

Thanks to Dawn's incredible speed, she was able to strike our enemy one more time, injuring his stomach before he got up. There was fury in his dark, hollow eyes, although his rage was mostly directed towards our mate. At that second, he probably realized that the blood loss would eventually wear him out, unless he managed to stop Dusk.

My she-wolf's eyes widened when the original Fallen turned in Dusk's direction. She acted fast, quicker than him, as she managed to stop his advance by grabbing his tail. She bit into the enemy's flesh as deep as she could. He roared as she turned to her, exposing his sharp fangs, but before he could react, Dawn bit down harder, ripping out a chunk of his tail.

The filthy creature cried out in pain, letting his guard down for a second. Dusk noticed the opening and took the opportunity to lunge for his neck. However, before he could pierce the enemy's skin once again, he was hurled into the air by a powerful blow. In an attempt to defend her mate, Dawn jumped at the Fallen, but before she could dig her claws into his back, he swatted his huge paw at her, sending her flying.

I could feel Dawn's pain as her body hit the ground for the first time, bouncing twice from the force of the blow before finally coming to a stop. She tried to get up quickly, but her paws failed her. She was still too disoriented to act. Her mind was hazy, her vision was blurry. Lying on the floor, we watched from a distance as the Fallen lifted Dusk into the air by his neck. He was ready to land the final strike.

"*No!*" My she-wolf screamed desperately, forcing her recovering body to stand back up at once, but it was too late. Not even with her superior speed would we make it to them in time.

Either way, she ran. We were both unwilling to stand by while we witnessed the murder of our mate. Tears already threatened to stream down Dawn's cheeks as we were hit with the realization that there was nothing we could do.

But just then, a slim wolf, who looked awfully familiar despite me being sure I had never seen him, came to my mate's rescue.

The light gray rescuer clinged to the Fallen's thigh, hanging from it and not letting go. It was enough to startle the enemy, causing him to drop Dusk to the ground. He didn't seem to be in pain though. With a scoff, he directed a pitiful look to the smaller wolf, who was definitely not a warrior. Dawn never ceased her movement as I studied the pack

member closely. Only when I saw the fearless determination in his light brown eyes did I understand who he was.

Vincent.

“What are you hoping to accomplish, little fly?” I heard the Fallen’s voice again, even though he was clearly talking to my mate’s adoptive father. *“I usually don’t waste time with the likes of you. I’d much rather slay Alphas. But since you dared get in my way...”*

It all happened too fast. Dawn was still a short distance away when the Fallen shook his body, easily getting rid of the Omega. He didn’t even wait for the old man’s body to hit the ground. Meeting him mid-air, the soulless leader closed his jaws around Vincent’s neck. I wasn’t prepared for the brutal scene I was about to witness.

One second was all it took for our enemy to end the old man’s life, separating his head from the rest of his body with barely any effort. The torn up carcass hit the ground with a thud, and I froze when my eyes met Vincent’s lifeless ones. My heart stopped. I could feel bile rising up Dawn’s throat, but before she could throw up, Dusk’s pain-filled howl caught her attention - and the Fallen’s.

“Tina! Snap out of it!” I tried to reach into her head, but if she was receiving my message, she wasn’t showing any signs of it. *“I know you’re in pain, but if you let grief consume you, Vincent’s sacrifice will have been in vain! You have to fight!”*

Nothing. No matter what I said, Dusk just stood there, eyes wide. He was petrified, probably overwhelmed by his human’s sorrow. He was always so efficient at protecting Tina, but this time, he didn’t even notice as the enemy sprinted in his direction.

Dawn and I didn’t think twice before jumping between the Fallen and her mate. She growled loudly as she went for the creature’s jugular, succeeding in grabbing a hold of him. However, it wasn’t as easy to rip his throat out as it was with other rogues. A strangled laughter rose from his chest, an insult to our attempt to injure him. Using his paws, he yanked

her off of him, pressing a single paw against her chest to keep her in place.

“It’s a shame you can’t make me bleed out, bitch!”

Dawn only had time to widen her eyes as he closed his jaws around her neck in a quick movement. His grip was so strong that it started blocking our airways. I heard her whimper for the first time as an excruciating pain took over. Despite that, she still tried to get out of the enemy’s grip, but her vision started getting blurry. We were suffocating. The last thing I saw before we blacked out was Dusk’s worried look, as he seemed to snap out of his trance.

“I told you if someone had to die, it would be me,” I whispered in my mate’s head, embracing the darkness that consumed me.

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Valentina

What had gotten into me?

Dusk had always been so strong and imposing. Sometimes, I wondered if he was invincible. But my heart shattered into a thousand tiny pieces as I witnessed Vincent's wolf, Lark, being brutally murdered. Even my powerful beast couldn't shelter me from the pain. The heart-wrenching sensation of our bond being broken made me sink deeper into the darkness. The Omega who had been the only father figure in my life... gone. And why? Why was he even on the battlefield? Vincent wasn't a warrior.

I froze in time as my mind went blank. I couldn't see anything, I couldn't hear anything. A light tingle in my head let me know that Zephyr was trying to communicate with me, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. For a moment, I lost track of where I was, taken to dwell in a world of raw grief.

Then, an awful sound pulled me back to my tragic reality - the sound of my mate's cries. I found Dawn caught between the original Fallen's teeth. She coughed as he tightened his grasp around her neck, rivers of blood streaming down her fur through the large puncture wounds. Zephyr's last words were crystal clear as I watched his counterpart direct one last glance at us before slipping out of consciousness.

Was I about to witness the death of my fated partner, too?

Dusk's knees grew weak, threatening to fail him at any second. He was feeding on my negative emotions, paralyzed by them. I shook my head; I had to be strong. I had to push through. With a deep breath, I cleared my mind, shoving all my feelings aside. My wolf instantly seemed to come back to himself, and the only thing he could feel was blinding rage.

There was no way in hell we'd let our mates go down without giving it our all.

We were the Darkbringer, and we would gladly show the bastard why that was our fated title.

The dirty creature was about to snap Dawn's neck when Dusk shot forward. The opponent was bigger than us, but with Dawn and Zephyr's life at stake, we were determined to fight twice as hard. My black wolf landed a clean strike, the taste of blood invading his mouth as he latched onto the enemy's hind leg. He pulled on it with all the strength he could muster, hoping to make the fucker lose stability. When he stumbled down, he opened his mouth to let out a shocked gasp, thus releasing our mate from his grasp.

Desperate to check on Dawn's state, my wolf let his guard down for a brief moment, which soon proved to be his worst mistake. Not being able to use our vision switch left us at a big disadvantage; we couldn't read the Fallen's intentions. In a quick movement, he turned around to grab Dusk by his tail, tugging at it so fast that it threw him to the ground.

My counterpart tried to get back up, but it was already too late. With our belly pressing against the grass, the soulless creature climbed on top of us, adjusting his paws over our legs to secure us in place. My wolf struggled to break free, but it only made the situation worse. The next second, the enemy dug his honed claws into Dusk's skin, forcing him to release a howl of agony.

I thought the original Fallen would end us then and there. Instead, I was surprised to hear him in my mind yet again.

"I did a little research on you." In the beginning, his filthy, croaky voice sent shivers down my spine. Now, all it did was make Dusk growl louder. *"Valentina Quill, the heir of Diamond Stream Pack. The little pup whose parents I helped kill."* His laughter only added to my anger.

Dusk roared fiercely, trying his best to ignore the pain. However, before he could try anything, the enemy moved one of his paws to the top of his head, mercilessly pressing it to the ground. It hurt, but not enough to subdue our rage. This scum!

He had slain hundreds of wolves, murdered my adoptive father, attempted to kill my mate, and took part in my parents' execution. How dare he speak so proudly about it!

"You know, when Rhys offered to be my lab rat, I couldn't care less what he'd do with the power," he continued, barely making an effort to keep my wolf still. *"But when he shared his plans to take over your pathetic pack, I sympathized with him. All of you born-Alphas are simply the Goddess' favorites. How can a deity have preferences among their children? Outrageous!"* He growled so loud, it sounded like thunder.

I didn't give a shit about what he was saying. While he wasted time with his monologue, Dusk and I searched for an opening, for any way we could turn the situation around. I started to notice that, the more involved he got in his long-winded monologue about taking over the world, the less pressure he exerted over us. He was getting sloppy. All we needed to do was wait for the right time.

"That's when I decided to make it my life goal to destroy all Alphas and end the werewolf race as we know it. I'll become king and create a powerful species that forsakes the discrimination and negligence of the higher powers!" He made a brief pause, enjoying his confession. *"So I stayed to watch Rhys kill your parents. I can still hear them screaming for mercy, and smell their fear. Oh, what a delightful moment it was! To see a couple of mighty Alphas begging for their lives!"* He laughed once again, making my blood boil. *"Had I known back then that they had an heir - and that she was part of a prophecy to overpower me - I would've ended your feeble life right then and there."* At that moment, I finally noticed an opportunity to escape his hold.

And Dusk didn't hesitate.

"You should've killed me when you had the chance!" I thought loudly, not knowing if he could hear me with his telepathy. By the shocked look on his face, I guessed it had worked.

Dusk stood up abruptly, pushing his back against the soulless wolf to throw him into the air. Even if he was bigger

than us, we were still naturally stronger than any other shifter. Without giving him time to recover, my black wolf jumped at him, hitting him hard in the face with his claws before biting down on the side of his neck. The enemy shrieked in agony, but still managed to kick us back into the ground with his front paws, freeing himself from our teeth.

Aware that the Fallen wouldn't waste time to launch another attack, Dusk instinctively used the last ability we discovered - the ability to inflict psychological pain with a simple stare. Well, at least he tried to. Still lying with his back against the ground, my wolf glared intensely at the monster in front of us, but nothing happened. He didn't even shake. Instead, a macabre laughter left his throat.

“You really thought it'd be that easy to stop me? Your mind-twisting stare might work on my minions, but I know real pain. You can't fool me with your illusions!”

I felt my counterpart's searing pain when canines tore through our waist, but even if Dusk's plans were hindered, he wasn't willing to give up just yet. We knew we had already injured him badly, and since he wasn't healing properly, it was a matter of time until he lost too much blood to stay conscious. In hopes of further wounding the original Fallen, my black wolf started struggling, trying his best to ignore the discomfort of his flesh being torn in the process.

Thankfully, our sacrifice was worth it, as we managed to loosen the beast's grip just enough to sink our teeth into his neck once again. Neither one of the wolves let go of the other, but that was an advantage to us - after all, we were still minimally able to heal, while the adversary bled out. But it seemed I had gotten too hopeful, too soon.

Acknowledging his disadvantage, the Fallen tightened his bite, and in a swift movement, ripped out a chunk of our flesh. I felt all of the air escape from Dusk's lungs as unbearable pain tore through us. The opponent was in pretty bad condition, but I could feel my counterpart blacking out, both from his suffering and the blood loss. There was no way we could stay alive until the enemy fell.

As a last resort, I concentrated on Zephyr, forcefully sending images of what was happening right now to his mind. I didn't even know if it would work, since Dawn was still passed out on the bloodied grass, but I had to at least try. The last thing I saw was the Fallen's open mouth coming towards us.

Then, everything went black.

* * *

Zephyr

“Dawn... Wake up, my child...” An unknown motherly voice infiltrated the voice in my mind. Despite not being able to identify its owner, it brought me inexplicable peace. *“It's time, Dawn. It's time you remember all of your abilities. You and your mate must put an end to the massacre. Only you can restore the natural balance...”* The bright light that came with the call suddenly flickered away, leaving me in the dark yet again before I could make sense of the message that had been delivered.

Being unconscious was uncanny. It felt like I was trapped inside the darkest part of my mind, floating in the dimness. The feeling of emptiness I had lived with for my entire life was stronger here, and it would have certainly consumed me whole if I couldn't still hear my she-wolf's faint melody. I was glad to have her with me to ease my pain. Even if I was dying, and we would soon have to say our goodbyes, I felt a little more at peace to know I would go in her company.

But before my life faded entirely, something bizarre happened - even more bizarre than the strange voice I had just heard.

Flashes of a bloody battle invaded my mind. It was just a fraction of a second, but I could feel the terrible pain of the one projecting the sight to me. Allowing me no time to figure out what was going on, another image crossed my thoughts,

followed by another. And another. A dying figure, sharp teeth, hollow eyes. Then, all I could think about was...death. Was that Dusk, covered in his own crimson blood?

"He's dying." I heard Dawn's faint whimper, echoing somewhere in the distance. How did she know that? Was Valentina projecting those images to me?

One final scene crossed my mind. The black wolf howled in agonizing pain before the monster's jaws opened up again, ready to strike one last time. No, this couldn't be happening! I waited for another projection, a sign that my dear mate was fine. But there was only darkness.

No, no, no!

"Dawn, we have to wake up!" I yelled frantically.

"She said the same thing..." she whispered. What? Who was she talking about? *"But we're still weak, Zephyr."*

"The Fallen leader was in pretty bad shape. All we need to do is land the final blow!" I encouraged her, my low heart rate rapidly increasing. *"Please, Dawn! Wake up! Wake up!"*

Even if I was only sharing my thoughts with my counterpart, I felt like I was losing my voice. My throat was sore and dry, but I never stopped screaming, cheering for her. She taught me to trust her, to never lose hope. Now, it was my time to remind her not to give up. Eventually, I saw a faint light. Golden beams reached the sky, painting it a mix of light pink, lilac, orange, and blue. The dawn had come after a long, freezing night.

We were awake.

It felt like a thousand needles piercing my skin as Dawn moved her head with great effort, groggily trying to recognize her surroundings. The first scene she saw was gruesome. Dusk was lying in a pool of his own blood, his chest barely moving as he struggled to take slow breaths. There was a massive wound on his stomach, leaving his flesh completely exposed. He was clearly unconscious, hanging on by a thread.

Dawn cried out, feeling her fated partner's pain. She wanted to go to him, but a thought crossed her mind. In our

vision, the enemy was about to end our mates' life, but they were still there - badly injured, but alive. Where was the original Fallen?

As if to answer my question, a loud snarl caught our attention. When Dawn turned in the direction of the sound, she found a dark brown wolf battling fiercely against the apocalyptic threat - Ebert. It seemed that, while we were passed out, my father had stepped in to protect my mate on my behalf.

A whimper escaped Ebert's throat as he was sent flying. He landed right next to Dawn. A quick look at him was enough to notice that he had quite a few ugly-looking wounds, as well as dozens of scratches scattered around his old body. Still, he pulled himself back up to his feet. Shooting my she-wolf a look, he finally seemed to notice my presence.

"Good. You're up." My father's voice sounded in my mind. *"I'm glad I managed to buy enough time."*

"Thank you for protecting her, Dad," I told him from the bottom of my heart.

"Thank me later! We still have this fucker to kill!" Ebert growled, turning his attention back to the enemy who was marching toward us. *"Dusk managed to weaken him significantly, but I can't get near him. He's much stronger than me. I doubt he'll let you come any closer to him."* He made a brief pause, and there was a sudden change in the atmosphere. *"I can be a distraction. When he comes for me, finish him!"*

"Wait, Dad!"

"Do it, Zephyr!" he roared. *"I've lived to fight many battles. I did what I had to do. If it ends for me now, so be it. You still have your own legacy to write."*

"What... What about your legacy?" I struggled to acknowledge his words.

"You are my legacy, son!" Those were his last words before he started running. *"Come on, we don't have much time!"*

I had to shake my head to organize my thoughts. I wasn't willing to lose any more lives, and I knew Dawn wasn't too fond of the idea either. Ebert went for the huge beast's neck, but it was obvious he wouldn't make it. The Fallen opened his jaws, ready to catch my father mid-air. But before he could, my she-wolf headbutted the enemy on his side, causing him to miss his target by a good few inches. Instead of closing his mouth around the brown wolf's stomach, the soulless beast caught his hind leg.

My heart throbbed as an agonized howl cut through the early morning. Blood rained over me when Ebert's right leg was pulled apart from his body with the Fallen's sheer force. Then, there was only silence. I couldn't tell if my father was dead or alive with the amount of blood he was losing and the pain he must have experienced, but I wasn't even allowed time to grieve.

For a millisecond, the Fallen leader and Dawn exchanged glances. I saw the horror in his eyes when he realized that we were back to our feet. In a desperate attempt to end the prophecy and save his own life, he tried to finish Dusk before we could stop him. But it was too late.

Every fiber of my she-wolf's body begged her to lay down and rest, but she knew her priorities. Her paws thundered against the ground as she used her superior speed to jump at the enemy, digging her claws into his back to help steady herself. In a quick movement, she closed her jaws around the Fallen's jugular. Although weak, she gathered all the strength she had left to sink her teeth as deep as she could into the opponent's flesh.

I heard the bastard gasp for air as his windpipe was punctured, and he started drowning in his own blood. Thanks to the wounds opened by Dusk, which were still bleeding, the enemy had already lost too much blood. In a matter of seconds, he dropped to the floor, knocking Dawn down as well. Yet no matter what happened, she didn't let go.

"It can't be..." I heard the original Fallen's hoarse voice one last time as his eyes widened in horror, right before they shut. Forever.

Dawn stayed on the floor, lying in her own blood as she tried to catch her breath. However, she soon remembered the state her mate and my father were in. Dusk was right in front of us, but when she searched for Ebert, we were both relieved to see that Bellona was already there, helping him. Now, we had to save our mate.

With shaky legs, my caramel blonde she-wolf slowly stood up and stumbled in Dusk's direction. He was barely breathing. His wounds didn't seem to be healing, especially the one on his waist. His body was too weak to fix his injuries.

"Hey, Tina, it's gonna be okay," I whispered as tears rolled down my face. I promised my sunrise I'd never let her get hurt, but I was about to watch her light fade forever. I was breathing heavily in my panic. *"Dawn, we have to take their pain!"*

My she-wolf lied beside her mate, touching her muzzle to his. She closed her eyes to hum her classic melody, but nothing seemed to be happening. Then, I felt Dawn's horror.

"What? What's wrong?!" I demanded.

"I can't...I can't take their pain," she whispered in disbelief.

Anger. Sadness. The whirlwind of emotions made it hard for me to understand why her stupid power wasn't working, but then it dawned on me. We couldn't take their pain because they weren't in any pain anymore. They couldn't possibly be in pain, because they were ready to die.

"Shit! Do something, Dawn! Do anything!" I yelled, just to take my frustration out on her. Because deep down, I knew there was nothing to be done.

Or at least, I thought so.

"Wait...I remember..." Dawn said, but I had no idea what she was talking about. *"I remember now! I remember what the Goddess told me when we were unconscious!"* Her voice was somehow filled with joy, and a light smile crossed her face. *"We can heal him, Zephyr!"* What?

Without hesitation, my she-wolf touched Dusk's wound with one of her paws, resting her chin on his neck. Just her presence seemed to be enough to cease his bleeding. Then, she lifted her head up to the sky. Instead of humming her usual song, she howled it, louder than ever. A terrible wave of pain hit me, but from the corner of Dawn's eye, I noticed something astonishing. Dusk's wounds were closing.

"What are you doing?!" I asked in awe.

"Healing him. Just like the Darkbringer's bite can take life, our song can restore it."

The more we helped Dusk heal, the worse we felt. I had finally discovered the last of Dawn's abilities, but this one seemed to come at a cost. I could feel my she-wolf's consciousness slipping away as she used every last drop of her energy, but neither of us cared. We were willing to sacrifice our lives if it meant our mate got to live another day.

And once again, we fell into the darkness.

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A dim light shone in the distance, the only source of illumination in a realm of darkness. I didn't know why, but I found it beautiful - like the last blaze of hope flickering in a world of misery. Little by little, the glow grew brighter, slowly subduing the darkness and taking over. Eventually, all I could see was white, so clear and radiant that it seemed as if I was staring at a burning sun. I blinked a few times, trying to adjust my vision.

As soon as I woke up, I was greeted by a throbbing headache. A grunt escaped my lips as I dizzily looked around in an attempt to understand where I was. It was cold. There were white walls around me, and the smell of antiseptic filled my nostrils. It took me some time, but I was struck by a vague familiarity. This had to be a room in the pack hospital. Was I still alive?

In an attempt to clear the brain fog, I searched my mind for the reason why I had ended up here. I tried revisiting my most recent memories, but I regretted it as soon as I started. All I could remember was pain. Despair. Agony. Dead bodies and blood everywhere. It seemed like a nightmare, but it felt too real.

As I dug deeper, flashes crossed my mind in a blurry timeline. First, we were attacked by the Fallen army. Vincent died. I faded into darkness, only to be brought back to the cruel reality shortly after. My father... Shit! Last time I saw him, he was losing a lot of blood from the hole left by his leg being ripped out. Did he make it? Did I lose him? Did I lose anyone else? My friends, my family, my...

My sunrise.

The worst pain struck me as the vivid image of her wolf hanging by a thread poisoned my mind. Valentina. I needed to see her. I needed to make sure that she was okay. My heart started racing and I pulled myself from the bed abruptly, only

to be held back by a bunch of wires connected to my skin. I didn't think twice before ripping every single one of them off, struggling to stand up soon after.

I got up so fast that my legs failed me, and I immediately fell to the ground. The room started spinning as I noticed my stitches opening. Not too long after, I felt blood oozing out of the wounds. I sucked in a painful groan as I tried to get back up. I didn't care about my condition. Valentina was all that mattered.

"Zephyr, she's fine!" Dawn's faint voice made me freeze in my place. She had been silent for so long that, for a moment, I was afraid she had left me. "If she wasn't alive, I wouldn't be either. You'd also have felt your bond breaking." Even in times like this, she was still the voice of reason.

"I don't care. I need to be with her." I shook my head, using all of my strength to get back to my feet, but it was useless. No matter how hard I tried, I was unable to leave the cold floor.

"Alpha!" A desperate male voice called out, catching my attention. Only then did I notice Dr. Peter standing right in front of me.

With wide eyes, the older man rushed to my aid. I cried out when he pulled me back up again, helping me lay on the bed. Once he made sure I was stable, he ran around the room collecting a bunch of medical supplies. In the blink of an eye, the Doc was back beside me to carefully clean the blood running down my naked skin. I felt a sharp pain as he restitched my wounds, but it wasn't nearly as terrible as everything I had been through in the last...how long had I been out for?

"Valentina..." was all I managed to utter in a faint voice.

Thanks to his heightened senses, he heard me. "The Luna's condition is stable, Alpha. You must not worry," he reassured me. "From what I've heard, your wolf did most of the job nursing her back to health. She's resting right now. Would you like me to have her relocated to your room once she wakes up?"

“Please.” I whispered.

“Very well. For now, you need to rest, too.” He scowled at me. “And please, do not try to leave your bed again.” I nodded slowly and he sighed. “The Beta, Gamma, and Delta wish to see you. I’ll leave to allow you some privacy.” He bowed before walking out the door.

And as soon as he left, in came my friends. Malin had his left arm immobilized by a sling, while Zach had an occlusive bandage over his blue eye. Alex was the one in best shape out of the trio. They all had a few bruises as well, but other than that, they seemed fine. The three of them smiled as soon as they saw me. I still wasn’t used to seeing Zach express happiness, but I rolled with it.

“You did it, man!” Malin cheered, resting his hand on my shoulder and applying a bit too much pressure. I let out a grunt. “Oops. Sorry.” He stepped back, noticing his mistake. “I can’t believe that we actually ended the war.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “The...Fallen...” Damn it, why was it so hard to speak?

“We defeated them,” my Beta reassured me. “And we made it just in time to witness Dawn’s miracle. Man, it was amazing! She started howling so sweetly, as if she was singing a song. Then, a beacon of light beamed from her, reaching up to the sun! The glow surrounded Dusk too, and when it was done, he had no wounds. Like at all!”

I tried to smile at his amusement, but it hurt so badly that I grimaced instead.

“The losses...” I started again. As if to spare me, Zach didn’t let me finish.

“Quite a few perished....” he revealed sadly. “More than half of our warriors. May they be at peace with the Moon Goddess.”

“May they be at peace with the Moon Goddess,” Malin repeated, bowing his head in respect.

“But the members that hid inside of the bunkers are fine. Honestly, considering the threat we were facing, I’d say this

was the best possible outcome for us,” my Gamma finished.

His statement reminded me of something. “Vincent...”

“It was my mistake, Alpha.” I was surprised when Alex stepped forward. She had never done anything wrong in her years as Delta. She always executed her job flawlessly.

“Vincent never made it to the bunker. I was supposed to count the members after I led them in, and I couldn’t find him. Since everyone else was there, I thought that maybe I had just missed him in my hurry. I mean, where else could he be? I never imagined he would try to-”

“It’s not...your fault,” I interrupted her. “Alex, my father-”

“That one I managed to save.” She showed me a half smile. “He needed a blood transfusion, and he won’t go anywhere without a wheelchair anymore. But he’s alive.”

A feeling of relief washed over me, at the exact moment that the doors opened again. A couple of nurses came in, pushing a bed and placing it beside mine. My eyes filled with tears when I noticed Valentina lying there. She seemed weak, probably exhausted by our horrifying experience, but she seemed physically fine. Hell, she was alive; that was all that mattered. The moment she saw me, a smile lit up her face, contrasting with the tears that ran down her cheeks

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” I whispered to her, still struggling to believe that she was real.

“You saved me, Zephyr,” my mate chanted, exhaustion evident in her voice.

“And we have another hero in the room, too,” Alex interrupted us. When I turned to her, I noticed Amaya standing shyly behind her. “The Beta Female helped ensure the success of Alpha Bertrand’s surgery. She was an essential blood donor. Without her, I don’t know if we would’ve found another suitable match in such a short time.” She smiled at my best friend’s mate, making her blush.

Valentina smiled brightly at her. “I know you wanted to fight with us, but even if you didn’t, you saved a life.” She got teary-eyed once again. “You’re a hero, Amaya.”

“It was the least I could do.” The Beta Female lowered her head politely.

“Thank you so much, Amaya,” I had to tell her despite my struggle to speak. My voice was still weak, but at least I didn’t have to take a breath after spilling each word.

“We’ll leave you two to rest. Just link us if you need anything.” Zach gave me a curt nod. I forced a smile in response as he exited the room with the rest of our friends..

Once they were gone, I turned to look at my beautiful mate. We were in terrible condition, but we were breathing, somehow. As long as we were together, we would make it. I stared deeply into her serene golden eyes, and a weak smile played on her lips. Without saying anything, we both let our hands fall to the side of the bed and intertwined our fingers. Feeling her touch sent sparks of joy through my body. That alone made all of my pain go away.

“I love you, sunrise,” I whispered, brushing her hand with my thumb.

“I love you too, moonlight,” she replied. “And I always will.”

“From dusk ‘til dawn,” I completed with a chuckle.

Two days after my mate and I were brought into the hospital, we were feeling well enough to leave. The doctors advised us to take it easy and avoid stress for the following two weeks. We weren’t allowed to go back to training for another seven days, and Valentina seemed more upset about it than me.

Sadly, the first thing we needed to take care of upon our release from medical care was to organize a funeral for those who had lost their lives in battle, including my mate’s adoptive father. It rarely rained in Genoro during Spring, but as what was left of our pack all dressed in black to bury the fallen

warriors, there was heavy rain. It was as if the Moon Goddess was crying with us, shedding her tears onto our backs as we howled together to guide the spirits of the wolves we had lost into her arms.

Valentina stood by my side, crying harder than most, while I gave a speech about how life is short and we must enjoy every second of our journeys. In all honesty, I knew it was all bullshit; nothing I said could bring anyone back. I just hoped my words would be enough to soothe the hearts of the wives, mothers, sons, and daughters left behind. They seemed to help my sunrise cope, and it was more than I could ask for.

In the evening, we welcomed the National Council into our pack for a visit. They congratulated us for having defeated the Fallen, thus likely saving our species as a whole. It seemed like such a major achievement, but it still felt so small. Aside from awarding each of my Elite members with medals, they also offered us financial aid for the next two years so we could rebuild our pack.

After my emotionally and physically exhausting first day out of the hospital, all I wanted was to lie in bed with Tina in my arms. However, the second we were alone in our room, I became restless. As the seconds went by, it seemed as though the emptiness I had always lived with grew larger and larger. For the first time in my life, I couldn't shake it off at all. One look into my mate's distressed eyes let me know that she felt the same.

"It's finally time, Zephyr," Dawn's voice was serene as she spoke to me. "We have to mark our mate."

"What? Now?" I cocked my head to the side.

Before she could answer me, Tina caught my attention. "Dusk is saying I should mark you...now."

"Are you sure? We can wait," I asked her, and she nodded. "Okay," I sighed, moving closer to her.

Usually, the marking process was completed at the end of the mating process. Although not mandatory, it was traditional, since the pleasure helped ease the ache. But quite honestly, I

had a feeling that Tina and I had grown tolerant of pain after everything we had been through.

Face to face with her, I lowered my lips to the spot connecting her neck and shoulders. She followed my lead. I took a deep breath of her calming scent to build my courage before actually doing anything. I waited another second to see if she would change her mind, but when she didn't, I gently wrapped my arms around her waist.

Without hesitation, I sank my elongated canines into Valentina's velvety skin, making her stiffen. At the same time, I groaned as I felt her pierce my flesh. We both pushed through the pain, biting deeper into each other's necks to complete the marking process.

However, before we could celebrate, something out of this world happened. All the air was forced out of my lungs. My chest ached as if my insides were being twisted, and my head started pounding. It was just for a millisecond, but I had the worst sensation in my life, like my very own soul was leaving my body. Just when I thought it had ended, things got even weirder.

"Hello, Zephyr." A strong, deep male voice echoed through my head. It sounded imposing and intimidating. *"We finally meet."*

My eyes widened in surprise as realization hit me. *"Dusk? What... How?"*

"The marking seals the prophecy to restore nature's balance once again. Now that the greater evil has been defeated, so too will the good return to its original shape." Did he mean that we had lost our powers? And that- *"Dawn's soul was switched with mine. Now, you and I are one, as it should naturally be."*

"Dawn's inside my head," Valentina stated in a mix of shock and confusion.

"And Dusk's in mine," I replied.

I had mixed feelings at the revelation. After not being able to feel whole for a lifetime, and having to share my body and

soul with a female, I should finally feel complete again. Well, the emptiness inside me did vanish, but it was weird to not have Dawn around anymore. I couldn't believe I was saying this, but I was going to miss her.

“Aw, you're so cute. And remember, that actually means you're a dork.” I was flabbergasted when I heard the awfully familiar, annoying feminine voice inside my mind again. *“Don't worry, you can still talk to me. But sadly, you won't be able to shift into the most badass she wolf you've ever met.”*

Nothing made any sense to me anymore. *“How are you-”*

“When Diana appeared to me, she said she would bless us with one final ability - one we will get to keep forever,” Dawn stated. *“Because of the bond we previously shared, I'm able to reach inside your mind, even if you're not my counterpart anymore. Valentina and Dusk can do it, too.”* She smiled.

“That's amazing!” I said out loud, and by my mate's cheerful smile, I guess Dusk had been talking to her too.

“That's it, Zephyr. After all this time, we're finally complete again,” she celebrated, hugging me tight. I brushed my fingers through her beautiful caramel blonde waves, laughing at her excitement.

“You're right. We are one,” I observed. “All four of us.”

* * *

One week later

“Are you ready for this, Dawn?”

The sun had just started to set on the horizon. All the wolves of Wind Howlers gathered at the top of the hill leading into the dandelion fields. We were ready to welcome the arrival of summer with a traditional pack run, which marked the beginning of our summer festival. I was at the front, leading the group alongside my Luna. My friends were in position right behind me, all of us in wolf form.

At last, I would get to run with my pack, as I should have on the night of my first shift. Only now, I would do it in the form of Dusk.

“I’ve been ready for a long time, Zephyr,” the caramel blonde she-wolf replied with all her sassiness.

“Then please, do the honors.” My black wolf gestured towards the field with his head. Shooting us one last glance, Dawn howled into the skies, bolting down the hill with a smile of pure joy spread across her face.

For the first time, I could watch my former she-wolf’s fur dancing with the wind from a different perspective. Through Dusk’s eyes, I was able to witness all of her majesty as she proudly led our pack, as she had longed to do since the day we met. She deserved this. After everything we went through, we all deserved to be happy.

The hundreds of wolves followed Dusk and Dawn through the endless fields, howling in celebration as the wind chanted each of our names simultaneously. Even the dandelion seeds, blown away from their stems with our movement, flew into the air to salute us. They danced with us, greeted us with kisses, and caught a ride on our coats. Together with the flowers and the breeze, we cheered, for Wind Howlers had prevailed. And it would continue to do so for generations.

I would make sure of that.

EPILOGUE

“Daddy! Wait up!”

My jet-black wolf barked cheerfully at the two little girls struggling to keep up with him. Even if he was just bouncing around at the town square, their tiny legs didn't run as fast as he did. Once they looked tired enough, Dusk locked his eyes on his third pup, who had just turned one. She was wobbly sitting on the grass, but she lost her balance as soon as my beast rolled on the ground beside her.

“Duck!” Coraline pouted, obviously annoyed at my counterpart. Completely ignoring her, he proceeded to shower her with wet wolfish kisses.

Moments later, Vera and Zayla pounced on top of Dusk, burying their hands and faces into his dark, rough fur. Although my two oldest daughters had inherited my blue eyes, they both looked very much like their mother, with shiny caramel blonde waves and the most angelic facial features. Cora, on the other hand, was almost an exact copy of me, except for her intense golden orbs, which glowed even brighter than the sunrise.

Five years had gone by since we defeated the Fallen and fulfilled the prophecy. Since then, peace has reigned. With the help of our allies, especially Dune Drifters and Sapphire Pond, we spent the first couple of years rebuilding our pack. I worked day and night to ensure the growth of Wind Howlers. We were now at almost 600 members, which consecrated us as the second largest pack in Genoro.

And the pack wasn't the only thing that had been expanded; our family had also grown.

“Zephyr! This is not what I had in mind when you said you were gonna watch the pups!” My mate's scolding voice caught me by surprise. The second Dusk turned to her though, her expression softened, and a smile played on her lips.

“Boys will be boys, even as dads,” Alex laughed, sitting her 2-year-old daughter on the grass beside Cora. “Honestly, I thank the Goddess for blessing us with Robin.” She exchanged one loving gaze with Victor as he pulled her into a hug. “There’s too much testosterone in this pack already.”

“On that we can agree!” Nisha laughed, rocking her daughter Ella in her arms. “Arnaud’s a good boy, though. But I must admit I always wanted a baby girl.”

“I have my doubts about that.” Zach’s usual frown stained his face as he shot a glare at the 4-year-old running around Cora. “That boy will be a troublemaker. I just know it.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked, grabbing a robe after finally shifting back into my human form. “To me, it looks like those two will be good friends.” The corner of my lips turned up as I watched Cora and Arnaud playing.

“You’re lucky Neil is here to keep them all in line. Isn’t that right, son?” Malin turned to the blonde boy, the oldest out of all the pups, who nodded in response. Even at only 5 years old, he wore a serious expression, fit for a Beta-in-the-making. Then, my best friend turned to Amaya, planting a kiss on her slightly swollen belly. “And he’ll show the ropes to this little Beta-on-the-way.”

“Do you know the gender yet?” Tina asked Amaya, who shook her head.

“The doctor said he’ll be able to tell in about two weeks,” she revealed.

“Well, anyway. We need to leave these three little girls with Grandpa Alpha and Grandma Luna,” I stated, lifting Coraline into my arms. Tina followed my lead, carrying Zayla close to her chest, while Vera took her hand. “We’ll see you in about ten- Ouch!” My sentence was interrupted by my one-year-old daughter roughly tugging on my earlobe. “Goddess, Cora! What was that for?”

“Come on, Zephyr!” Tina called again, and I knew better than to make her wait.

Along with our pups, we walked to the other side of the town square, towards the large house where my parents were now living. Since Dad lost one of his legs in combat, it was hard for him to climb up and down the stairs inside the pack house. They also decided to move out of the top floor, designated to the Alphas, to make room for our growing family.

The door was already open when we arrived, so we made ourselves at home. Both my parents were in the kitchen; judging by the smell, they must have been preparing some snacks for the pups. They didn't notice our presence at first, but with three energetic little girls, it was only a few seconds until they started yelling and running around.

"Grandpa! Grandma!" Vera chanted running up to my parents. Zayla wiggled in Tina's arms, begging to be let down so she could do the same.

"Oh, my sweet girls! How are you?" My mother happily crouched to give each of them a hug.

Dad flashed them a small smile, greeting them before rolling his wheelchair towards us. "Where are you going tonight?"

"To the movies," I replied, handing Coraline over to him. He gladly accommodated her on his lap. "Careful with that one. She's growing feistier every day," I warned, creasing my brows.

"I thought so. She's got that Alpha glow in her eyes," he observed, staring straight into my youngest daughter's golden orbs.

"That girl has more Alpha in her than most males I know!" Mom agreed, laughing.

"Yeah, well... I'm sure we'll finally get a boy next time." I shot Tina a suggestive look. It took her a while to notice it, but when she did, she immediately crossed her arms.

"Oh, hell no! There'll be no next time!" She put her foot down, thanking my parents as she turned around to leave. "I'm getting my tubes tied next month."

“What?” I widened my eyes at the news. “Wait, sunrise! Let’s talk this through!”

“We’ll talk when you get yourself an uterus!” she yelled, already out the door.

I flashed my Mom and Dad an apologetic smile before running after my mate. “Technically, I had one for a couple of months! Dawn, back me up here!”

“Absolutely not. Sorry, Zephyr. You don’t get a say in this.” The she-wolf’s voice echoed in my mind. Betrayed by my own former counterpart! *“But, if you want my opinion on something, I think you should start training Cora to take on the Alpha role when she’s old enough.”*

“Cora?” I cocked my head to the side. *“I don’t know. A female as an Alpha... She would have it pretty hard. Our society wouldn’t give her a break.”*

“Dawn’s a female, and she was an Alpha for a while. Everyone respected her,” Dusk wisely pointed out.

“Listen to your new voice of reason,” Dawn chuckled. *“Calm seas never made good sailors, Zephyr. She can handle it.”*

“Zephyr, will you please not just stand there?” Tina’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “You still have to get changed. I don’t wanna keep our friends waiting.”

With a sigh, I walked up to her, planting a soft kiss on her cheek. “Alright, sunrise. Whatever you want.”

As we walked together towards the pack house, I couldn’t help but think about how much things had changed. When I stepped in as Alpha, I never imagined I would have such a wild journey ahead of me, but I was proud of what we had accomplished. Although there was no way to tell what awaited us in the future, I was sure of one thing:

As long as I had my family, nothing would ever stop us.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Fated to the Rogue*. If you enjoyed it, it would be of immense help if you could [leave a review on Amazon](#). It only takes a minute, and it can truly make a difference for both my career as an author and my story!

Would you like to know more about Zephyr's daughter, Coraline, whom we've met in the epilogue? The next book in the Peculiar Shifters trilogy, *Mated to the Enemy*, will follow her journey as the first female Alpha of Wind Howlers Pack. The ebook will be available for pre-order on Amazon, so don't miss out!

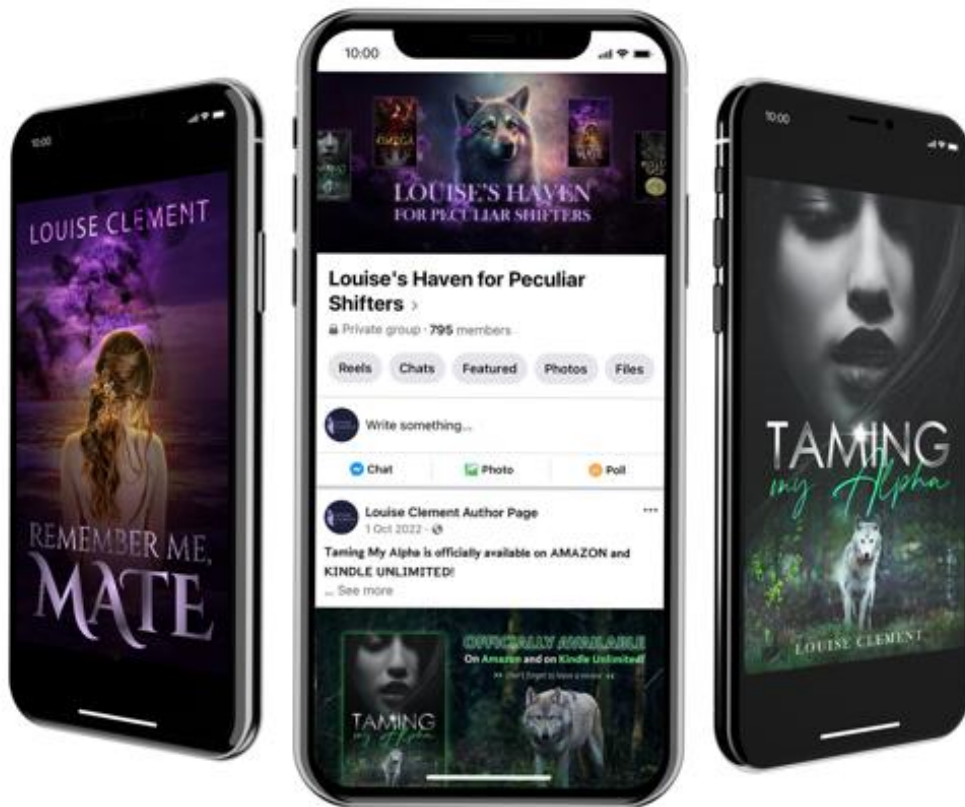
Are you curious to know what the characters look like, and would you like a chance to win *exclusive* book merch? Join my facebook group, [Louise's Haven for Peculiar Shifters](#). There, you'll find extra content such as character visuals, opportunities for giveaways, and discussions about this book, as well as my other works, with other readers.

For early access to the next books in this trilogy and all my future work, along with the opportunity to further support me, you can join my [Patreon](#) page. I would love to see you there!

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Fated to the Rogue will always hold a special place in my heart. It was the very reason why I started writing. One day, I had this crazy idea that no one seemed to have written about before, and I thought to myself “what if I write it?”

That’s how Fated to the Rogue was born, but that’s not how it survived. It was because of all of you, my wonderful readers who decided to support this crazy author with a weird idea, that this journey has come so far. From the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU!

Next, of course, I want to give a special shoutout to my incredible proofreader, Cailyn. Because English is not my mother tongue, I really mean it when I say none of my books would even exist without you. You literally made it possible for me to follow my dreams by eliminating the language barrier. You have been with me from the start of my journey as a writer, and I hope you’ll be here until the end!

My boyfriend, Rennan, who supported me from the moment I decided to try my luck as a writer. Despite not understanding my love for books, you listened to my senseless ramblings, read chapters when I needed a second opinion, and even helped me when I was uninspired. For the eight years during

which we have been together, you never once failed to encourage me to do what makes me happy.

My family, especially my father. You can understand me better than anyone else, and you never judged me.

My girls, Priscilla, Luiza, Duda, Clara, Roberta, Tailana, Juliana, Lais. You'll probably never know about the existence of this book (lol), but I would never have gotten this far in life without your friendship. You mean the world to me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise Clement



Louise Clement was born in 1998 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she lives with her parents, her sister, and her two dogs. At 24 years old, she has just graduated in Graphic Design. A girl who never knew how to stay still, she has an ever-growing list of hobbies. With an insatiable hunger for acquiring new knowledge and skills, she will often write about her experiences.

Louise's journey as an author began in late 2021, when she published her first English book, a werewolf novel, on a mobile reading app. What started as a hobby and a dream soon turned into reality when her first work quickly became popular, and she decided to continue telling her stories.

Although Louise is mainly a supernatural writer, she has plans to write non-fantasy books in the future. She ventures mostly through the romance genre, but her stories also have a good dose of action, mystery, and a sprinkle of spice. In 2023, she released the first book in the Peculiar trilogy, titled "A Peculiar Wolf."

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

[Taming My Alpha](#)

Calliope is the Delta of Moonstone Pack. After her parents died in battle when she was only 16, everyone dismisses her as the weak she-wolf left behind. She is bullied daily by her pack mates, who fail to recognize her importance, as she sits and waits for her mate to come and save her. But when he finally comes along, he's not the Prince Charming she was expecting.

Levi Griffon is the Alpha of Blood Eclipse Pack, the most ruthless pack in the country. At 26 years old, the feared leader is pressured into finding a Luna in order to reach his full potential, but he has no interest in having a mate. He brings Calliope into his home, and like a good Delta, she doesn't complain about his coldness - at first.

Little by little, the fire builds up in Calliope's heart, and her desire to fight for what is hers becomes dire. Will she find the strength she needs to tame her Alpha?

[Remember Me, Mate](#)

What happens when a soulmate is forgotten?

Zahra Demeter is the beloved Luna of the Scarlet Meadows Pack. On the night of her eighteenth birthday, she discovered her mate and Alpha, and they've remained inseparable since. Amidst the trials they've faced together, Zahra was certain that nothing could sever the unbreakable bond they shared. Or so she thought.

Tristan Wolfgang's loyalty to his Luna transcended even his dedication to the pack, his family by blood. He would go to hell and back to ensure her safety and happiness. Needless to say, it came as a shock to everyone when he suddenly rejects

her, disappearing without a trace.

When Zahra's pain becomes unbearable to the point of threatening her life, her friends have no choice but to erase every memory she had of the man she once loved. She lives a contented life without him for three years, until he shows up at her door as mysteriously as he had gone away.

Now that Tristan has returned, he will do everything in his power to make her remember him. But even if she does, will she ever find it within herself to forgive his betrayal?