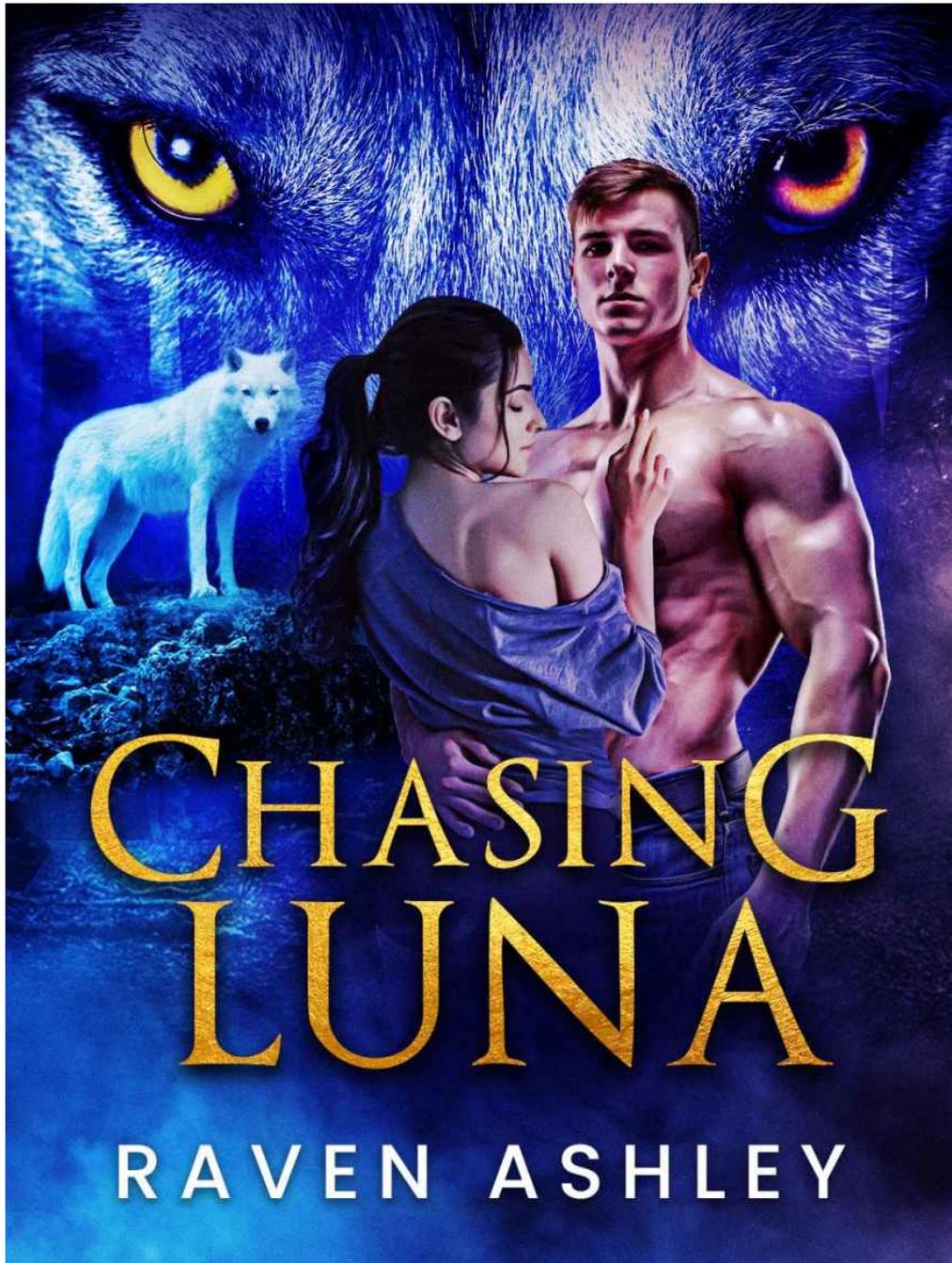




CHASING LUNA

RAVEN ASHLEY



Chasing Luna

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Chapter One

I smell danger.

I pull down my black face mask to catch unfamiliar scents. I lift my head and scan my immediate surroundings, but nothing seems to be out of place inside the café.

Outside then? I straighten up from behind the counter, instinctively rolling my shoulders and stretching my limbs in the process.

“Isabela, you always look like you’re getting ready to fight. Can you relax a little?” a voice from behind breaks me out of my thought process. I turn and face my friend, Rie.

“What do you mean?” I ask, turning to empty the cash register and putting the money in the envelopes before me.

My ears pick up on slight movements coming from the bushes outside. *A small animal?* I try to figure out what I’m hearing, but Rie grabs my head and pulls me down close to her face.

“Are you even listening to me?” she makes a fuss. I can easily overpower her, but I don’t dare make a move. She is one of my closest friends after all.

“You know, you can be intimidating... if you weren’t so tiny,” I reply. Rie grits her teeth at that. Her small frame starts to shake from annoyance and she lets go of my face almost immediately. I smirk victoriously. The rustling stops outside.

Maybe I’m overthinking things.

A shrill laugh comes from the open kitchen where Nina, our other friend, is currently checking inventory. I spot her strawberry blonde hair swishing side to side while counting stocks of baking powder. “You two need to stop fighting in my café. It’s sending bad vibes to the customers,” she half-yells.

“Okay, first of all, there’s no one here since we’re about to close. And second of all, she’s the one who called me small! Completely unprovoked too,” Rie responds with a petulant

huff. She gathers her blue locks in one ponytail while glaring at me. I grin and reach for her, but she slaps my hand away. “Also, it’s not *your* café yet, Nina. If I remember correctly, *daddy* signs the checks around here.” Rie stomps to where Nina is and starts cleaning up Nina’s station. Flour decorates the entire kitchen table, along with chocolate syrup and colorful sprinkles.

“Please don’t ever call my father that word again,” Nina says rather sternly.

I chuckle as I lock up the cash register and head to the kitchen. Rie throws me a towel and points at a specific spot to clean. “Why am I doing this for—”

I’m interrupted by the sound of windchimes ringing in my ear, and my body freezes before I can even make sense of what’s happening. An overwhelming earthy scent of sandalwood mixed with musk wafts through the air, and I know that the person who just walked in isn’t entirely human. Just like me.

At that realization, my body activates its fight or flight response as if on cue. *Do something!* I desperately try to move, but my feet feel glued to the floor.

“Oh, he’s hot. Like, Tom Cruise in ‘Top Gun’ kind of hot,” Nina whispers beside me, blissfully unaware of my worries. “Isabela, go ask him what he needs. You’re technically not done with your shift.” She smiles coyly.

My head starts to pound as alarm bells are going off inside me. Every fiber in my body is imploring me to leave but I can’t just run away, especially if my friends are in potential danger too.

“Isabela, go,” Rie urges. I take a deep breath and find enough strength to take one step after another out of the kitchen and back to the counter.

Just know, if you can smell him, he can smell you. I secure my mask back on before I face the man. Be prepared to fight for your life.

“We’re closed,” I declare curtly while fiddling with the cash register.

“Oh, no. I’m here to pick something up. I ordered earlier today.” His deep voice startles me.

A sweet floral scent lingers in the air while he speaks. *I’ve never smelled that before. Perfume? No, that can’t be right.* I furrow my brows in confusion and look at him. *The scent is a little addicting.* I find myself inhaling again. He gives me a smile and I’m almost convinced that he’s not an immediate threat. Almost.

“I have the invoice here, if you want to check for yourself.” He fumbles for something in his back pocket, but his hazel eyes hold my gaze steadily.

I sigh. “There’s no need. You ordered under what name?”

“Gregory.” I nod.

“Wait here,” I say as I quickly return to where Nina and Rie huddle together. “He’s picking up an order under the name *Gregory*,” I half-whisper.

Nina clasps her hands together. “Oh yeah! Let me go get it.” I situate myself by the door frame of the kitchen entrance. I look back at the man and keep my eyes trained on every miniscule move he makes.

He’s focused on the phone in his hand, long fingers grasping the entire device, thumb scrolling up from time to time. The gesture seems normal enough, I guess. *It doesn’t seem like he’s planning something devious.* His dark hair is tousled to one side, and his strong jaw complements his round cheeks, making his entire face a little softer to look at. His black shirt barely hides the muscles underneath, and his tall figure makes him a bit more intimidating than most people. If we got into a fight right now, he could easily take me down.

But if he wanted to kill me, he would’ve done it by now... Right? My muscles stiffen almost instantaneously. *Maybe he’s planning an ambush?* I ask myself.

“Look at her, just staring at him,” Rie muses.

“It looks like she’s in a trance, doesn’t she?” Nina chuckles. I roll my eyes.

“Hurry up,” I start to whine, and Nina hands me three cake boxes.

“Here! Give these to him first.” I take it from her hands and walk to the counter.

“Come back for the coffee next!” Nina nearly yells. I plop the cake boxes in front of him wordlessly and start to head back to my place by the door frame.

“Is he that handsome up close, Isabela? Are you thinking of a pickup line? I have a few suggestions,” Nina offers, putting three coffee boxes in one carrier. I can feel her giddiness from where I stand, but I keep my eyes fixed on the man. Now that I think about it, he seems familiar somehow.

“Maybe she’s fantasizing about bouncing on his d—” I cut off Rie’s attempts to tease immediately.

“Okay! That’s enough.” I feel the heat start to prickle behind my ears as my friends burst into fits of giggles.

Well, I’m pretty sure he heard all of that. I pick up the carrier and head back to the counter.

“Here you go,” I say, pushing his orders toward him. My hand brushes against his accidentally, and I feel my entire body bristle at the touch.

“That was fast. Thanks,” he mutters while checking his things. He flashes me another smile and leaves quietly without another glance.

I feel myself visibly relax. *Maybe I was just being paranoid.* I sigh and reach for the keys to the register again when I spot a wallet sitting above the tip jar. I pick it up to check for any trace of the owner.

A white card nestled in between the folds catches my eye, and I slide it out. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say out loud.

Chapter Two

I'm not sure if he did this on purpose or he's actually dumb. I stare at the name of the owner in my hands. "Gregory Richardson." I shake my head as I look back to where the man exited earlier.

He's walking toward a car parked right in front of the café. I study the calling card further. Underneath his name states his occupation in bold, black letters. "A stock broker from a New York-based firm. He's a tourist? Hmm, maybe I should give this back to him?" I muse.

"Give what back?" Nina interjects, casually draping her arm over my shoulders.

"Uh, that guy earlier, he left his wallet." I hand it over to her.

"Ooh, let me see!" Rie attempts to snatch it away from Nina, but she's too slow.

"That's him over there." I point to the black sedan. "Give it to him in case he comes back," I instruct my friends and they nod in agreement. I leave them be and head to the small closet space beside the kitchen entrance where we leave our things. It takes me a while to remove the intricate knot Nina did to my apron and to change out of my uniform. I grab my backpack and fumble for my phone in one of the side pockets. I've got a couple of unread messages. "Shoot!" I shriek as I read a message from my sister demanding that I

come home early today. “Hey, I need to go. My sister just messaged me—what are you both doing?” I stop in my tracks as I spot Nina and Rie hiding behind the display counter.

“Get down here!” Rie demands, confusing me altogether. I crouch beside them.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask again.

“He hasn’t left yet,” Rie whispers.

“Who?” I try to get a good look outside, but I’m pulled down again.

“Gregory. You know, the customer from earlier?” Nina emphasizes.

I tilt my head in confusion. “And?”

“What do you mean, ‘and’? Aren’t you a little suspicious? Why is he still here? Why isn’t he leaving?” Rie slaps my arm.

I roll my eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. Probably because his wallet is still here?”

And I thought I was the paranoid one.

“Then why won’t he come back inside?” Nina interjects.

“Because you’re both acting weird! I’d also be a little scared to come back when I know two lunatics are huddled behind the counter waiting for me.” I shrug off their hands and stand up. “Quit being ridiculous. And this isn’t a very good hiding spot. I’m pretty sure everyone can see you from the outside.” I look over my shoulder and stare at the figure inside the black sedan. I can see him hunched over the steering wheel looking directly at us.

His demeanor seems a little less friendly, unlike earlier when he was all smiles. “He’s giving me the creeps. Like, he’s waiting for someone. Or something,” Rie infers.

“Or for someone to give him back his wallet?” I offer while gathering my raven hair into a ponytail.

I pat down my back pocket to make sure I have my valuables with me. “No, Isabela. I’m serious. Something

seems... off. Don't go yet. Just wait for us to close up the café and we'll walk you to your car." Rie grabs my hand. "Please." I smile at the sweet gesture. "What if he turns out to be one of your stalkers? I feel bad just letting you go out there on your own."

I exhale sharply, vaguely recalling the details of a story I once told my friends. I mentioned that I had stalkers during one shift, and that at any moment they might attack me because of my family's status. It's entirely plausible and simple enough to remember, and it doubles as a good excuse if I ever need to miss a day of work.

"She's right." Nina looks at me imploringly. "You know, we're ready to protect you anytime, right? Don't go home tonight. Stay with me!" she suggests.

"I appreciate it, seriously. But you know what my family is capable of." *Well, not all of it*, I mentally add. "And you know I'm not some helpless little girl. I'm going to be fine," I reassure them. Concern still laced their features, but it seems like I've appeased them.

"Fine," Rie sighs at me, "but we'll go outside and give this back to him. And we'll make sure you'll get to your car." She waves the wallet in front of my face.

"Okay, that seems fair. Let's go." I fall a few steps behind and let my friends continue toward the black sedan.

The man inside lowers his window and flashes them a smile. *It's a good thing we're in public*. I narrow my eyes at the exchange. There are multiple CCTVs hidden all around the café, and numerous cars are passing by the minute since we're beside a busy road. *Whatever happens, I know he won't make a scene*, I think to myself.

The sound of faint footsteps coming toward us breaks me out of my thoughts. *They're coming closer to us*. I feel my entire body bristle with fear. *Two, no, three people? There are more hiding somewhere, I bet*. I utter a silent apology to my friends and slip away furtively to find my car behind the café.

I can see my silver Audi a couple of yards away, nestled in between a minivan and a sports car. *Huh? Where'd those come from? This parking space was closed earlier.* I quicken my pace, hoping to get in my car and drive away without confronting who or what is following me. As I do, I hear my pursuers break into a jog and I feel my heart start to race.

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath. *I don't think I'm going to make it.* Scrambling for a quick solution, my eyes settle on the lush trees and overgrown shrubbery in front of me. I realize that there's only one thing left to do.

Run.

Chapter Three

“After her! Now!” I hear a gruff voice yell from behind me. I break out in a sprint toward the woods, desperate to lose my

pursuers.

“Do these wackos have nothing better to do?” I half-whisper to myself. I weave in between the low-hanging branches and thick roots that cover the forest floor, careful not to trip over anything. With every step I take, I hear four more footsteps following me. *They’re closing in on me*, I think to myself as I leap across a fallen log with ease.

“Give it up, princess! We’ve got you surrounded,” a voice sneers. I look back just in time to see a blonde-haired man reach for my face. I grab his wrist, and pull him hard toward me. Using his own weight against him, he stumbles forward and I take this chance to knee him in the face.

“Go back to hell,” I whisper as he falls flat on his face.

“Jean!” someone shouts after him, and I take this as a sign to run even faster.

I turn to my left only to come face to face with a burly man. “Ooh, she’s a feisty one!” He snickers. “Come here, girly. We won’t hurt you,” he leers, “I promise.” He lunges at me with both hands and I take a quick side step to my right. In his split second of confusion, I push all my weight to my left leg and use the momentum to roundhouse kick him.

I feel my foot connect to the side of his head, and he falls to his knees. “Fuck off,” I spit and hit him on the back of his head, knocking him out. I take off my face mask while running and throw it in the opposite direction of where I am going. *Go follow my scent that way, you dogs*. I smirk to myself. *But that can only buy me a few minutes of time. I need to act fast*. I slide in between a couple of tall bushes, taking a handful of dirt and rubbing it all over me.

“*When someone is pursuing you, make sure to hide your scent well*,” I recall my father saying to me while playfully smearing clay on my face. “*This is your first line of defense. Do you understand, Isabela?*” he said to little eight-year-old me. That was one of his last reminders before he disappeared. I’ve always hated that memory.

“Thanks for the advice, Dad,” I mutter as I gather more dirt and leaves and rub them all over my backpack.

I try to steady my breathing and focus on the environment. “Over there!” I hear someone bark, and I automatically crouch down to hide. A woman and another man run past my hiding spot. I stay still for a few minutes until the smell of sandalwood has become faint.

I get back up and sprint again. I frantically scan the ground, looking for something to defend myself with. There’s nothing but leaves, tiny rocks, and small branches, nothing I can use. “Nothing deadly, at least,” I tell myself. After a few minutes of running, I slow down a little.

Just then, I feel myself getting pulled by my backpack. “Hi.” A tall, muscular blonde-haired man holds me by the arms. “Aren’t you a pretty, young thing?” he muses as he grabs my chin and tilts my head upward. I struggle against his grip, but he’s much stronger than I am. “Are you lost? This is no place for royalty like you, you know?” He brings his face closer to mine, inhaling deeply. “You smell nice. Very... *pure*,” he emphasizes the last word. “Just my type.” He grins. I feel my eye twitch at that. I raise my right foot just a little bit and stomp hard on his toes. He yelps in pain, and I jump and push myself backward in an attempt to make him fall on the forest floor. It works and I land on top of him.

I turn quickly, clasp my hands together, and sucker punch him in the gut. “Ew.” I sneer and kick him in the crotch for good measure. He groans in agony, and I take off running.

I can’t keep fighting them. What if they suddenly turn? I shake my head as I go deeper into the woods. I’ll be dead before I know it. The sound of footsteps is still hot on my trail, but I keep moving forward.

“Isabela!” a foreign voice calls out to me. “You won’t be able to escape us you know!” he mocks, with a slight chuckle. “So why don’t you just give up, come here and let’s talk, yeah?” I feel a slight cramp on my left leg but I don’t let myself slow down.

“Over my dead body!” I growl back. A few meters in front of me, I can see the edge of the forest floor disappearing. *A cliff?* I panic. “There must be something here I can use.” I try to calm myself down. Surrounding the edges of the cliff are a couple of vines hanging low. I can take a running start and bait them into thinking that I’m going to jump off. The risk lies in whether the vine I grab is strong enough to support my weight. I curse under my breath. *But, is this a risk I’m willing to take?* “Well, it seems like I’m dying either way.” I grin and quicken my steps. A few yards behind me, my pursuers pick up the pace as well. “Might as well die on my own terms,” I utter cheerfully.

“You have nowhere else to go, princess!” someone expresses from behind me. “Give up or die!” I slow down a little bit to let them catch up.

“Knock some sense into her,” I hear one of them order. I look behind and see three men close my spot. The one called Jean is bleeding from his nose and I mentally pat myself on the back.

“Catch me if you can!” I break out into another sprint just as they are an arms-length away from me. Running as fast as my legs can take, I spot a thick vine hanging low enough for me to reach.

“Get her!” I jump forward and catch the tail end of the vine just as my pursuers reach the edge of the cliff. They end up falling off the edge, unable to stop their speed in time. I use my own momentum to direct the vine to turn one hundred eighty degrees and land on the balls of my feet at the other side of the tree.

Holy hell, I can't believe that worked!

I look back to see where they landed. It is a small clearing, not enough to mortally wound them. But enough to buy myself time and let me escape. I listen closely for any reinforcements, but the footsteps stopped when the strange men fell off the cliff.

I run back to where I came from, not slowing down or stopping until I can see the familiar building of the café. I grab

my keys from the pocket of my jeans and unlock the car before I can even get close.

I frantically pull open the driver's side door and slip inside. My heart continuously pounds against my chest as I struggle to catch my breath, but I don't let myself relax. I inhale sharply and get a strong floral scent coming from the backseat.

I feel my eyes go wide just as a hand encloses my throat. I can feel a cool, sharp object lightly scratching against the soft part of my jaw.

"Ah, finally," the unidentified voice says. "You kept me waiting, Isabela."

Chapter Four

"Kill me," I sigh, slowly raising my hand to grab the pointed edge and pull it closer to my throat. "If you dare," I mutter.

"Or what, princess?" I can hear the stranger practically smirk.

"I'll curse you myself," I say with a strangled breath. This time he actually laughs.

"Nice try. I know your family's secrets so I know you've yet to gain your place among your pack." He leans in. "Also, you're not very convincing. Anyone can see through your empty threats." His hot breath fans the side of my face and I fight the urge to roll my eyes in disgust. I struggle deeply, but still, he carefully slides the weapon across my face. A knife with a serrated edge is now pointed directly at my right eye. "Try to move again and I'll blind you," he whispers.

"Fine. What do you want?" I deadpan.

"Start driving—" he starts.

“But you just said don’t move. Why don’t you drive?” I smirk. He starts to move his lips closer to my ear and I feel my airway constrict. I fight my instinct to start clawing at his hand.

I won’t give you the reaction you want, I think to myself as I close my eyes and concentrate on calming myself down.

“Why aren’t you fighting? Giving up that easily?” he taunts but I try my best not to dignify his presence with a response. After a few beats, he sighs and loosens his grip.

“Just drive,” he instructs as I try to catch my breath, “and don’t get smart with me again.”

“Fuck off,” I spit, affixing my gaze on the rearview mirror. “It’s you!” I yell. My eyes

widen at the image of the man looking right at me. Posture hunched over the backseat, broad shoulders engulfing the entire driver seat as he keeps the knife pointed at my throat and his other arm poised to grab my neck at any moment’s notice. His hazel eyes narrowed in anticipation of what I had to say next. “You, the guy from earlier? Gregory?” I ask in disbelief.

“Surprise,” he responds emotionlessly. His deep voice sends my mind into a frenzy.

All my life I’ve been carefully guarded, and the moment I allow myself to relax for an hour I get into trouble.

I mentally continue to berate myself, unaware of Gregory’s knife starting to dig deep into my neck.

“Now then, Isabela. I’m growing impatient. Get us out of this parking lot, and get on the main road,” he commands. I grip the steering wheel and start backing out from my parking space.

“Where are my friends? Did you do something to them?” I ask cautiously. I keep my eyes trained on the road before me, but I do my best to keep my other senses focused on what Gregory’s doing in the backseat.

“They’re fine,” he breathes into my right ear. “We just talked.” He chuckles. “I was kind of hoping you were going to give me back my wallet but when they knocked on my window side, I had to switch to plan B. Though as soon as I sent all my people after you, I knew you’d give them trouble.” He points to his right and I turn to a long dirt road that is illuminated by street lamps. “I had to act fast, I didn’t want to lose you.”

“So, you broke into my car?” I finish his sentence. He hums in response. “That’s your master plan? I give you back your wallet, you kidnap me, and expect that I go down without a fight?” I laugh at this point. “If you truly know my family, you’d know that I’ve been through a lot worse. And yet, you couldn’t come up with something other than this?” I smirk as I hear him growl. “Dumbass,” I taunt him. We stop at an intersection and I take a good look at him in the rearview mirror. He glares at me and I smile innocently. “So, Gregory. You’re from which pack exactly?” His fingers are now clenched, but I don’t drop my gaze.

“The Dark Moon pack,” he answers with a low voice. “Turn right at the first corner after this intersection,” he commands. I keep driving until we get to a dead end. I notice the abundance of trees covering what seems to be a forgotten trail going deeper into a wooded area. “Stop. Park right here and get out of the car.” He pushes me to walk in front of him. I scan my surroundings for anything I can use against him for my escape. “Don’t even think about it or else I’ll kill you right here and now.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, pretty boy,” I reply sarcastically. A few minutes of walking and we arrive at a small clearing. Makeshift benches made out of logs and a couple of twigs and small branches are collected in the middle. Some of it charred, some are intact. *Must be a previous campsite*, I deduce. “Now, let’s talk.” I face him just then.

“Your family is very powerful,” he starts, “so powerful in fact that no other pack dreams of fighting yours for fear of getting cursed.” I stare at him, careful not to make any sudden movements until I hear all he has to say. “But my pack is

strong, too.” He steps forward but I stand my ground. “And I will do everything it takes to get my father back from your family’s evil clutches.”

His father? “What do you mean?” I shift uncomfortably. The air is thick with tension, and my instinct tells me that he wouldn’t hesitate to snap my neck now.

“Your family attacked mine ten years ago, which started a chain of hostile takeovers and riots all over the country. My mother didn’t survive the violence.” His eyes darken as he looms over me. “And you took my father away from me,” he growls.

“I don’t understand. If this happened ten years ago, I would’ve been a child! Why are you involving me in this?” I subconsciously take a step back. He shakes his head and keeps coming closer.

“I saw it with my own eyes. How your grandmother yelled her demonic incantations, how time seemed to stop, and how my father writhed on the ground in pain before being taken away.” He grabs me by my shoulders. “So, listen closely because I’ll only say this once. I know on your eighteenth birthday you’ll gain your powers. I also know my father is somewhere in the Esperanza estate. My pack will sneak into the estate and locate my father and bring him back. You,” he grabs my face and pulls it closer to his, “I’ll keep you with me as a slave.” He smiles. “I promise I won’t hurt any of your pack members if you break my father’s spell.”

“You know my family is powerful. You said it yourself.” I grab his hand and attempt to pull it away from my face but he doesn’t budge. “You think they’re going to let you waltz in the estate without a fight?” I ask incredulously.

“Your family might have demonic powers, but you know what every member of the Dark Moon pack is an expert at?” His rough hand caresses my cheeks and barely hovers above my lips. “Assassination,” he whispers and I unintentionally shiver.

Rumors of a pack as strong as ours had been circulating ever since I can remember, but I never thought much of it.

After all, I didn't care about any of this stuff. All I wanted as a child was to get rid of this werewolf curse and live as a normal human. *I guess that's not happening anytime soon, huh?* I slap his hand away from my face and push him back. "Listen. I'm sorry for what happened ten years ago, but I had nothing to do with it. If you have any problems with my family, why don't you take it up with the head of the household? I'm sure she'd listen to you," I say, sarcasm dripping from my every word. "I don't want to be a part of this. Just let me go," I plead.

He closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths. As soon as he opens them again, I couldn't feel anything except pain.

Chapter Five

“You think I’m scared of you?” I manage to say through gritted teeth. I wasn’t sure what Gregory had done to me as soon as he opened his eyes.

Warm liquid trickles down my arm and in confusion I look down and blink. Gregory’s foot hurls over mine. That is when the realization hit me, he may not be aware of what he’s done to me. *Still, I get the inky feeling that if I don’t get out of here fast, I might actually bleed to death.*

Gregory fixes his gaze on me. “You will do as I say.” He holds me by the waist and pulls me in closer. “Or you lose everything, including your life. Don’t you get that? You don’t have a choice here but to do as I say!” He lets go of the foot still stuck to my other foot. The worn-out pain forces me to keel over. I try to get my bearings and focus on finding a

weapon but I feel a little lightheaded. Gregory twirls a fistful of my hair and motions for me to look at him. “I’m not a very nice man, Isabela. If you don’t cooperate with me, I’ll kill you right here, right now. I’ll just have to take someone else from your family. Your sisters, for example.” He sneers. My eyes start to water from heat and exhaustion but I use all my strength to try and create some space between the dirt and my nose and mouth.

“Stay away from my sisters,” I mutter. Heat flows through my body and the urge to survive overtakes me, entirely.

“What was that? I couldn’t quite catch it, princess.” He stares at me coldly. I gulp in air fast.

“I said fuck you.” I smile as I throw dirt into his eyes as hard as I can.

He yells and I run as fast as my legs can carry me. It’s not long before I hear heavy footsteps running after me. This area isn’t a place I’m very familiar with and I debate slowing down to calculate my next move. My choices right now are limited, so I run deeper into the woods to avoid getting murdered by a maniac.

I dig my heels deeper into the ground as I attempt to put more space between us, but he’s too fast and I hear him getting closer and closer. “You little shit!” he yells.

He’s too quick, I’m going to have to fight. My hands start to shake at the thought. I do a quick body scan; I may be smaller than him, but I’m a skilled fighter. *I’ll give him hell, though. If I die, he dies with me.*

I listen closely to Gregory’s footfalls. I sense him a few meters behind and I slightly slow my pace. I hear him grunt and I duck my head just in time to evade his grasp. He stumbles forward, and I take this moment to move my body further away from him. But he regains his footing and lunges at me immediately. I fold backward, feeling the strain on my right arm but I continue and, with as much force as I can muster, I kick upward and connect my left foot with his chin.

The sound makes a loud echo throughout the woods and Gregory screams in pain. *Good, that should give me time to get away from you.* I take a step away from him but a tugging sensation keeps me from leaving. I look down and Gregory has a death grip on my ankle, hellbent on making me lose my balance. I struggle to break free and kick him with my other foot but he catches that one too and I tumble forward.

I break my fall with my hands. I bite back a groan as I feel Gregory begin to crawl on top of me. “You won’t get away that easily.” He snarls.

“I don’t plan on running away this time,” I retort. Taking a swing at his face, I manage to scratch him across his forehead, barely missing his eyes.

He curses in agony but he’s still on top of me. I push him away and knee him in the chest. This creates more space between us and I take the knife and drag the tip against his chest. His hand shoots up to stop me and I kick him away and he falls to my side. I throw the weapon as far as I can and muster enough strength to pin him to the ground.

Still groaning in pain from the multiple blows I gave him, I straddle his waist and reach behind me to grab something in between the waistband of my jeans. I almost laugh with delight as soon as I feel the smooth edges make contact with my hand. I take both out and pull them from the cowhide sheath.

I prod him to open his eyes. “Do you have any last words?” I giggle like a maniac. I twirl my silver daggers in between each hand. He glares at me and attempts to grab my face but I immediately press one pointed edge of my dagger to his forehead. He freezes and his eyes roll back to his head. “Do you know what I have in my hands right now?” I tease. His body starts to shake slowly, and he whimpers in fear, if I am to conclude. “Can you recognize what I’m pressing to your forehead, Gregory?” I try again and this time I pull the dagger away from his face. His eyes shift to me, he tries to grab me but his grip is weak.

“Silver,” he pants out, “silver daggers.”

“That’s right!” I yell out in joy. “I really didn’t want to do this but you’ve left me with no choice!” I howl in laughter. The bloodlust had taken over me as soon as I grabbed my daggers, and now I’m not so sure I can stop myself from tormenting my “prey” before I finish him off. To outsiders, we might look like a couple getting frisky under the moonlight. But one look at the somehow bloody mess and the torn-up clothes, they’d realize that this is a homicide waiting to happen. “Back to my first question, Gregory.” I dangle the tip of the dagger dangerously close to his eye. “Do you have any last words? I’ll make sure to relay them to your pack.”

He chuckles sardonically. “I guess I shouldn’t have underestimated you, huh?” He closes his eyes. “Make it quick, princess.” I press my dagger to the open wounds on his forehead and he starts to shiver again.

“Oh, this isn’t the end for you, not yet.” He grits his teeth, grabs my shoulder, and tries to squeeze it. I wince but the adrenaline rush surging through my veins takes away the same amount of fear I bear. “I kind of want to see how certain scenarios play out first.” I drag my other dagger down his body slowly all the way until I reach in between his legs. Without breaking eye contact, I press down and hear Gregory stifle a groan. “Like, I wonder what would happen if I take away your ability to breed? Would your pack members disown you? Or make you into an Omega?” I burst into another fit of giggles. Gregory doesn’t move or make a sound and I smile innocently. *Time to finish what I started.* I look up and take pleasure in what I see before me. “I’m just kidding.” His face distorts into a mixture of confusion and disgust at my actions, his body is shivering at the effect of his proximity to my weapons. “I’m not going to do any of that.” I fully lower down on him and press my torso to his. I stab my silver daggers on either side of his face, caging him in. I lean in close to his face, fresh blood trickles from his brow. I spread the warm liquid that trailed to his cheeks and almost let it coat my mouth. Beneath me, I can feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest. His breath starts to quicken. Though from want or from fear, I don’t know. I hover just above his lips and smile.

“I need you for something else first.”

Chapter Six

“I need to make sure the magic ends with me,” I whisper. I pull myself back up and off Gregory, making sure to pull my silver daggers away from the ground and walk a safe distance away.

“What?” He groans as he sits up. “What the hell are you talking about?” He doesn’t make a move to stand from his place and I don’t move too. We’re staring each other down a couple of meters apart, unwilling to budge and unable to continue the fight we just had.

An idea forms in my head. “Listen closely because I’m only going to say this once, pretty boy.” It is my turn to be condescending. “I’ll help you get your father back. But I’m not going to be a slave, and I’m not going to let you kill any of my family members. I’ll find him, sneak him out, and take him

to you. I'll release him from his curse on the day of my eighteenth birthday, but that's it." I lean against a tree trunk and close my eyes, hoping he takes the bait and lets me go. "I'm not helping you or anyone else after this. I'll run away and take my sisters with me. After that, whatever issues you have with my pack you can resolve on your own. I'm not going to stick around to find out how that's going to end, though." I open my eyes to see him looking at me with an unreadable expression. "Or," I continue softly, "you can kill me now. And ensure that the magic of the Raging Demons pack will never return. My pack will cease to exist, and no more royal blood will continue after me. Everyone will live in peace, or you know, at least you won't get scared of curses anymore." I close my eyes again and listen to the breeze flowing through the leaves. *If he doesn't let me go soon, I might actually die here. I don't think I can fight anymore, too.* "But if you choose to end my life tonight, you will never get your father back. I assure you, no matter how far or how deep you look into the estate, you will never see him again. The estate is enclosed with magic in every window, door, and room. Whatever you can think of, I can tell you right now, it's going to be bound in magic." I hear him start to crawl toward me and I subconsciously tighten my grip on my daggers.

He stops moving shortly after. "You think I can't fight your family? Your grandmother?"

He's a few steps closer, I mentally note. "You think you can counter a spell? You said you remember your father writhing in pain on the ground, unable to maneuver his body." I recount his words back to him. He stays silent and I continue. "That's probably my grandmother's paralysis spell at play. Just one of her mastered spells, she barely has to speak the entire incantation for it to work at this point. And Gregory, I doubt that you or anyone in your pack is faster than the speed of sound itself. You won't win. That's just my grandmother though. How much do you know about my family, exactly?" I can feel myself starting to drift off to sleep. *Probably the thought of dying finally got to me.*

"I know that you have powers," he says softly.

“Yes, but do you know to what extent?” I wait for him to answer. “Guess not.” I smirk. “Each time a pack member is introduced, there’s a whole induction ceremony where that member is presented to the demon wolf spirits. The spirit that appears is the one who gives powers to the member. We don’t get to choose.” I sigh. Resentment over this whole situation starts to take over me, but I proceed. “Each one of us has different powers. My sister, for example, can heal people with her incantations. My grandmother though, since she’s the chosen one before me, is probably more powerful and can do a multitude of spells aside from paralysis.” I pop my eyes open to see Gregory try and mull over what I’m saying. He’s still bleeding from his forehead and chest, but his injuries aren’t really that serious. “Are you following me so far?” I ask genuinely. He nods. “The chosen one is the person who inherits the crown.” I put air quotes around the last word. “He or she will continue the royal bloodline, and that person is me.”

“But what about that silver dagger? Is that part of your powers?” he asks after a beat of silence. I shrug and feel pain shoot up my right arm.

“I’m not so sure. I was presented with a silver dagger as a child by my father once. He wanted me to recognize the effects of silver on a werewolf so I’ll be able to think of different ways to fight such when the time came.” I can see an image of my father trying very hard to keep himself upright during that day. “But when I grabbed it from him, it just felt like a regular knife to me. I started carrying these daggers the day my dad disappeared. I’ve never told anyone else that I’m immune to silver.” A couple of minutes pass and I grow impatient. “Well? Make up your mind then, Gregory. I don’t have all night to exchange secrets with you,” I remark as I rip off a large piece of my shirt and attempt to wipe off any dirt and sweat.

“So, the only one who can break my father’s curse, is you?” he pops a question, attempting to come closer once more, but I give him a glare.

“Bingo! Guess you’re not a dumbass after all, pretty boy,” I say sarcastically. “I turn eighteen in a couple of days, too. By that time, my grandmother will transfer her powers and the entire knowledge of our pack since the very beginning of our existence to me.” I look him straight in his eyes. “I can break your father’s curse. I’ll do it, I promise. But I’m not going to be your slave, or whatever, in the process. If you don’t agree, well, just kill me. You will never see your father again, though.” I check to see for any more residue of any kind—even blood—and face him, subtly feeling my daggers in my hands again. “Whatever you choose, you lose. Do you understand that?” I feel a slight satisfaction from being able to throw his words back at him. His face is still unreadable, and he doesn’t look like he’s about to budge. *Dammit*. “Just so we’re clear, I’m letting you have the option to kill me now. You won’t get another chance at this.” I feel another surge of adrenaline start to course through my body. I’m well aware that I could be in a disadvantaged position to fight again, but the need to survive kicks all my senses.

“Yeah? And why are you offering your life so easily? We were fighting just a minute ago. You were winning. Why give up when you had the upper hand?” I can almost hear him laugh softly. I look directly at him.

“To atone for the sins of my family.”

Chapter Seven

“You think I’m going to believe the lies of a Demon like you?” He snorts. “Why are you telling me this? Why would you let your own family go extinct like that?”

“Why not? I’m sick and tired of this bullshit. I never asked to be a werewolf, to be half-human, half-monster. I never asked to be royalty, to be treated like a trophy. I never asked for this... curse.” I gesture at my body. “And yet, it seems that whatever I do or how much I try to remove myself from my own family, I’m forced to carry the sins of my ancestors.” I take a pregnant pause. “And I guess that’s not something I can easily run away from.” My voice starts to get raspy and itchy.

“The blood of your pack carried you into existence. You don’t feel a sense of gratitude for that? Just for being alive?” he asks incredulously.

“It’s kind of hard to feel grateful for being alive when I almost met death over here.” I deadpan. He looks at his hands. “Aren’t you tired of this?” Exhaustion laced my voice as I try to sit upright. “Aren’t you tired of the cycle of violence? Of living with revenge or fear in mind? Aren’t you tired of the death that surrounds us?” I make sure to emphasize that last word and gauge his reaction. Gregory remains still. “Because I am. You think I want to be an abomination?” I sense bile rise up in my stomach. “I want to be normal. I want to be human. I’ve tried to break free from this werewolf curse. But I can’t do it. Well, not yet anyway. The moment I gain my powers and the knowledge of the clan, I’ll get to work on cutting my ties with the demon wolves.” Gregory is sitting a few feet away from me, hugging his knees to his chest, mulling over what I just said.

I marvel at the sight of this man acting like a kid who was just told he couldn’t go play with his toy anymore. “I’m aware that I sound ridiculous. After all, who betrays their own kind?” I start. “But it’s not my obligation to convince you of what’s true or not. I gave you your options. It’s up to you where we go from here.” There’s a strong sense of tension in the air after I finish my spiel, and I start to get worried about my chances of survival. “I’ve said all that needs to be said,

Gregory.” I feel for the edges of my silver daggers beside me. Knowing that I might need them again, I make sure to hold them at the handles tightly. “Make your choice.”

Gregory huffs in response and starts to stand up. I quickly do the same. “That was a great speech, princess. Really, I was moved for a minute there.” He claps.

Uh-oh. I guess I’m not getting out of this one.

His advantage may be his large frame, but I’m quicker in step and lithe in evading attacks. Though my body is aching, I force myself to stand tall.

“I was almost tempted to agree with you at one point. But then I realized, you come from a pack whose main purpose is to bring misfortune and fear to others. You,” he points one long finger at me, “came from a family of murderers. Whether or not you have anything to do with your family’s atrocious acts, doesn’t matter. You’re never going to be an innocent victim. Honestly, if I kill you now, I think I’ll be doing the world a favor.”

Well, that kind of stings more than being stabbed or anything alike.

“I’ll grant you your wish to die, just not right now,” he continues.

“After everything I just said, you still think I’m lying?” My breath starts to quicken its pace.

“No. I believe you. I have no reason not to. And if you say you can free my father, even better. If you say you don’t want any part of this, however, then good luck. Because you don’t hold power in this conversation.” He takes off the remains of his torn-up shirt and tosses it to the ground. “You don’t get to give me choices here. You don’t get to negotiate. You’re my captive from now on.” He takes a step closer and I find myself frozen where I stand. “You are my slave.” I involuntarily roll my shoulders and stretch my limbs, ignoring the wounds and tears that course through my skin. “It’s just a matter of catching you, that’s all.” He smiles menacingly. “I don’t want to have you bleed to death here,” he gestures

around us, “in the middle of nowhere. That’s not fitting for a princess like you, is it? Come, now. Be a good girl and stop fighting.” He extends an arm to me but I don’t move a muscle. His smile drops after a moment and sighs. “Okay then, we’ll do this the hard way.”

He hunches over and his body starts to shake violently. *He’s starting to turn into a wolf. I can’t outrun him anymore. He’s going to be way too strong to defeat even with my daggers.* I panic at the sight in front of me. Just then, I hear rustling in the bushes behind me and a faint smell of musk and sandalwood. *Someone else is here.*

Gregory notices this too and turns to face the noise. “Who’s there?” his deep voice bellows throughout the area.

“It’s me,” says the voice. A woman about my age emerges from the bushes. Her small face is framed with large glasses, and her blonde hair is tied in a neat ponytail.

“Marnie? How did you get here?” Gregory asks. Concern masking his entire features, his voice soft and gentle—a stark contrast to how he was with me earlier: cold and deadly.

The woman named Marnie looks at me first and then looks at Gregory. Gasping at the sight before her, she takes a step forward. It doesn’t take me more than five seconds to decide my next move. Whether or not they’re related to each other is none of my business. But one thing’s for sure and that is very evident in how they’re acting. *He cares about her deeply.*

In a heartbeat, I raise my left hand and grip my silver dagger by the very tip. But Gregory notices my slight movement and runs just in time to see me aim quickly and throw my weapon as fast as I can. “No!” he screams and lunges to protect the girl who is a little confused by the sudden yell.

My risky plan works out perfectly. As soon as my silver dagger hits Gregory in the leg, I grip my last dagger and sprint toward the unsuspecting pair.

Chapter Eight

Don't mess with me, I think to myself angrily. I reach Marnie first and grab her by the shoulders.

“Tell your pack not to follow me home, or else, I swear to heaven and hell Gregory,” I press the blade of my dagger at Marnie’s neck, “I will take her life.” I draw a bit of blood from her neck and she starts clawing and screaming. “Try to move and I’ll make sure this dagger goes in deeper,” I warn and she whimpers.

“Stop,” Gregory pants out, “she’s not part of this.” He reaches for Marnie, but I pull her back. “She’s... not like us, she’s human. Don’t hurt her.”

“Oh? And what was that you said earlier? About not having a choice in the matter, innocent or not?” I cry out. “Answer me!” Gregory is struggling to keep his shivering body under control. I don’t even make an attempt to hide my smile. “How dare you! She’s just as much a part of this mess as we are.” I pull Marnie’s hair back to expose her neck. “Isn’t that right, Gregory?” I drag the dagger across lightly and she starts to choke out sobs and cries for help. “Shut up!” I yell and she starts crying harder.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes. His eyes start to roll to the back of his head. I see light foam start to come out of his mouth.

So, this is what silver does to a werewolf? It’s... torture. My eyes widen at the thought.

“I’m sorry. Please, give her back to me,” he says softly.

“Oh, now I’m really having fun. Where’s your bravado now, pretty boy? All gone at the sight of your little girlfriend in danger?” I giggle.

“She’s... Marnie’s my sister.” Gregory gurgles before fully foaming at the mouth. He’s on all fours now and struggles to breathe, chest heaving and clawing at the ground.

“I don’t give a fuck. I have half a mind to let the both of you drown in your own blood before I go!” I laugh maniacally, ignoring my own pain and exhaustion.

“Please, let me go,” Marnie pleads.

I try to calm myself down but anger doesn’t dissipate at once. “Make sure to die a slow and painful death,” I declare before stabbing Marnie in the waist slowly, relishing her surprised expression and agonized yell. Gregory tries to stop me but I drive my dagger right above her hip bone before pulling it out and kicking her down to fall beside him. Marnie desperately tries to stop herself from bleeding. “Try to calm yourself, it’ll slow down the bleeding.” I chuckle. Gregory tries to lift his head but he’s too weak to try anything.

“Don’t worry pretty boy, the stab isn’t that deep. I just want to make sure you learn your lesson.” I tilt his head up so he can look at me. “Remember this night. How I defeated you and your pack of pups, without using dark magic.” He stares daggers into my eyes and I smirk back. “You should’ve taken one of my offers. Dumbass,” I say and escape into the night, leaving them both bleeding and in pain.

I run as fast as I can through the forest. Dodging everything in front of me, I periodically look back to check if I’m being followed. My keen sense of smell carries me through the darkness, and before I know it, I arrive at the small clearing where I parked earlier. I check the backseat first for any unwanted guests and slip into the driver’s side.

“Holy hell, what time is it?” I say out loud while fishing for my phone in my backpack. I dial the one number I know by heart. My sister answers after the first ring. “Hey, Katya?” I pant. “I need your help. I got hurt,” I state.

I back out of the clearing. There’s a considerable pause on the other line and I hear shuffling in the background. “Quit being dramatic, it’s not funny. Where are you? You missed the

family meeting! Grandmother's going to kill you," she whispers.

"I'm not kidding. I've been attacked, I need your help. I'm driving now but I'll meet you at our secret place. Please, don't tell a soul." I drop the call just as Katya unleashes a barrage of questions. I drive as fast as I can. The heaviness in my body is a little distracting, but I power through the pain. A couple of minutes pass and I'm finally back on the main road.

My phone starts buzzing in the compartment beside me and I pick it up. "Isabela, I'm here. Where are you?" Katya says worriedly.

"I'm pulling up right now. See you," I remark and hurry to turn my engine off. The Esperanza estate sprawls across several hectares of land in this small town. There are multiple guards in strategic areas, as well as numerous traps in each gated lot. But Katya and I have lived here our whole lives, we have our own hideouts. Our own secrets. "Katya!" I whisper-yell, waving my good arm at her. She stands underneath the large oak tree where we set up our treehouse when we were kids.

"What the hell happened to you? You look half-dead!" she asks while jogging to come meet me halfway.

"I got kidnapped... for a bit." She immediately scans my body for all my injuries.

"My God, Isabela. Who did this to you?" She touches my face gently as if I'd break at the slightest movement.

I shake my head. "I've been badly beaten as you can see. Can you help me? I don't want to get into even more trouble." She nods and leads me to lie down.

"This may hurt for a bit," she warns and starts speaking in an ancient language that I barely understand. Her eyes start glowing red and I feel searing burns in each body part she touches. I bite back the urge to scream. Since werewolf blood is different than that of a human being, hospitals may not be able to help us in life-or-death situations. If someone gets hurt, it may be the end for him or her. Which is why a designated

healer is important in each pack, and for us, that person is Katya. No matter the circumstance, or how deep my cuts were as a kid, she was always the one who took care of me. When she got her powers during the induction ceremony, no one was surprised when she was given the ability to heal. “How do you feel?” she asks as she helps me sit up. I roll my shoulders and stretch my limbs.

“Some muscle stiffness, but nothing I can’t handle,” I reply with a kiss on her cheek. “Thanks, sis.” I get rid of my soiled clothes and change back into my work uniform, making sure to leave my backpack in my car. “I’ll ask Eliza to come get that in the morning,” I tell Katya. She looks at me with sadness in her eyes instead.

“Isabela, who did this to you?” she queries again on our way back to the main entrance.

I mull over telling her the truth, but I know if I do, she’s just going to tell our grandmother. “I didn’t get a name, sorry. But don’t worry about me. Just don’t tell anyone, okay?” I say as I push open the heavy wooden door to our living room. The main house is quiet, though it is a little early in the evening.

“Where have you been, Isabela?” a voice breaks through the stillness of the room. A shiver runs down my spine out of pure fear.

“With my friends. I lost track of time. My apologies, Queen Mother.” Katya and I keep our heads down, as is our custom. A cold finger taps me on the chin and I look up to see the vicious stare of my grandmother eyeing me up and down.

“I will ask one last time, Isabela.” She grips my face hard. I try not to wince.

“I’m telling the truth, Queen Mother.” I attempt to steady my breathing and avoid her gaze. “I was with my friends.”

She sighs and pats my head. “Okay, if you say so.” I look up in confusion.

And a heavy hand comes down and slaps me across the face.

Chapter Nine

It's been a while since I felt that, I think to myself while cradling my face.

“Is this what passes for respect these days? Your half-hearted lies and weak attempts at deceit are almost as insulting as your whole mediocre existence.” At this point, a number of guards have burst into the living room to check in on the commotion. “May I remind you of your status in this world?” my grandmother walks to Katya’s side and gestures for her to go back to her room. “You are the chosen one. The one who will lead this pack in the future. The one who will continue the royal bloodline. The only person destined to inherit the great power of the ancient demon wolves. That,” she pushes a perfectly manicured finger at my forehead, “is who you are. And that is who you will be. That is who we all expect you to be.” She signals the guards to come closer.

“Look for her car. It’s bound to be somewhere in the estate. If she won’t tell us the truth, then I will force it out of her,” she commands. Five guards bow their heads and leave the room. “Who were you with, Isabela? My patience is running thin,” she speaks with such a low voice that the last part somehow comes out as a growl.

“I was with—” She slaps me again and I can taste blood in my mouth.

“Wrong answer. Try again.”

“Why won’t you believe me?” I scream, eyes starting to get watery. The traumatic events I encountered start to catch up with me.

“Why would I when you have the scent of an Alpha all over you?” she asks point-blank and stares at me with her steely gaze.

“What?” I ask. *Gregory’s an Alpha?*

“You don’t know what an Alpha smells like?” She exhales sharply. “You never listen during your studies, don’t you?” She shakes her head at me. “An Alpha has a very distinct smell. It’s a sweet, irresistible scent. Capable of alluring even the most cold-hearted Luna.” She trails off for a bit, smiling to herself. “Think carefully, child. And tell me, who you were with.” She grabs me by the shoulders. “Were you... marked?”

She pulls my shirt to one side and then the other. “No! I —” I inhale and close my eyes. “I was attacked in the woods by the café. And when I got to my car, someone was inside, and he kidnapped me. He took me to a secluded area and he tried to kill me,” I blurt out the events of the day, hopeful for some sense of security in my own grandmother.

“And you just let him take you?” I deflate at her words.

She never gave me a comforting hand or reassuring words my whole life. I don’t know why I expected things to be different this time. My grandmother drops her bony hands from my shoulders and paces the living room. “I did my best to protect myself. I managed to gain the upper hand and got away from... the Alpha.” I almost let Gregory’s name slip my mouth.

“Do you have an idea who this man is? Where he’s from? Which family is he a part of?” she questions.

“No. He didn’t say a thing about any of that.” Another lie. “He tried to take me and make me his slave. He said something about his father being taken from him, though. I don’t know what that means or who he’s referring to, Queen

Mother. You have to believe me.” Something in me tries to suppress any chance to give out specific details about Gregory.

My grandmother whips her head so fast at my words that I feared she might get whiplash. “His father? Did he say a name? A place?” I shake my head and shift my gaze at the floor. I can feel her stare at the back of my head and I involuntarily shiver.

“If you did not manage to escape, you would have died.” She steps closer to me. “And the future of the Esperanza family would have ceased with you.” I feel her start to brush my hair at the back. My body bristles at her every touch. “We’ll need to be careful from now on. Do you understand, Isabela?” she whispers but the message is loud and clear: *Don’t fuck up again.* I nod slowly. “Go rest. Leave things to me. I’ll get to the bottom of this.” She pushes me lightly toward the staircase. I keep walking until I get to my room and lock the door behind me. As soon as I do, I lie face down on the bed and let the hot tears stain my cheeks.

I didn’t realize I fell asleep until my phone started buzzing in my back pocket. “Ugh, who is it now?” I look at my notifications and see a photo attachment from Rie. I open it and roll my eyes. It is a picture of her and Nina with Gregory. “She really pushed her luck this time, huh?” I don’t bother replying and turn off my phone. I close my eyes again but I find my head racing with thoughts of what Gregory said earlier. “I wasn’t aware that there were riots ten years ago? I would’ve remembered that if it was taught by the tutor,” I muse out loud. An idea forms in my head and I sit upright. My clock reads two forty-seven a.m. *Everyone should be asleep by now.*

I carefully open my door and head quickly to the east wing of the main house. The hallway is dark, but my eyes can see each speck of dust clear as day. As a werewolf, all my senses are so sharp that I often get sensory overloads daily. Still, being able to creep in the dark is pretty neat so it’s not something I really complain about.

The intricately carved wooden door greets me in the dark. I listen closely for any sign of life behind the door. I

touch the doorknob and twist it lightly, afraid of any dark magic that may hurt me. Surprisingly, it opens with ease. *Maybe because no one will even dare go to this side of the estate.*

I step inside my grandmother's library. It's smaller than I remember, but heaps of books fill each wall and table. Some are even neatly stacked on the floor. "Where do I even start?" I spin around and choose a random wall. The titles are arranged from fiction to nonfiction, in alphabetical order. After a few minutes, my eyes settle on an untitled book by the edge of the center table.

The book is larger than most in my grandmother's collection, and I wonder if it's a personal diary. Its cover is bound in maroon-dyed leather, with one side already faded in color. I pick it up and sheets of folded paper tumble onto the floor. I bend down to collect them but as soon as I do, I hear footsteps come closer into the room.

I scan the entire library for a viable place to hide, but any space I can crawl into is either too cramped to fit my body or too tight. I can't come close to any of the books either for fear of accidentally knocking some of them down. Panic surges through my body.

Just then, I hear the doorknob jiggle open.

Chapter Ten

This is not how I envisioned my Thursday morning to start. I frantically try to grab the contents of the book in my hands and shove them under my shirt.

"Mistress Isabela? Are you in here?" someone whispers.

"Eliza!" I jump in surprise at the soft voice of my personal assistant. She half-screams and puts a hand to her

mouth.

“Don’t scare me like that!” Eliza berates me but she giggles after a while. “Mistress, pardon my intrusion. But you shouldn’t be in here.” She gestures for me to follow her out into the hallway but I stand my ground.

“Give me a few minutes. I just need to check something,” I say, and pull her inside the library with me. “How’d you find me, anyway?”

“I saw you walk down this hallway. I thought you were a ghost at first, but then I figured those aren’t real.”

“And werewolves are supposed to be fictional too, yet here we are.” I chuckle.

“Yeah, even the idea of half-werewolves isn’t supposed to be real. But here I am.”

She smiles to herself. “What are you looking for anyway? Shouldn’t you be resting? I heard what happened. Are you okay?” I nod and ignore her other questions. I look at Eliza’s face in the darkness.

“I’m fine, there’s no need to worry. Katya healed me.” I hand her a couple of papers. “Here, look through these first and tell me if you see any mention of riots from ten years ago.”

“Mistress Katya was with you?” she inquires and sifts through the documents. “You know, you can’t rely on her to fix your injuries each and every time. You need to be careful.”

“Eliza, we’ve been friends since we were kids. You know I AM careful. It’s not my fault trouble seems to come find me wherever I go.” She sighs.

“People call you ‘troublemaker’ behind your back.”

“Even you?” I pout at Eliza. She nods and I push her shoulder lightly.

“Which is why I think you should travel with bodyguards from now on. It’s not safe anymore.” She trails off and reads through newspaper clippings she took from a drawer.

“No. It’s bad enough to be cursed with wolf blood. I don’t want any more unnecessary attention.”

She puts a hand on my arm. “I don’t think you have a choice, Mistress. Your grandmother spoke to the head of the Elites earlier. She’s putting together your own set of guards starting tomorrow.” She cringes at my gaze.

“She... *what?*” I hiss.

“Calm down, Mistress. Handle one problem at a time.” She shoves some clippings into my hands. “Focus on this one first.” I look through the articles in the dark, some of the headlines have been cut off, but I can make out a few lines. I take pictures of the piles and move on to the next one. “Mistress Isabela,” Eliza queries, “are we looking for the great uprisings?”

“I—what do you know about this?”

“Well, it started when the Esperanza family, rather your grandmother, ordered an attack on the Richardson pack.”

Richardson? My mind backtracks to the white calling card I found in Gregory’s wallet. “Why this specific pack?” I ask bluntly.

“I’m not sure why. But the moment your family launched their hostile takeovers, the allies of your family took this as a sign to freely attack other packs related to the Richardson clan, which set off a chain reaction of violence among our community. Most of the deaths were kept in secret, but the few that the media got hold of were reported as the works of a serial killer instead,” Eliza explains.

I spot a folder taped to the underside of the table. *Weird.* I reach for it.

“Don’t you remember, Mistress? You were caught in a crossfire at some point.”

I stare at the parchments and letters in my hands. They’re correspondents between my grandmother and someone named Simone L. “I was? If something like that happened, I don’t think I’ll forget it.” I trail off. “And why do you know so much about this, Eliza?” I ask off-handedly as I

look through each paper. I can make out a couple of words but some of them are smudged.

Stage a coup. They need to be stopped. And then it just cuts off. I think this is it.

“Because I was taken from my family during the great uprisings.” The silence that follows her confession makes me uncomfortable.

I look at Eliza, and her expression is unreadable. I recount the very first time I saw her. I was eight when my grandmother brought a young girl, about my age, into my room. Grubby and red all over, she wouldn't even look at me at first. “I didn't know. Eliza, I'm so sorry.” She turns and smiles at me.

“No, Mistress. How could you have? You were a child. We both were. Though it's still painful to think about what happened to my family, I'm quite grateful that you've shown me nothing but kindness. I'm thankful for your friendship.” Eliza puts a hand on top of mine, her own way of reassuring me. I smile at her but inside I feel the familiar sense of burning rage starting to grow.

Gregory was right. We're nothing but murderers, I think bitterly. “All this time, I thought it was normal for our kind to keep fighting. To keep taking from the weak. I thought it had to be done, and that others needed a ruler. A queen. I can't imagine the pain you and other people must've gone through in order to survive. It must've been hell,” I tell her. “I appreciate you, Eliza. But I can't live like this anymore.” I proceed to confess everything to Eliza, from Gregory's attempted kidnapping to the story about his mother and father. When I was done, I couldn't help but let out a few tears of frustration. “I want to make this right,” I say after a while.

“How will you do that? Where will you even begin?” I shake my head.

“I'm going to help him. I'll find Gregory's father within this estate and help him escape. It's not much, but it's a start. Maybe, other packs will hear about this and,” I inhale sharply, “and maybe, we wouldn't be feared or hated as much.” I hear

hushed voices coming this way and I quickly gather all the letters and parcels in my hands when a photo lands on my lap. A picture of a young boy, smiling sweetly at the camera. Both hands holding tightly to the arms of a woman beside him. A beautiful woman, tan-skinned and blue-eyed. They both look similar. I tuck the picture in between the sheets of paper and hand them over to Eliza. "We need to go." I push random documents inside the folder and place such under the table again.

"Mistress Isabela, I'll go first and distract them," she states and quietly slips outside. As soon as I hear Eliza speaking, I reach for the door handle. Just then, a shine catches my eye. I turn and see a book nestled in between fictional titles. The old cover seems to shimmer in the dark.

The voices creep closer and I take the book on impulse and escape into the hallway.

Chapter Eleven

“I’ll protect you, don’t worry,” I say to a chubby-faced boy as we huddle together behind thick shrubbery and large slabs of stone. “Shh, stop. They’ll hear us,” I mutter and attempt to soothe the boy but he keeps blabbering something I can’t quite make out.

He’s staring at something far away but I can’t turn my eyes away from the crying child. *I wonder what’s wrong?*

“Can you look at me instead?” I ask and attempt to turn his head my way but he pushes my hands off of him.

“She’s going to die,” he whispers back.

“Who is?” I query and he points at someone from beyond our hiding place.

“Help her, someone please,” he pleads to no one in particular. I look to where he’s pointing and see a woman on her knees, trying to strangle a man bigger than her. He’s clawing at the ground beside him, feeling for anything he can use against her. His hand creeps closer to a shard of broken glass and he grins. He mutters something to her and she screams. At this moment, his right hand comes flying to her throat. The shard of glass slots itself in between her neck and collarbone, and he drags it all the way across. Blood comes rushing out of the wound and the woman falls on top of him, lifeless. “No!” the boy beside me screams and my hand comes flying to his mouth.

“What did you do?” I berate him. I look back and see several pairs of eyes zero in on our spot. “We need to go, come on. We need to leave!” I urge him to move but he remains frozen, crying out for the dead woman in front of us.

“Mom, no...” He trails off. A tall, slender man moves in time to stop a rather large werewolf from pawing at the thicket of bushes in front of us. He grapples with it for a bit, before reaching behind him and pointing a gun directly at the creature’s temple. He shoots it point-blank and moves to

crouch protectively at us. “Dad! Run! Run away!” the boy beside me squeaks.

“Please, let’s go.” I take him by the hand and pull him out of our hiding spot. I tug the boy outside with me and we start running just as a flurry of gunshots starts echoing through the forest.

“No! Dad! No!” The boy tries to pull his arm away from my hold but I grab on.

“It’s not safe!” I yell.

“No!” he screams again. I look behind to see the man from before, convulsing on the ground. Gun still in hand, but he’s unable to grip it right this time. Time seems to stop as the man starts levitating a couple of feet from the ground. He stills for a while, and I think he might have died right then and there.

I pull the boy and run as fast as I can, not looking back and not slowing down. As soon as I spot the main road outside of the forest, I quicken my pace with the boy still in tow. A gust of wind blows us back a couple of feet away from the road, and the next thing I know, searing pain travels from my left leg all the way up my body and I yell.

“Ah!” I wake up with a start. Sweating profusely, I try to get a good grasp of my surroundings. Plush pillows scatter all over the floor, and the familiar feel of my mattress is soft against my skin. Various papers disperse all over the bed, and I suddenly remember what I’ve been doing before I fell asleep. “He’s not coming back.” I sigh. “It was just another dream. You’re fine, Isabela,” I say out loud. My hand fumbles for my phone in bed, but it catches something else. I bring it closer to my bedside lamp. The picture from the library had been slightly crumpled but I attempt to smooth it over. “I need to bring this back to the library, but—” I freeze.

It’s the boy! I gasp as I realize who this is. *It wasn’t a dream; it was a memory. I know who he is.* “Gregory! I can’t believe this! I knew he looked familiar.” Head swimming in confusion and disbelief, I stare hard at the photograph. The same hazel eyes stare back at me.

A knock on my door breaks me out of my trance. I quickly gather the litter all over my bed and stuff them into my drawer. Eliza steps into my room after a few more knocks. “Mistress Isabela, time for breakfast. Will you be joining your family?”

I shake my head. “I’m heading out to the café. Prepare my car.”

“Mistress, your guards need to meet you today,” she utters softly.

“No, just tell them I left early for my shift today. I’ll worry about grandmother’s guards later.”

“But—” she starts, though I stop her with a wave of my hand.

“I need to go, please.” I hop into the shower as Eliza proceeds to pick up my pillows from the floor. After showering, I hurry to get dressed. Taking the keys from my desk, I spend a few more minutes getting ready before heading out the door. “But why can’t I remember anything from the uprisings if that was a memory?” I say while driving, trying to rationalize the connection between my dream and my childhood friend from before.

That can’t be Gregory, right? But his story checks out. His mom dying, and his dad being taken away... Was I with him that time?

Questions still swarm my thoughts as I enter the café, distracting me from recognizing the person following me inside.

Chapter Twelve

“I think destiny wants us to be together, princess,” the familiar voice says behind me. I spin around and attempt to punch Gregory in the face.

What a haughty jackass.

He catches my hand easily. “I missed you, Isabela.” He smirks at me, half of his face concealed by a baseball cap. Probably to hide the gash on his forehead from last night.

His scent overtakes my senses almost immediately. “What the hell are you doing here?” I hiss.

“Surprised I’m alive after hitting me with your dagger?”

“Not really. After all, only the good die young.” He drops his smile and I retract my hand right away.

“Isabela! You’re early.” Rie back hugs me out of nowhere. “What’s he doing here? The café isn’t open until ten a.m.” I shrug her off and head behind the counter.

“Relax, he’s actually here for you,” Nina replies, putting cakes on the display trays.

“I’d rather not talk to him.” I slam my hands on top of the tabletop. “Leave.” I stare at the man before me.

“God, why are you so hostile this morning?” Nina puts a hand on my shoulder. “He’s also a paying customer. You can’t force him to leave, we’ll get in trouble,” she continues.

As if on cue, Gregory’s signature smirk is back. *I really want to punch him again.*

“Please, just hear me out,” he speaks almost sincerely. I eye him up and down, his demeanor seems a little unguarded. But I know better now than to trust someone so easily.

“I’m not comfortable being alone with you.”

“Why not?” Rie chimes in. “Don’t you trust yourself enough around him?” She nudges me. I feel my cheeks heat up at her comment but I shake my head.

“No, I just don’t trust him,” I say, putting on a black mask.

“I’ll wait here until you talk to me. I’ll do this all day if I have to,” he states plainly and leaves to sit in one corner of the café.

“She really woke up today and chose violence,” Rie whispers to Nina.

“Stop that,” I mutter and put my things away in the small closet space beside the kitchen. “Where’s breakfast? I’m starving,” I demand while pouring beans into the coffee grinder.

“Isabela, at least go listen to what he has to say. I found him waiting around in front of the café. He said he was here since six a.m.” Nina breathes into my ear, ignoring my attempts to change the subject. “I asked him why, and he said he needed to talk to you. He says it’s a family matter.” She sneaks a look at Gregory, who’s keeping his eyes trained on a book he’s now reading.

Family matter, my ass. I bite back a snarky reply as I remember my dream from last night. It's all so overwhelming, from his assassinating me, to relieving painful memories from the past. I'm not quite sure who to trust or believe.

"Fine," I say curtly. "I'll go talk to him." I walk toward Gregory's table and sit across from him. He lifts his head and puts down his book. "Hello," I greet. He smiles at me. "Let's both agree that this café is neutral ground first." I eye my friends giggling behind the counter.

"What? Afraid I'll stab them like what you did to my sister?" He deadpans.

"Yes. After all, isn't this the life that we live? An eye for an eye? And we let the cycle of violence continue?" I note plainly. He snorts back a chuckle. "Is she okay?" I ask out of curiosity.

"Yeah, she's okay. She forgives you, by the way."

I sigh. "I didn't ask."

"Doesn't matter because that's just the kind of person she is." He smiles at me.

"Did you travel all the way here just to tell me your sister is a better person than me? Because if that's the case, I forgive you too for attempting to kidnap me, for hurting me, and for trying to kill me." I sneer.

He laughs heartily at that. I get a whiff of his sweet scent and I remember my grandmother's words about the distinct scent of an Alpha. "No," he starts, "I didn't come here to argue. I wanted to see how you were doing, actually." His hazel eyes travel up and down my torso.

"You mean, you needed to see if I was still alive?" I ask coyly. He ignores that question.

"I really did want to ask you something, though," he announces and I inhale sharply.

"What is it?"

"The thing you said last night, about you wanting to atone for your sins—I mean your family's sins," he corrects

himself quickly, “did you mean it?” I pause for a bit, remembering what I said to Eliza last night, how I’m committing myself to making things right this time.

I guess it’s safe to say that befriending Gregory is the next best move.

But before I can tell him my answer, Gregory stands and suddenly pulls at my hand, ushering me behind the counter. It is then that I get a whiff of another person walking into the store, someone who smells like sandalwood and musk, someone like us. Gregory looks at me and mouths the word “hide.” I scan my surroundings for any place we can use.

“Here,” I whisper and pull him inside the small closet space. We cramp our bodies inside where there’s barely enough room for Gregory’s height so he lowers his head a lot closer to mine. Aside from this room being a storage facility for employees’ things during their shift, this is also the place where we use to store cleaning supplies and other materials. I pull my mask down. “Hopefully the smell of bleach and soap can mask both our scents,” I tell him.

Gregory attempts to get comfortable, knocking a large container of bleach out of balance. In a panic, I kick it back but lose my footing and almost flip. Gregory catches me by the thigh, slotting himself in between my legs in the process. “He’s close,” he whispers above me. I listen closely for any movement outside and hear heavy footsteps walking inside the café.

Rie and Nina must be by the furnaces behind the kitchen, I think to myself.

I feel my breathing start to get heavy, both from the anxiety of getting caught and from the very compromising position I’m forced in. Gregory stares at me, his hazel eyes dark and brooding. He leans an arm at the wall behind me to gain some sort of balance, and I lock my other leg behind his for support. His scent is sending my mind into a frenzy and I fight the urge to inhale deeply.

“Isabela,” he breathes out, almost needy.

“What?” I tilt my head, looking at him directly.

“Last night, did you mean what you offered?” I nod.

“Yes. I was serious.” I lean in closer, giving in to temptation. “I still am, Gregory.” I let my lips almost touch his.

Chapter Thirteen

“What are you both doing?” Nina gasps.

“Oh my God,” Rie chimes in behind her. “This is what you had in mind when you said you wanted to talk to my friend?” She giggles, pulling me out of the closet; multiple bottles of dishwashing liquid tumble to the floor.

“No! It’s not like that, I—uh,” I stammer and look at Gregory for support. “We got stuck,” I offer weakly. Gregory fights back a laugh.

“Sorry about that,” he responds after a moment. “I just can’t seem to keep my hands off my girlfriend.”

What?

“What?!” Nina and Rie repeat the question I have in mind.

“Come on, babe. You can tell your friends,” he urges, winking at me. I look back at my friends’ inquisitive stares.

It's not like I can tell them the truth. And there's no other logical explanation for why we were in the closet. Good job, Isabela. You've successfully dug yourself into a deeper hole. I internally cringe and prepare myself for what I have to say next.

"He's not my boyfriend. I—" I force myself not to give out other details. *There's no going back after this.* "I mean, we're... not exclusive. He's just someone my family wants me to, uh, check out." I lower my head almost automatically, not wanting to give Gregory the satisfaction of seeing my embarrassed face.

"Check out?" Gregory intervenes. "Is that all I am to you? A toy you want to play with?" He fakes a shocked expression, playing along with our ruse.

I will end you. I glare back. He smiles at me and reaches forward to pull my black mask up my face.

"Is that why you were acting so weird yesterday? You didn't want us to meet him?" Nina puts a hand over her mouth. "And, oh my God, you left your wallet intentionally, didn't you?" she half-yells. "You wanted her to come out so you can have a little bit of fun after her shift." She giggles.

Rie gasps, too. "It all makes sense! No wonder you didn't want to leave the parking lot! Now, you waited outside for two hours for some heavy petting?" Rie grins. "That's some dedication, Gregory." She slaps him on the back and I shake my head.

For fuck's sake. "Again, nothing happened," I emphasize, smoothing out my clothes.

"Sure, whatever you say. But quickies are against store policy so you're going to have to wait until after her shift," Nina says and I attempt to slap a hand over her mouth but she's already hiding behind the kitchen door, towing Rie with her.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to control my temper.

“Is it just me,” Gregory puts a hand on the small of my back and starts rubbing circles, “or did you actually try and kiss me back there?”

I look up at his face full of mirth. “Leave. Now.” I slap his hand away from me.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ll go. But you...” He trails off, eyes scanning around for anyone who might be lurking around. “You said you’re serious about helping me find my father.” He pauses and scans my face.

I nod. “I am. I want to make things right this time. I may not remember anything that happened during those riots, but that doesn’t matter anymore. Like what you said, I’m just a part of this as anyone else in my clan. But it’s up to me how I continue my life, and I refuse to put that in someone else’s hand. If I let myself be used, if we keep hurting each other, no one wins in the end.” I step closer to him. “I’m not saying I’m a saint, Gregory. And I sure as hell am not saying that this is magically going to make things better for everyone. But it’s a start, right?” I tell him. “I’m willing to bet you’re tired, too, from carrying the anger of your ancestors. I feel the same. It’s not doing anyone good.” I look deeply into his eyes.

“I’m willing to put aside our differences, and take up your offer,” he agrees, pondering my words. “Help me find my father, release him from the curse. I’ll do as you say. I promise, no one will die.” Gregory stares at me imploringly. “Will you help me then?”

“I will,” I reply without hesitation.

“Okay, well. What do we do now?” he asks.

“I need to find your father first. I’m certain he’s at the estate somewhere. But it might take some time to do so. And after your little stunt yesterday, I’m going to be heavily guarded from now on.” I sigh.

“Right.” He puts his hands in his pockets and fishes his phone out. “Here,” he says, handing the device to me. “Put your number in, and give me your phone.” I do as he says. After exchanging numbers, he peeks out of the café cautiously.

“You need to stay hidden until I leave. The guy who entered earlier is my lead warrior. He’s probably still looking for me outside so I need to go.” He smiles apologetically. “Sorry about the, uh, whole closet situation again.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Please don’t ever mention that again.” He rolls his eyes at me.

“Don’t get so snarky with me, after all, we’ll be seeing each other a lot from now on,” he teases with a wink. He taps the side of the kitchen door and out pops my two best friends. “I’ll go now, but it was nice to meet the both of you!” he says cheerily, pulling them both for a hug.

He’s masking my scent with theirs. That’s actually kind of smart. I smile at the scene.

He bids me one last goodbye and I wave back. I crouch down to pick up the fallen dishwashing liquids from earlier and fix the arrangement of the bleach bottles on the shelf. After a few minutes, my phone buzzes in my pocket. *You can come out now*, it reads and I hurry out and start my shift.

A couple of hours after I end my shift, I arrive back at the estate. This time actually parking my car in my designated spot beside my sisters’ sports cars. I hum merrily as I push open the heavy wooden door, only to be greeted by a gun pointed directly at my face.

Chapter Fourteen

“It’s me! It’s Isabela,” I speak, putting my hands up immediately. “It’s just me,” I voice out, extending a finger to push down the barrel of the gun lightly.

“Apologies, Mistress. We thought everyone was here already,” the guard utters with a bow.

“It’s fine, I— ”

“No one really expects you to be here, Isabela,” my grandmother cuts me off. “It’s a surprise that you’re actually here for the family meeting... and you’re on time.” Her icy gaze holds mine steadily, and I feel my hands start to sweat. “Which is the bare minimum anyone expects of you, by the way.” She walks away, indifferent to what I wanted to say and instead leads her guards, sentinels, and some hunters to the drawing room. I follow suit.

“I mean, you kind of had that one coming, girl. But I’m glad you’re here.” Katarina takes my hand and pulls me beside her.

“How can you stand attending these meetings almost every day?” My face scrunches in disgust at the thought of having to see the same old faces, hearing the same updates each and every time. I sit at the back of the room and Katarina situates herself beside me.

“It’s not like we have a choice. Being royalty means rising up to meet the expectations of the people around you.” She lovingly runs a hand through my hair. “And there’s even more pressure when you,” she touches the tip of my nose with her finger and pinches my cheek, “inherit the crown.”

“Which is why you have to take things seriously from now on, Isabela.” Katya sits to my left, joining in on our hushed conversations. “You’re almost eighteen, and with that, you’re going to have to start taking over some of Queen Mother’s responsibilities. Maybe start with going to the family meetings more often?” she suggests, taking my hand in hers.

My older sisters were the ones who took care of me when our mother passed away suddenly. Katarina is considered the golden child. The protective firstborn and the

smartest out of the three of us. She aced every etiquette and skill test when we were kids, and now she took over as guardian of the pack, making sure that the elderly and the young were and are taken care of every day.

Katya, on the other hand, is the princess everyone adores. Known for her valor and kind heart, she took over as the Healer of the pack, and she teaches potions and healing techniques to other pack members. They're both revered and loved, and they embody the picture-perfect royal image everyone expects of them.

Meanwhile, no one's really paid any attention to me. I've been treated as an outcast from the moment I was born. My dark hair and green eyes stand out amongst my blonde-haired and blue-eyed sisters and grandmother. As a child, I've been told I was too strong-willed, too stubborn, too tough.

If the birthmark of the chosen one didn't appear at the center of my back, I bet no one would care if I go rogue. But I have to try to fit in from now on. *I need to get other people to trust me.* "Yeah, I'm trying to do that now. You don't think it's too late, right?" I ask Katya after a moment of silence. The room is starting to get filled now with people I've never seen before.

"No, I think it's great that you're here too," she reassures.

"Who are these people anyway?" I point in the direction of a flock of women wearing camo pants and black shirts, sitting near the front of the room.

"They're warriors."

"They're women, though." I scan the room for males in the same getup but don't see any.

"We have more women warriors than we do men, which is how it's always been," Katarina replies.

My grandmother takes her place at the center of the room, flanked by her Beta and Delta on either side of her. Toward the opposite end of the room, a group of men and women huddle together. They all look a bit rugged and

sluggish in appearance, and out of place inside my grandmother's lavish drawing room.

"Who are they?" I whisper.

"They're the new Omegas. They couldn't keep up with any of the skill set training and cannot fight properly. There's more of them in the estate, doing odd jobs and errands here and there. There's little room for them in the estate now though. I feel that grandmother's going to have to... kick them out. Wait, have you never seen one before?" Katarina eyes them too.

I shake my head. "It's 'cause you're either holed up in your room or too busy sneaking out to see your human friends to meet people living in the estate," Katya intervenes.

Right. I guess I've been a little out of touch with my family. I sigh.

"Silence!" my grandmother's voice rings through the entire room. "We will start the meeting now. If you have an issue you'd like to address before the family, you may do so now. Anyone?" She sits straight on her throne, looking at each and every one of us. A man in his early forties raises his hand. "Yes, what is it?" My grandmother encourages the man to stand.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I'd like to raise a matter of grave importance regarding the inheritor of the crown, Her Highness Isabela." I whip my head up immediately at the sound of my name.

What did I do now? My grandmother sets her steely gaze at me and nods. A sign for me to stand up, too.

And so, I stand head held high, just like my father taught me. "What about my granddaughter?" My grandmother stares at me, though she's addressing the man who raised the question.

"Her eighteenth birthday is in a few days, my Queen. Which means at her induction ceremony she will be given new responsibilities. We feel that she may... not be ready, my

Queen.” He sneaks a look at me and I start to feel my heart beat faster.

Where is this going?

“We,” he continues, gesturing at the different pack divisions gathered in the room, “don’t feel comfortable welcoming her into any of our respective ranks. She’s never given us a reason to trust her, or shown any initiative to learn about our way of doing things. She’s too unpredictable to trust, Your Highness.” A murmur breaks out in the crowd. Side glances and a couple of sneers are thrown my way but I keep my eyes ahead.

“Hmm, I see what you mean.” My grandmother smirks. “What do you suggest, sir?” She eyes him up and down.

“We elect a new leader,” he requests simply, and the whole room breaks into chaos and disorder. Katya holds my hand reassuringly, though I can sense panic in her too. Katarina’s face is unreadable; she remains silently looking at the people conversing loudly.

“Break tradition? Is that what you’re saying?” a sentinel yells.

“I will not stand for this nonsense! Isabela is the inheritor of the crown, she’s the one tasked to continue the royal bloodline. Her birthright is to be the chosen one.” My grandmother’s voice overtakes the entire crowd and her people fall silent.

“My Queen, I apologize for the hasty statement, but I merely meant that we separate the person leading the pack and the one who continues the bloodline. We need to ensure the survival of the pack, instead of relying on traditions. Especially if we cannot even trust our future leader,” he states, his back turned to me.

My grandmother is glaring daggers at me as if to say “Look at what your irresponsibility has done.” She sighs. “Do you have anything to say, Isabela?” As soon as she utters her question, the entire room turn their heads toward me.

“My birthright is mine to carry from the moment I was born until the day I die,” I declare to the room. “I will never give up my crown.”

Chapter Fifteen

History repeats itself, I think to myself as the crowd breaks out in hushed voices and angry stares.

I remember my father speaking out impulsively against my grandmother during one of these family meetings. My sisters and I were still kids then, but we were permitted to participate in these meetings and meet with other pack members.

I can still see how he was dragged out of the room, how I followed him out into the courtyard, where he was whipped for his insolence. How my cries were unanswered, how my sisters begged our grandmother, how our own mother sneered at the image of my father in pain and afraid.

I remember now why I stopped attending these meetings in the first place. “Your Highness, I don’t mean to be rude but —”

“But you were. How dare you question my place in the pack? My crown? My duty?” I feel my voice rise a couple of octaves in anger. “Have you forgotten who I am? Have you forgotten who YOU are? Where your place is in this pack?” I look at the man straight in his eyes. He immediately puts his head down. I’m not entirely sure why I’m so angry at this point, when all I’ve ever wanted is to leave this hell house in the first place. But the way this man questioned my authority, the way people looked at me in disappointment, and the way my sisters held both of my hands in support made me feel a little overwhelmed. *I also can’t afford to lose even more of the trust people have in me, no matter how little that may be. I need them if I’m going to help Gregory.* “Wait. Still, I can understand where you’re all coming from,” I say after calming myself down a bit.

“What would you suggest we do? Who do you want as an alternative if not Isabela?” my grandmother asks the man.

“We want her Highness Katarina, Queen Mother.” A collective gasp leaves everyone’s throat, including mine. I

glance at my sister who squeezes my hand. She seems unfazed but I feel her palms start to sweat.

Just then, another sentinel stands in solidarity with the man. “Princess Katarina has shown exceptional skill as a leader and as a guardian. Even as a child she has managed to outshine both Princess Katya and Princess Isabela in their studies, and she shines even more now as an adult. All of them here agree,” she states while gesturing at the crowd, “whether they voice it out or not, that Princess Katarina is who we all need, the one who can lead us to victory should there be a need for it.” The room falls silent.

“We don’t mean to diminish Princess Isabela as the heir to the power of the crown, but we cannot dismiss the leadership potential of Princess Katarina and what it means to the future of this family,” she finishes her statement with a bow. My grandmother has an unreadable expression on her face, appearing almost catatonic.

“Isabela, do you have anything you want to say?” she asks pointedly.

“I have made mistakes in the past brought on by my own refusal to see things and do things the way you want me to, and for that, I do apologize.” I bow my head and continue talking after a beat of silence. “But I am the rightful heir to the crown and the chosen one to lead this family. Allow me to earn your respect and your trust. Let me show you what I can do and the lengths that I will go through,” I inhale sharply, “to protect this family.” *That’s a lie.* But why did it feel right to declare to the crowd that I’m unafraid to prove who I am and what I’m capable of? *Snap out of it, Isabela.* “I’ll take care of the new Omegas.”

“A royal-born, taking on the responsibility of training the weakest links?” someone shouts but I ignore it.

“I’m aware that we have no more room for Omegas in the estate, but we cannot kick them out just like that. They’ll get killed if other packs find out that they came from this family.” I let go of my sisters’ hands and stare at my grandmother. “If I succeed in finding places for them in this

family, I will continue to be the chosen one and the future leader of this pack. If I fail,” I sigh and look at Katarina, “I will personally endorse my sister as the future matriarch of the Raging Demons pack.”

I glance at the faces of the Omegas in the corner. They seem scared and upset at the turn of events. People are leering in their general direction, but I hold all of their gazes.

“Fine, I like that idea, Isabela.” My grandmother smiles menacingly at me. “Let’s settle it at that, then, and revisit this topic once again in the near future.”

The meeting passes by in a blur after that.

“I feel like I’ve just declared war on half of my family,” I tell Eliza once we’re back in my room. She’s brushing my hair soothingly and laughs at my whining. “Eliza, I’m serious. I don’t know what came over me today, I felt like a child,” I cry out.

“In many ways, you still are, Mistress.” She chuckles.

“Stop, you’re not helping.” I pout.

She puts down the hair brush and takes out a piece of old parchment from her sleeves. “I found something that may cheer you up.” She hands it to me and I unfold the delicate material on top of my dresser. “I was cleaning the upstairs master bedroom earlier and saw this slipped in between a pile of old paintings.”

Staring closely at the paper, I realize that I’m looking at blueprints of the whole estate. But not just ordinary blueprints. There are several highlighted rooms on the parchment paper, some of them have folded papers attached in areas, and some are blacked out.

“Holy hell, Eliza! These rooms,” I say, pointing at the blacked-out ones, “are ones enveloped in dark magic.”

She smiles at me and nods. “Yes, Mistress. I remember those silly little ‘adventure’ games we used to play.”

“Remember when we played scavenger hunt for a whole day and grandmother almost had us whipped because we were

missing?” I laugh at the memory. “This is great! I can’t believe you found—” A sudden thought interrupts my nostalgia. “Eliza, I can come look for Gregory’s father with this!” I gasp.

She pauses. “If you were your grandmother, where would you hide your captives?” she asks me as I study the blueprints closely. I feel the adrenaline pump through my veins as I stand and pull Eliza outside.

“Come on!” I say and jog through the dimly lit estate.

“Where are we going? It’s almost two a.m.,” she whispers.

“Shh! Just follow me,” I instruct her and continue down the stairs and travel all the way to the western wing of the estate. Grandmother’s room is located at the center of the western wing, and she doesn’t share this part of the estate with anyone.

“If your grandmother sees us here, we’ll both be in trouble,” she pleads with me. Finally, we reach the end of the west wing, where a lone bookcase stands. “It’s a dead end,” Eliza states and starts pulling me back.

“No. Come look at this.” I point at the paper in my hands. “It’s a room, shrouded in dark magic.”

“Even if it is, how will you open it?” I ignore Eliza again and step forward, feeling myself getting pulled toward the bookcase gently. “Mistress?” Eliza says behind me but her voice seems dull somehow. I put my hand on the case and push; it turns to the side with ease. “Oh my gosh,” Eliza utters as she steps inside with me. The room is pitch- black, with no windows and no other door except the bookcase. A glass partition obscures my view in the center of the room. I step closer and see a man in shackles, breathing laboriously and looking deathly thin. He can’t seem to move any other body part, but one look at his hazel eyes and I’m sure I know who this man is.

“It’s him,” I say out loud.

Chapter Sixteen

“I’ll get you out of here,” I whisper as Eliza rushes to pull me back outside.

“Have you lost your mind?” she angrily tells me while dragging me all the way back to my room. “If we had gotten caught, it would’ve been the end for the both of us! What about your promise to earn the trust of your people? You made such bold statements earlier and yet you keep doing reckless things!” She shuts the door to my room behind her.

I bury my head in the palms of my hands and ignore Eliza’s admonishments. “Eliza, I can’t believe it. He’s real, and he’s here. Inside my own home.” I try to shake the image of Gregory’s father out of my head but I can’t. Eliza sighs beside me and puts a hand on my shoulder. “You know, a small part of me didn’t want to believe it. A very small part of me held on to the hope that maybe, my family isn’t that bad. That we wouldn’t be as cruel to keep someone imprisoned for a very long time. That maybe,” I look at Eliza in her eyes, “maybe there’s still a small part of humanity left in this household. I guess I was wrong,” I say, feeling my heart get heavier by the minute. “I mean, even you were taken in as a... slave,” I note carefully, and Eliza stares blankly at her hands.

“You play with the cards you’re dealt with in life, Mistress. What happened in the past is something we can’t change. But now, the power to change your fate is in your hands.” She leans her head on my shoulder and sighs, and we stay like that for a while.

“What are you going to do now?” she asks.

“I have to tell Gregory. He needs to know I found his father. I don’t know what to do after that, though.” I pull out my phone from my pocket. “I’ll figure it out tomorrow,” I express, and Eliza leaves to let me rest my head.

My grandmother’s booming voice wakes me up the next morning. “Isabela! Come down at once,” she demands, barreling through my door, not bothering to knock. I nod and try to rub the sleep from my eyes.

“It’s a Saturday, I don’t have work today,” I huff, attempting to hide a yawn.

“These are your new bodyguards,” my grandmother blurts out simply. Behind her, five men greet me with a bow.

Well, that woke me up completely.

“I—uh, what for, Queen Mother?” I ask hesitantly. She fixes her gaze at me.

“To protect you, child. These days are crucial for our family.” She pulls me closer to her. “Remember your promise last night. You need to survive.” I don’t dare question her authority after that. “There’s no need to learn their names or ranks,” she says to me and turns to the guards. “You may only address her as Your Highness. I don’t want you befriending the princess to lessen the chance of her manipulating you into doing her bidding.” My grandmother slyly eyes me and smirks. I fight the urge to talk back and just watch her walk away.

“I’m not manipulative, you know.” I smile at the guards and they simultaneously look at the ground in response. “I’m

actually quite nice!” I quip cheerily only to be met with silence. “Does this mean you’ll follow me wherever I go?” I ask and they nod. *Okay then, how am I supposed to meet Gregory if I have a couple of tails following me?* I sigh and start walking to the cabin where we house the Omegas. Hearing the clunky military boots trail after me gives me a bit of anxiety but I try to shrug it off. “Hello, good morning!” I greet as I open the door. The dark, windowless room is shared by a couple of teenagers, some of whom are huddled in one corner, shivering and already whimpering.

“Greet Your Highness properly, you dimwits!” a guard yells and they crawl near my feet.

“That was unnecessary,” I hiss and order the guards to stand outside the room. I crouch down to look at them in their eyes. “You don’t have to be so scared of me, you know? I’m here to take care of you. We’ll get you strong and healthy so you can be better pack members!” I smile at them, but it’s clear that they’re very apprehensive to trust me. *This is going to take a lot of work.* “I’m here to protect you, I won’t... *throw you to the wolves*, so to speak.” A girl, maybe my age with the same green eyes, stares at me and grabs my hands with her trembling ones. I smile at her. “Why don’t we start today by having breakfast?” They look at one another and slowly bob their heads.

I hear someone gasp beside me. “Vera looks like you, Your Highness!” A boy around seven years old suddenly blurts out after having a mouthful of pancake.

“Stop that! Show some respect for the princess!” A girl around his age slaps his hand.

“It’s quite alright,” I say with a chuckle. “Who is Vera?” Looking around the room, I spot the same girl from earlier with green eyes. “Is it you?” I ask softly and she nods slowly. I eye her up and down, and then a sudden idea sparks in my mind. “I have a favor to ask you, Vera.” I smile innocently.

Chapter Seventeen

“You’ve gone insane,” Eliza says and eyes me incredulously.

“I have not, and this is going to work. Trust me.”

“Mistress, why can’t you just text him or something?”
Eliza asks.

“It’s too delicate. I need to tell him in person, so we can plan ahead.” I clasp my hands and pout at Eliza. “Eliza,

please. You just need to drive Vera to the café, and that's where we'll switch places. She'll be back here in the estate, and I'm going to stay at Nina's tomorrow after I meet up with Gregory. I'll be back in the morning, and we'll switch places again after that. It's simple." I sway her hands in mine and she shrugs me off.

"It's not that simple, your grandmother will find out."

"But no one comes into my room on a weekday. Everyone has work around the estate, and my grandmother's going to pay a visit to an old friend of hers tomorrow. She won't be back until late at night. If I don't do this tonight, I won't get another chance. You have to help me." She sighs and I know I've won her over.

"Fine! Go, before I change my mind." She practically pushes me out of my bedroom door and into the arms of my bodyguards.

"Where are we going, Your Highness?" one of them asks as I slip into the backseat of my car.

"To the café, of course. I have work to do," I remark as I slip on my black mask, smiling to myself.

"Isabela!" Nina screeches when I step through the café doors. "Listen, I—who are they?" She eyes the five men behind me.

"Bodyguards," I say simply and walk inside. I hear footsteps following me and I put a hand to stop the men from accompanying me any further. "I work here. You can't come in behind the counter with me. Stay here." They bow silently and disperse within the café.

"Your grandmother's really strict, huh," Rie notes once we're out of earshot from my guards. I nod and she puts a hand lovingly on my shoulder. "Don't worry Isabela, you're going to be free soon." I open my mouth to answer her, but Nina hinders me from doing so.

"Enough about that! I'm having a party later tonight. Rie, did you tell her?"

A party? That's perfect. I can meet Gregory there and I'll have an alibi in case things go south and my grandmother discovers that I snuck out again.

"No! She didn't but I'm going," I affirm.

"What are you going to tell your guards then? Will they come to the party, too?" Rie questions.

"No, but I have a plan," I declare and let them in on my little switch-up plan. I tell them that Vera is one of my "maids-in-training" who can pass off as me.

"What time is she going to be here?" Nina whispers as we prepare to close up the café after my shift.

"She's close by. She'll pass through the back door, right?" I ask and Rie nods. My phone buzzes in my pocket and I instinctively move to open the back entrance reserved for Nina and her father. Vera walks in and I hand her my clothes from earlier. "Change by the furnaces and hurry." She does as she's told and I pack up my things and hand them to her afterward. "Don't talk to anyone until you get home and make sure to walk straight to my bedroom." She nods silently. "Hey, look at me. You're going to be fine," I reassure her as I fix my black mask onto her face. "Go," I whisper and she walks out wordlessly.

Nina and Rie walk out after her and make a show of hugging and sending her off. I wait with bated breath in the kitchen where Eliza is hiding with me. "*I owe you one,*" I mouth to Eliza.

"You better come home early tomorrow," she angrily whispers.

"They're gone," Nina says as she goes back to the kitchen with Rie.

"It was nice meeting you both, but I'm afraid I can't stay any longer," Eliza expresses and we bid her goodbye too.

"It's been a while since I got to spend time with the both of you! With school and part-time work, I've been a bit busy," I say, almost apologetic.

“I know, but we’re so glad you get to be a teenager today instead of little miss perfect.” Rie pats me on the back. We close the café and head to Nina’s house shortly after.

A couple of hours after settling in Nina’s room, she barges in and tosses me a dress and heels to change into. “They’re almost here! Why aren’t you ready?”

“Why can’t I just wear this uniform?” I ask. She rolls her eyes at me.

Rie walks in behind her and pulls me to sit upright. “Wear makeup too!” She hands me her stuff and huffs at me petulantly. “You don’t have maids or assistants here. Go get ready yourself.” And with that, they both slam the door behind me.

“Geez, I didn’t know they could get so uptight over a party,” I blurt out, pulling the dress over my head and smoothening out its wrinkles. “Isn’t this a little too tight?” I eye myself in Nina’s full-body mirror. The silver dress glistens under the room’s yellow light, shimmering as I turn side-to-side. Its neckline stops right above my cleavage and the length itself drapes down my figure all the way to my mid-thigh. I sigh and shake my head. “This will have to do, I guess.” I had texted Gregory the address earlier and asked him to meet me before the party starts. But he’s yet to respond to my messages which irks me a little. *I thought he was desperate to see his father?*

A knock on the door breaks me out of my trance.

“You ready—oh my God!” Nina yells. “I almost forgot how beautiful you are because you’re always wearing that stupid mask. But, Isabela. Look at you,” she spins me around gently, “you’re absolutely stunning.” She smiles and grabs my hand. “Come on, let’s go downstairs.” She pulls me outside and I hear the loud bass of house music bounce against the walls of the house. “Here we are! Everyone, there’s someone I want you to meet!” she announces. “This is Isabela, one of my best and dearest friends. Please be nice to her tonight!” A dozen pairs of eyes look at me and I feel a bit self-conscious

about the way I'm dressed. I give a small wave and people send small "hellos" my way.

I quietly slip away after a few introductions and get myself a drink. "Hey, Isabela," a man's voice comes up from behind. I turn and see a handsome guy around my age, with an undercut and dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans. "I'm Robin, Rie's cousin. She's told me so much about you," he cheerily says and gives me a peck on the cheek as a greeting. I blush at his bold gesture.

I guess I'm not used to dealing with boys who don't want to hurt me, I quietly tell myself.

The more I talk to Robin, the more I find the party enjoyable. He seems nice and polite, and he looks at me as if I'm normal and not an enemy. His voice is softer in tone but deep enough that I feel he could lull me to sleep if I asked. "Do you want to go somewhere a little quieter?" I boldly ask him. His eyes widen slightly, but he nods and leads me to an empty hallway. "Sorry about that, I couldn't hear myself think," I speak coyly.

"I know what you mean. My head's about to burst from the loud music," he agrees innocently enough, but he steps a lot closer and backs me against the wall. I bite my lip in anticipation and it looks like he's getting the message. Putting a hand on my waist, he stares deep into my eyes. "Is this okay with you?" he asks huskily and I nod. He lowers his head down to give me a chaste kiss and I close my eyes at the sensation.

As soon as I start to get comfortable, someone else pulls his body away from mine.

Chapter Eighteen

“What the hell, man?” Robin yells. He attempts to push Gregory, but Gregory barely budes from where he stands.

“Don’t even bother, if I were you,” Gregory warns Robin, giving off a side-glance look. Gregory’s hazel eyes then narrow at me. “Let’s go.” He pulls me toward him, not letting go until we get outside.

“Isabela!” I hear the familiar voice of Nina come running after me. “Where are you taking her?” she asks Gregory.

“Back to my house for some... alone time.” He smirks, completely charming her. I feel my face scrunch up in disgust.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” I reassure her blushing face. Gregory keeps my hand in his and walks away from the crowd that is starting to form. “What the fuck are you doing?” I press on and attempt to release his hand from mine. He doesn’t answer and instead leads me to his black Mercedes Benz and ushers me inside.

“You told me you had something important to tell me and I find you grinding on some scrawny punk like there’s no tomorrow!” he barks as he starts the car.

“Huh? Didn’t I ask you to come meet me earlier? And when you didn’t respond to any of my messages, I thought, oh, maybe you’re busy.” I glare at his side profile.

His jaw tightens at my response. “And so, you decide to what, fuck someone else while waiting for me?” My jaw slacks at his hostile tone.

“What I do in my personal and private life does not concern you. We work together, we’re not actually in a relationship,” I spit out. I look out the window and see that we’re slowly traveling to a nearby city. “Where the hell are you taking me anyway?” I ask after I’ve calmed down.

“To my knowledge, working together doesn’t necessarily mean closing yourself off from your partner,” Gregory says through gritted teeth, completely ignoring my question.

What the hell is his deal? I scrutinize him up and down and stay quiet for the rest of the car ride.

“We’re almost there,” he utters a bit softly after a couple of minutes.

“Where?” I deadpan.

“To my house. I gathered everyone in my pack that’s why I’m late. You’re meeting them tonight.” He shrugs.

“I’m what?” I ask incredulously. *Is he feeding me to them? I’m completely unprepared!* I pat around for my phone but quickly realize I forgot it back in Nina’s bedroom. *Goddammit.*

“Don’t worry. They know the entire situation. Also, I know you’ve met a couple of my members. Make sure you say hello to them.” He chuckles slightly.

“That’s not funny. I think I broke someone’s nose that one time in the woods.” I flashback to a couple of days ago, shuddering at the thought of seeing *them* again.

“It’s a little funny to me.” He smiles at me and I can’t help but return the gesture.

“I found more evidence of that night,” I start and he sneaks a glance my way, “the uprisings, I mean.” I shake my head and look out the window. “I’m not entirely sure of this yet, but I think I was there. Lately, I’ve been having these weird flashbacks and dreams. As if I can see them all play out in my mind, how people started turning and killing each other. How everything was engulfed in flames and how blood splattered everywhere.” Gregory stares ahead at the road before us. “I don’t know what to do with myself. I know I said I didn’t know anything about the uprisings before, but you have to believe me. At the time, I really didn’t. Now, though, I don’t think I’m as innocent as I made myself out to be. And for that,” I face the road too, “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you bringing this up again now?” he replies after a while.

“I just feel a little overwhelmed, you know? I was perfectly living happily, well pretending, to be the dutiful princess to my grandmother until my eighteenth birthday. After that, I really planned on running away with my sisters.

But now, it feels like there's a lot more at stake. I feel responsible, somehow. I've been blinded by privilege and status that I turned away from the truth."

"And what is that truth you speak of?" he asks gently.

"That we're the villains in your history. We always have been, and I think we always will be unless I do something about it." I feel him stare at me but I keep my eyes ahead, unwavering in my resolve not to break down in front of him.

"Okay," he starts and reaches out to pat my hand. "Well, I hope you like public speaking. Because I'm going to have you repeat that speech again in front of my entire pack." He grins and I slap his hand away.

"You know, I thought we were having a serious moment just now. But you had to go and ruin it, didn't you?" I roll my eyes and fight the urge to smile.

The rest of the car ride is silent, but I sense no tension in the air. *I guess he's alright when he's not trying to kill me*, I tell myself. The car comes to a halt in front of a mansion right on the outskirts of the city.

I open the door and step into freshly cut grass. Instantly, I feel immense pressure coming from behind me. I turn and forty or so people are staring at me, tense and ready to pounce at any given moment. I fight the urge to pounce too and make sure not to make any unnecessary movements. *Isabela, relax. It's going to be fine*, I think as I inhale sharply.

A warm hand settles itself on the small of my back and leads me forward. "Everyone," Gregory's intimidating stature immediately settles down the crowd, "this is Isabela, the youngest princess of the Raging Demons pack." His hand doesn't leave my back as he looks at me as if urging me to greet the strangers before me.

"Pleased to meet you," I say shakily.

A man steps forward, blonde-haired and blue-eyed. There's a cut on his nose bridge and I cringe, remembering what I did a couple of days ago. He looks at me up and down

and leans in closer. Gregory holds my waist in place. “We’ll never trust a bitch like you.” The wounded man smirks.

Chapter Nineteen

This is not going to go well. I can feel it, I think to myself.

I lean into Gregory’s touch almost impulsively. His firm grip doesn’t seem to be anything but comforting. I try to steady my breathing and control my urge to run away from all of them. After all, I’m still on enemy territory. “I’m not asking you to. I’m asking him.” I point to Gregory. “It’s his father we’re talking about.”

I grin and the wounded man grimaces.

“Why you chose to ally yourself with the literal enemy, I will never know.” Another man with tattoos on his arms and a large scar on his face steps forward. His eyes travel up and down my body and I’m suddenly reminded of how short and tight my dress is. “But there has to be a better way than giving in to her,” he sneers at me, “demands.” At this, Gregory sighs.

“We’ve been through this, haven’t we?” Gregory takes his arm away from my waist and steps forward. His commanding presence makes all of them take a step back, and I peek at their faces. Some are looking down, some are staring at him, and most have hunched over themselves, not willing to anger him. “Unless, you have unresolved problems with me?” He shrugs off his denim jacket and throws it hard against a

nearby wall. “I’m stressed enough as it is. The plan was to get my father back through violence. It didn’t work, or have you forgotten exactly what she did to you, Jean?” He points at the man with the cut on his nose. Jean narrows his eyes back again at me and I can’t help but smile at him.

“Hey,” I said with a slight wave, “sorry about the, uh, cut on your nose. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing...” He scoffs at me and I trail off, not wanting to get things more awkward than they already are.

Off the side of the room, I spot Marnie, sitting on the steps leading to the main entrance of the house. She smiles at me sweetly, and I wave back a hello. *I would be fuming if I were her. I guess she really is better than me.* I grimace at the rough memory of the fight in the woods.

“And now that we might actually have a chance of changing things, you want to, what? Keep fighting? Keep losing more men? For what?”

“Have you forgotten what they did to our family?” The man with the tattoos gritted his teeth.

“No. But if your plan is to chase after revenge, when will this brutal cycle of violence end?” Gregory replies, rubbing circles on the side of his forehead. “We’ve got a very powerful person on our side. Aside from being born royalty, she’s also the chosen one of the Esperanza family. And she,” Gregory looks at me, his eyes searching mine for a moment, “wants to break the same cycle. And I believe her.” I smile at his words. “Stefan, fighting should not be the means to an end. It shouldn’t have to be our only way of life—”

“Yeah, and what’s in it for you?” Stefan cuts Gregory off and points a slim finger at my face.

“I want to be free, too.” I sigh and move a few steps ahead to where Gregory is. “I don’t want to be the villain in anyone else’s life. I want to be normal... human even.” I hear a gasp amongst the crowd, but I continue. “But I won’t be able to do any of that with my grandmother rampaging, abusing, and scaring people left and right. I understand that in your eyes, I’m always going to be tainted by the sins of my

ancestors. After all, if not for us, werewolves wouldn't even exist." I look down at my hands, remembering the history taught to us time and time again. How we were the first clan to be gifted with the ability to shapeshift into wolves, how we were given immense power and strength in exchange for letting our souls be merged with demon wolf spirits from the depths of hell. And how we used that power to torment others who became like us. *What kind of monstrosity am I, anyway?* "And I'm not asking for anyone's forgiveness. I'm not asking for your support," I gaze at the faces of Gregory's pack before me which were painted with cold expressions and an obviously unforgiving air. *But I have to keep trying.* "In fact, I'm not asking anyone to do anything for me. But he is." I point at Gregory beside me. "Your leader is asking for your help. Your Alpha is asking you to trust in him. Isn't that right, Gregory?"

Gregory nods and smiles at me. "We can finally change the tides. We can fight back without shedding blood. We can show every pack in the world that the Esperanza clan is not to be feared. We can live without ever having to lose anyone anymore. But we can only do that with Isabela around. She is the key to this future."

"What I want isn't important, and it should be the least of your worries," I follow after his statement. "After all, I know that no matter what I do, I'm still going to be the bad guy in your eyes. And I want you all to know that I don't care what you think." I smirk as their heads snap in my direction. "I just want to leave this godforsaken place and live a life far away from everyone." I exhale sharply.

"Even if it means the end of your clan?" The man regarded as Jean eyes me and steps closer. I don't make a move at all.

"Even if it means the death of my own grandmother," I say with full conviction.

"And how can you possibly help us?" Jean scoffs. I look at Gregory who is already staring at me.

I take a pregnant pause before speaking. “This is a little bit late what with all the commotion that just transpired. But, Gregory, I was able to do my own reconnaissance. And... I was able to locate *him*—your father. He’s barely alive,” I state.

Chapter Twenty

“I’m telling you the truth,” I continue after the collective gasps of the crowd die down. “But it’s not my obligation to convince you to believe me. Either you trust in my words, or you don’t. Again, it doesn’t matter to me anyway,” I say and step back.

Gregory starts pacing across the yard. “You found him? Where?” His voice is frantic, shaky even.

“I was right—he was at the estate. In an isolated wing that only my grandmother can enter. She kept him in a locked room, with a glass partition inside. The room had no windows

and no visible doors. It was behind a bookcase.” I recall the sorry state Gregory’s father was in and I shiver at the thought.

Jean laughs. “You heard her Gregory! She already gave us the layout of the land; we don’t need her anymore. Let’s just storm the whole place, and leave them high and dry right after.” He sneers at me and I fight the urge to slap his stupid smirk away.

“Right, I forgot to tell you. It was behind a bookcase locked with dark magic. Oh! And the glass partition inside? I suspect it was also enshrouded with magic. Also, don’t forget his father is paralyzed still. Even if you come and get him, can you undo the spell?” My snide retort shuts him up immediately. “I mean, if you want to ask my grandmother to reverse the curse, be my guest. But I don’t think she’s going to be as nice as me.” I smile and bat my eyes at him.

“And how did you get to that place?” Stefan asks me, too.

“I guess since I’m the one chosen to inherit the crown, my grandmother’s spells don’t work on me. After all, once I turn eighteen, I’ll get all the power she has, maybe even more.” I inhale sharply. “Not to state the obvious here, but I think you need me, whether or not you like it,” I speak shortly after.

“Right, you heard her. She knows where my dad is. She can get him out. It doesn’t matter whether you believe her or not. But I do. And it matters to me whether you trust in what I say,” Gregory sighs, “or not.”

A long stretch of silence follows Gregory’s words, and I worry a little if this is a good idea. Even I’m in disbelief at the words I just said. *Going against my family? My entire pack? My own grandmother? What about my sisters, what happens to them? Am I really ready for this?* Questions run through my head a mile a minute.

“Do you trust me?” Gregory’s voice bellows across the yard. Stefan steps closer to Gregory, chest to chest. Not one person dare move a muscle in anticipation of what’s about to happen, including me.

“We’ve known each other since we were kids, Gregory. I’ve never known you to be irrational or impulsive. Not once have you been cruel or unworthy of our trust,” Stefan starts. “Which is why I stand with you.” He backs away and takes his place on the other side. “If this is the way to end the reign of that demon...” He looks at me and I shrug. Stefan nods and clears his throat. “Then, this is the path we should all take.” Stefan slaps Gregory’s back a little too hard, and I wince at the sound.

Murmurs break out through the crowd. Jean steps forward, too. “We get uncle back, and then figure it out from there.”

Uncle?

Behind Jean, another man with the same blonde hair follows him out of the crowd. “If you say we can trust her, then we trust her.” He turns to me and smiles. “I’m Nicolo, by the way. Call me Nick, for short.” I bob my head at his words.

Pretty soon, all of them follow suit and proclaim their support for Gregory. *It’s now or never then; no turning back this time*, I think to myself.

“So, what now?” I hear Marnie speak up behind me. I turn and she puts a small hand on my shoulder. “Hey.” She smiles at me.

“Um, hi.” I look at my hands. “Sorry for the—uh—” She waves a hand between us.

“You had to do what you had to do, didn’t you? I can’t blame you for wanting to live.” I feel my mouth gape at her statement. She couldn’t have been older than me, but her wisdom and empathy cut through my conscience like a knife. I nod wordlessly and look at Gregory just as he turns to return my gaze.

“Well, Isabela. Do you have a plan?”

“Me? Why me? You’re the Alpha,” I state.

He furrows his eyebrows. “Yes, but you know the estate more than I do. Maybe you can come up with a proper route to follow?” he offers. I stare at him for a moment. I feel multiple

eyes land on me at the same time and I force myself not to grimace.

I hate attention more than anything.

“Um, my birthday is coming up. Do you want to... *crash?*” I suggest, cringing at the idea that just came out of my mouth. Gregory laughs beside me.

“Yeah, and what gift would you like, princess?” he asks me, face full of mirth.

“Hey! It’s the best that I can come up with, you know?” I roll my eyes at him.

“Jokes aside, she may be onto something here,” Marnie chimes in. “Isabela, do you have a caterer in mind?” She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“Oh! Marnie, you’re a genius!” I exclaim. “Listen, we hire help for every occasion, and the best part is we hire from other packs. The smaller ones—never humans because, you know, we might be *discovered*. You can dress up as the service crew!” I say excitedly only to be met with blank stares.

“Now you want us to be part of the hired help? Unbelievable,” Jean scoffs with a smile on his face.

I roll my eyes. “Hey. My eighteenth birthday is going to be huge. It’s also my coronation night, meaning at midnight I gain my powers. Other packs will be present, your scents will be hidden. Also, hired help can go in and out of the estate at any time.”

“It’s the perfect plan,” Marnie agrees and she turns to me. “Leave it to me to get everything ready. I just need the map of your estate so we can properly plan on our side.”

Wow, she seems dependable. “Okay, I’ll send it to Gregory!” Gregory winks at me and I can feel the heat start to prickle behind my ears.

I spend almost an hour getting to know Gregory’s pack and planning with them before heading back to Nina’s home. I collect my things and make my way back to the estate before the sun rises.

Trudging along the hallway, my eyes settle on the door leading to my room. I slowly creep inside and close the door gently behind me. “God, I’m so tired,” I say out loud, fumbling for the zipper on Nina’s dress, anxious to get it off of me. I lie down on my pillow after, only for my head to hit something hard. I reach behind me and take the book I once hid inside my pillowcase. “I forgot I had this.” I open it and read the contents, eyes widening as I flip page after page. *The book of spells? I can’t believe it!* I sit up straight and start memorizing a couple of lines, checking if there’s anything I can use to free Gregory’s father from his chains. Engrossed in the ancient script in my hands, I don’t hear my door open and close.

As soon as I look up, an icy stare meets my gaze.

Chapter Twenty-One

“I just wanted to learn more. I *want* to be like *you*,” I mutter almost immediately, as if I knew exactly what she was going

to ask. Fear courses through my veins, waking me up from my drunken stupor.

“Child.” She comes a bit closer. Her footsteps are so light I can barely hear them. “Have you no patience at all?” she asks through gritted teeth. “Why were you snooping around my study? Why did you take the book of spells? Do you have any authority? Have I given you permission?” With each question, I earn one slap on my face. I take ‘em all through watery eyes. “Why? Answer me!” she bellows.

“I want to earn the trust of the pack. I thought that if I had more power to show, I could make them see that I’m someone who can lead the family for a very long time.”

I keep my head down as I lie through my teeth. I try to keep my breathing steady as my cheeks reel from the pain. “And so, your solution was to go behind my back and take what’s mine?” She grabs a fistful of my hair, forcing me to look at her. “How stupid of you, Isabela.” She sneers.

“I knew you wouldn’t allow it if I asked. I had no other choice,” I spit out, still trying to keep my voice low.

She lets go of my hair and takes the book from my hands. “Have you learned anything, then?” she queries.

Her voice is a little cautious. There must be something she’s hiding. “No,” I lie carefully, and position my hands on my lap.

I hear her chuckle. “Well, all that snooping around and yet, you didn’t even gain a single grain of knowledge? I see you’re still as useless as ever.” She fully laughs now. I don’t say a word. “Honestly, I have no idea why the spirits have chosen you as the heir. It’s clear that your juvenile ways will never amount to anything. If you weren’t my granddaughter, you’d be married off to another pack. And then we’ll see if there’s any use for your... *abominable* face.” She snickers as she tucks the book underneath her arm. “You’re grounded for a week. No contact with the outside world. I will have Eliza take your phone away. That should be enough time for you to learn your true place in this world,” she declares, slamming

the bedroom door and locking it behind her. I close my eyes in an attempt to dissipate my anger.

But I can't control it when my hands shoot up on their own. I can't stop it when heat pools behind my eyelids. I can't believe it when ancient words swirl in my mind and I understand what they mean. I open my eyes and utter the script very silently.

As soon as I do, frost appears in front of me. *Snow? Mist?* I bewilderingly ask myself. The room gets colder, and I feel a lot stronger. A smile spreads across my face as I utter another spell, and then a jolt of electricity shoots from my fingertips. I fight the urge to laugh out loud. "Holy hell. I guess I'm not as useless as you thought I was, grandmother."

I can't believe I managed to memorize a few of those lines. But how did I know how to say them? I stare at my hands, trying to gauge if there's anything wrong with them physically. I poke around my palms, looking for an on-off button hidden somewhere. They still feel soft to the touch, but a bit warm compared to the rest of my body.

I shake the confusion out of my head. "Okay, let's try it one more time." I prod myself. I close my eyes and concentrate on my hands. I say the incantation softly, and heat gathers from my eyes to my cheekbones. A puff of cloud appears before me, bigger than the one earlier. "Frost. I can control... ice?" I tilt my head to one side, examining the misty cloud as it disintegrates right here.

I look at my left hand and utter another incantation, this time a sizeable current of electricity shoots from my fingers and hits my cabinet, creating a noticeable hole in one of the doorframes. "Oh shit," I mutter and hurry to cover up my crime with a chair. I take deep breaths to calm myself down. "Holy shit, I do have powers. But I'm not eighteen yet. How is this possible? How can I control this?"

I rub my palms together, trying to think of any possible explanation. Recalling every lesson my private tutor taught me as a child, and every book I've ever read about or even my lineage. I come up with a blank slate each and every time. "I

need to tell Gregory.” I fish for my phone that’s sitting somewhere on my bed.

I type out a quick message: *I’m locked in my room right now, but we need to meet. I need to show you something.* As soon as I hit send, I hear a bloodcurdling scream echo against the halls of the estate.

“What the hell is happening?” I take my phone and hide it somewhere in my drawer. I put a hand on my doorknob and twist it, but it won’t budge open. Another scream, more strangled than the last. It’s a voice that I recognize all too well. “Katya!” I tug and tug on the door, but it’s locked from the outside. “Someone! Please open the door!” I pound against the wooden frame. I hear footsteps scurrying outside, and the voices of various guards talking amongst themselves. A slow, agonizing yell rings in my ear yet again, and I grow desperate to open the damn door.

What the fucking hell is happening?!

“Please open this!” I plead and beg and threaten anyone who might hear my yells, but it seems like my voice falls on deaf ears. “Fuck this.” I kick the doorknob once. Twice. As many times as it takes for me to be able to jiggle the lock open. *Just a little more.* I try pulling the doorknob away, and it loosens but still needs another push.

I steady my breathing and concentrate on the very tip of my forefinger. I say the incantation I just learned earlier and focus it on the lock. Bolts of electricity prod on the lock until its outer area is singed. I take careful aim and kick it down with all my might. Finally, the door springs open and I run as fast as I could through the hall, pushing everyone out of my path.

Once I reach Katya’s door, a couple of people were already there. Some are crying, most are yelling for reinforcements. I try to step in but a guard puts a hand on my shoulder to stop me. Without thinking twice, I twist his arm behind his back and push him out of my way. “If anyone tries to stop me,” I yell as menacingly as I can, “I will not hesitate to kill you.” At this, people avoid me almost immediately.

I look inside Katya's room, and I find her lying on the ground, a pool of dark liquid soaking her flimsy nightgown. I run and kneel beside her. "Katya! Katya, what happened?" I beg and shake her awake. Her eyes focus on mine, but they're about to close. "No, please! Katya, we can save you. I'll get you out of here. Please don't let go of my hand, okay? Don't let go of me," I cry out, hot tears flowing freely down my face.

"Take... care, Isabela. There's a traitor in our midst. Don't," she heaves for more air, eyes rolling on the back of her head. "don't get hurt, okay?" She coughs and tries to smile at me. But I can see she's crying too. "Survive, for me." Katya closes her eyes right after. I whisper her name, but she isn't responsive anymore.

I cry as I hold my sister's lifeless body against mine.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I’ll make sure that whoever did this will rot in hell.” I sob as a few guards try to pry Katya’s limp body away from me. “I promise, Katya. I’ll make them pay,” I whisper as I watch in sorrow.

Another pair of hands try to pull me up from the ground. “Isabela.” Katarina—with her clammy hands—holds my head. “Look at me, Isabela. Are you okay?” She scans my body presumably for injuries, her eyes bloodshot and teary. “What happened?” she croaks.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. Grandmother locked me in my room. By the time I got out—she—she couldn’t,” I cry into her shoulder, uttering nonsense in the process. I feel her tears drop on top of my head. Katarina and I stay like that for a while, letting everyone else circle around us. Collecting pieces of evidence, clearing out clutter.

“What in the world is going on?” my grandmother’s voice cracks as she yells. She peers inside the room and sees us both in our sorry state, without our sister. One look at the puddle of blood by our feet and it seems that a puzzle piece clicks inside her head. “You two, come with me,” she orders us to follow her out of the room and into her study. “Talk,” she says as she sits behind her desk.

She looks at me first. “I was in my room, locked in. It took me a few tries before I got to destroy the damn doorknob so I could get out. By the time I got to her room, she was on the ground. Half-dead.” I stare at my grandmother, gaze hardening as Katarina tells our grandmother where she was. *If only I wasn’t locked up. I could’ve saved her. It’s all your fucking fault,* I curse in my mind.

My grandmother avoids my gaze in the meantime, and focuses on her hands. “Alright, you may leave. I’ll… handle this. No one leaves the estate for now. Am I understood, Isabela?” she asks and I nod.

How can she be so calm? Katya is dead! My fists shake in anger and Katarina takes my hand and pulls me outside the room.

“Isabela, are you—”

I raise my hand up. “Katarina, I just want to be alone right now. I’ll see you at lunchtime, okay?” I look at her face with the same unreadable expression it always conveys but her eyes hold the same sorrow. The same kind of pain I feel. “I’m sorry. I’ll see you later.” She nods and I walk away. Back in my room, the doorknob I destroyed earlier had fallen to the floor. I look at the pitiful state of my doorframe. The hinges were uprooted from me kicking it down, and the singed lock looked too suspicious to be left there so I took it and hid it underneath a pile of clothes in my dresser. *I’ll deal with that later.* “Fuck!” I shout as I plop down on my bed, numb from the events of yesterday and this morning. My sister’s angelic face flashes in my mind, alongside the bloody state she was left in. “No,” I whisper and let the tears fall freely. A knock on my door breaks me out of my stupor.

“Mistress?” Eliza’s voice cuts through the silence. I don’t bother turning my head or opening my eyes.

“I’m exhausted, Eliza. I’m so tired.” My lower lip trembles, sobs threatening to fly out of my mouth.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Mistress,” she consoles, closing the door behind her.

“What can I do to help?” She follows up with a shaky breath, putting a soothing hand on my back. I shake my head and cry into my pillow some more. After a few minutes, Eliza stands. “I’ll prepare food for you. Isabela, you still need to eat.” Throwing formalities aside, she leaves the room without another word.

I need some air. I will myself to get up from my bed and head straight to the training room. A couple of sentinels are inside, chatting after what looks like a rigorous exercise session with knives. “Leave,” I order, staring at all of them. They wordlessly let go of their throwing knives and head out, bowing as they pass me by.

Securing some wraps on my hands, I walk toward the lone punching bag in the center of the room. I give it a few jabs before unleashing a flurry of combos. The image of my sister flashes behind my eyes, and every time my fist comes in

contact with the heavy material, I give it a bit more power than the last punch.

“I promise,” I repeat out loud what I had said to Katya. *I promise*. I grit my teeth, and combine kicking in my combos. *I promise*. My left wrist buckles from my own strength, but I don’t think of the pain. *I promise, Katya*. Hit after hit, I repeat her last words to me. *I promise, even if it’s the last thing I do*.

My attacks keep getting faster, stronger. Sand seeps through the sides, but I don’t stop my assault on the already ruined punching bag. “I’ll make sure they rot in hell.” One kick after the other only rips through the bag even more. “Even if I have to drag them down there myself.”

I feel heat trickle through my face, and the combination of punches, kicks, and quick grabs quicken the beat of my heart. I struggle to catch my breath, hands already warm from the workout and from my own blood dripping from my knuckles.

In anger, I let out a yell and with it, a powerful swing of my fingers, slicing the bag in half. *A new power, perhaps? Or maybe it’s just my own bloodlust growing stronger?* I think to myself. A gasp reaches my ear as sand collects beneath my feet. Blinded by rage, I quickly grab a small knife and throw it toward the sound.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“What the hell!” Eliza cries out in surprise. The knife sticks to the wall beside her.

“I like how when you’re surprised, all formalities go out the window. No, ‘Hello, Mistress’ this time?” I snicker.

She rolls her eyes. “You could have killed me!” Eliza exclaims, trying to take out the knife from the wall unsuccessfully.

“Honestly, I didn’t know it was you,” I say, walking over to her and pulling the thing out in one go. I wipe off the sweat and blood and put the knife back in its tray.

“I’ve seen you kill a sparrow with perfect aim just by listening to it fly away. How can you *not* know it was me?” she emphasizes, staring daggers at me.

“I’m not lying! I was too... engrossed in training. And, I wouldn’t intentionally kill someone without reason; I was really aiming for the wall.” I smile at her, taking off the wraps from my hands.

Blood splatters on the floor, mixing with grains of sand and polyester from the punching bag. “Did you... do this?” Eliza steps forward, eagerly examining the wreck, walking in front of me.

“Yeah, I got too carried away.”

“But how did you rip the synthetic apart?” She looks at me with wide eyes.

“No idea.” *Quite literally. Should I tell Eliza? Will she get in trouble?* I look at Eliza, undecided if I should let her in my little secret. “Eliza, I, um,” I stutter and she fixes her gaze at me expectantly. “Well, let’s say if I—”

“There you are Isabela!” Katarina’s voice interrupts my supposed monologue and startles us both. “I was looking for you. Do you want to have lunch together?” she speaks cautiously, eyes roaming around the sorry state of the training room. “Did... did you attack the whole room? What the hell has gotten into you?” She stares at the red-stained sand in between my feet.

“I was imagining Katya’s killer.” I deadpan. “Thinking about all the things I’ll do to the bastard. How I’ll torture that shit. How I’ll wring that shit’s neck in between my fingers. How I’ll make sure the bastard regrets ever crossing paths with me.” I throw away the bandages in a nearby bin. Eliza clears her throat, clearly uncomfortable at my sudden threat. I feel my pulse quicken, anger rising slowly in my veins. *Calm down*, I think to myself as I take a few deep, slow breaths.

“Right,” Katarina mentions after a beat of silence, eyeing me up and down. “How about we, uh, take a walk? After lunch? Clear our heads and grieve in... healthier ways.” I sigh and nod in agreement.

“Alright, what’s for lunch?” I walk away with Katarina, Eliza following behind us.

“You can ask the chef to make your favorite. I know your comfort food is tomato and chicken pasta. You can ask him to make it extra savory.” She wiggles her eyebrows in anticipation. Something about how natural she acts irritates me. I swiftly turn and face Katarina.

“How can you act this normal? Like someone wasn’t killed inside *our* home? Like we didn’t see our sister die helplessly?”

Katarina’s smile drops almost immediately. “I’m just as angry and confused as you. But the thing about being the firstborn is,” she reaches out and pats my head lovingly, “you have to make sure that everyone else’s needs are met before

yours. That everyone you care about won't crumble at the slightest touch. That's my responsibility; I have to make sure everything stays intact in this family." She grips my shoulder. "I'm trying to act strong so you can go around destroying rooms inside the estate, aside from the training room, of course." She grins and I shake off her hand.

"Shut up. I panicked because the door was locked from the outside."

"Right, you panicked so naturally, you completely destroyed the locks? You're currently missing a doorknob, by the way." She chuckles as she drapes her arm on my shoulders.

I didn't tell anyone that. "Huh. Must've not noticed it. I sprinted out of the room as soon as I opened it," I say nonchalantly.

"You've grown a lot stronger, Isabela. More than what I expected," she whispers and I feel my hands grow clammy.

Does she know? "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing! Just an observation." She grins and leads me to the kitchen.

I plop down on my bed the second I enter my bedroom. "Ugh, this has to be a bad dream, right?" I sigh out. I take out my phone from the drawer I left it in earlier. *Good thing grandma forgot to tell Eliza to take my phone away.*

A new message from Gregory pops up on my screen as I turn it on.

Gregory: *I'm coming over to meet you.*

I shoot up straight in bed.

Isabela: *What? Bad idea! What the hell are you doing?*

I send message after message, but it's quiet on his end. *God, how is he this reckless and still alive?* I run out to the courtyard, only to be met by my bodyguards.

“Your Highness, we’ve received orders to keep you inside,” one of them informs, gesturing for me to go back in.

“I just wanted to take a walk. Can’t I do that?” I narrow my eyes at her.

“We’ll come with you, Your Highness.”

Dammit. They won’t leave me alone, will they? “What do I have to do for you to leave me alone?” I snap.

“We apologize, Your Highness. But since your sister’s...” the guard trails off and clears her throat. “We need you safe, now more than ever.”

I sigh. “Fine, I’ll go back inside.”

“Intruder!” someone yells, and everyone starts running toward the commotion. “Princess! Stay inside!” A sentinel picks me up and takes me back inside the house, blocking my view with his whole body.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Well, who do we have here?” My grandmother leers at the person found in the compound, near the Omega’s house. “Take off his mask,” she orders. In one smooth movement an armed guard pulls the black bag over the person’s head, revealing *Gregory*.

I internally cringe. *What the hell is wrong with him? He’s going to get himself killed.*

“Who are you?” My grandmother motions for the guards and they force him to kneel before us. I sit on the left side while Katarina does the same on the right side. Gregory’s face scans us three, expression unreadable.

“I don’t know,” he mutters. This earns him a smack on the head. His eyes land on me for a brief moment before looking back at the floor.

I struggle to keep my face as stoic as possible. “You… don’t know?” Katarina interjects, voice filled with venom.

“Hush, child.” My grandmother stands and points a bony finger at Gregory.

Oh, no. He keels over in surprise, trying to breathe in rapidly, but it doesn’t seem like he’s getting any air.

“Let me try that again.” My grandmother smiles at him. “Who are you?”

Gregory shakes his head slowly and falls to the floor on all fours, barely holding himself up. “I don’t know. I don’t remember,” he responds a little more clearly than before.

“Search him,” she orders. I avert my eyes as they strip Gregory off his shirt and pants.

“Nothing on him, my Queen.” One sentinel lays his clothes for all to see.

“Why were you loitering around my territory?” My grandmother’s voice hardens, clearly irritated.

“Again, I have no idea how I got here.”

“I find it quite unbelievable that on the day one of my granddaughters gets killed, an Alpha shows up on my property as well. Is it a coincidence? Are you here to take another one away from me?” She slams her fist on her armchair.

Gregory’s eyes flicker to mine. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He stares at my grandmother. My grandmother waves a hand in front of Katarina, and Katarina stands in front of him. With a flick of her wrist, flames travel from her hands to Gregory’s body, engulfing him in flames.

I ball my hands into fists and stop the urge to call out my sister's cruelty. *Anything I do or say right now will be taken against him. Against the both of us.* The fire completely covers Gregory's body, but there's not a single singe or burn mark on him. As if the flames are illusionary, like the heat is all in his head.

This is the first time I've seen my sister's actual power. If Katya can heal, Katarina seems like she can... destroy. Gregory bites his lips from crying out for mercy.

"Answer honestly, and this will be all over soon," Katarina coldly states.

"I'm telling you," Gregory spits out in between gasps, "the truth. I have no idea what the... hell you're talking about!" he yells.

The flames disappear and Katarina joins us after. "I don't think he's lying," she tells my grandmother.

Oh, he's one hell of an actor. I smile to myself. Gregory collapses on the floor, hands roaming all over his toned, bare body, checking for any injuries. He flips back on all fours and kneels again once he's gotten his bearings back.

"Take him to the basement. Keep him there until we know what to do with him." Two armed guards take him out of the room almost immediately. "An Alpha's scent. Quite a strong one, too. I've never heard of an Alpha going rogue before," my grandmother muses out loud. "In any case, find any clue if his pack is anywhere near us. Or anything connecting him to Katya's murder." I grow livid at the reminder. "No one will come down the basement without my knowledge. Am I understood?" Her constituents bow their heads in compliance. "Isabela, meet me in my chambers later." With that, my grandmother leaves the room first.

Katarina is on my side in an instant. "I can sense that you're very curious about our new visitor, but I don't trust him. Isabela, do not meet him alone, okay?"

"What makes you think I'm going to go see him?" My voice rises a couple of octaves higher.

“Because you’re my sister and I know you.” Katarina grins, holding me close to her. “I won’t tell grandmother, of course. Just be careful, I guess.” She lets me go and gestures for her own guards to follow her.

A few hours after Gregory got caught, I finally make my way to my grandmother’s room all the way to the west wing, while trying to prepare myself mentally for whatever my grandmother will inevitably ask of me. Images of Gregory’s pained expression flash in my mind, and all I can feel right now is anxiety over the uncertainty of his future here.

I knock three times on a heavy wooden door. I turn the doorknob and peer inside. “Isabela.” My grandmother’s icy eyes bore into mine.

“Yes, Queen Mother?” She points to a chair in front of her and I hastily sit down.

“As the heir to the crown, I need you to prove your loyalty to me, to the pack.” I nod slowly, making no move to interrupt her. “I need to know that you’re willing to bear your fangs and your all to protect us. I need to bring out the fighter in you.” She smiles, and I immediately grow distrustful of her words. “In life, the strongest survive. And in our life, the strong must know how to take a life.”

I don’t like this conversation already.

“You should know that an Alpha who goes rogue is no use to anyone. He’s no better than a lone wolf, no matter how strong he is. And I am certainly not going to keep that man around in case he has other... friends looking for him.”

Where is this going? “What do you mean, Queen Mother?”

She caresses my face gently with her cold hands. “You will show us all the might and fierceness of the Raging Demons pack. Show to us all the strength of the new Queen by sacrificing that man’s life to the demon wolf spirits, on the day of your eighteenth birthday.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Dark Moon pack will cease to exist if that happens.

“Am I understood, Isabela?” My grandmother leans on her elbows, eyes cold and unfeeling.

I take a quick, deep breath to steady my voice. “I will, Queen Mother. You can count on me,” I tell her with as much conviction as I can muster.

“I’m glad we see eye to eye this time. You may go,” she points to the door and it swings open on its own, “oh, and Isabela?” I turn to face her, and as soon as I do her smile turns malicious. “Stay out of trouble.”

“Of course, Queen Mother.” I bow my head slightly and head out the door.

I need to see Gregory, fast, I think to myself as I hurry back to my room. “Holy shit.” My hands shake as I absorb what my grandmother told me. “This can’t be real. There has to be a way out of this.” Feeling sick to my stomach, I run to my bathroom and promptly spew the contents of my stomach. *She’s evil. She’s absolutely vile.* I splash water all over my face, sobering up. I trudge back to my bed, reeling over the events of this God-awful day. *Katya’s murderer is still on the loose; there’s a traitor in our midst, and now Gregory is here and he’s probably going to die.* I breathe slowly in an attempt to calm myself down. Katya’s death only brought back memories of my mother’s slow descent into madness, and the futile attempts to bring her back to “normal.” A knock on my door grounds me to reality again. “Who is it?”

“It’s me.” Eliza walks in and closes the door behind her. “I just wanted to see how you’re doing?” She situates herself

on the floor beside my bed. We sit in silence, in the dark before I decide to answer her.

“I feel absolutely wonderful, thank you for asking. How about you?” I close my eyes for a bit. She snorts at my snarky reply.

“Me too, I feel fantastic,” she sarcastically replies. I laugh at that.

“Do you think this will end?” I say after a while.

“Honestly? Not really. We’re in too deep in this cycle of revenge. You never know who to trust.” Eliza sighs.

“Yeah? So does that mean I can’t trust you, too?” I ask pointedly.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe,” she taunts but I can hear the smile on her face as she speaks. “Where were you earlier, by the way?” she asks.

“In my grandmother’s room.”

“Oh, what happened?”

“Well, my grandmother wants me to kill *him*.”

“Who? The man from earlier?”

I inhale slowly. “Yes. Do you know who that is?” I look over at her.

“No. Do you know him?”

I nod. “Remember the guy who tried to kill me a few days ago?”

She gasps. “That’s him?”

“Yup,” I remark, popping the “p” sound. “He’s also the same guy whose father is locked in that isolated chamber we saw a while back.”

She grips my arm. “Oh my God.” She looks like she’s seen a ghost. “He’s hot,” she comments after a while and I laugh again.

“That is the only thing you can think of right now? He’s hot?” I chuck a pillow at her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Did you not see the abs earlier?”

I roll my eyes. “Stop that. Things are weird enough as it is. I don’t know why he’s here.”

“Oh? So, he just... randomly showed up today?”

“No. He texted me he was coming.”

Eliza raises an eyebrow at me. “Ah, so he showed up for you.”

I shake my head. “No, I mean—”

“I see how it is.” She smiles at me and stands abruptly. “Okay, Your Highness.” She pulls me up with her. “Let’s go meet your Prince Charming,” she says and leads me out the door.

We run together through the silent halls of the estate. “Where are you taking me?” I half-whisper.

“I know where he is,” Eliza replies as we turn corner after corner. She leads me to an old, abandoned wing of the house, a place I’ve never even been to.

“I didn’t know this wing even had rooms. I thought it was just unfinished and abandoned,” I note as I step over blocks of wood scattered on the floor.

“I didn’t either. But I saw them drag him here earlier. I tried following them until the end but I got scared I’d get caught.” She ushers me upstairs to an open landing. “That’s weird. I was sure this was where they were taking him.” She looks around the empty room for any clues, and I find myself doing the same. “Look!” She points at something on the ground and I step closer.

“Is that... blood?” I peer closer at the droplets beside my feet.

“There’s a trail, Isabela.”

We follow the drops of liquid back down the stairs, to a sliding door that leads outside. “This path leads to the graveyard, doesn’t it?” I ask Eliza, who is already walking toward the other end of the hallway.

“Isabela, let’s go this way.” She grabs my hand and pulls me to a broken glass window. Wooden planks board the window and we both look for slight openings to peer outside.

“What is happening?” I say, trying to see through the small spaces in between the planks. Behind the wrought-iron gates of the Esperanza family graveyard, I can make out silhouettes of men and women wearing dark cloaks and gloves, encircling something small in their center. A crack in the wind echoes in the air and I finally put two and two together.

“Tell us the truth and this all ends!” Another whiplash startles me and outside I can hear a couple of cackles from the crowd.

“I told you already! I have no idea who she is!” The whip comes in contact with Gregory’s skin a third time, and I’m already running past Eliza and out the door before I realize what I am doing.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When will this cruelty end? I shield my body in front of Gregory, surprising the ones encircling him. “Stop this nonsense at once!” I scream. I sneak a glance at Gregory, lashes cover his body, and blood trickles from his torso down to the freshly cut grass. He sputters out blood and looks at me. “What are you all doing?” I ask, careful not to seem eager to save the man behind me.

“We just wanted answers, Your Highness,” one of them responds, taking off her hood. Another soon follows suit, and another, and another. I recognize a couple of Katya’s guards: some warriors, and some hunters.

“Princess Katya’s death was too sudden, and his appearance seemed too abrupt for it to be a mere coincidence.” A man with a marred face almost snarls at Gregory.

“You’re looking for answers from a man who can’t remember anything? With whips? Were you really concerned with finding Katya’s killer or did you just enjoy torturing someone who might be innocent just because you can?” I spit out.

“How dare you.”

“Oh, how dare I?” I quickly turn my head and step as close as humanly possible to a woman my age, and push her backward. “How dare I? Me, the one who inherits the crown?”

“We don’t want you to lead us.” She glares back at me and I push her back again.

“Okay. I can accept your stance. But how dare you talk back to me?” I shove her back and she stumbles backward. “Me, your princess? Have you forgotten who you are in this pack? Have you forgotten who *I am*?” I raise my hand to hit her again but she slaps my hand away.

“I don’t care!” she growls.

This makes my blood boil instantaneously. I punch her straight in the face, but she dodges quickly. However, my foot connects to her side faster than she can gain back her balance. She tries to stand back up, but I step on her neck. “Me, who is the sister of the person who got killed?” I say, slowly pressing on her airway. I lift my foot ever so slowly and she makes an attempt to claw at me. I kick her so hard in the face I’m sure I knock out a few teeth. “I can respect you not trusting me to be a leader.” I aim for the stomach this time and she doubles over, trying to catch her breath. “I can understand the pain you feel for my sister’s death.” She tries to grab at my ankles and pull me down to her level, yet I dodge quickly. I crouch and pin her arms behind her body, and promptly sit on her waist so she’s unable to move. “And I can accept *you* wanting answers for her death.” I slap her, and she spits at me. I slap her again, harder this time. “But she’s MY sister, and it’s MY crown to inherit, and you,” I point to all of them who are still watching,

“you all need to remember who I AM again, before you talk back to me.” I take a pregnant pause. “How dare I?” I scream menacingly, my voice echoing in the eerily quiet graveyard. “Do you think that because I don’t have powers yet, I’m weaker than my sisters? Weaker than my grandmother?” I punch again, and she groans in despair. “Answer me!” My eyes feel heavy with rage and regret at not being able to save my sister or Gregory.

“No, Your Highness.”

I slap her repeatedly. “Ah! A change of heart, huh? Did you all hear that?” I lift my head and scan the faces of the people around us. Most of them horrified, some of them avert their eyes. *It’s not enough. I need my pound of flesh.* The voice inside my head demands as my bloodlust grows stronger by the minute. I yell out in anguish, pulling one of her arms from behind her and twisting her wrist until I hear it pop. She screams in pain and I giggle. “How about I kill you right here, right now? Make an example out of you? Make sure that everyone here knows I can just be as ruthless as my grandmother, maybe even more?” I grab her tear-stained face. She shakes her head immediately.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness.” She cries her eyes out while I laugh even harder.

“All of you! See what I’ll do the next time someone disrespects me.” I hit her repeatedly, blinded by rage and by sorrow.

“Your Highness, please. That’s enough.” I whip my head so fast in the direction of the voice and he cowers immediately.

That’s the reaction I’m looking for: fear. “I’ll kill you next,” I warn and the man looks down, immediately becoming silent and still. The woman beneath me sputters out apologies and pleas. “Oh, I’m not done with you yet,” I brag, unaware of who is moving closer to me.

“Isabela.” Immediately, I stop my attacks. *Oh no.*

“Queen Mother?”

“Child.” She appears before me regal and frightening as ever, porcelain skin glistening against the moonlit sky. “What are you doing?”

The rage in me still courses through my veins. “She disrespected me,” I reveal simply, gripping the face of the woman before me.

“Oh? What did she do?”

“Insinuated that I don’t care about Katya.” I grin before I continue. “And she openly defied royalty by telling me ‘How dare you.’” I snicker, slowly losing my mind over the absurdity of the situation.

“Please! My Queen! Please save me,” she begs. Aside from her whimpers, the silence stretches for a long while to the point that my grandmother might have me whipped to death. That is until I hear my grandmother cackling with delight.

“Continue, child. I shall watch.”

I look at my grandmother’s cold, vicious, and deadly demeanor. I glance at the men and women behind her, trembling in fear, some looking at me and others looking at their Queen. I smile back at her. “You heard your Queen,” I declare to the girl below me, launching combos at her, stopping only when she ceases to move. By the time I was done, my own blood had mixed in with hers. “I don’t think she’s going to be able to move for a while,” I bellow.

My grandmother walks over to me and examines my face. “And not a scratch on you, impressive.” I bow my head graciously.

“Look at your princess,” my grandmother’s voice echoes in the still night. “This is the face of someone who is a natural-born killer. A demon.” She turns to face Gregory, who is flinching on the grass. “This is someone who is going to kill *you* if you’re not careful.” And just like that, I freeze.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Is this why she didn't stop me? She wanted Gregory to watch?

“Now child,” she caresses my face, a lone finger taps on my chin, “it’s time for you to come to bed. You need to rest.” I reel back, unfamiliar with the gentleness in her touch.

“I want to fight more.” I make it a point to flicker my eyes at Gregory, hoping she gets the message.

“I see. Take him inside then. It’s too cold for you to be doing this outside.” And with that, she leaves.

I, on the other hand, instruct two of my bodyguards. “Bring her to the Omega’s house. I don’t need a weakling amongst the ranks of my warriors.” They bow and carry her back to where she belongs. Some other guards haul Gregory’s tired and bloodied body back into the house, up the stairs and chain him to the floorboards of the empty landing earlier. “Leave us,” I command and this time, they obey almost immediately. Once alone, I carry Gregory’s head in my lap. “Hey, Gregory. Can you hear me?” He groans and I put a hand over his mouth. “Shh! Not so loud. Can you move?” He shakes his head.

“You scared me back there,” he says. I take my hand away in response. “I thought you were going to kill her.”

My brows furrow at the thought. “I would’ve, to be honest. I wanted to break every bone in her body first.”

He exhales sharply. “You have a tendency to be... cruel, don’t you?”

“I’m an Esperanza. I was born to be evil, I guess.”

He laughs at that, before groaning again. “Fuck, those whips really hurt,” he whispers.

“Oh, you’re not into that kind of stuff?” I jokingly say.

“Maybe if I’m the one doing the whipping,” he replies, finding enough strength to give me a pinch on the cheek. I pull his arm away and fold it on his chest.

“Why did you come all the way here?” I ask quietly. His hazel eyes look up at mine.

“You need an ally inside this house. After all, it’s easier to break out of prison when there are two of you inside.” He grins.

“I’m serious, Gregory.”

“Well, I am, too. Your grandmother needs to believe that my pack is weak and stays under the radar. And for that to happen, their Alpha needs to leave.” He shifts uncomfortably from where he lay on my lap. “Otherwise, the whole ‘ambushed by the hired help’ plan might not work at all if she so much as sniffs an ounce of Dark Moon pack blood on me.”

“So, you faked an amnesia?” I snort.

“It was the only thing I could think of earlier. I didn’t plan on getting caught, I thought I could hide somewhere in the estate.” I flick his forehead.

“You idiot. You smell like an Alpha. You think she wouldn’t notice?”

“Yeah, I admit I didn’t think this plan all the way through. But now, I’m here.” He shoots a toothy grin at me and I grimace at the blood splatters all over his face.

“She could’ve beheaded you earlier too, you know?” I say, lightly wiping off the grime.

“Yeah, I think you have that responsibility now.”

“I am not going to kill you.” I slap him on his arm lightly.

“What she said earlier, what was that about?” He tries to sit up, but I stop him.

“You need to lie down and rest.”

He complies. “Okay. Answer my question, though.”

I let out a long sigh. “She wants me to prove how committed I am to the pack... by killing you.”

His eyes widen at that. “Why?”

I shrug. “Because she believes that you’re a lone wolf. An Alpha who has gone rogue. She wants me to sacrifice you to the demon wolf spirits on the day of my eighteenth birthday.” We’re silent for a while, just listening to each other’s ragged breaths.

“Will you?” he asks, breaking the silence first.

“No. I promised you I’d help you. I have no reason to kill you. I don’t want to.” He holds my gaze a fraction of a second longer than I expected, and I look away almost immediately, heart starting to beat rapidly. “Oh, also, I have something to show you.” I tap at his arm and push him lightly off me. “This is the reason why I messaged you yesterday.” I sit up straight and aim at the wall. “Watch closely, okay?” He nods and I concentrate on my fingertips. I say the first incantation I know slowly, and feel the palm of my hands warm up. With an exhale, a large cloud of snow flutters from my hands and travels straight toward the wall. It hits the concrete with a soft thud. “It’s frost,” I emphasize, looking over at Gregory.

Eyes wide with concern, he looks at me and he looks back at the wall. “What? How?”

I shrug. “I found my grandmother’s book of spells, and managed to memorize some words there. I thought nothing of it at first but then I felt called to try saying some of the incantations out loud.”

Focusing again on my hands, I close my eyes and try to control my breath in preparation for the next spell. A bolt of electrical current rapidly shoots from my fingers, leaving burn marks on the wall. “Goddamn. Was that lightning?” he queries in a voice a little too loud for my liking. I scurry over, and clamp a hand on his mouth.

“Not so loud I said!” I whisper-yell. He nods, eyes roaming all over my face. We stay like that for a while, me

lying on top of him and his hands on the side of my thighs. I clear my throat. It's my turn to break the ice. "It's an electrical current. I'm not sure if it's lightning," I answer, getting off of him in the process.

"That's amazing. You think you can get your hands on that book again?" he asks, eyes growing lidded by the minute.

"I'll try," I voice out, softly caressing his head. "Gregory, I think you need to rest now. I'll ask Eliza to help you with your wounds tomorrow." He nods slowly. "But I just want you to remember that I will find a way to save you and your father, so trust me a little more from now on, okay?" I prod at his face.

"Yes, I trust you terribly." He yawns. "I promise, I just do."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"I know what you did yesterday." A voice wakes me from my slumber. "Isabela, wake up." I open my eyes only to see my sister Katarina pointing a slender finger at my face.

"What do you mean?" I ask groggily, sitting up on my bed. I fumble for my phone, checking the time. *Seven thirty a.m. God.*

"You tried to kill someone!" she exclaims, climbing into the bed with me.

"Katarina, it's too early for this. Please, leave me alone." She shakes her head, blonde hair hitting my face a little too hard. I swish it away from my face.

"I will not! I saw the warrior yesterday in the infirmary. You left her half-dead, she's in a coma now."

I nod, not really grasping what she wants from me yet. "And?" I ask, attempting to turn away from her. She pulls me back immediately.

“What do you mean ‘and’? I never knew you to be so... vindictive. What happened?” She shakes my shoulders, waking me up from my drowsiness.

“I found them torturing him,” I start but quickly correct myself. “The man from yesterday, I mean. And I tried to stop them. That warrior said something idiotic and I snapped. I can barely remember what I did to her, but it must be pretty serious if she was put in a coma.”

“You snapped?” she queries incredulously.

I bob my head and close my eyes. “Yes, I did. It felt like she wanted me to know that she—that *they* all loved Katya more than we do. Like they knew her more than I did. I couldn’t have that.” My fists clench in anger once more. “They need to remember that even though I was disconnected from this entire pack, I wasn’t detached to my family. No one knows you more than I do. They need to remember who they’re talking to.”

At this, I hear Katarina giggle. “Wow, you sounded really sweet right now. In your own, twisted way, of course.”

I try to push her off the bed, but she quickly grabs onto my arm. “I am not twisted,” I emphasize, reluctantly taking my arm back from her.

“Yes, you are. I have never met someone so bloodthirsty as you. The mark of a true demon.” This rings in my ear like a curse rather than a compliment.

“Kat, do you ever wish you weren’t born into this family?” I blurt out and feel Katarina’s head turn to look at me. I keep my eyes trained on the ceiling above. “I mean, do you wish you could’ve been normal? Human, even?” It’s my turn to look at her now.

“I don’t know. I try not to think about the ‘what-ifs.’ It distracts me from the present.” She shrugs. “But I won’t lie, I am a bit curious. I want to know what it could be like to, you know, not smell anything and everything from a million miles away.” I laugh at her insane analogy.

“Do you like having powers, then?” I ask again, turning toward her.

“Yeah, I do.” She smiles at me. “It makes me feel special. Powerful.”

“How do you control the flames?” I press on and she scrunches her nose.

“How did you know what my power is?”

I blink, raising an eyebrow. “I saw you use it yesterday, remember?”

“Oh, right!” She giggles. “Um, it comes with experience. Sometimes, the flames get harder to control. But I find that when I concentrate on certain areas of my target, for example, it’s easier to manipulate the size of the flames. Oh, and the intensity of the hits increases when I zero in on my... prey.” She tickles my sides and I giggle non-stop.

A knock on my door stops us both from our banter. “Mistress, it’s time for breakfast!” Eliza’s voice rings through my room. “Oh, Mistress Katarina. I had no idea you were here.” She bows respectfully.

Katarina climbs out of bed and waves a hand in front of her face. “Nah, it’s fine. I’m going to get ready too. Isabela, make sure to join breakfast!” Katarina says a bit too cheery for my taste.

“I’m going back to bed the moment you walk out that door.” I stretch my limbs and fluff my pillows again. I feel a pull on my waist, forcing me on the ground. “Ow! What the hell, Kat?” She and Eliza laugh.

“I said get up and get ready. Now, young lady.”

I grimace at her. “Ugh, you’re not that old. You don’t get to call me that.”

“Oh, but I am your older sister. So, you have to do as I say.” She smiles at me one last time before shutting the door behind her.

“I really want to go back to bed.”

Eliza pouts sarcastically at me. “Aw, the little princess wants her beauty rest?”

She walks over to me and hits me with one of my pillows. “I can’t believe you! You randomly went rogue on me yesterday, started assaulting one of your constituents, who, by the way, you were supposed to convince to like you, and ended up almost killing the poor thing!” She hits me again. “And now you want to keep being selfish? No! Absolutely not. Go out there, make friends, otherwise you can kiss your crown goodbye,” she hisses, marches down to the exit, and then slams the door behind her.

I sigh. *Eliza’s scary when she’s angry.* I reluctantly get ready and head out the door.

In the dining room, I’m joined by my sister and my grandmother. The room is filled with the fresh aroma of bread and croissants, chocolate mousse, and coffee. I sit down beside my grandmother, just as Katarina fixes her plate and cutlery in front of me. She picks up a croissant and places it on my plate.

“Ah, we have a special guest, ladies. So, please don’t start eating yet.” We both look up from our plates in confusion. Footsteps echo from the hallway toward the dining room.

“Good morning.” I freeze, recognizing the owner of that voice.

“Good morning, please sit down.” My grandmother gestures at a seat beside Katarina. My eyes widen at the face sitting across from me.

Gregory, what are you up to now?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I have plans for you, my dear.” My grandmother’s icy gaze pierces through Gregory’s tough facade; he looks shaken, but he’s holding himself quite well. Katarina and I, on the other hand, keep glancing at each other, unsure of what is about to happen, of what we have to expect.

What in the world is she up to now?

“Please, help yourself.” She raises one hand and maids immediately lay down an extra plate, cutlery, and an empty cup in front of Gregory. “As this will be the last time that you’ll get special treatment from me. Well, from everyone here.” She smiles wide, and Gregory seems more confused than scared at this point.

“What do you mean?” he says cautiously, and my grandmother leans back on her chair.

“You need to be useful around here. You don’t look weak enough to fit in with the Omegas, and I am in no way going to allow you to join my warriors or sentinels.” She picks up her mug filled with black liquid. Half of me knows it’s coffee, but the other half is scared that it might be something more sinister.

I hope it’s not what I think it might be. Because if I’m right, all hell breaks loose.

“Therefore, I’ll have you become Katarina’s personal... plaything.” She glances at Katarina who seems to be in complete and utter shock at the words that are coming out of my grandmother’s mouth.

“What?” she screeches.

“Don’t you dare yell at me, child,” my grandmother warns.

“My apologies, Queen Mother. But what do you mean? Why am I the one responsible for this... stranger?” There’s a hint of indignation in her tone, which is a surprise because Katarina is the poster child for a “picture-perfect” princess.

“Ah! That reminds me, I have yet to hear your name. Do you remember it?”

At this moment, time seems to stop for me and Gregory. I peek at him, trying my best to keep calm and to be as stoic as possible. “It’s Gr—” He coughs and catches himself before he can say anything more. “Grayson.” He sneaks a glance at me and I fight the urge to laugh.

Nice save.

“Very well, Grayson.” She points a long, bony finger at me. “This is Isabela. But she’s not the one you should be worried about.” And then she points at my sister. “This is Katarina, she will be your new Mistress. You are to address her only as ‘Princess, Your Highness, or Mistress.’ You are to assist her in everything she does and do every single thing she says.” My grandmother pauses, taking a sip from her mug before continuing. “For example, if she asks you to bark, you bark, no questions asked. It’s either you agree to these terms or I’ll have my men beat you until it’s ingrained in your memory.” My grandmother folds her hands on her lap and stares at Gregory, daring him to speak up. “Am I understood?”

Both Katarina and I are dumbfounded at the scene unfolding in front of our very eyes. My grandmother appears unaware of the tension in the room, and Gregory doesn’t speak, but keeps his head down the whole time. “But I already have a personal assistant,” Katarina starts; however, one look from our reigning monarch and she’s instantly as quiet as a mouse.

“Then you’ll have two. Make use of this one, however way you want, in the meantime. As a chef, as a sparring partner, or as a maid, I don’t care.” The smile on my grandmother’s face is gentle, but her whole aura is nothing but menacing as she gives Gregory another death stare. “I have yet to hear a reply from you, boy.”

At this, Gregory nods. “Yes, my Queen.” Pleased with his response, my grandmother digs in her plate without another word. Katarina keeps sneaking glances at Gregory, looking cautious and doubtful of his very existence in the dining room. Her eyes flit to mine, pleading for an excuse to leave the room. I give her a small shrug.

Deal with it for now, sis. I can't help you.

I keep to myself after breakfast, visiting the Omegas and ensuring their needs are met. They're helping out with the laundry today, and they seem to be getting along well with the others. Tommy, a nine-year-old boy, grabs me by the hand and pulls me down to his level. “What's up, little man?” I smile at him, ruffling his dark hair a bit.

“Someone wants to talk to you!” he whispers and discreetly hands me a small note. I take it from him and he skips away to join the other kids in separating the wash.

Meet me inside the Omega's house.

“It must be Vera,” I softly say, tucking in the note in my jean pocket. I separate myself from the crowd and start walking to the small cabin that the Omegas share. I step into the windowless and dark room. “Vera?” I say into the void. I feel a hand creep behind me and grip my mouth shut. “Mph!” I start to protest, gearing into my fighting stance, when the owner of the hand starts talking.

“Shh! It's me,” a deep voice states.

“Gregory?” My eyes start to adjust and I can slowly make out the silhouette of a man with a muscular body. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?” I half-yell.

“Not so loud!” He steps closer to me, and I back away on impulse, hitting the wall behind me. “I just wanted to talk to you.”

I wait for him to continue, but he stares at me. “Well? Talk.” I poke at his chest. *Damn, he's like a brick wall.*

“Right. I wanted to let you know that what happened at breakfast earlier,” he leans down to my ear, sending shivers down my spine, “was all planned by your sister.”

Chapter Thirty

“We should be more careful from now on,” he declares, hot breath fanning the side of my face softly as he breathes in and out.

“What? How? She looked just as confused as I was...” I trail off, trying to recall the weird morning we all had.

“Well, your sister is quite the actress.” He sighs and pauses for a brief moment, as if trying to find the right words to say. “After you left last night, I woke up to someone... touching me.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What did you do to my sister?”

He shakes his head violently. “I didn’t do anything! If anything, she was the one acting suspicious last night. She was

beside me, treating my wounds. I asked her where'd she get the first-aid kit, and she said that another person was brought in to dress my injuries, but she told that person to go away so we could have some, uh, alone time."

I shiver at the thought of my sister and Gregory together. "I'm assuming the person she sent away was... Eliza?" I nod.

He clears his throat and I motion for him to continue. "So, I asked her who she is and what she was doing, and she told me she's the firstborn princess. And she wanted to 'save' me," Gregory emphasizes the word with air quotes.

"Are you sure you weren't imagining things? I've been told that there are ghosts inside the estate." I chuckle, attempting to push him away from me, but he doesn't budge.

"Isabela, I'm serious. Can you please listen?" He gently holds my face, forcing me to focus on nothing but him.

"I am listening, but so far your story sounds ridiculous," I whisper back. There's a pause as he tries to gather his thoughts. I inhale gently and get hit with a sweet, irresistible smell. *His scent is driving me crazy right now.* "Gregory, you need to—" I try to push him away, but his rough hands catch mine and pin them to the wall behind me.

"No, you need to listen." His face is inches away, and I try to focus on anything else besides his lips. "After putting ointment on me, she said that there's only one way to help me from getting tortured every single day, and that is if I had ties to the royal family. I asked her what she meant by that, but she ignored me. Instead, she told me to be ready and to trust her." He visibly gulps. "And true enough, this morning I became her personal assistant. I want to think that maybe I was being delusional yesterday, but after you left, she pulled me into her room. You know what she said right after?" He sighs, letting go of my arms. I shake my head. "She said, 'You're welcome, by the way.' After that, she gave me a list of things to do." Gregory gulps again, visibly confused. "I need you to be careful, Isabela. I heard about what happened to your other sister, and I know you have no reason to doubt her. But

something in me... just doesn't trust her." I stare at him incredulously.

"You've got to be kidding me. Katarina is the only one I have left, and you're telling me that I should stay away from her?" I almost screech at him. "You're right, maybe you are delusional." I try to get away from him, but he blocks my way. "Get out of my way," I warn.

"How she spoke to me was very different from earlier today. It was like she was your grandmother. Cold, calculative, and detached." He grabs me by the shoulders gently. "Isabela, I know that your family is important to you. But remember, in this life," he gives me a gentle shake, "in our life, there are not a lot of people we can't trust. Everyone is out there, following his or her own self-serving ambitions. I'm not telling you to do anything now, but I just wanted to let you know that your sister managed to trick your grandmother into... bending the rules a little bit. And this came after you were told to kill me on your birthday."

I stay frozen in place, unable to process the information given to me. "So? What do you want me to do? Stay away from her?" I take deep, consecutive breaths. The image of Katarina turning evil, turning into my grandmother is nightmare fuel. But now that I think about it, it's not impossible.

"No. But be careful about the information you share with her. She absolutely cannot know that we know each other, that we work together. We don't know if we can trust her, at least not yet. Her act of saving me from getting tortured seemed innocent enough, but I didn't think it was for free. I'm going to pay for that, one way or another," Gregory says with a low voice.

"Okay, I got it." I nod in agreement. *He's right. I can't just trust anyone. Not now, and not in this household.* "So, what are you going to do now?" He steps a little bit away, and I feel myself start to breathe normally again.

"Just like what your grandmother said earlier," he speaks at a low volume. "I'll do whatever she asks, make

myself available at her every beck and call. She may be useful in the future, we never know.”

“You’ll make her trust you?” I ask after a moment of silence.

He grins, opening the door. “Yes. I’ll use her, too.”

Chapter Thirty-One

“Take what should have been yours,” I hear my grandmother say to someone as I pass by her study on the way back to my room.

I stop for a moment, waiting to hear who she is talking to, but Eliza appears at the end of the hallway beckoning me to come to her. “Yes?” I ask, smiling at my friend.

“Last night, Mistress Katarina—” I cut her off with a wave of my hand.

“I know.” She nods. Eliza follows me inside my bedroom, and immediately gets to work on replacing my curtains.

“How did you know? Did she tell you?” she queries, struggling to reach for my tapestries next.

“Gregory told me. He warned me,” I mention, stepping closer to her, “not to trust *her*.”

Eliza stops all movement. “What? Why?” I sigh, leaning against my small bookcase.

“After you left, she started saying all these weird things to him. Like, she’ll save him from getting hurt, asked him to trust her. And get this,” I take the tapestries from her and drop them in her basket, “he told me that him becoming Kat’s personal assistant was all part of her plan.”

“Do you believe him?” Eliza asks after a while.

“Yes. No. Well, I don’t want to but I kind of believe him...” I trail off, taking my things off the shelf so Eliza can dust them.

“Which is it?” She turns to look at me, raising an eyebrow.

“The look on Katarina’s face when my grandmother proposed the assistant part looked so real. But Gregory went out of his way to come here and help me.”

“Let me ask you again, which one do you believe?” Eliza smiles at me.

“Gregory,” I utter with a shaky voice. “I love my sisters. But he’s right. There are not a lot of people I can trust right now. Not even Katarina.” I sigh. Eliza gets to my wardrobe and notices the hole from when I was practicing my new abilities. She stares at me and points at it. “Um, I can explain.”

Eliza taps her foot against the floor repeatedly. “This is an antique. You ruined it.”

I put my hands up in an attempt to pacify her. “Yeah, I know. But I have a very good explanation for that.”

“Then explain,” she states. Concentrating hard, I try to remember Katarina’s advice about focusing more on the area around my target. I try to imagine containing the power around my hands instead of letting it out into the open. I lift a finger up in the air, and invoke the spell that tumbles a little too freely from my lips. My finger starts to feel warm, and heat pools behind my eyes. “I-Isabela?” Eliza calls out to me cautiously, looking directly at my eyes. “What’s happening?” I ignore her and focus hard on containing my power. The sudden appearance of electric bursts from my finger shocks me, but surprisingly doesn’t hurt. Eliza backs away almost immediately.

I think of it spreading around my finger and all over my hand. The currents dance around from my fingertips, around my palms, and settle just above my wrists. “This is my explanation,” I whisper.

“What the hell... is that?” Eliza takes a small step toward me.

“It’s my power, I guess. Well, technically I learned it from my grandmother’s book of spells.”

“What?! You took it?” she almost yells.

“Yeah, but she found out that I took it.” I try to concentrate on my other hand, reciting the other spell I’ve memorized. “But before she could confiscate the book from me, I managed to learn these tricks.” A sudden chill appears in the air, and I concentrate on keeping the frost around my palms. “Pretty cool, huh?” I grin.

“Yes. Now, make it stop.” I let go of the feeling of my powers, and in an instant, they disappear back into my hands.

I'm getting good at this.

Eliza plops down on my bed, and I follow after her. “You really are the chosen one, huh?” she remarks, pushing my shoulders with her own. “There’s no way anyone can have two powers at once. Even your sisters had to wait until they were eighteen, and even then, they only have one power to work with.” She shakes her head.

“Yeah, too bad I only got to memorize two.” I shrug. “But I feel very powerful. I want to keep practicing but maybe it’s too dangerous to stay indoors.” My eyes flick over to the hole in my wardrobe.

“You can always practice in secret outside. Others wouldn’t dare bother you anyway,” Eliza offers.

I nod. “Hey, keep it a secret, okay?” I say, raising my pinky finger.

Eliza interlocks it with her own. “Of course.” She smiles, and continues to clean my bedroom.

After Eliza leaves, I head out to the Omega’s house. “Hey,” a familiar voice pops out behind me.

“Gregory, I mean, hello, Grayson.” I grin, not bothering to look back.

“What are you up to this afternoon?” He trails behind me.

“Going to see my children,” I simply state.

“Huh?” He spins me around to face him.

“I’m looking after the Omegas in our pack. We’ve got a couple who were close to becoming homeless. I can’t just sit around and watch them get eaten by the wolves.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Can I come?” He smiles and I feel my heart start to beat faster.

He looks even more handsome against the sunset.

“S-sure,” I stammer. “Ah, but Katarina will get suspicious if you’re not beside her.”

He shrugs. “She told me to spy on you, actually.” That stops me in my tracks.

“What?”

“Yeah. Something about wanting to keep you safe. But I think she just wants to know what you’re doing.” He pats me on the head. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe from her.” He winks at me and I roll my eyes. We walk in silence toward the lone cabin far removed from the rest of the estate. Around fifteen Omegas loiter all over the cabin, waiting for orders or waiting to get beaten up for no reason. “What do you plan on doing with them today?” Gregory queries. We’re surrounded by tall oak trees and thick bramble bushes.

I smile at him. “I’m making my own elite team.”

“But... they’re Omegas. Look at them, they look so frail. Not an ounce of muscle on them.” Gregory looks lost in thought. I clap my hands together. As soon as the Omegas hear the sound, their auras change. Focused but in a very relaxed state, they nimbly navigate the thorns from the bramble bushes, and climb the trees with speed and ease. I feel pride in my “people” when I see Gregory’s shocked face. “What exactly are you trying to build here?”

“Well, if you must know, I’m simply trying to build my personal assassins.” I wink in the shrewdest way I can.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“You really are unhinged,” Gregory comments after joining today’s training session with the Omegas.

“What do you mean?” I slump down on the grass, feeling the cool breeze of the wind brush gently against my face.

“I lived in New York right after the uprisings. Some of my distant relatives brought me there to keep me safe. And when I was planning to come back, I wanted to dig into your family’s profile.” He lies beside me. “Including you.”

“Oh? What did you find?”

“Reports of you trying to run away, personal accounts of people who have worked for your grandmother telling me that out of everyone in this household, you were their favorite. Although, you tend to go a little... crazy with the fighting.” He smiles at the last one. “At first I didn’t believe them, I mean look at you.” He gestures at my body. “You look light as a feather. So, I told my men, ‘Ah, this one’s going to be easy.’” He sighs. “I wasn’t aware you were made out of pure muscle.” He chuckles.

“Yeah, years of training in secret really had its advantages,” I say as I punch him lightly on the shoulder. “Speaking of your men, do they know what happened to you?”

Gregory shakes his head. “No. Though, I did tell them that this might happen, but they shouldn’t get too worried.” I feel my nose scrunch at that.

“Why? If I were a part of your pack, I’d start looking for a new Alpha.” I laugh as he attempts to push me away.

“Well, I told them it’s going to be okay because,” he leans in to whisper in my ear, “I have you, my dear.” I shiver at his husky tone, remembering all the times he called me that when we were little.

Should I tell him I knew him back then? Turning my head slightly, I see his face inches away from mine. “Don’t be ridiculous,” I whisper back.

His eyes stare at my lips a little too long for my liking. “I’m serious,” he says, closing the gap slowly between us. I gulp and sit up straight.

Isabela, this is not good, I mentally berate myself at the continuous pounding of my heart against my ribcage. *It’s his scent. You’re not actually attracted to him.*

Gregory sits up, too. “Am I becoming too much for you to handle?” he asks, a cocky grin adorning his chiseled face.

“Shut up.” I am about to retort when I hear footsteps scurry toward us.

“Aren’t you two done with your date yet?” Luca, a sixteen-year-old boy, hands me a water bottle.

“Shouldn’t you be sparring?” I say sternly.

“We’re done for the day.” Lisa, his twin sister, plops down beside me.

“And the others?” I ask, and they point toward the group. Some are stretching their limbs, some practice the shadow boxing techniques Gregory taught them earlier. We regroup with everyone. “How do you feel after today’s training?” I ask afterward. Hidden a few yards away from the cabin, I clear out a space where the Omegas can train freely in their spare time. I look over at Gregory, hazel eyes gazing over the group.

“So, as soon as training sessions are over, they go back to acting like weaklings?” he presses on a little too loudly.

I laugh. “Yes, it’s a way of keeping them safe, too. As soon as I ascend the throne, I’m formalizing this group as an exclusive team working for me.”

He nods slowly. “Sounds to me like you’ve watched a lot of bad superhero movies.” My hand flies to connect with his chest, but he catches it mid-air. “Too slow, my dear,” he teases, grinning as I snatch my hand away from his.

“I have a question, Mistress Isabela!” I hear Luca’s voice call out to me.

“Yes, Luca?”

“I don’t want to say it in front of him.” He eyes Gregory up and down.

“It’s okay, he’s on our side.” I wave him off.

He sighs and continues, “I don’t mean to sound rude, but me and some of the people here would like to know how you plan on fighting if they stage a revolt before your eighteenth birthday?”

“What?” I gesture for him to stand.

“There are rumors going around the estate, here on the lower levels of the pack.”

“Just how big is your pack?” Gregory chimes in, and I elbow him on his side.

“Rumors regarding what?” I ask, motioning for Luca to continue.

“About how unfit you are to rule. After the death of Mistress Katya, it seems that the guards at the frontlines favor your big sister more now. Tommy overheard some of the kitchen staff talking about Mistress Katarina’s ability to bring everyone in the pack together with ease.”

“The discontent has grown,” Vera expresses, standing up with Luca. “Especially right after you nearly killed one guard that one time. Most of them say that you might become even more of a tyrant than your grandmother.” She twiddles with the end of her shirt. “We’ve been doing the best we can in

trying to fit in the pack. But I don't know what else you can do to gain favor amongst everyone."

I look at the faces of the Omegas before me. "Yeah, I've been trying to rack my brain for a solution, too. It's not like I can just show up and help around the house one day. Even that seems a little disingenuous." I sigh.

"But can you fight your sister?" Vera asks again. "She's had a head start at gaining her power. Her flames grow stronger every day."

I shake my head. "I can. Don't worry about it." I smile, but I can't ignore the uneasiness that's creeping around everyone's head. "Why don't I show you what I mean?" I smile, warming up my hands for my next trick.

"Isabela, are you sure?" Gregory queries.

I nod. "They're loyal to me. Don't worry." This time, I try to think of the spell in my head, instead of saying it out loud. My left hand starts to feel tingly and warm, and I point at a particularly overgrown bramble bush with my finger. A bolt of electricity crackles through the air, blue light reflected in the eyes of the Omegas. In one swift movement, I cut the bramble bush in half, disintegrating most of its leaves in the process. My eyes widen in surprise. *I can't believe that worked!* I quickly lift my other hand, concentrating on the trunk of the nearest oak tree. I don't even have to think of the entire spell at this point; I just have to focus on the cool air beginning to fill my palm. I exhale sharply, and a large, pointed icicle forms in mid-air and shoots at the center of the oak's trunk. "See?" I say after a beat of silence. "I'm strong, too." I smile wide at the astonished faces of the Omegas. Gregory grins beside me. "There's no need to worry," I announce, relishing the feeling of being able to control my powers even more. After dismissing the training session and scattering the evidence of our little rendezvous around the clearing, I head to my room with Gregory tailing behind me.

"I have to get back first. Someone might see us together."

“Most of the guards are on patrol, and the house is relatively empty at this time,” I reply.

Gregory quickens his steps a little bit more. “I’ll see you around, then. Maybe I can tag along in the next training session?” he offers and I nod.

“Grayson?” Katarina’s voice suddenly calls out from somewhere in the hallway.

Dammit, we can’t get caught.

I look around for a hiding place and see the door to a dumbwaiter we rarely use. “This’ll have to do,” I mutter, squeezing in with Gregory’s help.

As soon as I close the door, Katarina appears. “There you are,” she notes, a little too sly for my liking. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Mistress Katarina, others might see you getting too... handsy.” Gregory’s voice seems a little shaky, and my blood starts to boil.

“That’s not going to happen. And even if they do, they won’t care. Do you want to know why?” She giggles. “Because you’re mine now, Grayson. Remember that,” Katarina breathes out.

Chapter Thirty-Three

What. The. Actual. Fuck, I think to myself, feeling my legs start to cramp as I continue to listen in on Katarina's attempts at seducing Gregory.

"Mistress Katarina, I need to get back and help the other personal assistants set the table for dinner." Gregory's voice is firm and neutral, and I hear Katarina's petulant sigh.

"Wait, before you leave. Did she do... anything weird? Fight anyone? Mysteriously gain a friend?" My sister seems eager to know what I did today, which makes me question how many times she's had someone spy on me.

Was Gregory right all this time? Am I too blind to see the wickedness in my sister's eyes?

“No, Mistress. She spent the day with the Omegas, helping them learn how to read and write. She said that it’ll be useful to them one day,” Gregory lies with ease. At this, Katarina laughs heartily.

“Jeez, I don’t know what’s gotten into her these days. Insisting on helping the weakest of the pack? These Omegas are nothing but punching bags for the warriors when they’re bored.” She leans against the dumbwaiter and my eyes go wide with fear. “I thought she’d do something worthwhile. Turns out she’s still as hopeless as ever.” I feel a twinge of pain start to grip my chest. “I think she’s a little unstable, especially after our sister has died. I want you to keep a close eye on her, but don’t speak to her. She might lure you in with her beauty, but make no mistake. She’s very... unpredictable. I don’t want you getting into trouble.” Katarina’s words pierce through me, shattering all of my core memories with her.

“She’s unstable? Don’t speak to her?” She thinks I’m nothing but a crazy person. I can’t believe this. I’ve never felt so betrayed. I try to stop the trembling of my lips, biting them until I draw blood. Stray tears flow from my eyes, but I make no move to wipe them away.

“I see. Mistress, I really have to leave.” Gregory remains calm amidst Katarina’s short tirade against my character.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay and play with me instead?” I roll my eyes at her coy tone. “I can play nice tonight.” I gag a little at that.

“No, Mistress. Good night.” Gregory’s footsteps fall farther and farther away.

“Ugh!” Katarina says, with a stomp of her foot. “Having an Alpha on my side will make me more powerful. We can even make our own pack, and yet, I give him every chance and he doesn’t care,” she mutters, leaning away from the dumbwaiter’s door and slowly walks away.

I wait for a few minutes inside the small space, processing the things I’ve heard just now.

She's worried about me, but she thinks I'm hopeless? She says these things behind my back but when she's with me she acts like the noble, perfect older sister. I let myself cry silently at the thoughts swirling around my head.

I wipe my face after a while, listening keenly if someone is waiting for me outside. Once I assure myself that the coast is clear, I hop off the dumbwaiter and sprint to my room. I lock the door behind me and head straight to the shower. Anxious to clean myself from the horrible day I've had.

Scrubbing my body furiously, I feel my grief turn into anger. "Today proves that I can't trust her and she feels the same way. And what was the whole thing with Gregory? Is she actually just using him or is she interested in something more?" I keep talking to myself, unaware of the red patches I've made all over my body. Once the cold water hits my body, I start to relax a little bit. "Two can play at this game," I say out loud. "I'll play even better." Armed with a new resolve to prove that I'm worthy of my throne, I step out of my shower and change into an appropriate outfit for dinner.

I slip on a corset dress, texting Eliza to come in and help me in tightening it. A knock on my door signals my friend's arrival and I open it without even looking at her. I hear the door close as I turn and point at the delicate string decorating my back.

"Eliza, could you please help me? I don't want to be late for dinner," I state, putting on my watch and a few rings on my hands. Hands pull at the seams of my dress delicately, slowly. Warmth spreads across my back as hot breath fans my bare skin.

"Is this too tight?"

I suddenly realize this person isn't who I thought it was. "Gregory!" I spin a little too quickly, and twist my ankle. I stumble and the back of my legs hit the edge of my bed while Gregory makes a move to catch my hand and help me regain my balance, but I pull him on top of me instead. "Ow." I try to shake off the whiplash, but feel a certain pressure kneading on the delicate part of my torso.

I look down and see Gregory's long fingers gripping my left breast. He looks down too and instantly moves his hand away once he realizes what he's done. "I'm sorry!" he almost yells, but I cup my hand around his mouth.

"Not so loud. People might hear you in here." He nods and I lift my hand away from his face.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to do that. I promise."

"Why are you even in here?" I breathe out.

"I wanted to ask if you're okay. I know you heard what your sister said earlier. I was a little worried, and should have said something too when I entered your room earlier, but you just started ordering me around and I wasn't thinking clearly and I'm sorry—" I lift a finger to shush his rambling.

"Okay, it's fine. We're good. Don't worry." I laugh lightly, and he starts chuckling too. "Holy hell, what a day," I express after a giggling fit.

"Couldn't agree more." Gregory smiles, still on top of me.

I hear the familiar creak of my door opening. Someone gasps in surprise and we both turn to look at the stranger who just stepped inside.

Chapter Thirty-Four

“Am I interrupting, Mistress Isabela?” Eliza pops in a question, locking the door behind her.

She looks mad as hell. Gregory immediately pushes himself off of me, trying his best to run out the door but Eliza blocks him. I sit up straight and feel the strap of my dress slide down my bare arm. *Great, now this looks even worse.*

She stares daggers at the man before her. “Explain yourself.”

“We weren’t doing anything!” Gregory justifies, indignant.

“Gregory, just go. It’s dangerous if someone sees or hears you in here. Eliza, let him leave,” I order, pulling up the strap of my dress. Eliza unlocks the door and Gregory hurries outside. “He fell on top of me because I got surprised that he was in my room.” I shrug. “I thought it was you who knocked at first so I opened it without thinking.” I point at my back. “Please finish what he started.” Eliza sighs and pulls at my corset a little too tightly. “Eliza, can’t you do it gently?” She ignores my question, and instead continues tying up my dress.

“You’re both lucky it was me who walked in. If it was your grandmother, you two would’ve been hanged by now.” She spins me around and forces me to sit on the bed. Getting the hairdryer from the bathroom, she starts fixing my hair for me. “Start being a little more careful from now on, Isabela. Your enemies are looking for a reason to get rid of you. Don’t give them any reason.” I stay silent as I absorb Eliza’s warning.

“I heard there were rumors about me now,” I softly say.

“Yes. But not too many people believe you’re as bad as your grandmother. Still, that little stunt you did with the guard last time planted doubts inside everyone’s heads. You weren’t thinking clearly.” She sighs and lifts my head to look at my

face. “Your father used to tell us that we shouldn’t just act on our emotions, we have to think about things too. You say you have a lot of things you want to change around here. You told me you want to help Gregory and his father. You won’t be able to do that if you can’t stay out of trouble, can you?” Eliza moves away and starts putting makeup on my face.

“These past few days have been difficult for you, I know. But these times are crucial, too. You have more enemies who are out to get you as your eighteenth birthday nears, so toughen up a little and start using your mind more than your heart. Do you understand?” Eliza stops what she’s doing to look deep into my eyes. I nod.

Ugh. She’s actually right. Lucky for me I just haven’t been caught.

“You can’t lose to them,” she states and she’s silent after that, letting her words linger in the air. “Now go. You’re dining with the head of the guards, warriors, and sentinels tonight.” I stand up, smoothing the wrinkles on my dress. One swift glance at the mirror, and I realize what Eliza has done. She styled my hair in a half-up, half-down ponytail. Little ringlets of my hair frame my face in the front. She put little makeup on me, just a bit of blush, concealer, and highlight. “There. You look like a Queen.” She appears behind me, cleaning up the back of my dress a bit. “Make sure to act like one.” She shoves me out the door.

I start my long walk toward the dining room. Breathing slowly, trying to gain an ounce of courage with every step. The sound of my shoes hitting the floorboards distract me from my thoughts, from the events of the day, and from my sister’s poisonous words.

“Let’s do this,” I mumble, entering the dining room floor. About forty pairs of eyes look at me immediately, and I gracefully stop in my tracks. I stand tall and smile innocently, savoring the attention, knowing exactly how I look in the public’s eye. “Good evening, everyone,” I announce softly, greeting everyone on the way to the dining table.

Taking my place on the left side of my grandmother, I sit and keep my eyes trained on the plates of food before me. “Isabela, it’s nice to see you cleaned up and on time,” my grandmother whispers, trailing a finger under my chin and lifting it up, making me sit up straighter. “Were you doused in holy water?” She smiles.

“No, Queen Mother.” I smile back and keep my mouth shut. *No retorts this time, Isabela. Keep it cool.*

“Isabela.” I lift my head and see Katarina beaming wide at me from my grandmother’s right side.

“Yes, sis?” I try not to make the gritting of my teeth noticeable and force myself to return the same gesture.

“You look so beautiful.” I roll my eyes at her and smirk just as I would if we were in private. She giggles.

She doesn’t suspect a thing. You’re doing great, Isabela. Focusing on the faces around the dining table, I give each one of them a smile and a wave. My eyes land on a familiar, handsome face. He’s eyeing me a little too long, and I give him—Gregory—a soft smile and break eye contact immediately.

“Let’s start with today’s agenda.” My grandmother clasps her hands together and everyone in the room stills. “My Beta just received a tip that—” But before my grandmother can finish her sentence, a shrill scream cuts through the air.

Chapter Thirty-Five

“What was that?” My grandmother stays seated in her chair, but everyone is on high alert. Heavy footsteps can be heard hurrying in the hallway.

“Stay away!” someone yells—one of our older guards, I suppose—and a growl pierces through our ears.

Someone turned without my grandmother’s permission?

“My Queen!” Another guard yells as he enters the dining room. Before he can utter another word, his body is ripped to shreds by a werewolf right before our very eyes.

“Save the royal family!” the lead warrior screams and starts to shift. I see now a large, black wolf in front of me as he starts attacking rogue wolves that have entered the dining room.

I spot a knife on the table and arm myself with it. *Can’t exactly use my powers now, can I? God, I wish I brought my*

silver daggers with me.

Someone grips my arm from behind. “Get behind me, Isabela,” Katarina commands and pulls me behind her, shielding my view.

“Katarina, I can fight.”

She spins around quickly. “I know. But we both don’t know how you fare against fully-formed wolves. So, let them handle this first.” She guards me with her hands, and I feel the heat emanating from them.

Is she acting out of care? Or is this one of her schemes to look good in front of everyone?

My eyes narrow at the back of her blonde head. I try to subtly move around her so I can look at what’s happening, but she pushes me aside as a brown wolf is thrown by a Sentinel, hitting the wall behind us. “Holy fuck,” I say, looking at the blood pooling around its body.

“Isabela!” Katarina shrieks, motioning me to run.

I shake my head. “I’m not leaving you!” I yell back. I step away from the mangled body ahead. A growl so close to my ear sends shivers down my spine. I spin, ready to attack with my knife when the whole creature is lifted up in the air and repeatedly slammed against the floor. I can hear the bones breaking inside the beast, and I know immediately that my grandmother is the one controlling its body. I scan the entire floor before finally settling on the calm and collected atmosphere surrounding my grandmother. She looks at me and beckons me to come closer to her. I try to, but out of the corner of my eye, another wolf is headed straight for her. “Watch out!” I squeak, but she seems distracted by the enemies in front of her.

I start to sprint; however, someone else collides with the wolf about to attack the Queen. Both of them land in the middle of the room. I squint and recognize the figure immersed in the action scene: Gregory. His entire human body pins the creature to the ground, and with one swift movement, he twists its neck. The wolf slumps to the floor, lifeless.

“Are you alright, Queen Mother?” he asks in earnest. My grandmother, stunned at the gesture of who she considered a nuisance before, can only nod in response. Gregory assumes a fighting stance in front of her, just as she focuses on another wolf to attack.

Katarina pulls me to the side, away from any visible threat. “Isabela, are you alright?” She scans me for any visible injuries.

“Yes, I’m okay. Are you okay?” I ask her too.

She nods, looking around us. “They’ve got us surrounded.” I turn and look at the carnage that’s unfolding.

“They’re not ours, are they?” I query hesitantly.

“No, I don’t think they are. They look different. Wilder.” I glance at her then, expression unreadable. Her eyes narrow at something and she immediately steps in front of me. She lifts her arms to aim at something I can’t see.

A sudden wave of heat courses in the air, and Katarina’s unknown target screams in pain until it can’t scream anymore. She steps aside to deal with another wolf, and I am confronted with the charred remains of what resembles a wolf. Tufts of fur still connected to some of its skin, blood and guts completely disintegrated.

She... cremated it. I didn't know she was this powerful. I fight the urge to vomit at the ghastly scene, focusing instead on my surroundings for any impending threats. One by one, the enemies seem to fall down, slowly decreasing in numbers and knowing that they were outmatched.

I hear quick footfalls run toward me and I turn my head in time to see a gray wolf lunge at my torso. I slide to the floor to meet it halfway and quickly slice across its neck, blood pouring out almost instantly. Warm liquid hits my neck and body, and I push the beast off of me.

“I ruined my favorite dress!” I complain as an immediate response.

Katarina is beside me in an instant. “We’ll get you a new one, sis.” She grabs me and pulls me toward our grandmother.

“Stay close and stay alert,” my grandmother orders, and we flank her side. “No, Isabela. Get behind us. We can’t afford to lose you.” I obey the command of the Queen, to my dismay.

Gregory takes my place, looking discreetly at me. I tightly grip the knife in my hand, and I nod at him. “*I’m okay,*” I mouth silently. He gives me a once-over, and focuses on the dangers in store for us. Warriors surround us and my vision is completely obscured by the sea of bodies all around.

I hate feeling helpless, but this is the right thing to do. If I get hurt, or if I go “crazy” again, it will be more reason for them to hate me. I stay still, listening in on the groans and yelps coming from afar.

After some time, the situation seems to simmer down and the warriors have dispersed around us. I stare at the bloodbath that adorns the dining room. Looking closely if I recognize any familiar faces.

“Take the wounded to the infirmary, and the bodies of our enemies to the morgue. Have the guards start an investigation immediately! We need to get to the bottom of this.” My grandmother lets out a sharp exhale.

“Yes, my Queen!” And instantly, the members of the pack go to work.

“Isabela, you handled yourself quite maturely this time. I’m impressed, child,” my grandmother states, spinning me around slowly to look for any injuries.

“I’m fine, Queen Mother.” She eyes me up and down once more before turning her attention to my sister.

“And you, Grayson.” She taps Gregory on the shoulder, and he gives her a slight bow. “I do not take kindly to strangers in my home, and you were no exception. Though this time, an expression of gratitude is in order.” She stands tall and firm before continuing. “Thank you,” she expresses and Gregory shakes his head in response.

“It was my honor to fight for you, Queen Mother.”

“Katarina, you fought splendidly. As expected from the guardian of the pack,” she compliments my sister, smiling

wide.

“Thank you, Queen Mother. I was just acting out of responsibility.”

“Hush, now. Do not downplay your abilities. You are a truly gifted child.” She pats Katarina on the back.

My sister speaks in a very soft tone, “I really wanted them to see what I was capable of.” Everyone within the vicinity cheers in response. Katarina looks at the floor, slightly abashed. I keep my eyes on her. Once the cheers have stopped, she smirks to herself and I feel my mouth part slightly.

She's not my sister. I don't know who this person is anymore.

Chapter Thirty-Six

I can't believe this is what I have to deal with, I think to myself, faking a calm demeanor to quell the worries of those around me. A grandmother who hates me, a sister who is manipulative, and a pack that's on the brink of a coup d'état because its members can't agree on who should rule the family in the future. I step out into the garden, desperate for some fresh air.

Not to mention the enemies we have that seem to only grow stronger in number. Or the fact that my sister's killer hasn't been captured yet. Taking deep, slow breaths, I try to calm myself down as I sit on one of the stone benches beside my grandmother's orchids. Closing my eyes, I let myself drown in my own thoughts.

"How did those wolves get in anyway?" I hear Katarina's voice coming closer to where I am. "No one can infiltrate the security system we have unless there's someone on the inside helping them." I keep my eyes closed, inhaling deeply, trying to detox myself from the smell of blood and

guts coming from inside the house. “Isabela.” She stops in front of me.

“Yes, Kat?” I reply, not bothering to open my eyes.

“What are you doing outside? You’re vulnerable here. Come inside.”

“We were already inside the estate earlier when we got attacked.” I crack an eye open. “It’s not safe anywhere, sis. We’ve got lots of angry enemies to deal with.”

She sighs. “Yes, but we’ve got lots of guards inside. You being out in the open isn’t... ideal.” She grabs my hand and attempts to pull me up, but I snatch my hand away. I open my eyes, blinking slowly so I can adjust to the environment.

“I can go inside myself.” Standing up, I smooth out my blood-stained dress and make my way back into the house.

“Listen.” Katarina closes the distance between us. “It was a nightmare back there.”

What is she even trying to do? Be a good sister? As if I’ll ever believe that now. I struggle to keep my composure and try to tune her out.

I turn left toward the corridor leading to my room. “I just want you to know that I’m here any time you want to talk, alright?” Katarina starts again, keeping up with my pace easily. “Because I know grandmother isn’t exactly the most... affectionate person in this house.” She chuckles drily. “But I’m here. I’m your sister.” I stop at the door to my bedroom and face her. She raises a hand to pat me on the head, and I let her. “I’m the only one you have left.”

No, you’re not.

“The only one you can depend on.”

I have my friends.

She puts her hands on my shoulders. “The only family member who cares about you.”

I have Eliza.

She pulls me in for a hug. “And the only person you can trust.”

I have Gregory.

I smile and push her away gently. *It was my turn to lie.* “I know that, sis. Don’t worry. I’m here for you, too.” I attempt to push open my door, but she stops me again.

“Do you want me to sleep over here tonight? Maybe we can set up the projector and watch a movie, just like we did when we were still kids?” she offers, but something inside me screams not to be alone with her.

I sigh, feigning exhaustion. “I’d love to but I just want to be alone tonight, Kat.” I open the door.

“But—”

“Good night,” I cut her off and shut the door gently, locking it for good measure. Once I am sure she is gone, I ask Eliza to come and get the damn dress off of me.

I plop down on the floor, fishing my phone from inside my bedside dresser. Turning it on, I see a couple of messages from an unknown number. A knock on my door gets me back on my feet, and this time I make sure it’s Eliza before closing the door behind me.

“Rough night?” She starts untying my dress as soon as she steps inside.

“You heard?” I ask, scoffing.

“I was in the laundry room when it happened. As soon as I heard some guards yell ‘intruder’ I locked the door and hid in there until I knew the coast was clear.”

“Good. It was crazy inside the dining room. I won’t be going back in there for a while.”

Eliza shakes her head. “I don’t think anyone’s going back in there at all. I saw your grandmother sealing it closed until renovations are done.”

I scrunch my nose. “People died in there. They should burn the entire wing down. Why do we even have so many

rooms in this goddamn house?” She shrugs. “I have no idea why rich people have the need to own so many things.” I laugh at that.

“Why are you laughing? All of this is yours in the future.” She pulls hard on the corset and takes it off for me. “What do you want me to do with this?” Eliza asks as she haphazardly folds it across her chest, not caring about the blood stains.

“Burn it. I don’t think those stains will come off.” She nods and leaves me alone. I slip into the shower and, for the second time today, try to scrub off the disgusting and vile things sticking to my body.

Stepping back into my room, I spot my phone on the edge of my bed. Remembering the unread messages from earlier, I sit down and open them up. I almost drop my phone as I open the first text. It’s an image of Katya, with a red “X” mark across her lips and eyes. The next message sends chills to my bones. *You’re next*, it said.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Sometimes I wonder what I did in my past life to deserve this fate,” I tell myself as I make my way to my grandmother’s study.

It’s still quite early in the night, I’m sure she’s still there. “Queen Mother? Are you inside? Might I have a word?” I press on, knocking softly on the door.

“Come in, child,” she urges and I slowly peer inside before stepping in. “What is it?”

Her voice sounds strained somehow, I note. “I need to show you something.” I come closer and sit in front of her. “Here.” I open my phone and show her the messages. “An unknown number sent this to me earlier tonight. I just saw it now because I left my phone in my room.”

She analyzes the contents briefly, handing me back my phone right after. Rubbing her temples together with one hand and tapping the table lightly with the other, my grandmother sighs and almost lets herself slump forward. For the first time in my entire life, I see how exhausted she is. But I feel no sympathy for her.

Good. Suffer in the consequences of your decisions, I think to myself, studying her features. “I already sent it to some of our friends in the police station, and had our own team conduct an investigation and see if they can trace back the number.” She stares at me with her icy gaze, but this time I feel no fear. Just pity. “I just wanted to let you know that I don’t think this will end soon.” I sigh and attempt to stand back up, but she stops me.

“There was a new pack that came into town a while back. Around the same time Katya died. We’ve had reports of them loitering near our territory, sneaking around and scouting us out.” She takes a folder out and pushes it in front of me. “Midnight Walkers pack,” she reveals as I pick the contents of the folder. Dozens of security camera footage and discreet pictures taken of the leaders of the pack unravel before me.

“Where did they come from?” I ask and my grandmother leans back on her chair.

“Somewhere up north, I presume. They have the markings of the northern factions on their arms. Look closely.” I spot a tattoo of a triangle with two diagonal lines cutting across it on a woman’s forearm. Similar styles can be seen in all of the people captured in the photos.

“Why are they here, then?” I commit each face that I see to memory before pushing everything back into the folder. “To challenge us?” I follow up quickly.

She bobs her head slowly. “Most likely.”

I attempt to stand again and this time she doesn’t stop me. “I’ll leave now and let you rest, Queen Mother.” I turn and walk away.

“Child.” I spin back and face her.

“Yes?” I say softly.

“I would appreciate it if you stay out of trouble, and that means no more fighting senselessly. We need the pack to stay together and not fall apart. Do you understand?”

“I do, Queen Mother. I’ll stay out of trouble.” And with that, I bid her another goodbye and walk away. Instead of going back to my bedroom, I walk cautiously toward the Omega’s house all the way to the south wing. It is a long walk, but I have to warn them. “Are you all awake?” I knock on the door and they let me in. I turn on the lone light in the center of the room, letting it illuminate the faces of my own warriors. “I’m so sorry to barge in like this. You all must be tired,” I mention, sitting down on the floor with them. “I’m not going to stay for long, but I’m sure you all know what happened earlier tonight.” They nod. “Good. Then, I won’t have to keep reminding all of you.” I inhale slowly. “It doesn’t seem like a random attack. I spoke with the Queen just now, and she told me that there’s a new pack in town that might be out to get us.”

I beckon them to come closer, and they scoot over toward me. I continue with my speech.

“This will be your first mission. Tomorrow, gather intel in and around the house for any signs that they are working

with someone inside the estate. You,” I point at Lisa, “take Tommy and Mikey when you go out to the gardens. I suspect that some of the guards might be spies because otherwise how will the enemies get in without alarming the security system?”

“I also wanted to say that I’ve received a threat from an unknown number. While I don’t doubt that they will come for me next, they shouldn’t underestimate me,” I declare with as much conviction I can muster. “So, don’t worry about me and focus on the tasks we need to finish, and let’s take this one day at a time.” I stand up, and head for the door. “That would be all. I’ll come back to check in on you.” I open the door and leave without another word. I step back inside the estate and make my way toward my own room, when I notice a couple of guards pushing past each other to run in the direction of the main hall. “What is going on now?” I mutter loudly.

“A news report broke, Mistress.” I look behind to see Vida, one of the elder healers in the pack, walking calmly. “Arsonists have attacked the town. Close to a hundred people are dead.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

I sigh. “You really play with the cards you’re dealt with in life.” I shake my head. “Sometimes you get lucky, and sometimes life finds a way to fuck you over sideways.”

Vida laughs at that. “I’m afraid they’re not mere arsonists, Your Highness,” she comments, pulling me toward the foyer. We both look down at the commotion happening in the main hall, where the projector had been set up.

A TV station broadcasts the details of the attacks in real time, with hundreds of firefighters scrambling to put the fires out. Images of kids, some as little as toddlers, cry in one corner. Medics pull out the remains of those unfortunate enough to get caught in the flames one by one in the background.

I get a sudden flashback of the uprisings. The flames dancing around my memory, and the violence and the carnage that followed were enough to traumatize me until now. I can’t imagine how normal people will be able to rebuild their lives after this.

“Who did this? It’s horrible, like it’s taken straight from a horror movie. Where’s their sense of humanity?” I watch in disgust as the news reporter interviews a victim.

“They don’t have one. They’re not human.”

I turn toward Vida. “What?”

She pats me on the back. “They’re from another pack. The destruction of the town is a message for us since it’s our territory. We’re being targeted by a usurper of power, Your Highness.” With that, she leaves me by the foyer and makes her way down into the hall.

“They’re already this strong?” I scan the crowd below. Most are murmuring amongst themselves, concern lacing their features. Others are angry, expressing their discontent over the whole situation. My eyes land on Gregory isolated in a corner, leaning against the bookcase below. His eyes are already on mine even before I notice him. I give him a small smile and head downstairs to join the crowd. “Katarina?” I pull at her pajama sleeve.

She spins and gives me a hug. “Great, you’re here. Grandmother called us for a briefing.” I nod and she locks her arm around mine, pinning me at her side.

A few moments after, my grandmother appears beside us. The crowd disperses to give us space, and as soon as the commotion has settled down, my grandmother clears her throat. “As you all have guessed, we are under attack. This,” she gestures at the news reports behind us, “is the work of the Midnight Walkers pack. This is them declaring war against us. And we will not stand to the side and let them get away with this. We are the oldest pack in the world. We own the power to the demon wolf spirits. We own their whole existence. They all wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for us.” My grandmother pushes me and Katarina a bit away from her. Her whole body starts to glow, and she starts levitating from the ground. The lights in the room start flickering, and a slight shake beneath the floorboards startles everyone in the crowd. I look at my sister and she’s just as distraught as I am. “Let’s make sure they do not forget it,” my grandmother’s voice echoes throughout the estate.

The crowd erupts in howls and cheers. Gregory, still in his place by the bookcase, wears an unreadable expression. *I can’t imagine how he must feel right now. Getting dragged*

back into fighting a battle not meant for him. I need to get him out of here soon.

“Tomorrow, we start our preparations. We will intercept their hideouts. We will eliminate them, one by one.” And with that, my grandmother leaves the pack in high spirits. As soon as she is out of sight, Katarina clears her throat and pats me on the head. With one nod to me and a smile at the crowd, my sister lets go of my arm and goes upstairs too. I wait until she’s safely upstairs before bowing to the crowd. Assuming my role as a princess tonight, I follow suit and make my way back to my room, forcing myself not to look back at the man I wanted to talk to.

Back in my room, I let myself fall freely on the bed. I try to force myself to fall asleep, but my mind is a little overstimulated. Another knock on my door rouses me from my thoughts, though this time the sound annoys me more than it should have.

“Who dares disturb me now?” I say, opening the door wide.

Gregory stands in front of me, hazel eyes full of concern. “May I come in?” he asks as he steps inside without waiting for my response. I lock the door behind him.

“It’s almost three in the morning. Why are you here? Again?” I rest my head back on my pillow, not caring about the tall man pacing back and forth here in my room.

He closes the gap between us, and sits on the floor beside my bed. “I just wanted to ask if you’re okay.” He folds his arms across his chest and leans forward.

“Honestly? At this point, I just want to go to bed.” I close my eyes again. “If someone catches you in here, we’ll be both dead.”

“Isn’t that why you locked the door, my dear?” I can practically feel him grinning at me.

“Stop calling me that.”

“You used to like it when we were little, though,” he remarks and I open my eyes to see his eyes boring into mine.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“How did you know *that?*” He shrugs at me and rests his head on the edge of my pillow, too.

“I figured it out as soon as you said that you remembered the uprisings when we were on our way to my place, and I saw the scar on your leg too.” I smile at that.

“You remembered the scar?”

“How can I forget? You and your incessant need to climb on the top of every tree eventually got you a pretty nasty scar, and a stern lecture from your father.” He chuckles and I study his handsome features closely.

How can this man be the grubby, weak kid I used to tease way back then? “Hey! You’re older so aren’t you supposed to be wiser? And why didn’t you stop me from doing those things?”

He scoffs at me, but there’s a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes. “Why would I? You were the only form of entertainment I had,” he teases and I roll my eyes.

“How dare you! And you left me all alone after that, too! It was as if you didn’t share any responsibility for that accident.” I try to push him away, but he didn’t even move an inch.

“What did you expect me to do? Wait for your grandmother to come and kill me?” he says a little too loud and I smack him with a pillow.

“Be quiet, dumbass. We’re going to get hanged by our toes if we get caught.” I laugh along with him. We stay silent after a bit, reminiscing about the past on our own.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I stifle a yawn. He smiles softly.

“I should ask you the same thing. Why didn’t you tell ME?” He softly touches the tip of my nose with his forefinger and I try to bite it. “Too slow, my dear.” I can’t help but giggle at that.

“Well, I didn’t realize who you were at first.” I sigh at the memory. “And, the first time we met you tried to kill me. The couple of other times we saw each other were just... messy.” I shake my head, wondering what kind of sadistic God reunited us as enemies after years of separation.

The silence that follows is long but not uncomfortable. For a while, all I can hear is his own breathing in sync with mine. I let myself yawn loudly this time and close my eyes.

“Are you that tired? Shall I leave?” Gregory makes an attempt to stand but I grab his hand, shocking even myself at the bold gesture.

“Can you stay until I fall asleep?” I mumble sleepily, not caring how needy I seem.

“Okay, I’ll stay as long as you need me.” I feel myself drift off to sleep as soon as he whispers those words.

I wake up the following morning hugging my pillow. No sign of Gregory anywhere, too. It is as if I dreamed up the whole thing from earlier. I stretch my limbs, recalling bits of our conversation as well. My chest feels warm and tingly at the thought and I immediately slap myself awake. “Isabela, the situation is already complicated enough.” I admonish my own thoughts. “Come on, girl. Pick a struggle.” I stand and get ready for a shower when a knock on my door rouses me from my musings. “Ah, Eliza, just in time.”

Eliza blinks at me and shoves a robe in my hands. “We don’t have time, Mistress. Now, put this on and come with me.”

“What’s going on?” I say, hastily wrapping the thin material over me.

“There are new developments on the Midnight Walkers pack. The Queen has asked you and Mistress Katarina to come to the study at once.” She leads me through the winded corridor, eventually stopping in front of my grandmother’s study room. She knocks three times and opens the heavy oak door without waiting for an answer from the other side. “My Queen, Mistress Isabela is here.” I step inside and do a curtsy before scanning the room.

“Good morning, Queen Mother.” My eyes fall on my sister’s bewildered face, and Gregory’s smiling one behind her. I give them both a nod before settling in front of my grandmother’s desk.

“Good, we’re all here.” I feel Katarina’s hands settle on the small of my back, and I fight the urge to slap them away.

“Did you have a good night’s rest?” she whispers. I glance at Gregory who seems to be very interested in what my grandmother is setting up on her desk.

“Yes, I actually slept well.” I smile at Katarina. *I’m not falling for the “good sister” act again.*

“Children.” The Queen claps her hands together, making us both jump. “We’ve found their hideout, thanks to Grayson here. He stayed up all night to plot the next targets of the Midnight Walkers pack.” She gestures for him to take the floor.

“There’s a pattern to their attacks.” He unfurls a map on the table, and we all crowd over it. “The Esperanza estate is located in the southwest of Elvira Springs. The Midnight Walkers pack started at the opposite end of the map, near city hall here.” Gregory points to the lone building on the map. “And they’re attacking places in a circular pattern, skipping one building or area in between. It eventually ends here, on the estate. And if I’m right—” He takes a pen from the table and marks a point in the map.

I take a closer look at it. “The orphanage?” I look at my grandmother. Elvira’s lone orphanage building stands near the center of the town square. It’s one of the oldest institutions in town, and houses more than fifty abandoned children. “If Gre—I mean, if Grayson is right, then those kids will die tonight!” I urge.

“Hush, you insolent child!” My grandmother slams her hands against the table. “We’ll stop them at just the right moment.” She walks to one of her bookshelves. Her next words chill me to the bones. “I’ll make sure those pests will burn.”

Chapter Forty

Absolute power corrupts absolutely, I repeat the words in my head as I walk to the Omega's house. I gather all of them in the training space. "Heard anything yet? Anyone spying on us?" I sit cross-legged on the soft grass and they all follow suit.

"I didn't get anything." Lisa takes a swig of her water bottle.

Tommy and Mikey also shake their heads. "Hmm. I guess people aren't gossiping as much these days," I comment.

"I don't think that's it, Mistress Isabela," Luca mentions out of the blue. "If others were spying on us from the outside, they'd easily get found out especially if their connections come from the lower levels of the pack. People here don't exactly filter out their words when talking to others. One way or another, someone's going to slip."

He takes Lisa's water bottle and brings it up to his lips. "What does that mean?" I ask, softly kneading the grass in between my hands.

"It means that if there was a spy it would come from someone with rank. Someone who wouldn't get questioned when going in and out of the estate. Someone with the skills to pull off an ambush so cleanly like that." He shrugs.

"And the way they attacked the pack, too," Lisa intervenes. "It was a little too rehearsed." I scrunch my nose at that.

“Like the fighting was rehearsed? I don’t know about you but I was there, I saw people die. I killed one myself. I don’t think someone can die twice.”

Lisa shakes her head. “No, Your Highness.” She sighs tiredly. “The news reports them as massive arsonists, burning everything in sight, and leaving nothing to chance. So, how did they know you all were inside the dining room? Together with other higher-ranked pack members? How did they know where you all were in the first place? They had the chance to start lighting everything from the inside and destroying everything here. Why fight? Why take the risk of having everyone fight back?” The more Lisa explains it to me, the more I feel chills run up and down my spine.

“It wasn’t an ambush and not a mere inside job. Someone is working with them.” Luca gets his throwing knives and starts aiming for the dummy targets we set up around the space. “And that someone is probably close to you, Your Highness.” I stay frozen in place as they all get up and do their own training.

Someone close to me? I ask myself, thinking of all the times I may have met face to face with the culprit.

“Mistress Isabela,” Eliza’s voice cuts through my own thoughts. “Your presence is needed in the main hall.” She helps me up and smooths out the wrinkles on my clothes.

“Why am I needed?” I go ahead and Eliza follows close by.

“Something about the rival pack—plans about a new intervention.” I look back at her and she shrugs. “I wasn’t really listening earlier. Sorry.” She smiles politely and I shake my head at her.

“What will I do without you, Eliza?” I say sarcastically.

“Shut up. Make yourself presentable.” She laughs and leaves me to go through the doors on my own.

“Ah, good. You’re here.” My grandmother gestures for me to take a seat by her side. Several pack members are also

scattered around the room, some hunters, a few warriors, and my grandmother's Beta and Gamma are also present.

It feels like we're going to war, I think to myself as I sit down.

"Your Highness," a scruff male voice greets me and places a glass of iced coffee in front of me.

"Oh, thanks—oh my gosh, Kenji!" I struggle to keep my voice down as I see the familiar face of my childhood friend smiling at me. His light brown hair is ruffled a bit, his blue eyes twinkle with delight, and his signature dimpled grin brings back so many memories of playing together during summer.

He sits beside me and greets my grandmother and sister. "It's nice to see you again, child. You've grown quite well." He chuckles a little bit at my grandmother's compliment.

"Thank you, Queen. I aim to impress you more in the following days." She scoffs lightly but a ghost of a smile plays on her lips. Kenji winks at me, and I suddenly remember just how big of a flirt this boy was. He scooches a little closer to me. "I missed you," he whispers and I fight the urge to push him away.

"Stop being annoying, we're in a meeting," I utter in response.

"So, no 'I missed you too'? Do I mean nothing to you?" He pouts at me and I laugh lightly.

Someone clears his throat behind me and I glance back to see Gregory staring daggers at me and Kenji. "Stop that," I say, sitting up straighter in my chair.

"Alright, it seems that we're all here. Let me get to the point." All of them here stop what they're doing and immediately redirect their attention to my grandmother. "We will organize an intervention later tonight to stop the destruction of this town brought on by those mangy mutts." She spits out her last few words like they're poison to the tongue.

The Queen's Beta steps forward. "We've contacted the building administration of the orphanage and have successfully evacuated all occupants as of this hour. For now, we're working on the decoys to act as the residents of the orphanage as well as the acting nurses and doctors. Once in place, we'll commence with the operation."

"Of course, my grandchildren will stay here for their safety and to quell the worries of the other pack members." My grandmother rises from her seat. "I will be in battle with you. As I always have. Once the decoys have settled in, and the Midnight Walkers have begun their ransacking, we will lock the doors from the outside and surround the entire building. I will remind all of you that we will do these things quietly. It is an ambush, not an all-out war."

A few more reminders are brought up in the meeting, but I zone out after a while. "It's really nice to see you, Kenji," I reveal to the yawning boy beside me.

He smiles at me. "I knew you missed me. It's impossible not to."

I roll my eyes. "You're insufferable."

"You love me anyway, don't you?"

A beam forces its way out of me and I laugh lightly. "I don't," I tease and he pouts.

"Okay, that would be all." My grandmother's voice forces us both out of our seats.

"Hey, walk around with me?" Kenji asks and grabs my hand. With a nod, I hook my arm underneath his and we proceed to the garden.

"You're joining the ambush later, aren't you?" I ask tentatively.

"Yes, it's why I'm here actually. Your grandmother asked for reinforcements from other packs. Of course, I wouldn't pass up the opportunity to see you again, Isabela."

Stopping underneath the shade of an old oak tree, I turn and face him. "So, what you're saying is, you're here for me

and not for my family?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah," he says plainly and grins.

"How shameless," I retort and push him away, only to be pulled against his chest.

"If I don't make it out alive tonight, I need you to know something." He leans in close to me, and I make no motion to pull away.

He'd pull antics like this when we were kids, testing the waters and seeing if I'd get flustered. But after spending summer after summer in our shared vacation home south of the country, I got used to it. Since then, we'd do this to each other for fun. For some reason, my family and Kenji's family have been good allies with one another, with records of working together dating back as early as the nineteenth century. Though my family views them as a necessary ally, I never saw Kenji as a pawn. I only saw him as a friend.

I move closer to him, and smile. "What is it?" I mutter.

"I know why the Midnight Walkers are attacking your family. But I can't tell your grandmother yet unless I confirm something. I need to see it for myself later," he reveals and pulls away.

"What? What are you trying to confirm?" I hold my breath.

"If the Alpha is the Queen's first mate or husband, something like that."

Chapter Forty-One

I think someone up there must hate me. Otherwise, my life would be so much easier. I sigh. “What are you talking about? My grandmother didn’t marry anyone else except for my grandfather.”

Kenji looks around and puts an arm around me. “You little cutie, so naive.” He directs me to the edge of the garden, away from the direct view of the people inside the estate. He cups my face gently. “Your grandfather is the second mate, the side chick if you will.”

I let out a strangled laugh at that. “Shut up! I thought you were serious.”

He stares at me, wide-eyed and unyielding. “I am serious, Isabela. The Queen had a mate before she took over the Raging Demons pack.” He leans his weight onto me as he drapes an arm over my shoulder. “However, after a few months of being together, he disappeared. Some said he couldn’t take your family’s wretched ways.” I clear my throat at his choice of words, and he grins sheepishly. “And so, he ran away. However, some said that he died suddenly, and was buried right here in your estate.”

What? Is he really serious about this?

He shrugged. “No matter the reason though, it was still strange how one day, he was just... gone. After that, the Queen united with your grandfather, and here you all are.” His eyes flicker somewhere beyond me and he beams. “Anyway, I have my duties to fulfill tonight.” He pats my head lovingly. “I’ll see you after all of this is done.” He leans in as if to kiss me, only for a hand to suddenly appear between us.

I take a step back and look at the owner of the hand. “Please refrain yourself from committing any indecent act, especially if it makes Princess Isabela uncomfortable.” Gregory’s hard stare appears intimidating from where I stand, but Kenji stares back at him, amused.

Kenji directs his attention again to me. “Isabela, I’ll see you tonight.” He sneakily maneuvers his way around Gregory’s hand and quickly gives me a kiss on the cheek, to my surprise.

“That is, if you make it out alive.” I smirk.

“Oh, I will.” He winks at me and walks away, leaving me and Gregory alone.

I start walking back to the estate, and Gregory follows me close behind. “Are you okay?” Gregory asks after a while.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I stop abruptly and spin to face him.

“Because he kissed you.”

I smile at that. "It's fine. Kenji is my friend. He's done that since we were kids." I shrug and he continues to follow me until I reach my room.

"I *was* your childhood friend, too," he mumbles softly.

"Yes, that is true." I reach to open my door, but he tenderly pries my hand away from the doorknob.

"Does that mean," he moves closer, and I inhale deeply, losing myself in his scent, "I can also kiss you whenever I want to?" I feel my eyes go wide in surprise at that.

"Uh, what?" He smirks at my response and opens the bedroom door swiftly. I stumble backward, almost losing my footing in the process. I almost yell in protest, but he's quicker.

"Stay inside and don't come out until tomorrow." And with that, he closes the door and leaves me alone.

What the hell is his problem? I scoff. I lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling. "Man, tonight's going to be hell. I can feel it," I say out loud, letting my thoughts run free. *If my grandmother's joining the ambush, then that means the study will be unoccupied.* I shoot straight up. "I wonder if I can learn new spells tonight?" I wait a couple more minutes before heading out, making sure that the pack members in charge of the operation tonight have left.

"Okay, it's my time to shine." I giggle out of excitement, giddy at the thought of learning new things about my powers. I slip out of my room, and quietly make my way down the winding corridor. I reach the study and sneak inside, taking the time to let my eyes adjust to the dark.

Should be around here somewhere, I think to myself.

I start rummaging the shelves, feeling for the familiar leathery hardcover. But as I circle around the room a fourth time, I realize the book is missing. "Well, it was a stretch anyway." I sigh and start putting things back where I found them. "She did catch me with the book. Of course, she's going to hide it better this time," I keep talking to myself as I finish cleaning up.

I quietly step back into the corridor, only to hear footsteps coming from downstairs. *That's odd.* I stay still, hidden in the dark, listening for the origin of the sound. *Pack members should either be at the main hall, except for me and Katarina.* “Ah, so it must be her.” I shrug and spin on my heels, ready to go back to my room when I hear three people murmuring in the distance.

“It’s time,” a female voice instructs, followed by scratching noises and fumbling.

“The chosen one, where’s her room?” a male’s voice asks. I feel the hair on the back of my head stand up and I realize what’s happening. I set off running in the direction of my sister’s room.

“Katarina!” I whisper-yell. I jiggle the doorknob, hoping that she’s still awake. “Kat —mph!” I get pulled to the side by a strong arm. I frantically whip my head to see who it is, and Katarina’s hair blocks half of her face.

“Shh! Don’t let them hear you.” She drags me further down the corridor.

“Katarina.” She shakes her head.

“I know.” She hands me a couple of knives. “It’s an assassination.”

Chapter Forty-Two

“Why do you say it like you’re excited?” I inspect the knives she gives me. *Lithe, but not sharp enough for me.* “Also, did you get these from the kitchen?” We trudge slowly until we come to a stop in front of the staircase. I try to snatch my hand away from her clutches.

“Stop squirming!” she half-yells.

“I have my own daggers. Why do I need kitchen knives?” I balance one on the tip of my finger.

“Isabela, we’re about to die. Is this really what you want to focus on?” I shake my head.

“Is it bad that at this point I’m not even surprised that this is happening?” I sigh, twirling the blade between my fingers.

“Have you gone insane?” She crouches down and pulls back a piece of the floorboard.

“I hope not. I am tired, though. Also, what are you doing?” I crouch down beside her.

“I’ve got a few... accessories here.” I look down and see steel ring knives, brass knuckles, and a pistol.

“Okay. I’m taking all of them. But I’m going back for my... special daggers,” I say, taking care not to tell her about the silver properties in my weapons. I carefully pick up a ring and a pair of brass knuckles and fit them onto my hand.

“Where’d you even get the pistol? Why do you have these hidden by the staircase?” I ask quickly.

“For events like these. I have other hiding places all over the estate.” I nod and stand back up.

“The rest of the pack are either in the main hall or on patrol. We need to alert them.”

She shakes her head. “We don’t have time, Isabela. We need to split up. Go to the main hall, tell them what’s happening, and turn on all the alarms. I’ll make contact with grandmother... somehow. Let’s meet in grandmother’s study when you’re done.” I agree and take off running.

I reach my bedroom door and pull it open only to be greeted by a large figure in the dark. I attack blindly only to hear the large figure grunt in response. “Isabela! It’s me. Relax.”

“Gregory?” I back off and turn on the light.

“What the hell are you doing in my room?” I ask and sidestep away from him and quickly drag my dresser away from the wall.

“I came to warn you.”

“Yes, I know. We need to alert the others. Also, I thought your prediction was ‘foolproof’? What happened to that? You send half my family away and signed off our death certificates in the process.” I push at a dent in the wall, to reveal my box of silver daggers.

“It is foolproof. I wasn’t counting on a counterattack from them though. And, the last time I checked, I’m not part of your militia. I’m your hostage,” he spits out before backing away at the sight in my hands.

“Okay, fine. I’m sorry. We need to gain control over this situation. Katarina is out there trying to contact the Queen. You should go and alert those out for patrol. Also, Gregory, you should step back.” I look back and see him already against the wall, sensing the pure silver in my hands. “I need to go find my sister.” I conceal my weapons inside the waistband of my jeans. I secure the thigh straps and squeeze in three daggers on each leg.

“I’m going with you,” he breathes out.

“You can barely stand being around my daggers. You need to go sound the alarms. The security room is in the back room of the garage.” He nods and slides out of my room

silently. Once I've properly tightened the straps, I head out too.

Okay, Isabela. Deep breaths.

I make my way to the main hall, ears pricking at every disembodied sound I hear. Heat picking at my skin, I notice a dull, orange light flickering from a distance. "Is that... fire?" I break out in a sprint. The light gets bigger and bigger the closer I get to it. "It is!" I exclaim as I push open the door to the saloon. "Fuck!" I watch the entire room start to get engulfed in flames. I search the room for anything I can use to quell the fire. "There's nothing in here but alcohol. I'm going to burn." I turn back and try to head to the dark corridor, but I hear a creak coming from above. I look up just in time to see a part of the beam fall in front of me. I raise my arms to protect my face, but splinters from the beam hit my bare flesh.

I'm trapped.

My eyes start to water from the heat, my lungs fill up with smoke every time I inhale. "I can't see." I frantically try to cover my face with my shirt, but the fumes feel like they're sticking to every part of my body. I gasp for air, for anything before kneeling on the floor, unable to stand for very long.

I try to open my eyes one last time, only to be met by the orange flames. My hands feel like they're about to burst from the searing heat, and I collapse onto the floor. *Think, Isabela. There must be some way out.* I try to limit my breaths, but it's already difficult to inhale without coughing from the toxic fumes.

I stare at the fire dancing around me, ready to accept my fate.

Chapter Forty-Three

No, I refuse to die this way.

Before I even know it, my mouth moves on its own accord, uttering an incantation I know all too well at this point. *Please work.* As soon as I close my eyes, frost creeps up from my hands and surrounds my immediate vicinity all at once.

I kneel and mumble another spell, this time I target the flames on the walls. A larger mist of frost shoots out and smothers the fire until it's extinguished. My eyes keep losing focus, but I welcome the cool air coming from my hands. I repeat this until the fire is completely out. *Good thing I'm alone, or else I wouldn't be able to explain this to others.*

Alone and exhausted, I try to calm myself down. The room, though old and dank, holds itself well against the attempted arson made by the intruders. *Though it may not be safe to stay here for long. I need to get out of here. Other rooms might also be in flames.* "Alright, fuck staying silent. If it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get."

I barrel out of the saloon, and start yelling at the top of my lungs. "Where are you sons of bitches?" I start turning on all the lights in all of the rooms I run past. "Come and get me if you can!" I scream, letting my feral instincts take over. "I'm here!" I yell and run and bang on all the walls and doors.

I hear footsteps running in my direction and I grin before reaching for my silver daggers. “Sorry, Your Highness,” an unfamiliar voice calls out to me and I spin on my heels fast, swinging my silver dagger in the process. It makes contact with something soft and I plunge it deeper into the person.

A gurgled cry echoes in my ear before the person falls to the floor, writhing in pain. I look closely at the female’s face. A stranger with a cut on her jugular, gasping for air and foaming at the mouth, clawing at my face before succumbing to death. “Did you really think it would be that easy to kill me?” I giggle before securing my silver dagger back, and continuing on to the main hall.

“We’ve got intruders in the estate!” I shout as I burst into the room.

“Your Highness! We’re—” One of the sentinels comes close to me, but another voice echoes in the room.

“Isabela!” Katarina grabs me by the shoulders and scans my face. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I got stuck in the saloon.” I step back and stay by the door frame, afraid of my pack members finding out my secret weapons. “Come on, we need to snuff them out before they burn the whole place down.” As soon as I say that, multiple pack members turn into their wolf forms and follow me out the door. I run fast, keeping to myself, ensuring that I don’t stick with my pack for too long.

“Isabela! Stay with me!” Katarina yells, but I ignore her.

You’re the last person I want to be around. I scoff.

Okay, Isabela. Here they come, I think as I hear numerous thuds coming from different directions. “I’m right here!” I shriek and lead them to the garden. Four people appear before me, and I slide out two daggers and throw them at those attempting to turn. The daggers hit them in their chest and stop them in their tracks, foaming at the mouth almost instantaneously.

I don’t waste time patting myself on the back for my aiming skills, and instead lunge at the enemy closest to me.

With my brass-knuckled hand, I pound on his face repeatedly until I can hear him choking on his own blood. Sensing the other person inching closer to me, I elbow him on his chin. I do a backhanded flip, making sure to kick upward, hitting the other man square on his head.

I feel for another familiar dagger from the waistband of my jeans, pull it out, and haphazardly stab the man in front of me. “You’re nothing but a bunch of amateurs.” I let out a strangled laugh, feeling my bloodlust grow. I slash upward and feel warm, dark liquid spray on top of my head. I walk to the other two casualties, and pull out my daggers from their bodies.

“Who else wants to play with me tonight?” I say a little too loudly, just in case someone else had been listening in on my recent activities.

“Isabela, come back in!” I hear Katarina’s voice boom from the inside.

I run and stay by the doorway. “What? Why?” I ask.

“Grandmother’s coming back home.” She exhales, and leans on her knees to catch her breath. “We just have to hold on for a bit.”

I nod and spot a figure looming behind my sister. “Kat! Behind you!” I squeal and she instantly spins just in time for a wolf to lunge at her. Katarina puts an arm up and she gets bit and dragged across the room. “No!” I growl and prepare to throw my dagger again, when Katarina shoots flames from the palms of her hands.

“Nice try,” she says plainly, and places her palm on the face of the wolf. Its fur burns in between her fingers, her grip not letting up in the slightest. It tries to break free, but Katarina’s fire is quick to take effect. My sister lets go, and the wolf staggers backward. Katarina raises her bloodied arm and points a long finger at the weakened creature. “This is the end of the line for you,” she remarks before uttering a spell that seems familiar to me.

Before long, a bolt of electricity shoots from her finger and hits the wolf directly on its chest, killing it instantly.

That's impossible. How did she learn to do that?

Chapter Forty-Four

“You’re outmatched,” Katarina comments out of the blue once I get near to where she is.

“Kat, where—”

“Not now, Isabela. Stay where you are,” she instructs slowly, staring at something in the dark. A growl can be heard echoing in the room, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Isabela,” I hear Gregory’s breathy voice linger behind me. I instinctively take several steps away from him.

“Where were you?” I ask, scanning his face for any injuries. He’s a little unkempt, but looks relatively unharmed.

“I went with the guards on patrol to check in on the rest of the pack, and scout the area in case there were more of them somewhere.” He gulps in air, before continuing. “Sorry, I can’t help more. If I turn right now, people might find out which pack I’m from,” he says in a low tone, making sure I’m the only one who can hear. Suddenly, a sweet smell combined with the scent of musk and sandalwood drifts in the space between all of us.

An Alpha? Gregory? I look at him and he looks just as confused by what’s happening.

“Come out,” Katarina commands, seemingly relaxed. But one look at her subtly flexing her fingers, and shifting her weight from one foot to the other, I know she’s preparing for a fight.

Even though she’s turning into an evil little liar like my grandmother, she’s still my sister. I know her too well. I smirk. No doubt about it, they are outmatched.

“Bold of you to face me on your own, princess.” The voice sends chills to my spine. A man, well into his late fifties, comes out from the shadows. He is flanked by two larger, intimidating wolves. Eyes shining in contrast to their dark furs, the sight is nothing short of menacing. Demonic, even. “I know your dear sister over there has yet to turn herself, meaning no powers. No way to defend herself if she gets attacked.”

He smirks and the two wolves growl in response, turning their attention from Katarina to me. “I wouldn’t underestimate my sister if I were you,” she spits out.

Thanks, sis. But now it feels like I’ve got a target on my back. I gulp.

“What do you want?” she finally asks the man. Behind me, I feel Gregory bristle. I look back and he’s looking far off

into the distance.

“I want retribution. I want vengeance!” the man screams and howls erupt from behind him. “Do you know what your grandmother did to me? She tried to kill me and take my pack for herself!” he yells. “Traitorous and murderous, those are the traits of an Esperanza. I should’ve known better. I loved her.” He trails off and I grimace.

I did not need to know that.

“Isabela, someone’s coming from behind,” Gregory half-whispers.

I concentrate on where Gregory is peeking, and I see a couple of furry heads bobbing in the distance. *Reinforcements? There are more of them?* I panic. “Katarina,” I warn, but she doesn’t seem to hear me.

“What? Scared I’ll kill you now because dear little grandmother isn’t here to protect you?” the man taunts and Gregory steps a bit closer to me. I hold out my hand and let him see the silver in my belt. He backs away.

“Shut the fuck up.” I scoff, and subtly touch the hilt of my dagger in preparation for what’s to come.

This angers him though, and one of his wolves starts padding toward me. “I’m sure even though your sister here is skilled enough to take on one wolf, she can’t possibly take on three.” He laughs.

I have no choice. I have to fight.

“Don’t even think about it,” Katarina warns, but the wolf continues its advances. I take a step back, putting as much distance between us.

I need to take this outside so I can use my silver dagger.

It stalks me, snarling as it does so. “Isabela! Stay where I can see you!” Katarina yells out, but doesn’t let the man leave her sight. Gregory seems to catch on pretty quickly, and steps aside as I continue backing away.

“Don’t worry about me, Katarina!” *I can handle this,* I think to myself as I run back to the garden. Gregory takes this

as a sign to help Katarina fight the ferocious wolf. “Catch me if you can, you mongrel.” I laugh as the wolf targetting me lunges forward, big paws making a loud thud as they hit the ground beside me. I pull out my dagger just in time, and it plunges itself into my weapon. The wolf, sensing what I have in my hands, tries to pull away but I hold its head against my body. I wrap my legs against it too, and lock onto it as I push my dagger inside its chest to the hilt. It whimpers as it struggles against my hold. I laugh once more.

Too weak to fight back now, huh?

“What happened to your vicious growls earlier? What? You thought I was easy prey?” I scornfully whisper in its ear. The wolf twitches as it spits out foam on my shoulder. I drag the dagger across its chest with as much force I can muster. “I’ll cut you up and feed you to the fishes. You don’t deserve to turn back into a human. You’ll die like this. Unnamed and forgotten.” It squeals like a pig before going limp against me. I drop it to the ground as a huge explosion occurs inside the house. Soaking with blood, I try to run fast to get to my sister. As soon as I step into the foyer, I smell burned flesh and fur emanating from the inside. I resist the urge to gag and look at what’s happening. I spot Gregory standing in one corner of the room, mouth hanging agape while looking at the ground. I try to make sense of what he’s looking at, and I can vaguely make out charred legs and an arm, and two paws. Nothing more. Katarina stands victoriously in the center of the room, grinning at her kill. “Katarina?” I call out cautiously.

“He’s dead.” She smiles and I feel myself wanting to hurl.

“Oh, he’s more than dead, Kat.”

There’s nothing left of him.

Chapter Forty-Five

When did she get so strong? I think to myself as Katarina crosses the room, hugging me.

“Oh, God. What happened to you? Why are you... wet?” She scans me up and down, grimacing as she takes in my bloodied clothes.

“Why were you so disgusted when you did that?” I ask, and then point at the floor.

“Oh, that? Kind of just happened.” She smiles sheepishly.

“Things like that don’t just ‘happen.’ You blew up an entire person.” I stare at the remnants of the Alpha, and the bits of fur scattered around the room.

“Is it some sort of mutation from your power?” I press on cautiously.

“I think so,” she says flippantly. I lock eyes with Gregory, who seems frozen in place. But after a few seconds, he starts moving toward me. Katarina pulls me back, however, and pushes me gently out the door. “You should wait for the pack to return out here,” she commands, but I squirm under her grasp.

“I don’t want to. I want to help search for more.” She continues to keep a firm grip on my arm.

“We need you safe,” she insists under her breath and tries to close the door on me, but another hand shoots forward to stop Katarina.

“I’ll stay with Princess Isabela.” Gregory steps outside and stands beside me. “She needs my protection more than

anyone,” he notes simply and stares blankly at Katarina.

I can practically feel Katarina bristle at Gregory’s words, and I don’t know why but it gives me immense satisfaction seeing her this upset. “Okay, I’ll stay here.” I sigh and turn my back on both of them. I start going near the gate of the estate, knowing full well that Gregory is right behind me.

I haven’t even crossed half of the walkway when I spot a familiar light brown-haired boy running at full speed toward me. I sneak a glance at Gregory, who already seems exhausted at the sight of Kenji. *Oh, no.*

My eyes widen as Kenji comes barreling toward me, taking me in his arms and tackling me down to the ground. “You’re alive!” he yells.

“I am. Welcome back.” I laugh lightly at his antics.

“When we got the call from Katarina, I thought we would be too late.” He snuffles and helps me back up.

“Quit being so dramatic. You know me, you know I can take care of myself.” I lightly push him on his bare shoulder. My eyes trail down his toned body, abs tightening with his every breath. *Damn, when did he get so buff?*

“Like what you see, Isabela?” He grins.

“Shut up, you look horrible.” I point at his grubby, dirt-ridden face.

“Hey, can you be a little nice? It was a nightmare back at the orphanage.” As soon as he says that, pack members run past us to bring back reinforcements and fight off any other intruders remaining inside the house. “What happened here?” he asks as we are walking back inside. Gregory falls back, silently following us. Though Kenji’s attention is directed at me, he seems a little tense at Gregory’s presence.

“The Alpha of the Midnight Walkers tricked us all. He sent half the pack on a false lead, and then tried to ambush me and Katarina.” He nods, and reaches for my waist.

As he pulls me, two pack members in their wolf forms run past us at full speed. “That was close.” He lets go, but I can practically hear Gregory growling. “Anyway.” He smiles at me. “Where’s the Alpha now?”

“Dead.”

“Good. Then I can finally confirm if the rumors about your grandmother are true,” he whispers.

“Uh, I don’t think you can do that anymore,” I whisper back as we walk up to the front door.

“Why not?” He scrunches his nose.

A few moments pass by and we reach the place where *it* happened. Those around here seem a little shocked at what they’re seeing, and I know exactly why.

That’s when I reveal to Kenji what he wants to know. “There’s nothing left of the guy,” I mutter and point at the remains on the floor.

“Holy fuck, where’s the rest of him?”

“Exploded,” Gregory says, moving past us.

“What? What do you mean?” He sighs and looks at me up and down.

“I mean exactly what I said. He mocked Katarina one more time when Princess Isabela left, saying she’ll never amount to anything. Before I knew it, he just... exploded.” He stares blankly at the floor. “The other wolf exploded, too.” He shakes his head.

“I’m guessing it’s a part of her power?” Kenji guesses. It’s my turn to be incredulous.

“I don’t think so. Katarina’s flames appeared when she turned eighteen. I’ve never seen her use anything else other than fire. Until tonight.” I spot Eliza in the crowd, looking disheveled but otherwise okay. “Eliza!” I yell and run to her. “God, you’re okay. I’m glad.” I sigh out and hug my friend.

“Everyone’s back home. I think the coast is clear too.” She scrunches her nose at me. “You look disgusting.”

“Hey! I was busy fighting for my life. Where were you anyway?” I ask and she drags me down the hallway, away from the crowd, and pushes me into a spare bedroom.

“I saw Katarina.” I nod as she looks around for any sign of life inside the dingy room.

“And?” I follow up, but she shushes me.

“Not so loud. I was looking around for you, and I saw her go into the Queen’s study.”

I shrug. “So? I go in there all the time too.” She shakes her head.

“No, Isabela. She was in there to return a book. The Queen’s book of spells.” I feel my mouth hang open.

“What? But no one else is allowed to see that except for the Queen and the chosen one,” I announce, head spinning with theories. However, not one sticks out as a viable answer for Katarina’s behavior.

“I know. But it could be the reason why she was able to defeat the enemies so quickly.” I think back on tonight’s events and gasp.

“Eliza, she knows how to use the electric bolt I’ve been practicing,” I confess and Eliza grips me by the shoulders.

“Be on guard when you’re with her. Don’t even, for one second, believe that she won’t hurt you,” she warns. Just then, a familiar icy voice booms through the hallways.

“That’s the Queen. She’s back.” We step outside and I see my grandmother walking around the area. Inspecting what’s left of it.

“Katarina, are you hurt?” my grandmother asks, twirling my sister around, unfazed by the charred remains of the person by her feet.

“No, Your Highness.”

My grandmother looks at me and scowls. “You. Get yourself cleaned up.” I nod, and head back into my room.

Eliza follows me, presumably to help me out of my blood-soaked clothes.

I sit on my bed, in shock and exhausted after my shower. Eliza sits beside me, drying my hair. “You need to be on your best behavior. Your birthday is coming up. I suspect a lot of other things will happen before then.” She pats me on the back and leaves me to rest on my own.

A few minutes after, I feel myself beginning to drift off to sleep when I hear a knock on the door. Groaning, I force myself up and open the door, only to find Gregory outside. “It’s way past midnight, Gregory. I’m exhausted.” He moves past me and goes inside.

“I realized something tonight,” he shares, pacing a little inside my room.

“What?” I yawn, and make my way back to bed.

“I realized how much of a coward I actually am.”

Huh?

Before I can say anything, he speaks, “When I saw what your sister did, I remembered what happened during the uprisings. How scared I was back then, how I let myself get swept up in all of the mayhem without ever doing anything.”

“Gregory, we were kids.” He cups a hand on my mouth. He stares at me before speaking again.

“I was stupid to let you go without telling you how I felt.” He moves his hand to my cheek. “Isabela, I like you. I always have.” He moves a little closer to me, slowly. Gently.

“And I know I always will,” he breathes out.

Chapter Forty-Six

“You have the worst timing in the world,” I reply, and this takes him by surprise.

“I, um, what?” he sputters.

“You barge into my room at this hour, confess you’ve liked me since we were kids, and expect me to just accept it? After everything that happened tonight?” I hiss.

“I don’t mean to overwhelm you, but seeing you earlier with Kenji—”

“So, this is fueled by jealousy?” I roll my eyes at him. “Gregory, I don’t know if this is something we should be thinking about right now.” I sigh. “It’s not a good time for me. For both of us. Remember? We’re here because we need to get your father out. I also can’t leave my pack behind anymore, not after Katya’s death. Not until I learn why Katarina’s acting strange.” I go off on a tirade, but he takes both of my hands.

“I understand all that, Isabela.” Gregory nods, stepping closer to me. “But I just have to let you know. I can’t let you go again without you knowing how I feel. I don’t ever want to leave you again, especially not here with your evil grandmother. I’m not even asking for an answer from you.”

He rubs his thumbs against the back of my hands. “I just want to let you know, before it’s too late again.”

Okay, breathe, Isabela.

“Do you think, I, um,” he inhales to steady his nerves, “do I have a chance, though?” He smiles. “With you? Not now, of course. But, sometime in the future?” He exhales shakily. I stare at him. He’s looking at me in earnest, hazel eyes big and vulnerable. He’s hunching over me, broad shoulders rising up and down to match his breaths.

This grown man looks so out of place inside my quaint room, but he seems comfortable, at home, even. Although if the situation wasn’t this serious, I would’ve burst out laughing at the contrast. I try to calm myself down, realizing I haven’t given him an answer yet. “Can you wait for me?” I ask, hesitating to look at him. “It’s not a no, but right now, there are just too many things that are happening. I can’t exactly say yes.”

He lifts my head so I can face him. “Of course, take the time you need.” Gregory lets me go. “I, uh, I’ll see you tomorrow?” he offers. I nod and he leaves me alone. For the first time in my life, my heart is pounding and it’s not because of an enemy.

He likes me? He actually likes me?

I feel myself starting to get giddy, but I force myself to get serious. “Am I a child? Stop this nonsense, I’ve got to concentrate.” I shake my head to clear my thoughts, and let myself drift off to sleep.

I wake up with a start at this point. It’s still pitch-black, so I know I haven’t been asleep for long. Feeling the scratchiness in the back of my throat, I head outside to get a glass of water. I go to the kitchen, and take a glass from the cupboard. I reach for a pitcher from the fridge and drink to my heart’s content. “You’re up late.” Kenji’s voice startles me, and

I almost spew the water out of my nose. I glare at him. “Oops, sorry about that.” He snickers and hands me a towel.

“The hell are you doing up? Also, I’m surprised you’re still here.” He feigns being hurt at my words.

“I’m actually staying until you turn eighteen. I mean, I traveled all the way here might as well stay for a few more weeks.” He shrugs and takes the pitcher from my hands, and pours himself a glass of water. “How are you doing?” he starts after a moment of silence.

“I don’t know, it’s a lot to take in,” I mutter.

“How likely is it that Katarina’s gained a new power?” he asks and I think back to what Eliza told me earlier.

“I don’t know,” I answer carefully, not ready to fully trust Kenji too.

“Really, because it seems to me that’s what’s happening here.” He takes a swig from his glass.

“Yeah? Why is that?” He looks at me, blue eyes twinkling in the dark.

“How else will you explain how she killed the Alpha?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, a grenade?”

He shakes his head. “A grenade would’ve blown up the entire body, not leave a limb or two. It would’ve also destroyed half the whole room where it transpired. But that blast seemed like it was contained, like it was concentrated solely on the victims.”

I ponder on Kenji’s words. “But that doesn’t explain how she even got a new power in the first place.” He sighs and puts the pitcher back in the fridge. We leave our glasses on the counter and head upstairs.

“Where’s your room again? Mind if I sleep over?” he teases and I elbow him on his side. He seems unfazed by it though.

“Don’t even think about it.” I laugh along with him. We reach the top of the staircase when we hear a pair of voices

below.

Kenji pulls me along to the side, and together we crouch and silently peep at the unknown pair. “I’m telling you we’ll be unstoppable.” My ears prick as I hear Katarina’s hushed voice. I sneak a look downstairs.

“Your Highness, please. I’m not interested in you in that way.”

Gregory? I look at Kenji and he seems just as surprised at what’s happening.

“You don’t have to see me in that way right now. I’m just trying to offer you a viable alternative. Once Isabela has taken over the family estate, I’m going to move away and start my own pack. You may not know it now, but no one actually wants her to take over.” I can see her caressing his chest. Gregory stays perfectly still but takes her hand off of him. “I’m sure when I move away, she’ll be all alone here. And we can start our own pack. You as the Alpha, and me as the Luna. Sort of like a new version of the Raging Demons pack.” She giggles and I see Kenji visibly bristle beside me. I take his hand and tug, but he doesn’t budge. He nods to the odd pair below. “I’m sure even if you don’t fall in love with me,” Katarina takes a step forward and locks her arms behind Gregory’s head, “I can make you very happy in other ways.” She smiles before pulling him down, kissing him deeply.

Kenji sneakily stands and picks me up, but not before I see Gregory’s hand settle on Katarina’s hips.

Chapter Forty-Seven

It gets worse before it gets better. Pain comes first before pleasure, I think as Kenji closes the door in my room.

“Wow, and here I am, thinking he was into you,” Kenji mutters under his breath.

I thought so, too.

“Guess that’s less competition for me!” He laughs, thinking that I’d laugh along with him, but I just stare at the space between us. “Hey, I don’t know what Katarina was talking about earlier, but I can assure you people won’t follow her. You won’t be left alone. Not everyone likes her too.” He pats me on the back reassuringly. “Okay? So, stop feeling sorry for yourself. If anything, I’m here. I won’t leave.” I feel a slight tremble on my lower lip, and I try to furiously blink back tears. “If you ask me to, I’ll even move in here with you if you feel unsafe.” I scoff at that.

“Shut up.” I laugh at his joke.

“So don’t worry about it. Alright? I got you.” I nod and pull him in for a hug. He gingerly holds me in his arms, and it feels genuine. For a moment, in what seems like a really long time, I finally feel safe. “I’ll leave you alone to rest now, but I’ll hang out with you tomorrow. Just like old times.” He pinches my cheek and leaves.

“What is this nightmare?” I sigh, locking the door behind him. “I guess it was the right choice to let him wait.” I let myself fall asleep once more.

The next day, I head downstairs for breakfast, only to see Katarina and Gregory sharing the makeshift table set up in the garden. They spot me before I can leave quietly. Gregory beams at me, but I avert my eyes to the food on their table. “Oh, Isabela! Join us. We have your favorite pastries right here.” She points at the croissants lined up.

“Oh, no, I’m good. But thank you, though,” I say a little too quickly.

“Oh, we also have hot cocoa. It should warm you up real nice,” Gregory offers and I fight the urge to roll my eyes at

him. A pair of arms wrap around me from behind; I instantly know who it is without turning my head.

My hero. I grin.

“Nonsense. I’m taking her away today,” Kenji cuts through my musings, and the air becomes thick with tension.

“Yeah? Where are we going?” I ask, placing my hands over his, holding him in place.

“Anywhere you want, princess,” he whispers, making sure Gregory and Katarina have a good view of what he’s doing.

“Oh, is that so?” Katarina raises an eyebrow at us. “You were never this cheeky when we were kids, Kenji. What makes you think Isabela will willingly go with you?” she challenges.

“Isabela and I have a . . . special connection.” Kenji nuzzles my neck and I can’t help but laugh at his stupid antics. “She’s mine for today.” He flashes them a cute smile, before taking my hand in his. “I asked the Queen if she’d let us out,” he declares.

“And? What did she say?” I press on, swinging both of our arms side-to-side.

“She didn’t say yes. But she didn’t say no either. She more or less just grunted and waved me off. So . . . I’m just going to take that as a ‘yes,’ anyway.” I punch him on the shoulder lightly.

“You moron, she’s going to have us tortured if we sneak out,” I hiss.

“I’ll cover for you,” Katarina interrupts, a wide smile adorning her face. Before I can even ruminate on what the smile means, Kenji tugs me along.

“You hear that, Isabela? Let’s go.” I start to walk, but another hand stops me from taking another step.

“I think I should come with you.” Kenji sighs and slaps Gregory’s hand away.

“In case I haven’t made myself clear, she’s mine today. Only mine,” he emphasizes on the last word. “So, maybe back off for a bit? Yeah?” He pulls me behind him to stare at Gregory. Gregory is slightly taller than Kenji, but Kenji has been training in martial arts and assassinations since we were kids. If a fight breaks out, I’m sure it will end in a draw.

“Leave them alone, Grayson.” I almost cringe at the fake name. “Isabela’s going to be fine. Kenji’s been her knight-in-shining-armor since we were kids. I doubt he’s going to let you join in on their... fun, today. We’ll have our own fun, don’t worry. I’ll keep you entertained.” Katarina sips her drink and winks at me. I grit my teeth but disguise it as a smile.

“I killed two people yesterday where you’re sitting. If you look closely, there are blood and guts stuck to the rose bushes behind you,” I reply and Katarina almost spits out her drink. “Have a nice day!” I yell and pull Kenji away. “God, she’s annoying,” I mutter and Kenji laughs.

“Consider yourself lucky you have me, then.” He leads me to his Mercedes Benz right outside the gate. “I’ll take care of you today,” he whispers as he takes my seatbelt and secures it for me.

“Where are we going?” I ask, and Kenji doesn’t reply. He revs up the engine and we speed away. “Kenji?” I wave a hand in front of his face. “Did you hear me?” I pout.

“We need to make a stop first.” He beams and I bob my head, turning on the radio for some white noise. “I need you to see something for yourself,” he mentions after a while and I look over at him, his usual jolly expression changes into a more serious one.

We arrive at a run-down warehouse, with a couple of men loitering outside. “They’re my men. Don’t worry.” He gestures for me to get out of the car, and I follow him inside the warehouse. He greets someone at the door, and we are led deeper inside. It’s dark, with a number of steel pipes and hollow blocks strewn about.

What is this place? I think to myself. A strong stench of blood fills my nose and I immediately know what’s going on. “Did you bring me here so I can watch you torture someone?” I tap my foot as we wait for Kenji’s men to unlock a door. He ignores my jab and instead nods to the man tied down on a lawn chair in the middle of the room.

“We caught him last night attempting to leave the orphanage. He’s part of the Midnight Walkers pack. We managed to get him to squeal about their motives, and, well... you might want to hear the rest from him.” Kenji wakes up the man with his foot, and I hear a sickening crack in his ribs.

Ugh, remind me to never get in a fight with this man.

“Oi, tell her what you said earlier.” He slaps the man some more, and I place a hand on Kenji’s shoulder.

“Tell me what?” I ask, heart pounding once more against my chest.

“Your Highness?” The man opens his one good eye to get a good look at me. And then he laughs. “You look nothing like them,” he sputters which earns him another slap from Kenji.

“We don’t have all day. Tell her what you confessed earlier. Or else.” Behind us, Kenji’s men crack their knuckles. The man visibly gulps and shakes his head.

“It’s your sister, Katarina,” he breathes out. “She asked us to come here with the promise of an alliance. But we had to do something for her first. And she’s the princess, so we couldn’t refuse royalty.” He nearly cries as he looks at me with bloodshot eyes.

“She asked us to kill your sister, Katya. I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

I think I'm going to be sick. My hands tremble at the revelation. "What?" I manage to say. My knees start to feel like jelly and I drop down to the floor. "What the fuck are you talking about?" I hiss, but it comes out as a strangled cry. "Katarina will never do anything like that. We're... we're

family. She'll never do anything that vile." I shake my head until I feel dizzy.

"Tell her everything right now." Kenji pulls at the man's hair and forces him to look at me.

"The princess called on us, told the Alpha that she'd form an alliance with him once she became the Luna of the Raging Demons." He breathes in, and my hands start to tremble more. "Of course, no one believed her. We all know who you are, after all." He attempts a smile and it earns him a slap from Kenji.

"Get to the point." Kenji seethes.

"And? What did she say?" I whisper.

"She said she already had a plan, that she's been gaining the trust of your pack members and was on the verge of starting a coup."

I vaguely remember the time when my position as the chosen one was challenged. *That was because of her?*

"The princess said that once she's Luna, the alliance with the Midnight Walkers will push through. We get first dibs on trading routes from this town going to the north and beyond."

They'll dictate the flow of goods from one region to another; I finish his sentence in my head. "What does Katya have to do with any of this?" I clarify, though I have a feeling I already know what he's about to say.

"Well, she found out. Princess Katarina tried to persuade Princess Katya to join us, but Princess Katya refused. I guess she cared for you more than Princess Katarina hoped for." He coughs up blood and heaves.

Katya died because of me?

"When that happened, Princess Katarina asked us to assassinate Princess Katya, and, well, the plans have changed since then. A hostile takeover had to happen before you turned eighteen, and here we are." He laughs humorlessly. "Princess Katarina helped us plan our attacks, including the ambush

inside your estate. She also planned the attack on the orphanage so we could confront the Queen there, but our Alpha had other plans and split up the pack.” The man steadies his breathing, before continuing.

“One would stay in the orphanage to attack the Queen, and the other would ambush the estate while you all were vulnerable. He thought Princess Katarina was on his side, and would welcome him with open arms.” He shakes his head. “He wasn’t counting on her actually killing him.” Kenji gently touches me on the shoulder and I feel myself start to seethe.

“Why should I believe you?” I spit out.

The man scoffs. “You don’t have to believe me.” Kenji interrupts him before he can speak again.

“He’s the Beta, Isabela.” I shake my head. My blood runs cold as I repeat his words over and over again in my head.

“But you need to be careful, Princess Isabela. I think she’s getting desperate, which means you’re in trouble.”

I’m in a daze as Kenji tugs my arm and leads me back outside. *It’s not real. This isn’t real. No. We’re her sisters. We’re family. We had so many plans together. It can’t be real.*

“Isabela, how are you holding up?” I stare at his worried face.

“I thought you said this was a date?” is all I can say as I pout and just let myself cry in his car.

“Sorry about that. It was the only way for me to tell you without anyone else getting suspicious.” He grins cheekily as I sniffle.

“We have a book of spells.” He turns his head in confusion. “It’s a book that contains every spell or magic-binding incantation known to the Esperanza clan. It spans centuries of knowledge, and it’s given to the chosen one once she takes over the pack. It’s going to be mine soon. Well, it’s supposed to be mine.” I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “But Eliza said she saw Katarina with the book, and at first, I didn’t know that she could conjure the spells. Because how

could she? I'm the chosen one." I laugh. "But it explains how she got so powerful. It explains how she gained new abilities. I guess there must be something she did so she could use the spells for herself. I don't know how, but she did something," I ramble. "Although, I can use them too," I reveal and show Kenji my new abilities. "Even though I'm not eighteen yet. I have powers, too."

"Maybe it's the book itself?" Kenji offers and I shrug, completely burned out.

"Thank you for telling me, Kenji," I whisper after a moment of silence.

"What are you going to do now?" he asks.

"Well, first, I need to survive until I turn eighteen."

He nods. "And?"

"And I don't know what else to do except keep an eye on Katarina." I shrug. "That's all I can do right now at least." Kenji reaches out to hold my hand. "Are you sure your men won't say anything about today?"

He shakes his head. "Not if they know what's good for them. Besides, they're loyal to me." He squeezes my hand before letting it go. "Now, let's actually go out and have fun."

"What?" I say, wiping my tears away.

"Oh, sorry, did you want to spend the rest of your day crying?" He raises an eyebrow.

"No."

"Great, then let's go," he urges, and we speed away once more.

It is past midnight once we get back to the estate, and since I was with him all day no one batted an eye. *I guess people don't mind me as much if I'm with Kenji.* We creep into the house, giggling to ourselves when the lights suddenly turn on.

Chapter Forty-Nine

“Didn’t think you’d get caught?” a scruffy, deep voice scoffs. My eyes adjust to the person in front of me, though I knew who it was already.

“Not so loud, dude,” Kenji whispers harshly. Gregory steps forward a bit menacingly.

“You’ve been very irresponsible, Your Highness.” He towers over me. “Coming home late doing God knows what, with God knows who.” Gregory side-eyes Kenji, who stares back unamused at the former. I feel irritation take over me.

“I’m not doing anything wrong with anyone. Kenji is my friend and I trust him wholeheartedly. I know he’ll never do anything to hurt me,” I spit out.

“Yeah? And think about what other pack members will say about you. Is this how a princess should act? You—” Before I even know what I am doing, my hand already connects to the side of his face.

“One, let’s be clear of one thing: you don’t get to tell me what to do. Two, since when have you been so interested in how royalty should behave? What? Getting too close to Katarina these days?” I’m seething at the development of our situation. *First, he confesses to me, and then kisses my sister? The nerve of this guy.*

Gregory’s face is unreadable as he stares at the floor. Beside me, Kenji can only sigh. “Okay, calm down man. It’s late and I’m sure the princess is tired.” He steps forward and jabs a finger on Gregory’s chest. “Besides, she’s right. You’re not her keeper. Are you?”

Gregory slaps Kenji's hand away. "Neither are you. And I'd like for you to remember that."

I roll my eyes at the two idiots before me. "I'm going to bed. I'm done with the both of you," I mutter under my breath and begin my walk toward my bedroom.

"I'll escort you," Kenji says and keeps a hand on my waist.

He's doing the most to irritate Gregory, huh. "Fine," I say and keep walking.

"You know," I start once we're inside my bedroom, "you really shouldn't tease him that much."

Kenji raises an eyebrow at me. "Oh? I guess you do care about this stranger a whole lot more than I imagined." He puts his face close to mine. "What are you on about?"

I take a step back, but Kenji follows. "I care about him... a normal amount."

He laughs at that. "Yeah, okay, keep telling yourself that. But, Isabela, you should know I'm not giving up on you yet. I found you first. You were mine first." He smiles at me.

Huh?

"What the hell does that even mean?"

He straightens up. "It means... well, you'll figure it out eventually. But for now, I must bid you goodnight." He winks and leaves me alone to ruminate on his words.

I don't think I'll ever understand men. I sigh and get ready for bed.

The next morning, I invite Eliza out on a stroll around the estate. "Don't you think your friends miss you?" she asks as we pick out fresh roses from the garden.

"They do. But at this point, it's too dangerous to go back into town, knowing that I have a target on my back," I

whisper.

“Do you believe in what the guy said then? That Katarina’s the traitor in this family?” She hands me the basket of fresh flowers and I give her another empty basket to fill.

“I mean, it checks out.” I shrug, still feeling the sting of Katarina’s alleged treacherous ways. “And with everything that’s been going on around here, it feels real. I don’t want to make the mistake of trusting someone just because she is family.” I pause. “Of course, you’re part of the exception, Eliza.”

She smiles. “I know. Does that include Gregory, too?” She raises an eyebrow at me.

“Don’t even get me started on him, he, ugh! He just irks me these days. Confesses his feelings, and then kisses my sister, and then acts as if he’s jealous of Kenji!” I dig my heels deeper into the soft grass beneath my feet. “He’s a dumbass. You know what, when we get his dad out of here, I’m cutting ties with him.”

Eliza sighs and rolls her eyes at me. “Yeah, okay, keep telling yourself that, princess.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I feel my face scrunch up in confusion.

“Do you really think he likes your sister?” She stands up and faces me.

“Why else would he kiss her? Or at least allow Katarina to do that?”

Eliza shakes her head. “Maybe you’re the dumbass, Isabela.” She shrugs and walks away.

She heads for the warrior’s training center. “Hey! What does that mean? Eliza? Answer me! Your princess commands you—what is happening?” My barrage of questions gets interrupted by the cluster of people gathered in front of me. I spot Eliza a few meters ahead.

She motions for me to come closer. “Um, I think you need to see this, Isabela,” she says as soon as I’m by her side

and then pushes me in front.

A bunch of people circle around one of the clubhouses in the training center. A few of them murmur amongst themselves, and I catch words like “Alpha,” “royalty,” and “princess.”

What the hell is happening? I push past other pack members. In front of me, Kenji and Gregory are in the center of the room, chests puffed out, eyes narrowed and locked in deadly stares. Before I can even yell out to gain their attention, the two walk away from each other and start stripping their shirts off. “Um, what’s going on?” I say out loud. A couple of pack members turn their heads to me in surprise.

“Oh, Your Highness!” a warrior-in-training gasps. “It seems that they’re doing a... friendly duel.” She smiles sheepishly.

“Friendly? I doubt that.” Eliza snickers behind me.

“Eliza, now’s not the time,” I hiss.

“I’m just saying that this is going to be one helluva fight.”

Kenji spots me in the crowd. “Hey, princess.” He winks at me. “I’m going to win this for you.” I feel my face heat up in embarrassment at the cringey line.

“Don’t even think about bringing me into this, you idiot.” He laughs at my cold response.

“Alright, fine. But if I win you should give me some sort of reward.” He shrugs, muscles rippling as he starts stretching lightly.

“Why the hell would I do that?” I yell back.

“Yes, why would she do that?” Gregory’s voice booms from across the room. I turn and get a nice view of his toned abs and lean, veiny arms. I gulp involuntarily and avert my eyes, though Gregory’s smirk doesn’t escape my gaze.

“And didn’t I just say don’t bring me into this?” I cross my arms and Kenji makes his way to me. He crouches so we’re at eye level.

“Can’t help it, princess. *Others...* need to know I want you for myself.” The girls within the vicinity audibly giggle, no doubt getting excited over his flirtatious words.

“Alright, pretty boy.” He stands straight up and turns to Gregory. “Let’s do this.” Then, he prepares himself for his next moves: a spiking lunge and a mighty first punch.

Chapter Fifty

Damn. That sounds like it hurts.

I watch as the two throw punches, connecting at different body parts at such an alarming speed. Kenji's lithe steps give him immense advantage when it comes to maneuvering his body away from getting punched. He also has the agility to fake a couple of moves to confuse his opponent. Gregory, on the other hand, has enough power in his punches that whenever it connects to Kenji's body, there's a sickening sound to it. *Like his ribs are cracking.* The smile drops from Kenji's face, and now it looks like the "practice fight" is turning into a serious one.

There's definitely more power to his punches, I don't even think he's using them at full force, I muse. As the fight progresses, the hits they're both taking from each other turn sinister as I hear a couple of growls from each one. I roll my eyes and start getting bored from watching them go at it.

"Eliza, I'm leaving," I say but I get ignored as Eliza seems a little too engrossed at the muscled men putting on a show for everyone to see. "Okay then, here." I hand her the basket in my hands. "I'm going to the Omega's house. Let me know who wins," I speak and she waves me off, clearly not

caring what I do anymore. I sigh and make my way to the familiar faces I've been training in secret. Some of the kids are doing chores around the area; I spot Tommy on the far side of the bushes, trying to plant some seedlings.

Lisa has a few of the other Omegas gathered around her, teaching them how to mend the holes in their shirts and pants. Luca and Vera are hanging out clothes to dry, laughing at each other as they do so. At a glance, these kids look like normal children acting as children usually do. I whistle a familiar tune that only they know the meaning behind of, and immediately it's as if something snaps inside them. These Omegas, under my command, have become some of the best spies and assassins I've seen to date.

"Your Highness!" Vera leads the entourage to come greet me.

"Hello. How have you all been?" I smile, looking at their grubby faces.

"We're good," Luca interjects.

"Are we training today?" Lisa says in a hushed tone.

"Yes. But before that, we need to talk." I lead them to our secret spot a few meters away from the estate.

"Talk about what?" Vera asks while walking.

"Something really important," I inform and look around the area for anyone that might be listening in on us. "I have a mission for all of you," I start and sit on the soft grass. The others follow suit, and gather around me with serious expressions. "We can't trust anyone else in this family," I express.

"Yes, we know that by now, Your Highness," Luca notes.

"Let me finish." I put both my hands up in protest. "I finally know who's behind Katya's murder, and the recent ambush in the estate." I feel my heart start to pound against my chest in rage. "Katarina did it," I announce quietly, and the Omegas can only gape at my words.

“What? How’d you find out?” Vera asks.

“Kenji’s men captured an offender—the Beta from the Midnight Walkers pack—and he confessed. Katarina made them believe that she wanted to become allies, and used them as a way to bring me down and steal the crown.” There’s a pulsing sensation that starts in my head, and my hand flies to attempt to soothe it. “But things didn’t go quite as planned, and now it seems that she wants me dead.” I sigh. “That’s why we need to even be more careful than before. We’re all outsiders in this family, and all we have is each other.” I look into their eyes. Some look scared, some look angry, but most of them just seem uncertain of what they’re hearing.

“What would you have us do?” Luca breaks the silence first.

“I need you all to keep an eye on Katarina. I want to know what she’s doing, who she’s talking to in order to know exactly what she’s capable of. Spying on her is the only thing I can do right now.” I shrug, half-defeated. “Report back to me anytime. Ask Eliza to send messages to me.” They nod. “My eighteenth birthday is coming up soon. I won’t be as powerless when that happens. It will also be the time that I introduce you all as my personal assassins. So be prepared.”

I dust myself off and make my way back to the estate. Preparations for my birthday party will happen soon, and I still have to find a way to communicate with Gregory’s pack to make sure they know where they’re going in order to find Gregory’s father in the estate. I pass by the warrior’s training center, where the crowds seem to have dispersed. I spot Gregory and Kenji on the floor, lying down and seemingly passed out.

These idiots.

“You boys hashed it out yet or will there be a round two?” I mock as soon as I reach them.

“There’s no need for a round two because I won.” Gregory looks at me, smile on his stupid face.

Ugh. Damn that smile. “Hey, we need to talk.” I nudge Gregory’s knee.

“I’m coming with—” Kenji starts, but I hold out my hand to stop him.

“Not now, Kenji. I need to talk to him alone.” I motion for Gregory to come with me and we stop at a secluded area in between clubhouses.

“It seems like this is the first time in a long while that I got you alone, my dear.” Gregory looks at me up and down. Heat emanates from his still unclothed torso, and I do my best to only stare at his hazel eyes.

“Yeah, you won’t get much more time than this, buddy.” I deadpan.

“Is there something wrong, with you know, us?” He steps a little closer, and I inch back instinctively.

“There is no ‘us,’” I say, and he appears to be hurt by what I mentioned.

“Have you not decided yet?” he asks in a small voice, and I feel my chest tighten a little bit.

“It’s not,” I sigh and close my eyes, “it’s not that. I just can’t focus on anything else these days except...” I trail off and stare at him. *I can trust him. I know I can.*

“Except what? Tell me what’s wrong.”

I nod. “Okay, listen. I don’t know what’s going on between you and Katarina—”

“There’s nothing going on between us. It’s you. I like you,” he points out rather quickly, and I feel my cheeks heat up at the confession.

“I saw you kiss her,” I simply state and he shakes his head.

“I know what it looks like but she—” I put a hand to his lips.

“I don’t need to know the details. Whatever it was, you probably had to do it. But there’s something you should

know.” He bobs his head, still staring into my eyes. “Katarina was the one who killed Katya.” His eyes go wide at the unexpected revelation.

Chapter Fifty-One

I really wish I hadn't done this in public. I can tell by the way he looks at me that he probably has a million questions in mind, but I do my best to explain to him what happened.

“All this time, the traitor was right under our noses,” he says, leaning against the wall.

“I don't have the time to fully give out details, Gregory. But you need to be careful.” He nods, absorbing every word I had to say. “Also,” I continue with a hushed tone, “we need to check back with your pack members. My birthday is in a week, you need to get them to bid for their ‘services’ in order to even be allowed to enter the estate on that day. Otherwise, we can't sneak your father out.” I look around to check once more if someone is close by.

“Alright, I’ll see if I can sneak away from Katarina soon,” he comments, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes at the mention of my sister’s name.

“No need, I have a plan. Also, meet me at midnight tonight, I need you to see something for yourself.” I leave first without even looking back, going straight to my room. I catch Kenji on the way back to the Omega’s house and stop him from walking away. “Hey, can I ask you for a favor?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“That doesn’t sound like an ‘ask.’ It’s more of an ‘order.’” He folds his arms across his chest in an attempt to be intimidating.

“Yep. It’s an order.” I smile innocently.

“What do you want?” he cuts to the chase.

“You’re doing errands today, correct?” I tug on his arm and hold on to it. “Bring one of my Omegas with you.”

“Your Omegas? You own a couple? What’s that supposed to mean? Also, I don’t need assistants,” he mocks.

I roll my eyes. “I... sort of handle their training. I don’t ‘own’ them. And no, they’re not there to help you. They have their own thing to do. It’s just that I don’t think they’ll be let out of the estate on their own. Which is why I need you to sneak one of them out, and come back home with them.”

He sighs. “And why would I do that?” I pause momentarily. I can’t exactly tell him what’s going on between me and Gregory.

“Just... I have to, okay? It’s going to help me make sure Katarina won’t do anything bad to me,” I lie, but Kenji seems to be buying it.

“Alright, fine. Bring whoever it is to the garage.”

I gasp. “You’ll do it? You’ll cover for me, too?” I bat my eyelashes at him exaggeratedly.

“Shut up and just do it before I change my mind.” He flicks my forehead and leaves me alone. I find Vera inside the Omega’s house as she’s cleaning the floors.

“Vera, I need you to do something.” I take out my phone and show her an address. “Memorize this because you’re going there right now.” She seems in for it. “Once you get to this mansion, find someone named Marnie. Tell her that I sent you, and that we need to have their fake bid to become servers for my birthday, or else they wouldn’t be allowed anywhere near the estate on that day. Do you understand?” She shakes her head up and down. “Great. Give them my number after, and I’ll keep in touch with them after that. Go change, I’ll bring you to Kenji after.” She does as she’s told and I wait for her inside the estate.

We manage to get to the garage without coming across either my grandmother or my sister.

Way to go, Isabela.

“Here we are,” I say and point to Kenji’s car. “Keep silent and don’t tell him anything,” I whisper as Kenji’s back is turned. “He doesn’t know anything and I’d like to keep it that way.” She agrees and I sense a shift in energy in Vera. Green eyes void of any emotion, rigid and focused.

I trained her well. I smile.

“Oh, you’re both here.” Kenji looks Vera up and down. “I didn’t know you had a twin, Isabela.” He raises an eyebrow and winks at my spy. “Hey, there,” he greets flirtatiously, but Vera doesn’t even bat an eye.

Oh, I trained her really, really well, I think to myself, fighting back a smile.

“Don’t even bother flirting, Kenji.” I open the door for Vera, and she quickly gets in.

“Oh, I take it you’re jealous then? Don’t worry, princess. You’re still my number one.” He smirks before getting into the driver’s seat.

“Shut up.” I roll my eyes and take one last look at the pair. “Take care of my girl,” I say and leave them to go back inside the estate.

I barely take a step inside when someone summons me. “Isabela,” my grandmother’s voice comes from above and I

look up to see her motion for me to come closer.

“My Queen,” I greet once I’m within earshot.

“You are turning eighteen in a few days. Preparations are underway.” She starts walking and I follow suit. “It also seems that whatever you’ve done for the past few weeks with the Omegas have turned the tides in your favor, seeing as our pack members seem to trust you more these days.” We get to her study and she shuts the door. “It also helped that you were with us while the estate was attacked repeatedly. It seems you’ve proven yourself capable enough for them to notice, but the general consensus seems to suggest that you’re still a bit... unpredictable.” She sighs, not even bothering to hide her disappointment. I stay silent as she pulls out the book of spells from behind her desk. Its worn-out leather cover glimmers against the light.

Oh, here we go with the snarky comments.

“Well, that’s something you can work on in the months after you take over the pack.” She rolls her eyes. She hands me the book. “Flip it over, see if any of the pages jump out at you.” I do as she says and see the spells that I already know, but none of the other words makes any sense to me.

“It’s... a language that I don’t understand,” I simply state, and she takes it back from me.

“When I was your age, I had this book handed over to me right before I turned eighteen. The pages instantly jumped out, enabling me to learn the spells before I could even use them. But you? You’re weak,” she hisses, and slams the book on the table. “Weak and powerless. You don’t even look like an Esperanza. Dark hair and green eyes, you look more like a witch than a werewolf.” She scoffs. I stay silent and take them all in, not even bothering to explain that I do know some spells.

Unfortunately, they’re the same spells that Katarina now knows.

“There’s only one way to make sure you prove your strength this time,” she says after a while. “That rogue Alpha

that came into our lives not too long ago has been... settling down well with the pack." I freeze at her words. "Even your sister seems to want him close by. But you'll need to sacrifice that man in front of everyone soon. Don't think I've forgotten what I've told you before." She smiles at me as I let her words swirl into the air.

Chapter Fifty-Two

“Destiny is meant to be met halfway,” I recall my father’s words as I am ushered out of my grandmother’s study and as I head outside to find Gregory. *“Remember, you have the willpower to choose,”* he had said as he brushed off the dust from my cheeks after a rigorous training session. *“Even if you’re the chosen one to lead this family, you can choose to do things differently. You are your own person. So be strong in whichever way you think is best for you.”*

The memory brings tears to my eyes, but I quickly wipe them away.

“Gregory,” I whisper as I tap on his shoulder. He’s busy reading a book by the burned doors of the saloon. The area got sealed off because it was a little unstable, which made it a perfect meeting place for us.

“Hey, you’re here.” He smiles at me, and I feel my heart skip a beat.

Damn it.

“Well, yeah. I did ask you to meet me.” I deadpan.

He smirks. “Are you still jealous of Katarina? I didn’t think you were the type.” He reaches forward and caresses my cheek. “It’s a little cute, though.” His voice drops down a few octaves, and I shiver at the change.

“I’m not jealous,” I note a little indignantly and start walking away toward the west wing. “But I can’t say the same for you,” I huff and it’s his turn to be a little indignant.

“Please, Kenji had nothing on me.” His hand wraps around my wrist, and he pulls me toward him.

“I didn’t say a name,” I start, but he spins us both around until I feel my back hit the drywall.

“Do you like him?” he asks, hazel eyes concentrated on mine.

“Is now really the best time for this?” I feel my breath start to quicken at the close proximity. *God, his scent is addicting. No wonder Katarina’s gone crazy.*

“I see.” He raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t let go yet. He pushes his body closer to mine until the gap between us is nonexistent. “Just so you know,” he leans into one side and puts his lips close to my ear, “I can take care of you way better than he can.” His fingers trail along my back and stop just above my ass. “If you know what I mean.” He dips his head into my shoulder and gives it a quick peck. I feel the heat pool down to my core at the simplistic gesture. He sighs against my neck. “Just something to mull over, while I wait for your answer, my dear.” And just like that, Gregory grabs me by the shoulder and pushes me forward, a signal to start walking again.

“I don’t appreciate being manhandled like that,” I share, feeling a bit frustrated and dizzy at the thought of his hands caressing all over my body.

“I just wanted you to remember that I’m a man, and that friend of yours is still a boy,” he says simply and we walk in silence the rest of the way.

“Here,” I mention and point at a familiar bookcase. I look around to check if there’s anyone else nearby.

“What are we doing here?” Gregory asks, checking out the titles in the case.

“I have to say I’m sorry first. One, for not being able to take you here the first time you came into the estate. And two, for... everything else my family has put you through.” I keep my head down and push it open, feeling the familiar magnet pull me inside. “Come on,” I usher him in and keep myself by the door. I watch as Gregory steps forward and pauses at the person he’s seeing.

“Dad?” he whispers softly as he falls to his knees. “Dad, can you hear me?” I can feel my heart break at the sound of Gregory’s voice cracking. I watch as this grown man crumble at the sight of his father, paralyzed with a spell I still can’t break. “Can he?” He turns to me with tears in his eyes.

“I’m not sure. But it’s worth a try to keep talking to him,” I speak and stay quiet afterward, tuning out his words to his father and instead trying to listen outside for any intruders.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” he expresses with a small voice, with almost a child-like fragility in his tone. Whether he’s asking for repentance or expressing his regret, the sentence is pretty loaded with emotions. “I’ll see you again, soon. I promise.” He snuffles and taps me on the shoulder.

“Are you ready to go?” I ask, and he nods wordlessly. I push the doorway open and we step out into the hallway.

“Gregory, we have one more problem,” I break the silence first as we head back to the main wing. Night has fallen all over the estate, and the house is eerily quiet.

“What is it?” he says slowly, voice devoid of any emotion.

“My grandmother wants me to sacrifice you on the night of my coronation as Queen. Which is also the night I turn

eighteen.” He stops walking.

“What?” He shakes his head.

“I’m not going to do it, obviously. Though, I do want you to be careful. We’ll have to act fast on that night, since I’m sure you won’t be allowed to go far away from me and my family. After I get my powers, we’ll need a distraction in order to bring the attention away from me, and then we’ll go grab your dad out and we’ll leave the estate.” I hear people murmuring close by just as we reach the saloon doors.

“Alright,” he agrees. He follows as I sneak past the gathering crowd and reach the center of the room which is just near the saloon.

What is going on?

Chapter Fifty-Three

“What’s going on?” I voice out the question in my head. Gregory slips past the crowd and heads to the other side.

“Your Highness,” Eliza’s voice calls out to me from behind. “It seems that the final list of suppliers for your birthday has come in.”

“Oh, the bidding is done then?” I ask and peer over the papers strewn about.

“What’s the bidding for?” Kenji also comes from the side and languidly drapes his arm over me.

“Every time someone is crowned the Queen, the suppliers from all over town bid on their products to be chosen as the food, or the service, for the event,” I explain and his face scrunches in confusion.

“Wait, but that means the supplier pays your family for the rights to bring you food?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah. First of all, we are royalty. It should be an honor for them to do this for us. Two, whoever wins is offered protection from anyone who tries to take over our territory and stake their claim over the land. And finally, if they win the bidding, they get first dibs on supplying for the rest of the town.” I shrug.

“It’s a one-time offering for a lifetime of comfort,” Eliza finishes the thought.

“That’s insane. You monopolize the economy in this small town?” Kenji shakes his head.

“It’s life. And it happens,” Katarina calls out to us three from behind. “You win some, you lose some. The pack also has family or friends inside and around town. They wait on the results too because this can potentially change someone’s life for the better, and chances like this are rare.” She sighs.

“Alright!” Katarina yells to the crowd. “Settle down. I’ll announce the list in a bit once you all quiet down.”

Immediately, the room goes silent and only Katarina’s footfalls can be heard as she makes her way to the front of the room.

“The Queen is resting now, and she’s given me the opportunity

to finally announce the winners of the bidding.” She clears her throat and starts listing names.

This is it. If Gregory’s pack doesn’t win in anything, we’re doomed.

I search for his familiar face somewhere, but I can’t seem to find him.

“Are you okay? You seem... rigid.” Kenji rubs my shoulder comfortingly.

“I’m not rigid. I just feel tired, that’s all.” I sigh. “Where’s Vera?” I ask, and it’s his turn to shrug.

“How should I know? As soon as we arrived back, she went straight to the house. She never even spoke a word to me the entire time. Is she always like that?” he asks.

“No. I told her not to talk to you. It’s nice to hear she did her task very well.” He pushes me away from him and I stifle a laugh.

“You’re evil,” he says, but he smiles as he does.

“What else do you expect? I’m an Esperanza. It’s in my blood to be bad.” I smirk, and divert my attention back to Katarina as she finishes the roll call.

“How are we supposed to know if Gregory’s pack won the bid?” Eliza whispers. I freeze.

Right, if they did join the bidding, they wouldn’t be as stupid as to use their real pack name. Or either of their real names, for that matter, I think to myself and shrug at Eliza.

“I guess he’ll know. I’ll ask him the next time I see him,” I whisper back. She nods as the crowd disperses around us.

“Well, dear sister. Your birthday is coming up, but I still don’t have a gift for you. What do you want for your birthday?” Katarina queries. She takes both of my hands in her hands.

Some peace and quiet away from you, murderer, I think bitterly, but force myself to act natural.

“Nothing, actually. I’m fine with whatever.” I squeeze out a smile and pray that it looks natural enough.

“Oh? Nothing? New weapons, maybe? Not even a lifetime supply of coffee?” She pouts and I fight the urge to punch her face in.

“Yeah, it’s already too much to even have a party. I just want... to have fun, on that day.” I sigh contentedly and scurry away from Katarina before she asks more questions.

Before I can even leave everyone behind to look for Vera, Katarina’s warm hands catch mine. “I also have something to say!” She holds me in place while the crowd stays to listen. She has this crazed look in her eyes as she looks around the crowd. “Ah! Grayson! Over here.” She motions for Gregory to come over. I look at him once he’s by my side and he looks just as confused as I am. “I called him over here to ask for your permission.”

Huh? The hell is she talking about?

“Um, what? Katarina, are you okay?” She nods and takes Gregory’s hand in hers.

“I know it’s a little sudden, but I just wanted to get this out into the open, and ask you in advance because I don’t know when I’m going to get the chance after you get the crown.” She’s smiley and giggling, and I immediately don’t like where this is going. I motion for her to continue. “Well, everyone,” she flits her gaze around and waits for everyone’s attention on her. “I’d like to announce that I’m getting mated to Grayson after Isabela’s birthday!” A cacophony of yells and protests ripple through the crowd.

What? I ask myself for the second time that night.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Nothing I've experienced in life can ever prepare me for what Katarina had just said.

"You're getting what?" I echo what everyone's thinking right now.

"Your Highness, this isn't—" Gregory starts to protest, but he's immediately shushed when Katarina's long finger pushes itself to his lips.

"You say you want my permission, but it seems like you've already made up your mind?"

She's gone batshit crazy, hasn't she? I sneak a glance at Gregory, but he just appears terrified.

"Well, for starters, I'd like to formally include Grayson into the family! He has no one else in life, he can't even remember his past. He needs our protection. A rogue Alpha won't survive anywhere else, we all know that, right?" I cringe internally but don't interrupt her manic tirade. "And, with you being the Queen in a few more days, you'll be so busy running everything you won't even have time to, you know, date." She

smiles. “Oh! Not that you need to, of course. I mean, Kenji’s right here.” She points to the stunned man beside me.

“Huh?” he asks more to himself than to Katarina.

“Oh, come on. Everyone’s been talking about you two eventually getting mated, and even merging the two packs together. It’s an alliance you won’t want to miss out on, as the new Queen.” She giggles. I look at Kenji who just seems horrified too at the things he’s hearing right now.

“No one said anything about me mating with or *marrying* anyone, Kat.” I shake my head at her.

“Exactly. Which is why you wouldn’t have any qualms about me getting together with Grayson, right?” she says as she trails her fingers across the man’s chest.

“Um, I still think he needs to have a say in this.” I look pointedly at the man in question. *What exactly did you do to make her believe this was a possibility?* I make a mental note to ask him later.

“Why?” she queries, actually confused. At this point, the room had gone deathly silent. All those in here have stopped murmuring amongst themselves and are now just as troubled with Katarina’s behavior as the rest of us. “He won’t disagree. Right, dear?” I cringe for a second time tonight. “Also, if you make it your command, he won’t have any other choice.” I gulp. It’s an unspoken rule that once the Queen makes a decree, no person can ever disobey.

It was how my mother married my father. It was how my grandmother had married, and so on, and so forth. “Kat, I’m not taking someone’s will away.” She looks at me dumbfounded. “I don’t plan on being a dictator. Our members are allowed to love whoever they want to love.” I take a step back and let them both become the center of attention. “You’re going to have to ask him yourself on this one.” I stare at Gregory who seems a bit hesitant to speak up. The crowd looks on, eager to await his answer.

“Your Highness, I can’t...” Gregory trails off and disentangles himself from Katarina. She watches him in shock.

“I don’t want to marry you. I don’t even see you in a romantic way,” he says simply and takes a step away from her. She shakes her head, as if this is a nightmare she’s just having.

“I’m not going to ask you. I’m commanding you,” she declares, indignant to his obvious rejection.

“You don’t have authority over me. I’m not part of this pack. And you are not the Queen.” He bows his head as he finishes the statement, unable to look the woman in the eye.

“Why don’t you ask the Queen for permission?” Kenji offers, and I subtly nudge him in the stomach.

“Don’t make this worse, you idiot,” I whisper.

“Shh, chill. I just want to know why she came straight to you,” he whispers back.

Katarina laughs maniacally. “She’s not going to agree! Why would she when we know nothing about him?” She continues to laugh.

“Oh, she’s completely lost it,” Kenji mutters, grip tightening instinctively around my shoulder.

“I can’t believe this. You chose her? Over me? Why would anyone choose her over me?” she screams at Gregory, who is astoundingly silent throughout this whole thing. “I should have known. This whole time you must’ve been in love with her!” The crowd gasps in response.

“No!” I yell out instinctively.

“Shut the fuck up! You’ve been the thorn in my side ever since we were kids. You, being the chosen one, doesn’t mean a thing! I climbed up the ranks on my own. I made my own name within this family. I’m the firstborn that everyone loves, not you!” She points an accusatory finger at me and starts to cry. “So why does it seem like you’re always one step ahead of me?” Disgust looms over her facade. “You don’t deserve anything in this world. You’re always so loved, adored. Even our own father loved you and Katya more than he loved me!” she blubbers. “Well, I took care of that, didn’t I? I took care of one sister. I can take care of another.” Her

snide remark doesn't go unnoticed and the pack is immediately on high alert.

A chorus of disbelief swirls around the room at Katarina's sudden confession. "Your Highness, what do you mean?" someone presses on, a bit apprehensively.

"What the fuck do you think it means?" Her shrill yell hurts my ears. "I killed Katya!" she confesses and raises a hand to point at me. "And tonight, I'm killing you, too." She smiles.

But before Katarina can do anything, she is tossed into the air by some unknown force.

Chapter Fifty-Five

"That's enough," the icy voice of my grandmother booms throughout the room. "I've heard enough, child."

She doesn't even sound angry, just... disappointed, I think. Katarina lands on the ground with a hard thud.

"My Queen! It's not what it looks like! She's the one at fault here." Katarina points at me from where she is sitting on the floor.

“What?” I say indignantly as Katarina stands up and starts moving toward me. Kenji immediately puts me behind him, and Gregory jumps in my defense as well.

This won't end well.

“I said that’s enough, Katarina.” My grandmother puts a spell on all of them in the room, one that freezes their bodies, paralyzing them with fear.

However, I am unaffected by this and so I make my way to the center of the chamber. “My Queen.” I present myself to her.

“Are you immune to the spell, child?” I nod.

“I see,” she says simply. “What exactly happened here?” She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. She sounds exhausted.

“Well, Katarina suddenly announced that she wanted to get married after I get crowned Queen. She asked me to command Grayson to... uh, consent to this mating ceremony. And then, I told her that I didn’t want to tell anyone to do anything, much less marry someone he doesn’t want to be with.”

As I blurt those things out, Katarina grunts beside me. Eyes wild with despair and anger.

Let's see what happens after I spill the beans.

“So, Katarina started spewing nonsense, eventually saying she’d kill me like she killed Katya,” I finish and look at my sister’s eyes. I can barely recognize her now; she’s just... a stranger to me at this point. I force myself to forget the memories we shared together as kids.

She means nothing to me now. I resolve and look back up at my grandmother.

“Do we have any evidence she did that?” I freeze. I don’t know if I can say anything. If my grandmother finds out Kenji and I knew before Katarina blabbered her mouth, we’d get in trouble too for keeping secrets.

Play it safe, Isabela. You're not the only one in danger here. I take a deep breath and just shake my head.

“It came from her mouth, though. Everyone here heard it loud and clear.” I keep my head down as I speak, just in case my grandmother sees the anger fill my eyes.

Soon, the crowd starts to come alive again, but Katarina is lifted up in the air once more. “Katarina, what in the world were you thinking?” my grandmother voices out, but something about her tone makes me question whether or not she’s actually angry at Katarina, or just tired of her. “I’m not sure I want you around for the coronation,” she says, and the pack looks around in confusion as to what is about to happen.

“Please, like I actually care about that bitch,” she spits out, and I fight the urge to defend myself.

Now is the time to stay quiet and let the situation unfold in itself. Patience, Isabela. You'll get your fill for revenge, soon. I take deep breaths, and let my mind wander someplace else.

“Fine. Then, you’ll be confined inside the estate for the time being.” My grandmother sets her down gently, and I get pulled back by Kenji.

“I’m not letting her hurt you,” he notes. Gregory keeps a close watch on her, too.

Katarina laughs once more. “Don’t bother. I’m leaving this hellhole. And you,” she turns to me, “I hope you die soon. You don’t deserve the air you breathe.” She snickers and sets off running out the door before anyone can even realize what she’s doing.

She sets the front door ablaze as she goes, ensuring no one can run after her. However, it is immediately extinguished by my grandmother’s powers. “I had such high hopes for that child, but she seems to be mentally unstable,” my grandmother reveals, making sure the attention is on her now. “Listen as I make a new decree. Katarina is banished from this family, and from this household. She is not to set foot inside this place, nor will she be allowed to come near us ever again. Am I

understood? Anyone, and I mean anyone, found to be working with Katarina Esperanza, will be punished with death immediately.” Everyone around us gulps in fear as my grandmother walks away.

The crowd starts to disperse. Some keep to themselves and leave to take care of other matters; others try to make conversation with me to ask how I am or to gain favor now that I’m the only one left in the house that seems... emotionally stable enough. “I am exhausted. I need to go rest now,” I inform and make my way out of the place.

“Where are you going?” I hear someone call out from behind. I look back to see Gregory following me closely. We get a good distance away from the prying eyes of the pack members before I start talking.

“I need to get to Vera. I have to ask her what she got from meeting your pack,” I say and make it to the Omega’s house. It’s dark outside already, but I feel comfortable at night.

I knock on the door immediately. “Your Highness,” Vera answers the door.

“Do we have a name?” I ask. She nods and lets me inside the house; Gregory follows suit.

“They bid under the name of Liberty & Co,” she continues and Gregory bristles behind me.

“They got in,” he informs and I look at him in confusion.

“They did?”

He nods. “Liberty & Co. was the codename Nick and I used back in college.”

My eyebrows furrow in confusion. “For what?” I ask.

“Whenever we wanted to uh... impress girls. We made this made-up company, complete with a fake website and everything,” he explains, voice lowering in volume as he finishes his sentence. “I don’t do that anymore. Just so you know, I don’t care about anyone else—” I put a hand up to make him stop talking.

“I get it. Just... shh.” I shake my head. “Well, that’s good then. I hope you’re all ready for what’s going to happen.”

They nod. “Yes. We saw also what happened earlier,” Luca chimes in.

“How? I didn’t see anyone of you there earlier.”

“We snuck in, stayed in the shadows. Then went back here.” Luca points at Lisa as I look on in stunned silence.

Wow. Even fooling me? “I’m thoroughly impressed.”

“We saw Katarina pass through the back, by the cemetery. She was followed by a couple of pack members outside,” Tommy reports.

“It seems that some members are completely loyal to her,” Vera chimes in, too.

“Well, I figured it would happen,” I mention, knowing full well that others will always follow her no matter how crazy she got. “For now, keep safe and keep your ears peeled for any information about her whereabouts. She might have spies inside this family. And another thing, on the night of my coronation, I need you to make a distraction away from the estate. I need to do something for him.” I gesture to Gregory. “Just a couple of minutes of distraction will suffice.”

Hope it’s not overwhelming him badly at this point.

They all nod in response as I finish up my reminders. I look at Gregory, who seems resolved to finish this madness once and for all. “It’s now or never,” I whisper to him as we make our way back into the main house.

Chapter Fifty-Six

“Happy birthday, my princess.” I looked up to see the smiling face of my dad, as he pushed a gift into my hands.

“Oh, what is this?” I heard myself say.

“Open it! I think you’ll like it.” He pinched my cheek lovingly. I unwrapped the neat gift and came face to face with the *head* of my sister: Katarina.

Just then, the picture-perfect scene I had with my father turned into something grotesque.

“You better hide,” Katarina’s disembodied head said. *“I’m coming after you!”* She smirked.

I wake up in my bed, startled and close to tears.

“Well, that’s not a good omen,” I mention, rubbing my chest in an attempt to calm myself down. It’s been a week since my sister left the house and was banished from the family. It’s been quiet. Peaceful, even. Without the constant need to look over my shoulder to see if anyone’s after me, I’m actually enjoying myself at home. A knock on my door startles me. “Eliza,” I greet as I open the door.

“Happy birthday, Isabela,” she says and hands me my breakfast.

“Oh, breakfast in bed? How kind of you,” I tease and she rolls her eyes.

“Don’t get used to it. It’s just to greet you a happy birthday.” She smiles.

“It’s not until later,” I note as I take a sip of the coffee in front of me.

“Well, I might not get a chance to greet you again. Today’s going to be quite busy. I heard there are tons of people coming over tomorrow to greet the new Queen.” She nudges my knee. “Speaking of, are you ready to take your throne?”

I immediately shake my head no. “Absolutely not. But I don’t have a choice. Besides, there’s still a lot for me to learn. Maybe, I can learn on the go.”

She sighs. “I don’t like how you’re treating this as if it’s a role-playing game.”

“Well, what do you want me to say? I literally have no clue what to do. My grandmother never said anything about being a Queen. She never gave me any of her wise teachings, she just focused on my sisters. And look at how that backfired on her.” I shrug, taking a bite of the croissant. “Now, I don’t want to embarrass myself in front of everyone, much less the pack members I’m about to look after. But I have no choice but to learn as I go about my days. I’ll definitely stumble, but,” I gulp down the breakfast pastry and take another swig of coffee, “I trust myself more than anyone else in this world. I’ll be fine,” I say, and take another bite.

Eliza nods. “And what about Gregory?”

I freeze. “What about him?” I ask and she shrugs.

“I don’t know, I thought that maybe... you’d want him to be your mate or something.”

I blush at her blunt words. “There’s absolutely nothing on my mind right now except to do good for my pack and for the people around us,” I state and Eliza immediately rolls her eyes.

“God, being royalty must be a pain in the ass. You’re missing out on a lot,” she comments, a glint of something malicious ignites in her eyes.

“What do you mean?” I stop eating for a moment.

“I mean, you’ve never... known the touch of a man.” A hand flies out to push her from the bed.

“I have experience,” I simply state, shame filling my cheeks.

“Yes, but not all the way.” She giggles. “Oh, dear. Can you imagine being Gregory’s mate? You’d probably bruise all over from his touch alone. He’s probably a little too rough—” I shove a pastry inside Eliza’s mouth.

“Eliza, stop!” I blush furiously. I shake the image out of my head.

“Look at you, so cute. No matter how much of a badass you are in fighting, you’re still too innocent when it comes to

lust.” She shakes her head as she stifles her giggles. “Go get dressed after that. We need you to oversee some of the decorations tonight.” Eliza slaps my knee and takes another pastry.

“I thought that was supposed to be my gift.” I pout.

“You’d get to eat more later. Hurry up, okay?” she instructs before closing the door behind her. I attempt to calm myself down after Eliza’s incessant teasing. But images of a half-naked Gregory fill my mind and I ignore the heat overtaking my body.

“Okay, let’s just take a cold shower,” I mutter before hopping in the bathroom.

“Listen, this can’t go with the blue color, they’ll clash.” I watch as two decorators fight over the table arrangements.

Ugh. I just want this over with, I mentally complain.

“Princess, you’re here. I’ve been looking for you.” Eliza’s voice rouses me out of my misery. “It’s time to get ready for the coronation.” I nod, and let myself be dragged to a secluded area in the estate.

I’m led to a large bath filled with rose petals. Salt lamps and scented candles adorn the edges of the bath, and a dress hangs in the background. “What’s all this?” I ask.

“You need to be cleansed of impurities. The bath has been filled with the essence of the demon wolf spirits.” My grandmother comes out of the shadows. “It’s supposed to bring you closer to our ancestors. After that, you’ll wear the dress prepared by our seamstress.” Beside her, someone bows to me in greeting. “Her family’s been making the traditional garments for our family. This is a special occasion, and so you can’t just wear something from... the mall.” She makes a face at the mere idea of me wearing some frilly thing I bought on sale.

“Okay,” I say and strip off my clothes, and get into the bath.

As soon as I do, hands clamor to scrub my body for me. I close my eyes and relax, feeling the maids massage my tense muscles. The scented candles and the salt lamps’ lights flicker behind my closed eyes, making me drift off to sleep. “Your Highness?” someone’s voice wakes me up from my nap.

“Yeah?” I whisper groggily.

“It’s time to get up now.” I nod and open my eyes. The bright light from the moon illuminates my bare skin. Something in this bath is making my body glint and glimmer in the moonlight. I step out and those around me utter words of praises and awe at my naked form. “Here, put this on first.” I am helped into the traditional garb by the seamstress. It’s a very pretty dress with jewels adorning the sleeves, and it feels like it was weaved from the clouds. A hooded robe is draped over me and it conceals half my face.

“It’s close to midnight. It’s time for you to make your way to the sacred ground.” Eliza ushers me out of the estate. But she secretly slips me something cold and sharp. I take a feel and instantly recognize what seems like silver daggers. She winks at me. “I actually had this one specially made from a blacksmith out of town. The design is exquisite. Happy birthday, Isabela,” she whispers. And I can only nod back, keeping the daggers inside one of the inner pockets of the dress.

“I’m not sure where we’re going,” I respond after a while and she shushes me.

“I do, so just follow me.” She nods and I look ahead. In the distance, I see lights flickering amongst the trees, glimmering as if beckoning me to come closer.

“Come, child,” my grandmother greets me and takes me to the center of the clearing. I look around and see selected pack members around us. In front of me, I see Gregory, right beside Kenji. I also see a couple of unfamiliar faces.

Probably caterers? I scan the crowd further and see Nicolo's face staring back at me. I almost choke on my own spit. *Holy shit. They're already here?*

“Stay in the middle, Isabela,” my grandmother instructs and leaves the book of spells open on the stone slab in front of us. “When the clock strikes midnight, you'll feel the power of the moon and our ancestors overtake you. Do not fight it; instead, welcome them. Feel their power. Invite them to make you strong.” She steps back and I feel the ground beneath me start to shake.

Translucent lights start to ripple from my body, and I look up at the moon—a certain heavy feeling makes me drop down to my knees, before I black out.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

“It can’t be!” someone shouts as I regain consciousness. A warm hand steadies me as I stand up.

“What the hell just happened?” I whisper.

‘Isabela,’ an unfamiliar voice fills my head.

What the hell was that? I shake my head.

‘Isabela, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’m Serafina. I live inside your body now. I’m the one you’ll change into once you turn into a wolf,’ the beautiful voice reveals.

What? I ask myself.

“You... you’re the reincarnation.” My grandmother looks astonished at what she’s seeing.

I’m the what? I shake my head, not feeling like myself anymore.

‘I’m your wolf form, princess of the demon wolf spirits, and the very reincarnation of the Moon Goddess,’ the voice explains.

“I think I’m losing my mind,” I tell myself.

“It feels like it, the first time it happens. But you’ll get used to it,” Gregory explains to me as he steadies my footing. “How are you feeling?” he asks, but I shake my head.

“What are they talking about?” I look at the book of spells in front of me, words from its pages jump out in a disarray of letters. “It’s... you’re the Moon Goddess. Look at your hands.” He stares at me as I look down.

Lines upon lines branch out and around my hands, glimmering with translucent light. They travel all the way from my fingertips to my arms, swirling to cover every surface of my skin. “What is all this?” I ask.

“The mark of the Goddess herself,” my grandmother chimes in and shoves Gregory out of the way. “You’re no mere royalty. You’d be revered by packs all over the world,” she states, but she doesn’t seem too happy.

I am? I query, and the voice inside my head chuckles.

‘I think we’d get along quite well,’ Serafina says.

“But I—” I start, but I’m interrupted by a loud scream that echoes throughout the woods. A fireball hurtles toward me, and I instinctively raise my arms in defense, and wait for it to hit. It never comes though, and I look over to see the fireball dissipate into thin air. Everyone looks over at me and I shrug. “Did I just do that?” I ask myself. Another shrill yell and this time, a bolt of electricity crackles in the air.

‘Oh, I know who this is now,’ Serafina’s voice muses in my head. I take a deep breath and utter an incantation I’ve never said before. The bolt shoots up and away from those of us here, and immediately I know I’ve gained full power.

Just then, I hear snarls and growls surrounding the area. *I’m stopping this once and for all.* I lunge to grab the book by the stone slab and run, just as Katarina’s wolf form emerges from the shadows. I slam my hand on the ground and immediately the trees surrounding us are uprooted, showing the ambushers out into the open.

“Katarina,” I warn, but she stalks me continuously. I feel my eyes heat up and my hand raises itself before I can even begin to understand what I am doing. “Enough!” I yell and an invisible force shoots out from my hand. It hits Katarina, and she convulses to the ground, shaking until she turns back into a human. Those around us, wolves and humans alike, stop what they’re doing and watch as Katarina stands.

“You... how did you make me turn back?” she queries, but I stay silent.

“Don’t move,” I warn once more and she smirks.

“Like hell I won’t,” she says and lunges for me, shooting flames as she does. I dodge as much as I can, using frost to counter her attacks. “You might be powerful alone, but your pack doesn’t recognize you. Look around you, no one will save you,” she screams as she continues to attack.

I stay silent and remove the hood from my body. An incantation I let out forces another gust of wind, which targets a lot of the pack members nearby, too. “Leave before I actually kill you,” I insist once more only to be met with a manic laugh.

“You don’t have what it takes, do you? Little sister?” she taunts and charges at me with flames gathering in her hands.

I grab her hands point-blank, and the flames dissipate. I headbutt her and that seems to knock some sense into her.

“I—What?” She looks down and utters another incantation, this time filling her hands with electric charges. She smirks. “You’re still no match for me,” she remarks and I hear a symphony of growls come from behind.

‘She lured you into a trap,’ Serafina tuts in my mind.

Now would be a good time to turn, I say.

‘You can’t. You’re still too weak. Your body needs a couple of days to recuperate after absorbing the powers I have. The good thing is you still can defend yourself with spells,’ she responds, and I sigh.

Well, that’s useful, isn’t it? I respond sarcastically.

‘Finish this, Isabela. She’s too far gone,’ Serafina’s voice ripples through my thoughts.

I know, I respond.

“Well, sister? What can you do? We outnumber you.” Katarina continues to advance, but I stand my ground. Just as I am about to attack, a couple of unfamiliar wolves jump out and target the traitorous pack members behind me.

I look back to see Gregory emerge from behind. “Isabela, go! We’ve got you covered.” I roam my eyes here and there and see full-fledged fights going around. Some of Gregory’s pack members have joined in to stop Katarina’s advancements.

Somewhere in the fighting, my grandmother looks on, stoic and unamused but stays away from engaging in anything. A fireball whirrs past me, barely missing my head.

“Pay attention to me!” Katarina screams, diverting my attention back to her. “You were always the favorite child. The pretty one, the chosen one.” She shakes her head in disgust. “Not anymore. I’m going to ruin that stupid, little face of yours. I’m going to ruin your life!” she yells and attacks once more, this time with as much force as she can as she lands a punch on my face. “Not quick enough,” she squeals, and lands another hit on my stomach. “Not firm enough.” She straddles and holds me down. Face flickering with maniacal delight, she utters one last phrase: “Not good enough,” before putting a hand over my face—just then, heat emerges from the space between us.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

“I’m sorry, Kat,” I express and catch her hands midway. I let the heat overtake my entire body, light emerges now from the latter. I hear her start to scream, struggling to get away from my grasp. But my grip is firm as I let the searing light envelop her. “Shh, it’s going to be over soon,” I say and ignore her pleas to be let go.

“Isabela, no!” I hear my grandmother’s voice cut through the forest. I ignore her and ramp up the light. Pretty soon, Katarina’s screams turn into agonized yells as her flesh starts to disintegrate.

“Katarina, your time is up.” Her silhouette shakes its head.

“No! It’s not! I’m going to win!” she bellows, voice starting to distort as her vital organs are being melted from the inside out.

“I win. Like I always have.” I smile and pull the disappearing body closer to me. “And I always will.” She struggles against my hold, but to no avail. I stare at the moon above us and wait for her to completely disappear into the light. Tears form in my eyes as Katarina’s spirit completely dissipates into thin air, and her clothes have remained on top of me. I stand back up, a little dizzy from the screams Katarina let out earlier. “She’s... gone,” I mutter and look around the area, where everyone has stopped fighting to watch what happened. “Now, then. Yield before your Queen,” I order, and immediately, a couple of wolves turn human and kneel. However, some still have the audacity to charge at me.

I raise my hands and squeeze the life out of them from where I stand. This display of power seems to raise fear out of the pack, as the assailants drop down one by one. “You’re not their Queen.” I look to my left just in time to see my grandmother raise her hand in an attempt to paralyze me.

I shoot out a bolt of electricity from my fingertips, which she easily dodges. “I am now.” I smile as if to say it’s over, but even I know it’s fake confidence.

I’m too weak after killing Katarina. I don’t think I can go all out next time, I think and I feel Serafina’s voice start to hum in agreement.

‘Yeah, I think so too. Can you fight her in hand-to-hand combat?’ she asks.

I mentally shake my head. Not if she turns into a wolf. She has years of experience.

‘You killed your own kin,’ she starts, but I interrupt.

“Should I have just let her kill me then?” I yell out in contempt.

My grandmother laughs. “You should’ve been dead a long time ago.” She levitates into the air but I bring her down easily, as if I can control the force of gravity itself. “Unhand me, you monster!” She struggles and it’s my turn to laugh.

“I’m the monster? I suffered years and years of abuse under your hands. I was made out to be an outsider, a person unfitting for the role of a princess for my whole life.” I lift her up and drop her down to the ground with enormous force. “And I’m the monster?” I laugh. “You imprisoned people, treated them like they were animals whenever you heard anyone say anything bad about you.” I lift her up once more. “And I’m the monster?” Before I can drop her back down, she launches a barrage of rocks toward me and I let go.

“If only I had known Katarina would be too weak to kill you, I should’ve never given her the book of spells!” she shouts and lunges at me. I quickly dodge and kick her away from me. Feeling the power in my legs, I start attacking her as well, but she’s too skilled in martial arts, evading and counterattacking whenever she can.

She uses a spell to push me away and I go flying a couple of meters back. She leaps to me, but I move out of the way and use frost to chain her. “You did what?” I confront her. Around us, pack members watch.

“Yes, that’s right. I wanted her to become the Queen. I gave her the book so she could study it. But too much of its power got into her head, and she became mentally unstable to control. I thought about fixing her, but you just had to go and kill her,” she hisses and escapes from my restraints. She walks a few meters back. “Now, I’m going to finish what I started.” She raises her arms, but I feel the familiar ache of bloodlust course through my veins. Serafina takes over my mind and utters a simple incantation, and pretty soon I can feel the ground beneath us start to vibrate.

“I’m taking it all away from you,” I say, but my voice sounds distorted. Evil, even. “I’m going to make you regret ever crossing me,” I warn and open my arms to the moon.

“Ha! I’ve never heard of a threat so weak in my entire life.” She scoffs and prepares to launch a spell, but it doesn’t come. Instead, I slap my hands together and the entire forest is still for a moment.

“Althea Esperanza. Now is the time to say goodbye to all you’ve ever known.” I laugh and watch as she looks around the area, only to see everyone in a frozen state.

“What is this power?” She lets out a strangled scoff.

“It’s power you will never, ever know. Power you can’t even dream of having. Because you were never worthy for it.” As I utter the words, it seems that a thousand voices have come out of my body. “It’s time to pay the price for your sins, Althea.” I laugh and clap my hands once more.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

It's over. It's done, I think to myself as the person I've come to hate stills for a moment. Her body lifts into the air, and swirls of multi-colored lights emerge from her body.

“What... are you... doing?” she asks, unable to breathe properly. I stay silent until the light dies down inside her. She drops down to the ground. She seethes as she sets her eyes on me, raising her hands and uttering a spell, but getting surprised when nothing comes out of her hands. “What the hell did you do?” she screams in disbelief. Around us, others start to come alive again.

“I took away your powers,” I state simply and sigh. “It's over,” I say and begin to back away but, like her granddaughter before, she lets out one shrill scream.

“No! You will not win! I'll kill you!” she cautions me and finds enough strength to stand back up. Gregory is at my side in an instant.

“Isabela, are you alright?” he presses on and I nod.

“Go, I can take her on,” he comments, but I push him away lightly.

“This is my fight, Gregory. This is mine to win. Step aside.”

“But you don't look—” I shake my head.

“Obey your Queen's command. Leave, go find your father. The bookcase must be open now.” He steps away instantly and runs.

“Huh, so you do know each other. Have you always been plotting my demise, child?” Althea mocks.

“No. But right now, I’m seriously considering it,” I express and straighten up.

“You’ve got some gall to speak to me that way.” She laughs and cracks a couple of her knuckles. “I was the best warrior in my day. You think you can take on a soldier with years of experience?” she taunts, but I ignore it.

“You don’t have to do this,” I retort. But she only laughs at that.

“Ha! That takes me back to so many years ago.” I scrunch my face in confusion.

“What the hell do you mean?” I query and she just shakes her head in amusement.

“You stupid child. Did you really believe your father was banished?” she says and I freeze. “Your father had the exact same look on his face when he said his last words to me. ‘You don’t have to do this. I’ll leave. Don’t hurt my Isabela.’ He pleaded. But I made sure he would never see you again. Not after hurting my only daughter. You see, child, you’re only half-sisters with Katya and Katarina. My daughter, though I love her, was quite the little whore.”

What the fuck is she talking about now?!

I bristle at the venom laced in her words. “She stole your father from someone else’s pack. Had you, and when that mark of being the chosen one appeared, he stayed to make sure you’d be taken care of.” She scoffs. “But he went back to his pack, made plans to steal you away. To live far away, making sure you’d never know you were an Esperanza in the first place.” She shrugs and smiles, as if remembering a favorite memory. “Because of him, your mother died of a heartbreak. Because of him, I lost my only child!” She wailed and I feel the heavy pounding of my heart beat across my chest. “And so, I killed him. Pushed him over the edge of a cliff, into the sea. You won’t ever find his body. It probably got lost at sea somewhere.” She sneers and I see her start to transform in front of my very eyes.

I wished you never said this, Althea.

“Now,” she half-growls. “It’s time for you to join him.” She snarls and fully turns into a wolf. I quickly evade the lunging wolf and break out into a run.

‘Don’t hesitate in killing her, Isabela,’ Serafina warns. *‘It’s either you or her now.’*

I mentally thank her for the reminder. *I’m not going to let her get away after that,* I reassure my wolf.

Feeling too weak to use my powers, I have no choice but to fight with my bare hands. I feel her gnashing teeth right behind me and I swiftly turn to kick her straight in the muzzle. I jump as she counters with another lunge, and land on her back where I attempt to strangle her. She easily shakes me off and I land on the grass below.

Taking quick action, she claws at my dress, tearing the layers of the cloth apart, but not enough to fully incapacitate me. The silver daggers fly out into the air and I try to catch one but fail. I scramble but the heavy wolf form of my grandmother settles on my back. I hear her snarl once more, but I manage to put enough space between us to knee her in the stomach.

I scurry away from her and run for my silver daggers. I make it in time and grab the beautifully designed hilt. I spin just as I see the wolf lunge toward me, mouth open, ready to rip my head off my body. I slash the vital point in her neck and don’t stop until I reach the other end of her neck.

Blood gushes out immediately, as she turns back into a human. Neck slashed and unable to speak anymore, she watches me with pure hatred in her eyes. “I’ll make sure your body will never be found. I’ll make sure memories of you will be erased from today forward. I’ll make sure no one will ever remember you existed.” She garbles up blood and tries to reach for me, but I kick her bony hand away. “Burn in hell for the sins you’ve acquired,” I spit and watch the light from her eyes dim. A breeze flows through the forest, and I watch as those close to her kneel in despair. “You will not show her any respect,” I command and they look at me with desperation in their eyes. But I ignore them, and command Kenji to have his

men take away the body. Securing the daggers in what's left of my dress, I set off to find Gregory.

I can't believe this. I can't...

“Let me see him,” I immediately say once I reach the west wing, where Gregory and his pack gather around him and his father. “Gregory, let me help you.” I lightly press his shoulder, and he steps away instantly. Hovering my hands over the poor man, I let my healing light traverse through his thin body.

Bit by bit, he manages to move. First, his fingers stretch themselves out, then his arms, and his legs. Soon, his relaxed body is laid out in front of his pack. I let Gregory and his men carry him out of the estate, and back to their own mansion.

“Isabela, I—” I shake my head.

“I'll see you soon, I know,” I whisper, and caress his face reassuringly. The gesture seems to calm him down, and he takes my hand in his and kisses my palm.

“Wait for me, okay?” I nod and finally, Gregory leaves with his pack.

Chapter Sixty

I've never known peace quite like this, I mull over as I enjoy a warm cup of cocoa in my room. Looking over at my things, still in their boxes, I shrug and make a mental note to unpack later. A knock on my door brings me back to reality. “Eliza?!” I exclaim as I open the door.

“Um, you have a visitor, my Queen.” She winks and I look back at her to see Gregory.

“Oh! Um... come in, I guess,” I speak and open the door wider for him to step in. “What brings you back here?” I ask but he ignores the question, looking around the big room.

“You made some changes,” he remarks.

“Well, yeah. I wanted it to feel cozy,” I point out and put down the cup on the table by the window.

“Yes, but moving to your grandmother’s room? It’s a little weird,” he comments and I laugh.

“It’s the biggest room in the estate! I can’t let it go to waste.”

He nods. “You made a lot of renovations, huh?” he notes softly, hair falling across his forehead, hiding his hazel eyes.

“It’s been months, Gregory. Change has to happen soon enough.” I smile at him as he turns to face me.

“Yeah?” he asks and I slowly bob my head.

“And has anything changed between us?” he presses on once more, and takes a step forward.

“I don’t know, has it?” I tease and he smiles.

“You’ve never given me an answer, you know?” He looks deep into my eyes, and I inhale his familiar, addicting scent.

“You were gone for a while,” I offer and he smirks.

“Did you miss me, at least?” he teases, and tucks my hair back behind my ear.

“And if I did, what will you do?” I question and this seems to take him aback a little.

“Oh, so you did?” His eyes widen at my sudden confession.

“How’s your dad?” I ask and sit on the bed.

He shrugs. “He’s doing well, though his memory is still a little too hazy. Body still a bit weak. But he’ll manage. He’s actually walking on his own now.” He smiles more to himself as he settles on the bed beside me.

“That’s great to hear.” I sigh, feeling a bit of tension in the air.

“And you? How are you? Are you finally with Kenji?” he queries and I roll my eyes. “What is it with you and him?” I laugh and lightly push him on the shoulder, but his hand catches mine instantly. “I want to know whether or not you’re... taken,” he says softly. I can only stare as he inches closer to my face. “My feelings haven’t changed, Isabela. I’ve loved you since we were kids. I still love you now.” He kisses my palm just as he did when he left all those months ago. “And I want an answer now. If there’s any way, any chance at all, that I can win you over, I’ll do it. I just want to stay by your side. Will you let me?” His face is a breath away from mine. I nod after a while, finally giving in, but he shakes his head. “I want to hear you say it. Come on, tell me. What do you want?” He kisses my wrist next before wrapping it around his neck. My hand seems to have a mind of its own as it caresses his nape.

“You,” I retort and his lips are on mine instantly.

He starts off slow, kneading and nipping my lower lip as if to test the waters. His soft sighs make me feel weak as he lowers us both onto the bed. “Is this what you want? Because if we continue like this, I—” His sentence is cut short when he hears the door to the bedroom lock by itself.

“Oh, yeah, I can do telekinesis now,” I remark and he laughs a little.

“Is that a yes, then?” His hands graze over the hem of my shirt, ready to take it off at a moment’s notice. Somehow, I find enough strength in my body to nod.

“Say it, Isabela,” he commands, voice husky with desire.

“Yes, Gregory. I’m all yours,” I whisper and he takes off my shirt. Kissing me hungrily this time, his hands wander all over my skin until they settle on top of my bare breasts.

“Fuck,” he breathes out and takes off his shirt before diving in to press sloppy kisses all over my chest. His lips

travel to my neck, sucking and licking to his heart's content. I'm sure I'll find a couple of bruises there in the morning. "You have no idea how long I've waited for this." He sighs as he takes off his pants, before taking off my shorts. I feel myself go rigid at the sudden chill that takes over my body. "Are you okay?" He looks deep into my eyes. "Do you want to stop?"

I immediately shake my head no. "Please." I don't even know what I'm asking for.

"Please what?" He smirks as he lowers himself, kissing me all the way down until his head is right in between my legs. "Please... don't stop," I request.

"There's a good girl," he says, taking off my lacy panties.

Thank fuck I wore those today, I think to myself. He kisses the inside of my thighs, taking his time to tease me.

"Look at me," Gregory orders. I do as I'm told, just in time to see him lick a long stripe to my needy cunt. He smirks before fully eating me out, holding my hips in place, making sure I know he is in control.

"Fuck, Gregory, I can't—" I warn, but he doesn't move an inch. Instead, he licks faster until I reach my climax. I let out a silent scream as he helps me ride out my high.

"Holy shit!" he exclaims, climbing back on top of me. He kisses me, letting me taste my own slick. "You ready for more, my dear?" I shiver at hearing the familiar nickname.

"Yes, please," I say, shameless.

"You look so good like this. I can't wait to see you all fucked out." He smiles before taking off his brief.

I look down to see him already hard, cock leaking precum. "Be gentle, okay?" I tell him and he kisses me again.

"Anytime you want me to stop, I'll stop. Just tell me," he breathes out and settles his head to my neck. I feel the tip start to stretch me out, and I bite down his shoulder to keep myself from screaming. "Fuck, you're so... tight." He exhales,

and I moan at his husky voice. He presses on my clit and starts to rub circles, while kissing me, doing the most to distract me from the pain. He pushes himself in all the way, waiting for me to adjust to his size. “Can I move now, princess?” He smiles and gives me a quick kiss when I nod yes. “Hold on to me, I want to feel you as close as possible.” He starts off with a slow pace, letting me get used to the motion. When the dull ache turned into pleasure, I feel my hips start to move on their own.

“Gregory, faster. Please,” I mewl out in between his thrusts. He smirks before stopping. I start to protest at the lack of friction before he gives me one deep thrust, and starts to fuck me a little faster than before. I can’t help but moan at the pleasurable sensation as Gregory holds on to my waist, guiding me to meet his hips halfway.

“I’m close, dear,” he whispers, and drops both arms beside my head, caging me in.

“Me too...” I trail off as his thrusts become sloppier and sloppier. I come undone at the same time he climaxes, both of us clutching at each other from the sensation.

“Fuck, you’re so good to me. You’re too good for me!” he exclaims and kisses me passionately, riding out the last of our highs together. He collapses on top of me for a bit. “That was insane,” he breaks the silence after a while. “You’re mine now, you know that right?” he remarks, coming up for another kiss.

I laugh. “Yes, Gregory. I’m all yours.” I smile and kiss him back.

Gregory leaves the next morning, with a promise to come back soon. I see him off, and make my way back to the estate. As soon as I step inside the front door, I feel a dull pain hit the back of my head, before things turn to black.

THE END.