



Heart Broken
MATE

BETTY LEVY

Heart Broken Mate

A Rejected Mate Werewolf
Shifter Romance

(Rejected and Fated Mate Series)

Betty Levy

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Chapter one (Hayley)

“Don’t look at him, Hayley,” my mother said, and she shifted my eyes away as she lifted me up. She carried me with my head resting against her shoulder blade. The goriness surrounding my father’s death kept pulling my attention back. Something about it was sickly fascinating.

He laid on the floor, half of his face caved in and his hands reaching for me but falling.

An hour ago, we were having dinner. It was one of my favorites; Spaghetti made with hotdogs and cheese. I loved the world out of it, but that night it tasted different, almost like a harbinger of the evil to come.

As my mother carried me out of the house, I kept my eyes on my father. I was a kid and understood what had just happened, but my mind was blank. It was like from the moment the door was broken down, my mind was wiped clean like a tabula rasa, and no one had bothered to write anything new in there.

My father stood up immediately and made me and my mother stay behind him.

“Who are you people?” he asked them, but they didn’t answer his questions. I will never forget the cold look in their eyes. The way their eyes glowed in the dark, I knew they were werewolves. Their fangs were extended, and their claws were ready to kill.

“Are you Alex Jones?” one of them asked. He had a long scar along the side of his face that made him look formidable, like he had been attacked by a pack of jackals and survived.

Since he didn’t answer my father’s question, my father didn’t answer his. But he is Alex; my mother calls him that all day.

“Where is it?” the man asked.

My father said nothing but spread his hand around to keep his family safe. He made his eyes glow, too, extending his fangs and claws, and was ready to fight should it lead to that. The

chances that would happen were tremendous. He was outnumbered, four to one.

“Are you going to fight us all by yourself?” the man who now seemed like the leader asked.

“You’re a threat to my family. I don’t like things that are a threat to my family,” my father said without a hint of fear in his voice. He was worried about his family, not about the man with the scar. He’d faced worse things in his life.

“I won’t touch your family, I promise you. I have a question for you. Where is the stone?”

“We don’t have it,” my father said.

“But you know where it is.”

“No, I don’t.”

The man with the scar growled. He was beginning to get irritated with my father.

“There is only one way this ends, little man. I leave with the location of the moonstone.”

My father held his resolve, and I sneaked out from behind my mother to see what was happening. I looked from the man with the scar to the other three strangers in our living room. For a girl of eight years old, I knew all too well that these people weren’t from the council, so they wouldn’t hesitate to kill us all. I looked at my father with his glowing brown eyes, and my mother’s blue eyes were so cold and damning that they sent chills down my spine. The two of them were ready to fight to protect me and whatever the moonstone was.

I knew I had to be ready too. That is what it means to be a werewolf. To never be scared of the fight should it come to you. I made my eyes glow too. They were a pretty shade of green, as my mother has always said. I extended my fangs and claws and growled like the others, but it came off more like a yap.

I stepped forward, facing the scarred man. “Leave my daddy alone.”

The scarred man chuckled at me but paid me no mind. He looked at my father instead. "I think I know just what to do," he said. "You'll watch your pretty little girl die bit by bit. Then you'll tell me where the stone is."

"You won't harm a hair on her head," my father said, growling more menacingly now.

The scarred man seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Stop me," he said and started towards me. I squealed and moved back behind my mother, the juvenile burst of courage I had earlier was gone.

My father got in his way and placed his palm spread on his scarred man's chest. "Don't move any further," my father said and looked at my mother and me. He looked particularly at my mother. "Stay with her. I've got this. Do not leave her."

The scarred man grinned and moved to slash my father, but my father was fast. He ducked so fast that it seemed he was just a blur. He grabbed the scarred man by the shoulder and threw him to the far end of the living room, making him collapse against the wall.

My father's eyes glowed brighter and dared the remaining three to come at him. He made sure we were still safe behind him. My mother held on tightly to me, but I could see that she wanted to help my father. She was conflicted, but she held on, trusting my father.

The other three wolves hesitated before they charged. It was obvious that they hadn't seen anyone deal with the scarred man in that manner. My father tossed him away like he was a doll.

Before the other three could make their attack, the scarred man stood up and dashed at my father. He was angry and hungry for revenge. It clouded his thinking and made his attack sloppy. But he was strong, too, stronger than my father could have anticipated. My father tried to claw him, but he pushed his arms away and grabbed my father's throat, squeezing as hard as he could. My father hit his arms, trying to relieve the hold he had on his throat. He continued hitting it, over and

over until the grip lessened a little, then he stepped forwards, closing the distance between him and the scarred man. He dug a claw into his stomach and tried to drag it alongside the gut, but the scarred man pushed himself off and looked at his stomach.

He was bleeding profusely and would die should he not get medical attention fast. But that didn't stop his attack, and this time, when he came again, he came with the rest of the clique. The four of them attacked my father at the same time. But they still were no match for him.

He was too fast for them. He fought like he was dancing, moving his legs with such grace that it seemed like he was floating a couple of inches above the ground. He grabbed the first attacker and slammed him against the floor, and before he could recover from that, another came behind him, looking to claw him on the neck, but my father ducked fast, grabbed the assailant by the neck, and put so much force behind his grip that the neck broke. The snap sound echoed through the room, and for a moment, the fighting stopped.

The pack knew then that they might not be getting out of this alive. They didn't know the kind of werewolf he was when they broke into his home. They would have brought more reinforcements.

Seeing that they wouldn't bring him down, attacking singly, they decided to attack as a whole. The remaining two werewolves and their bleeding pack leader. They came at my father as a whole force, closing down on him from every corner, so that he had no room to turn and make an attack. They smashed at him with their claws, getting his face, stomach, and neck. Just about anything they could get their claws into, they did

But he fought back. My father was weak and bleeding out, but he wasn't going to give up, and my mother wasn't going to watch him fight alone. She made up her mind.

She told me to stay back, and she stepped closer to them. She grabbed the first wolf by the neck, putting much effort into it, but he was stronger than her. He pushed her hands off and

swiped at her, trying to cut her with his claws. She was fast, though. She moved back, the claws missing her only by a couple of inches, and she was able to attack again. She swung at him before his arm was even away and punched his face. She put all her effort into it, which caused the man to stagger back.

She stood side by side with my father, who was bleeding heavily now. It was obvious he was going to die, but he was going to fight until his last breath.

They both went after the pack, my mum taking the same man that came after her again, and this time, she didn't waste time sticking her claws into his neck. She pulled his voice box out. The wolf looked like he wanted to say something or scream, and he was stopped halfway. She removed her hand, and he slumped to the ground, lifeless.

She moved on to the next wolf, who was also ready for her. She looked at me before stepping closer. I had moved back till I was standing against the wall, tears running down my face and fear incapacitating me.

"I am not going to let anything happen to you," she said, and she meant every word of it. She looked the wolf dead in the eyes and told him. "You will die now."

She attacked him with a flurry of hand movements. It was like she had a thousand arms moving all at once, and when she was done, the man dropped to the floor, his face and body formless.

My father had killed the alpha, and he had fallen to the ground, life sipping out of him. My mother rushed to his side and lifted him up. She tried to make him sit up.

"I told you to stay," he said, gurgling blood out of his mouth.

"I couldn't stay back," she said.

I started to move towards them, but my mother stretched her hands to me. "Stay back. Do not come any closer. You cannot see this."

But I could see it. Half of his face was clawed off, and I could see the fear in the other half. I could see the hunger in him to

keep on living.

“You have to keep her safe, Nylle. You have to.”

“I will,” my mother replied, and my father said nothing after that. He went quiet, and I knew he was dead.

I looked around the living room, at the remnant of bread and spaghetti we were eating before, at the blood all around the room, at the flesh and tissue scattered around. Then I looked at my mother, who had tears running down her face.

“Let’s get out of here, love,” she said and picked me up.

On the way out of the house, my eyes were fixed on my father. His hands seemed to be reaching for me, his eyes were opened and staring into the dark ceiling, and his mouth opened in a silent cry. He died unable to protect his family.

My mother pushed open the door and went into the hallway. It was quiet that night. Everything seemed to be secretive, even the air held its peace, and it was almost like it knew what had happened.

There was no peace tonight—just terror, angst, and blood. My mother continued down the hallway until we got to the stairs. She looked down to see if anyone was waiting for us at the end, but there wasn’t, and we continued down until we got outside.

It was raining outside. It was more of a drizzle than actual rain, but it was cold, and I shivered in my mother’s arms.

“I’m sorry,” my mother said. “I didn’t know it was this cold.”

The rain had cleared the street, and it was empty. Even the beggars that lined it at this time of the night, looking to draw sympathy from the passersby to get some change, were gone.

“Where are we going, mommy?” I asked, and my mother shook her head. She had no idea. She just knew they had to get out of the building and go somewhere safe.

We could go to the council. It would be safe there. We started down the street with a new location in mind. The council would be a long walk, but my mother was committed. Her baby had to survive.

Down the street, just a couple of feet from us, I saw them again.

They stood in the dark, looking menacing in the streaks of rain. Four of them with their eyes glowing and the claws extended.

They were attacking in groups of four. My mother turned away from them and crossed to the other side. There were another four at the other end, very close to the building we had just exited.

We were boxed in. My mother wasn't my father. She couldn't fight like him; she knew she couldn't take them all.

But she could stall them.

"Come on," my mother said, leading me into an empty alleyway with a dead end. We got to the side of a building with stairs leading up the side and into the apartments above.

My mother looked to the entrance of the alleyway, and the werewolves weren't there yet. She removed a chain from her neck and put it on my neck. The chain held a pendant at the end of it—a heavy pendant made of brass and carved into the shape of a half-moon.

"It's yours now," my mother said, her voice shaky and tears running down her eyes. "Find the person with the other half. The pendant binds your destiny together. Now, go!"

"Mommy, I can't leave you."

"You have to, love," my mother said and pushed at me. She pushed so hard that it hurt. "You are on your own now, Hayley. You have to learn to survive on your own. Run!"

I had no choice but to run. I ran up the stairs just as the pack appeared at the end of the alleyway.

My mother stood up from her kneeling position and walked to the middle of the alleyway. She extended her claws, and was ready to fight.

She would never survive that, I knew, and I watched as the first werewolf attacked. Before my mother could react to the attack, she got clawed in the throat.

I gasped but continued up the stair, looking back one more time to see my mother fall, limp body smacking against the wet ground.

Then, the knock on my door woke me up.

I bolted out of my bed, disoriented, and for a split second, I thought I was back in the alleyway and was a kid again. Then everything came back to me, and I knew it was a dream. It was so vivid and accurate to the letter that it felt like I was reliving the moment again. It was fifteen years ago, and I still can't move beyond that moment. It still haunts me.

The knock came on my door again.

"Yes, who is it?" I said, and a familiar head poked its face from behind the door.

"James called for us. Be there in five minutes."

"Alright, sure. Thank you, Karl."

When I was alone in the room again, I walked to my dresser and looked into the mirror. I pulled the pendant from my chest and ran my hand over it. It was cold. It was always cold, and just as it had been heavy that night my mother gave it to me, it was still heavy.

I found that very strange, seeing I had grown up, and I thought the heaviness back then was due to how little I was.

There was something about the pendant, something extraordinary. It wasn't just because of what my mother said about finding the person with the other half. I've been trying for fifteen years now and hadn't found the person, and I'd given up. But the pendant has always protected me in a way.

After that night, I was thrown into a life of perdition and suffering. I became a street rat, and daily survival was what was paramount. There was no point in preparing for tomorrow because it might never come.

All I have on the street is the moment. The moment to survive, to steal, to escape people, the people I stole from, to get away from predators who hunted me because I was a girl.

That was how I lived for years—barely surviving day to day. Then James came to save me.

I stuck the pendant back into my cloth. I couldn't remember what I had been doing before I fell asleep. But it didn't matter. James called for us, and that could only mean there was an assignment.

Something about that sent chills through me. I had a feeling someone was going to die soon.

Chapter two (Hayley)

As I walked out of my room and down the stairs, the pendant felt heavier on me. I stopped and raised it as though to confirm that it wasn't just in my imagination that it felt heavier. It did feel heavier, but I had no explanation for that except that, somehow, the dream had affected the weight. The memory of that day was burning even brighter now in my mind, and I was more focused on the pendant, which is why it felt heavier.

I took it off my mind as I got into the street.

It was a sunny day, and the street was lively. I walked past a man pushing a trolley with used wear looking to sell some. A couple of street kids ran past me; one of them stepped on me and didn't even stop to say sorry. I turned around to watch them for a while. They swerved around the people squealing and yelling. I knew what they were doing. Some people will get home to find their wallets and wristwatches missing. I smiled at the thought of that. A couple of years ago, that would have been me.

I wondered if I still had that uncanny ability. To look so innocuous and innocent while simultaneously wreaking as much havoc as I could. I stopped walking and decided to see. I looked around to score my mark. I saw a man standing on the side of the road, looking at a diner across the road, deciding whether or not to have his lunch there. I smiled and started towards him, looking at all he had on. His hat blocked out the sun, and my eyes landed on his wristwatch. It was Rolex.

That was a big score.

I continued down the road, and when I was just inches from him, I placed my own foot in my own way and tripped over it, falling down. The man came for me immediately. He caught me before I could fall, and I gave him a sweet smile.

"Thank you,"

"Look where you're going next time," he scoffed and said something in a haughty voice that sounded like an insult. I

walked away from him with his wristwatch in hand. I had no regret and even was happy I did that. He sounded like an asshole. I looked back at him as he finally made the decision to eat lunch someplace.

Bad choice, I thought, as I threw the watch to a beggar. He caught it and looked up at me, his eyes wild. "Go sell it. Get yourself a room. You deserve it."

He smiled at me, picked up his little belongings, and walked away. I felt satisfied with myself as I walked into the Palace.

The Palace was James's sitting building. It was called the palace because it looked like one, and on a street that housed diverse forms of buildings, it stood out in its Victorian form. I walked up the stairs and nodded at the guard posted outside.

Passing through the walkway, I nodded at some of the help who looked busy and were cleaning. Some greeted me back; some didn't even notice me. I left them to their work and walked into the throne room. I could hear the others behind the door. They were all there, waiting for me.

I knew there would be trouble.

"Why are you always late?" Viper asked. There was an unwritten rule that he was the second in command, and should anything ever happen to James, he was the one set to take over and rule the werewolf community. Viper is a very ambitious person, but I didn't care for him. He is disrespectful and has had it in for me since my first day in the Palace.

His name suited him right because he has a serpentine quality to his face. It was thin, and his pupils weren't round. They were thin like those of a snake. People say it was due to an accident when he was younger.

"I'm sorry," I said, not really meaning it.

I was late because I stayed the furthest away from the palace, and it took longer to reach. Besides, I have it on good suspicion that Viper sometimes delays getting information to me so that I would arrive late.

"You're always late," he said, his snake eyes taking on a bit of a glow as he turned around and faced me. I stopped walking

and watched him. I welcomed the distraction he was providing. He would take my mind off the pendant even more than I could manage on my own. But I changed my mind. It was better to keep things civil. James would want that.

“I’ll try not to be late next time,” I said.

“Don’t be so sure there’ll be a next time.”

“You’re not in charge,” I told him. “If James doesn’t want me here, he’ll tell me. Not you.”

I tried to move away from him and join the others, but Viper wasn’t having it. He stamped his feet on the ground to stop me from moving.

“I guess etiquette isn’t something they teach people on the street,” Viper said, and that got a couple of sniggers from the others. I smiled at him while reassuring myself that Viper wouldn’t provoke me to a fight today. But in any case, if he starts one, I would fight him right back.

“You don’t belong here,” Viper said.

“Well, brace yourself. I’m here already, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he said and pushed me away. I staggered backward but held my ground still. When he did that, some people in the crowd joined him. Those were his faction. Yes men ready to do whatever stupidity he was dabbling in.

They all glared their eyes at me, glowing and growling gently.

“You guys, stop it,” one of the others who was watching said, but they didn’t.

“Do you think you can handle us all, Hayley?” Viper asked.

I licked my lips. “You know what I see? Five wolves with the confidence of toddlers. The five of you against me? Where is your shame?”

“It’s not supposed to be a fight, Hayley. It is going to be a mauling,” Viper said.

“Then I think you better get more people on your team,” I said and winked at him, and that jibe got to Viper because he

attacked me, throwing a punch. I was ready for that. I grabbed his hand and hit him in the throat before I extended my claws, and showed them to the others. I dared them to come closer to me and get a taste of the same. I held on to Viper with my left hand, and my claw scratched at his neck, drawing tiny drops of blood.

The throne room was quiet, and everyone waited for what I would do next. I could easily just let my claw dig into his neck, paralyzing or even killing him. But what would that achieve? I let him go instead, making a fool of him again. He just never seemed to give up.

I guessed that was the problem. He was supposed to be the strongest amongst them, excluding James, who was the Alpha, but he wasn't. He used to be, but then James went into the streets a couple of years ago, found an urchin, liked her too much, and brought her into the Palace.

I remember the first time James made me fight the others. It was a massacre. None of them stood a chance with me. I was faster and stronger, and I had such swift reflexes that it seemed sometimes I was fluid. Here one moment and then gone. It was almost like magic.

But they all had hope in Viper. He was the local champion, and there was no way a street rat would knock him off his lofty position. I did, without even much of a fight, and that was when the beef started. Now, I just think it is stupid, but Viper won't give it up.

The door to the throne room opened, and we all turned around to watch James walk up to the throne. He stopped before Viper and me and watched the two of us. He scoffed before walking to his throne.

James looked much older than the first time I saw him. He had such fire in his eyes and was very quick to smile. He used to hang around with us and watch us argue and fight. But I guess we all grew up. And he got busier. He had big bags under his eyes, which meant he wasn't sleeping much.

"Have you two been at it again?" he asked.

“We were just messing around,” Viper said, and James shook his head. He couldn’t be bothered.

Everything about him screamed tired man. His voice which used to be so booming sounded very lax now. Something huge had changed about James. It had happened gradually, but I didn’t notice it until the effect was much more noticeable.

“I have an assignment for all of you.”

“Okay,” Viper said. “What are we going to do?”

“There’s a pack right outside, Brenx Avenue. They’ve been a disturbance.”

“Brenx?” I asked. “I’ve never heard of them before.”

There is a club on Brenx avenue that I visit sometimes, and I’ve made some friends there. It was relatively peaceful there, and I’d never heard the people complain before.

“Not to the people,” James said. “The people love them, but I don’t. I want them gone.”

“Oh,” I said. That was weird. The others shared a look too. Normally, we don’t go after packs at all. We just let them do their thing as long as they don’t cause trouble. In fact, there was a certain amount of trouble we let packs get away with. So long as they don’t kill and they don’t steal, packs can stay for as long as they want. After all, Nillport wouldn’t be a werewolf community without the wolves.”

“Okay, I can see you all have questions,” James said.

“No, we don’t,” Viper said. “We’ll do whatever you ask of us.”

“I have questions,” I said, not giving a damn about the stink eye Viper just threw my way. “Why are we attacking packs for doing nothing? Word would get around, and packs would stay away from us, then we lose numbers. When we lose numbers, we’re opening up ourselves for an attack. Opening up the throne for a challenge.”

“I know,” James said, but these are different situations. Besides, the wolfs aren’t particularly a pack. There are just a group of lone wolves that sub as hunters sometimes.”

“Lone wolves?” I said, now very interested in them. I had been somewhat a kind of a lone wolf myself for some of my life.

But the ones James was talking about were different, though. Lone wolves were called that because once they belonged to a pack, but due to different reasons, they lost their packs and couldn’t join another. Most of them usually lose their pack members due to death, or they get exiled for various crimes. It is hard to join a pack should any of those two happen, and most of them decide to be lone wolves.

The dynamic of belonging to a pack was complicated. There is an alpha in every pack. My pack has James as the Alpha, but James was also the leader of the whole Nillport community. An alpha has some level of control over its pack members. It isn’t absolute, but powerful alphas can call on some form of absoluteness of their power in dire situations. When that happens, the other members of the pack lose all forms of agency they have, and the only thing they do is what the alpha wants them to do. It is a strange concept that most people stay away from because it lays heavy responsibilities on the alpha. Beyond that, being alpha was mostly just ceremonial.

But it is important for a werewolf to belong to a pack. A pack makes you stronger. You share the strengths of your members and cover each other’s weaknesses. Alone or a lone wolf, you can easily be picked out.

“They are lone wolves and a pack?” Viper asked.

“Yes,” James said.

“How does that work?” I asked.

“When you see them, you ask. I want you to get them out of town. I have a business deal going down in a couple of days. The Tarloux family is coming to town, and I can’t have lone wolves around. They are unpredictable.”

I nodded, but now I understood why James wanted the lone wolves out of town. The Tarloux family, the most powerful werewolf family, hated them.

I don’t know much about the Tarloux family, but I know they are not to be trifled with, and this assignment James is sending

them is important business.

I was also eager to see a lone wolf. I've never met one before. I don't know what to expect when I see one. Do they have like a sort of tag on them that you'll use to identify them as lone wolves?

That was a silly thought. They probably will look like any other werewolf.

"Are they powerful?" I asked. "As powerful as us, seeing we share our powers as a pack?"

I wish I don't share my power, though. I don't want to share power with Viper and his friends. They are a bunch of assholes, but there was nothing I could do about that.

"I don't think they are," James said. "I fought a lone wolf once in a bar. He made a move at the girl I was with. I beat his ass easily, but he was drunk. I was drunk too, so maybe fair fight. If you become a lone wolf, Hayley, seeing how strong you are, do you think you will be more powerful than the others in this pack?"

I looked at the others as they eyed me, waiting for the answer. I know the answer; they know the answer.

"Yes, I do."

They all threw me a dirty look. The truth is a bitter pill.

"So, I think you have your answer. Now, there's no need to return here once it is done. I won't be in the Palace. I have a meeting with some stakeholders later in the day. So, we'll meet tomorrow, and no one better come late," James said with a grin and winked at me. "One more thing. If they put up a fight, you are authorized to use force. As maximal as possible."

We all looked at each and knew that was a bit unusual. James wanted them out by all means.

"Do you understand?" he asked.

"Yes," they all said.

What he said was a euphemism for 'you can kill them.'

“You can go,” he told us.

We started to head out, but on our way out, he called us back.

“Hayley, you’re in charge of the mission,” he said.

“What?” Viper and I said.

James shrugged. “Viper is getting too comfortable in his position. Maybe the prospect of someone knocking him off his pedestal will make him sit up and take notice. Clean yourself up, Viper. You’re still bleeding from the claw wound.”

As we walked out of the throne room, Viper threw me a look that could cause me to burst into flame.

“This isn’t over dirt rag,” he told me. “It is far from over.”

“We leave in two hours,” I said, ignoring him. “Be ready, and don’t be late.”

I still couldn’t get away from that feeling that something bad was coming. I looked at my pack members and wondered if it was going to be one of them.

Chapter three (Hayley)

When I got to the usual meeting point, as expected, Viper wasn't there. There were others waiting for me, though. I counted five of them, all of whom weren't part of Viper's little clique but who knew enough not to get too close to me because when Viper becomes the alpha, he might get petty and exclude them, and deny them political positions. Everyone was looking out for themselves, and I couldn't blame them. The game is the game.

I walked to one of them, a boy called Ilad. He was one of the first people that made me feel a little welcome in the group when I initially joined. He was a very reticent boy, kept mostly to himself, but he had a peculiar set of talents. He was good at gathering information. He has a small body, making him able to fit into places that no other kind of adult should. He can stay quiet for a very long time that you almost would forget he was in the room with you, and then you start to say things you shouldn't say with him around.

He always has some new information for me, but I can't call him my friend. I liked him, though. He would be the first person I save should anything terrible happen to the pack.

"Hey, Ilad, how are you?" I asked and stood beside him as we all waited for Viper and his clique.

I knew Viper was late because he was trying to get on my nerves, and James making me the leader, for the time being, couldn't have rubbed off him nicely at all. He would have felt slighted by it, and I am sure he would be coming for some sort of revenge. I had to prepare.

"I am fine, Hayley," Ilad said in this thin voice. The boy has always looked frail, but I knew that was just a front. He is strong and skillful. People say he came from an academy that trained werewolves to be spies. I wasn't sure that was true, but Ilad would never offer anything up about his past. In that aspect, he was just like me.

“You know I might need your help later,” I told him.

“With Viper?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s all bark and no bite. But I’ll keep an eye, and my ears peeled. Are you really worried about him?”

“I didn’t use to be. I don’t know why James made me lead this mission, but now I am. He looked very angry in the Palace earlier. It must have felt like I was taking his position.”

“I’ll prefer you in his position,” Ilad said and shrugged, then smiled at me.

“Oh, it’s too much trouble,” I told him.

There was a chatter behind me, and when I turned around to see the cause, it was Viper and his gang. He walked up to me immediately and stood feet apart and confrontational.

“We are here,” he said.

“Good,” I said. I was tempted to tap him on the cheeks like he was some cute dog, but I didn’t. We were out in the open, and James would be very mad at them if they fought here. “Let’s get going then,” I said instead and turned to the others—eleven of them in total.

They were supposed to be ten. That was the ultimate number in a pack. I was the addition. The addition many of them didn’t want.

Not that I cared for their opinion.

I was the last addition, and here I was, leading them on a mission. I ignored the sick feeling in my stomach as we walked on.

I walked beside Ilad, who I still had a couple of questions for.

“What can you tell me about these lone wolves?”

“Not much,” Ilad said. “They keep to themselves mostly. But I think they have a leader. A werewolf called Luke.”

“What’s he like?”

“Very dangerous. At least everyone says so. Very powerful too. He used to be an alpha of some pack a while back. The pack died, I don’t know how, but he came down here to get away from the memories and the shadows. You know it is hard for an alpha to move on when that happens to them.”

“What does it feel like? Losing a pack as an alpha.”

“It’s like losing your limbs. You get so used to having them around. You know, they are always there for you whenever you need them. Then they died? It feels like losing a part of you. Terrible thing.”

“Can you find out how his pack died?”

“I can,” Ilad said. “But what good is that? We are chasing them off. They won’t be in our lives anymore. I think it is best to only have info about people in your life. You know I could get you something on Viper.”

“Oh, that’s needless. I don’t need to play games with Viper. He wouldn’t dare come up against me; if he does, he’ll be taught a lesson for the umpteenth time.”

“Hate is a dangerous fuel, Hayley. He used to be irritated by you, but now he hates you. Be careful.”

“I will be. Thank you, Ilad.”

He nodded and left me alone. I knew he was right, but I saw no reason to worry. To me, Viper was just a cockroach that you can’t bring yourself to squash because that would be repulsive. You have to learn to live with it, and there isn’t much damage it can do but be a nuisance. I wouldn’t lose a night’s sleep over Viper.

I have bigger things to worry about. I reached into my shirt and wrapped my fingers around the pendant. Something about it felt different today. It was heavier and colder than usual. Before, I would go hours without remembering that it was on my neck, but now every passing second reminded me of it. I initially thought it was just my mind playing tricks because of the dream, but it looked more and more like something else was happening.

Find the person with the other half. The pendant binds your destiny together.

My mother had said. I haven't found the other half yet, and I had given up looking for it long ago. How do I find the other half of a pendant? It seemed impossible.

We were coming to our destination, and people were looking at us.

They recognized us as James's pack, and seeing us there meant there might be trouble. They didn't like that. Parents made their kids go inside; the teenagers looked at us with awe. They would give anything to be us, to walk with such confidence. The older ones looked at us defiantly, showing they were not scared of us, but I knew it was just a front. They were all scared shitless. None of them would dare to raise a hand against us.

We walked past the people and came to a dirt road that led to a sort of reservation with Recreational vehicles littered around it. The lone wolves picked the outskirts of the town to make their abode. They had done all they could to keep out of people's business and not be a nuisance.

Too bad they had to leave.

I looked around at the vehicles. There were ten in total, and I guessed that might mean ten or more wolves. If it leads to a fight, the numbers are equal. I turned around and saw some of the neighbors standing at the top of the reservation, watching to see what was about to happen. They mostly had scowls on their faces.

I don't like this.

James had sent us on a mission that might create discord between the people and him. If this goes sour and there is a fight, the resulting outcome wouldn't matter; the main message will be that sticking to the rules doesn't grant you a welcome in James's territory. That's not the kind of message James wants circulating.

But he didn't care. James must have thought of all this also. The Tarloux family and whatever business they had with

James was more important than his reputation.

Whatever way this goes, whatever the Tarloux family is in town for, I can sense already that it would be the beginning of a long summer. A long summer of unrest.

I sighed as the doors to the RVs opened, and the werewolves came out.

They looked just like any other werewolves. Hard looking, with calculating eyes, taking in their environment and mapping out patterns for an attack should it lead to that or for an escape should that be required too.

My pendant felt heavier suddenly, and it was so cold it was almost burning into my chest. I took my mind off the cold burning into my chest and focused on the wolves before me instead.

The lone wolves stood a couple of feet from us, banded just like a pack would be banded.

“Who is your leader?” I asked.

“Who’s asking?” one of the wolves said. He was about six feet tall with brown hair. He didn’t look like the leader. But none of them look like the leader, and in a way, they all also look like the leader. That must be what it means to be a lone wolf. To have total control over your actions and not be subjugated to others. I would have loved to be like them. That autonomy over my life was what I had to sacrifice for protection, shelter and food, and in time, position within the werewolf court.

“I am asking. I am on an assignment from James. The Alpha of the community. I demand to see your leader.”

“You demand,” the same werewolf said. “Well, little miss in charge, we don’t have a leader. We are lone wolves, haven’t you heard?”

I looked around at my own pack. Most of them had a stolid look on their faces, but Viper had a sneer on. He was enjoying that they were giving me a difficult time.

“Which one of you is Luke?” I asked.

The group was quiet for a while, and then one of them stepped forward. He was taller than the others, with dark hair, dark eyes, and a particularly dark demeanor. When I saw him, my pendant got so cold and heavy that I considered removing it, but then it stopped, and it was light and nonexistent on my chest.

“I am Luke. Who are you?”

I stepped forward until I was just about a foot or two from Luke. It was when I stopped in front of him that I noticed that I hadn’t even intended to walk toward him. It was like there was something in him that pulled me closer. I looked at him skeptically. He was awakening a strange feeling in me that I didn’t understand.

There was an air around him that I couldn’t describe. It was mysterious but attractive.

“I am Hayley,” I said. “And I have a message from you. You have to leave town by the Alpha’s order. You have to—”

“Is that all you do?” Luke said, cutting into my sentence. “Pass on other people’s orders?”

He threw the question at me with such bitterness that it took me aback, but I recovered fast enough and disregarded what he said. I focused on getting the message out instead.

“James wants you to leave.”

“What do you want?” Luke asked me.

“What?”

“You, Hayley,” he said, and his dark eyes danced around me, making my throat dry up. “What do you want?”

I didn’t understand the effect he was having on me. A part of me, deep inside me, wanted to say *you*.

I wanted to tell this man I had just met moments ago that he was all I wanted out of life, and I would abandon my pack and the orders of my Alpha just to be with him.

Get it together, Hayley.

Yes, he was dashing, and there was this dark look about him that I wanted to step into and be a part of, but I had to remain in control.

“I want what my Alpha wants,” I said.

“Hmm,” Luke said. “Well, we can’t give you that. We’ve made a home here, and we’ve done nothing wrong. If James wants to push us out, then he better come down from his lofty throne and do it himself. Short of that, we’re not going anyway.”

“We have orders to make you leave by force,” I told him.

Luke smiled at me. He had a perfect set of teeth, and after smiling, he bit down on his lips as though he was welcoming that idea. I felt like I would give anything at that moment to bite down on those lips. I made myself stand straight up so I would appear taller than I was. It was supposed to help me get back in control.

I wasn’t sure it was working.

“And how are you doing to do that?” Luke asked.

I looked behind her, and by cue, my pack moved closer to me. They all had their claws extended and glowing eyes, ready to fight.

Luke looked at them all and then looked at his own group behind him. They stepped forward, showing me they had no intention of stepping down and leaving without a fight.

“There are rules,” Luke said. “It is what keeps a community. I am beholden to those rules and so also is the supposed leader of the community. No one here has broken any of those rules, and no one here would leave. If you would, however, go against those rules and insist we leave, then you’ll have to contend with us. Do you want to do that, Hayley?”

Before I could stop myself, I said it. “No, I don’t,” I said and gasped. There was no taking it back. The others behind me gasped, too, and looked at each other, wondering what I was doing.

All the while, as Luke was talking, there was a well of emotions and wants building up behind me, and with those words, I let those emotions off. I couldn't control them anymore.

"What I want is you," I continued. "I don't understand it. It makes no sense to me, but I can't help it. I feel this tugging need to be with you. I don't know."

I stepped closer to him; that force was still pulling me. Luke looked at me like I was going crazy and stepped back. He looked at his group, who looked just as confused as everyone else in the opening.

"I think you should leave," Luke told me. "I think you should go and get your head straight. We'll be here. We are not leaving."

Luke led the rest of the group into their RV homes, leaving me standing there with my hands at my side, feeling very stupid. He just rejected me.

I had felt something terrible was going to happen, but I couldn't have guessed it would have been something of this nature.

I couldn't even turn around to look at my pack.

What just happened? That was the question running through my mind.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Hayley?" I heard Viper say but didn't pay him any mind. "I knew you were a mosh head, but I didn't think you were this stupid. James puts you in charge once, and you make a fool of yourself. Way to go!"

I stood there, affixed to the ground, as I heard the others turn around and leave. I really did blow it.

Chapter four(Hayley)

I lay quietly in my room, staring at the ceiling. It was bare white, and there were no intricate patterns for me to focus on, but it still served as a distraction. The blankness of the ceiling was the opposite of my thoughts. They were rushing like a roaring river. A thousand and one things at a time were trying to get my attention, and I couldn't focus on any. It was a disaster. I was a disaster.

What the hell have I done?

The first time I got put in charge, I blew it up. I didn't just blow it; I propositioned our opposition. It was unheard of. I still couldn't wrap my fingers around it. Strangely enough, I don't regret my action. If it happened a thousand times and more, I would do the same thing.

What eluded me was why?

Why do I feel this strong attraction to a man I didn't even know existed at the beginning of the day?

Granted, he was extremely good-looking, but appearance alone wasn't enough explanation for what I was feeling. I felt the attraction so deep inside me; it felt like it was supernatural.

It feels almost like we are fated.

I pulled myself from the bed at the thought of that. I've heard about fated couples. People talked about them as though they were some sort of ideal idea of love people should strive for. I never really believed in it. For me, love was simple, and when something as complicated as the supernatural gets mixed up in it, it defeats the whole purpose of it.

But I still couldn't understand this feeling. I wondered if the man had the same feeling. His name is Luke, and I could still see him when I closed my eyes. The way he stood before me, biceps bulging and defying James's order.

There also was the issue of James. How was I going to face James after what happened? How would I tell him I fumbled at

the first opportunity he gave me to prove myself?

On my way back to town from the lone wolves, I had walked alone with the other in front of me. Some of what they said drifted back to me, and they were mocking me.

It was just like the first time I joined them. They segregated me because I didn't grow up with them. Only Ilad was there for me, and now Ilad was there with them. He had to think of himself. He couldn't associate himself with me any longer. He had put some hope in me, and I had let him down. I feel like I have let a lot of people down. And I would understand if they wanted nothing to do with me anymore.

I will understand if Ilad treats me like a leper, and if James wants me out of the pack, I will leave.

But I have to make sure he hears about the incident from me first. I can't have Viper poisoning him against me. He would twist the whole story up and make it appear like was a two-faced bitch. Truthfully, it might appear like that. Because why else would I have sabotaged the mission in that way?

I sighed and finally stood up from the bed, walking to the door. I knew James said he would be busy, but he would have to make some time for me. Just five minutes and I would explain what happened to him.

When I got on the road, it was dark, and a little rain was drizzling. I didn't mind the rain; I didn't even notice it as my mind was focused on what I would tell James. He's an older werewolf and might have experienced something like this before or even have some advice for me. I hoped so.

When I got to the Palace, there was no one by the door, which was strange. Even at midnight, whenever I walked past the Palace, there was always someone at the door. And today, James said he has a meeting. There should be even more security unless the meeting isn't being held at the Palace. If it isn't, then James wouldn't be here.

I stopped on the stairs and considered going back, but I was here already, and it wouldn't hurt to check out the Palace. I

pushed the main door open and walked into the external garden.

It was night, so I wasn't surprised that it was empty. I was surprised to find the main hall empty. There are always people there. The palace isn't just the sitting place of James. It was a hub—a hub for all werewolves.

But tonight, it was empty. No people, no party. I got the sense something was wrong. I looked towards the entrance and considered turning back and returning in the morning. I decided against it.

I started up the stairs, glowing my eyes to see better and walking lightly on my feet so I didn't make much noise. I had my claws extended, ready for sudden attacks. No sudden attack came. I got to the top of the stairs and walked to the throne room. When I got to the throne room door, I used my enhanced wolf hearing to listen in and found it empty.

Everywhere was empty. I couldn't even hear people's breath, couldn't hear them talk. I figured I was right initially. The meeting wasn't happening here, and I would have to talk to James some other time. I considered sitting by the stairs outside and waiting for him. If he saw me there, he would know it was a serious matter, and he might also guess I was pandering for his sympathy, and if there was one thing James hated more than failure, it was emotional manipulation. I decided to head home and deal with my mess the next day.

Just as I was about to step out, I heard a scream. I stopped and listened for it again. It didn't come, but I picked up the location it came from. I followed it, making sure to be as quiet as possible. The scream didn't sound like that of someone in pain or distress, and it didn't sound like that of someone happy, either. It was just that—a scream.

The further I followed the sound, the more sounds started coming to me. They came as whispers, and I arrived at a door. I'd never been this far into the palace before. It looked like someone's private quarters.

I stood by the door, and the voices carried to me. Sometimes they were clear, and sometimes, they were not, but it wasn't

hard to get the bone of contention about the discussion. There were about five people in there, and I recognized some of the voices. I recognized James. He sounded subdued, almost like he was scared to talk. I guessed the Tarloux family had visited, and they decided to have the meeting at his home. I recognized one more voice. A man called Lenny, the commissioner of police, under James's employ. It was important that at least one person from the human faction knew about the supernatural beings they were inhabiting the town with. The person they chose was Lenny. I never liked him much. He had the look of a jealous person. I knew he couldn't be trusted, and James didn't trust him either. But Lenny was so scared of James that he would never do anything to cross him.

The other voices I didn't recognize. The conversation they were having sounded crazy to me.

"And how many children this time?" one of the voices asked.

"We don't know yet. Along the line of fifty to hundred," Lenny said.

"We can't take that. The deal was two hundred!" another voice bellowed, and I recognized it as the voice of the person that screamed earlier.

"You will take what you get, Ringer!"

That was James, and he was still talking.

"You will take what you get, and you will pay what we are owed. What, you think, we just walk into the streets and pick those children up? It takes months to curate a dozen of them."

"You told the family you would have over a hundred and closer to two hundred when you talked to them last."

"I know. Some unplanned situations came up, and we couldn't keep up with the numbers."

"It is those goddamn lone wolves, isn't it? I told you to deal with them!"

"And I will," James said, and then the next couple of things he said didn't carry to me. They weren't talking with their voices

raised anymore, and it was hard to listen, but I understood what was happening.

I couldn't believe it. I heard it but still couldn't bring myself to believe it. It all just seemed far-fetched. It wasn't the kind of thing I would have imagined happening in the werewolf world.

A child trafficking ring?

No, it wasn't possible.

I heard them, but I couldn't believe it. Am I going to assume my own senses were deceiving me now?

But not James. James saved me. When I was out there in the streets, getting beat up by the sun, rain, and even people, he was my messiah. To entertain the idea that he not only let other children be sold but that he was also facilitating it was damaging to my psyche. Any of those kids could have been me. If he hadn't found something fascinating about me, he might have just sold me off too.

I heard chairs scrape against the floor and knew they were done with their meeting. I ran to hide behind a wall and watched them. I wasn't wrong. I heard them earlier, and now I could see them. They walked out of the room, shook hands, and left James alone. He took a deep sigh and walked back into the room.

I remained at the wall for a long time. I knew what must be done, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't even think I could face him. The initial reason I was in the palace was quickly forgotten.

I walked out of my hiding place and to the door. I tried it, and unsurprisingly, it wasn't locked. I pushed it open and stepped into the room. James turned around at the sound, and when he saw me, he grimaced in surprise.

"What are you doing here, Hayley?" he asked.

I was speechless. The words formed on my lips, but I couldn't roll them off.

“Is everything okay? How did it go with lone wolves? Is everyone okay?”

“I...” I started and broke off again. I took a deep breath. “I heard everything.”

“What was that?”

“You and Lenny and those other people. I heard everything. You are selling kids?”

James realized what I was talking about and stepped closer to me. He walked past me to the door and locked it.

“Whatever you might have heard,” he said, walking back and placing his hands on my shoulder, “You don’t understand it. You cannot understand it.”

“I am not a fool, James,” I said and pushed him away from me. “I heard everything! That’s why you pick kids up from the street. That’s what you do. You pick them up as though you’re helping them, but you’re not! You’re selling them off like they are merchandise.”

“Hayley, you’ve had a long day. Go back home, rest, and we’ll pick this up tomorrow.”

I shook my head. “Don’t patronize me. Do you know why I came here tonight? I did something stupid and couldn’t allow you to think of me in that light. I wanted to be the first to tell you, but then I got faced with that.”

“Well, maybe you should have stayed back home then!” James yelled suddenly and came at me. This time, he wasn’t looking to calm me down. He was frustrated. “You need to go. You need to leave me alone, and we’ll talk about this tomorrow and whatever it is that you might have done. We are both not in the right space of mind now.”

“We are going to talk about tonight,” I said. I had no idea what talking about it would achieve, but I felt it was the only thing we could do. After talking, James would still remain a child trafficker, and I would still have that knowledge about him. Things like that can’t just disappear after we’ve talked about them.

“No!” James said. “You will go home. You will talk about this to no one, and tomorrow, you and I will have a conversation about everything.”

I knew what he was trying to do to me. He was trying to get me under his alpha control, but that has never worked on me. I wasn't just one of his minions that he could push around. I owed allegiance to him because I adored him and was grateful to him, but those two things were nonexistent now. He was just another werewolf to me now.

“Or what?” I asked him, and he was a bit surprised by that.

“Do not make me hit you, Hayley.”

“You can try. But you'll have an easier chance killing me.”

James's eyes went cold, and they regarded me with disgust and regret. “If that is what you want,” he said and smacked me hard.

I wasn't expecting that. The force of the slap lifted me from the floor and smacked me against the door. Pain jarred through my body like a lightning bolt. Before I could stand up, James was walking towards me. I saw the look on his face and knew he was going to kill me.

I finally had the answer to my question. I knew how this would end.

With one of us dead.

“You're a strong wolf, Hayley,” he said as he walked towards me. “One of the most powerful I have ever seen, but don't for one moment think that makes you my equal. You are just an ant compared to me.”

I pulled myself, using the door as support, and was ready for his next attack. I saw his sharp claws, the menacing claws of a killer. They came down at me, and for a bleak moment, I was eight again.

I was back there in the living room, hiding behind my mother and watching as the invaders killed my father. I wasn't going to end up like him.

I dodged the claw, grabbing James's arm and using it to pull him toward myself. I punched him in the throat and knew I should have clawed him instead.

But I am not a killer. I've killed only twice before, and both times, I hated it. Besides, this was James. I couldn't imagine myself killing him.

The blow to his neck made him stagger back, though, and he smiled at me. "You're good," he said. "Better than I taught you."

He didn't waste time attacking me again. He flew at me this time, and I met him halfway. I went in with my claws, sticking them into his side and dragging them up to cut him as deep as I could. I wasn't spared, though. He got me around the chest, and we both fell to the floor, wounded and bleeding.

I pulled myself up and looked around the room, finally taking it in. It was mostly empty, but for a round table at the center and a couple of chairs around it. I walked to the table and picked up one of the chairs, intending to use it as a weapon. I walked back to James, who was still struggling to get up, and I could see that my claws did a number on him. I hit him on the back, breaking the chair in the process and the pieces strewn around him.

"Why?" I asked him and grabbed him, forcing him to stand up. He didn't answer, though. He grabbed at me instead, and I moved away from him, causing him to fall.

James dragged himself on the floor, crawling on his stomach towards one of the pieces of the broken chair. I kicked his chin, causing him to stumble to the floor again.

"Tell me why James," I said, desperate for an answer. Just an explanation so I could wrap my head around this. "I need to know why. Was it money?"

James shook his head. "There is no why," he said. "It is just the way it is. The strong prey on the weak. It is just nature."

"You're a sick bastard," I said and lifted him up. My claws cut through his clothes. I knew what I had to do. I couldn't report him to the police. He owned the police, and I just saw the

commissioner of police walk out of the room with the others. There was nothing the police could do about this.

This was between him and me.

“You have to do it,” he told her. “There is no other way.”

I threw him to the floor again. I shook my head. I couldn't.

I fell to the floor and buried my head in my hands. The weight of the responsibility, of the knowledge, was so heavy on my shoulder it stooped her low. I was going to break; I could tell. I was going to break into a thousand pieces.

I felt a presence come over me, and when I looked up, it was James. He had stood up, and I didn't notice. He was standing above me with one of the legs of the chairs coming down at me. I moved out of the way just in time and pushed him. The leg was broken and pointed at the two ends. When James missed out on stabbing me, and I pushed him, he fell neck first into the other end of the leg of the chair.

I gasped as the stick impaled James, and he struggled to breathe. I wanted to run to him and push it out to help him, but that would only hurry the process. There was no helping it. He was going to die.

He fell to the ground, bleeding from his throat. He was trying to talk and gulping against the blood. He raised his hands and called to me. I came close to him; the shock still registered on my face.

“Run,” James said with a lot of struggle. “Viper will come for you. Run.”

He was right, I realized. A murdered alpha was more than just a big deal. People were going to come for me. I stood for a while and watched James bleed out on the floor before turning, and running out of the door.

I didn't care about my feet making so much sound now. I just wanted to get out of the palace, get out of town.

But the kids?

I would come back for them. I would figure something out. But I had to run for now.

I got to the main hall, and at the far end, I saw someone come out of a room, looking at me. I took a quick look at myself. My torn clothes, the blood on my body. It wouldn't be long before they found James's body and figured out what I did.

I could kill that person too, and that would keep it quiet until I put a considerable distance between myself and the community. But I wasn't going to be that person.

I ran out of the Palace instead, and I figured I was right about what I had surmised earlier.

It was going to be a long summer.

Chapter five (Luke)

I rolled the coffee inside my cup as the smell rose up to me. I had watched Bonne prepare it earlier as he told me what he had just heard when he returned from the store. We were in his kitchen, and there was a concoction boiling beside him.

“Are you sure she is the one?” I asked.

“Yes, I heard the way they described her. It was definitely the girl that led the group earlier in the day.”

“That’s an unusual and interesting turn of events,” I said as I took a sip from the coffee. It was black as usual with a dash of rum, just as I always enjoyed it. “Why would she kill her Alpha? It makes no sense at all.”

“Something is up with the pack,” Bonne said as he stirred the broth on fire. I could get a note of rosemary and hyacinth from the pot. I wondered what he was making. Bonne was always up to something. Cooking up a new concoction, trying different combinations of herbs just to see what would happen. He got the skill from his father, and even though he doesn’t talk much about him, I knew he missed the man. I had met him once, a couple of years before he died. He was a principled man like Bonne, tight-lipped and meticulous.

Bonne was part of the reason I returned to town. He and that feeling whirling inside me that something was waiting for me here. Also, after what went down with my pack and the amount of pain I was in, Bonne was the only one I knew could help me, and he did. He helped me heal. I owe him a lot.

“What was the girl like?” he asked as he turned down the heat on the stove. He was done and would just let it simmer now.

“She was strange,” I told him, but that was an understatement. She was invasive. She had left a significant imprint on me that I couldn’t shake off. Even now, I could smell her around me, and there was something specific about her. It felt like she could touch my soul when she stood in front of me with the

others. Then, that thing she did, throwing herself at me like that, caught me off guard.

“Oh, come on, you can do better than that, Luke. She just killed her Alpha. Let me get a sense of what she is.”

“I don’t really know, Bonne,” I told him, and he gave me that look that said he knew I was lying. “Okay,” I continued. “There was something appealing about her. Her mere presence was so strong it was almost choking. I can still smell her even now. It is almost like she is right here beside me. I have never met anyone with such a possessive presence. It almost kicked me off my feet.”

“You think she’s the kind to snap and kill her Alpha?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see it in her. She looked in control.”

“She threw herself at you.”

“I mean, besides that. That was unusual, and I think it surprised her as much as it did me. I don’t know how to explain it. Did they catch her?”

“No, they didn’t. She’s on the run. I am sure she is still in town, probably hiding, but her chances of getting out of town aren’t good.”

“Why?”

“The new Alpha, Viper, I think he’s called, is hiring hunters to track her down.”

“They won’t catch her,” I said dismissively. She looked smart, evasive, and very powerful. I could get that from just her smell alone. Hell, she killed an alpha. No mere werewolf can kill an alpha, and she didn’t just kill any kind of alpha; she killed her own alpha.

“He’s gathering the best,” Bonne said. “Maybe she would give them a run for their money, but they will catch her if they are smart enough and work together.”

I took another sip of my coffee and rolled the liquid in my mouth. An idea popped into my mind. I dismissed it at first and focused on something else entirely.

“What’s that you were making?” I asked Bonne, trying to get my mind off the crazy idea dancing around in my head. It was dangerous and couldn’t be taken in. The werewolves already want us out of the community for a reason I don’t even know. It would be unwise to test them again.

“Just a potion for Jade’s cough. He’s getting them terribly these days. I don’t know.”

Jade was Bonne’s son. He is a bit sickly and requires maximum care. But all they have to do is wait for him to trigger his werewolf gene. When he comes of age and can turn, his sickness will go.

“Is the rosemary supposed to help?”

“Yes, it is tussive. It should make him cough less. I’ll tell you what, Luke. I can’t wait for the year to end and for him to trigger his gene. The poor boy is in too much pain most of the time.”

I listened as Bonne talked about his son’s infirmities and how much work it was taking care of him, but it didn’t work to distract me. The idea kept dancing around in my head. I knew it wasn’t because I wanted to help out the werewolves. We lone wolves kept ourselves from them. It was more because I wanted to see and know her, and I don’t think any hunter out there is more skilled to get her than me. I can smell her; she’s left an imprint on me. It would be much easier for me.

“Are you okay, Luke?” Bonne asked, dragging me out of my thought.

“Where are the hunters meeting?” I asked Bonne.

“No,” he said. “You’re not doing that. Are you stupid? You’ve got history with her already.”

“That’s why I have to be the one to get her. There is something about her, I know. I want to talk to her and know what it is.”

“They won’t let you get close to her.”

“Let me worry about that. Where are they meeting?”

Bonne shook his head, he thought it was a bad idea, but he could see I had my mind set. “The Palace,” he told me. “This

can go very wrong, Luke. Things are fine now. Why don't you just let them remain fine?"

"I don't know, Bonne. But I must do this," I said and stood up. I took the last gulp of my coffee and stepped from the kitchen counter towards the door. Bonne followed me. "Tell Jade I said hi, okay? And tell him to hold on tight. It will soon be time."

"Are you going to be here for it?" he asked me.

"Of course. He is my godson. I would not miss his coming to wolfhood for any reason."

"What if you're out there chasing phantoms? Chasing girls you shouldn't?"

"Trust me. This won't take long at all. She's just one girl."

"Good luck out there," he said and closed the door behind me.

The cold of the night hit me in the face as I started my journey toward the Palace. I have been there just once before. It wasn't as impressive as everyone seemed to think it was. It is a big contrast to the building around it, and that was what made it appear so majestic. It wouldn't be if it didn't have literal shacks around it.

It had rained earlier in the night, and I had gone to Bonne's to share a cup of hot coffee and rum because of the cold. The walk to the Palace took about ten minutes, and during that walk, I couldn't get the girl out of my mind. Bonne was right. I should let this go and live the quiet, uneventful life I had become accustomed to in the past three to four years, but this wasn't a yearning for conflict or drama. However, I wouldn't deny the thought of having something interesting to do again—some real-life hunting—after a while was enticing. But this was about her. I have to find her before any other person does and before they kill her.

When I got to the palace, a wolf guard by the door stopped me. He was young and couldn't be more than seventeen or eighteen. He looked very green, and I was tempted to fight him, break a bone or two and show him not to mess with an older wolf, but that would be counter-productive. Besides, I

wasn't that kind of wolf anymore. I left that life behind a long time ago.

"I heard there are calling for hunters here," I told him.

"And are you one?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

He squinted at her, trying to appear tough. "What pack do you belong to?" he asked.

"I am a lone wolf," I told him, and his tough boy act broke a bit. I saw fear skim across his face, but he was quick to hide it. I don't know why they are scared of us. They think we are unruly scavengers. They think we are predators with a hunger for the chase and the kill only. But they are very mistaken because that's what it means to be a werewolf.

"I don't think they'll want lone wolves in there," he said after getting himself together.

I smiled at him. "I think I want myself in there," I said and showed him he could let me in, or I could force my way in. He moved out of the way, deciding that if I were going to be trouble at all, I would be trouble to the people inside.

"Thank you," I said and walked into the Palace. It was just as I remembered it. It was a sturdy and dour structure on the inside. So many arches and beams, and it appeared more like a church than a king's court. But it couldn't have been called a chapel, so I understood why they chose to call it a palace instead.

It was busy that night. It was almost always busy. No one can commit a crime here and get away without getting caught or at least getting seen. If she evaded all these people, then she must be very skilled. Maybe even more than I could imagine. I walked past the garden and towards the throne room. I could hear the noise coming from inside it and knew the meeting was happening there. No one stopped me as I approached the room. One would think that a group of people whose leader was just killed would care more about security. But they are werewolves, and that isn't our way.

The boy in front of the Palace was just a formality. Each person is obligated to be their own security. I pushed open the door to the throne room, and the chatters stopped. Eyes fell on me, and people whispered to themselves, no doubt wondering what a lone wolf was doing inside the throne room. No one moved to question my presence, so I simply ignored them. There were about twenty people inside the room, and from their appearance, I could tell they all were there to fill up the hunter vacancies. I took a place removed from the others and looked at them. Some of them I have seen around, but most of them I didn't know. One of them stood out to me, though. Buff. I have seen him around and even gotten into a couple of scuffles with him. I stood as far from him as possible, but he found me and walked towards me until he was standing beside me.

“What are you doing here, lone wolf?” he asked me as we waited for this new Alpha called Viper—what a strange name.

“The same thing you are,” I told him.

“Do you really think they will allow a man like yourself to go for the hunt?” he asked.

“A man like myself?”

“A low life, a runt in the pack. A lone wolf. Disgusting to nature.”

All those adjectives for me. I looked at him, and it was a wonder his head didn't smoke; that must have taken a lot of imagination for him to come up with. In my experience, men like Buff don't have much in that department. He was a brute who loved to do as he was told and to hate anything he couldn't understand or that was simply different.

He was trying to get me mad. I ignored him and moved away. He was a persistent one and stepped closer to me.

“You should leave,” he said.

“Why don't you make me?”

“Hmm,” he growled, and at that moment, the door to the throne room opened, and a man stepped in. He was younger than the other werewolf that had died but looked menacing,

and by the look on Buff's face and the others, I guessed this was the new alpha. He was followed by other members of the pack. I remembered him from the reservation earlier. And the others, too.

They don't particularly look like a pack who just lost their alpha, but looks can be deceiving, I have come to know.

The new alpha walked on, and they made way for him and his pack. He walked to the throne and looked at it for a while but didn't sit. He stood beside it, his hands on it.

"Is this the best Nillport has to offer?" he asked and didn't look very impressed with the crowd gathered in front of him. I couldn't determine the cause of his dissatisfaction. The lot before me looked battle-tested like any hunter I have ever seen. I guessed he expected them to look more rugged and scarred. A great misconception about hunters,

I have been a hunter all my life—at least before the last three years—and the most important attribute of a hunter was blending—the ability to be subtle and appear ordinary enough to mix with people.

"I guess I'll have to make do with you," he said. "The woman you're looking for is dangerous. She is deceptive, and most importantly, she is a traitor. She betrayed her Alpha, her pack members, and the order of nature."

I looked at the new alpha and the rest of the pack. They looked betrayed but not angry, or at least their anger has been kindled and was not fiery enough to capture her. They have spent years with her and are more suited to track her down, but it seems they have larger business to handle.

"I am not looking to hire one of you," the new alpha said. "I want to hire all of you."

Now that is interesting.

"Whoever brings her to me, dead or alive, will be the one to receive the payment. You can work in a group or work alone. I don't care. I want that traitor found. If you bring her alive, you'll have the crown in your debt. You can go."

There was a murmur of ascent amongst the group, and they all turned to head out. That didn't go the way I thought it would. I had no idea how I expected it to go. I have never hunted for the killer of alpha before.

"Excuse me," Buff said suddenly, loud enough for everyone to hear, and they all stopped. "We have people amongst us who shouldn't be here," he continued, and I grinned. I didn't expect him to go that low.

Everyone looked at each other, wondering what he was talking about. He stepped forward to the Alpha and then pointed at me. He recognized me immediately.

"We shouldn't be sharing an assignment with a lone wolf. It is below us. Besides, we've all heard about what went down between him and the criminal earlier in the day. Who is to say they are not conspiring together."

The new Alpha glared at me. "You, come forward," he said to me.

It was a bit disrespectful, but I stepped forward. I wasn't looking to cause any trouble.

"You're the leader of the lone wolf pack, aren't you?" he asked.

I wanted to explain to him that the lone wolves weren't a pack and I was not their leader, but what good was it? They have their presumptions already. Let them run with it.

"Yes," I told him.

"What business do you have with this pack business, then?"

"None. But I heard the killer was the same person that accosted me earlier in the day. I became interested."

"Are you not working with her?" Buff asked, and I wanted to knock him on the head to show he was making a stupid statement.

"I have only seen the lady once in my life, and that was earlier when you came with her," I said to the Alpha. "And you know how I reacted to her advances. You tell me, did they look like the actions of a man in collusion with her or one surprised?"

He didn't answer my question.

"What are you doing here?"

"Hoping to win a bounty just like every other person in here. That isn't forbidden, last I checked."

"He isn't to be trusted," Buff said. "He is dirt."

"Why should I let you join the hunt?" Alpha asked.

"What does it hurt if you do? If I get the girl, you win, and I win. If I don't and someone else does, you still win."

The Alpha seemed to think about it for a while. "If I find out that you're working against us or for Hayley, I would have you pulled limb from limb until you tear."

"Your word is the law," I told him.

"Of course it is."

"But can I ask for something?" I said, a little smirk on my face to show I knew I was yielding. I have been nothing but civil, so he had no choice but to listen to what I had to say. He had other choices, but he had to consider what message he was sending out there as the new Alpha.

"Go ahead," he said.

I could feel Buff boiling beside me. I don't know where most of their hate for us stems from, but they always seem to forget that once we were like them. Once we had a pack, we enjoyed the sense of camaraderie that comes with belonging.

"If I do capture this girl and I bring her to you alive, I want you to promise, before this crowd, that you will leave my friends and me alone in the reservation. We cause no trouble being there. We just want to be left alone in peace."

The Alpha considered it for a moment, and then he shrugged.

"Of course," he said. "You will have the land in the reservation if you bring her to me alive."

He walked away from the throne after that and out of the room. The rest of the pack followed him out. I notice one of them at the far end. He was smaller than the rest and had a

slickness about his eyes. He caught my eye before stepping out of the room, but he quickly looked away.

“Your kind is supposed to be nomads, not settlers,” Buff said, his eyes burning with hate. I said nothing to him and walked out with the others.

It would soon be morning, and I had a hunt to plan.

Chapter six(Hayley)

I could have returned home, but I had a feeling they would have someone there waiting for me. Werewolves work swiftly. Hell, there would be people on the street now looking for me. It had barely been thirty minutes since I left the Palace, and I was walking down an abandoned road, a location at the far end of the town in mind. I have to get out of these clothes first, get new ones, and make plans to leave town. It will be hard, close to impossible, but I have to get it done.

I wondered what Viper's initial reaction and response would be. He was a very rash being. He could order the whole town locked down and order everyone to be on the search for me. A town of over fifty thousand wolves searching for a single girl. It would be disastrous for me. There was no escaping it.

I came to the end of the road and heard voices approaching me. I ran to the side of a building that stood out in the dark of the night because of the white paint. It was the wrong building to hide against because it pointed me out. But I couldn't move anyway. To move would be to expose myself.

I stayed close to the wall, trying to become one with it, as the voices I heard were from two people. A man and a woman. They seemed to be walking back from a party or a club and were taking a shortcut. The town is relatively safe. People get ambushed, but it is a rare occurrence, and whenever it happens, James had been very adept at fishing out the culprit. Everyone knew they would be caught, so they didn't do it.

He kept the town safe. How could a man who did so much good, a man who the whole community loved, who they looked on as their savior, also be the same one selling children? It was hard to reconcile the two. So hard that there are moments when I think I must have misheard him. They must have been talking about something else. A raw material, some kind of electronics. Just about any other thing.

But it was all just wishful thinking. I heard them clear as day. They were trafficking kids. There were bigger questions

haunting me, though. What were they trafficking the kids for? What are they using the kids for, and how many have they gotten so far?

I watched as the couple walked up the street and held my breath, praying neither of them looked back because if they did, they would see me. They didn't look like they were on the lookout for someone, so maybe the word wasn't out yet. Maybe I still have time to make it out of town before Vipers has the town on lockdown.

The couple walked on, and they got to the top of the street without looking back at me. I sighed and moved to walk away from the building when I heard the growl behind me. In my anxious state, I hadn't smelled the dog. But now that I heard its growl, the muskiness of its fur filled my nose. It was right behind me and not on a leash, waiting to charge.

I growled back at it as gently as I could and glowed my eyes. It stopped growling and considered me for a moment, gauging to see if I was a friend or foe. It picked foe and dashed at me.

Thankfully it didn't bark.

I was ready for it. I stood my ground and growled louder at it. It stopped halfway, but I saw a light come on in the house. The occupant was awake.

I stepped away from the dog, one step at a time, so I didn't startle. It kept its eyes on me but didn't move and stopped growling. As I got back to the front of the house, the front door opened, and a man came out. He stared at me, his eyes going wild.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked. "Rico!" he yelled.

I guessed that was the name of the dog. Rico didn't move and didn't answer. He just kept his eyes on me.

"Sorry," I told him and walked back to the road. I got to the road, and the dog dashed forward again, but it didn't come for me. It went for his owner instead, and together they stood by the porch and watched me.

I walked away from them and down the road, taking a turn into a new street, my quarry just down the road.

I sighed.

The man was human, so I was probably safe. But I wouldn't be safe from humans and wolves alike once it is morning. It wouldn't just be the wolf after me, it would be the police, too, and then I would become a fugitive.

The police and the human I could handle. Even the werewolves, I wasn't very worried about. There was something else that scared me, and I hoped Viper wasn't smart enough to figure out what it was.

I walked down the road, looking around to make sure no one saw me before I ran to the porch. I knocked once, and just as I expected, the door opened. Even though it was way past midnight and there was no one coming to get a shot, he was always in his shop.

I had always questioned the location of his shop, set right in the middle of a living area, but today I was grateful for it. At this time of the night, it was quiet and empty, and no one was peeking from the windows wondering who the woman trolling through the street in the middle of the night was.

"I thought I was going to see you soon," Kris said and opened the door for me. I walked in, and for the first time since I ran out of the Palace, I felt safe. "What have you gotten yourself into, Hayley?" he asked me.

"Deep pile of shit I can't get myself out of," I said. He didn't bother turning on the light because we both didn't need it. We were werewolves, and our night vision was impeccable. I walked to his fireplace and started a fire.

"You're going to have to burn everything you're wearing," he told me.

"I know," I replied. I was already thinking like a fugitive, burning evidence of my presence.

Thus began my descent into madness.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" he asked.

"I should take a bath," I suggested.

“You should. And you should stay here for the time being. I can hide you in the basement. No one even knows it exists. You’ll be fine there for a couple of days, hell, maybe even weeks. Then, we’ll find a way to get you out of town. I can get you to Michigan. I have some friends there. They will take you in, no questions asked. You can decide what you want to do then.”

That was Kris, already thinking of how he was going to help me without even knowing why I did what I did. He was the oldest friend I had. In fact, he was more than just a friend. He was my father’s friend. He was a sort of godfather to me.

“I can’t stay here at all,” I told him. There was no way I would put him in danger. Viper would send someone here to look for me, and they will find me. He could mask my scent, but that won’t fool Ilad. Ilad can sniff through anything. He would find me here, and I didn’t want to put him in a weird position. I don’t want to make anyone liable. “I will just clean up and get out of your hair.”

“Rubbish. You can’t go back out there. He has a bounty out on you.”

I gasped at the mention of that. That was my fear. A bounty attracts all sorts of werewolves. The worst of the worst. Hunters who have been trained all their lives to track people. I didn’t think I would be able to handle them.

“How many?” I asked.

“The report is about twenty of them. A weird mix.”

“How much?”

“No mention. But you’re wanted alive or dead. Alive will attract a bonus.”

“I think people are hungry for the bonus.”

“Hayley hunters are not people to be messed with. They are mostly ruthless and callous.”

“More reason I can’t stay here. I will be putting you in danger.”

“I can help you. I’ve dealt with hunters in my life. I know how to fool them.”

“No,” I insisted. “I will clean up, you set me up with some provision for the road, and I will be out of here soon. No arguing that, Kris. This is the best you can do for me.”

He looked very much like he still wanted to argue, but he just sighed. He knew he wasn’t going to win the argument.

“This is insane,” he muttered as he walked into his workshop. I could hear some birds twittering. I walked into the bathroom, knowing it might be my last bath for a long time. It caused a chill to run down my spine.

The probability of me coming out of this alive was low. If it weren’t my life hanging on the balance, I would have staked a bet against me.

I got naked and then got under the shower, letting the water run down my body. How did I get here?

The lone wolf. A very simple answer.

He didn’t occupy the first spot on my mind anymore. Surviving had replaced it. I was still bothered about my reaction to him, and if I survived this, I would try to find out what it meant. Hell, maybe I would see him again.

I washed the blood off my body, and my hand touched the pendant on my chest. I rolled it in my fingers, tracing out the shape of the half-moon. It looked so inconsequential now. One half of a pendant, with the other half out there on some random person’s neck, waiting to be found by me. The possibility of that ever happening now was slimmer than ever.

I let the pendant go and finished washing up. When I got to the bedroom, a new set of clothes was on the bed waiting for me. It was just my style—a pair of jeans, a dark plaid shirt, and a leather jacket for the cold.

I put it on fast and walked into the living room. Kris was waiting for me with a bag in hand. He handed it to me, his eyes sad and heavy.

“I’ll be fine, Kris,” I told him.

“I really hope you will be. This is very serious. Now, tell me what happened. I know you didn’t kill that man for no reason.”

“It was an accident,” I told him, “He was....” I started but stopped. It sounded even crazy to me to say it out loud. Just ludicrous. I knew the reaction to expect.

“Spit it out,” he said.

“I found out he was involved in a child trafficking ring,” I said, and the silence that followed was intense.

“No way,” Kris said after a while, chuckling dryly. “James? No way.”

“Yes. I was shocked too. I confronted him, and he didn’t deny it. He told me to keep it to myself, but I couldn’t. He threatened to kill me if I didn’t. We got into a fight, and he died. I killed him.”

Kris still stared at me, the disbelief obvious. James has been Alpha for as long as I remember. Some say for over thirty years now, and he’s been the best alpha the community could hope for.

“Are you sure?” Kris asked again.

“Yes,” I said. “It wasn’t just him. It was Lenny, and some people I think are from the Tarloux family.

At the mention of the family, Kris’s eyes went dark.

“He’s got business with that family?”

“It would seem so,” I said.

“Oh, James, what the hell did you get yourself into? And what the hell did you get yourself into, Hayley?”

I wanted to tell him about the shipment that was about to happen but decided not to. I have no idea how I would stop that while still on the run, but I would figure something out.

“I have to go, Kris. Thank you.”

He sighed and pulled me in for a hug. “You find a way to send a message to me when you’re safe, okay?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Go towards Michigan if you can,” he said again. “I will send words ahead of you. Find a man called Parlance. He will help you.”

“Parlance. Okay, got it.”

I hugged him again and stepped out of the house, walking back to the road.

I had no intention of going to Michigan or looking for a man called Parlance. I had a plan. It might cost me my life, but since it looked like I was going to forfeit that anyway, I might as well take down James’s legacy with it and expose him for who he really had been.

Chapter seven (Luke)

“Come, I’ll show you something,” Bonne said as he walked into the shop. It was quite early in the morning, the sun was barely out, and the street was still very dark. Word has spread now about James’s death, and everyone knows there might be some trouble before the new alpha settles in. James kept the community in control, but it doesn’t mean there aren’t elements out there always looking to perpetuate evil. They will take this moment and attack. No one wanted to be a victim, so they remained home. They would stay indoors until the sun was well out and darkness couldn’t provide camouflage for evil. It will be that way for a while—at least the next two months or thereabout.

I wondered what else would happen within those months. There is a new alpha, but will he hold the position? Would everyone be satisfied with his appointment? If they are not, that will destabilize the community.

I pushed that out of my mind, though, as it is none of my business. It is my business now to find the alpha killer, and Bonne would help me with that.

I followed him into his herb shop, and he hit the switch on the wall, flooding the shop with light. We both could see clearly if we just glowed our eyes, but Bonne mostly liked to live like he wasn’t a werewolf. He barely turns, maybe once a year, just to see if he could still do it. I can’t remember the last time I saw his claws while I extended mine a hundred times a day.

It wasn’t that Bonne hated being a werewolf; he hated the uncertainty that comes with it. There is always a danger hanging in the air, waiting for you if you’re a werewolf. Not acting like one doesn’t keep the danger away, but it makes you less susceptible than living every day expecting it.

For example, when we walked into his shop, I looked around to make sure we were alone and that there wasn’t someone lurking in the dark waiting. I can’t help but be conscious. It

borders on paranoia, and it is because of the wolf part of our nature.

Bonne has learned to ignore most of it, though. I don't know whether to be happy for him or worried. With everything volatile now, he would need his wolf senses to remain alert.

We walked down the aisles in the shop, past shelves stacked to the brim with different types of herbs. Some hung freely on the racks; some were trapped in jars, and some ground to dust and packed in bottles. There were some jars with animal parts like a raccoon's skull, a crocodile's teeth, and other things like that. I can't come into his shop without him around. At least not this far into the shop. Everything about it is creepy. I guess I understand why he tones down his wolf part. We stopped in front of what looked like a kitchen but was a counter for making all sorts of preparations. He had an array of equipment, ranging from an industrial grinder to mortars and pestles of different sizes. The kitchen could also sub as a standard laboratory.

Bonne didn't like the wolf nature, but he was obsessed with it, always studying it, looking for herbs and mixtures of herbs and minerals, even animal parts that could enhance or subdue it. He always had some grand idea that he was working on.

We were there to look at his latest invention.

He picked up one of the mortars and the pestle by its side. There was ground-up material inside it. It looked like a red flower of the sort, with some other black color and green colored things, all mixed.

"What's that?" I asked him, eyeing it skeptically as he started stirring the mixture.

"You know, I thought the new alpha guy wouldn't let you in on the hunt," he said. "They hate your ass over there. You lone wolves. They think you're a band of devils or something, and you're Lucifer."

"They better think I am Lucifer and not mess with me."

Bonne chuckled and shook his head. "I would have loved if he had sent you away. You have no business in pack wolves'

business. It will mess you up.”

“It’s been four years, Bonne. I can handle it.”

“You say that, but I’m not so sure. Anyway, I know there’s no stopping you now. You’ll do what you want to do.

“Good, you know that. Stop preaching to me and tell me why I am here and not out there hunting.”

“Come on,” Bonne said. “You’re not going to hunt like those primordial wolves out there. This is a mix of beet, charcoal, and ageratum. The ageratum isn’t easy to come by around here. It is the main ingredient in the preparation.”

“What does it do?”

“It enhances your senses. Helps you focus.”

I took the mortar from him, and took a sniff from it. It had a particular earthy smell, and it irritated my nose. “I’d rather not,” I told him.

“Oh, come on. I have been working on this for days, looking for someone to finally use it.”

“I am not going to be your lab rat, Bonne.”

“Lab rat has such a stink to it. You’re a test subject. Trust me, with this, you’ll get the girl in hours. Shorter than any of those wolves out there can manage. You still smell her, don’t you?”

“Yes, I still smell her,” I said, and that was disturbing. It was usual for a smell to stay attached to me as a werewolf, but it mostly leaves in minutes, sometimes hours, if it invokes a feeling in me. It had been almost half a day since I smelled the girl, and her scent was still so thick around me. It was almost like if I turned around, I would find her behind me.

“Good,” Bonne said. “This will make it even sharper. It will be like you’re tailing footprints in muddy soil. So easy. Trust me.”

He looked like a kid about to fly a rocket for the first time. He took his craft so seriously. Too bad I was going to have to break his heart.

“I trust you, Bonne. It is the powder in the mortar I don’t trust. Can you just get me the usual?”

“Where’s your spirit of adventure?” Bonne said as he collected the mortar from me. He didn’t see the irony in his question because here I was going after a werewolf so powerful that she killed her alpha. What could be more adventurous than that?

He set the mortar down and walked to the end of the room, where he recovered a small vial filled with well-grounded herbs and handed it to me.

I don’t remember what he has in this, but he told me once. He mentioned them once and listed all of their functions. I didn’t care about that. I just cared that they worked fine for me. The mixture makes me more aware of my surrounding. Everything about the concoctions Bonne makes affects our senses. They just do it in different ways.

Imagine being out in the jungle; a single lick of the powder in the vial will give you access to every single thing around you. You will be able to sense everything. You will hear the crawling insect underneath the roots of a tree. Nothing at all will escape you. You will see so far into the distance, and any change in the air will get picked up by your skin immediately. He had a load of other mixtures, but this was the only one I liked.

“Thank you,” I said and collected it from him, then we headed out of the back room and into the main shop. By the time we got out, it was fully light outside, and people were beginning to show up.

“I heard you’re given the order to kill her if she resists,” Bonne said. “Is that true?”

“Yes. Dead or alive, we’re to bring her in.”

“We’re going for alive, I’m guessing.”

Of course. I bring her in alive, and the new alpha promised to leave us alone in the reservation.”

“You think he’ll keep to his promise? James said the same thing that every kind of wolf was welcomed in his community, and then he woke up one day and didn’t want you people.”

“Do you know why he did that?”

“I asked around. It had something to do with the Tarloux family.”

I scoffed at the mention of their name. I should have known they were involved somehow.

“I know, right?” Bonne said. “What will you do if she doesn’t come willingly, though? Have you thought of that? She killed the Alpha, so she must be pretty powerful. I mean, James wasn’t the most powerful alpha to have been, but he was strong, and he was an alpha! That means something. If she doesn’t come willingly, you’re going to have to make a decision. Kill her or let her go. One of the two.”

“She’s going to come willingly,” I told him.

But I knew he was right. I hadn’t thought of it, but it was a possibility. If I catch up with her and it leads to a fight, I have to make sure she doesn’t win. Even if it will take having to tie her down so she doesn’t escape and bring her in still tied up, then that is what I would do. I can’t think of killing her. She’s imprinted on me. In a way, she’s become a part of me, and the worrying thing was that that part was getting deeper and deeper as time passed. I’m going to have to fight it.

“I don’t know this girl,” Bonne said. “I have never met her, but she’s done something to you. Something I have never seen anyone do before. And I think that is more reason why you shouldn’t hunt her.”

“I have no option, Bonne,” I said. “It has to be me. I can’t let anyone else get her.”

I don’t know why, but the hunting was just a secondary mission. The main one was to make sure no one but me got her. It felt very important to me. There was something about her.

They call her Hayley, and I have to know her.

Chapter eight(Hayley)

About fifteen years ago, before James took me off the street, I used to run around for a gang that called themselves Persi. They were just a bunch of older street kids who got together and made us do things for them. If we didn't do those things, they'd beat us and collect whatever you made for the day. They were big, too big to be street rats, and they were mean. They didn't mind throwing a few punches and throwing things at you. They didn't mind even breaking bones. They were simply heartless, and they recruited me soon enough. I had avoided them as much as I could, but they found me. People talked about me a lot—a little girl on the street with swift legs and hands. I was a dangerous weapon.

I used to walk down the street with my nose flaring and taking a sniff at the people to see who was using expensive perfumes. They were always the right ones to rob.

Not the ones wearing the expensive designers or the ones with the expensive wristwatches, not even the ones that put so much effort into looking rich. It was simply the ones that smelled expensive. Most of them weren't showing off and just loved to smell nice. If they catch you stealing from them, they mostly would just shoo you away and not hand you over to the police. Sometimes, they would give you some money and make you promise never to steal again. It was all empty promises, of course, but it was fun to look into their eyes, those pretty things overflowing with naiveté with their lustrous skin and beautiful smiles, and lie to them.

The best humans are the ones that smell nice. A fact I came to understand as a street rat.

The Persi rounded me up one afternoon with a couple of other kids. They asked us to go steal for them and bring whatever we get back, and then they'll determine what portion to give us. They have made themselves the street mafia. It was utterly ludicrous, and they were pigs. There was no way I was giving them what I hustled off the street.

So, we went to the street to steal. I made a bit that day, enough to keep me going for about a week or two, and I wasn't about to hand it over to them. I ran away. I couldn't remain on the street because they would find me. It was their turf; they'd been out there longer than I had been, they knew all the hiding places, and they knew a lot of kids they could get to look for me. I was left with only one option—hiding inside a house.

When the streets get unsafe, when you have everyone skulking for you and every nose in the town sniffing out your scent, the best thing is to stay invisible. Stay away from the street for as much as you can. The trick isn't in getting out as fast as you can; the trick is in getting out alive, and you do that by picking the right time to be out during the day.

That morning after I left Kris's, I could tell it wasn't the right time to be outside. The hunt will just have started, and everyone will be at it with fresh enthusiasm. I had to lay low for a while, let them tire a bit from finding me and not seeing me, then I would step out again. It might take me weeks to make it out of town, but I would make it out alive.

If I had had humans hunting me instead of werewolves, this would have been much easier. But werewolves have a heightened sense of smell and perceive their environment differently than humans. They had the sensory ability of wolves and the cognitive abilities of humans. It was a dangerous pair. I know because as I walked down the street, with the sun slowly coming up behind me and basking the street in a lovely yellow glow, I was listening to the conversations happening inside the homes on either side of the street. It was a school morning, so families were up early to prepare the kids, and those without kids were preparing for work. What I was looking for was a house with no noise coming out of it at this time of the day.

I found it just about five houses from the start of the street. It was dead quiet, and I couldn't even hear the sound of mice skittering about from inside the house. As I walked towards it, I took a sniff of the air around the house. It was mostly just grass, some flowers, and a huge amount of dust. No human skin, though. Only flaked old ones. I got to the porch and

found some mail and newspaper on the floor. These people have been out of town for a long while. I did knock, though. Just a gentle one, and I didn't wait to get a reply before I broke the bolt and walked into the house. I could have gone in through the back window, but I wasn't a kid anymore. A neighbor was bound to see me sniffing around, and it wasn't dark.

I was a long way from the Palace but still within the community. Depending on the kind of hunters they hired, I should be able to keep them off my scent, and the time I spend in this house will keep them going in circles for a while. That was what I did before heading here—walked around the city in circles, keeping myself hidden and using the dark for cover, but once it started to get light, I headed out immediately.

It was a bit dark inside the house as all the curtains were drawn, but I didn't need to pull them. I could see like I was still outside. The furniture in the house was covered with sheets to stop dust from gathering on it and judging by the amount that had gathered on the sheets, I think the occupants of this house have been gone a long time. I hope they don't come back soon. There were family portraits on the wall, a couple of artworks, some child paintings on the refrigerator, and nothing to eat in there.

I was beginning to get hungry.

I made sure not to breathe in too hard because of the dust in the air. Our senses were good, but that had its downside too. A simple breath inward can send me into a sneezing fit. I was trying to remain stealthy, and sneezing would help me achieve the opposite of that.

I stepped away from the furniture and moved to the bedroom. There were three of them. The biggest one was for the parent, judging by the clothes in the closet. The other two were for the kids.

Were they on vacation, and what kind of vacation takes so long that they got this much dust on their furniture? Maybe they relocated and didn't want to sell this house. To keep it as

something to have should they ever come back to whenever they were back.

The house I broke into all those years ago wasn't half as grand as this, but it was good enough to hide me for three days, after which I assumed the bullies had forgotten about me.

There was a hatch at the far end of the house leading to a basement. I opened it and popped down into the basement. It was even darker in there, and the smell of dead rats hung in the air. It was very putrid as it had dried over time, but it still wanted to make me keel over and puke. I looked around the basement and saw it served as a storage unit also. Shelves have been built into the walls and on one of these shelves were canned foods. I almost squealed in joy when I saw it. I started towards it, hoping to find something good in there, but it was just rows upon rows of canned beans. I got some out and headed back to the kitchen, where I warmed it up, removed the sheet from one of the sofas, and ate. After I was done with that, I went into the bigger bedroom, which thankfully didn't have as much dust and the window opened into the backyard where no neighbor could see. I opened the blinds, dusted off the bed, and lay down, exhausted.

It felt wrong to be lying there and searching for sleep, but there was nothing else to be done, so I went to sleep. I would be out when it was dark, prowling like the creature of the night that I am.

Sleep came easy. I was tired, and it might be the last I got in a long time. When I get out of town, and I hope to do that soon, I will make for the woods immediately. I was better off out there with the trees, grasses, and other animals than here with the concrete and high-rises. I can get better camouflage there and even fight better because I would be surrounded by pieces of nature I could use to my benefit.

Fifteen years ago, when I slipped out of the building where I hid and went back to the street, they were still waiting for me. It was like nothing had changed since I left. They cornered me and asked for their share of the things I stole. I had spent it all, which was why I came back to the street. To get some. They attacked me. The three of them beat me so hard that I thought I

was going to die, but I didn't. They left me bleeding and with broken bones on the floor—a child, a girl helpless on the street. I was a meal for the predators. I dragged myself out of the road, rested against a building, and remained there for a long time. A couple of hours later, when I stood up, I felt something different in me. The broken bones were healed, the bleeding had stopped, and I didn't even have a scar.

I knew what it was, but it came early. It wasn't supposed to come until I was thirteen, and if my parents were alive, they would have made a big deal about it. My mum would have made her famous cake, my dad would have gotten me a present, and they would have sung for me like it was my birthday.

I was just eleven, and I had triggered my wolf gene. I felt different then, special. I tried to extend my claw, and it did. It was a springy little thing, but I knew how strong our claws could be. I knew the damage they could do.

I left the side of the building and searched for those boys. They never bullied a kid after that, and every one after that kept away from me. I had gained my power, but I was suddenly a pariah too. There are always sacrifices to pay; I learned this very early in life.

When I woke up later, it was already dark outside. Swinging the bag Kris prepared for me, I stepped out of the house, ready to face whatever may come my way. I had had enough rest, and my senses were even sharper now. I couldn't keep my eyes glowing in the darkness of the night because it would draw attention to me, so I made do with human eyes and sniffed the air a couple of times to see if there was any change. I kept my ears peeled to the ground too. I walked down the street and started towards the woods. I would have to go past the street I walked with the others yesterday and past the reservation with the lone wolves on it. I wondered what he was up to. The man called Luke, and a stupid idea came to my mind to check him out and see if he could help me. I pushed it out immediately. It was best to keep to myself, get to the woods and away from town, then find a way to help the kids that might be getting sold.

The walk was uneventful until I got close to the reservation. The streets were eerily quiet, there was no night party, which was common to the street, and the people used to stay out late, even until the wee hours of the morning. But it was all quiet now. I knew it was because of me.

The silence made my footstep echo so loud, so when I heard a foreign sound, I stopped. I was in the middle of the street, and a sniff in the air told me there were werewolves with me. I could get two distinct smells, but there could be more. I turned around, and I couldn't see them. They remained in the dark, probably hiding behind the houses. They were tracking, and they wanted me to know they were following me.

They were cocky ones. They must be some of the hunters, and I was fairly certain they were thinking I was no match against them. All my life, people have always underestimated me, and they've always regretted it.

I continued towards the woods, picking up the feet thumping against the ground. Now, I knew they were just two. After walking a while, I stopped again and looked behind me. They were both standing there, shrouded by the darkness, with their eyes glowing, ready for attack. I could see their claws extended, and low growls were coming from them.

I let my backpack drop and prepared myself for them. They were bigger than me; I could tell that. They had the hardened look of people who had gotten so accustomed to killing it had become a chore for them. They started towards me, one step at a time, and their movement was lithe and graceful. They were used to fighting as a pair, and I could see it in their coordination. They would always attack and defend together. They were a pack—a pack of just two with no alpha.

They didn't attack me immediately. They flanked me first, catching me between them with no place to go.

“Do you want to give up?” one of them asked. “You're outnumbered.”

“So it seems,” I told them. “But if you want me, you'll have to do the work.”

The other one smiled. "Then so be it."

They dashed towards me together, their movements fluid and swift. They were fast too. But I was faster and I saw that immediately. The first swiped at me with his claws, and I moved back, missing by a couple of inches, but with no time to celebrate my narrow escape. The two of them were on me again almost immediately, and I spent the next couple of minutes just evading their attack and never getting one in.

They had a grin on their faces the whole time as I started to formulate a plan. They attacked together; they retreated together. They did everything together. That was their strength, and to beat them, I would have to find a way to unsynchronized them. I continued deflecting their attack as they tried to keep up with my speed, and I knew what to do. Unfortunately, neither one was as fast as me, which was why they had difficulty getting an attack home.

I positioned myself between them and let them both come at me. They took the bait, dashing at me together and with hope in their eyes that they would finally get me. I turned toward the one to my left just in time, grabbed him by the arm, and pulled him towards me. Before the next could react, I pulled the other closer to me again until he was looking me right in the face.

I was going to have to kill them.

I realized then that to survive this, I was going to kill a lot of people. I hadn't really considered it, but these people wouldn't lose breath agonizing over killing me. They were doing it for money, but I am not like them. I am not a killer.

I hesitated in attack, and the werewolf I was holding attacked me. He swung his claws at me, and I had to let go of him and shift backward to avoid getting slashed by him. His claws nipped at my face, tearing off a part of my skin. It burned.

They both faced me again, realizing that I was more skilled than they expected. They flanked me again and attacked together. They were used to fighting that way and didn't know any other. It would be their downfall. I repeated the same thing, left myself open, and they swung in for the kill, but they

couldn't get to me. I swung towards the other and grabbed him by the neck, and this time, I didn't hesitate. I extracted my claws, and dug into his neck. I could feel his carotid vein move against my claws, and I snapped it. He fell, bleeding to death.

The other howled. It was a cry laced with pain and anguish and anger. He looked at me with a vengeance clouding his face. He attacked me without form, swinging his claws, growling, and throwing his whole weight behind each attack. It was easy beating him. I kept moving out of the way for him, and we moved in a circle, round and round around the body comrade, and when I had enough of him, I stopped and let one of his swings get me. He hit me in the face but barely stung. I punched him in the chest, a hard and heavy punch that dropped him to the ground. He fell to his knees, coughing and grabbing at his chest. I walked to him, held him by the neck, closed my eyes, and turned his head around. A sharp snapping sound followed it, and he fell lying beside his comrade.

I stood there immobile and blank for a while, looking at the lifeless forms at my feet. In twenty-three years, I had only killed one man, and it was an accident. In the last two days, I had killed three already, and it was only the beginning.

I felt sick in my stomach. A distant howl pulled me out of my trance, and I ran away from the bodies, leaving them there in the street.

Chapter nine (Luke)

The straps of my backpack settled gently on my back as I walked toward the gathered crowds. They were talking in hushed and excited voices, and some of their words carried to me.

“It was her,” one of them said.

“You don’t know that,” another replied.

“I saw it myself. I saw her fight them. She is just as powerful as they said. She moves like lightning.”

“There’s no way she killed the two of them. She is a skinny thing.”

I pushed past them. It was hard to imagine that they were all looking at dead bodies with the look on their faces, but I guess there is something enticing about chaos and death that excites the human mind. We love to observe it when it is detached from us, but only a number of us can actually face up to violence when it shows itself unless it is needed for our survival.

I got to the front of the crowd and was shocked by what I saw there. No one had bothered to cover them up, and I recognized them.

The Twins, they called them—a pair of very successful hunters who had never lost a bounty, at least not until now. The one closest to me had his head bent unnaturally, and he was looking up at the sky as though asking for help from it. I wondered which one of them died first. I can still smell the anger from within them.

She must have killed one first, and then the other got angry and attacked blindly. The Twins were spoken about in whispers about how deadly they were when they attack together. They loved to work in the dark, too, because they could move quietly, even more quietly than most werewolves can achieve. It doesn’t look like they moved so quietly now.

I wished I could send them all away and try to map out how the attack happened, but they had defiled the scene, and any chance I had of that happening was gone. I felt someone beside me, and I looked down at them. It was one of the hunters, I don't know his name, but I saw him back in the throne room.

"She did that," he said, pointing at the twin with the twisted neck. "She is sick and very dangerous."

He sounded worried, edging on fear. But he was a hunter, and hunters don't scare easily. When they see their colleagues' bodies battered, it is sure to cause them to pause.

"We were trained to take in people like her," I said.

He shook his head and said nothing. I wondered if the others shared his sentiment too. Were they all getting scared of Hayley?

Yes, I was thinking about her with the first name. It felt like we had formed a relationship already, and it only felt right to address her by her name.

If the other hunters shared this man's sentiment, how many of them would drop from the hunt? Earlier on, I was wondering why the pack themselves didn't go after Hayley, seeing it was their Alpha that she killed. Now, I could see why. None of those pack members, not even the new pompous alpha, could make a kill like this. They didn't have that kind of power in them. She was the only one that did.

What more does she have in there, I wondered as I stepped away from the dead twin.

"Do you think it is worth it? Whatever they might pay? They are the ones with the dead alpha. Let them get the revenge themselves," the hunter yelled at me.

I stopped and turned to face him. "I have a job to complete."

Really, I was less and less concerned about finding her because she killed the Alpha. Now, I just wanted to meet her and talk to her. Of course, I would still get her back to the council so she could be punished. But I have to meet her first.

I walked towards the RVs, and when I got there, the rest of my lone wolf friends were waiting for me.

“I thought that was you,” Jared said. He has a scrawny look and is so tall that half the time when he walks, I get scared he would topple over and fall. But he was one of the most agile werewolves I have ever met, and his history was a dark one. We all have dark histories; that was why we banded together.

“I thought she was headed here,” I said, looking back at the crowd a couple of feet from the RVs. She either was headed here in search of me or was going into the woods, and the Twin caught up with her.

“She never made a detour,” Jared said.

“Just ran into the woods,” Ben added.

“How did she look?”

“Can’t say for sure,” Jared said. “It was pretty dark, but she looked angry and sad. I don’t know. Why are you doing this, Luke? Let the pack wolves handle themselves, and let’s stay out of their business. They don’t like us already, don’t heap heat on the coals, please.”

“It doesn’t matter what we do; they will always hate us. Besides, this is a way to earn some money.

Allister scoffed on the couch in front of his RV. He was one of the first wolves I found when I came to town, looking to heal. Bonne introduced me to him.

“It’s not about the money,” he said. “It’s about the girl. She did something to him the last time she was here.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” I told him, but he chuckled dismissively.

“It’s all over you, Luke,” he said. “You’re awestruck. You can understand the girl and her mysterious nature as you wrap around her finger. Do you know what I think?” he said as he stood up. He dropped the book he was reading and walked towards me. I knew he was going to make some ludicrous proposition. “I think this is all part of her plan. She killed the Alpha because she knew she had you already, and you would

come tottering after her like a mouse after a cheese. She knows you won't stop until you find her, so she's enjoying the chase and the hunt. She's a frenzied adrenaline junkie. She's somehow like you."

"You shouldn't drink coffee this early in the morning," Jared said to Allister and shook his head.

"There's something different about her," I said suddenly, which caught everyone's attention. "And yes, I want to find out what it is, but that is not the only reason I am going on the hunt. I am going on the hunt for us too. When I get her and take her back to the council, they promised to leave us alone. No disturbance ever again."

"Oh, they say that every time. Nothing is going to change," Ben hissed.

"Maybe, maybe not. But it is worth a try. If all the hunters fail, and I get her, it will show them we are indispensable, and they need us."

"Did you see what she did to those two?" Ben asked. "She mauled them like an animal like they were nothing but dolls. Do you think you can go up against her?"

"When our path crosses, we'll figure that out," I told them. I could see Hayley's power now, but it didn't particularly worry me. There was something bigger between us; a mere conflict wouldn't topple it. I said hello to the rest of the group and headed into the woods, where I could still smell her. She smelled like a mix of daylilies and mud. It was a very distinct smell, earthy and very natural.

"You guys keep an eye out for her for me, will you?" I told the guys.

"We will," Ben said. "But Luke, what will you do when she refuses to come with you, and the only thing you can do is kill her?"

Bonne asked me that same question. "It shouldn't come to that," I told Ben. I prayed it never came to that.

I walked past them and into the woods. It was still early in the morning, and the sun wasn't as hot. The dampness from the

morning dew was still evident in the woods, and I could smell it. Mornings like this are supposed to be used to enjoy the sweet smell of nature, but I didn't have time for that. I filtered out the scent of the forest and focused on Hayley's, following it. I wasn't just following her smell. I was following a connection between the two of us. It felt like a tug in my heart, thumping quietly and directing me. I followed it obediently, and it led me through the forest until I came to a tree with blood on it.

It was dried and caked. I moved closer to it and smelled it. It was hers, I knew immediately, she had been injured in the fight, but it didn't look like anything serious. A scratch, probably. I wondered if, during the fight, any of the three turned, or maybe either of the twins, because a scratch from a turned werewolf can be very lethal. It injects the blood with poisons that can kill in hours. It weakens the body first, then causes a terrible fever, which reduces the victim to a shivering pile of flesh, and then death.

Bonne was rather fascinated with the venom in a werewolf's claw, but it was hard and nearly impossible to extract. First, changing was painful and used a lot of energy, and most werewolves don't bother with it. They just use their claws, strength, and speed to fight. A change werewolf can go through a little army in hours, but once he is energy sapped, he is as defenseless as a chicken and would need hours, sometimes days, to get their full energy back. The reward for the risk wasn't worth it.

So, I doubted either of them changed. Werewolves only change in dire situations when the other option is certain death.

I dusted the blood off the tree, so others won't use it to track her down. She must have gotten in on the tree by mistake, or she put it there knowingly. She put it there to pull me in.

I shook my head at the foolish thought. I can't let Allister's grand imaginings make their way into my head. She was on the run and had just fought two powerful wolves, killing them. Of course, she was shaken and distracted.

I pushed on into the woods, following her scent and the link between us. I heard a ruffle behind me and stopped, it stopped also, and I thought it must have been my own feet making the sound. I continued, and for a while, I lost her scent. It was replaced quickly by a different smell, but I could tell it was a werewolf. There was another werewolf in the woods with me. Her scent came back, but I ignored it. I can always catch on to it later. I wanted to know who this werewolf was.

I focused on the new wolf's scent but acted like I was still on Hayley's trail. I kept at it so that the wolf would get distracted and think I haven't noticed them. Whoever it was wasn't after Hayley. They were after me.

Who would they send a wolf after me? There was an obvious answer, but I ignored it, not wanting to jump to any conclusions just yet. I could hear a river coming up as I went further into the woods. If Hayley wanted to lose her scent, she would have passed through the water and washed herself. I don't know if the scent I was getting from her would survive that. I didn't want to lose it, but it didn't matter much. I knew she was long gone anyway. The attack on The Twins happened close to midnight, so she probably was halfway out of town.

But something made me feel she wasn't gone yet. She was still somewhere in town, waiting for something.

I started walking fast to put some more distance between the tracker and me, and slowly, his scent started to lose potency, and when I figured I had put enough space between the two of us, I began to run. I ran as fast as I could, and as I got very close to the river, I jumped on a tree, gripped its trunk, and climbed it until I rested on one of its branches. I balanced on it and looked around me, looking to sight the tracker. He would think he had lost me and would ascribe my scent left in the forest to residuals. He would assume I had jumped into the river and swam away. I made sure I was well covered by the leaves on the tree, giving me enough shade, and watched as he ran towards the river, and then he stopped right underneath the tree I was on.

It was Buff. The man that had challenged me in the throne room and asked the new Alpha to rescind me from hunting. He

looked around for a while and then turned away, going in the other direction. He didn't even bother tracking Hayley because he wasn't there for her. He was there for me. And he couldn't have come for me unless it had been sanctioned.

The council and Alpha must have put him on my detail.

What was happening? What game were they playing?

Chapter ten (Hayley)

I was dripping wet and a little shaky. I had no choice but to go through the river as I knew I would have dropped my essence in the woods. It would be hard to pick it up with all the wood's dew and smell, but a wolf with a sharp sense of smell and the ability to focus it won't have that much of a hard time—a wolf like Ilad. Besides, I had gotten cut during the fight, and heaven knows where my blood had dropped along the way. It is very easy to pick up a scent from blood. The water will mask my scent for a while, but once I get dry, it will be open season for everyone.

I have to make a reasonable distance before I dry off, but I really wanted to start a fire, lay beside it, and dry off. A runner doesn't get to enjoy such luxuries. The floral pattern and composition of the woods beyond the river were different from that of the woods before it. This new one has fewer trees than the former and more grazing land. I wouldn't be surprised if I come across a shack soon or just some random cabin house or farmhouse that has been abandoned.

I would rather I didn't, though. The lesser number of people that see me, the better for me. I had a destination in mind, but I had to shake off the hunters on my heels first before I started towards it.

Mosquitoes and other bugs buzzed around me, and I dusted them off, trying to catch any secondary sound or smell that wasn't natural to the woods. Earlier on, just after I crossed the river, I thought I saw someone move through the woods, but I figured it must have been my imagination. There was no one out there. I had killed the hunters that had caught up with me. I put the two of them out of my mind because thinking of them wouldn't solve anything. I killed them because I wanted to survive—the natural instinct.

Besides, I am a predator, a natural-born hunter. Killing is supposed to be natural to me, but that didn't stop the sick feeling inside my stomach. It was something I would have to

learn with. The sparse forest led into an open field soon enough, and at the other end, the forest continued.

I thought about walking to the side of the forest just to see where it leads instead of going deeper inside it. I knew no matter how much deeper I went, I would come to a road. It might be close to the community, or it might be far, but it wouldn't matter much. I decided to go deeper. Walking the sides wouldn't take me further from the hunters.

Kris said there were about twenty of them, and I had killed two, so there are still eighteen more out there. That was a large number of hunters to come after just me. The simple thing would have been for them to band together and hunt me, but that would never happen.

As much as we like being in packs, we hate working together. A group of hunters like that would need a leader, which would be the first step in the descent into conflict. None of those hunters would want to be subjugated, and everyone would want to be a leader. That was why the dynamics in a pack are much easier. The alpha is the leader; no one would argue that.

So, I was sure they were going to attack me banded together. They might form some groups, like the two that came for me earlier, but majorly, they will come individually, making it easier for me to pick them off. I looked back into the woods, taking a deep sniff to get the composition of the air. I couldn't smell anything foreign, but that didn't mean there wasn't one out there. Some wolves are good at masking their scent. Besides, they might have wallowed through the river as I had, and that would dampen even their smell further.

I continued toward the field, though. I wouldn't let uncertainty cripple me. I didn't look back until I got to the other side of the field. But before I walked into the woods, I looked behind, and this time, I was sure I saw a shadow. Someone hid behind a tree just as I turned back.

I wanted to walk back and check them out, but if they were really after me, they would cross the open field and join me. I just had to pay attention closely to hear them. This new part of the woods was like the first one. It was dense and provided a

lot of shade and trees to hide in. I walked on, listening sharply. I didn't hear anything but my own feet crunching against the dead leaves, birds in the trees twittering, and the distant mating calls of animals for a long time, and once again, I was about to blame my overactive imagination when my senses picked up something.

But it wasn't any of the senses I was used to. My ears didn't pick up someone walking behind me. I could smell them, I didn't see them, but I could feel them. Not totally on my skin, but also deep inside me. It was like a tiny thud of connection that was rousing a storm inside me, and I knew that feeling. Two days ago, it would have been alien to me, and I would have pondered what it meant, but not today. It was the same feeling I had when I first saw Luke.

It was subtle now, almost unnoticeable, but I noticed it alright. I wasn't a savant when it came to that particular kind of sensory information, but I had a good feeling it meant he was close by.

I stopped walking immediately and looked around the woods as though I would be able to see him. Of course, I didn't, but the feeling grew steadily. He was getting closer to me.

Why do I feel this way whenever he is around me? I wondered, but that wasn't the most important question now.

What was he doing in the woods? Looking for me? Why would he be looking for me? The only reasonable explanation was that he was hunting me too.

That seemed very unlikely because of the relation between lone wolves and pack wolves, but also because two days ago James had ordered me to chase him and his friends from the little spot in the reservation they had cut off for themselves. I had walked past the spot earlier. Did he notice me then and decide to follow me?

I was making so many assumptions that my head was beginning to hurt. But it didn't sit well with me that Luke was also part of the detail hunting me. I was fine with any other people, but not him. I felt a pang of betrayal that he was hunting me too. It made no sense that I should feel that way.

We have no established relationship. Hell, I don't think I've said more than half a dozen sentences to him, so he wasn't my friend or acquaintance. I have to bury the betrayal I was feeling and focus on getting away from him.

My plan has to be my focus and to do that, I have to lose all the wolves. Luke included.

I ignored the feeling inside of me and the sensation that he was somewhere out here in the woods and that everything would be clearer if I just talked to him.

I stopped walking again, and I knew what I had to do. I tracked him right back. Get him and then have that conversation with him. Maybe he knew something; maybe that was why he was tailing me. Why not just come forward and talk to me, then?

Werewolves act in a very strange manner. That wasn't news.

I found that if I focused on the feeling inside me, I could use it to track him right back, almost like there was a GPS tracker attached to him and all I had to do was follow it.

Does he feel this way about me? I hoped not. It would make it too easy to track me down, and it felt a bit like I was exposed to him, a bit intrusive.

I followed the feeling, and I was walking back the same way I just came, which meant he had actually been tracking me. I kept at it for a while until I returned to the edge of the forest and was before the open field again.

Then the connection was gone. It was like I was about to get to him, and then it was just gone. I scoffed angrily and turned around to return to the forest when I picked up someone walking towards me. He was holding what looked like a club with spikes all around it. It looked like some caveman type of weapon, and he was swinging it, his eyes focused on me and glowing.

He was a werewolf, and I knew him.

They called him Buff. He's a hunter too.

“I saw what you did to The Twins,” he said even though he was still far from me, and he didn’t speak up, I could hear him.

I didn’t know those two were twins. Now their synchronized coordination made more sense.

“You think you can do the same to me?” he asked with a gentle grin, daring me. “I have always thought about this moment and knew I would be the one to bring you in.”

I just watched him. I didn’t know anything about his fighting skills, but he looked like a brute, and his weapon made him appear exaggerated. I have seen wolves with weapons before, but they are more practical ones like guns and arrows, not batons with nails sticking out of them.

I wasn’t worried about Buff. He was a showoff, I could tell, and show-offs do worst in a fight.

He was soon in front of me, and just as I guessed, he didn’t waste any time attacking. He swung the club at me. His swing was quite heavy, and if it hit me, it was sure to do some damage. If it hits me in the head, it will do even more damage. I couldn’t let that happen.

His swings were heavy but slow, which made him predictable. I could see his moves before he completed them, and all I had to do was move out of the way. That continued for a while, and Buff was quickly getting frustrated, and I was getting tired. He had trusted in his strength too much, and I could tell he was just about as strong as I was.

I think that is the beauty of being a street rat with no one who could trace her heritage. It was hard to guess my abilities, and everyone was always surprised when they came up against me. I like it. I could have enjoyed fooling around with Buff some more, but I had serious business to handle. I stepped closer to him, and when he swung at me again, I grabbed the club close to the handle, just above his hand, where there were no spikes, and stopped him. He glared at me and wanted to drag my hand off by force, but I held on to it firmly, surprising him with my strength. I head butted him in the nose, and he staggered back. Before he could recover, I kicked him in the stomach and

knocked the club out of his hand, almost breaking his hand in the process.

He tried to recover and fight me back, but I pushed him against a tree and pinned him against it, hands wrapped around his neck and squeezing hard. I could feel all of my strength focused on my hands, and the feeling of the muscles in his throat against my hands filled me with such power I hadn't felt before. I was looking right into his eyes and killing him. I could almost feel the life slipping out.

"Tell me," I asked him as he struggled and tried to get at me with his claws. I could see his eyes glowing hard, and he was trying to change. He would never get to do that. The pain in his neck and the gradual loss of oxygen reaching his brain would make it close to impossible for him to do that. "The lone wolf, Luke, was he hired? Is he part of the hunting group?"

He didn't reply to me. He was heavily focused on changing, and I squeezed harder on his neck. A gentle yap escaped his neck. It sounded like the sound of a helpless dog dying. His eyes were bulging, and his hands had stopped struggling.

"Was he hired?" I shouted at him. "Did Viper send him out with the others?"

He nodded, or at least what could pass for a nod, with my hand wrapped that tightly around his neck. I should let him go now. He had answered my question. There was no reason to still keep choking him.

Except there was. He was a hunter, too, and if I let him go, he would only keep coming after me. I had cut down their number to eighteen. It will be good to have one less coming after me. I rationalized my next action and kept my hands on his throat.

Something caught my periphery. It was a stick about the size of a small trunk, and it knocked right into me. I fell down but was up immediately and threw the trunk away. Buff was by my side, coughing and wheezing. I didn't care about him. Someone had thrown that log at me. I had to be him because I could sense that connection again.

I ran towards the direction the log came from, back into the woods, but there was nothing there. No one. I smelled the air, and still nothing. He had been here; I could have sworn it. He had been watching me. I looked up in the trees, but the sun and green blades of leaves dancing to the tune of the wind gazed right back at him. I scoffed. There was no one up there. There was no one here any longer.

I walked back out into the field, and Buff was gone too.

Chapter eleven (Luke)

I ran through the woods, staying high in the trees to stay out of sight. Bonne has always complained about how dexterous I am with climbing and how it seemed rather unfair. I am a werewolf, not a monkey. I can go miles in the trees without getting caught. The trick is to be as fluid as possible and spread your weight all over your body so that the branches don't creak when you land on them, and the leaves don't fall. It is harder to do when you are tracking other werewolves because of our heightened senses, but practice does make perfect, and I am perfect at this.

I had watched from the top of the tree as Hayley attacked Buff. She had handled him almost effortlessly, and I noticed two things about her immediately. She was dangerously fast and very strong too. That was an unusual combination in a werewolf. There was something different about her. Something special, and it only made me want to meet her more. But I have to hold off. I have a job to complete. I could have let her kill Buff and then kept on her track, staying in the dark and gathering information about her, but then I got an idea and attacked her, distracting her from Buff and giving him a chance to escape. She had left him and came to look for me.

She had been asking him about me. She wanted to know if I was on the hunt too. I thought she sounded worried a bit. But why would she be worried that I was on the hunt also?

When she was far gone into the woods and had decided that she wasn't going to catch me just yet, I dropped from the top of the tree. I took a sniff of the air and knew exactly where Buff had run off to. Bonne's concoction came to help immediately. I walked out of the woods and into the field. He had stumbled through the area and back to the other forest, no doubt taking time to recover and maybe strategize an attack again. Or he might have just given up. After a fight like that and experiencing the kind of power and skill she has, he would be wise to give up.

With The Twins dead, and the testimony from Buff about her strength, I knew the other hunters would start to pull out. They were realists, and whatever the Palace would pay them wouldn't be worth it. Why go after a target that would probably kill them when they could just go for others that were easier? They might not get as good pay, but they can do multiple jobs in the time it will take to track down Hayley.

She's making a reputation for herself, which is good.

But there was also a downside to that. The number of hunters after her will cut down drastically. Their high number worked in her favor in one way before. The hunters will always get in each other's way, which will slow them down. Werewolves are very territorial and aggressive. A couple of them might even take each other out. The volatile and unthoughtful ones—people like Buff and maybe even The Twins. With those kinds of hunters gone, she would be left with the tactical ones. People like me, who love the hunt and relish it. People who were just as powerful as she was, or maybe more. They would be harder opponents to go up against, and they would be less distracted now that other hunters had pulled out.

I came out on the other end of the side of the meadow, the smell of wet grass and earth whirling around me. But lost within them was the smell of blood, pain, and fear. That was Buff. I was getting closer to him now.

I thought about climbing the trees again but decided against it. I will keep to the forest floor. Buff is injured, and he is not a serious threat. I had watched her go through this same woods from a distance, and I could see the determination on her face. She wasn't just running and trying to evade the hunters. She had a destination in mind and was circling to get the werewolves off her scent before she made her way to her destination. I was rather interested in that destination.

It didn't seem to me like she was going to a hideout, somewhere to stay until everything cooled down. If she wanted to do that, it would have been more sensible to stay back in Nillport and hide out there. Surely, she has friends that will hide her until the storm calms down—she might have put them in danger, but they would have made it work. Once the

storm calms, then she could make her way out of town. No, she wasn't just looking for a place to hide. She was looking for a place to get things done.

Now, I was interested in the two things. What was her plan? Why did she kill the Alpha? Bonne had thought she snapped.

That happens to werewolves sometimes. It isn't just our senses that get heightened. We feel things more deeply, too. Emotions for werewolves are always a roller coaster. Anger can easily lead to destruction; sadness can lead to despair, and happiness can easily become euphoria. And there are times when you feel the rush of a thousand emotions. The sludge hits you so hard, and then you snap. Snapped werewolves mostly go on killing sprees, and they target humans. They go on a hunting spree that's supposed to make them better, but it doesn't work. They just keep killing, and in cases where they stop, the risk of snapping increases a thousand fold. The solution to a snapped werewolf is to kill them. It stops their pain, and you save lives.

Our nature is complex and very volatile. No wonder Bonne wants nothing to do with it.

The secret to keeping yourself from snapping as a werewolf is to focus on the physical senses. The smell, the sounds, and what you can feel. They help to dampen the emotions; over time, you get used to it, and using the physical sense to dampen the heightened emotions becomes second nature.

Hayley, however, doesn't look like someone that snapped. She looked in control. Very much in control. She'd killed two hunters and would have killed another if I hadn't gotten in the way. Snapped werewolves aren't that coordinated. There is something else going on with her, and I intend to find out what it is.

The sun moved overhead, and I knew it was midday even though with the canopy, only small streaks of light passed through into the woods. I could still smell Buff, and he was getting stronger. He had stopped running and was resting. He wasn't bleeding much. She didn't cut him as much. She had choked him and had wanted to watch the life slip out of him.

Those were signs of someone on the edge of snapping, though. They are usually on the border of psychopathy. She could have simply clawed him. That was a more painful way to torture a werewolf, but she had strangled him, dragging out the experience.

Did she enjoy every moment of that? The thought sent chills down my spine. I would be wise to be careful with her. She doesn't look like she's snapped yet, but she might well snap at any time. The stress from the hunt might be getting to her.

The smell of blood and anxiety washed over me suddenly, and I turned around to see Buff rushing at me with a stick. He had abandoned his club and picked up something else. I had let myself be distracted thinking about Hayley and didn't notice the change in the smell in the air until it was too late.

Well, maybe not too late. Buff wasn't fast, so I moved out of the way just in time, and his stick missed me just by a couple of inches. He looked tired, but his hate for me was fueling him. It would be hard to subdue him.

He turned around and came at me again. He was taking another.

"Dog!" he yelled at me, his stick, which was bigger than the club he held earlier, swiping at me heavily, going for my head. I moved out of the way and saw an opportunity to attack him but held back. Such a heavy impact could have crushed my skull. I don't know much about Buff, just that lone wolves always avoided him, so I didn't know what his strength was. But I could see immediately that he wasn't fast.

I wanted to wear him out. Show him that he has no chance of going up against me. He hated me as a lone wolf and thought he was of a cleaner heritage than me, but I was his superior, and I would show him that by not attacking him at all.

He was ready for me again, and he yelled, attacking me. He came from the back, and I didn't even have to bother to turn to duck his attack again. He was tired, and his yells were spurring him, but they were also announcing his position. I turned to face him to find his stick a couple of inches from my face. I

grabbed hold of it, and he tried to pry it out of my hand, but he couldn't.

"Are you tired yet, or do you want to keep at this?" I asked him.

He growled at me and spat in my face. "Low life!" he called me, and I really wanted to kick his butt then. Show him to talk to people with respect, but I didn't. I pushed him to the ground with his stick. But just as I expected, he stood up again and came for me. I moved left to parry his attack, grabbed him by the hand as he moved past me, and pulled him towards me, my left hand wrapping around his neck, and a sneer formed on my lips as I gripped his neck, but I didn't choke him.

He went taut with fear and pain. His neck was still raw from his episode with Hayley earlier on.

"You know, attacking me is a terrible way to say thank you," I told him. "If I hadn't thrown that log at her, she would have crushed your windpipe, but here you are, attacking me with a stick."

"You didn't save me," he said and spat in my face, squirming to get away from my grip, but that was only causing him to feel the pain even more.

I squeezed his neck some more, and he growled out in pain. "Let the stick go," I told him.

He looked at me defiantly, and I squeezed even harder. He dropped the stick.

"Good," I told him. "We are getting somewhere now. You know, I should kill you."

"But you won't?" he asked.

"No, I don't see any reason why I should. I'm hunting for you. But you owe me one, and if you don't pay me back, then I'll have a reason to kill you."

He scoffed, and I could tell he wanted to spit in my face. With my hand wrapped around his neck and the other holding his two hands to the back, he was totally useless, which wasn't advisable. So, he kept his spit to himself.

“Good decision,” I told him. “Now listen. I want you to keep tracking her. Stay close to her, but never let her get you. She knows I am on her tail because you blabbed, and I don’t want that. I want her to focus on you.”

“The two of you have something together, don’t you?” Buff asked. His voice was raspy, yet he still found a way to get hate into it. “I should have known. A mere dog like you and a bitch like her killing her Alpha. You two are cut from the same cloth.”

This time he spat on my face. So, I squeezed his neck harder. I pushed against him until he hit his back against a tree, and he screamed out in pain. I choked him harder again, and he started to growl, looking to change. I could see what an idiot he was then. He never learns. He tried to change when Hayley strangled him, and it didn’t work. Yet, here he was doing it again.

I let go of his neck and his hands at the same time, and he looked at me, shocked. But he didn’t waste any time attacking me, which was what I wanted. I needed to teach him a lesson.

He extended his claws and swiped at me, but I blocked them and punched him in the belly. He stumbled to the back, colliding with the tree again. I saw the anger return to his face, and his hate took on a new outlook. It was disgust now. He wanted to kill me because he thought me an abomination. He pushed against the tree, using it as an anchor, and flew at me.

He had a smile on his face because he thought he had me, but I knew what he was doing. I remained fixed in the same position, and he came. Just as he was about to push his claws into me, I moved out of the way, grabbed him midair, and swung him against the tree again. Chips flew from the bark of the tree, and I thought I heard a bone crack. He fell to the ground, growling in pain. He pushed himself up again.

I have to give it to him. He is resilient. He didn’t attack me immediately. He took a breather. And I just watched him. I wondered how long he was going to keep this up before he realized that he was no match for me and that he was the inferior one here.

He shook his body as though trying to shake the fatigue that was settling in, but then I saw him close his eyes and growl. He was trying to change. That was a very stupid move. I didn't even have my claws extended and was giving him a whooping. I stepped closer pushed him against the tree. I wasn't going to give him a chance to change because if he did, I would be forced to change myself as the playing field wouldn't be even, and all he had to do was get a claw into me. The poison would take care of the rest.

He opened his eyes and looked at me, a sly grin crossing his face. I didn't care for that. I smacked him in the face, turned him around, and got my hand around his arm. He was still trying to change, and there was only one way to stop that. He tried to get his left arm out of my grip but couldn't. He turned around, looking to bite me, but I snapped his arm at that moment, breaking it.

He screamed out in pain. Now, he has to heal his broken arm and can't change that way. I threw him to the ground and knelt beside him.

“Do as I told you, or it will be your neck next.”

I didn't wait to see his reaction to that. I had gotten my message across, and I was sure he got it. I jumped onto a tree and moved to the top. It was time to resume hunting.

Chapter Twelve (Luke)

It was dark already, and I wondered if Hayley would take a break for the night. It was looking like she would. Just as I expected him to, Buff kept on her, and she was focused on him. She kept tracking back and going around to lose him. I couldn't tell if she knew it was still Buff or some other wolf on her tail, but she was taking precautions, which meant wherever she was going, she was going to take longer to arrive.

I had picked out about three other hunters in the woods with me, but they were all keeping a distance from her and using Buff as a mask too. I hadn't thought of that when I set Buff on her tail, but I knew if I wanted her to myself, I was going to have to deal with the other hunters.

For now, I just followed them and watched them all. It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. Because of Bonne, I could mask my scent from the other werewolves and also pick up on their smell easily. So, I am at an advantage.

The other three werewolves were legendary hunters. I have gotten into a fight with one of them before. A tall and dark man called Veron. People say he can turn at will, but I have never seen that happen.

I know hunters spread rumors about themselves to make them appear mysterious and instill fear in people. Veron looks like a person who would employ such tactics, and he was a skilled fighter too. So, a worthy opponent. I will try as much as possible to stay away from him, but should he get any closer to Hayley and makes any move for her; I might have to fight him.

She's mine and no one else's.

The other werewolves, I wasn't worried about. I hadn't come up against them before, but they didn't look challenging.

I shifted my focus back to Hayley. She mostly kept to the edge of the woods, and I think she is trying to get to a road. She wanted to get the wolves off her back first, though.

Does she know she has about five wolves on her heels, each of them taking their time to watch her and learn what they can about her? Or at least four of them. Buff was just doing what he's been commanded to do. It is getting dangerous for her, and I would love to see how she handles this. But I also think I might have to swoop in and capture her before she gets to a road. Once she gets to a city, it would be hard to keep track of her—the city with all its smells.

I was caught in a dilemma. I needed to close this up, bring her in and go back to Bonne so that I would be there for his kid's ascension. I had promised to be there. But I was also interested in seeing where Hayley was going. I wanted to see how she would evade the other wolfs. I don't need smell to keep track of her. I can also sense her inside my mind. It is as though there is a link between the two of us, and I was exploiting that to keep track of her.

I am going to have to make a decision soon. But I was going to enjoy this for as long as possible.

Maybe it is none of my business what she is up to. Maybe as Bonne said, I have no business sticking my head in the pack's business. I should stop this, and go back to life as I knew it, where it was quiet, without the hunt, and I have people that love and care for me.

The last light of the day packed up and left, and it got dark. I didn't glow my eyes. It would easily give up my position in the dark. I could still see in the darkness, and I had my other senses to guide me. That is what it means to be a hunter. You must be able to depend on your other senses whenever one of them falls short. My smell, hearing, and feeling will help me keep track of the other three wolves and Buff. I will keep track of Hayley some other way.

I moved through the woods stealthily, jumping from tree to tree. It wasn't the fastest way to move, and it kept me behind the others, but it provided an awesome vantage point, though. I could sense them all and keep track of them all simultaneously.

A couple of minutes later, when the darkness was well settled and I had gotten familiar with the new appearance of the environment, I noticed a new smell. A fifth person was in the woods with me, and he was behind me, probably tracking me too. I thought of turning back to track the person right back but decided against it. I would let them keep following me, and they would reveal themselves to me in time.

I wondered how they got to me, though. I was supposed to be invisible. My scent was supposed to be gone. I decided not to worry too much about it. They were about a quarter of a mile behind me and on foot, so they probably weren't tracking me. They probably were tracking the others or Hayley herself.

While I was focused on that new smell, I lost track of the other scents, and for a while, I almost panicked. But then, they came back to me, and one of them was closer and coming from a higher altitude. One of them was in the trees with me. Just a couple of meters from me. I jumped to the ground immediately, but it wasn't as quiet as I would have liked. They heard me jump to the forest floor, and they followed.

Soon, Veron was standing right before me, and his eyes were glowing.

"I should have known it was you, lone wolf," he said. "Nice trick, but you're not the only one with a trick."

I couldn't catch the scent from behind again, and I realized he had thrown that to disorient me.

"Hiding in the trees is pretty smart too. The leaves will hide your scent quite well," Veron continued and started to circle me. I didn't move. I kept my eyes on him but didn't glow them. I kept my claws and fangs in too, but I could see him in the dark. He wanted to fight.

"Do you want me to help you with something?"

"Yes," he said. "I made a calculation, and it seems you're one of the people that will actually stand in my way to get the girl. I'd rather you were not in the way."

"There's nothing wrong with a little competition, Veron."

"I prefer no competition," he said and flew at me.

I moved to the left, stamped my left leg, and used it to keep me anchored to the ground. I used then used the anchored leg to push myself toward Veron. His claws were coming for me, but I blocked them with my left hand and lifted him over my shoulder with my other hand, using his position and my anchor to the ground as leverage. I slammed him against the ground.

But Veron wasn't Buff. His back barely hit the ground before he was back up again. He was stronger and faster—a perfect match for me. I didn't have to wait for him to attack again; I took the fight to him. I attacked with my left leg still stamped to the floor, using the fluidity in my movement to get the better of him and the left leg for stability. I extended my claws and went at him, striking to get a swipe at his face, but he was just as fast as me, and he moved out of the way. He was trying to get an attack in, but I was too fast for him, and all he could do was defend himself. I didn't want to spend so much time fighting him.

I took a sniff in the air for the other two werewolves, and they were far away. I didn't want to lose them.

Veron saw the stand I made with my left leg, and he changed his tactics. He let me get two swipes at him, one at the face and the other on the neck, and that distracted me. I wanted to move closer to him to get a more lethal swipe in, and I moved my left leg before I realized my mistake. He came at me. His left swung and hit my right leg. I wanted to move up and get out of the way, but it was too late, and he had me just where he wanted me. I tried to move to the right to evade the attack, but all he had to do was move his body, and he was beside me immediately. There was nothing I could do but take the pummeling that was coming.

He hit me in the face, which caused me to stagger back, and he clawed at my face, taking a big slice of my flesh. The pain burned into my brain, but I was free to move away from him now, and we stood facing each other.

It has been a fair fight.

But I have to focus. I was thinking of the other two werewolves and them getting closer to Hayley. I didn't want

that to happen, and it was distracting me. I made the next attack, and this time, I didn't make the same mistake. I didn't keep any of my feet stamped to the ground for stability. I took the fight to him fully.

I jumped at him, aiming for his neck, and he caught on to my movement. He moved back and attacked with his right hand, causing me to change my direction at the last moment, but it was just what I wanted. I let him relax a bit because he thought he had me. I clawed at his stomach instead, which caused him to move further back, but I grabbed onto it with my claws and pulled at him. He growled out in pain as he tried to swipe my hand off, but he persevered through the pain, pulled him even closer and stuck my claws into his throat. I pulled at it and dragged his larynx out, catching his scream halfway. He looked at me, surprised, caught in his eyes and mouth. I let go of him. He staggered on his feet for a while but then stumbled back and fell to the ground.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

The stench of blood and death filled the air, but I caught a whiff of something else. There was someone else behind me. I turned around, ready to fight, but he didn't attack.

I could make out his outline on a tree, and he looked very familiar. I glowed my eyes, which I had turned off to better focus on Veron earlier on. I could see him better now. He was a member of the pack, and it was him I smelled earlier on. That meant Veron didn't throw the scent.

I remember the boy on the tree. He was the smallest of them all. He looked shy and sickly.

"What do you want?" I asked him as he jumped down from the tree. The agility of his movement surprised me. I had expected something shaky with his look.

"I have a message for you from Viper," he said.

"Go on," I told him.

"He wants you to bring Hayley in, in two days. Dead or alive, he doesn't care. He says he would sign over the reservation to

you. Your kind. Lone wolves will have legal backing to own the reservation.”

“Two days?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

The boy shook his head. He didn’t know.

“Did you tell the other hunters this?”

“No,” the boy said. “This is just for you.”

I found that rather strange. Why the sudden hurry, and why use a lone wolf? There was something going on. Something the new Alpha wants to keep hidden, and Hayley being alive will make that very hard.

“Can I ask you for something?” the boy spoke up after a while.

“Yes? Go ahead.”

“Kill her,” he said, but it wasn’t in a callous manner. There was compassion in his voice. “It is better for her. Kill her fast, don’t let her feel any pain. If you bring her to Viper, he will make her life hell. Drag out her pain before he kills her.”

“You like her,” I said to him.

“She was good to me. She was the only one good to me.”

“Do you have any idea why she killed your other alpha?”

“No,” the boy said. “Hayley liked him. He saved her from the street and added her to us even when we were ten already, and he was grooming her to become the leader, you know, compete with Viper. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, could you—” I started, but the boy cut me short.

“I have to go,” he said and jumped to the tree. He was just like me, too, keeping to the trees.

“How did you find me?” I asked him as he got to the top of the tree.

“I have my tricks, too,” he said and jumped away.

“What’s your name?” I yelled at him.

“Ilad,” he said in almost a whisper.

I watched him go, and now I was thrown into confusion. She had her life planned out before her. She had led the pack to the reservation to chase me, and my friends off, which means what the boy said was true. Why did she throw all that away?

She had begun to throw it all away when she made that move at me. But I know this didn't start with her. There was something bigger going on here. Something that links to why the other Alpha wanted the lone wolves out of the reservation and why this new one suddenly wanted them to stay, but he wanted Hayley dead as a price. I had a sick feeling in my stomach and didn't like it at all.

I jumped back to the tree and took a sniff in the air. I had lost the other two wolves, but I could still sense her in my head.

It was time to meet her.

Chapter Thirteen (Hayley)

I could hear them catching up with me. They were three before, but now I could only sense the two of them. I had tried to shake them off, but they were very persistent, so I knew it was only a matter of time before I had to come up against them.

I could still sense Luke, but he was far back. He'd been on my tail for miles but didn't move any closer. He maintained a distance behind the three werewolves tracking, no doubt, tracking them too. He had stopped me from killing Buff, and it took me a while to figure out why, but it soon became clear. He wanted to use Buff as a decoy because I had sensed Buff behind me again for a short while after he escaped. He kept his distance, too, and since it didn't appear like he was going to attack me again, I let him be.

It seemed I had strayed further from the road than I had gauged earlier, and it was taking me too long to get back there. I had hoped before it got dark, I would be back on the road, find a town to go to, and I could mix with the people. It would be easier to stay hidden that way. The city with all its stench. But it had gotten dark over an hour ago, and these werewolves were gaining on me. They were behind Buff before, but now, I couldn't even sense him. He must have retreated when he sensed them around.

Viper must have known there would be conflicts between the hunters he sent after me. So much confusion that they might not even get the job done. So, what game was he playing?

Maybe he wasn't playing any game at all and just made a foolish decision. Viper, after all, has never been the sharpest knife in the block. I continued through the woods, acting like I couldn't sense the werewolves behind me.

It was pointless running now. Besides, with so many trees around, there isn't much ground I will be able to cover. I would have to face them sooner or later, and I better do that on my own terms. I was moving toward a denser part of the

forest, and which seemed like the right move for me. The trees would come in handy.

I soon found a spot with trees in almost every spot, leaving barely enough space to stand. I stopped there and turned around. I glowed my eyes and extended my claws to tell them the time for games and tracking was over. It was time to move to the next stage of the hunt. Fight.

“Why don’t you come on out now,” I said and waited.

The first came out with glowing brown eyes, a long claw, and a gentle smile. He looked a bit like a school teacher with the smile on his face, but his eyes were calculating. He looked around and took in his environment immediately, still smiling at me.

“It doesn’t put you at an advantage,” he told me.

I said nothing and waited for the other to show, but he didn’t. I had assumed they were working together because the two seemed to have been walking at the same pace and at the same distance behind me. So, maybe I was wrong about that.

“We are not together,” he told me. “He wants me to go first so he can pick up the spoils of the battle. But there won’t be spoils, will there? Just two dead werewolves when this is over.”

“Just two dead wolves when this over,” I repeated at him and tracked back a bit—staying close to a tree and my heel pushing against it.

There was something I found constant in all hunters so far. They are all cocky and so self-assured. I guess it is important to believe in oneself in their type of business. They are always likely to make the first attack. I wanted to take that privilege away from this one, so I pushed myself against the tree, using my heel to push me forward. I flew at him, my claws going for his neck. He reacted fast. Moving to the side to get out of the way, but I turned mid-air and came at him again, my claws got his face this time, but they didn’t go as deep as I wanted them to. He moved away just in time. When I landed and looked at

him, the smile was gone from his face, replaced by slight apprehension

Good.

He could see the rumors he had about me were true.

He came at me next, wanting to control the tempo of the fight, but I wouldn't give him that. I backed away from him and hid behind a tree. I wrapped my hands around it and used it to launch myself forward. He was yet to recover from his attack and didn't protect himself from my kick. I buried my boot in his side, causing him to stumble to the floor with a groan. He shook his head and stood up immediately.

He had lost control of the fight already.

I took a quick sniff of the air to get the position of the other werewolf. He was closer now, a couple of feet to my left, and I didn't need to look in that direction to know that I could attack him if I chose to. He was watching the fight closely and would want to swoop in when I had tired the first werewolf out or killed him.

I wasn't going to give him that luxury either.

If they want me, they must both come get me now.

I have lived most of my life getting controlled by people who thought they were bigger or better than me. Never again.

The first werewolf was making a dash at me, and I moved away from him but also closed the distance between me and the second werewolf in that manner. The first werewolf didn't stop, though. He kept coming, and I had to attack right back. He threw his hand at me, his claws looking to grab at my throat. I moved away from him and tried to pull him by his hands closer to me, but he recovered fast; he brushed my hands off, and pushed me against a tree. But I didn't stop moving. I grabbed onto the tree and used it to push myself forward.

The second werewolf realized what was happening a second too late, and before he could make a run or even protect himself, I kicked him in the chest. I kicked him so hard that I heard a rib crack.

He groaned out in pain and fell to the ground.

The first werewolf got to me. He looked down at the second on the ground and then at me. He was genuinely impressed.

“He was missing out,” I said.

The second stood up soon enough, and it was the two of them against me.

“Now, this looks like a challenge,” I said, just to grind at their ego.

They were werewolves and men. It wasn’t hard to get that going. They both came at me without coordinating their attack, so it was easy to pick them off.

The first was strong, while the second was fast. The latter was the real trouble. He was almost as fast as me. That might be a problem.

The first caught me with a fist to the side, and just as I was about to recoil and make an attack, the second clawed at me. I was fast enough to move out of getting a fatal claw in my stomach, but it scratched me.

They saw they would fare better if they worked together, but they weren’t synched. They’ve never worked together and didn’t know how to start, and I wasn’t going to give them a chance to figure that out.

I had chosen this place because of its density and because I thought they would come at me together. Well, now I have that. It was time to use the tree to my advantage.

I hurriedly moved away from them and stood close to a tree, hoping they didn’t get wind of what I wanted to do. The first came at me, and their lack of synchronicity would cost them. His punch was heavy and focused, but I moved around the tree, using its girth to streamline my movement. I got to the other side rather fast and kicked the first in the stomach. He stumbled forward and wanted to turn around and make another immediate attack, but I wasn’t having that.

I moved away from him, still along the tree, and focused on the second, who was just a couple of feet from me. I had hit

him in the stomach earlier on, breaking a rib, so I focused on that. I glided in the air to get a kick in, but he was ready for me. He slid off so gracefully it was almost like he wasn't moving, but he wasn't in a position to get a punch in, so I hugged the next tree closest to me and used it to throw myself at him again. I punched him in the stomach this time, and his cry rang out, echoing through the woods. I smiled. That went better than I had hoped.

The second got himself up again, but he was hurting, and that would affect his speed. They could see they were not just fighting against me. They were fighting against the trees too. That was one thing they were not prepared for.

They both were still agile and would still keep coming for me. There was still a lot of fight to go down.

They both stood up and went around, flanking me. They had learned their lesson. They attacked me at the same time now, but I was ready. They were giving me what I wanted.

The first came at me with one of his heavy swings. I could see his fangs in the dark of the night, they were gritted together, and that swing, should it hit me, would have taken me out. The second didn't attack him strongly. He moved fluidly, but his speed was affected by the pain in his side.

I edged myself backward until I was against another tree close to me, and the two turned to come at me. I pushed myself against the tree, and went at the second. He had his claws out, and they were coming for my eyes. I moved down to escape him but got up fast and went for his throat. I pulled him down, and as he fell, I met him halfway with my fang buried right into his throat. He croaked, but he knew there was no surviving that. I buried it deep and pulled at his carotid. He was going to bleed to death.

Now, it was just me and the third, but it wasn't just the two of us in the woods anymore. Luke was there too, and he had his hand around the first's neck. I didn't see him come up.

I watched as he snapped the first's neck, and his limp body fell to the floor.

“I had it handled,” I told him.

“No doubt about that,” he said.

I had been so focused on the other two werewolves that I didn't hear him come up. Now, I could feel him all over me. My body tingled with want, and I wanted to move closer to him and run my hands over his chest.

But he was here to hunt me down, and he had rejected me earlier. I also know nothing about this man.

“You're impressive,” he told me. “Cutting through the hunters like they are just weeds. At this rate, you'll go through the twenty of them before you get out of town.”

I have always recognized my own ability, but when he said it, it made me feel appreciated. I liked it.

“There's one before me that needs to be cut down,” I told him, and he smiled.

“You should come with me,” he said.

“And why would I do that?”

“I am not them. I am different. Better.”

“So am I.”

“We shouldn't go through this dance. This only ends one way, and that is with you following me back to Nillport.”

“We'll see about that,” I told him and glowed my eyes, telling him the talking time was over. Even though what I really wanted to do was kiss him, but I would have to fight him.

I wanted to make the first dash at him, but he was fast. He was in front of me suddenly and smacked me in the stomach, knocking me to the floor.

“This is pointless,” he told me.

He was faster and stronger than me.

I jumped up and was on my feet again. He might be better than me, but I have the trees and would use them just as I did against the first two. I wrapped myself around the closest tree to me and used it to launch myself at him, but he was ready.

He simply parried me away and then caught me mid-air. He pushed me against a tree and was daringly close to me. I could smell him more intensely now, and he was intoxicating.

“Do you give up?” he asked, talking close to me, his mouth just a couple of inches from mine. All I have to do is reach up and kiss them. I kicked him in the shin instead, answering his question.

He buckled a bit, and I grabbed the opportunity. I turned and got myself out of his grip. I jumped on his neck and tackled him to the ground.

I let go of him and smiled. He grinned as he stood up.

“Sneaky,” he said.

“Why are you doing this? You’re a lone wolf. You shouldn’t be concerned with pack business.”

“I am not concerned with pack business,” he said. “I am concerned with you and my lone wolf friends. I have a deal with the new Alpha. You for my people’s freedom and some money alongside. Looks like a good deal, don’t you think?”

“A deal you won’t get to receive.”

“You still think you’re getting out of this?”

I can’t fight him and win. I can see that, but I can run. He is bigger than me, so he might have more trouble navigating through the woods, but I would have that issue.

“I think I am,” I told him and swung onto the next tree, used it as a lever to get onto the next, and I put a considerable distance between us. I started running and didn’t have to look back to see what he was doing behind me. I could sense him. He didn’t run after, and I wanted to stop and see why, but then I heard him climb one of the trees and I realized running was a mistake.

That was how he had kept out of sight from me and the others—the trees.

I barely made it a yard before he landed right in front of me. I attacked him immediately, though. I swiped at him with my claws, hard enough for him to know I intended to harm him.

He was fast, so he parried the attack away, but I was ready with another. I got him in the side, but only slightly as he moved out of the way too, and now had both my hands in his hand. He looked me in the eyes and spun me around, throwing me against a tree. I hit it with my side, and pain shot through my body.

“Stop fighting,” he told me.

“You’re going to have to stop me,” I told him and jumped back up, attacking him again. I got a punch him, but he pushed me against another tree again.

“This is stupid. Just stop fighting.”

“If you want to take me,” I said as I stood up. “If you want to take me back to Nillport, you’re going to have to take me back there with my head severed from my body. I will keep coming at you.”

He groaned and looked at me like I was mad. He removed his backpack and got a rope out of it.

“If you don’t want to come, I’ll make you come,” he said.

“You think a rope is supposed to scare me? Do you know how many times I was tied up and beaten as a kid on the street?”

“Then don’t make me tie you up. Just come with me. You killed an Alpha. That’s a crime, and you have to answer to it.”

“My answer remains the same. You’ll have to make me.”

“Alright,” Luke said and came at me. I tried to fight him, but whatever move I made, he countered it and then disabled me with the rope, and I was unable to make any other move.

Soon, I had the rope around me, and I was a kid on the street again, defeated by someone stronger and better than me.

Chapter Fourteen (Luke)

She was driving me crazy. I carried her strapped across my shoulder as we started the journey back into town. It was a long walk back to Nillport, and I knew I was not going to be able to carry her the whole way. I hoped that somewhere along the way, she would see reason and just agree to walk with me. I could have cut the rope and just had her follow behind me because I knew she couldn't run away, but she wouldn't walk. She had told me there was only one way she would get into town, and that was with her dead. I was going to find another way.

The problem with this new way was that she was too close to me. I could feel her skin on mine, her breath against my neck, and her scent engulfed me. She smelled of clay and daylilies, and it was intoxicating. The smell was driving me crazy.

"We can't keep walking the whole night," she said and tapped me on the shoulder. I acted like I didn't hear her at all. Her weight against my shoulder slowed me down; if I were walking on my own, I would make it back to town way before sundown. I'd travel faster if I took the trees, but that wasn't possible with her.

"We need to stop for the night. I am exhausted and need rest. I need to sleep," she tapped me again, this time with more urgency.

"Fall asleep right there over my shoulder," I told her.

"I can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"I—" she started but stopped. "Just put me down."

I grunted and dropped her to the ground before helping her sit up against a tree. I was tired too, but I could have pushed on. I wanted to get this over with.

"Cut my hands loose, please," she said.

I cocked my head and smiled at her. “And why would I do that? So you can wiggle your way out of the rope, and then we start the dance all over again.”

“I won’t try to escape. I promise you. Besides, what do you have in your bag there? I am hungry. I have something we can eat in mine.”

I was really hungry, though, and thought it wasn’t a bad idea to have something to eat. But I wouldn’t cut her out of the bounds. She was too much trouble for me to try that. I dropped my bag and went through it, removing a piece of dry bread and a bottle of water. It wasn’t the most nutritious food, but it was good enough for the two of us. I sat in front of her and glowed my eyes so I could see her better in the dark. She glowed hers right back and growled at me, telling me she was ready for an attack.

“Calm down,” I told her. “I was just taking a good look at you.”

I turned off the glow, and she turned hers off too. She was very untrusting; I noticed that immediately. She said she grew up in the street, so I expected that. Mikhail grew up in the streets, too, and at just twelve, he had to work for one of the street gangs, and he didn’t even know what he was then. His ascension was one of the saddest and most painful I have ever heard. Mikhail never had a pack and had been a lone wolf all his life. On his ascension, he was out with friends, and they had no idea what was happening to him.

“What are you thinking of?” Hayley asked and broke into my thought. She had those sharp eyes of hers on me. There weren’t glowing, but I knew she could see me quite well. I broke off some of the bread and brought it close to her mouth. I expected her to object, but she didn’t. She opened her mouth, and I slipped it in. She started to chew immediately.

“You said you grew up in the streets,” I said and sat on the floor, getting comfortable.

“Yes.”

“Did you ascend on the streets too?”

“Yes.”

“That was scary, wasn’t it?”

She looked away and didn’t answer immediately. I spoke to fill up the silence. I don’t know why I was doing it, but I just wanted to talk to her. It felt right.

“I have a friend. You met him the day you came to the reservation. He grew up on the streets like you, and joined a gang. When he transitioned, he was out with friends. They don’t have a home, so they just spend their nights wiling away. Doing anything and all things they could think of. That night, they wanted to sneak their way into a club. Very foolish thing. They were children, but they still wanted to get into a club to see what it was like. It was his thirteenth birthday, and they thought they should spice up the night. So, they made plans, but they barely got to the club when his ascension started. It scared his friends as he screamed and thrashed about. It was terrifying.”

I looked at her to see if she was still listening to me.

“I remember the night I did, and I had friends and family there with me, but I was scared. I thought I was going to die. The pain, the delusions, the surge of sudden emotions that you get hit with, and then, there was the urge to kill. He had no one there to tell him what was happening. He didn’t even know he was a werewolf. He was just a kid that had all this power all of a sudden. He killed his friends. All of them, and then ran away. He stayed in the woods for a long time, guilt eating him up and this newfound power terrifying him. He didn’t know what to do with it. He spent almost a year in the woods, surviving on berries and smaller animals. He was scared if he went back into town, he would kill someone. Then, he kept traveling through the woods and found Bonne.”

“Bonne? Who’s Bonne?”

“A friend of mine too.”

“A lone wolf?”

“No. He’s not, but he acts like one,” I said and chuckled. “He acts like he’s not a wolf.”

She squinted her eyes, confused at her.

“Don’t worry, you’ll meet him,” I said and realized too late that I had misspoken. There was no way she would meet Bonne unless I didn’t take her to the council. The truth was that it wasn’t my wish to take her back to the council. I would rather sit here with her and listen to all she has to say, take those ropes off her, and pull her closer to me. I want to smell her, kiss her and bite her gently on the lips. I swallowed my wants and focused on how to get her back to the council so she could face her punishment, and then I would go to Bonne and celebrate the ascension of his son.

We were quiet for a long time, and the awkwardness grew between us. She pointed at the bread after a while, and I put another piece into her mouth. She asked for a drink of water, and I gave her one.

“I didn’t kill people when I ascended, but I almost did,” she said finally, and I looked up at her—waiting for her to continue. She sighed and rested against the tree. “I knew what I was since I was way younger and was expecting it, but it came two years early.”

“When you were eleven?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my god, that must have been traumatizing.”

“Even though I knew what was happening. It was unnerving. Before my parents died, they told me about it, what happened, and how to prepare. Sometimes, I think they prepared me for a time when they wouldn’t be here. It was almost like they knew something was going to happen to them.”

“What happened to them?”

“They were killed,” she said and looked away. “That’s all I am saying about it.”

I didn’t push further. She was tied up and telling me about her ascension. I guess that was more than I could ask for. So, I simply just listened to her.

“I got in trouble with these bullies. It made me hide in a house for a long time, thinking they would have forgotten about me by the time I got out, but they didn’t. They found me, beat me up, and left me bleeding in the streets. When I felt my body shake, I knew what was happening, and I calmed down. I did all my parents taught me, but I wasn’t prepared for the rush of hunger that came after. I was filled with so much hate I thought I was going to explode. And it was hate for the people that had bullied me. I found them and beat them up. I broke a couple of bones, chipped some teeth out, and even might have even severed a limb. I don’t know. It was all a blur, but when I left, they never messed with me again. I became a pariah, but it was worth it.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her as she said those last parts. Her eyes had glowed unconsciously, which meant she still harbored hate for those kids. And the tone of her voice sent chills down her spine. I could see why James wanted her to become the alpha after him. She was fierce and fiery. Those hunters out there would never have stood a chance with her. I would never have stood a chance with her if I wasn’t cursed and blessed with my pedigree.

“Why did you kill your Alpha?” I asked her finally. The one question I had been looking to avoid. I didn’t want to know because I didn’t want to get involved. I wanted to take Bonne’s advice and stay away from it all, at least as far as I could get. But I had come out for this hunt because I wanted to know, and the urge to know took over.

“It was an accident,” she said and looked sad a bit. “I never intended to kill him. We got into a fight, and he died.”

“A fight over what?”

She looked at me long and hard, and I could see she was contemplating telling me, but in the end, she just shook her head.

“Nothing important,” she said. “You know this is all your fault,” she added.

“What?”

“Yes. If you hadn’t rejected me, I wouldn’t have been in the Palace that late, and we wouldn’t have gotten into a fight.”

I chuckled. “Tell me, what were you thinking doing that?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. It just came out. I just felt right to say. What about you? What are you doing in these woods hunting down a pack member? And don’t tell me it is because of the money or the deal you made with Viper. We both know that is bullshit. Tell me the real reason.”

“I don’t know,” I told her. “It just felt like the right thing to do. After what happened in the afternoon, I just wanted to know more about you. Then I heard you killed your Alpha, and the interest spiked.”

“You won’t get to know much about me if I remain bound. Cut the ropes.”

I smiled at her and shook my head. “You will run if I do that.”

“I won’t,” she said.

“You know that’s a lie. You killed an alpha. You should answer for that. It’s not my place to let you go.”

“It’s not your place to bring me to justice either!”

“I am not bringing you to justice. I am bringing you to the people that’ll determine what that is.”

“You know what will happen to me if you hand me over to the council, don’t you?”

“I do,” I said. “I met a friend of yours. His name is Ilad.”

She smiled at the mention of the name.

“Do you know what he told me? He told me to kill you, swift and clean. He said it is what is good for you.”

“He’s a truthful boy.”

“Maybe. But I can’t kill you. I can’t bring myself to do it. This is what I can do. Take you to the men that want you. Or you tell me why you killed your Alpha. I’ve not known you long, but I know you’re not the kind of person to kill a man for no

reason. Accident or not. Tell me why, and I will know whether to help you or not.”

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “It’s something I have to deal with on my own. And I would deal with it because I know you won’t deliver me to Viper. You don’t know it yet, but you’re going to help me.”

“You say that confidently.”

“I am pretty sure of it.”

“I don’t know so much about you, Hayley, but I think I like your confidence.”

I stood up and picked her up. It was time to keep going. I wanted to make some more distance before we finally went to sleep for the night and then kept going during the day. She didn’t struggle against me this time, and we walked in the woods, each of us to our thoughts. I was thinking of all we talked about and how she was relatively confident I would help her. Maybe I would, and I can’t put that fact beyond me. I had come here for a reason. Was it to just take her back to people who would kill her? I didn’t think so. I was here for some other reason. Maybe it was to help her.

A couple of minutes later, I was hit with the smell of blood. It was thick and close. It was a familiar one too. One I smelled earlier in the day. It was Buff, and it smelled like he had lost a lot of blood.

“Blood,” Hayley announced a second later, and I set her on the ground as I glowed my eyes, the night bursting into light before me. I could see every detail clearly and even hear the worms crawling in the grass. A couple of feet from me, there was a lump where the smell of blood was coming from. He was dead. There was no way he could have survived with that much blood loss, and I couldn’t even hear a heartbeat. I moved closer to him and took Bonne’s vial out of my pocket. I swallowed a bit of the concoction, and everything got even brighter. The air felt heavy against my skin. I could hear Hayley’s slow heartbeat. She was breathing slowly to keep herself undetected. She would sweat less that way. I wondered if she just started breathing that way or if she did that

unconsciously. Werewolves can slow their heartbeat to almost a beat per minute.

I stepped closer to Buff and looked around me, taking in my environment. I couldn't detect anything out of the ordinary. Just the body and the blood. There was something wrong with the way Buff was splayed on the floor, though. And I soon found out what it was.

There were metals glistening out of Buff, and before I got close, I knew they were arrows. I could see three of them. When I got close enough and stood over him, I saw bullet holes in him. I removed one of the arrows and looked at the insignia on the fletching. I recognized it—an eagle mid-flight.

They were hunters. Human hunters trained to kill werewolves. And not just any kind of werewolf. Alphas. They were lethal and tactical. This was wrong. They shouldn't be here. We shouldn't be here. It was too dangerous. I turned around and started back towards Hayley. We have to get out of this place.

I heard the swoosh before I saw it. If I hadn't taken Bonne's concoction, I would have missed it. I moved out of the way, as the arrow missed me just by a mere inch, chipping off a bit of my nose and lodging into a tree nearby. Another came immediately, and I dropped to the ground.

They were still around, and they were attacking us.

Chapter fifteen (Luke)

I watched as two more arrows swept from within the darkness and buried themselves beside me. They were very close, and they could see us. They probably have night goggles on, which meant they have a vision just as good as ours.

“Get me out of this!” Hayley yelled at me as I started towards her. I needed to get to my bag, which I had dropped beside her. Another arrow swooshed past me and settled into another tree. I returned to the ground just as another arrow was targeted at me. I pulled myself to the side of the tree, using it as cover as Hayley dragged herself, even though she was bound to the side of another tree. I needed to get to her and cut her out of the ropes. If we were going to have a chance to fight these people, we had to work together. I can’t even see or smell them. They probably have their bodies coated in mud, blocking off their sweat pores and making them unnoticeable to us. I have to do that too. I have to make them blind to us.

Everything went quiet for a while, and I ran from the tree, shortening the distance between Hayley and me. I was barely a foot from her when gunshots filled the air. I fell to the ground, but I was too late. A bullet hit me in the shoulder, and the force of it knocked me to the floor. But there was no time to wallow in pain. If I remained on the ground any longer, I would get torn to pieces by the guns. I pushed myself and wrapped my arm around the tree Hayley was hiding behind, not caring that the bark was tearing into me. I got to the other side and sat down to take a breather.

Why were human hunters after us?

“Who are they?” Hayley asked me.

“Human hunters. They are dangerous and very lethal.”

I removed the knife from my pants and cut her hands free, then handed the knife to her so that she could cut the rest of the rope off. What mattered the most now was surviving. I pulled

the bag to me and searched it for a flare. I needed to blind them. This was the way to do it.

“Are your eyes glowing?” I asked Hayley as I removed it, and they resumed shooting again.

“Yes,” she said.

“Turn them off.”

I said and ignited the flare. If they are using infrared goggles like I think they are, then they would need to take them off or blind themselves.

I looked at Hayley and saw she'd cut herself free. It was time to leave. There was no fighting people like this. We have to run from them.

“Let's go,” I said and pulled her up. I threw the flare to the ground and started walking. I couldn't take it along because it would give away our position. It had done its work. We distracted them for a while, and needed to cover a distance before they reoriented themselves. We started westwards, going deeper into the woods but not keeping to a direct route. We ran hard, using the trees to push ourselves forward. I got the urge to climb into the trees, but that might make us an easier target. Or maybe not. I looked up at the trees, confused. We had to make a plan.

The gunshots resumed behind us, but they sounded a bit distant now, and we were safe from them.

“Where?” she asked.

“Away. We have to run. We can't fight them. They have guns.”

“But they'll be right behind us. They will keep attacking us even if we remain on the run. Can we outrun their guns?”

“I don't think so, but what other options are there?”

We can't go up against men with guns, our heightened senses, and strength or not. A bullet will kill us, just as it will kill a human. Besides, I have been hit. We need to go.

“We need to cut them down,” Hayley said.

“We can't even see them,” I pointed out.

“No, and they can’t see us either. But we can hear them. We are werewolves, not mere humans.”

I stopped and considered what she was saying. She was right. We might have a chance against them. Cut down their numbers. We looked at each other, and the message was passed without even speaking.

“Wait,” I said and reached into my pocket, removing one of Bonne’s vials, taking a dose out of it, and passing it to her. “Take some of that.”

“What is it?” she asked, looking at it skeptically but took it anyway.

“Just take it. You’ll see.”

She did, and her eyes went wide as it kicked into effect immediately.

“Let’s go,” I said.

I grabbed onto the trunk of the tree closest to me and pulled myself up. When I got to the top and balanced on the highest part of the tree, I listened for Hayley first. She was at the top too. Then I listened for the gunshots. They were coming just north of me, and if we spread out wide enough, we could get them trapped between us. They won’t hear us coming because we’ll be above them and moving through the branches almost with no sound. This could work. I could make out about three different guns which meant there were at least three people up there shooting at us, at most, maybe ten. Ten with guns will be a tough number to contend with.

But not impossible.

I lunged through the trees, spreading my weight about as I jumped from branch to branch, and wondered how Hayley was faring. I was good at this. I have done it a thousand times before with my old pack, and I can do it with my eyes closed, even with a bullet stuck in my shoulder—which also helped me focus better. Hayley was new to this, but she is fast and lithe, so I guessed she’ll be fine. And she has Bonne’s concoction running through her.

Voices started to carry to me, and I knew I had to flank them further. Increase the girth between us so that I could have room for an attack. I moved to the side some more before continuing further again, and soon, I could make them out. I glowed my eyes and saw four of them. They were about fifty feet from me and about half of that below me. Four in number, and they had night vision goggles hanging on their necks. One of them was putting it back on to see better, and they were talking about their next line of action. A couple of feet from then, I noticed Hayley close the gap to them. She saw me and gave me a thumbs-up. The men were oblivious to us and we were about to drop from the trees. They either were about to call it quits or go in search of us. I didn't give them that chance. I jumped at the ones closest to me, and Hayley did the same thing. I caught one by the shoulder, my claws dragging him down with me.

We both fell to the ground, his gun dangling around him. He tried to reach for it, but I kicked it off and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, throwing him against a tree. Before he even hit the tree, I jumped at him and smacked his head against the tree. He screamed out in pain.

"Who hired you?" I asked, but he said nothing. He was covered in leotards, and the leotard smelled of the woods. That was how they had kept themselves from detection. They used mud. Now, they'd advanced.

I hit him against the tree again and was about to ask him the same question again when shots rang out behind me. There was still at least one up there shooting at me.

I grabbed the one I was fighting by the neck and snapped it. His neck gave way very easily. I turned around and started back up the tree, but my shoulder gave way, and I fell to the floor.

The pain from it rang through my body like a zap of electricity going through me. I tried to pull myself up, but could not move with that shoulder. I must have fallen on it when I landed from the tree earlier. I didn't even notice.

I couldn't remain on the ground, though. I would be a sitting duck there.

I pulled myself with my other arm, looking to grab onto another tree, but it was just out of reach. I heard more gunshots go off and a high pitched scream. I thought it was Hayley for a moment, but another person clothed in black leotards, fell beside me. I could see it was a woman. I shook off the fatigue from the pain in my shoulder and forced myself up. I had just one useful arm left. That would make climbing a tree harder, but I wasn't about to give up.

I am a werewolf and would heal. I just need a good rest.

I grabbed onto the tree closest to me, and with my good arm wrapped around it and the bad one, used for barely support, I started up. Using one foot to push myself up at a time, I was beginning to make progress. I could hear Hayley fighting with one of the men up there, and I wondered if we should have simply just made the run for it. I don't think this group is as highly skilled as other human hunters I have met before. They were distracted and didn't pick up our movements in the tree, and they looked and smelled green. I continued up, and just as I was a couple of inches from the branch, which I planned on using as a lever to pull me over to another tree, I saw a face look down at me. It was wrapped in black dressing and had a slight grin in the slit for his mouth. He pointed his gun at me.

Damn!

I growled at him as I pushed myself forward, using all the strength I could muster. The plan was to collide with him and make him drop with me to the floor. Then I would find a way to terminate him on the ground. But as I growled and jumped at him, I heard his gun go off. A burst of rounds came from it and buried themselves into my chest.

I fell to the ground, barely feeling the impact of my back against the dirt. I did feel a warmth spread across my chest, and then it was all quiet.

Chapter sixteen (Hayley)

I snapped at one of the human hunter's necks as Luke fell to the ground. A heaviness came upon me, and for a moment, all that made sense with the world paused. It felt like with him falling to the ground and probably to his death, nothing about the world made sense anymore, and this was the end. I jumped at the hunter that had shot at him.

He moved his gun to direct it at me, but I was faster than him. He took a shot, but I moved out of the way and dragged him with me to the ground. He landed on his back while I fell right on top of him. He never got the chance to recover and come for me again. I buried my claw into his face and felt it break through his jaw. Anger flooded me as I squeezed his head and heard it squish and then pop in my hand. I was getting very good at this killing thing, and that disturbed me, but there was no time to contemplate the kind of person I was becoming.

Luke was dying.

I jumped away from the man and looked around me, waiting for another person to attack, but that was all of them. I knelt next to Luke and saw the blood dripping from his chest and spreading on his clothes. I have to get the bullets out. I could still hear his heart beating, but it was slow. Very slow, and it was straining. He was going to survive. I have to get the bullets out that were putting that much strain on his lungs and heart.

We were stuck in the middle of the forest with knives, backpacks, and just water and food. Even if I had the chance to do a quick surgery on him, I lacked the technical know-how. There was only one option. I would have to use my claws to get the bullets out of his chest.

Without time to contemplate, I tore his clothes, exposing the pulsating bullet wound on his chest. He had a string on his neck that I overlooked before, and it was attached to some pendant that was stuck to his back. I wanted to pull the pendant around to see what it was, but there wasn't time for

that. I focused on the wound instead. Three bullet wounds. Two at close proximity and one at his side. The first two are the ones I am going to have to remove. The last one at his side and the one in his shoulder he got earlier aren't lethal, and he would survive with them inside of him. I would get back to them when I could find us a place to hide out and for him to heal.

I extended my claws and used them to cut the first wound, making it larger and more blood to spurt out. I extended them some more until the claw on my thumb hit the first bullet. I sighed as I picked it up with the claws on my thumb and index finger, looking at Luke. His eyes were closed, and he looked so calm. He looked like he was just asleep. The bullet was safely lodged in my fingers and I pulled it out and threw it down. That was the first one gone. His lungs would heal faster now, and he would be able to breathe better. Now for the one lodged against his heart, I knew I had to be more careful.

I made a bigger incision, and it had gone deeper than I had expected it to. My claws weren't going to get to it, no matter how long I extended them. The only thing I could do now was reach into his chest with my fist. I took a deep breath before I did that. He would most likely heal without a scar and fast, though, but if he doesn't get enough rest, the healing process will slow up. What should take hours will take days.

It was barely believable that hours ago, he had wound a rope around me and had told me he would deliver me to Viper. Ideally, I should let him die here, alone in the woods and with the rest of them, but I couldn't do that. There was something different about him, something that made my heart beat faster and my loins stir. He's not going to die on my watch.

I stuck my fingers into his chest and moved my hands about in the squishiness of his flesh. My finger touched the bullet, and I let my claws do the rest of the job. I searched some more and wrapped my claws around the bullet before pulling it out.

A gentle sigh came out of him, and I fell to the ground, looking up at the stars, exhausted. I wanted to lay down there and go to sleep, but more hunters, humans, and werewolves might still be out there, and they will come for us.

We all knew the game had changed. The human hunters came for the two of us, but they seemed more focused on Luke. I was sure Viper hired them. He was cleaning up, by the looks of it.

Luke had asked me earlier why I killed James, and I didn't tell him. I wanted to know if Viper would be involved in the crime ring himself; now, I saw that he was.

There was something that had been eating at me for a while now. James had put me in charge when he sent us to the reservation to get Luke and the other werewolves out, which meant he was also grooming me to take over sometime later. If he did that, would I have also taken over the criminal ring and trafficked kids? He would have known I wouldn't agree to that, and I would have brought the council down if I had learned of that. Then he must have had another plan in mind.

Maybe he wanted to pull out before handing it over to Viper or me. That was the easiest conclusion to come to, but a more insidious one made my stomach turn.

James was grooming two alphas. One to handle the dirty business and the other to handle the people. I was the latter, and Viper was the former. If that had happened, it would have only been a matter of time before I found out about the other business. Viper wasn't very good at keeping his mouth shut, and he would have bragged to me about it. It was still hard to see James in the light of someone terrible, and I knew I was just grappling at straws, trying to justify what he did, but that was the only option left for me.

James was a messiah to me. The last memory of him that keeps playing in my head wasn't the one where he came to save me from the streets. It was the one where he shook hands with people who I saw as the devil. People who bought and sold kids. It was hard to live with that.

I pushed myself up and looked around, noticing that our bags were just a couple of feet from me. I walked to it, picked up the two, and removed the bottles of water in them and also the little food that I could carry. I stuck them in my pocket, took a drink of water, and walked back to Luke. I opened his mouth

and forced him to drink some water as it would help him heal faster. He needs food too, but I would have to figure out a way to get that into his body later.

I removed the vial he gave me earlier on from his pocket, turned it over in my hand, and decided it might help. It enhanced every ability I have, so it might enhance healing too. The downside to that, however, is that I would have to cut him again when I had to remove the remaining bullet in his body. A small price to pay. I lifted his head up slightly, and the string came into focus again. I ignored it for now and focused on getting some of the contents of the vial into his mouth. When I was done, I took some myself and swallowed it.

I would need to carry him and needed as much strength as I could garner.

I knelt by his side again and pulled at the string behind him, hoping it held an address to a place we could hide out for him to get better. But it didn't hold any address. It held an explanation as to why I had been feeling the way I had been feeling around him since I first saw him. The reason why he came for me, even though it was a foolish thing to get himself involved in pack business.

On the end of the string was the other half of the moon pendant I had on myself. He was the person my mother asked me to look for when she handed me the pendant all those years ago. I fell back as the sudden realization hit me, and my knees couldn't hold me. I felt cold and weak.

It was easy getting a place to stay. I considered walking back to the reservation and returning Luke to his lone wolf friends, but it was a long walk back, and then I would have to repeat the journey, getting away from town. Luckily for me, after walking back a couple of miles, I came across a bothy on the far end of the plain meadow. I didn't see it earlier because I was focused on running, but with Luke on my back, there wasn't much running going on. I was listening and smelling the air for any invader and was soon hit with the smell of dry logs and followed it, hoping to find a cabin and praying it was

abandoned but came across a bothy instead. It wasn't much compared to a cabin, but it had a door and a bed, which surprisingly looked clean. Even if it weren't, we couldn't be picky. I let Luke down on the bed and got him comfortable. I had cleaned the blood off his chest with his clothes, now he was shirtless, and the pendant settled on his chest gently. I watched it for a while before kneeling and removing my own from my neck. Mine was attached to a chain, but his was attached to a string. It didn't really matter much. It was the pendant that was the most important thing of it all. I examined the two of them, and I was right. They made each other whole.

Are we supposed to make each other whole that way too? I looked at him, and a wave of sadness hit me. I needed him to wake up because I needed to talk to him. I couldn't believe I had been searching for him all these years, and he had just been a few miles from me. It was chilling to think about.

When it became obvious he wouldn't be waking anytime soon, I gathered some wood and made a fire for the night. I knew it was risky, but I didn't think any hunters would be coming for a while now. We had decimated a number of them, and they would need to take time to recuperate. Werewolves were mostly irrational, and they could get overwhelmed by their emotions easily, but they had a human part, too, and it was intensely analytic. They would know I wasn't a mere wolf to be trifled with and would make better plans to come at me. Some of them might even start to assume that Luke was working with me.

I went to sleep too but didn't sleep deeply as I kept my ears to the ground, picking up any tiny sound or difference in the air pressure. It wasn't the best sleep I had ever gotten, but it would do. It would have to do for now. I woke up early in the morning and added some more wood to the fire. It had dewed overnight, and it was even colder that morning. After I built up the fire, I went to check on Luke. He looked better, the color was returning to his face, and I knew it was just a matter of time before he woke up. When he does, he shouldn't eat dried bread and water or those canned beans in my bag. We needed something better. I would have to go hunt, but I didn't want to

leave him all by himself. I didn't think anyone would come for him, but I wanted to be here when he woke up.

Later, I decided to leave him when it became apparent that we would need the food, and I was getting hungry too. I took a dose from his vial, and my eyes lit up, and all my senses prickled. I wouldn't go far from the bothy, and I took a deep smell of the air. I couldn't get a sniff of a werewolf or human. That didn't mean they weren't close, but I wouldn't make a bet on it. Besides, I would hear whatever went on.

A couple of feet from the bothy, I found my quarry. A litter of rabbits scurried past me, and I dashed for their mother, catching it by the leg and snapping off the neck immediately. It barely even squealed or knew what was happening before it was dead. I watched the little litter run around and find their way deeper into the woods. I walked back, and he was still sleeping. Peaceful with the calm of a child on his face. I had watched him fight, and he had fought me. I have never seen anyone as skillful as he was. It was like he could see into the future and predict my moves. That goes beyond just being a werewolf. That is being a fighter. James had trained us to be better fighters and told us that would separate us from the other werewolves out there. There would be werewolves as strong as us, as fast as us, and when we fought them, the only edge we would have over them is to be a better fighter. Figure out your opponent's strengths and weaknesses in a fight, starve them of strength, and make them focus on their weakness. It gives you an immediate advantage.

That was what he did to me. I was reliant on my speed and reflexes, but he made it moot by mirroring it. Now, I had to rely on my strength, and he used my own strength against me. It was both impressive and frustrating to think about. He had beaten me effortlessly.

He stirred in his sleep, and I dropped the rabbit, walking to him. His eyes flickered open, closed again, and then finally, they opened. They stared right into me.

He smiled a bit and turned around, croaking in pain. He had recovered faster than I thought he would.

“That was painful. Getting beat by a human. Humiliating,” he said.

I chuckled a bit as I took a seat beside him. My pendant was hidden beneath my clothes, and I just watched his. He was fine now, and he would be able to travel within the next hour once he finished eating—the perks of being a werewolf.

All his wounds were healed, and he had just a tiny scar on his side. I knew that was going to happen. He looked all over his body and was seemingly satisfied with all he saw.

“Thank you,” he told me.

I shrugged. “I told you that you weren’t taking me back to Nillport.”

He sighed and rested against the wall. “What is this place?”

“Some shelter. I found it just in time.”

“Is it safe?”

“For now. They will be back, though. Humans and werewolves alike.”

“What game is Viper playing?”

“The one where he wins at all costs. And one where you are collateral damage.”

“Coming for me isn’t going to end well for him.”

“Maybe, but he doesn’t care. I bet he expected you had killed me, which was why he sent the human hunters. They were supposed to kill you, and then the deal he made with you never happened.”

“He’s a despicable person.”

“He’s always has been. But we have more pressing issues. Issues more serious than Viper. Than the hunters after the two of us.”

I said and sat down before I told him about it. He looked at me, confused. He couldn’t understand what could be more pending than a threat upon our lives.

Fate. I wanted to tell him.

“Where did you get that?” I asked him, pointing at the pendant on his chest. He noticed it and wrapped his hands around it. I could see that he wanted to hide it away. He was just like me in that aspect, always looking to hide it away.

“I got it,” he said. He wasn’t ready to depart with the truth.

“I need to know,” I told him, my eyes communicating the message that it was important.

He got it and nodded. “It is the only thing I have of my mother that remains. She gave it to me a long time ago.”

“Before she died?”

“Yes, but years before she died. She wanted me to have it, just in case the wind of life took us on different paths. She died a couple of years later, and I had found my pack by then.”

He said, and his face clouded in sadness for a while, but he pushed it off and was now brooding.

“Did she tell you anything about it? Like finding the other half and things like fate.”

He looked up at me, shocked. “Why are you asking that?”

I sighed, reaching into my shirt and removing my own pendant. I handed it over to him and his mouth fell open.

“No,” he said as he collected it from me. He looked up at me, then back at the pendant. “That explains it,” he said finally before handing it back to me.

“Yes, it does,” I added.

“I knew I had to meet you to find you. I couldn’t get you out of my mind. It was like everywhere I turned, I could smell you. Clay and daylilies, and it was intoxicating. I wanted to hold you tight and not let you go. It was confusing and I couldn’t understand it.”

“I didn’t understand why I blurted those things out in the reservation too. It was unlike me. It was strange, scary even.”

“But you meant every word of it,” he said. It sounded like a question but was more of a statement. A testament to what he felt himself.

“Yes, I did.”

He held my hand, and I felt myself melt as our skin touched. We weren't out in the woods fighting anymore. We weren't hunting each other anymore because it would be pointless to do that. We were holding onto each other now because there was a bond between us that we couldn't explain. We had chased each other, ran from each other, even fought each other, and it still ended here.

This moment, where nothing seemed to exist, not even the shelter we were in, not the bed he was sitting on, not the pendant on our necks—just the two of us, and our hands touching. Everything felt right with the world. It was like I had been navigating it with my head turned upside down and going about it the wrong way all the time, but now, that was over. I have found something I could use to make sense of the world.

Luke pulled me toward himself, and I surrendered myself to him.

“I had been lying to myself about this. I had been fighting this,” he said to me. “But there's no fighting it anymore. It is what we want. What we need.”

He kissed me then, and I had been kissed a lot of times before, but this felt different. It felt right. The moment our lips touched, something aligned between the two of us. But there was hunger, too, and passion and a deep need. He pulled me closer to him until I had straddled him. We kissed for a very long time. It must have taken about ten minutes before we finally pulled apart from each other and took a breath. I sat with him and rested my head against his shoulder.

“I guess I'm not taking you back then,” he said.

“No, you're not.”

“And are you ready to tell me what really happened with James?”

I felt I could tell him whatever he wanted. I could tell him everything about my life.

“Yes,” I said to him.

Chapter Seventeen (Luke)

After we had a breakfast of roasted rabbit, which was the best thing I've had in days, we headed out of the shelter. I was totally fine now, and we had to decide where to go next. We weren't thinking as individuals now. That had gone out of the window when Hayley showed me her pendant. We were thinking as a pair, and any decision we make now has to favor the two of us.

I didn't know how I missed the pendant. It had become such a part of me that I forgot I even had it. My mother gave it to me a long time ago. There was something about the night she gave me. The fear and pain in her eyes that I could never forget. She told me to find the other half, too but didn't tell me to go all out like Hayley's mother had. She told me the second half of it would find me. She told me to live my life, and when the time comes, it will find me.

After I left home, I found my own pack, and we hunted together. We made a life together, and then I lost my pack. I came to Nillport to pick up the broken pieces of my life and tried to get it all back together. I did that, but still, the second half of the pendant never found me, and the right time never came. I soon gave up on it and forgot all about it. I focused on just living instead. And yet, here it was, and it came with Hayley.

I held her hand as we walked through the meadow and came to the other side of the forest. We were heading back to Nillport. It was a risky decision, but we both agreed we had to make it. We have to understand what the pendant signifies. Two halves of a moon. It seemed important. If it weren't, our parents wouldn't have tasked us with finding the other halves, and from what Hayley told me, her parents died protecting the pendant.

If anyone had information about the pendant, then it would be Bonne. He knows and has books detailing histories and lore about werewolves. Our origin and old rituals that had died out

because they were dangerous. Ancient and powerful tribes that had either died out or hidden away. He would have answers.

“Where were you going to go before?” I asked Hayley as we made it back into the woods. I had found a rabbit earlier, burnt our clothes, and mixed the ash together. Then I tied a vial of our ash on the rabbit and sent it in the opposite direction. If there were still any werewolves or even humans using dogs to track our scent, then they would go after the rabbit. Hopefully, they go after it for a long time before discovering it was a decoy. It wasn’t the most ingenious idea, but it was the best I could come up with.

“I was going to keep going west,” Hayley replied. “My godfather said he would have people waiting for me in Michigan. I could have gone there, but I didn’t want to. I was going to find a place in whatever town these woods lead to, lay low for a while, and then double back to Nillport.”

“I still can’t believe James was a child trafficker,” I said as I kicked a twig out of the way. It was midday, and we were making good time. By my calculations, we should get to Nillport by dark, which would be good. We enter under the guise of the night, and the hunters will still be scouring the woods for us. “I used to think he was one of the good ones. The ones you can trust. That was before he ordered us to be thrown out, but people said that was because of the Tarloux family, so I didn’t fault him for that. But child trafficking? That’s inexcusable.”

“The Tarloux family is implicated in this, too,” she told me. “I saw one of their representatives. I recognize him from seeing him around.”

“Of course they are.”

“How do we deal with the two of them? The Nillport council and the Tarloux family?” Hayley asked me. “Do you think the pendant will be any help?”

“I hope so. We found each other for a reason. There must be something about it that will help us. Bonne will know how. I am sure he will.”

“Okay,” she said, and we continued our journey.

I think the rabbit distraction thing worked because we weren't attacked. We got into Nillport late at night, later than I imagined, and it was still the same town we left behind. It seemed it had rained earlier in the day as the roads were slick with water. The town was boisterous, and no one paid us any mind as we pushed through the streets. We kept our eyes low and focused on the road, not looking anyone in the eyes. There were posters already calling for people who had information about Hayley. Those were from the police. Lenny seemed busy.

At this time of the night, Bonne wouldn't be at his shop, so we went to his house. Besides, his house was what we needed. That was where he kept his books and journals. The shop is for potions and poultices.

He would be very mad at me, but I was ready to take the heat. His anger would simmer down once he found out what I had for him. Bonne loves mystery, maybe more than he loves his own self.

I got to the door and asked Hayley to remain behind me. The air was a bit nippy, and I had a good sense his son and wife would be asleep. I knocked on the door just slightly. Bonne might hate his werewolf pedigree, but he couldn't do away with it. The little noise will perk his ears. I knocked once more, just in case. A couple of moments later, the door opened to reveal a tired Bonne.

He squinted his eyes at me, surprised.

“Luke? Are you back already?”

“Yes, Bonne.”

He couldn't see Hayley behind me, but he could sense someone was there with me. He looked at me, waiting for me to cough up the answer. He didn't look as tired anymore.

“Don't be mad, Bonne. But I brought someone with me,” I said and stepped aside to reveal Hayley, who waved at him slightly.

Bonne threw me a look with sharpened edges. He opened the door to let us in and closed it immediately before he started on me.

“Are you crazy?” he asked me. “Why the hell will you bring her here?” he turned to Hayley and smiled at her. “I don’t mean any offense.”

“It is fine,” Hayley replied.

He turned his attention to me. “What are you thinking, Luke? She is a fugitive, a killer. The council and the whole community is after her. Do you want them knocking on my door and taking my family away? I know you to be reckless, but this reckless? Come on, man!”

There was a creak from up the stairs before I could reply, and Bonne’s wife, Nellie, walked down the stairs. She stopped when she saw us in the living room. She looked from Bonne to me and then to Hayley, and her eyes went wide. Nellie wasn’t a werewolf, but she’s seen the posters outside, and Bonne tells her all that goes on in the werewolf world. She has a kid who was close to his ascension, too.

“It’s her!” she said, pointing at Hayley. “What is she doing here, Bonne? Luke?”

Bonne walked to Nellie and held her by the shoulder. “Go back to sleep, Nellie. Luke and his friend won’t be staying the night.”

“Actually, we will,” I said.

Bonne looked like he wanted to come over and strangle me. I walked over to Nellie.

“Nellie, you know me. I wouldn’t put either you or Jade in danger. I made sure no one followed us here. You’re safe. Trust me.”

Nellie looked at me like she wanted to complain and then sighed. “I’ll be upstairs, waiting,” she said and left us.

Then Bonne turned to me, demanding an explanation.

“There’s something you have to see,” I told him and walked to the dining room, pulling a chair for Hayley. Bonne gave me

another quizzical look. I removed my pendant and handed it to him.

“Yes? I know you have this. Is this why you came—” he started but stopped when Hayley got hers out and showed it to him too. The two were made from the same material—a perfect replica of each other. But there was only a slight difference between them. The difference made them distinctly identifiable. My own was almost smooth, but Hayley’s had a slight lump in the center. The bump on the surface of the moon.

Some people call werewolves the children of the moon and say that we are descended from the moon itself when it came down to earth in the form of a human but then had sexual relations with a wolf. The rocky bit on the surface of the moon, they say, is responsible for our heightened abilities.

“The other half,” Bonne said, rolling both in his hand. “And they fit into each other too.”

Yes, they do, we had tried that back in the shelter, and we had a full moon. It was just two pieces of metal that made a full moon. It didn’t make any sense.

“Can you find out what it means?” Hayley asked. “Or what it is supposed to do, if it would do anything.”

“Yes, I can find out. I am sure there is something in one of my books I can find. In fact, I know just where to start,” Bonne said, his eyes lighting up and anticipation and anxiety effused out of him.

“Good,” I said.

“But not tonight,” Bonne added. “I have to go back upstairs, or Nellie will kill me. You two okay sharing a bedroom?” Bonne asked, staring right at me. I could see the implicit question in his voice.

“Yes,” I answered, and he nodded. I just answered two questions.

“Alright. There’s a bathroom in there, and I am sure there are robes in the closet. Nellie cleaned it up two weeks ago, so I am sure you will be fine.”

He stood up like he was about to leave but then stopped and looked at the two of us. “What happened out there, Luke?” he asked.

“A lot,” I answered. “But let’s just say she didn’t snap and kill her Alpha. She killed a child trafficker who also happened to be her Alpha.”

Bonne looked confused and had some more questions, but he needed to return to the room, so he bid us farewell and returned upstairs, leaving us to ourselves. I led Hayley into the spare bedroom and showed her the bathroom. I turned down the bed while she prepared to go into the bathroom.

“I don’t like that we’re inconveniencing your friend,” she said as she stood by the door to the bathroom.

“Don’t worry about Bonne. He’ll forget all about it tomorrow when he starts going through his books.”

“Still, we could have just found an inn or something.”

“I came here because I know we’ll be safe. Bonne has precautions he takes against unwanted visitors. Humans and werewolves. We are fine in here. He knows that. Now, go bathe. Don’t worry about it.”

She sighed and walked into the bathroom. I watched her go in and finished the work in the room. I wondered briefly what Bonne would have for us tomorrow. I know that he will be up before the others working on finding clues regarding the pendant. He’d always asked me to allow him to search for what it might mean when I found the other half, but I have never been interested because finding out would somehow translate to the pendant leading my life. If I found out it was supposed to be something important, I would spend my life looking for the other half. What happens if I don’t find it before I die? Then I would have lived as a failure. Now, he must be glad he finally gets to unearth the mystery. And not only that, he now has the complete pendant.

Hayley came out of the bathroom with the robe wrapped around her, and it was my turn to have a bath. It was nice to

finally wash off the dirt and smell from spending days in the woods and from the injury and blood too.

I touched my side, which now had a little scar, and smiled at it. It was the second scar on my body. The first, I got fighting men that the Tarloux family sent after me. Men that were after the pendant. After my bath, I put on the bathrobe available and walked into the bedroom. Hayley was on the bed, looking at a picture she picked off the dresser. It was one of Bonne and me. We were much younger in there, and his father was still alive.

“You’ve changed a lot,” Hayley said as I sat on the bed beside her.

“We were so young back then. I had just left my mother then. She basically threw me out. She wanted me to go out there and discover myself. I found Bonne and his father. We spent so much time in the woods, looking for herbs and dead animals. That was how I got so good at climbing trees.”

“He’s your oldest friend, then?”

“Bonne? Yes. I trust the man with my life.”

“You think he feels slighted that you didn’t put much consideration into coming here?”

I took the frame from her and returned it to the table, then held her hand. “Are you still worried about that?”

“Just a bit. I’ve learned not to stay somewhere I am not welcome. It keeps me out of trouble.”

“Well, I am welcome here. And anywhere I am welcomed, you are too. Bonne knows that, and he would dispute your welcome here.”

She sighed. “If you say so.”

“Yes, I say so,” I said and pulled her closer to me, lifting her chin up slightly with my thumb and opening her lips slightly. I leaned in and kissed her. She inched closer to me, and my hands moved from her cheeks, following down the side of her face until they got to her shoulders. She shivered under my touch and bit gently on my lips as my hand found her bare shoulder and pulled the robe down. It didn’t give way

immediately, so I pulled her closer to me, my lips traveling down her neck as I pulled the string holding the robe together. It spilled open, and she was naked underneath.

The view of her sitting there on my lap made me pause. She was gorgeous. Her hair was slick and wet, but it still flowed gently to her shoulders. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth opened in a little moan that urged me on. I laid her back on the bed, and she opened her eyes to look at me. The hunger and need in them couldn't have been more obvious, but I wanted to look at her. I wanted to drink her all in. I helped her out of the robe until she was totally naked before me. She wanted to shy away, covering up herself with her hand.

"Don't do that," I told her.

"I'm shy," she said and struggled to keep her hand from her body.

"Don't be," I said as I moved in closer to her and kissed her on the forehead and then on her lips. I felt her relax a bit. "You're lovely, and I want to look at you."

She shifted her face away from me, blushing, but I pulled it back to me and kissed her again. The yearning had increased twofold since the last time she kissed her, and there was an urgency in the way she wrapped her hands around my head and pulled me further down as though she couldn't get enough of me.

I didn't want to rush. I wanted to savor this. If Bonne finds the clue about the pendant, we will have to leave again and then be on the run. Who knows when next we will have the chance to do this. I wanted to touch every part of her body and memorize them so I could think of them when I closed my eyes. No, we weren't going to rush this. We would enjoy every moment of it and let the pleasure build up in her.

I pulled myself away from her for a moment, and she looked at me, disappointed. Her breath was getting raspy, and she didn't want to stop kissing. I chuckled and pecked her on the cheeks before getting out of bed and then out of my clothes. I was naked with her now as I returned to the bed, this time kissing her just slightly on the lips before starting downwards, down

to the pit in her neck, on which I placed a small kiss, and she squirmed a bit. Seeing she liked that, I kissed it again, and a tiny moan, barely audible but sounding rather ragged, escaped her. I kissed away from the neck and watched as goosebumps rose on her skin and her shaking steadily grew.

From the neck, I moved to the bridge between her breasts and lifted the left one in my hand. I squeezed it a bit, and she squirmed again. I shifted my focus from the bridge to the areolas and then wrapped my tongue around the nipples. She groaned, and I swear I heard a bit of a growl, but soon it all settled into moans. I ran my tongue around the left nipple, taking tiny love bites, and watched her throw her head back as the pleasure hit her. She had her hand stuck in her hair and kept combing through it, using it to urge me on. I didn't need any assistance because I was committed to this already.

I directed attention to the right breast and got the same reaction from her, but this time I didn't abandon the other. I played with it with my hand as my tongue snaked around the right one. Soon, I moved away from that, her body an ocean I wanted to explore, I wanted to swim in with my tongue. I let my tongue follow down her body, placing tiny kisses along the way. She kept squirming on the bed, moaning louder now and wanted to move away. I pinned her down.

"Don't move," I told her.

"What if we wake them?" she asked.

"They won't mind. Don't move," I said and glared at her, telling her I meant it. She stayed put on the bed, closed her eyes, and bit down on her lips to stop her from moaning, but it did little because I came up and kissed her, freeing the lips, then winking at her before returning to her stomach. From there, I kissed down to her thighs, and she opened herself for me. I kissed down her thigh, mapping it out for my memory as my finger trailed along my tongue. I did the same for the other thigh and then settled at the top of her mound, kissing it slightly, and she clamped her thighs together, imprisoning my head between them. I slowly inched them apart as I ran my tongue over her wetness and felt the warmth emanating out of her. I wanted to do that and look at her simultaneously, but it

wasn't possible, so I kept running my tongue over her and pictured her inside my mind. Her face was washed with bliss, and her lips were rounded in an open moaning. It was all I wanted.

I put my hand on her mound and flickered around it with my thumb too. Her legs shook a bit as that happened, and soon she pushed me off. She reached out to me and kissed me long and hard, the hunger effusing out of her body. She wanted more, and she wanted it now.

She reached down to handle my hard member, but I pushed her hand away. I laid her back down on her back and lifted her legs up to allow me an easy slide into her while still kissing her and caressing her breast. She held on tightly to me when I slid in for a moment; neither of us moved. We just remained still and enjoyed the moment. I was entranced by the silkiness and warmth of it, and it felt like home there. We weren't just making love now. We were making something greater. It was hard to put words to it, but it felt so exhilarating that I felt I had transcended beyond being a mere werewolf.

After a while, we both started to move, and soon we found a steady rhythm. I flexed in and out of her while she gyrated into me and then out. One of the good things about being a werewolf was the flexibility and endurance. We didn't get tired; we didn't feel pain in our joints. All that mattered at that moment was the two of us and the pleasure slowly building in our bodies. It had started small, but now it was growing, filling us up as our moans took up a new tempo and her rhythm fitted right into it.

I held Hayley tight as the moment moved in. It built up in both of us, pushing us steadily to the end, and then she moaned out loud, suddenly not caring if Bonne heard us. She kept at it for a while before she calmed down, and then I felt my body go taut as a new sensation filled me up. It was different from everything I'd ever felt before. Blissful wasn't the right word to describe it. It was beyond just heavenly. It was perfect.

Chapter Eighteen (Hayley)

I woke up later than the rest of them, and when I stepped out of the room, there was a young boy looking at me. He had a striking resemblance to Bonne and was dressed in a robe just like mine, only it had some animation graphics on it. I could see from the look in his eyes the thinness of his body that he was Bonne's kid. The sick one, whom they were all waiting for to ascend. I have heard of the emergence of ascension causing kids to be sick; this was the first time I witnessed such. His thinness made me remember Ilad. Ilad was sick during his ascension, although he told me he had been a sickly child since birth. I smiled at him, and he waved at me.

"You're Luke's friend," he said, and I started down the hallway and into the living room.

"Yes, I am. And you are Jade."

"Cool. Yes, I am," he said and went into a coughing fit. I waited for him because it seemed like he still had something to say to me. "Come, mum has breakfast."

Smiling at him, I followed him to the dining room, where we had shown Bonne the pendant that he had joined to become a sort of medal last night. Luke was seated beside Bonne, who had a stack of books beside him and wasn't paying much attention to his food. Luke smiled at me, and I went beet red, images of us together last night flashing through my mind.

Nellie walked into the dining room from the kitchen had placed a big bowl of spaghetti on the table. There were other things on the table—a bowl filled with pieces of chicken and some other things. I smiled at that. That was a big breakfast—the werewolf way. I looked at the kid, who was watching his father and Luke with pride in his eyes.

"I hate when he becomes like that," Nellie said and sat down, taking a portion of the spaghetti before passing it to me. "He doesn't care where he is. He keeps his head buried in the book."

Bonne looked up for a while and smiled at Nellie, then smiled at me. “I didn’t hear you come in, Hayley.”

I knew that was a lie. He might not like to explore his werewolf side, but he couldn’t turn it off. He heard me quite alright, but was too absolved in his book to acknowledge.

“That’s fine,” I told him.

“I trust you had a good night?” he asked. He has a way of saying one thing and meaning two things at the same time. It was in the way he looked right at you.

“Yes, I did.”

“Of course,” he smiled and received the bowl from Luke, scooping out a small portion of food for himself.

The rest of breakfast was rather uneventful, and when we were done, Nellie made Jade help her clean up and left us to work. We got to work on the medal immediately, and Bonne put two books on the table, eyeing them interestingly. Those two seemed to have made the cut from the numerous ones on the floor.

“If we are going to find anything about the pendant, it will be in one of these two,” he said, smacking his hand on the biggest of the two books, a smile spreading across his face like that of a kid with a new set of Lego about to build.

He was loving this. Every moment of this, and it felt like the man that was a bit hostile to me last night, didn’t exist anymore. He was an interesting character.

“So, I got up early to start some work on it. Medals and medallions aren’t a big part of werewolf lore. In fact, for people who are better in tune with the earth, werewolves aren’t as romantic as you would expect them to be. They prefer practical things, which makes them boring, but I think I can understand it. If you get hit with so much sensory information as they do, you’ll try as much as possible to do away with things that might be emotive. So, if they wanted any message passed across, they were most likely to do it by word of mouth, with stories, and the ones that get a bit imaginative

amongst them will write stories or books about it. Those are the only existing lore we have of werewolves.”

“You talk like you’re not one,” I said, watching him. I wanted to see how he was going to respond to that.

“I try not to be one,” he said rather dismissively, and I didn’t push it further. He wasn’t going to talk about it, and I didn’t want to dampen his interest in the medallion, as he calls it. I looked away from him and at Luke, who smiled at me, then at the two pendants that had now been joined together and were on the table.

“Okay, let’s go on,” Bonne said when he saw I wasn’t going to pursue that. “I have gone through the books for mentions of medallions and similar things. I got caught up in a big derail, I would confess, but I’m back now, and I have narrowed it down to these two. We read through them, and we might just come up with what the pendants are supposed to mean.”

“There’s three of us and two of those,” I said, pointing at the book.

“Ahead of you at that,” Bonne said and placed four spiral-bound copies of the books in front of us. He had made copies of that while we slept. “Now burn through those.”

I picked up my copy and started reading right there in the dining room. It was asking a lot. I have never been attracted to books. I learned to read at a very early age and got good at it, but it was just one of those things you pick up. On the streets, there was no time to read. Just time to hustle for the next meal and to make sure there aren’t people hunting for you. Even after I got in with James, I didn’t do any reading. We were always training, so now it was a hard job to keep my eyes glued to these pages. Soon, the words all started to swim before me, making my eyes water, and I dropped the first one I picked, just ten pages in. It made a big thud on the floor and caught everyone’s attention.

“Not a book person, I take it?” Bonne asked.

“Their spines are good weapons,” I said. “They break bones easily.”

He chuckled a bit at that, and Jade, who was now back in the room, laughed out loud. I didn't notice he was back. I looked around the room, and my eyes settled on Luke. He looked very comfortable here, with these people. I have never been comfortable with people. And it wasn't even an issue with him. I wanted to be with him, be around him, hell, even be inside him. I didn't struggle to be comfortable with him, but with these people, that wasn't coming as easily as I wished it would.

I relaxed, though, even though what I wanted the most now was to be back in the room—the small thing it was—and just stare into the ceiling. That was very comforting for me.

“You don't have to read it,” Luke said.

“Oh, I have to help and do my part.”

“You can come with us,” Nellie said, and I looked up at her. She was preparing to go for a walk with her son. “Come with us. Let's show you the woods.”

“Is it safe?” I asked. “Won't people see me out there?”

“I don't think anyone would. It's just behind our home. The neighbors aren't nosy, don't worry.”

“I want to show you my trap,” the kid said. “I made it all from scratch.”

“Yeah,” Bonne said. “You should go see his trap. Luke and I got it covered. Besides, we have some rather ugly things to discuss. Not good for ladies' ears or kids' either.”

“I see,” I said and stood up, following Nellie and Jade outside.

We went out through the back door, which opened to a small yard, and beyond that, a fence opened to the woods. I followed them out there. It was a cold morning, but not so chilly there was a need for a sweater. Only Jade was bundled up in extra clothes.

“I heard about what you did,” Nellie said to me after we passed the fence and were in the woods, following down a well-trodden path. I could see it wasn't just humans that walked past this place. No wonder the kid has a trap set.

I didn't know what to say about Nellie's statement, so I walked on.

"Luke told us all about it this morning. Bonne made him do it, and I don't think I would have done the same if I were in your shoes," she said and stopped walking, turning around to regard me.

"Bonne likes to talk about werewolves a lot for someone who doesn't want to be one, and I know how hard it is to go up against your alpha. It is a fight against your natural instinct. That takes guts, and you did it for the right reason too. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that, and definitely not worthy of persecution. In my books, you're a hero because it could have been my kid those bastards took next."

Nellie smiled at me and then started towards the kid. "Are you coming or not?" she yelled at me after a while, and then I found that I had stopped walking.

No one had called me that before or even acknowledged me as she did. I had been on the run for killing a man that sold kids, and for the first time since that happened, I felt justified.

We went back to the house after seeing the trap. It was well set but yet to catch game. Luke and Bonne were still going through the books and had not found anything. They had both moved from the dining table and were drinking cups of coffee on the floor in the living room. They had left the pendant, which had now been joined to form a medallion in the dining room. I picked it up and looked at it. That was the first time I looked at it in the form of the medallion. I ran my hand over the smoother half of the medallion, and it wasn't really smooth. I felt something grind against my hand, and it was almost unnoticeable.

I turned it over in my hand and felt it again. It was the same thing. The rougher part of the medallion was simply parts of nudges made into the medallion, not the crevices and outcropping on the moon, as Luke and I had assumed.

I glowed my eyes to see the medallion better, and the nudges all linked up to form a pattern. It was even a smaller moon, with something that looked like a cross between an eagle and a

wolf jumping out of the woman. Whoever did this was a werewolf and made it visible only to werewolf eyes. What was Bonne saying about werewolves not being romantic enough?

“There’s something on this medallion,” I told them and walked to the living room. “You have to glow your eyes to see it.”

Luke was the first to collect it from me. He turned it over in his hand and checked it out with his eyes glowed. He saw what I saw too.

“It’s a symbol,” he said.

“What does it look like?” Bonne asked.

“See it for yourself,” Luke said and threw the medallion at Bonne, who didn’t look very comfortable. “Just glow your eyes this once, Bonne. It is not going to kill you.”

Bonne grunted and did. His eyes went wide when he saw the pattern on the medallion. He turned it over and almost keeled over in surprise. “Oh my god, oh my god,” he said and stood up suddenly, walking to the stack of books in the dining room. He searched erratically until he saw what he was searching for. He placed it on the floor and opened it. On the front page was the symbol I saw on the medallion. A smaller moon and a weird creature jumping out of it.

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“It’s the moon stone,” Bonne said.

I knew what the moon stone was—a myth. A myth people have been pandering about for ages now. It isn’t real and will never be. No one has ever seen it.

“The moon stone is a myth,” I said.

“But, is it?” he asked. “There are first-person accounts of people that saw it. Those accounts survived.”

“A stone to give werewolves more power? I don’t believe it.”

“How did you get the pendant, Hayley?” Bonne asked.

“My mother gave it to me,” I said.

“Did anyone ever come searching for it when you were younger?”

I nodded my head in response. They killed my father and mother when they came in search of it. I barely escaped death myself. I could still remember the night and hearing my mother thud against the floor. She had died protecting the pendant. Protecting the knowledge of the moon stone. Why would my mother do that?

“What was your mother’s maiden name?” Bonne asked. “Was it Heline?”

I looked up at him, surprised that he knew that information and that he even asked at all. No one asks about my mother. But here was Bonne acting like she was special.

“I should have known,” he said, looking for a book again and kept all of us looking at him, a thousand questions burning through our minds. “How could I not have seen that? It was so obvious. Too obvious for me to have missed it.”

He was almost castigating himself.

“What did you miss, Bonne?” Luke asked him.

“Your mother was a Peline, Luke. I knew that the day you told me about your mum and how she liked to talk about her family that grew up in the mountains.”

“She kept saying they were royalty.”

“Yes, and she wasn’t lying. These days, no one recognizes royalty in werewolves because it has all been watered down, and the Tarloux created a sense that royalty cannot be inherited. Power is grabbed and stolen. But that is a lie, an illusion we’ve let ourselves believe for too long, and now, it plays as the truth. The old royal lines were the most powerful werewolves to have ever existed. Their power gave them authority and responsibility, and they took the two rather seriously.”

Bonne rolled the medallion in his hands, and his eyes had a glint in them, suggesting he was enjoying this moment.

“But the werewolf clan started to grow, and people started to question why there were only two lines of royalty. The Heline and the Peline. The Tarloux led that inquiry, and soon, they gathered enough people and sought the extinction of the royalty. There were powerful, but the Tarloux had the numbers. They defeated them and killed everyone in the line.”

He scoffed and tapped the medallion on the table.

“Some other people picked up the name Peline and Heline to assume royalty themselves, so the name never died down. The Peline were mountainous royalty, while the Heline controlled the fields. It was said that two families controlled the moon stone, but the Tarloux never found it, so they spread the story that it was just a myth, but they never stopped searching for it. I think the two families made these pendants to safe keep the moon stone for a time when someone from each family would finally be able to search for it.”

“How do we look for something that’s a myth?” Luke asked.

Bonne turned to the other side of the medallion, still looking at it with his glowing eyes. He was showing us something. I walked to see what it was. I didn’t notice the markings on the other end earlier. They were even finer than that of the symbol.

“It’s a code,” Bonne said. “A code to a map, and I know just how to decrypt it.”

Chapter nineteen (Hayley)

When it got dark, we made our way out of the house. Nellie had made some food for us and promised that it would last at least a week before it started to go bad, but then even if it started to go bad, we could warm it up, and then it would be consumable again. Bonne had restocked our supply of the vial and had tried to push some other reddish thing on Luke, who rejected it and said his answer remained the same. We thanked them, and before we could leave, she hugged me tightly.

“It was good to meet you,” she said, and I smiled back at her. I still wasn’t so comfortable touching her, but I didn’t squirm under her touch. When all this is over, and if I come out of it alive, I’ll be back here.

“Are you going to be here for my ascension, Uncle Luke?” Jade asked, and Luke smiled at him.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he told him.

We both know he said that just to placate him, and heavens know what awaits us where we were going. Nellie took the child, and they walked into the house, leaving the two of us and Bonne, who handed the map to us. Luke collected it and looked it over. It was well-detailed and perfectly drawn out, starting right from the front door where we were all standing at the moment.

Bonne has spent the last couple of hours working on the map. Just as he promised, he decoded the marking on the other side of the medallion rather easily and got to work drawing us the map. The place we were going had no name, but it was somewhere deep in the woods, and by Bonne’s estimation, we would travel for about three days before we arrived. It would be a tumultuous journey, not just because we would still have hunters on our tail but because the road was dangerous. We would pass through mountains, valleys, and swamps. We were looking for a long-lost tribe that he said people assumed was wiped out after the royal house fell. I was still coming to terms with the fact that I was royalty. I didn’t feel like one. I had

lived life as something less than a peasant. My parents never talked much about where they came from, and my mother rarely mentioned her maiden name. She only made sure I knew it, and she kept to my father's. It probably was safer for her to use it.

"I really hope I got the map right," Bonne said, looking at us. He seemed more anxious than us, but I knew that was because he wished he could come with us. He wanted to see the tribe and see how they lived. But to do that would mean leaving his family behind, and he couldn't do that. Not when his kid's ascension was getting close. Also, if he came with us and had to travel and evade hunters, he would have to use his werewolf abilities. He didn't want to do that.

"I am sure the map is just fine, Bonne," Luke told him, and we said our goodbyes and headed out.

It wasn't as cold as yesterday when we arrived, but the night was quieter in a way, and distant voices carried to me. This wasn't just due to my enhanced hearing. There was something else going on. Luke and I exchanged a look, and we both had the intuition, but we didn't stop walking. We didn't even talk. We just pushed on, putting as much distance between us and Bonne's home.

"Will they be fine?" I asked Luke as I looked back once more, the house now so tiny in the distance.

"Yes," Luke said, but I could tell he wasn't so sure.

Have we put that poor family in danger?

"Bonne knows how to take care of himself," he added. We came to the end of the road and were now out of the street. We walked to the west, just as the map suggested. We were going to pass through different woods than we did before. We continued west.

I kept on taking sniffs of the air, expecting an attack soon. It was inevitable. The people had been sent away for that reason, and I knew it wouldn't be like back in the woods, where they were coming at us one after the other. We'll get a bombardment here. I stood close to Luke, drawing strength

from him. I felt like with him around, I could fight better. The stakes were definitely better.

We took just about ten steps further before the air was polluted by the smell of a werewolf. I knew it was Viper immediately. Luke and I stopped walking and turned around to see him shrouded in the dark. He wasn't alone. I could sense others with him but couldn't tell their number. I was surprised to see it was just werewolves and no human hunters.

"I heard you two were back in town and working together. I came to take a look," he said and stepped out of the dark, a little grin on his face.

I could see him better now, and he looked different. Not the unsure boy I used to beat whenever James had us fight each other. He looked confident, cold, and in charge. He looked like an Alpha. The role fit him perfectly.

He stepped closer to us until he was just a couple of feet from me.

"Well, hello, Hayley. Long time no see."

"Still need a posse to go to a fight, Viper?" I asked him.

"I'm an alpha now. I need a posse for everything," he said and looked at Luke. "You know, I had great plans for you and your friends at the reservation. Now, all of you would have to die."

He moved his hand up and signaled to the people behind them. They all started to troop out of the darkness, and I could barely believe the sheer number of them. They have to be around twenty of them. I looked around and saw some of the pack members. The people that Viper trusted. He seemed to have added to his posse.

"Do you want to go down this route, or do you wish to surrender?" he asked.

We can't take them all. Not the two of us. I knew that. Luke did, and Viper did too. I guessed that was why he came with the large number and why he waited until we left Bonne's and were in the street where we would have nowhere to run or hide. He'd always been the cunning one.

I took a step towards him until I was standing right in his face. The fear that used to be in there was gone now. He was very self-assured for a moment that stumped me, but I shook it off. It was just Viper before me. No one special. Then I slapped him.

Then, he got his answer.

Before he could react to the slap, the crowd behind him charged forward. Then he moved and tried to fight me, but he was still slower than me. I evaded his attack and punched him in the chest. I went for him again, but someone got in my way and kicked me off. I didn't care who it was. I turned around, grabbed them by the neck, and snapped it. The man dropped to the floor, dead. As he fell, another wolf attacked me from behind. I ducked just in time to miss the attack, but before I could respond, someone else punched me in the throat, and I fell to the ground. I watched as people reached down to pummel me. I growled and pushed myself up, flying into the air and lifting one of them with me. I extended a claw, and stuck it into the person's neck just as I dropped to the floor.

We couldn't keep this up. There were too many of them. I moved away from them and stood beside Luke, who had his claws extended and his eyes glowing as they circled us. We turned around and watched them. They won't come at us one at a time. They will come at us as a group and weigh us down. Luke has killed just two of them too, and there were more. They started towards us, inching in and looking to choke us. Luke and I stood side by side, and I wondered how many of them we could take down before they got us. I was worried but didn't panic. I looked beyond them and at Viper, who had moved to the back to keep himself safe. If I died out here, I would take Viper down with me. I know the council and the Tarloux family will replace him with someone else, someone they can control, but I would have rid the world of one more evil person.

As they made their way closer to me, I looked for a path toward Viper.

But then, a howl from a close distance distracted them. They all turned around to see what it was as three werewolves

jumped over them and landed beside Luke and me. I looked up again as another set of three landed, but they spread themselves around the werewolves. Now, Viper's werewolves were caged between us.

It was Luke's lone wolf friends.

"Were you just going to leave town without saying hi to us?" one of them said.

Viper's men didn't look so confident now. Two of us, they could deal with. But eight cuts down the advantage they had over us before.

"Bonne sent a message," another said. "He said you might be in trouble. Pack trouble, I see."

He looked at me and acknowledged me with a nod.

"He says you two are a special package," the last one said.

"We have to get out of here," Luke said. "Can you hold them off?"

"Of course," the first replied, and I watched as three of them formed a circle around Luke and me, and together we started towards the group. This time they were the ones that stepped back.

One of Luke's werewolves moved forward, attacking the person closest to him. It was a swift move. One moment, his claws were retracted, the next, they were stuck into some poor bloke's throat, and he was dead, creating a space for us to go through.

I could see that these people were well trained and they knew how to work well with each other. They got Luke and me out of the crowd while still keeping them contained. I could see Viper on the other side, looking at the people he came with get decimated and me and Luke escaping. There was close to nothing he could do about it.

We were soon left on our own and ran the rest of the way into the woods, where the real journey and the real hunting would continue. Just a day away from it, and I seemed to have missed the woods.

Chapter Twenty (Hayley)

“Come on,” Luke said, stretching his hands to me as he pulled me up the tree. I could hear them closing in. There were about three of them, ever relentless never stopping. We’ve been in the woods for about an hour now and haven’t stopped running. We had put some distance between us and the werewolves behind us, and Viper had left the hunting to them. That had gone worse than he thought it would. I wondered what would happen to Luke’s friends. We had put two different sets of people in danger. Bonne’s family and his friends.

My mind briefly snapped to Kris, and I wondered how he was doing. He had insisted on me staying back, but I pushed against that. I would have put him in danger if I had stayed, but I didn’t and then turned around and put two other sets of people in danger.

I grabbed onto the tree and Luke’s hand as he pulled me up, and I balanced on the thin branch. I had a good vantage point from up here, and the leaves were covering us, our scents masked. I looked down as the wolves gathered around the tree, wondering where we went. They were all hunters and not coordinated. That means they still hadn’t learned to work together. I wonder how long that will last. I held on to Luke as they circled the tree for a while, confused as to what had happened. They had heard us come to this area and then disappear.

Would any of them figure out what had happened? The three of them were sniffing the air hard, trying to get a sense of us. If they were half the werewolf I am, they would get a scent. Even with the mask on, I can still smell Luke, but I think that has more to do with the connection between the two of us.

They all looked confused. Moving away and back to the tree. Their senses were messing with them. It was fun to watch for a while until one of them looked up, and his eyes lit up in joy. He’d found us.

“Fuck,” Luke said and jumped down. There was no point staying up there anymore. We couldn’t remain in the tree forever and needed to push forward. We might as well just get on with it. I watched as Luke jumped down, grabbing one of the werewolves and hitting him against the tree, causing the leaves on the tree to shake. The hit was heavy, and I heard a couple of bones crack. I jumped down next, landing right in front of the second, who swung at me immediately, but I moved out of the way before he could make an impact. He was a fast one. Jumping at me again, and I had to move back to keep some distance between us. But he was relentless. He jumped right back at me, his claws at the ready, his eyes glowing in the dark, and his sly smile spread across his lips. He was enjoying this, and he was powerful too. It looked like he was just as fast as me. I wondered if he was strong as well.

I looked behind me to find Luke fighting two of the hunters. He wasn’t having a good time with them either. The one he smacked against the tree, who seemed to have broken some bones, wasn’t even acting like he was hurt. He looked just as agile and eager.

There was something different about these people.

I moved back again as my assailant forged forwards again, and I hadn’t even had the chance to get an attack in. I stumbled against a tree and backed up against it. I wanted to use it as a lever to push myself toward my attacker, but he saw what I wanted to do before I did and moved out of the way. He turned back, grabbing me midair and smacking right into the same tree. I felt pain spread from my back to my whole body, immobilizing me for a moment as it took control of every functioning organ in me. They all seemed to stop for a while and time stopped with them.

My assailant growled and jumped right at me again. He wasn’t even taking a moment to breathe. He was jumping right at me, and I was looking into his eyes. There was something about them, cold and inhumane, that sent shivers down my spine.

What was he?

These are the kind of people Viper sent after me? People bare of all emotions.

I moved out of the way just before he smacked himself right into me, and then I turned around to attack him, but he was up again already and moved away from me. That speed was unnatural. He has to be doing something else.

He settled on his heels, grinning at me. I expected him to talk, but he had no words for me, just more attacks. I heard Luke yell behind me. He was having it just as tough as I was, and he was facing two of them. My own assailant prepared himself and jumped at me. I was ready and rooted myself to the ground, using my left leg as an anchor. I caught him mid-air, and he was trying to squirm out of my grip, but I held on strong. He struggled and fought, but I was rooted to the ground and used a large extent of strength to hit him against the tree closest to me. I heard bones break as he smacked against the tree, and then I watched as he stood up, cracked his knuckles, and then nodded at me. It was like I never even threw him against the tree. It sent shivers down my spine.

That wasn't right. He didn't look like he could feel pain at all.

I walked away from him and got closer to Luke. We stood side by side as three of them rounded us. There was no defeating them if we fought separately.

"What are they?" I asked. "It's like they can't feel pain at all."

"They can't," Luke said. "Not until the drug in their system wears off. Then they would be useless. But they have enough to last hours. We can't last hours. We have to beat them."

"Drugs? What drugs?"

"Coke, meth, loads of stimulant. They use different things."

"Can we beat them?"

"We have to. We can't outrun them for long. Especially these ones. I should have known when they wouldn't walk away from the tree."

We had gotten away from Viper with the help of Bonne's friends, and he decided to send demons our way. He needed us

contained, and he was getting desperate. From werewolf hunters to human hunters and now, this.

The three wolves turned around, keeping their eyes on us; in such a focused glare, I looked away from them. It was like they could peel me open with that look. They might have their strength and speed enhanced by drugs, but they were werewolves, and all werewolves have beating hearts situated behind a fragile ribcage, which in turn is protected by a thin layer of skin. Nothing I can't get behind.

"Any ideas?" Luke asked.

"Their hearts aren't as strong," I said, and he nodded, understanding me.

We both attacked together, picking off one of them at a time, but they didn't give us that luxury. The three of them were more synchronous than we were, moving in and out as if they were one big blob of fluid. I had wanted us to dictate the attack, but that didn't look like it was going to happen. They attacked us right back, hitting me closer to Luke until we were standing back to back again and couldn't get a clean shot in.

I felt quite useless. I haven't felt that way in a very long time. A couple of days ago, when I fought Luke, he had overwhelmed me, but that felt different. When that happened, I knew he wasn't going to kill, and I was fighting more with my emotions and wasn't analytical. With these people, I have gotten as analytical as I can get, but there was no beating them. They were just three, but they fought like they were twenty.

"This isn't working," I told Luke, and he sighed.

We have one more option. Match them in strength and speed. Bonne's concoction couldn't do that. There was only one way. Changing into a full wolf.

It wasn't an option I readily welcomed because of what comes after, but if we don't do something, these people will wear us down and kill us.

"Is there no other option?" Luke asked, thinking along the same line I was. It was hard to get used to that. I could feel

him, and he could feel me too. We get a sense of each other's emotions and, in that manner, can determine thoughts. It was chilling to think that my thoughts were open to some, but with him, it felt comfortable. He wasn't going to hurt me with that because I knew he was trusting me not to hurt him with it too.

"None."

"We use the tree, then."

We needed a distraction from them to be able to turn.

I closed my eyes and growled at them. I called up some extra strength and attacked the ones closest to me. I was just a couple of feet from my nearest tree. I just needed to push them out of the way to give me enough leeway to jump on a tree and get to the top, all the while changing.

Which was what I did. I kicked at the one closest to my, putting as much aggression as I could into the kick, and he fell to the ground, but before he could recover, I jumped onto the next tree, growling at the way to the top and reaching into myself, pulling out the wolf inside of me. It was a hard process that required a lot of strength and focus, which was why we had to make it to the tree to be able to change. I got to the top of the tree as the rush filled me. I could feel it happening, and the world shifted.

I wasn't seeing the world as a werewolf anymore. I saw it as a wolf, and everything was clearer. I focused on the men on the ground, and a boost of confidence rushed through me. I howled at the moon, and Luke howled back at me. The men looked at each other, strikes of fear sipping into them. Our howling was loud, and every animal, werewolf included, knew to run. We were more monsters now. Monsters with just one skill. To kill.

Luke and I jumped at the men at the same time. We picked one of them each, and they tried to fight back, but we've matched up or even exceeded their strength. I grabbed on the first one, my jaws snapping at his neck. He moved back just in time and tried to punch me in the neck. I moved with such ease, my streamlined body aiding movement in the air, making it almost fluid. Halfway in the air, I saw another dashing at me. He

thought he was going to do a sneak-up on me, but I saw him and dropped down, using new momentum to push myself towards him. He saw his error too late and tried to rectify it, but there were no takebacks. I bit him on the neck with my heavy jaws and pulled at it, separating his head from his body.

I turned to the other, who looked at his comrade with his head severed and growled at it. The growl spoke of one thing, and he understood it clearly.

“You’re next.”

He braced himself and got ready to fight, but he was no match for me. I jumped at him, and he moved out of the way, looking to get a punch into me again, but he was too slow. I bit the arm he stretched to me and pulled at it until it broke away from the socket. He screamed out in pain and looked at his severed arm in shock. I leaped at him, not giving him a chance to come to terms with his lost arm. I took a big chunk out of his throat, and his scream was cut short, leaving him falling like a lump.

Two dead. I turned around and saw Luke standing in front of me, his fangs dripping blood like mine, and the third werewolf on the forest floor, his heart beside him. I guess the job was done.

We ran through the woods next, looking to cover as much distance as possible before the fatigue came, and then we’ll hide in the trees and rest there.

Chapter twenty-one (Viper)

I stood in front of the mirror in my room and watched my reflection. My eyes were glowing, and my fangs were extended. They were no different, and I felt no different, yet, everyone looked at me as though I was supposed to be. Suddenly I am supposed to be the alpha and have everything figured out. I am supposed to be in control, a specimen of order, and a symbol of authority. I am none of those things.

Then you'll pretend to be.

The tiny voice said inside my head. How much longer can I pretend? That can't last forever. They will find me out soon enough, and then I will be exposed for the fraud I am. I have been putting up a front for a while now, and there are cracks in the curtain now. Someone would soon punch deep into it and open me up, and the world would see what was behind my curtain. Just a child, shaking in boots that are too big for him to wear.

The boots have always been too big for me to wear, but it never stopped me from wearing them. I pulled my eyes from the mirror and looked away. I was made for this. I was made to rule and to become the alpha.

The knock on my door pulled me out of my thoughts, and I looked towards it, taking a sniff of the air to get a sense of who it was—a messenger.

“My lord, Alpha,” the voice said from behind the door. “They await you.”

“Good. I'll be with them shortly.”

This I learned from James. Learn to keep people—your subordinates—waiting. It creates an even deeper sense of control. They can't leave unless you deem it that way, and they will remain in whatever position you put them.

But there was serious business to discuss, and I would rather get it all over with. I walked out of my room and started

towards the court, my feet stamping into the ground and echoing. I used to run in the hallways as a child when James just took me in. I played around and scuffed my knees many times. I used to be the one everyone listened to. They played the games I wanted, had the lunch I felt like having, and beat up the people I didn't like. No one dared to stand up to me because I was strong, Stronger than all of them, and I knew power early, how to wield it and make people shiver before you, to be callous and buy fear.

I was enjoying it all until she showed up, and I no longer was the venomous viper. I was now just Viper. I pushed open the door to the court, and everyone turned around to look at me. They had been talking amongst each other, I heard them from down the hall, but when I stepped in, they stopped. I continued down the big hall and to my seat. I nodded them all and took my seat, taking a quick look around.

There was Lenny sitting and looking very sickly, almost opposite me. He was the commissioner of the police and also the only human here. We've ensured he maintained that position for a long time, as it would be hard to find another human to groom and keep under control. Besides, Lenny was a covetous man, and his selfishness would make him fight tooth and nail to keep that position. Whoever dared to go up against him would be going up against a formidable enemy, one that would fight dirty so, in the twenty years that Lenny had been the commissioner, he had gone into every election uncontested. Sometimes, he gets an opponent, but they always, unfortunately, pull out at the last minute.

Beside Lenny was Pique. He was the Tarloux's family representative here, and he moved like he was untouchable. That will not hold true forever. He thinks he can talk rashly at anyone because he wears that crest on his arms. I sighed and got control of my anger as just looking at him was triggering anger in me.

There was Klint. He was part of James's council, and I needed someone that knew how things worked. I don't trust him, but he owes his allegiance to James. I have no idea what James did for him, but Klint was loyal, and even in death, he would keep

serving James, and in that manner, he would keep serving the people.

But that was the problem. I was the alpha now, and I needed people that would serve me.

None of the people in this council served me. None of them respected me. Not even Lenny. Lenny feared me. He knew what kind of rascal I could be because he'd had to deal with me on the streets, but that wasn't what I was going for now.

"What news is there?" I asked, getting the meeting started.

"Nothing new," Lenny said. "We still have hunters on their tails. We've incurred ten more deaths with the hunters; more of them are pulling out than are volunteering. We have only six hunters out in the field now, and my estimate is that two will pull out of the six, and the remaining four will meet their death."

"We can't rely on our own kind," Pique said and scoffed. He sounded like he wanted to go into the woods and fish out Hayley and Luke himself, and I was tempted to make him go so he would never return and I could have the family send someone else. Someone more affable this time.

"When it was just her, she was formidable," Klint added. "But the two of them are proving to be an unstoppable force."

It was crazy that we'd been on Hayley for two weeks now, and yet we'd been unable to get her. When I sent the hunters out for her earlier, I thought it would be an easy win. I knew she was powerful, but I couldn't have imagined she was more powerful than all those hunters. Then she teamed up with the lone wolves—I should have seen that one coming.

"But they are still just two werewolves. How hard can it be to kill two werewolves?" Pique asked. The derogatory tone in his voice was grating on my nerves.

"Counting by the number they have killed, I'll say twenty werewolves and five human hunters," Klint said, catching my eyes. He had suggested something to me earlier in the day, which I thought was a terrible idea. They will come in and

undermine my authority. But wouldn't it be better to do that and rein in this catastrophe before it gets any bigger?

Hayley and Luke were deep in the woods, and I wouldn't worry about them taking over the community until they were close to us again. Besides, it didn't seem like the two of them were looking for power and position. They were in it for something else.

I looked away from Klint and at Lenny.

"What do the scouts report?" I asked him.

"They are headed to a destination," Lenny said. "Nothing that could be pinpointed yet, but it seems they are following a map, but they keep going deeper into the woods, and there is nothing out there. They aren't even making a detour to the road at all."

"Keeping to the woods," I said, thinking out loud. They aren't running from us anymore, and we've become mere disturbances to a goal they were looking to achieve. Things are worse than I imagined they would be. "What could be in the woods?"

"Lost tribes?" Klint said, and Pique scoffed. I had to agree with Pique on that. Lost tribes are called lost for a reason, and things that are lost don't take long to die out. No one has heard from a lost tribe in centuries. Whatever was left of them after the war was long gone.

"No, it can't be that. It has to be something more practical. Hayley isn't the kind of person to go chasing after myths."

She also wasn't the kind of person to kill. Yet, she had killed a lot in the past two weeks, and she kicked it off with James. I had figured out what had happened between her and James. It had to do with our other business here. She found out about it and confronted him. But how could she have easily killed him? Hayley was strong, but I could never have imagined she was as strong as James.

"Well, they are headed somewhere, and we need to find out where," Klint said.

“What about the friend?” Pique suggested. “The one that hid them when they came back to Nillport. He might have some information.”

“Bonne?” Viper said. “We’ll sooner get something out of baboon’s ass than get Bonne to speak.”

Pique looked at me, confused.

“Bonne doesn’t like werewolves, and he is a sort of mad scientist. We won’t be able to get close to him.”

“Isn’t he a werewolf?” Pique asked.

“Yes, but he’s eccentric. Just crazy.”

“Well, there must be a way we can get to him. If he’s untouchable, then there must be something he owns, loves that isn’t so untouchable.”

“He has a wife,” Lenny said. “A human wife and a sickly child. He’s close to ascension, and it’s a very touchy period in the home.”

“Well, there you have it,” Pique said and stood up. “Things get ugly. People start to talk. That is how to rule.”

“Sit!” I told him, putting as much gusto as I could into my voice. “We are not done. There is still the other issue to discuss.”

Pique held on to the table for a while and glared at me daringly. He looked like he was going to defy me and then head out of the room. Oh, I wanted him to. I wanted him to give me a reason to kill him. But then he just shook his head and sat down.

“Of course, we have to talk about that. But what is there to discuss? The shipment will be delivered as promised. Won’t it?” he asked.

“We might have a little trouble regarding that,” Lenny said and sighed. He looked around at them, scared to talk. It was brave to be the only human among three very powerful werewolves, but it was also stupid. Lenny had always been safe when it was James in charge. James had strict rules and enforced them, and no one dared to cross him. But I was new to this, and people

have been trying to cross me since my first minute in charge. I could see Lenny was worried about the possibility that I had pent-up anger, and he didn't want me to take it out on him.

“Go on, Lenny. What is the problem?”

“We can't move on with the shipment,” he said, and Pique's head snapped around, a little growl coming out of him. Lenny swallowed and looked at me. I nodded at him. Pique wouldn't dare. He is here to represent Tarloux's interest, and the family needed that shipment. Without Lenny, there is no shipment. When James fashioned it all out, he did it such that the least powerful of the council members held the greatest power. We needed Lenny alive for smooth operation.

“Why not?” I asked him.

“With James's death, there's been some rumors flying about and uncertainty within my men. They don't want to be caught with a truckload full of kids that have been reported missing in the past year.”

“You're the police,” Pique said. “Who's going to catch you?”

“Federal agents,” Lenny said.

“Are they around?” I asked.

“No, but there's been talk, and these people run a deep underground system. They might be here already, and we don't know. Going on with the shipment is a risk. We need to let things cool down for a while. Maybe wait until Hayley and the lone wolf have been captured, and people aren't talking much about it anymore.”

“There is no time to wait,” Pique said and turned to Lenny, his eyes glowing and his claws extracting gently. “We had a deal with James. He promised us that merchandise, and we have made plans for its use. Plans that are time-sensitive. The family has been considerate regarding James's death, and they think enough time has passed. It is time to resume the deal.”

He looked away from Lenny then and at me. “You're the new alpha. James kept the Tarloux family from this place by making that deal with them. You are not going to rescind the deal now because if you do, you will have a large number of

Tarloux soldiers on your doorsteps, and when they do, they wouldn't just be here to collect what they are owed. They will be here to make a statement that you do not own the family and default on your debts.”

Klint looked at me again, but I closed my eyes. I wasn't going to do that. There will be no difference between refusing the family their debt and that. I would be destroying all that James had worked for. The efforts he had put into keeping this place safe. I couldn't do that, which brought me back to the only other option available.

I focused my attention on Lenny.

“The shipment will go on just as planned, Lenny,” I told him, and he moved to object, but I moved my hands up to stop him. “Do not argue with me. There are a thousand other Lennys out there, and I can go pick another. The shipment moves on and if your men are too scared to do it, tell them they can find a new home with their family. The deal goes through. Nothing changes.”

Chapter twenty-two (Hayley)

We've been at this for over a week, and we were slowly approaching the end. Bonne had made a very detailed map for us, and we had no trouble finding the tribe. The trouble we had came from hunters still looking to take us down. It was easy dealing with them, but they were relentless. Even now, I can still sense them behind us. We had put so much distance between us, but they were beginning to catch up.

Besides the hunters and the not-so-friendly vegetation this deep into the woods, it has been splendid. I was spending time with Luke, and I'll take a thousand adversaries just to be with him.

"We are getting close to them," Luke said as we cut through some more vines. This thick into the woods, there were fewer trees and more vines wrapped around each so tightly it was hard to go through them. Movement was one step per minute, and it made sense that the tribe had hidden itself this deep. No one would stumble across them by mistake, and even for those, like us, who were seeking them out, it would be hard to get them, and they would have measures in place to stop people.

I sniffed the air, and Luke was right. I could smell werewolves. But they were different. They weren't like the ones that had been on our heels since we left Nillport. These had a more distinct smell. They smelled like the earth itself.

I shrugged through a web of vines and came to the other side of what had wrapped itself like a gate. There was a long row of the normal forest before us again, and beyond that, we could see another layer of vines. The map says we have arrived, but there was nothing here. Except, of course, the smell of werewolves, but we couldn't see them.

Luke and I pushed on, seeing no other thing to do. We would cross the other thicket of vines and see what lays behind it. I didn't know what to expect. A village of some sort? People living in trees, like cavemen, or maybe even something cruder.

All I knew about the lost tribe was what I heard from people and the stories James used to tell us. But he had always insisted they were gone, and news we get now and then of lost tribes out there was all speculative. No one had ever seen them in centuries. But here we were, going after one of the lost tribes. People that were supposed to have information about the moon stone. The moon stone that was a heritage of my mother's family and Luke's, apparently.

A gentle crack of a twig filled the air, and I stopped. Luke stopped in front of me too. The sound would have gone past us had we not been werewolves, but we picked it up and stopped to see who might have caused it. For a while, no one came forth, and then the leaves moved and slowly, camouflaged against the woods and the leaves, people started to step out. They surrounded us.

How did we pass them without knowing they were behind us? I took a sniff of the air again, and now that they were so close to us, they smelled the same way, like they were still distant, and it was that smell of the earth after a short rain. I watched them as they circled around us, and caged us in. There was no escaping, and I wondered how good they were at fighting.

I had assumed they wouldn't be hospitable, so I was ready for a fight if they brought one. I stood with my legs apart and eyed them one after the other. They were of different ages and sex. The youngest of them was about ten, and I could see he was yet to ascend. He still smelled like a child, and he had a sorry look on his face. He must have been the one that stepped on the twig that made that noise, and he was the only one with a discernible heartbeat, and even at that, it was barely audible, and I had to focus to hear it. The others could as well just be dead people. It didn't seem like they were breathing at all. They had slowed their heartbeat down to a ridiculous rate. They were very adept at hiding and camouflaging.

But that might not be the only thing they were good at. They had kept themselves a secret this long, which had to mean one other thing. They were good at killing. Killing to keep their existence a secret.

We were quiet for a long time and watching each other skeptically, looking for who would attack first. Luke had his hand up and told me to stand down.

“Let’s talk to them,” he said.

“I am all for that, but they don’t look like they want to talk.”

My eyes settled on the eldest among them. He had to be at least seventy years old, by the wrinkle on his face, but he still had an agile stance, and he was very focused. Luke walked towards him, assuming he was the leader.

“Can we talk?” Luke asked.

“You can,” the man beside the eldest talked. He was about thirty years younger. “But maybe not here. We don’t take kindly to visitors. You have to leave now, or you die. Your choice.”

“We are here to talk about the moon stone,” Luke said, ignoring all the man said earlier and moving closer to him.

Two of them stepped in his way and growled. It was a deep and reverberating one that shook through the forest, and a couple of growls came back in return.

It wasn’t just these here that were protecting whatever they were protecting. There were others we couldn’t see. That was the purpose of the growl. If we pushed them further, they would fight us, and we would lose. The message was simple.

Luke held up his hand again and stepped back, showing them he had no intention of getting violent.

“We found you using this?” Luke said, holding up the map and his half of the pendant. “We need to talk to the leader. We need to talk to him about the moon stone.”

“If we had what you are looking for, why would we give it to you? You are a stranger.”

“Are you the leader?” Luke asked.

“I am leading now.”

“The leader of the tribe. We would rather talk to him, not you,” Hayley said. “This is serious. There are werewolves

behind us, hunting us down. You do not want them to catch up to us here.”

“We have our ways. We will be fine. You do need to leave, though. You are not welcome here.”

Luke sighed and stamped his feet on the ground.

“I am sorry, but we cannot do that.”

The man looked at Luke, surprised, and then at me. I just shrugged at him. Left to me, we’d have fought our way in. Luke’s pseudo-diplomatic move was just the right one we needed. The man sighed and then turned to speak to someone behind him. The boy nodded and ran into the vines behind the forest. He ran through it so easily. It was like he had just disappeared through it.

“The leader will talk to you then,” the man said.

“Thank you,” Luke said.

“Do not thank me. You’ve been given a chance to leave unharmed, but you didn’t take it. When the leader returns, and he doesn’t want you, we’ll have to kill you.”

The werewolves surrounding them stepped closer, making sure we understood what their alpha had just said. I nodded and looked at Luke, who was rather confident that we were not going to fight here.

The werewolves were still groaning slightly, and their focus on us was so intent it made a chill run through me.

I had expected them to be dressed in leaves, but they were dressed in just shorts, with their bodies coated in mud and leaves, which was how they had camouflaged easily with the environment. They were all barefooted, making for lighter walking and even quieter. They will move as though they were air and make no noise with their bare feet.

Soon, the boy returned, and he was with an older man. He looked almost seventy too but was very agile. The duo stopped in front of Luke and me and the new man, who was their leader, cocked his head to look at the two of us.

“You asked for me,” he said.

“Yes,” Luke said and was about to go on, but the man held up his hand. He wanted to talk.

“You were talking about the moon stone?”

“Yes.”

“What do you know about the moon stone?”

“We know it is here,” Luke said.

“Our map led us here,” I said.

“Your map. You do understand that if you continue to perpetuate this story, and I find out you are lying, you will not be given the opportunity to leave again. You will be killed. It is our tradition.”

“I understand,” Luke said and handed him the map. He was very confident in Bonne’s work. The man collected it and looked at the map.

“You’re from Nillport,” the man said.

“You know Nillport?” Luke asked.

“You can read?” I asked.

He just smiled at both questions and then returned his attention to the map. He gazed over it and handed it back to Luke. “Where did you get that?” he asked.

“A friend drew it.”

“How? How did he know to draw it?”

“From this,” I said, removing my half of the pendant from my neck and passing it to the man. Luke removed his, too, and passed it to the man. He took it, and he gasped a bit as he ran his hand over the pendant. When he looked up at us again, there was awe in his eyes, and the growling that had gone on since the wolves made themselves known stopped.

“What are your names?” he asked.

“Heline and Peline,” I said, knowing he was asking for our family name.

A big smile sprayed across his face, and he looked at me, moving closer until he was just a couple of inches from me.

He looked me in the eyes and held my face in his palms.

“I see it,” he said. “It’s your eyes. It’s always in the eyes. You have the eyes. You have the Peline eyes shaded to ever haunt you and the people of your bloodline.”

My mother had always said I had beautiful eyes. She said I had eyes worthy of worship, and standing here, looking at this man stare into my eyes as though they were objects of awe, justified what she’d always said.

He moved away from me and then walked to Luke. “You are both broken. You’ve been broken for a long time, but now you’ve come to make each other whole. Come with me. There is so much I want to show you and so much you have to tell me.”

He turned around and started leading us toward the vine.

“Hmm,” I said, and he looked back at me. “We had werewolves on our heels before we got here. Hunters that wouldn’t be as patient as we have been. They’ll come for us. They’ll tear down your tribe to get to us.”

The man smiled at me and held my hands, walking closer to the vine.

“How long do you think my people have been here, child? What devices have we not encountered before? They are not a threat to us. Come, a whole new world awaits you.”

Chapter twenty-three (Viper)

It was a cold night, and that was evidence that it had rained somewhere not far from where. The breeze blew in from the west, and it smelled of wet earth and smoke. I used to enjoy nights like this. People tend to be lax on cold nights, and they were the right nights to wreak havoc. People get drunk, get in fights, and all you have to do is walk through the city and pick up the spoils of the night. Wallets, chains, wristwatches, whatever.

I knew Hayley grew up that way, too, and she would have understood what I was saying better. I've heard people talk about her. Especially the quiet Ilad. He thinks the world of her, and we should have gotten along better, Hayley and I. We grew up on the same streets, survived the same way, and got rescued by the same person. But the glaring difference was that when we were in the street, I was the one doing the bullying, and Hayley was the one getting bullied. Our paths never crossed, but if they had, I was sure I would have bullied her.

I had assumed her weak the first time James pitted us together and had us fight. I thought it was just like back in the streets. She had that look of the street kids, and while I had washed mine off, she still stunk of it. I felt superior to her and was sure I was going to win by a big margin.

I didn't win.

I looked down from the Palace roof at the cold city. It was empty already at this time, and only people with foul intentions were still lurking on corners, waiting for unknowing victims to pounce on. I wished I could be down there with them. To score a target, mark it, follow it, and then steal from it.

The air on the roof shifted, and I turned around to see my new companion.

“You’re late,” I told him as he moved out of the darkness and showed his face.

“I had to deal with a couple of rascals on the way over, my lord. And getting up here on the roof was hard,” he said and bowed a bit.

“What do you have for me?” I asked him.

“We did as you asked. We tracked them and have a lock on their location.”

“Go get them then?”

“We can’t,” he said and walked closer to me until he was standing close to me on the ledge and looking down, the hard and cold breeze slapping against his face. “They’ve found something that we’ve long assumed had disappeared into time.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“A lost tribe,” the human hunter said, his voice shivering in reverence.

When everyone talks about a lost tribe, they do so in respect and awe, and I never really understood why. They say they are powerful werewolves, but if they are, why did they go missing then? Why didn’t their powers save them? Why are they in hiding? If I had the kind of powers everyone professes they have, I would rule the world. I would become the next Tarloux family.

“There are no lost tribes,” I maintained.

“I saw them, my lord,” he insisted. “They morphed out of the jungle and had a conversation with the lone wolf and the murderer. One of them, which I presume was their leader, touched the two of them like they were some kind of gods. Then he led them into the jungle.

“Why didn’t you follow them then? You saw where they went, didn’t you?”

“Yes, we did, my lord. But the lost tribes have powers that we do not understand. We tried to follow them but couldn’t. They just seemed to have disappeared into thin air.”

“Nobody disappears into thin air.”

“I know that,” the man replied. “They are somewhere out there in the jungle waiting, and we would wait for them to return.”

“What if they never return then?” I asked him. “What if they went there because they knew you wouldn’t be able to follow them, that I wouldn’t be able to follow them, and that has been the plan all along to make themselves ultimately evasive? Become one of the lost tribes and evade the justice they deserve here.”

“My lord,” he started and turned to me, his eyes searching my face. “Do you not think that makes it all better for all parties involved?”

I looked back at him and scoffed. He was right. Hayley gone was what I wanted, and she took the lone wolf with her. All that would be left to do was rid Nillport of the remaining lone wolves. I could even have the human hunters do that for me. But there was something else in his face.

“You don’t think she would leave forever, do you?”

“No,” he replied. “I think she will be back, and when she returns, she will be an even bigger force to reckon with. The two of them will be.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked him.

“The tribe they found. The path they followed to find them. There have been rumors about them, and people have been searching for them for ages because they hold a great power source. The moon stone, my lord.”

“The moon stone? Are we peddling another myth?”

“I think it is time to start believing this myth, my lord. I am not a werewolf, but I was raised to understand your lives and to know your history. I did some quick research on the lone wolf and the murderer, and I don’t think they happened upon each other by chance. I think we are seeing a destiny play out.”

“What are you saying?”

“Do the names Peline and Heline mean anything to you, my lord?”

“Old families?”

“Yes, but not just any kind of old families. Royalty. The crème de la crème. They were at the top of the food chain before the Tarloux displaced them and made power transference by birth moot. Before the family was wiped out, they transferred powers into the moon stone and gave it to a tribe, stating that only their descendants bound together by true love could find the stone and use the power trapped in it. I think we’ve found those descendants.”

“Hayley? Hayley is just a street rat like me. She didn’t descend from royalty. That’s impossible.”

“But, my lord, she did. She is a Peline. She has their look, and the lost tribe welcomed them. She is a Heline, and the lone wolf is a Peline.”

I have heard of these myths and stories, but James had always taught us to disregard them. He’d always said the only things that matter the most are those you can prove and disprove immediately and not those that you require faith to hold onto. Myths are stories people make up to keep hope. There is nothing tangible about them as they don’t affect real life.

It looks like he was wrong about that too.

“What does this mean, Laird?” I asked him.

“If the murderer and the lone wolf emerge from the jungle and possess the moon stone, they will be more powerful than any werewolves that have ever lived. They could come back here and lay claim to the throne, and you will not be able to stop them. No one would be able to stop them. They will be powerful beyond measure.”

I sighed and looked into the starless sky. I had barely been the alpha for a month, and there was the possibility of a challenge to my throne already. And who else would dare to if not Hayley? She’d always been my nemesis.

“How do I stop them?” I asked.

“There is no record that states it is possible to stop the bearer of the moon stone. They would be powerful beyond measure and cover every aspect of a possible adversary. I have no idea how to stop them, you lord. What my men and I can do is remain in the jungle and wait for them to reemerge, and before they can activate the power of the stone, we attack them and try to kill them. If we fail to do that, then I am afraid, my lord, you will have to abdicate your throne.”

He bowed once more and walked away. I was alone there in the dark for a long time, and the night’s cold didn’t bother me anymore.

“You can come out now,” I said out loud, and a figure came out from the dark corner of the roof. He had been there for over an hour now. “You heard all he said.”

“I did,” Klint said.

“What do you think? Do you believe in any of what he said?”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe, but what the man saw. And I could tell he wasn’t lying. He’d seen the lost tribe, and the thing he said about the moon stone must be true. Then, we have a bigger problem on our hands than we can handle.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“What I have been advising you to.”

“I would give up all he worked for.”

“If you don’t do it, and the girl returns with all that power, you will be handing over the throne to his murderer. Which do you think would be better?”

I sighed and looked deeper into the dark, glowing my eyes to see further. It was a very quiet night, and nothing was happening on the streets. All that mattered was happening here on the roof.

“You know, I used to stand down by that telephone poll,” I said and pointed down the street. “I would stand there and look up at the Palace. I started to do that two years after I ascended and would watch all that was happening. I would watch the werewolves go in and out, moving in packs, and I

knew something was missing in me. I had my friends on the street, but they didn't understand the rush I get sometimes or why I was always so energetic. I wanted to chase the moon. They were not like me. The people inside the palace were like me, and I longed to be with them, but I couldn't cross the road and walk into the Palace because I thought I would be out of place, and god knew I was right. I was tattered and smelly. Then, one day, I was down there on a night unlike this. It was hot, and everyone was outside. One of those wild nights when the party inside the Palace just never ends."

"I know one of those nights," Klint said. "They were James's favorite. He loved having werewolves together and making sure we remained peaceful. People say we are naturally unruly, and it is just our nature to fight and kill. James never believed that. He thought nature was made, it was learned, and it can never be absolute."

"He told me something like that when he walked up to me by that pole that night. I had seen him around, and I knew he was powerful, but then, I didn't know how much. The street had taught me to be fearless and never fazed by anyone. So I looked at him and asked if he could get me into the party. What don't you just walk in? he asked me. I told me I'd have looked out of place. Oh, everyone looks out of place. That's why it is the Palace. It is supposed to give a sense of cover to everyone. Then he walked with me into the Palace, and I found a new home that night. He saved me from the streets. He gave me this place. Would it be right to hand it over to them, Klint?"

"I think it is better to hand it over to them than for them to come to claim it. You're not a fool, Viper. James was the only person standing between the Tarloux family and this place, and he's gone. No amount of deals will keep their hands off it. You will only be delaying the inevitable. You're not James, and no one will ever be him. It is time to change the rules of the game. The bigger dogs want to play. Throw them the toy, don't let them drag it from you and tear it into pieces."

Chapter twenty-four (Luke)

We walked for hours, and soon, the sun set, and we were walking in darkness. It seemed like we had been walking forever when before us, I saw dotted lights that looked like fireflies on trees, but I could hear streams of noise coming from the noise. As we approached it, I saw they were huts with light streaming out of them. We were in a village. I didn't know what to expect from the lost tribe, but a village was far from my mind. But it made sense. They were hiding away with magic, and we could see this only because the leader wanted us to.

We continued towards the village and passed people, who were all gawking at us and whispering to each other. They were all werewolves and had the same smell as those on the outskirts of the village that had stopped us. I don't know why I felt that way, but it seemed that these people were smelling the way werewolves should. They smelled of the earth because they were one with it.

The leader led us through the village until we got to a hut in the center of the village, and he stepped towards it.

"This is mine," he said and pulled open a raffia curtain, showing them the inside of the hut. It was made with sticks and leaves, with mud to hold them together. It was colder inside than I thought it would be, and there was a lamp sitting at the center of the hut.

"No door," Hayley said.

"We don't need one. We are not hiding anything from each other. Sit, please."

Hayley looked at the man skeptically. She didn't believe that they had nothing to hide from each other. She grew up on the street, where information was a commodity.

I looked around and couldn't find anywhere to sit. There was only a small lamp that was burning with a sweet smell in the center of the room and then a lump of cloth in a corner and a

thin mat that made up a bed. Besides that, there was nowhere to sit. I looked up at the man, asking for answers.

“On the floor,” he said finally. “Sit on the floor.”

So, we sat on the floor, and it was cold, just like the rest of the hut, watching as the man moved about in the room, searching for something. I looked at Hayley and smiled at her. At least we were here now. They would have more information for us, and then we would know what we were supposed to do. The man returned with something in his hand, which he passed to us.

It was the two halves of the pendant we had but carved out of wood.

“I have had that since I was a child,” he said and sat down. “My father gave it to me, and his father before him did. They all waited for this day. For the two of you to come, but it never happened, and they never gave up. They knew the order of things would be restored to the status quo, how nature meant it. Now, here you are inside my hut.”

“Can you tell us about it?” I asked, passing the wooden medallion back at him. I had seen enough of the design on the pendant to last two lifetimes. I was bored of it. I wanted to know why I had it, though. What made me worthy of it and the moon stone?

“I’ll tell you as much as I can to my ability,” the man said.

He picked up a small effigy of a wolf and ran his fingers over it as he told his story. He took on a new countenance, like that of a wise historian, and I felt like a child listening to him.

“It started with three friends. They were powerful, but only two came from royalty, and only two were deemed worthy because of their birth. One was a Peline, the other a Heline, and the last one a Tarloux. The first two ruled the werewolf world in peace, and there was no trouble, but then there was a disagreement between the three friends, and the Tarloux believed he would make a better leader than the two that were currently leaders. He went to the council of werewolves, and told them leadership should be given based on merit and not

inheritance, but it had never been done that way before, and this way, there had never been trouble. So, they didn't listen to him, and he became a rebel. He walked through town, preaching his new philosophy of merit, and surprisingly he wasn't met with as much resistance as the council gave him. There were people who shared his sentiment. They wanted different leaders. They wanted one that they had put there themselves and not pompous boys that had inherited their positions and wouldn't know what it was like to struggle, to suffer."

He moved the effigy from his right hand to his left. Then he dropped it on the floor before he continued with the story. Hayley and I paid rapt attention to him.

"Back then, werewolves had communities like humans. There were the royals, and there were the peasants. Tarloux found love among the poor and the people in general. He was going to give power to the people. When he had amassed enough of a crowd, he returned to the council, thinking they would listen to him now that he had the backing of the people. But the council had never listened to the people because they didn't think them relevant. They were not as powerful as the royals, and that power was the reason the royals were the leaders. You don't make the inferior stock your leader. To them, that wasn't going to change. They chased him away and didn't listen. He was infuriated. Then, the two other friends invited Tarloux for a conversation. He was becoming a nuisance, and it was their job to rein him in. After all, he was their friend, and they thought he was only blinded by ambition."

The man chuckled slightly as though he was telling a joke only he could understand. He nodded and continued the story.

"Tarloux was from a powerful family himself but not powerful enough to be royalty. But they were rich, and one of their sons in a position of power would strengthen their stance in the community and make them even richer. So, the two other friends decided to make Tarloux a regent. A regent back then was a big position. He gets to control dynasties and have autonomy. But he was slighted by their offers because they were proving his point. They were in no position to appoint

him ruler over a group of people. He threw their offer back in their faces, and returned to his people. By then, it was obvious that the Royals wouldn't listen to him, and he needed to get them off the throne somehow. He was the heir to a rich empire, so all he had to do was wait. But during his wait, he continued to recruit people into his belief system, and soon, it was like a church. They met to discuss what was wrong with the royalty, and it wasn't hard to come up with a reason for them to uproot the royalty. It was a cruel system that assigned unfavorable benefits to a group of people just because they were lucky enough to be born into a particular family. The people demanded more than that. Tarloux showed them they could have more than that."

The man looked up at us suddenly. "Pardon me, but when I get into a story, I get lost in it. Do you want anything to drink or eat? You must be tired from all the walk," he asked as he had realized that we might be thirsty and hungry, and we were. At least I was, and when I looked at Hayley to ask, so was she.

"Yes, we would like something to eat and drink."

"Alright, come with me," the man said, and we followed him out of the tent. It was now totally dark outside, and the only lights in the night were those streaming out of the tents. It was night, but the village was still lively. Kids were still running about, and laughter was pouring from tents. Everyone looked happy and content here.

"How do you do it?" Hayley asked. "How do you stay hidden with this large population?"

"Oh, we've been hidden for a long time, even before the time of the Pelines and Helines. We have our ways, and we can't expose them."

Hayley nodded and looked around at the village again.

It was simple, yet so beautiful. There was something refreshing about the collective sense amongst these people. They knew each other and not just in the way I knew of my neighbors back in Nillport. They were a big family here. Loving and supportive of each other.

“We never got your name,” I told the man and moved closer to him until I was standing right beside him. He was old but so agile and fast.

“Just call me Merine. Everyone does.”

A kid ran past them and dropped a ball made out of leaves. He stopped to pick it up and looked at Hayley and me. He found us very curious as he could tell we were strangers. He called his friends over to look at us, and soon we had a herd of children surrounding us, but they didn’t say anything. They simply just looked.

Merine said something to them in an archaic language, and the kids skittered off, throwing their ball into the air again.

“What language is that?” Hayley asked.

“Our language,” he said.

“You all don’t speak English?” I asked, surprised.

Merine smiled at me. “There are many misconceptions about the lost tribes. That is what you call us. But we don’t think of ourselves as that. We call ourselves hidden, although the tribes at the end of the Alps just call themselves shaded, blocked away by the mountains.”

“There are more of you?”

“Of course. This is just one tribe. One clan. There are a lot more that I don’t even know about. Tribes that have stayed hidden from the beginning and will always remain hidden because that is our way of life. Some of us venture into the other worlds every now and then to keep up with happenings, and how would we relate to you if we can’t speak your language?”

“So you knew we were coming then? You knew I killed my Alpha?”

“Yes,” Merine said. “The news got to us, and there were many fights in the woods. We had to keep children away from it. We know all about what happened in the city.”

“Did you know about the trafficking? The kids James was selling off?” Hayley asked. She posed her question

aggressively.

Merine didn't reply but just kept walking, and I could see our destination as the smell of roasted meat came from a gathering of people with a bonfire in their middle. Hayley walked in front of Merine and stopped him. She put her hands on his chest, which caught the group's attention. They all stood up and watched what was going on. They were all ready for a fight.

"Did you know what was happening with the kids?" Hayley asked again.

"Yes," Merine answered finally.

Hayley moved away from him, pain and disappointment washing across her face.

"Why didn't you do anything?" she asked and turned around suddenly. "Why didn't you stop them?"

"It wasn't my place to," Merine said.

"They were children. They were like them!" Hayley yelled and pointed at the kids running around in the village. "They were innocent, and you just allowed them to be sold."

"It wasn't my place to stop them," Merine maintained. His voice retained a calm tone, and he didn't seem bothered that Hayley was disappointed in him. I could tell that this was something he had discussed with his people and mulled over on his own a long time ago, and they had come to a decision, and he'd learned to live in peace with that decision.

"You people have your wars and your conflicts. They never stop; we never interfere because it isn't our place. Just as it isn't in your place to take action on whatever is happening here. James had the support of the council. If we had interfered, what do you think would have happened? We would have stopped one, and then would we have been there for the other? What happens when in trying to stop them, they kill us? Then these children lose fathers and mothers fighting a battle that wasn't theirs? That is a bigger guilt that I would not be able to handle. What if we risk our position because we helped them? We've remained hidden for millennia, and I

wasn't going to expose my people to harm. We have seen the weapons your people have. Your guns, your bombs. They can decimate people and split them in two. We would never stand a chance against them. Our best option was to remain hidden, keep out of your business and remain safe. We all made that decision, and whatever contempt you think about us, we do not share the sentiment with you."

The quiet that followed looked like it was going to last forever. It just went on and on and never ended. Then one of the men by the bonfire spoke up, breaking it.

"Does anyone want some meat?" he asked.

We were hungry, so we had to oblige them. I walked to Hayley to talk to her.

"Do you understand the position they were in?"

She looked up at her, anger still in her eyes, but she had mellowed a bit.

"I do. But it is hard to imagine they would just abandon those kids to their fate. Why would anyone do that?"

"We are here now," I told her. "We are not abandoning them. We would save every last one of them. But we need the stone to do that. We need power, and they can give it to us."

We walked to join the others, and they made a seat for us while one of them cut meat from the big bull roasting on the fire and served it to us. He passed us a big cup of wine too. I looked at that, shocked, and they smiled at me.

"We like the good things, too," one of them said.

That got a chuckle out of me, and I started to wolf down the meal. Hayley did the same as Merine continued the story.

"Yes, where was I?" he said, but he didn't need our help reminding him. "Tarloux stayed his hand and waited until he inherited his family's wealth. Then when that happened, he used the wealth to accumulate soldiers and for himself weapons. He trained the people that believed in his vision that were willing to fight too, but a bulk of his soldiers were humans. You call them human hunters now, and they have that

sigil of an eagle in flight. But the first human hunters were trained by Tarloux, and the first werewolf hunters were his people that wanted to fight. He trained them on how to kill werewolves, and they did it dexterously. He did that for years, and all the while, the royalty knew what he was doing, but they were unperturbed. They've had rebellions before, and it had been nothing but a sting to them. They had power beyond measure and were confident they couldn't be conquered. It had never happened before. But they were going up against Tarloux. A man who knew their strength and weaknesses. It was a flawless victory for him. We wiped out the entire royal family. It was a blood bath. But Tarloux remained loved amongst the people because he never harmed the masses. His war was with the Royalty, and it remained so. It just so happened that when he started the war, the two families had pregnancies. The Peline princess was pregnant, and so was the Heline queen. So, they came to us.”

Merine looked up when he said that. He looked at Hayley specifically as if to tell her the next couple of things he wanted to say were for her.

“That was the first time we dabbled in business that wasn't ours. We had stayed away from other werewolves, but they needed help, and we couldn't turn pregnant women away. We let them in, but we lost over a thousand lives before they finally left. It was a sad moment for us here. None of us here ever witnessed it, but we heard the stories, and we saw the graves. Tarloux didn't kill the masses in his land, but he settled on us because we had helped his enemies, and he slaughtered us. Still, we couldn't just send the pregnant women away. We let them stay until they gave birth. And when it was done, they asked us for one final favor. The moon stone. They wanted to bind the two children together, and we did it for them. We bound them with the moon stone and the pendants. We also promised to hold the stone until someone worthy comes back to claim it.”

“Well, I guess we are here then. You'll hand it over to us, and we'll be on our way,” Hayley said.

Merine smiled at her. “No, it doesn’t work that way. I allowed you in because you had the pendant. Consider that a key to get in here. Now, to get the moon stone, that decision will be left to the moon stone.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “You want a stone to make a decision.”

“It is not just a stone,” Merine said. “It holds within it power beyond measure. You would have to go through a ritual to get to the moon stone. The moon stone will pick you. If it wants you, it will show itself to you. If it doesn’t, you will have to leave the village immediately.”

Chapter twenty-five (Hayley)

We went to the room they provided for us soon enough after Merine was done with his story, and surprisingly we had a bed. Although I would have preferred for our hut to have a door, the raffia blind would have to. In a community like theirs, trust is imperative, and a closed door is subject to breed distrust. Merine had explained that to us. Luke thought it was nice. I thought it was simply bonkers.

He'd been sweet so far, Luke. Always listening, always watching, and always there for me. He had steered back to the right earlier in the night when Merine told me he knew about the children getting kidnapped, but now I knew why he never interfered. They had interfered once, and it didn't end well for them. Their interference was also the reason we were here now. If they hadn't taken in the two last royals, Luke and I would never have been born, so I guessed I should be grateful to them for that.

We were so tired after the day's walks that as soon as we got into the room, we slept and didn't wake up until morning.

When I did, there was a child standing by the foot of our bed. He was naked with only a small pair of shorts on him. I tapped Luke awake when I saw him; for a while, I thought he was lost. But the curtain was opened, so anyone could come in and out as they pleased. I guessed that was the point of such a flimsy door.

The boy had chubby cheeks and sweet blue eyes with a smile that could melt mountains. He stretched his hands to me and spoke.

"Come," he said, and then nothing after that.

"You want us to come with you?" I asked, looking at Luke, who was just as surprised at what was unfolding before us as I was.

The boy nodded yes.

“Okay,” I said to him and turned to Luke. “It wouldn’t hurt to see what he wants.”

He grunted and stood up from the bed. We were still fully dressed from last night. It was bright outside already, and I could hear the villagers walking about and kids laughing. We stepped out with the boy leading us, and I could see the villagers walking toward the little community’s far end. Some of them looked at us and smiled, some waved, and we waved back to them, but most just ignored us. The children soon found us, and just as they did last night, they started running around until someone came and chased them away and apologized to us.

“Oh, it’s fine,” I said. “They are just kids.”

The woman smiled and walked beside the kid that came to get us, who was walking with a determination that was unusual for a child his age. I looked at the woman and the child but didn’t see any resemblance and concluded she wasn’t his mother.

Since we arrived last night, the kids have been running amok freely with no one to stop them. They were confident of their safety here. I hoped it remained that way forever. We walked with the crowd until we came to a hill, and Merine was at the top, looking down at the rest of us.

“I see Yola got you to wake up,” he said to us and smiled. “He’s a good boy. Thank you, Yola.”

The boy smiled again and then ran off to join the others. He had a task, he had done it, and it was time to play.

“That was impressive,” Luke said as he watched the Yola join the others.

“How old do you think he is? Four? Five, and he’s so well behaved and knew to stick to the job he was assigned.”

“I guess that’s why they have a well-functioning society,” he said. “Everyone plays their part to the letter.”

“Alright!” Merine said, breaking up the conversation that had ensued between the people. “Huh, let’s get this over with. Herlie has told me that he would love to be back home with

his wife before sun up, and since we'll all move at once, we will not have him go before us."

"Oh, he just wants to eat, is all!" someone yelled from the crowd. "The man likes food too much."

"I have a pregnant wife, Yuliss, who is very close to term. Be respectful," the man called Herlie replied.

"It's a wonder you haven't eaten her yet!" Yuliss said, and that got a couple of snickers from the crowd, and then Herlie replied in a language we didn't understand, which caused the whole crowd to burst out in laughter.

Merine remained at the top of the hill, smiling, and waited for them to calm down.

"Well, we've presented ourselves in such a terrible manner to our guests," he said, and everyone turned to look at us. I smiled at them and quickly looked away, but Luke waved. "I know they must be wondering why we are here. It is hunting season, and you are in luck. You get to hunt!"

I wasn't so sure I shared in the enthusiasm in Merine's voice, but Luke looked like he would enjoy that. Well, he is a hunter, so I expected that, but we should be working towards getting the moon stone and heading back to town. I listened to all Merine had to say after that, giving instructions for no one to stray too far into the woods and where they mustn't hunt beyond. Which animals were out of reach and which they could hunt. When they were done, he split them into twenty groups, with four members per group. He put Luke and me together with a couple called Hirshey and Pam. They were giggly and quite excited to work with us.

"Hold on," I said to Pam as she started talking about how we needed to get into the woods fast and get on the hunt before the others got all the good game, and the rest ran away. "I need to have a quick word with Merine."

"Okay, go on," she said. Pam was almost as tall as Luke and a couple of inches taller than her husband, who was a quiet man with a quick smile that looked very familiar and stern eyes.

“Wait,” I said. “Is Yola your son?” I asked, as I could see the same smile on the man.

They both beamed up. “Yes, he is!”

“Oh, he’s a good kid,” I said and left them to talk to Merine as Luke buttered up the boy for them, and the parents grinned ear to ear, happy to have raised such a good kid.

Merine was talking to a younger werewolf when I got to him, and he quickly sent the wolf away, telling him they’ll talk later.

“Yes?” he asked me with his unwavering smile. “I take it you have an objection with something. It is all over your eyes.”

“Yes, I do,” I said. “Do we have to do this? The hunt. Shouldn’t we just do the ritual we need to get the stone and leave? I feel like we are wasting time here.”

Merine kept his smile, but I could see he was offended that I called the hunt a waste of time.

“I am sorry,” I apologized.

“It’s okay, and I understand your worry. But you can’t just get to the ritual, Hayley. Consider this hunt a training, a preparation. You will need it, and have fun too,” he said and then walked away.

His advice was simple. Go and do what I’ve been told. I scoffed exasperatedly.

“It’s a hunt, Hayley,” Luke said behind me and moved closer until he touched my hand. I could smell him just by breathing the air around him, and it was comforting. “Why don’t we just go enjoy that? We will have much more time to worry about the stone.”

“You don’t think we are wasting time here?”

“No, I don’t think we are. Come on,” he said and held my hand, pulling me towards Pam and Hirshey. “Pam and Hirshey say they have something to show us. A technique to hunt.

“Alright,” I said and followed them into the woods.

There were others in front of us already, making their way deeper and spreading around, marking territories and looking out for game.

“Do you ever hunt in the city?” Pam asked as they walked past a group that stopped to examine the prints on the ground of the bear they were tracking.

“No,” I said. “But I’ve been hunted a lot these past days.”

“We heard about that. It must have been scary.”

“Not so much,” I said, and it wasn’t a lie. I was pretty confident that I would survive even when it looked like I wouldn’t. We walked past another group and went even deeper. “Luke is more of a hunter than I am. A werewolf hunter. He was trained to be that.”

“Who trained you?” Hirshey asked.

“I doubt you know him,” Luke said. “His name was Kevin. He was my best friend’s father and a great hunter too.”

“Oh, but I bet he didn’t know what we are about to teach you.”

“I doubt it. Do you know what we’ll do in the ritual to get the stone?”

“No idea. Only the leaders know such information, and they are usually passed down through word of mouth. Stop,” Hirshey said and raised his hands up. We all stopped, and I looked around, looking to see why he had asked us to stop. He pointed at something in front of him. It was the dung of an animal.

He walked up to it and picked it up, taking a sniff from it. “It was here just recently, and no one has marked it. We have our target. Take a sniff,” he said and stretched his hand to me.

“What?” I said. There was no way I was smelling that. Pam walked closer and sniffed it.

“Do you know how dogs track humans with their pheromones?” Hirshey asked and stepped towards Luke and me. I watched him intently, looking to see what he was up to. “They take a sniff and get hooked on it. It’s like they become a crack addict and want nothing but to get a bigger sniff from

the source, so they start to track it. Running and hunting, but they are dogs and can easily pick up another scent and get distracted. But with us, it is different.”

He stopped in front of us and stretched his hands toward us. “Just focus on not just the smell, but what source it might have come from and let your mind latch on to it.”

Luke stepped forward before I did and moved his nose closer to the dung, closed his eyes, and smelled it. I watched his eyes glow suddenly and could sense his body perking up. He was so alert and ready for a hunt.

“Oh my god,” he said and stepped away from him, looking around the woods and sniffing the air aggressively, trying to catch a scent. Now, I was very curious as to what had just happened, and my curiosity pushed me closer to Hirshey, who still had his smile for me.

“Come on,” he said. “You’ll like this, I assure you.”

I nodded, moved my nose closer to the dung, and did as he directed. I took a sniff and tried to focus on the source of the smell. I felt my whole being on fire immediately, and my environment changed. It sharpened, and my focus shifted away from everything and hurriedly tried to align with just one thing. The trees around me didn’t matter much anymore. I could still see and sense them just as I could still see and sense Luke, Pam, and Hirshey, the ground I was stepping on, the air around me, and even the singing bird and the chirping insect, but suddenly they all became peripheral. Secondary to all things. There was only one thing that mattered at that moment, and it was the animal the smell came from.

“It is a deer,” I said, and I started toward the direction the smell led me.

“Yes,” Hirshey said.

“It went down here,” I said and continued walking, as soon I started to run, the others joined me. I wanted to hunt and track it down fast. It was more than just a game to me now. It was life and death now. I needed to get that deer. There was nothing I wanted more than to get it.

I sensed Luke beside me as we both ran through the woods. I was using the trees to push myself forward, covering longer distances in a shorter time that way, and I was tempted to turn fully just so I could get deer.

“Don’t do it,” Luke said and smiled at me. “Just focus on the hunt and not the game.”

“What?” I asked, confused as to what he was talking about.

“Focus on the feeling inside you. Enjoy it; let it push you to the game. Don’t let the game pull you to itself. Just relax, Hayley, you’re letting the rush drive you,”

I tried to do as he advised but just couldn’t. There was a fire burning in me, and it would consume me alive if I didn’t let it burn. So, I let it burn through my limbs as I grabbed on to another tree and let it swing me to the left, and out of my periphery, I saw the deer dash through the woods.

Now that I had my eyes on it, it was a different ball game. Everything that had been in the background before even got pushed further back, and I drowned them. The thudding sound the deer hoofs made against the ground, the raspy breathing as it ran for its life, and the stretching and retracting of its muscles were the only thing I could sense, and I didn’t even take a breather before I charged towards it.

I didn’t expect it to be that fast, but the deer was fast, and it was putting a lot of distance between us. I grinned and flanked to the left, watching it run deeper into the woods while being just a couple of yards from it. I didn’t let myself flank it too far, and since I could see Luke on my other side, going after it too, I knew it was trapped and it would be rendered indecisive. But for now, it just ran. I pushed head-on through the wood, going in a straight line as I used the trees to hurl myself forward. One arm at a time and making sure I didn’t throw myself smack into another tree. That would have been disastrous.

We chased the deer for about ten minutes, just running in a straight line and flanking it. I remembered Merine said we were not to hunt into some parts of the woods, but I didn’t care

about that right now. Only one thing mattered. Getting closer to the deer.

It was tiring out already, and its pace was slowing. But not for me. I was stronger than ever and started to catch up to it. The trees were still my best companion, and I closed the gap between the deer and me.

From about fifty feet to forty.

The deer didn't even have to look back to sense how close they were getting to it. I could smell the fear coming out of it.

Forty to twenty feet.

The deer jumped over a log, and its movement, which was set against the rising sun, was so graceful I could see the movement of all the limbs in its muscles as it used them to push itself forward. Too bad they would be able to save it for long.

Twenty to ten feet.

I could smell it so close to me now, and the stench of terror enveloped it. Such terror would have rendered a human immobile, but not this deer. It still ran and wanted to live.

Ten to five feet.

Out of my periphery, I watched Luke charge at it, and he was going to get the kill. No way I was going to allow that. I jumped right at the deer but didn't get it.

I caught Luke instead.

My mind was sharp, and my reflexes were working down to the millisecond. I didn't waste a moment holding onto Luke. I pushed him off but could see the grin on his face. He had a plan up his sleeve. Once he was with me, I moved back, grabbed onto the closest tree, and dashed at the deer who had used the collision between the two of us to gain more ground. But not enough ground to save itself.

I jumped at it and had my arms wrapped around its neck. But Luke came for me again, pushing me off the deer again.

“Aargh!” I growled at it and extended my fangs. He still had that silly grin on him. I pushed away from him again, but this time, I clawed him in the stomach just as I was moving away, hoping the pain would stop him from recovering fast. But it didn’t.

He was up immediately. I was hanging on to another tree again, going after the deer who had put a bigger gap between us. I had to resume running with Luke right behind me.

The hunger for the hunt, the need for it, didn’t tone down at all with the squabble with Luke. I wanted it more now. I dashed harder, covering up the distance between the deer and me quicker than ever, and when I was within the area to make an attack on it, I looked around and saw Luke wasn’t with me. I didn’t care where he was. I just jumped at the deer. It tried to move out of the way and evade my attack, but I caught it by the neck and pulled it closer to myself. It pushed its limbs against me, trying to get away, but my grip on it was strong, and it wasn’t going to get away.

I grabbed it and looked into its eyes. It was terrified now, and its dark eyes blinked twice at me. I am the hunter, and it is the prey. The big eat the small. That is the way of the jungle. But the big can also be merciful. The hunt was over, I had gotten the deer, and it was in my hands. I have won here.

I extended my claws and focused on the deer in my arms. It had closed its eyes now as though it understood what was coming and had accepted its fate. I let it go, then.

I watched it tumble against the floor and then steady itself. It looked at me, a bit shocked, before rushing into the woods. A lucky deer.

I felt Luke behind me, and I was still burning with so much adrenaline that I needed to expend, so I jumped at him.

“Why the hell did you keep stopping me!” I yelled as I swiped at him, but he was ready for me. He caught me by my arm, turned me around, and pushed me against a tree, pinning me down with his body and still grinning.

I growled at him. “Why the hell did you do that?” I asked.

He didn't provide me with an answer. Instead, he placed his lips over mine and kissed me hard. I felt myself melt against him, and the fire that had been burning in me earlier changed and was converted into passion. I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned closer to him, slipping my tongue into his mouth, hungry for more of him. My loins toiled with want, and every inch of my skin wanted to be touched.

There was a cough behind us, and that broke the fire that had grown between us. I pushed Luke away.

"We are not done!" I told him, my anger resurfacing again.

"You let it go?" Pam asked.

I shrugged. "I caught it. It didn't look like it was ready to die. I didn't feel like killing anything. I have been killing for the past two weeks. It was nice to finally let something live."

Pam smiled at me. "Yola will like you. Come on. We need to get back to the others. We've strayed further than the rest."

"And the two of you are fast. I have never seen wolves run that fast before. The thing you did with the tree, how did you not get disoriented?" she asked, and I just shrugged.

"It comes naturally, I guess. I had never gotten disoriented before doing it. It feels just like running too."

"Yes, but it makes you faster."

I could see the awe on their faces as we started back to the others. Luke walked with me, and he wrapped his fingers around mine. We were the last to return and the only ones without game, but no one batted an eye or even asked us questions. Everyone gathered what they had gotten, and Merine said there would be a feast at night. He asked everyone to be present as it would be a prelude to the ritual that would happen the next day.

"For the first time ever in our tribe, we'll have people hunting for the moon stone!" he announced to the people.

The people erupted in joy, and the rest of what Merine had to say got caught in their noise, and in the end, he simply gave up

and told everyone they could go back to their huts. People walked by us and hugged us, wishing us good luck tomorrow.

Luke and I walked side by side until we were inside our hut. I was still burning with adrenaline from the run earlier, and he still had questions to answer. I turned to him immediately and pushed him against the wall.

“Why did you stop me from getting the deer?”

Luke shrugged, smiling and enjoying himself. “Because I thought it would be fun,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes that made my knees go weak. When we kissed earlier in the woods, a need and passion rushed through me, but it was cut short by Pam and her husband. But here, there was no one to stop us, and Luke had the same idea. He pushed me against the wall, grabbed me, and pinned me down. Before I could react to it, he kissed me hard on the lips, biting me gently, and a moan forced itself out of my mouth. I wrapped my hand around his neck and pulled him closer to me, so close that I wanted him inside of me.

Luke’s hand moved from my cheeks and moved to my breast. I ran his palms over my breast, his thumb grazing my nipples. A strike of pleasure rushed through me, and I pulled him ever closer.

The bed was just a couple of feet from us, but we both knew we wouldn’t be using the bed. The hunger in us has grown to a level beyond which we could waste time making our way to it. I wanted him, and I wanted him now. My ragged breathing and the loud moans coming out of my mouth were enough evidence of that.

Luke turned me around, his claws reaching through my blouse and tearing it, opening my breast to the cold air in the hut that caressed my hardened nipples. My jeans were the next to go, and soon I was naked. I turned around and reached for Luke. I wanted to touch him, but I also wanted to have him. He moved my hand back and whispered into my ears.

“Close your eyes.”

He said it with a stern voice that caused me to close my eyes. I was under his control now, and I could hear him get out of his clothes. His hands found my buttocks, and he moved his palms around it until his thumb found my wet entrance, which was warm with want. I felt him get closer to me, and as I was bent over, my hand against the wall and my eyes slammed shut, he moved into me.

Pleasure flooded through me, and I moaned, with no care about who might hear us. I was getting a new sensation that I had never had before. It was coming from deep inside me, almost like as Luke kept stroking in and out, we were coupling in spirit, too, and that filled me with even greater pleasure. I still had my eyes shut and just surrendered myself to the feeling of bliss.

I also knew that this sweet feeling wasn't something I would want to enjoy once and be done with. We had the whole night, and I intended to make it count.

Chapter twenty-six (Hayley)

When I woke up the next morning, Yola was standing at the end of the bed again, looking down at us. He had a tiny grin and looked more comfortable than he did yesterday.

“Good morning, Yola,” I said, expecting him to respond, but he didn’t and just waited by the door. We figured it was time for the ritual to begin. Luke and I got out of bed and dressed before heading out of the hut, letting him lead us again. When we got outside, there was an electric excitement in the air, and it was strange to imagine they had all gathered here and were excited for us. But as Merine had said last night, it was a once in existence occurrence, and they were happy it was happening during their lifetime.

“What do you think they will have us doing?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe we’ll answer some questions. Whatever it is, we better get it done fast, so we get back out there.”

“You sound eager to leave.”

“I sound eager to save those kids.”

“It’s nice in here. It wouldn’t be such a bad idea to live here forever.”

I looked around at the people, the community they had formed, the joy on their faces, and how they all looked so content to be here. It wasn’t a bad way to live at all. In fact, it seemed like the perfect way to live. I could imagine Luke and me here, having our own little Yola, hunting in the mornings, taking long walks with friends in the afternoon, and making love like we did last night, every night. It would be the most blissful thing ever.

But there are bigger expectations of me, and before I can have the life I desire for myself, I have to fulfill those expectations first. The moon stone grants great power, and surely, with that comes great responsibility.

The crowd was gathered in the same place they were last night, and when they saw us, they became excited and made way for us to pass through. Yola led us through them and to the top of the hill, where Merine was waiting for us.

He looked different. He was dressed in an overflowing black robe and had a hood that he didn't wear, making him look a bit like a monk. There were two boys beside him, each holding a wooden box with intricate flowery designs on them. Yola stopped right before him and bowed a bit before moving away. I was looking right at him now. He looked mysterious and gave off a sense of someone with such immense power in the robe.

“Welcome,” he said, and I could swear there was something different about his voice. It was more focused, and there was a sense of command. He sounded like a person who wanted every word he said obeyed, and I found myself bowing a bit as Yola did, but I nudged myself to get back in control.

Merine raised his right hand, and the crowd fell silent save for some kids who still chatted in the background. He cleared his throat.

“Everyone of us here was raised on the myth of the moon stone. We were told to wait for the day travelers would come in search of it, and only worthy ones will be allowed to see it. Today, we have two travelers before us who claim to have a right to the stone. At the end of the day, we will see if they are worthy of the stone or if they are, like the others that have come before them, frauds that want the stone for selfish reasons. The stone will only show itself to people with royal blood who are loyal to the blood and the whole community of wolves. People who will dedicate their lives to erasing tyranny and restoring the order of things intended by nature. Today, they will undergo tests, at the end of which, they will either be cast out of the village as failures or will walk out with their heads held high and their names forever etched into history.”

He looked away from the crowd and then looked at Luke and me. He smiled a bit, and I could tell that somewhere in him, he believed we were the right people. The ones that will finally reveal the stone to them.

“Step forward,” he said.

I moved first, and Luke followed me.

Merine looked at the boy to his left, who turned around and opened the box he was carrying to reveal a knife. It was unlike any that I’ve seen them use in here. Its blade was made of brass, and it glistened in the morning sun. It had a long hold with a stone at the top of it. The stone was bluish and dull and held by a hilt made of black leather wrapped around it. It was an exquisite knife.

Merine removed and showed it to the crowd, all of whom were in awe, and the chattering among them resumed. Merine didn’t bother stopping them, and it soon died out on its own.

“Give me your hands,” he said, and I stretched mine to him first. He grabbed hold of it and looked into my eyes before nicking a part of my thumb, causing blood to flow. He did the same for Luke and then returned the knife to the box.

He turned around to the next boy, and the boy opened his box. There were two pieces of cloth in it. Two tiny pieces that looked like they were made of reed soaked in red dye. He removed the two and placed one over my pricked thumb and the other over Luke’s. He wrapped the clothes around the thumb but removed them again and changed their positions. He placed the one he had placed on Luke, which was now stained with his blood, over my thumb and placed the one he had placed over my thumb earlier on Luke’s, then he proceeded to finally tie them together.

“Now, you’ve been bound in blood and an oath,” he said and nodded. “Come with me.”

He turned around and started down the hill. We followed him and walked for about thirty minutes with the community behind us until we finally came to a cave hidden behind a thick vegetation of grass and trees.

“For your first task. You will go into the cave and find your way out.”

“That’s all?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Now, get going.”

Luke and I looked at each before we started towards the cave, and when we got to the mouth, we saw an opening through which we could go in. We walked in, and behind us, the opening was closed, throwing us into semi-darkness. There were some rough natural stairs that must have been made from centuries of trodding down the cave, so we followed them until we got to the floor of the cave, which was large enough to house a small community.

“Do we just walk back outside?” I asked.

“I don’t think that door will open for us anymore,” Luke said and turned around to consider the rest of the cave. “Maybe there is something on the wall that we can use.”

We spent the next couple of minutes walking by the cave wall, looking for signs or anything that might suggest a way out and ended up with nothing. It was just a standard empty wall, nothing interesting about it. We ended up on one of the stairs and sat down to think. I looked around me, searching eagerly to see if there was anything that we had missed.

“There has to be something in here that we are missing,” Luke said, but I couldn’t figure out anything. The cave itself didn’t look impressive—just an excavated interior of rock with bare walls. I stood up again and walked to the wall, this time touching them closely and running my hand over their rough surfaces to see if there were some carvings in it like they were on the medallion. There was nothing there. Just the normal serrations on a rock’s surface. Nothing looked out of place.

I was about to walk back to Luke and wait until the men outside got tired and rolled the stone out of the cave mouth when I decided to try one more trick. I glowed my eyes, just as I had done with the medallion. The walls came alive. I wondered why that didn’t come to mind earlier on.

There were carvings on it now that glowed in a sort of blue-green light. I stepped back, shocked by it, and Luke was by my side immediately.

“What is it?”

“Glow your eyes,” I told him.

He did and smiled. “I should have known. Secret messages?”

I walked back to the wall and looked at the carvings on them. They were not words, not even any kind of writing characters, but pictures. Someone had carved them into the wall using a material that was only visible to our glowing eyes.

“It’s a story,” Luke said as he ran his hand over the wall. He walked down the length of the wall to the west until he reached the end and pointed at the bottom left. “It starts here.”

I walked to him and looked where he was pointing to and got a sense of the story they were telling with the drawing. It was the same story Merine told us of the two pregnant werewolves that came to the clan when the Tarloux army decimated the royal line. The story detailed how the clan welcomed them, but shortly after, Tarloux men found a way into the clan and started killing people, looking for the women. The women came here when that started, keeping away from the clan to keep themselves safe. That was when they began writing this story. The story went on as the two women were in the cave on their own.

“Is that magic?” Luke asked as he pointed at a diagram that depicted the two pregnant women on their knees, praying to what looked like the moon. “Bonne once said the werewolves of the old family were more religious than we were. They worshiped a lot of things. But they adored the moon. It was the god they believed would always come to their rescue because we believed we were direct descendants of the moon. They also believed that with chants and some rituals, they could access powers the moon had bestowed on the earth. With all that we’ve witnessed so far, the lost tribe and the moon stone, being real, I wouldn’t be surprised if that bit about those old families is true too.”

“They are asking the moon for something,” I said, looking at the woman. I touched the part of the wall their image was carved on, and it almost felt like I could feel the pain in them. They were desperate and in deep supplication to the moon. I stepped back suddenly as those emotions from the wall overwhelmed me. This was beyond just the ability of a werewolf to sense things. This was magic.

I walked on, continuing to read the story. And by the looks of it, it seemed they got what they wanted from the moon.

The moon stone.

They asked the moon for power in a stone, and it answered them.

Before the birth of the children, they hid the stone away and kept a key inside the cave here. That was what we were there to recover. Luke looked at me and the end part of the story. There was a hole there, about the size of a finger, and the instruction from the story says only the real blood of a Peline and a Heline will show the key.

What we had to do was obvious. Luke went first. He put a finger inside the hole. At first, nothing happened, but as he was about to remove it, he got pricked, and a drop of blood dropped from his hand inside the hole. Then it was my turn, I put my hand inside the hole, and just like him, I got pricked too. It was a sharp pain that was gone as soon as it came. We both stepped away from the wall and watched to see what would happen.

For a while, it was all quiet. And then, there was a little crack above the hole where we just put our hand. The hole grew gently until it cracked open, and a bigger hole was revealed behind it. The bigger hole held a key. I reached out and picked it up. It was made of brass, just as the knife Merine had used to cut us earlier. I turned the key over in my hand as the rock that covered the door opened up and light flooded in. Merine stood at the opening, a big smile on his face.

“You look like you’ve seen ghosts,” he said.

“Magic,” Luke said.

“Yes. There are secrets about the old world that died with the royal family. But some of them remained inside the moon stone.”

“We have the key, then,” I said, “Let’s go get it.”

Merine chuckled. “That is just one of the three keys you need to get to the moon stone. Now, on to the next task. Are you ready?”

“Of course,” I said. I was eager to be done with this.

“Let’s get it over with,” Luke added.

Merine led us out of the cave and back to the woods, where there were a group of kids held tiny cauldrons that seemed to be steaming. I could get a whiff from them. There was some sort of herb in there. Merine stopped in front of the kids and collected two cauldrons before walking back to Luke and me and handing us one each.

I took it, wondering what we were supposed to do with them. The smell from inside the cauldron was a bit irritating. Whatever was in there, I was sure it wouldn’t taste nice. I let the cauldron sit on my palms as I listened to Merine.

“The old families,” he started, “The royal families were not just known for their reach into the secrets of the world that have been kept from us. They were also known for their strength, and a descendant of them must be ready to prove themselves in battle.”

I think I have done that already, but I didn’t say anything. Luke and I had evaded a horde of hunters to get here. We’ve killed scores and managed to stay alive.

“A descendant of royalty must be tested, and their strength pushed to the brink. Only the best is expected of them, and only then will the moon stone show itself to them. Only then will they find the other keys to unlock the box inside which the moon stone awaits you. You have been introduced to the magic that flows in your blood. It is time you are introduced to the strength in your blood.”

A gentle growl filled the air as I heard new footsteps approach us from within the woods. It wasn’t the growl of a werewolf. It was something different. I watched as the steps got closer to us, and I got a sniff of something different in the air. It was a predator like us, and I could smell its hunger for blood. Soon, men carrying a big cage came from within the wood and stopped beside Merine. The cage was holding a cheetah. It was about five feet tall, his face was set on Luke, and I knew what they would have us do.

This wouldn't be like chasing a deer. This would be different. More intense and dangerous.

"Drink the potion in the cauldron."

"What does it do?" I asked.

"It helps you," Merine said, and from the tone of his voice, I knew we weren't getting any more than that. I took a sniff of it again to see if I could detect its contents, but I couldn't. They all just smelled strange.

"Bonne might have a better time doing that," Luke said, and I agreed. I did as Merine said and took a gulp from it, and just as I guessed, it tasted horrible.

"All of it," Merine said, and I groaned before finishing it. The cheetah growled back at me.

When we were done, Merine collected the cauldrons and handed them back to the kids behind him. "The rule here is simple. There are no rules. You do whatever it takes to hunt down the cheetah and bring us its head."

"Is that really necessary?" Luke asked. "You just saw the cave accept our blood and give us the key. Obviously, we are what we claim to be. Why the need for more tests?"

"You are what you claim to be. But what you are doesn't make you entitled to the stone. If you want it, you will have to earn it."

"What if we die out there? It's a cheetah, not a chimp."

"If you are what you think you are, then you have nothing to fear. Your ancestors hunted cheetahs for sport."

With no more objection from Luke or me, Merine turned to leave. "The cage won't open until we are far from here."

I watched them all go, and soon it was just me, Luke, and the growling beast that looked ready to tear us into pieces. Merine said we needed to capture it, but the cheetah looked like it wanted to fight us. It kept growling at us, its black eyes scanning the environment behind us and then settling on me. I could see the intent behind them. They were those of a murderer prepared to leave with no regret.

I had killed scores of hunters that people had described as dangerous, but looking at the cheetah, I knew this would be the hardest job I had done yet.

Merine and the others were gone, and we waited patiently for the cheetah,

“We attack once it comes out,” Luke said.

He looked eager and wanted to be done with this. I wanted to be too, but I felt wary about this cheetah. It wasn't an animal I had ever come up against. I have not come up against so many animals, just deer, but I had a feeling they don't think like humans. They attack just because they are predators, and there aren't any complexities to their thought process. That would make them utterly dangerous, which was disturbing for me.

The gate of the cage creaked, and slowly, it lifted. I couldn't tell if they did that by magic or if there were some kind of mechanics in place to open the cage after a while.

Luke and I didn't have to talk to communicate. We knew what must be done. We flanked the cheetah, each of us ready to attack it from the side once it stepped out. The gate was all the way up now, and the cheetah took the first step out of it and smelled the air. It moved back into the cage as though it was disappointed with what it found in the air. I watched it intently, not taking my eyes off its black eyes, so that I could be able to tell what it would do next.

But I wasn't ready for it when it happened. Neither of us was. The cheetah leaped out of the cage suddenly and dashed at me. It was unbelievably fast, and I only had time to push myself upward to avoid its attack. But it moved up with me, its movement so fluid, it felt like I was fighting with the air. It snapped at me, its heavy jaws looking to clasp down on my arm. But I moved out of the way just in time, stumbling to the ground about two feet away from it, and Luke was at my side immediately.

We were both ready, but we weren't ready for that. The cheetah turned to look at us for a while, but then it yapped and started towards the woods, right in the direction where the tribe village was.

I was up immediately, and we started after it. It was fast, almost faster than Luke and I, but we kept at it. It would take a while to get back to the clan, and Merine and the others had to have made a good distance. So, we might catch up to it before it hurt anyone.

This is a stupid test, I thought as I grabbed on to the tree closest to me and used it to lunge myself forward. The push was the longest I had ever done, and I felt a sudden surge of energy in my limbs and veins. The potion Merine had us drink had started working.

I was stronger than ever, and there was no sign of fatigue settling in any time soon. I continued using the tree to lunge myself forward, and Luke was doing the same thing. We were catching up to the cheetah, which was just a blur in front of us. The only other option we had was to flank it and attack it from either side, so it would be indecisive about who to attack first. It had come at me back there because I was closest to the cage. That must be what it had moved back into the cage to observe. We had slacked for a moment there, and it was making us pay.

Besides the strength in my body, I was acutely aware of my environment. Even though I was running so fast and everything seemed almost like a blur, I could tell where I was going to land next and was calculating my next ten moves before I even made them. The analytical portion of my mind was working harder than ever.

We were just a couple of feet from the cheetah now, and we moved apart to give ourselves a better advantage. I was going to get it from the right and Luke from the left. But as we started to move, the cheetah found a tree with a long hanging branch and jumped into it. The speed at which it did that was so impressive that I barely saw it happen.

“Can they do that?” I asked Luke.

“Yes. For trees with branches hanging low.”

“What do we do now?”

“We go after it.”

It was sealed then. We started after the cheetah, and our plan of flanking it from the sides flew out of the window. I used a tree close to me to lob myself onto the tree it climbed, using my claws to hang on to the trunk and then pulling myself further up until I was just inches from the cheetah. Climbing up the tree had slowed its progress, and it was obviously not a good climber. It came at me when it saw it had made a wrong decision, leaping at me with such strength and power that had I not moved out of the way and it had knocked me down, it would have taken a limb from me. I let go of the tree, pushing myself against it but balancing in the air and jumping down at it, tackling it to the ground.

I had my hands around its neck, but it shook itself free. And stood before Luke and me.

There was no running anymore. It was time to fight.

It growled at us, looking menacing and daring. It attacked first before we could even make a charge. It struck with its jaws, snapping at Luke first, who ducked and shifted to his left to evade the attack. Luke was fast enough to turn around before the cheetah started its dash at me and delivered a punch to its neck. It fell to the ground whimpering but was up again. It came at me next. I stood my ground and didn't move out of the way. It was strong, it was fast, but so was I. And I was one thing better than it. I was human, and the punch Luke just gave it weakened it. I could see the fear in its eyes. I punched it in the neck as it came for me again.

It stumbled to the ground, whimpering harder than before. This time when it stood up, it didn't come back. It turned around to run, but Luke jumped in front of it. It turned around to find another way out, but I was there too, waiting for it, and it made its decision then.

To go out with a fight.

It leaped at me, its jaws opened, and its sharp teeth came for my neck. This time, I couldn't just stand and wait for it. It would have gotten my head pulled off my neck. I went at it instead and moved to the ground, my knees sliding against the forest floor. I knew it would leave a bruise later, but I didn't

care. I rolled underneath the leaping cheetah, impaled it with my claws, and got it by the neck. I dragged my claws through it, pulling against every resistance I met on the way until it got to its stomach.

It fell to the ground, bleeding. I stood up, drenched in blood, watching it as it whimpered and died.

We were done with that test, now onto the next.

But we were not. A couple of growls around us alerted us to new companions. I looked up and found a herd of cheetahs surrounding us. I counted six of them. One of them, the biggest, looked to be in the leading position, and it looked at the dead cheetah and then at me. What it communicated with those eyes was glaring. Revenge.

The cheetahs were to the village and had murderous intentions. This was far from over.

Chapter twenty-seven (Luke)

Impossible. That was the first word that dropped into my mind. A pack of cheetahs attacking? I didn't know them to be social, and I could tell these were a mix of both males and females. They rarely get along except to mate. This was an unusual thing happening.

Hayley moved closer to me until her back was against mine. We watched the cheetahs. We had just killed one of them, and that had been tasking. There was no way we could go up against the six of them. They would maul us to death.

"How did they get here?" Hayley asked as the cheetahs started to make their way down to us. They wouldn't attack as a group, which I was sure of. Animals aren't coordinated, and animals like cheetahs prefer to hunt alone.

But this wasn't hunting. They were here not because we were a source of food to them. They were here to kill us. Revenge effused out of them. We've killed one of them, and they wanted to kill one of us.

"We have to distract them," I said as they continued to move closer, their growls getting more menacing, and anytime now, they would attack.

"How?" Hayley asked.

"One of us has to be the bait. Wait here and fight them while the other runs. I think they will stay here to fight. You have to go get help."

"I am not leaving you," Hayley said. The authority in her voice told me there was no changing her mind. I couldn't leave her either. Not with those things here.

The first cheetah attacked. It was a small one, but very fast, and it came at me. It was hard to evade its attack, and it hit me in the stomach, scratching me with its fangs along the way. I tried to claw at it but missed, and I fell to the ground. It had barely landed before it charged back at me again, and there

was another coming for me. I pulled myself up before it got too close. I looked around me to find Hayley fighting off another pair of cheetahs.

I looked up, and there were more standing by trees, not yet attacking but just watching. More of them had come.

The first cheetah came at me again and was assisted, this time by another, which was about twice the size and just as fast. I got a punch into the first one, but the second grabbed at my arm with its teeth biting into me. It was dragging me, and wanted to pull my arm off. I punched at it repeatedly until it removed its jaws from my arm. Then I moved away immediately, so it didn't come at me again.

Hayley moved closer to me too. We were not winning this. It was obvious.

"Where are they coming from?" she asked.

I couldn't tell because even now, they had swelled in number, and they had us surrounded. Still, they were not attacking as a whole, but two or three of them on one of us would be impossible to fight off, and even if we did fight them off, there were more waiting. The only option remained distracting them and getting help. If they finish with us, they will head to the village and kill them all.

"Hayley," I said and turned to her. "You have to do it. You have to go get help. Tell Merine. I will hold them off, I promise you."

"No," she said. "I am never going to leave you. Never."

"The villagers," I told her. "We need to warn them. They need to prepare."

"Do you think this is new to them? They will have measures in place to protect them against things like this. This is just us."

She had a point there. But why would they let us kill that cheetah if they knew others would attack us? This couldn't possibly be part of the test because there was no way we were surviving this.

“We are in this together,” Hayley said. “We fight our way out of this together. Or we die together fighting it.”

I reached for her hand and squeezed it as the cheetahs closed around us, and another leaped at me. I moved down, my claws at the ready, and grabbed at it. I drove through its belly, killing the first one and turning around to get the next, but then I got mauled in the face. I didn't see what hit me, but I fell to the ground and scampered to get back up. It never happened.

One of the cheetahs climbed on top of me and bit hard into my side while another pulled at my arm. Pain raged through my body, and I screamed out loud as I tried to get them off, but they had me pinned. I looked to my left, and a group of cheetahs was on Hayley, too, and she couldn't fight them back. I watched as they got her down, and they buried their fangs into her neck, pulling at it, and then she was quiet.

I screamed again and tried to get at her, but I couldn't move. I was dying. I could feel the life slipping out of me.

Werewolves had been unable to bring us down, but cheetahs did the job alright. We couldn't even get to the last ritual before we died. I closed my eyes and welcomed death. Before the darkness overwhelmed me, I saw Hayley. If there were a heaven for werewolves, she would be there waiting for me. I took solace in that.

I could feel my heart beating. It was a distant feeling that seemed so far to reach. Just a gentle repetitive motion that started the blood pumping through my body. I remember what happened, and I knew I shouldn't be here. I should be dead, but I wasn't.

I could feel the softness of a bed pushing against my back, and smells started coming to me. It was the smell of herbs burning in a furnace, and then voices came next. They began as a whisper, and then I could hear them and make out words. Merine was speaking with someone else.

“Are they coming to?” he asked.

“Yes,” the other man replied, “Give them a minute. They might be disoriented at first.”

I blinked my eyes open, and light flooded through, making me close them back immediately. I opened it gently again to let my eyes get accustomed to the light. Soon, I could look around and saw I was in a room of some sort. It wasn't the room they gave Hayley and me, and it wasn't Merine's room. It was a different one. And the room was lit up by a burning furnace in the corner.

I should be dead, I remembered again, but I couldn't even feel any pain. It was like I had gone to sleep, and then I was awake again. I remembered the cheetahs. I remembered how they attacked and their fangs sticking into my body. They pulled at my limbs, bit me, and they killed me. I died. They killed me, and they killed Hayley.

At that thought, I sat up immediately, but I got woozy and fell off the bed, my head hitting the floor

“Come on,” I heard Merine say, and soon I could see him above me. He was looking down at me. “Help me with him. Let's get him back on the bed.”

He stretched his hands to me, but I moved them away and turned away from him. “Where's she?” I asked as I struggled to get up. “I saw her die! Where's she?”

Merine held my hands again; this time, I didn't push him off. I let him pull me up until I was sitting on the table, and then he handed me a cup of water.

“Drink that. It should help you calm down.”

I didn't take the water from him. “Where's Hayley?” I asked.

“She's right there,” he said and pointed to the end of the room, where there was another bed. She was there, sleeping. I stood up and walked to her. She was just like me, with no injury to her body and she looked so peaceful just sleeping there.

“What this?” I asked Merine. “What did you do to us?”

“You passed the test,” he said. “The ritual is done. You have all the keys.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I will tell you all that happened after she wakes up. For now, you need to sit down and drink some water. You need to rest. When we are done here, I will take you to the stone. It is waiting for you. They are all waiting for you.”

A couple of hours later, we walked down the same road we’d walked since we’d arrived at the village, but something was different this time. People lined the road this time, and they all bowed a bit as we passed. They whispered amongst themselves, and to them, we were close to gods. We had come here for the stone, and we would be leaving with it. It was something that had never happened before, and that was what awed them.

Merine had told us what happened after Hayley woke up, and she was disoriented like I was. She looked at herself and couldn’t believe it. We both thought we had died, but it had all happened in our minds. The drink he gave us from the cauldron contained hallucinogens, and it distorted reality, so we thought we were getting attacked by cheetahs. That was the last test. To see if the connection we shared was genuine and strong enough that we would have the same hallucinations. We passed that.

We walked past the group and came to the mountain again. Merine was waiting with a box again. They seem to have a lot of those just waiting around. We stopped before him, and he nodded at us.

“Centuries ago, against better judgment, the leader of our clan let two royals into our village. They were women heavy with pregnancies and couldn’t be turned away. The story that follows is one that we have exhausted in excess and have become familiar with, but it is also one that was never finished. It was one with an open end, and today, we bring a close to the story. Throughout our lives, we have made the stone a purpose. We have waited for the day when the ones worthy of it shall walk through our gate—not that we have one.”

That got a couple of snickers from the people, and Merine smiled before he continued. “When the two of them came in with the medallions on their necks, I saw something different about them. I saw the look of royalty on them, and I was tempted to hand over the stone to them. To do this so that the clan can be fulfilled. So, we can say in the history of men; we played our part. But aligning with better judgment, I put them through the rigor of the ritual, and they came out victorious. Now, they have earned this, and it shall be theirs. Our job as custodians of the stone is over. Now we can go back to being a mere clan with families and children to care for.

Yola stepped out of the crowd, and he had the keys with him. He handed the three to Merine, who smiled and nodded at him.

“The first two keys to the box have always been with us,” Merine said. “But the last key, the old family kept away to ensure only someone with the royal blood will be able to recover. For the first two, we were instructed only hand them to the couple that passed the test. The couple destined and fated to bring peace and restore the flourishing old order to the werewolf world. You two are that couple. And you have proved yourselves beyond doubt.”

He opened the box, and there it was the moon stone.

It looked like a random piece of rock, black and with jagged edges, but there was a pull in it that I felt immediately. It wasn't just an ordinary piece of stone. It was power. A breathing and living power existed inside the rock; now, it was mine and Hayley's.

Chapter twenty-eight (Viper)

There was too much cold for this time of the year. Just a simple breath of it, and my throat was getting sore. It felt like I had chewed dry ice. I walked down the stairs in the Palace and walked out. The two boys I had set outside the door bowed at me, and I nodded back. They were just there to save face. If Luke and Hayley were to show up now, those kids wouldn't be able to stop them. They might stand and fight because they want to prove themselves, get good word to me, and book their place in the community early enough. The smart thing to do, however, would be to run away. Those two were no joke, and heaven knows what has been done to them inside that tribe, where they had gone missing for days now,

I walked down the road, looking at everyone I passed. There was relative calm on the faces of the humans, but the werewolves looked a bit agitated. They were scared. They had heard of what might happen, and they were worried.

I came to my destination, which was a pub at the end of the street that catered only to wolves. I pushed the door open, and the conversation in the pub stopped as everyone took a sniff of me, and they recognized me immediately. Not a single word was said until I reached the bar and nodded at the lady tending the bar.

"There is someone here for me," I said, and the girl nodded.

"Come with me, please," she said after stepping out from behind the bar and led me to a room at the far end of the pub. Once we crossed the room, the conversations behind me resumed again. I knew if they hadn't been talking about me before, they definitely would now.

The bartender led me to the room lit only by a singular bulb that dangled, throwing its shadows around. The lady stepped out fast and left me with a man seated against the shadows, drinking a pint of ale. He looked up at me and cocked his head.

“You didn’t make an order with her before she left,” he said, his voice a croaky terror

I stopped right in front of him and took the only other seat in the room, and sat across from him on the table.

“I am not here to drink,” I said.

“I have found that conversations like this go better with drinks—something to temper our anxieties. For example, you are worried I will kill you here, and the status of your position wouldn’t matter much. Alphas seem to be dying these days. And I also am considering the possibility of killing you and getting away with it. They are both erratic thoughts and non-beneficial to the two of us. The drinks help tame them.”

“I don’t need a drink. I have enough fortitude for that.”

“Well, I don’t,” he said and stepped away from the darkness. He was just as they had described. Dashing.

His look was his greatest weapon—an instrument of deceit. You wouldn’t expect someone so good-looking to be capable of such evil.

“So, what do you want from me, Viper?” he asked.

They called him Herald, and years ago, he was in the employ of the Tarloux family, making kills for them. He could conquer a city on his own and have them bequeathed to the family. They didn’t need armies back then because they had him. The man who precedes loss. You see him, and you count your losses. The downside, though, was that no one knew what he looked like. At least no one lives to describe him. When he got tired of giving the family cities, he went freelance, and now he works for just about anyone that could afford him. He was expensive but sure to get the job done.

“You know what I want. The alpha killer and her new lover.”

Herald chuckled. “She’s a nuisance to you, isn’t she? For a month, you’ve been chasing her, and you’re no closer to getting her. You must be frustrated.”

“She’s killed scores of hunters. She seems to know what she is doing.”

“Of she does. That is why she is still alive. Now, you’ve told me what you want me for, but I have no interest in the alpha killer. No, I am here for a different interest.”

“What is that?”

“You have someone in holding that I would love to talk to. Or rather, someone that might have useful information for me. They call him Bonne, and you have his family. His wife and sickly son. Give them to me. Bonne and I have unfinished business from years back.”

“You are not here to make demands,” I told him. “You are here to be hired. And I would advise you to watch the manner in which you speak to me. You are in my town.”

Heralder looked like he still had something to say, but the look on my face held him back, and he just watched me. I didn’t like the look on his face because it looked like he was watching me, looking for a weakness. I wasn’t going to give him that.

“This is what I need you to do,” I told him. “You get Hayley and Luke.”

“Alright,” Herald said. “I’ll do what you need me to do, but I need to see that family too. You do that for me, and I’ll be in your debt.”

“I do that for you, and you fight with me should I ever need your help with intelligence about the Tarloux family, you give it to me.”

He seemed to be thinking about it for a while, and then he nodded.

“Alright, I’ll help you with the Tarloux family.

He had agreed to that so easily, that I didn’t trust him. Going up against the Tarloux family isn’t child’s play, and he would know that more than anyone else. Why was he so ready to do it, then?

I moved closer to Herald to threaten him and make him aware that should he cross me, he would have to answer to my wrath, and something clicked in me. The man called Bonne

never once came to claim his family. And here I was, sitting with a man that I had never seen before, one I had contacted through letters and who had claimed to be Herald.

What if this was the first move?

I jumped across the table immediately and came for Herald or the man pretending to be Herald. He was faster than I could have imagined, but he didn't fight back at him. He removed a knife from his pocket and just pricked me. I felt a heat rush through my body, and I fell to the ground. He had paralyzed me. I tried to move, to get up, but nothing worked. I remained on the floor as he walked over and stood above me.

"I told Bonne, you might look a fool, but not a total one. I told him I should kill you, but he didn't want to throw the city into disarray. They need their alpha, even if he is one without a spine."

He knelt very close to me and smiled into my face. "And yes, I am Herald. You got the right guy, but you picked him for the wrong job. I am a lone wolf. I don't hunt other lone wolves. You pack wolves should learn about camaraderie."

He stood up and walked away from me then. I remained on the floor for a while as the poison rushed through me and my body struggled to burn it out as fast as possible. I remained still so it would happen faster.

After about an hour on the floor, I was finally to stand up, and I walked out of the pub, heading back to the Palace. When I got there, the kids by the door were gone, and there was a commotion inside.

I saw Lenny walk up to me.

"Where have you been," he asked, but I didn't answer him. "They came and got them."

"Who?"

"The lone wolves. They came minutes ago, got the family, and left. Where were you?"

"Dealing with family matters," I told him.

“We just lost the only bargaining chip we had against Luke and Hayley. We should have known the Bonne fellow was plotting something when he didn’t come to us begging.”

“How did he get in so easily?”

“He paralyzed people. They say he is some kind of herbalist. He is good with things like that and knows how to render a werewolf useless within seconds.”

I was too familiar with that.

“There is news,” Lenny said and dragged me under the stairs so we could talk. “They are out. They got out of the tribe, and they have the moon stone with them. They are heading right here, back to Nillport. You know what they want. We will not be able to deal with them. See what one of their friends wreaked in here in just under thirty minutes. We need help, Viper. Help from whatever source you can get it. We need help, and we need help fast.”

“We need to make the delivery then. Hurry it up. Is that possible?”

Lenny said. “It’s not impossible, but it will be hard.”

“If I would ask the Tarloux for help, I need to put a good foot forward. If I get them their merchandise, then deliberations go faster. Make the calls, Lenny. In two days, we will make the delivery. Let’s put this to bed and focus on Hayley and Luke. We can’t have them running amok in the city.”

“You know what that means for you, right? Contacting the Tarloux for help.”

“Yes,” I told him. I knew what it meant. It meant siding with the most dangerous family out there and inviting them to Nillport. It might even mean giving up my throne, but that wouldn’t happen without me putting in a fight. I nodded at Lenny. I was ready for this, and if war was what Hayley and Luke wanted, then I would give it to them.

Chapter twenty-nine (Hayley)

We knew what we had to do now that we were back in town. Even though I felt different and more reassured in myself because we had the stone and because I knew Luke was with me and he would always have my back, I didn't feel any more powerful. We only have the stone and haven't activated it just yet. We didn't need to because the next job we were about to take on, we wouldn't be doing alone.

Luke and I walked side by side through the heavy fog forming in the morning. It seemed appropriate for the clandestine meeting we were about to have. The smell of metal and engine oil trickled through the fog and to my nose, and we dropped from an abandoned pier onto the top of a container. I wonder how they moved it there.

Beyond the smell of the oil and metal, I could smell the sea too. It was just half a mile from us, which made this spot the best place to meet—hidden with all the abandoned cars and metal scraps. No one would think of finding us here, and so close to the dock too. I jumped down from the container and was back on the ground again.

We'd been back almost two days but didn't venture deeper into the town. We didn't even let Bonne know we were around. He wouldn't be able to help us here, so there was no point in telling him. Luke said it would only make him worry more. On our travel back, we didn't encounter any hunters, and that was because of Merine. He had some of the tribe members follow us, and they masked our scent the whole way. Some hunters had been waiting for us outside the clan, but we used a different route to evade them. By the time we were about three leagues away from the clan, and they were sure they hadn't followed us, our entourage returned, and it was just Luke and me. We made the rest of the journey on our own, and it went uneventfully.

When we got to Nillport, one of Luke's lone wolf friends had a message for us. They had found where the kids to be sold were

being kept, and the sale was getting hurried up. Something about an incident in the Palace and Viper looking to get in the good graces of the Tarloux family. He would need their help for what was to come.

Well, those good graces will have to wait. We arrived, and they were all waiting for us. A total of ten of them were standing beside an old Chevrolet Jeep missing its engine.

“You’re alive,” the first said and stood before Luke and me. I recognized him from the first time I was at the reservation and made a fool of myself. It was just about a month ago, but it seemed like a lifetime ago. A lot of things have happened in such a very short time. Things that would forever change and define my life. I recognized the man, but I didn’t know his name. “We thought it was a trap when we got the message that you wanted to meet here. But the location had to be some kind of message. Because I know this place. This was where we first met.”

“And fought,” Luke added.

“Yes, and fought. What are we doing here, Luke?” the man asked and looked at me. He gave a little nod of acknowledgment, but I wasn’t getting anything beyond that. I was the girl that took their friend away, and they didn’t know whether or not he would be back.”

“Declaring war,” Luke said,

The man shook his head. “You declared war a long time ago, Luke. You declared it when you eloped with the Alpha killer here.”

“Her name is Hayley,” Luke said defensively and stepped forward. The man cocked his head, interested, and nodded.

“Hayley,” he said, correcting himself and nodding at me again. The others stepped forward this time, and they all stood behind the first one. A couple of weeks ago, Luke was on the other side with them; now, he was with me.

“What happened in the Palace?” I asked.

“You’ll find out. Bonne asked us not to tell you. A secret between the two of you,” the first man said, looking at Luke

with a sly smile.

“What did you mean war?” another one asked, and I wished I knew all of their names. They were all Luke’s friends, and I would come to know them one by one. Their stories and how they became lone wolves. For now, I just watched them. They were the people that saved Luke and me when Viper cornered us on our way out of town. So, they were on our side.

“Before you left, you said you were going to get something. Where is it?”

Luke looked at me and nodded his head. I dipped my hand into the small pouch I had tied around my neck, removed the stone, and showed it to them. They all stepped back from it, reacting differently than I expected them to. I didn’t understand why they stepped back.

“What is it?” Luke asked.

“That thing,” the first one said. “Too much power. I can feel it pushing against me. Like a tornado.”

Luke and I felt the power in it when Merine showed us, but it wasn’t as strong as a tornado as he described. I put it back in the pouch, and they all seemed to recover.

“But the stone isn’t why we called you here today.”

“You want to attack the package?” the man asked, and he looked at the others.

“You know about it?” Luke asked.

“The new alpha isn’t James. He isn’t good at covering his tracks. We found out easily, and he’s in a stir, so he’s getting sloppy. We were making plans to attack it before, but we didn’t want to do that without assurance that you were alive. Bonne thinks if we do, the council will come down heavy on us, and we need to be ready to receive the heat. We need you to do that. We need the two of you to do that.”

“So, you guys are ready for war?” I asked them but didn’t need to get an answer. I could see it in their eyes. They’d been just lone wolves for a long time—the wolves that lived in the

reservation, and now, they wanted to make a name for themselves. This was the first step towards achieving that.

“Yes, we are.”

“You know what this means don’t you?” Luke asked. “If we attack the Tarloux family’s merchandise, they will come for us. They have always hated lone wolves. Now, they will have reasons to exterminate us.”

“We know. You have your stone thing. It’s got some power, doesn’t it?”

I smiled at them. “It has a lot of powers.”

“Good. Let’s go up against some bad wolves then.”

Luke and I led the charge, but it wasn’t much of a charge. The container where they kept the children was guarded by humans and just a handful of werewolves. The humans had guns, but it was over before they could understand what was happening. We cut through them like grass on a field. It was too easy. When we were done, Luke picked one of the wolves, who was still alive but trying to escape.

He smacked the wolf against the container and looked into his eyes that were filled with fear.

“I want you to deliver a message for me,” he said as the wolf squirmed under his touch. He recognized him and couldn’t take his eyes off Luke and me. I stepped closer to drive the fear further. “Go to Viper. Tell him we freed the kids, and we are coming for him next.”

He dropped the werewolf, and he scampered off. Then we walked to the large container, where we could hear some screams and whimpers. The kids were in there. One of the lone wolves broke the padlock used to lock it with, and the kids were there. The smell from them hit us hard, and we both stepped back.

“They are werewolves,” Luke said. “All of them.”

I moved further back than the rest as my mind was digesting information, trying to understand what this meant. James said he’d been delivering kids to the family for a very long time.

What does the family want with little werewolves? Werewolves that were yet to ascend. The answer was obvious to me, but I didn't want to believe it.

"What do they want with this many kids?" one of the lone wolves asked.

"An army," I replied, barely an audible whisper, but I knew even with the whimpers coming from the kids, they could hear me. "They are training an army of hunters."

Just like they did when they conquered the royal families. They needed hunters to win the throne. Now, they needed hunters to hold on to the throne. We'd stopped the merchandise from going through and signaled our interest in a war with the Tarloux family. We knew they were powerful, but we had underestimated the extent of their powers. If the Tarloux family made the first hunters, then they would have techniques unknown even to the best hunters out there. They will be ruthless killers with a hunger for blood and the hunt. Killers, we weren't capable of going up against.

Yes, we have the moon stone, which will only make Luke and me stronger. But can we take on a horde of specially trained hunters? Hunters that the Tarloux family have trained over the years to kill werewolves.

There is an endless supply of werewolf children on the streets all around the world—an endless supply providing an army to the Tarloux family.

This wouldn't be the walk through the park that I assumed it would be. We had assumed we would be going up against Viper backed up by the family. We would be going up against more than that. We would be going up against the foundation that the werewolf community has come to know and recognize for the last couple of centuries. To many werewolves out there, the Tarloux family was the archetypical definition of normalcy. They ruled with an iron hand, but with them, there was stability and peace. People recognized their position and played their roles obediently. Going up against them would be going up against the lives these people have crafted,

depending on the stability Tarloux had provided. It would be going up against what it means to be a werewolf now.

“Are you okay, Hayley?” Luke asked me as he started towards me.

No, I wasn't. I was far from okay. I had hit a stack of dominoes the day I killed James; now, it was all falling down on me. And it was falling heavy.

But this didn't start with me. I am just part of the cascade. It started with the three friends. It started with Tarloux's jealousy and his resulting reign of tyranny. And if there is anything a tyrant like the Tarloux family had accumulated as much as they have an army, it is enemies.

“We need an army,” I said to Luke. “We need to get to Bonne and get people that are willing to go up against the Tarloux. We've declared war on them, and they have an army of hunters. We need an army of our own.”

Chapter thirty (Luke)

We were standing at the door to Bonne's home again. Something had happened while I was gone; I could tell. I could sense it in the way Mikhail had talked to me when we took the dock and rescued those kids and the hours it took to get the kids somewhere safe until their families came to recover them and then to get back into town and head to Bonne, I had my heart in my mouth. Had I put him and his family in danger? It seemed that was what had happened. But if someone were dead, Kurt would have told me. So, I calmed myself down with the fact that they were all alive and well.

The walk down to their house had been uneventful. I had expected Viper to send some more hunters after us, but it seemed he had learned his lesson. He would stay his hand and think for a while about his next line of action. He wouldn't be so rash anymore. But it doesn't matter how long he takes to decide. He only had one sensible line of action. To call the Tarloux. If he doesn't call them, they will simply waltz into town and take over. If he does now, he could still have a sort of negotiation with them.

I wouldn't want to be him right now. Barely a month in charge, and everything was falling apart around him.

I looked at Hayley, who looked a bit tense. She doesn't do well around strangers; I have come to know that. She was a strong woman, though. One that was more than capable of taking care of herself, and I fell deeper in love with her every day I spent with her. I don't need the ritual or the moon stone to tell me that she is the woman I am fated to be with. I can feel it deep inside me. Nothing I have ever done felt more right, and it feels right to be with her. It seemed I was made to love her.

She had handled the sudden transition in her life for a month. She went from being a member of James's posse to becoming a fugitive, and now she was a rebel, looking to rouse the foundation of the werewolf community and bring it to its

knees. She had that stern and steady look on her that said she could do whatever she wanted. Become whoever she wants.

The moon stone made the two of us feel more powerful, but this with her wasn't just about the moon stone. It was what she was. A woman that keeps her head up fighting, and survives no matter the condition. She was just like me.

I held her hand as footsteps became audible behind the door and smiled at her. "They are happy to have you here," I assured her.

She nodded at me and relaxed a bit. The door opened to show Bonne behind the door. I tried a smile at him, but he didn't return it. He looked behind him and closed the door before stepping out.

"What is it?" I asked. He was acting suspiciously.

"Jade got worse while you were gone. Something happened, but I took care of it."

"What happened, Bonne?"

"Don't worry about it," Bonne said, but he knew that wasn't possible.

"Was it Viper? What did he do?"

"I said I took care of it," he insisted. "Now, I need you to promise me something."

I squinted at him. I didn't like where this was going. Bonne keeping secrets never ends well. He isn't very good at doing that.

"What is it?"

"I need you to be on your best behavior," he said. "Nellie is with Jade. She's been by his side for days now and won't leave. There is someone in there that I had to recruit to help me—someone you might not like to see. But no fighting in there. Do you promise me?"

Bonne was acting very strangely, but I promised him because what would it hurt? He said there was someone in there that I wouldn't want to see. Many people have made an enemy of

me that I wouldn't want to see, but there was one that I would kill should I set my eyes on him. Bonne couldn't be referring to him.

"Wait," I told him before answering. "Tell me what happened while we were gone, and I promise not to fight whoever is in there."

"Viper took Jade and Nellie as hostages. I got them out, and that is all you need to know. The lone wolves helped."

So, that was what happened. Bonne had a deep resolve in him that I hadn't seen before. Something was different about him. More alert, more grounded.

"You did it, didn't you?" I asked him.

"Yes. I had to. They needed my help. What good is a philosophical stand if I can't help my family?"

He'd changed. He'd made use of his ability as a werewolf, something he hadn't done in over a decade, and I made him break his promise to himself because I put him and his family in danger.

"I am very sorry, Bonne. This is my fault."

"No, it's not. It is the situation we've found ourselves in, and we must act accordingly. Besides, who was I fooling? I am a werewolf and will always be a werewolf. I better accept that and stop acting like a kid. Now, I have told you what happened. Keep your promise."

He turned around and opened the door, smiling at Hayley as we stepped into the house. I sniffed once we were inside and would have picked up that scent anywhere in the world. He had been waiting for me, listening to our conversation, and now he stepped out of hiding and stood behind the table where Bonne had decoded the information on the medallion that led us to the lost tribe.

I know I promised Bonne not to fight, but I couldn't help it. My anger grew from within me. Years of vengeful thought pushed their way to the surface, and they spurred me on. I flew from the position I was in and across the room, right at him. I felt strong, and my anger was the right fuel. I swiped my claws

at him, and he moved, trying to escape them, but I was determined. He wasn't going to run. I turned around just in time before he made his escape and stuck a claw deep into the back of his neck, holding it just in place. I could pull it out along with his spine and kill him. He saw that I knew that, and he kept his peace. His eyes set on me.

He was under my control now, and there was no fighting. I growled, my anger seething. I would be justified to do this.

"I said no fighting, Luke," Bonne said from across the room. "And look at that. He is bleeding on the floor. You're going to have to clean that up."

I simply just growled and kept my eyes on him, looking into those dark and empty cold eyes of his. They called him the Herald, but to me, he was Fig. The man that made me lose my pack. Forgiveness was far from my heart right now, and right behind it was caring about the blood on Bonne's floor.

"Tell me why I shouldn't pull this out?" I asked him.

"What would that achieve?" he asked me.

"You'll die. I just saved about fifty kids from a life of perpetual servitude, but killing you will be more satisfactory."

The vileness in my voice surprised even me. But I didn't care. I let the hate eat me.

"Do it then," he said. "If it'd make you feel good, kill me. I am, after all, the sole source of all the pain you've had to carry in your heart all these years, and none of it is yours."

"Watch what you say."

"What?" he growled back at me. "Do you not want to take any fault at all? We wouldn't have been out there that night if it wasn't for your insistence. You needed to prove yourself, and your reluctance to stop and think is one of the reasons it happened. Do you not think so, Luke? Are you too much of a saint to consider that? Should we all pander to the piety in you?"

"I am no saint," I told him. "But you're the devil. You turned right around and worked for the enemy!"

“And I am here now, aren’t I? You want to bring that enemy down, don’t you? And I am here to help you.”

“Why should we trust you?”

“He helped me save Jade and Nellie, and the family is after him. They have a bounty out for him.”

“Hmm,” I groaned but didn’t take my claws off his neck.

“We need him, Luke,” Bonne said. “We know why you are here. We heard what happened on the dock. The whole community knows what happened at the dock. We need all the help we can get. He is one part of that help.”

I looked at Bonne. He was right, but that didn’t matter much to me now. I wanted to kill him. I wanted him to feel the pain I had been feeling all these years.

“Luke,” Hayley said. It was a gentle call, but it tugged at me. Her voice always gets to me. The others I could ignore, but not her. She was a part of me now. I groaned and looked at her. “Let him go. Let’s think about this. We need everyone we can get. He is powerful; I can smell it on him. We need his power.”

She was right. I couldn’t kill him, and I needed to consider the long game here. Fig had worked with the Tarloux family for a while, and he would know how they function. He would be a great source of intelligence for us.

I pulled my claw out of his neck, but I wasn’t finished with him. I stepped closer to him and cut him in the chest, cutting deep enough so that it would take a long while for the wound to heal.

“Keep him away from me,” I told Bonne. “Or I’ll kill him.”

I walked from him and looked around the house, picking up a napkin by the table to clean my hand. “Where’s Nellie?” I asked.

“Up,” Bonne said. “She’ll be glad to see you. And you, too,” he added, looking at Hayley. “You two go on while Fig and I clean up this mess.”

I nodded at him and started up the stairs, and Hayley followed me.

“Do you want to talk about what just happened?” she asked.

“No. Some other time.”

She didn't push it, and I was grateful for that. We got to the door, and I sighed to get myself under control. I knocked on the door, and a gentle call asked us to come in.

Nellie was seated on the floor with her legs wrapped underneath her. Jade was on a mattress placed on the floor in front of her. They had put it there because, at this stage of the illness, night terrors happen, and they didn't want him to fall. I walked closer and sat beside her. I looked at Hayley, who, for a while, wasn't sure what to do but sat beside Nellie and picked up her hand. Nellie smiled at her, a little color coming to her eyes.

“How much blood is on the kitchen floor?” she asked me and looked at me.

“Not so much. Bonne will clean it all up.”

“I told him to do it outside. He said you would behave yourself. Sometimes he forgets what it is like to be a werewolf.”

“I am very sorry, Nellie. Bonne told me what happened with Viper.”

“It is all part of the life we live, isn't it? I understand why he wanted to leave it all behind now. But he knows, and I know it is impossible to do that. We've been visited with our own pain of what it means to be a werewolf. But you have to promise me one thing, Luke.”

“Anything,” I told her. I didn't care what it was.

“The two of you,” Nellie said, holding both our hands now. “Bonne tells me all that happens, and I know our fate lies with the two of you now. You have to promise me. No matter what happens, those tyrants don't win. I can't let Jade live under their influence. I want a better world for my child. Will you help me make that possible?”

I wanted to talk, but Hayley beat me to it. She looked at Nellie as she spoke. There was conviction in those eyes of hers. She

was certain of what she was saying.

“That will never happen, Nellie. I promise you. This only ends one way, or it doesn’t end at all.”

Chapter thirty-one (Viper)

As I walked down the heralding hallways, I didn't feel any power or confidence. James had said the hallways were designed to instill power into you. Their arches, the taxidermal animals mounted on either side in close proximity. A constant reminder to werewolves that walked down the hallway that they were hunters. And not just any kind of hunter. They were top predators and must believe so. He said for an alpha, it tells you to be in control. You have these killers under your leash, and on your go, they can destroy cities and bring worlds down to their knees.

I opened the door to the throne room and stepped in. They were all waiting for me, and this time, they weren't even talking. But their eyes were saying a thousand words per minute. I took my seat and, for a long time, was just quiet.

No one knew what to say. How do I broach this matter before us and maintain assurance that we aren't rightly screwed? There was no way. I turned to Lenny and threw the first question at him.

"Is there any way we can get more children to give to the family before the week runs out? Not as many as we'd gathered before, but something good enough to appease them?"

"No," Lenny said. The answer was short and straightforward. "My men were killed during the rescue, and the ones that survived have gone into hiding because they don't want their names attached to a container filled with kids. Besides, it took James over a year to curate those kids."

"Because the family wants only the best of the best. They won't settle for whatever mediocre substitute you have for them. You have failed the family." Pique said.

I hated his guts, but he was right this time. There was nothing I could do. I have lost the family's shipment and am now at their mercy.

“Your enemies are in your backyard, and you cannot go get them. Even when they were miles away, you couldn’t get them. It is getting rather disgraceful.” Pique added. It was obvious what his intention was, but he wasn’t the one in charge here. He might be representing the Tarloux interest, but he should recognize that there are recognized protocols, and he would do very well to follow them. I am a wolf that’s gotten its tail stepped on, and I am very angry.

“You should watch how you talk to me,” I told him. “I am still the Alpha here.”

“It doesn’t look like it to me,” he said. “There is a lone wolf just miles from here that would challenge you to your throne, and when he does, he’ll take it from you. Face it; you’re a failure.”

Lenny’s face met mine, and he shook his head. It was rather obvious what Pique was doing, and I shouldn’t reply to him. It would be best for me to ignore him. But James had told me about the Tarloux family. Everyone is dispensable to them, no matter how strong or powerful you are. You need more than power to get the Tarloux under your thumb. You need resilience, and you need to present to them the idea that power means the whole world to you. You will do whatever it takes to keep it. And power comes in two ways, as James put it. Autonomy and control. The first is what the Tarloux will try to take from you when they try to get to you. You can hold on to it for a long time, but you can’t keep it in the end. You will have to surrender it for immediate control—the control of the things around you. You show them that you still have that, and they will take a moment to consider you.

I have lost control of what was close to me. My city was barely under my control, but I wasn’t going to let this table here, this court here, get out of my control.

“I’ll advise you to keep your tongue reined in, Pique,” I told him.

“And what if that doesn’t happen?” Pique asked, glad that he had me just where he wanted me.

I knew then he wasn't doing this because he wanted to. He had been commanded to, and this was the Tarloux way of seeing if I still had anything under control.

"I'll send you back in pieces to the ones who sent you here."

"You can try," he said and grinned at me. I had growled and jumped across the table. I wasn't Hayley, and I didn't have her speed, but years of getting beat up by her have taught me that the best attack was one people were not expecting.

Pique perked up and braced himself for my attack, his growling sound roaring through the throne room, but I didn't go for him directly. I dropped to the floor before him just at the last moment, and before he could react to the sudden detour and turn around to attack me, I stuck my claws into his stomach and tried to pull his innards out. My claws got in, but they never latched on to anything. He moved out of the way fast and fell against the table. He had a sharp reflex and pushed himself off the table just as I came for him. He was on the other side already, surprise etched on his face. He thought he had me with the first attack.

We were both crouched on the ground as the others in the room moved away from us. Lenny stayed the furthest away, and he looked like he had no interest in watching two werewolves go at it. I know how disturbing it must be for a human to watch us fight. We attacked each other with vigor and strength, like we wanted each other dead from the very first punch, and I guess there was a truth to that. We didn't fight to enjoy it like humans like to do. We fought to kill, to make a statement, to establish dominance, and dexterity barely comes to focus when that happens. I was looking at Pique, who was growling and watching me closely.

He was a hunter, trained by the family, so I knew he was a formidable opponent, and I also understood why he'd been at my court since the beginning. He was here to take me out in the event of my failure. They were counting on it. They knew I wasn't James, and there was no way I would wield the same amount of control and the love of the people that James had. I was weak, and if Pique killed me now, they would waltz into town and take it, suggesting that they needed to do it or the

city would have gone to hell without a ruler at its helm. They would be the necessary devil, and before the end of the year, all the werewolf children in Nillport would start training to be werewolf hunters and werewolf killers. Another cog in the Tarloux machine designed to kill other cogs that were going errant. I could see now why other older families never liked them, why they have always wanted the Tarloux gone but couldn't do it because of their power.

I couldn't let them take the city unopposed.

Pique came for me next, and there was a liveness to how he attacked. It was almost like he was floating in the air, and I had a déjà vu of fighting Hayley again. The way she always moved and how she could use standing structure to lob herself forward was like a cheetah cutting through the air. People who move like that, almost streamlined against the air, are good at making last-second decisions in the air. You would think they are coming for your right, but then as you guard that, they go for your left. So, I left myself open and let him come to me, so he could fully commit and wouldn't have time to move away as I blocked him.

He moved to his left very sharply, and was attacking with his fangs. He was too fast for me to move away, so I moved backward instead, and he had to push himself forward, but he had expended all the potential energy he had gathered to make the attack. I stepped forward immediately and kicked him in the groin. He stumbled to the ground, and before he could recover, I pounced on him, trying to claw at his throat and be done with it, but he wriggled out from under me and threw me against the table. He didn't come at me immediately. He was still in pain. And by the look on his face, he had expected me to be an easier challenge.

I took the fight to him this time, and he was more careful, looking to understand my tactics. But I had none. I was simply waiting for his attack and was forcing him to make one. When I got close enough to him, and he saw I was still very much open, he came at me, and he moved to his left again. I tried to get out of the way, but he was faster than me, and he punched me in the stomach. I fell to the ground as pain wracked me.

Luckily, he didn't extend his claws. He didn't have the luxury to do that.

I was up again and watching him. He had gone left before. I needed him to go left one more time and then attack him.

He was getting frustrated that the fight was taking longer, and he came at me again. This time, he went left again. He might not have noticed it, or maybe he had thrown caution to the wind, but he had gotten predictable now. He got me this time, under the chest with his claws searching for my lungs, but I was out of the way swiftly, blood dripping from my chest.

The two of us stumbled to the ground, and when I stood back up, I led the attack. I moved to the left, too, simulating him, and he had it easy to move with me and block my attack, but I was going to use his own poison against him. I moved away from the left just in time, and he was caught in that position. He was swift and fluid, but he favored moving to the left, and when I moved left to force him to move left, too, he had committed too hard, and there was no way he could recover fast enough to save himself. I stepped closer to him before he could turn and swiped at his neck with a claw. Blood spurted out, and he stared at me, his eyes wide with surprise as he fell to the ground and grappled against his throat as though that would make him stop the bleeding. He was dead in seconds.

I looked up from him and to the other. Klint had a gentle smile on him, and Pique had gone white.

"I know," I told Klint. "I'll send the Tarloux a message. We need their help. I'll send their delegate along with the message too."

I looked at Pique on the floor and felt proud of myself. This is what it means to become a leader. I have taken charge, and the truth remained that I needed help and wouldn't be able to handle what came next on my own. Besides, Klint was right. Whether I invited them or not, the Tarloux would come because they had two reasons to be in Nillport. Their missing shipment and the moon stone, which just happened to be centered around the same person.

So, maybe, they had just one reason to be in Nillport. Hayley. The sensible thing will be to invite them now instead of having them walk in and take over. This way, I can still make demands.

I knew just what to do. Along with the message I would send to them, I would attach Pique's head.

"It'll be a message well received. You've made the right choice, Viper."

Have I? I was clueless. But I guess we'll find out in time.

Chapter thirty-two (Viper)

My view from the roof was impeccable. I watched it all play out. The street was thrown into a raucous first as people scampered about, and I heard someone come up the rails. I didn't have to turn back to see who it was, as I could tell by the smell coming from him.

"They are here, Lord Alpha," Klint said, and for the first time, he called me his Alpha. I turned around and nodded at him. I expected he would turn around and leave, but he walked towards me and stood on the roof with me. "You did the right thing," he said.

"I know," I said with another nod. I couldn't even keep my throne for two months. I looked away from him and back to the streets as the people ran into their houses. This was what the Tarloux was about. Control by fear. I couldn't see their line yet, but I could hear them. The army marched towards my city. Soon, the streets cleared, and it was all quiet, but I could still see people peeking from behind the blinds in their homes. They all wanted to get a look at them. "Tell me about them again, Klint," I said and turned to Klint as the sound of the soldiers got closer. I would have to go down soon to welcome them.

"Alright," Klint said, and he rested against the ledge on the roof. "They are a powerful family. The most powerful since the royalty were exterminated. They exterminated the royals themselves and took control of the entire werewolf community. There was a lot of resistance to their leadership in the beginning because it seemed unnatural, so they are not strangers to opposition and resistance. Because they aren't, they have also gotten very adept at dealing with it. They employ different methods for different sources and have never been contested since they came to power centuries ago. They have ruled long, and they have ruled with an iron hand. You can't go up against the Tarloux. It is a suicide mission."

“Hayley and her new lone wolf friend have made that their target.”

“Yes, they have. And it is good that we have aligned ourselves with the winning team.”

“Have we?”

“Do you know the sheer size of Tarloux’s army? Do you know why when they conquer cities, they don’t bother with the men and the women? They take only the children. Children at such a young age are malleable. They train them to believe in the Tarloux and make them into soldiers. Formidable soldiers. You fought Pique. You saw the skills he showed. That is the kind of training they get as a Tarloux soldier. They are the best-armed force in the werewolf community and are virtually undefeatable.”

I nodded but didn’t entirely believe that. I have gone up against Pique and defeated him. Hayley is a hundred times the fighter I am. She wouldn’t have a hard time cutting through the Tarloux army, and she wouldn’t be doing it alone. She would have the lone wolf with her, their new moon stone, and whatever army she could gather. The only advantage we have now is if the people remained fearful of the Tarloux and refrain from rising against them. But the other thing the Tarloux have in excess besides soldiers are enemies. You don’t establish your reign on tyranny and conquest without making a horde of enemies along the way. That is the design.

The noise of the moving soldiers was now closer, and I could see them. They were dressed in the red and black colors of the family, and they moved as a unit. Their movement was so uniform it seemed like I was watching a slow-moving red and black worm eating up my city.

Not my city anymore.

“Do you remember what we talked about?” Klint asked.

“Yes,” I said and nodded.

“Good. Let’s go down and say hello to them.”

“Wait,” I said. “Tell me, Klint. Why did you do it?”

He smiled at me. “You aren’t fit to rule this land, Viper. Under you, the people will die because it wouldn’t be the Tarloux alone that will be coming after you. Nillport is the envy of many people, and with James gone, they saw it as open season. People were just waiting to see where the chips would fall from the run-in you had with the lone wolf before they attacked. The Tarloux family will stop that attack. It is not about you, Viper. It is not about James either, even though I wished he was alive now and we weren’t in this position. It is about the people and what is best for them. That isn’t you.”

“Would you have done the same thing, insist on handing the reins of the rule of Nillport to the Tarloux if Hayley had been in charge?”

“No,” Klint said without hesitating. “Even James knew she would make a better ruler than you.”

He bowed once more to me and headed down. I followed him, through the hallway, to the front of the Palace, where the first of the soldiers were just arriving. He moved past the Palace, making camp around it and establishing their presence heavily. I knew this was just a fraction of the men they had arrived with, but even at that, it was a large number.

The message they were sending was simple. War was coming.

I stood on the stairs in front of the Palace as the motorcade arrived, and the long black limousine stopped in front of me. One of the soldiers walked to the door and opened it. I watched two men step out of it. They were old and wrinkly but moved with such agility that it was impossible. They were twins and looked perfectly alike; nothing was different between them. Not even the cold stare they threw across the street and the lithe manner as they walked. I had a cold sensation that I was looking at a member of the old family. I knew it was a lie, but they held such awe it was almost numbing. A lot of Tarloux rulers have come and gone, but these two were the longest yet. They also were the ones that had conquered the largest amounts of provinces. They were brutal and callous in their ways. And it was all there to see in their eyes.

They started up the stairs and towards me, and naturally, from the way they looked, one would expect they might need help walking up the stairs. Nothing like that happened. When they got in front of me, they both extended their hands to me. One on the left and the other on the right, so it was side by side and in their middle finger was a large red ring that glittered like it was holding some kind of shimmering matter inside. I knelt down before them and kissed the rings. The left first, then the right. They looked at each other and smiled as though they were making an internal joke.

“Viper, they call you,” one of them said, and he had a very disturbing voice. It was itchy but still had that same reverence common to everything about them. His voice was that of evil and pain. Everything about them made me shiver.

“I don’t see anything venomous about a man on his knees.,” the other added and cocked his head to see me. They did this to every alpha that had ever bent his knees to them. They ridicule him. I was glad there was no one but Klint here to witness this.

“There is nothing venomous about a man with a horde of Tarloux army outside his city,” I said.

“Yes, and nothing venomous about a man who can’t seem to kill an errant wolf and a lone wolf,” the other said.

When he said the lone wolf, they both had a look of disgust wash through them. So, it was true what people have always said about them and the lone wolves. No wonder James wanted the lone wolves out. There was only so much rebellion he could stand in the face of men like this. I had nothing to say to the insult they directed at me, so I remained on the floor.

“But we’ve found out she’s a descendant of the old family. A family we thought we exterminated, so it is no surprise you were unable to handle her. She and her newfound mate are noble, and they have old blood running through them. They are not like you lowborn wolves. They have power, they have heritage, and they have huge destinies. It is our job as Tarloux to take the three from them. They also seemed to have stumbled upon something that we want.”

“Stand up,” the other said. “Walk with us and tell us about this girl.”

“Hayley?” I asked.

“Yes, that one. The one that now has the moon stone with her. A stone our family have been after for centuries.”

I walked behind the two of them as they walked through the Palace as though they had been walking through it forever, and they knew just where they were headed to. I thought they would talk about Pique, but no one mentioned it.

“She’s a runt,” I said.

“I’ll hardly call her that. She is powerful. She’s killed all the hunters you’ve sent after her, and she is the reason we are here to take your city from you and to help you guard it.”

“She does have power,” I said, admitting.

“Now, we are getting somewhere,” the other said.

“James picked her up from the street like me too.”

“So, she’s known a lot of hardship.”

“Yes, she has. And she is rather resilient too. She wouldn’t budge even in the face of inevitable death.”

“She sounds just like a Heline. I would love to meet her soon.”

Neither of them said anything about the lone wolf, but as they got to the court, one of them turned around and faced me.

“You killed our delegate and sent him in pieces to us,” he said. There was no callousness in his voice, just interest in whatever answer I would give him.

“He disrespected me,” I said, and he scoffed.

“Pique can go overboard sometimes. But you passed a test. Now, tell me, Viper. What do you want from us?”

This was the moment I had been waiting for. I looked at the two of them, and for a moment, I faltered. But it passed soon enough as I told myself I deserved this. I had been under James’s tutelage for a long time, and he’d prepared me to be a

leader. In whatever capacity that turns out to be, I would be a leader.

“To keep me in charge here. You will need a viceroy as you do in other clans in your empire. Make me the viceroy here.”

The first one smiled at me and shrugged. “You know the people. You know the politics. Once we get our stone, you can have the clan. But there are fulfilments that must be met. Do you understand what I mean by that?”

“Yes,” I said. “Shipments.”

“Good. There is a war coming. We will lose soldiers, and we’ll need to replace what we lost.”

“You’ll have as many soldiers as you want,” I told them.

Chapter thirty-three (Luke)

We all stood around him as the time got closer. A wave of anticipation was all around us, and we watched out there in the cold that had settled early. Nellie wanted him to ascend inside, but Jade wanted it to happen outside. He's dreamed of this day for a long time and had suffered to get here. I could see the eagerness in his face, but anxiety effused out of him. He wanted this more than any of us could understand. He didn't want to be the sick boy he had been for a long time anymore. He wanted to be able to do the things his father and godfather could do. He wanted to be a werewolf and not a child anymore.

He knelt there, his two hands touching the ground as we waited for the moon to move out of the dark clouds and touch him. I took two steps forward, looking at Nellie, who, unlike the rest of us, had fear in her. Some kids die during their ascension because the power gets too much for their bodies to handle, and they just shut down. I knew that that wouldn't happen to Jade, but the mere knowledge of that scared the bejesus out of Nellie. She had nursed this child for the last couple of years toward this moment. What if he dies before he can finally enjoy the new freedom he so much deserves? I knelt beside Jade and took his hand. He looked up at me.

"Are you scared?" I asked him.

"No," he said and shook his head. He wasn't lying.

"Good. But don't be tense," I told him. "Relax and just let it happen. Don't worry about what will happen when the first light hits your body. Just let it go through you. Let it happen. It is nature finally healing what has been left unhealed in you for a long time. It is you finally becoming whole, and you deserve it."

He nodded his head, and I nodded back at him before stepping away and standing with the others. The clouds were moving away now, and the moon would be here at any moment. I joined them and watched as the moon moved over us and then

toward Jade. I had told him to relax, but I could barely do the same myself. I held my breath as the first streak of light touched him, and he screamed out loud. It was a shriek that reached deep into him. Nellie started towards him, but Bonne got in her way and stopped her.

“He’s in pain,” she said as Jade screamed again, and the scream shifted to a gentle growl.

It was starting.

“There’s no growth without pain,” Bonne told her. “Trust in him. He has this handled.”

He managed to calm her down a bit, but he didn’t let her go because he didn’t trust that she wouldn’t dash at him if he did. He looked at me, and I nodded at him. Jade was doing fine. The growl came with the second scream. He was getting closer to it.

I looked at Hayley, who was beside me, and she had a stern look on her face, taking in all that was happening intently. It looked like a learning moment for her. This must be the first time she had seen someone else ascend. It usually is an eye-opening moment. The evident pain in the person’s face and voice, the terror in the air, and the possibility of death hanging around. She was tense, just like the rest of us. But she kept it together very well.

The next growl came from Jade, and I could see his claws becoming extended. He fell to the ground suddenly and started to spasm. That happens, but it shouldn’t take long for him to snap out of it. Bonne once said he thinks it is the venom from the fangs slipping into his body and poisoning him before his cells recognize it as something similar to them also.

The spasms stopped, and he was quiet for a long time. It was close to over now. The screams were gone, the spasms gone, his fangs had been made, his claws extended. All that was left was for his eyes to glow. We all waited around him for that to happen. He took his time, but finally, he turned to us and went back on his knees. He growled quietly, the humming still in his voice, drilling into the ground, and reaching us. He had a growl that sounded eerily similar to Bonne’s father’s, Kurt.

The man that had practically raised me and taught me what it meant to be a werewolf.

Jade growled again and then looked up finally and glowed his eyes. We all tracked back at the sight of it. They were golden and beautiful.

Jade growled at us one more time before he turned around and looked like he wanted to run into the woods, but then he stopped and fell to the ground. He was tired. Bonne walked to him and picked him up. Nellie was beside him, and she looked at her kid with awe in her eyes. The infirmity in him was gone. He wasn't a sickly child anymore. But there was something else in him now that would need nurturing. Bonne's eyes met mine again as they started towards the house, and I knew he was the right person to handle this. He smiled at me and looked to his left. Fig was back.

I turned around and watched the man approach us as Bonne and Nellie headed to the house. They needed to be together now, and we would be fine on our own.

"What do you have?" I asked Fig as the moon moved underneath a cloud again, throwing us into darkness.

"Bad news," Fig said. "It's true. They are here."

The Tarloux family. I knew they would show up at some point, but I didn't expect them to be here so fast. The thought of them being so close made my skin crawl, and I got a mess of irrational thoughts rushing through my mind.

"They are at the Palace, aren't they?" I asked.

"Yes," Fig said. "But you are not going there. You are not going to do anything stupid."

"Who is going to stop me you?" I asked him.

He looked to his left at Hayley, answering my question. "Besides, going there will be like signing a death warrant. They have guards surrounding the palace now, and you wouldn't be able to enter."

Hayley turned to look at me. "You have something to tell me," she said.

And she was right. I have a lot to tell her. I looked at Fig and nodded at him. I wouldn't be making any stupid decisions tonight and would love some time alone with Hayley. He nodded back at me and left.

"I best to go see Nellie and Bonne. They might need help with something."

He left us and started into the house.

"Have I told you how I came to be with Bonne and his father?" I asked Hayley and started walking into the woods. I wanted to tell her things I haven't thought of for a long time because it burns me to think about them. The mere existence of those memories fills me with so much bile that I feel like I would explode just thinking of them. But I need to tell her. I needed to be totally open with her.

"Yes. When you left home after your mother asked you to go out and make a life for yourself."

"Yes, then. I was barely in the street for a week when Kurt found me. He could tell I was a werewolf immediately, and he took me in. He raised Bonne and me together and taught us how to hunt. After he died, Bonne decided to stay back in town, and I wanted to see more of the world. Back then, I just wanted to belong to a pack and didn't think I would be an alpha, but I turned out to be one. I found members easily because people were just drawn to me. I couldn't explain it."

But I found my pack, and they became a part of me. During those times, I met Fig. He was a mercenary back then, working for whoever could hire him, and the Tarloux were doing a cleansing. Cleaning out old blood werewolves, and I was one of those. They hunted me down for years, but I had my pack with me, and we always found a way to evade them. Fig always gave us a heads-up whenever they were coming to town because he had friends who worked for the Tarloux. We were pretty much untouchable for the Tarloux, which made them very angry because what they did next was similar to what Viper did to you. They sent hunters after me, but they weren't trying to kill me now. They were killing off my pack. One after the other, they started picking them off. They were

going to get to me through my pack. And they succeeded. I made a stupid decision to put an end to the attack from them, take the fight to them. It didn't end well. All my pack members died, and I barely escaped with my life. For the Tarloux and me, it goes beyond just war. It is a vendetta. One that has had years to grow."

"Why do you hate Fig, then?" Hayley asked. "You said he was working for the enemy the other day."

"Yes. Because he was. After my pack's death and I went on a bender, Fig became the Herald. You've heard of that person, haven't you?"

"Yes. The Tarloux's henchman."

"Exactly. And for the earlier years, before I knew Fig was the Herald, there were rumors that the Herald led the pack that killed my pack, and I made it my life's mission to find this Herald and kill him. It was a devastating blow when I found out it was Fig. There was nothing I could do but leave and come back to Nillport to get my life together again. I had lost a big part of me, and I needed time to recover."

"We'll get the Tarloux family," Hayley said and moved closer to me. Her eyes were filled with assurance. "I promised Nellie, and I am promising you too now. Your vendetta is now my vendetta, and we'll not rest until they are brought to their knees."

She leaned closer to me and kissed me. Everything was right with the world, with her arms around me.

Chapter thirty-four (Hayley)

Bonne called them Kaels. He said it meant vigor in the old language. They were once royalty like Peline and Heline, too, but when Tarloux was cleansing out royals and establishing his reign, they had gone into hiding.

Rumors have it that they were hidden by a lost tribe too, but Bonne wasn't sure that was true. All he was sure of was that the Kaels went into hiding, and then after about two hundred years, their descendants started surfacing again. By that time, the Tarloux had its roots deep in the werewolf world, and the Kaels couldn't claim it.

Besides, they didn't have the military power to go up against the Tarloux, who were already building a dynasty. If they had gone up against them, Tarloux would have crushed them to dust, so they remained quiet and grew gently.

They grew slowly, and the Tarloux grew exponentially. Both parties soon recognized that should they go to war against each other, mutually assured destruction was certain with the Tarloux coming out on top, but it will be a pyrrhic victory. The clear choice was to remain on their own and stay out of each other's way. But where there is history, something is bound to happen. The hate within them existed, and they both knew one day when the scale tilts, the war would ensue.

Luke and I were looking to tilt that scale.

We both sat at the back of the SUV that had collected us from the airport, which the family provided, and held hands during the drive. We needed to present a united front during these visits. They will determine if we'd have a fighting chance or not against the Tarloux. This was the first of the three big families that seemed likely to throw support our way that we were visiting. The big families have smaller families that owe them allegiances. For the other families, we were hoping they would support us once they saw we were gathering an army to cause the Tarloux some worry. Bonne thinks they will, and he was banking on the hate they all have for the Tarloux and the

hunger to get things back to the status quo and restore the royalty.

The car glided down the road, driving through a secluded estate with a small gate coming into focus before us. The driver stopped and talked to some men by the gate. The men looked at Luke and me, spoke into comms, and soon, we were allowed to go through. We were driven to a garage, and the driver opened the door for us.

“The family will see you now,” he said and took a gentle bow at us, pointing at the house before us. It looked like something out of a fairy tale. The house was a Victorian mansion, bounded by two waterfalls, and it had climbers growing around. In the bright light of the afternoon, it stood majestic.

Halfway to the house, the door opened, and a middle-aged man stepped out. He had a big smile on his face as he approached Luke and me. He stopped before us and considered us for a moment.

“I see you, and I know you are what you say you are. I can feel the reverence oozing out of you,” he said, his smile getting bigger and his voice shaking slightly. He stepped even closer to us and put his hands on my cheeks first before kissing me gently on the lips.

Bonne had warned us about some of the eccentric traditions we might come across with the families. They loved to uphold the older traditions, and we might find some of them strange and others outright crazy.

“The last Heline to grace these lands was almost a thousand years ago. I would never have thought I would have one on my doorstep. And not to talk of a Peline,” he said and faced Luke. He kissed him on the lips too. He looked like an excited little kid who was just told he would have real elves visiting on Christmas morning. There was even a little dance to his steps as we started towards the house. There was a striking resemblance between him and the house. They were both elegant and ancient. They look like a piece of work stuck in time, and it struck me as wholesome.

“My name is Timothy Kael,” he said as we stepped into the house, and it was just as I expected it to be. Expansive and extensively made of concrete. “I am the Kael family custodian.”

I looked around me, expecting to see more people, but he was the only one there. He must have sensed my confusion.

“The family doesn’t stay together for security reasons. The Tarloux and his allies can take us out more easily that way. I take care of business in the family house. We’ve owned it for centuries. Even the Tarloux couldn’t seize it. There is history here. You must be tired. I will leave you to sleep, and we’ll take care of business tomorrow.”

“No,” I told him. “I’d rather we do that first. We still have a long road to cover, and the Tarloux are strengthening their army as we speak.

Timothy smiled at me and nodded. “I understand that. Can I see it?” he asked. We knew what he was talking about. They would all want to see it.

Luke dipped his hand into his back pocket and removed the small bag holding the stone. He removed the stone and handed it to Timothy.

“It is real!” Timothy said and collected the stone. He wrapped his hands around it as he looked at it with awe. He had to move to the closest chair to him and sit down. He said nothing for a long time and just looked at the stone, the awe in his eyes growing ever more significant as he stared at it. After a while, he stood up and walked back to us, and handed Luke the stone again.

“They will come for it,” Timothy said. “They aren’t just in Nillport because you stopped their shipment.”

“The Twins are there,” I told him.

“Yes. And they only show themselves for things that are of the utmost importance. This is the most important thing to the Tarloux since they went on their crusade against the royalties. They have spent centuries looking for it. They want it, and they will kill for it.”

They killed my mother and father for it. The night I still have nightmares about. They had broken down the door midway through dinner and asked my father for the stone. They had assumed he was the one with the royal blood, and they had assumed wrong. My mother had guarded me and laid down her life for mine. I didn't see what happened after she fell in that alleyway, but I knew she didn't just die because those men didn't come after me. She must have stood up again and fought to keep me safe. She died so I could have that stone. She had made a great sacrifice. Now, it was my turn to make sacrifices and fulfill my destiny. To bring peace and the old order back to the werewolf world. To stop the reign of terror that the Tarloux had established and run for centuries.

"Will you fight with us?" I asked Timothy.

He fell to his knees suddenly and bowed before Luke and me.

"I bequeath my sword to you," he said. "Your word is my command. I will lay my life for you and fight your battle. The blood that flows in your veins and that flows in mine are the blood of allies, and it will remain so forever."

We stayed the night because Timothy insisted, and we didn't want to offend him. We had a large dinner, went to bed early, and woke up to get back on the road. We had two more families to see.

The second family was called Gork. They were even older than Kael, and they had a dark history of betrayal and deceit. Bonne advised leaving them out, but they controlled a large army, and their soldiers were feisty fighters. They lived almost like nomads, never staying in a place for too long and always moving in large numbers and camps. A moving herd of werewolves was trouble brewing, so it wasn't a surprise that the night we found them, there were having a big fight.

It was a dark night, one of those with nary a star in the sky, and we could barely see beyond our noses. We had walked in on them, and no one noticed us for a long time as they were all gathered around a bright burning bonfire with four werewolves fighting beside it. They were growling and yelling at them.

“This is just like ten percent of their total number,” Luke said as we made our way into the crowd, and they moved out of the way for us, barely taking a second look at us. They were a very careless group that was obvious immediately, and I guessed that was why they’d been betrayed so many times over the years. They have gone through many leaders, too, and were on their fourth leader in the last ten years. We watched them fight, and I saw they fought differently.

They were skilled, and that was their useful secondary character. What put them above most werewolves was the hunger in their eyes. It wasn’t one for blood or death, but the fight itself. They enjoyed it and the pain that came with it.

No wonder they die so young. It seemed to me that it was all they were all living for—the pain from the fight.

I watched the four men fight, and there were no rules—just bodies smacking into bodies, bruises, and broken bones. We had a lot of fun watching them until there was a gentle growl amongst them, and soon it started to grow and spread, and they were all growling. The fight had stopped, and everyone was looking at us.

Finally, they took notice of us. One of them stepped forward, and I recognized him from the images Bonne had given us. He was their leader. They called him Penit.

“We have strangers in our midst,” he said and started towards us. “People who have enjoyed our show even though they are not deserving of it.”

The Gork had fought alongside the Tarloux when the insurrection started. They were royalty but had always been looked down on as they didn’t fancy castles and beautiful dresses. But after the war, the Tarloux turned around and started killing them. They were royalty. Pretty pink dresses or not. They had prestige and power, and they were a worry. Now, they have a vendetta against the Tarloux, always killing off their scouts and raiding their warehouses and business.

“I think we deserve it,” I told the man who was standing before Luke and me now. “We are after all of one blood.”

“One blood? Are you Gork?” he asked.

“No, I am a werewolf.”

“Oh, there are werewolves that I would cut down just by looking at them. We are not of one blood. They are bile made to mix with the right blood.”

“Not this blood,” I said and stepped closer to him, putting my hand on his chest. He stepped back suddenly, and the wolves around him growled at me. I smiled and opened my hand to show him the stone.

An audible gasp went through the crowd, and their leader stepped closer to me. He watched the stone intently, but he didn't touch it.

“So, it is true. The old blood is back.”

“Yes,” I told him. Luke stepped closer until he was standing side by side with me. “The old blood is back. And we are calling them together. It is time to take back what was stolen from us. It is time we are restored to our prestige.”

The man smiled and turned around, looking at the men who had surrounded the three of us, so we were now in the center. He walked away from us and towards the men.

“Do you want to fight, people?” he asked them, and for a moment, there was no reply. The air was fraught with anticipation, and I held my breath. I knew whatever way they replied would determine what their answer would be.

“Yes,” one of them answered, and soon enough, the answer spread, and it became a chorus.

“Yes! Yes!” they yelled.

“Do you want to take back what has been stolen from you?” Penit asked.

“Yes!” his men yelled. Their voices were louder now, and they made the air vibrate with such violence I could taste it. If these men, as hyped up as they were set on a town, they would bring it down in mere hours.

“Do you want to go with the bearer of stone and die in their war? Do you want the pain of war to roar through you and set you on fire?”

“Yes!” the reply came, and this time, it was more a roar than it was a word. Penit turned to me and smiled.

“There is only one thing more important than pain to a Gork. Prestige. We shall fight with you, and if need be, we shall die for you, bearer of the stone.”

With two in the bag, the last would be the hardest. Bonne had given us a brief history about the family we were going to meet, but most importantly, he'd told us to think on our feet with them. They were skeptical and had been since before the Tarloux uprising against the royal families. He called them the waterside werewolves because they've always chosen to settle in places with large bodies of water and give great reverence to family itself. Even greater than other werewolves. To others, it was more about the name and the power that comes with the family, but with them, it was about the unit itself and its composition.

When we arrived, we were made to wait in the living room of their big cabin house by the river until dinner, all by ourselves. No one entered the room where we were, and no one talked to us, but we could hear them whispering about us. They knew we'd gone to the first two families, and they were the last. They would have no choice but to join us, but it seemed like they would make it hard first.

Later in the night, one of the kids came to get us, and he led us out of the cabin and to the waterside, where a large table had been set, and the table gathered a crowd. There were two seats set apart for us, so we sat down.

“We'll eat before we talk,” their family head said. A man called Patel with a stern look, lean body, and skinhead. He had the calmness of a leopard and the alertness of a cheetah. He was one of those werewolves that looked lean but had extreme strength within them. Thinking of him made me remember Ilad. I would have to talk to Ilad and see if any of the

werewolves with Viper would like to come to us. I would convince Ilad particularly to join us. We could use him. We could talk to all the people.

Dinner was huge, and it took over an hour to eat. When we were done, the table got cleared, and bottles of wine were brought out. Then, the kids left, and it was just the elders left at the table, but I could still sense the kids listening through the windows. I could tell Patel sensed them too, but he said nothing to the effect and watched Luke and me instead.

“You met the Gork before us. Why?” he asked, jumping right into it, and it sounded like he took offense to that fact. I remember Bonne’s advice. Think on your feet, and with the look Patel was giving me, I could tell he wasn’t very interested in the words of my answer but in how I phrased the response.

“We were following a route,” I said. “The Kael was the closest to us, followed by the Gork.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but it was suitable for this moment. Patel smiled a bit and nodded his head.

“When this is over,” he said, taking a sip of his wine. “We would need diplomats and not fighters anymore. I just wanted to know if you two can be that. In ruling, fighting and wars only take a small percentage of the time. The rest, you listen to people and try not to make them angry. You’ve answered well. Now, can we see it?”

Luke looked at me, and I nodded at him. He reached into his pocket and retrieved the stone before passing it to Patel, who looked at it disinterestedly and passed it to the next person in line. He said nothing as the others checked it out, and they were all impressed by what they saw.

I watched Patel. There was a certainty about him. He looked like a man that would make a meal before going to war, assured that he would return to consume that meal. He was talking about governance already, and when this was all over when the war hadn’t even started. The stone found its way back to him, and he didn’t pass it back to Luke. He examined it again.

“It looks rather ordinary; wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t think the look of it matters.”

He scoffed, but it wasn’t derisive. It was hard to pinpoint this man’s emotions.

“Of course, the look of it matters. The look of everything matters. Why do you think the royals lasted as long as they did? Do you think they weren’t just like the Tarloux? They wreaked tyranny too and were terrible people. But the people on their own would never have rebelled against them. It took a man close to royalty himself to spur them on. A man that witnessed their rotten ways and decided enough is enough.”

I frowned at him. He was saying the polar opposite of what I expected from him. People have never talked about the royals in that manner before. Rotten wasn’t a word I would have imagined getting associated with them.

He smiled at me.

“I am not a Tarloux lover,” he said. “I am a historian, and what I have found in the history books tells me the Tarloux are worse than any leader the werewolf world has ever had. They are an empire intent on creating a dynasty, not a community. They wanted power and prestige, but they wanted to earn it, not inherit it. That I have found to cause more pain than any other kind of endeavor. But the old royals aren’t saints; as I said before, the people didn’t rebel against them because of their appearance. They looked impeccable, clean, and in control and gave a sense of piety to the people. They were deeply religious, but not to their own benefit. It was to the benefit of the people. They gave them a status they could look up to, but on the other hand, they recognized they could never attain it. They made a rat race.”

“But it was a beneficial rat race,” one of the men we were sitting with said.

“Of course. All rat races are beneficial. If we don’t have it, what shall people design as their purpose? The difference between the rat race the royalty made and the one the Tarloux made was that the royals were clueless about what they had

created. They saw a system that worked and relied on it. The Tarloux created the system, and they made tweaks to it to see that they weren't visited with the same fate they gave the royals. But life is a cycle. Time always rebirthed. Humans are always rebirthed," Patel said and took another sip of his wine, then he looked at me. "I see your mother in your eyes."

"You knew my mother?" I asked, surprised.

"I knew both your mothers," Patel said, and that got Luke's attention. "I told you life is a cycle," he continued. "There are parts of that cycle that extend out and touch other parts. Your mothers came to me on different occasions with the halves of the pendants you both carry now. They wondered if I could help them find the other half. They knew what it meant, and they both wanted to be the ones to herald in the new order or restore the old order, as they both put it. They were both scared for their lives and the lives of their kids. They knew if they died, the burden would be passed to the two of you, and they didn't want that. They didn't want you to go up against the Tarloux family that had been hunting them for a long time. But I told them they couldn't fight fate, and they couldn't rewrite destiny. What will be will be. And here we are."

"So you'll fight with us then?" I asked.

"It isn't up to me," Patel said. "These men here lead their own families, and I lead them. It all depends on them whether or not we'll go to war with you."

"Do you want to go to war?" Luke asked. He sounded aggressive and looked squarely at Patel.

"As I said, what I want doesn't matter."

"No," Luke insisted. "I asked you a question because the answer matters to me. You said if we win this, we'll need diplomacy, but we'll also need authority. So, I am asking you, with authority and as a man who holds authority, do you want to go to war with us?"

Patel smiled slyly and took a while before he answered. He looked at the other men beside him and nodded. "Yes, I want to go to war with you."

“Who then will stop you?” Luke asked and looked at the other people by the table, almost like he was daring them to oppose.

“Not us,” the first of them said. “We go to war with you, Son of Peline. Bearer of the Stone.”

Soon, the air was filled with people declaring their intentions to fight with us, and at that moment, I had never felt more fulfilled. We were doing this for the right reason, and because of that, we were bound to win. We had to win so it wouldn't all be in vain. I remembered what I told Nellie, and I intended to keep it that way.

There was only one way this ended, or it doesn't end at all.

Chapter thirty-five (Hayley)

We still didn't have enough numbers to go up against the Tarloux. We've gathered about five thousand wolves from the three families, which was about half the number of the Tarloux's forces, and even though the others seemed pretty confident in the ability of their forces, I still had doubt in me.

Patel seems to think a two-to-one disparity isn't a big deal, and they have us. Once we activate the moon stone, we will go through the Tarloux forces like they were grass. That was the reason they all agreed to come with us. The moon stone was a great power no one had ever seen at work before, but they all trusted it. They were all trusting in Luke and me and relying on us to bring them victory.

I wanted victory, but would it be at the price of so many werewolves' lives? That was troubling. We were back in Nillport and at the reservation, where the army had set up camp in the woods. It has been a week since we got back from our travel and everything seemed to be going well. The battle was getting closer, but there was no set date yet. We have spies within the Tarloux ranks now, and it was safe to assume they have some within ours too. This was how wars are fought—with deceit and blood.

Bonne said we'd take the Tarloux when they are at their weakest and have to fight the battles at the mountains. We held the higher ground here at the reservation, and all we needed to do was split our army in two, make one attack through the city and force the Tarloux to move towards the plain closer to the mountain. We'll meet them at the plains, but we'll still have some soldiers left in the mountains, waiting to pick off whatever was left of the Tarloux army.

Bonne thinks we'll win and shares in the hopefulness of Patel and the others. He also has his herbs which he says will give us an edge, but who's to say the Tarloux won't have herbs too? They have been preparing for this moment for years now. This

was the reason they were getting children from James. Children to help them fight battles like this.

I don't share in their hopefulness, and I wish I did. I heard trees move behind me, and I jumped up, sniffing the air. I recognized the smell immediately. It was Ilad. He was our spy within the Tarloux ranks. He was doing a very dangerous job, but it was one he was good at, and he'd found me the second day after we arrived in Nillport. It was surprising that I had thought of him while we were traveling, and then he showed up. He'd asked for a way to help me and wanted to join our side, but Bonne had other businesses for him.

"You should teach me how to do that," I told him as I sat down again. He moved so quietly, almost like a ghost which was why I didn't pick up his scent and sound through the woods until he was almost behind me.

He sat down beside me, looking reticent as ever. He is so small that it is easy to forget about him. Even with his small size, he had a way of making himself smaller and fitting into tiny spaces, all so he could listen better. He knew a lot about everyone in the Palace.

"The Twins think you're a fool for not looking for more numbers," he said and looked at me. There were no emotions in his eyes, just a man delivering a message. I had often wondered about his story, but today wasn't the day to ask him that. I got a sick feeling that that day would never come and Ilad would be dead at the end of this war.

"We hold the higher ground," I told him. "The terrain gives us a better advantage to charge."

"They won't come to you in the mountains, and even if they did, they would still beat you. I've seen them train, and I've seen the way they fight. They are deadly. You need a larger army, Hayley. This is a war you cannot afford to lose."

"But there are no more armies," I said. "These are the only ones that are bold enough to take a stand against them, Others are shit terrified, and they are right to. They want to stay back and see where the chips fall and just live after that. I don't blame them, Ilad. This isn't their fight to fight."

“This is everyone’s fight. There are people out there that will still listen to you. People who know what they get to benefit from the restoration of the old ways. People who are living in fear now, but with you, they won’t have to live that way.”

“Who are you talking about?” I asked him, and he looked at me before jumping up.

“Your mate is coming,” he said and jumped to the nearest tree, taking one long look at me before he dropped again. “Do you know where I am from, Hayley?”

I knew he was going to leave before Luke showed up—he’s never been comfortable around him because he felt intimidated—so he must know Luke was still far away.

“No, but I have always wondered.”

“Take a guess. I never fit into the pack, and I always stayed by myself. I never was good at making friends, and I look malnourished, even though my werewolf powers cover that up very well. Which people do you think live like that?”

“The segregated clans?” I asked, and he nodded.

“My people will fight. They just need a reason to.”

Almost immediately, he swung into the tree again and was gone.

The segregated clans were just like the lost tribes, but they weren’t a myth. People knew of them, and people visited them in their abode. They frown on visitors largely because they abandoned the werewolf community to escape their drama and politics. They have been pawns in their game for way too long, and when the Tarloux uprising happened, they saw an opportunity to seek life somewhere else, and they took it. If they hadn’t, the Tarloux would have crushed them because they were stern believers in the royalty and the moon as a goddess. They would have rebelled against the Tarloux, and they would have been massacred. The escape was the best thing they could have done.

The trees shifted again, and Luke stepped out and into the clearing I had chosen for myself. He’s made himself comfortable with the new crowd we have, but I have chosen to

stay deeper into the woods. He was spending more time with his lone wolf friends now and catching them up on all that happened with the two of us gone. They were all ready for the war. They seemed like they had been ready for the war since the day they met.

“We’ve been fighting since we lost our packs,” one of them, Mikhail, said. “The fighting never stops. Not with others and not within you.”

I don’t know what it is like to lose a pack, but I know what it is like to lose your family and for the one person who you looked up to die by your hands. It is never a pretty affair. So, maybe I do understand some of the pain that Luke was carrying around with him.

There was something different about him this morning, and I knew it was because of the people around us. As much as he likes hunting and the woods, he seemed to do perfectly well with people, too. I wished I was like that.

“How is Jade?” I asked after his godson, the boy that had ascended before we left.

“He won’t stop extended his claws, and he keeps bugging Bonne about where they go when he retracts them.”

“Bonne will enjoy that,” I said.

“He’s got his head buried in war books and strategies. His kid is now a distraction to him. You know how he gets.”

I have come to know Bonne some more and come to like him. He is a very attentive werewolf and a strange person for a werewolf.

“If anyone will win us this war, it is Bonne,” I said, and Luke smiled at that. He pulled me closer to himself until my head was resting against his chest, and I took comfort in him.

“Your friend has been here,” he said.

“Ilad, yes. He had information.”

“What information?”

“We’ll lose if we don’t get more soldiers. The Twin won’t fall for our trick to get them to the mountains and attack there. They have the highest number of expendable resources. We don’t. They can drag the war on for as long as they want and take us out slowly. We need a big battle that will happen once and end the war for us to win. We don’t have the number, though.”

“He never comes with good news, does he? That friend of yours.”

I chuckled at that. “He had some good news this time. A place where we can get more soldiers.”

Luke pulled away from me and looked at me skeptically. We had exhausted all other options and came up with naught, and now Ilad has a place for us to get soldiers.

“Ilad is from a segregated clan. He thinks we can get soldiers there.

“Oh, that’s not going to work,” Luke said dismissively. “Those people hate other werewolves, and they’ll kill us if we ever go around them.”

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss the idea. I trust Ilad. He says his people would fight, and they just need a reason to. Let’s give them a reason to.”

“It doesn’t sound like a good idea,” Luke said.

“You just don’t like that it came from Ilad,” I said, and he sighed.

“Yes, there’s that.”

Luke never really trusted Ilad. He thinks he is playing the two armies against each other, and his quiet nature is very suspicious. No one should be able to move like a ghost, he’d said, but we’ve seen the lost tribe move like that before. Werewolves whose survival had been based on how well they could hide have evolved to move silently and camouflage themselves in broad daylight.

“I trust Ilad,” I told him. “I trust him with my life, and I’ll trust him with yours. Do you trust me?”

“You know I do.”

“Good. Let’s find these clans then and convince them to fight for us.

“We’ll have to talk to Bonne about it first, though.”

“Yeah, let’s talk to Bonne.”

He pulled me closer to himself again, and I was resting against his chest until it got dark, and through the clearing, we could see the stars coming up.

“Let’s go back,” he suggested, but I shook my head. I wasn’t ready to go back to people. I wanted to be here a while longer.

“Stay with me. Let’s watch the stars.”

“Okay,” he said. “Let me get something we can lay on the ground, though.”

He left, and I counted the seconds until he returned. He came back with a mat and set it on the ground. He laid down first and pulled me to himself.

There was a half-moon in the sky, so the stars weren’t so clear, but when we glowed our eyes, the night got brighter, and so did the stars.

“You’ve never told me about what it was like for you growing up,” he said. “I know a lot about you, but I don’t know that.”

“I don’t like talking about it much,” I said and ran my finger around his chest, slowly unbuttoning the shirt to reveal his hairy chest.

“I figured. But you should talk to me about anything.”

“Yes, I should,” I said and looked at the stars.

I told him then about the night the Tarloux knocked down my parent’s door, looking for the stone. They thought they had it. They killed my father and my mother, but I managed to escape with my mother sacrificing herself.

I had to run through an apartment and went as fast as my feet could take me. I ran until it was morning; by that time, I had no idea where I was. I wouldn’t get to Nillport for three more

months, and during those three months, I almost got picked up by the police twice, but I evaded them and just continued west with had no idea why, but it seemed right to me. When I got to Nillport, I stopped, and it felt like the right place to be. There was no reason to keep traveling anymore. I was home to roost.

Surviving on the streets of Nillport was a tough job, and there were days when I thought I was going to die, Days when I would get so hungry and go search through the trash to find something to eat. That was before I learned to pickpocket. I got into a lot of trouble with bullies but handled them when I turned, and a while after that, James found me. He saved me from the streets.

“I still remember the night it happened. There were police vans that went around picking up kids that were below eighteen on the streets, and they took them to foster homes. We’d heard about those places, and they were a nightmare. But I think the werewolves amongst those kids picked up would have preferred the foster homes to getting sold to the Tarloux. Anyway, one of those vans was picking kids up that night, and we were all running. I had a policeman on my tail, but he was no match for me. I was faster than him.”

I looked back at the police, who was struggling to keep up and knew he wouldn’t get me, but they used to have them scattered all around, so I could bump into another at any time. I pulled myself up a ledge and to the other side of a bridge, looking to find a place to hide. Before I could, I bumped into a man who stepped out of the dark. I didn’t even see him. I thought he was a policeman, so I decided to fight him. I moved swiftly and tried to get underneath him. He moved down and stopped my movement with just one hand, and he looked at me, shocked.

“You’re a werewolf,” he said.

I didn’t answer him. I tried to get away again and could hear voices getting closer to me. The police behind me were beginning to catch up with me. I punched at the man, but he pinned me to a wall, camouflaging us with the darkness. It was the same wall he had stepped out from earlier. He put a hand on my lips, and I was very quiet as the cop walked past me and

headed in the opposite direction. When the cop was gone, he let go of me.

“Don’t run,” he said and glowed his eyes at me, showing me he was a werewolf too. I didn’t know why, but I glowed mine right back at him, and he smiled at me.

“You’re too young,” he said. “You couldn’t have ascended.”

“I’m eleven, I told him, and he looked at me with renewed interest,

“Come with me,” he said and led me away to the Palace. That was the beginning of a new life for me.

I turned away from the stars and looked at Luke.

“I used to think back to that day and imagine myself lucky to have been found by James. But the real luck was me ascending early. If I hadn’t, he would have taken me to the van, and I would have been shipped off to the Tarloux.”

“But you’re here now. Fate made it so,” he said and kissed me on the forehead. “We’ll make history, put tyranny behind bars and create a new dawn in the werewolf world.”

He kissed my forehead and my lips before he pulled me closer to himself, and there was a burning passion between us suddenly. The stars looked down at us as Luke proceeded to remove my clothes.

Chapter thirty-six (Luke)

It was hard finding the clan, and that was because they didn't want to be found. Just like the lost tribe, these fancy their privacy. The plan was to locate one of them, and if we find a way to convince that one, we'll get the one to help us convince the others. It will take a while to do all of that, and I still think it will be a waste of time. We should have simply made a strategic plan to go up against the Tarloux regardless of the difference in numbers between us. The Tarloux don't have something that we have in excess. The will to fight until we can't raise a finger any longer. I have walked through the army that we have gathered. I have talked to their generals, and they all believed in their men. They understood what we were fighting for. They wanted the war and wanted to make a better future for their children or die while trying. That is the most honorable way to go out.

But Hayley wouldn't allow that to happen. She wanted to win so badly, but she wanted them to be around and enjoy the spoils of their victories. She wanted them to see the future they fought for. It would be pointless if they all die, and it is a pyrrhic victory for us.

We walked side by side and continued up the mountains, moving one step at a time to avoid falling and get a good grip on the ground. The mountain was quite jagged, and it wasn't made for travel. I can see why they would choose to settle in a place like this. If we intend to attack them, we will be slowed down by the mountain floor, and they will easily pick us off. Also, if we are intent on finding them, the mountain will do a very strong job of breaking our intent, and we will give up. But not with Hayley. With the determination in her eyes, nothing short of death was going to stop her from getting to them.

We spent almost a day walking through the mountains, and it was dark when we got to the other side, which consisted of sparsely located vegetation interspersed by rocks. We stopped

when we got there as there was a shift in the air. We could smell them now, and we knew they were watching us.

We'd come down the mountain, and we were just two, so there was no point attacking us. They would watch to see what we wanted and if we would turn back. Hayley looked at me as we moved on, looking around us and trying to make out one of them, but it was nearly impossible to do in the dark. I wanted to suggest resting for the night and continuing in the morning, but I knew she would kick against that. We were here now, and it was best to get it over with.

We barely walked for a quarter of a mile before a voice told us to stop. In the mountainous area, it echoed all around us, and it was hard to pinpoint its location. We stopped, though, and soon we were surrounded by bare-chested werewolves, with their eyes glowing and their intent obvious to us. They wouldn't hesitate to attack if we didn't do as they asked.

"What do you want?" one of them asked and looked at Hayley and me. I could tell he knew exactly what we wanted; all these were a formality.

"Take us to speak to your leader," I told him, and he growled at me. He wanted me to answer the question. I wasn't going to answer. I growled back at him and glowed my eyes, extending my claws to show them I was ready for a fight myself. The man stopped and seemed to consider his options before he stepped forward and handed two blindfolds to Hayley and me.

"Use that," he said, and this time, we complied. We tied the black cloth around our eyes, and we couldn't see through it, not even when I glowed my eyes. The group led us out of the mountainous area and into the close woods, after which I heard the noise of a crowd. It was a large crowd, and that surprised me. The segregated clans were supposed to be segregated. They don't form a community; that is what we know about them. The man stopped, and we stopped.

"Remove the blindfolds," he said, which we did. I looked around us to see where we were. It was in some village square with an older man, who I could smell as the Alpha, seated on a small stand. He was blind and had a small boy helping him.

He was chewing some tiger nuts, and he looked up at us with his bad eyes when we removed the blindfolds. I could still hear the simmering of the crowd a couple of miles away from us. They were a lot of people, and by the way they moved and communicated, I had a suspicion it was an army too.

The segregated clans, by the looks of it, have come together and formed a community. They also have a great army. One greater even than the Tarloux's army. We'll need just about half of them to tilt the chances of winning the war in our favor. It is good that we are here. Now, we have to convince this Alpha to give us his army.

"Hello," I started when no one said anything for a long while, but the Alpha put up his hands, gesturing for me to stop talking. I moved back and watched him instead. He continued chewing his nuts, and we remained there for about thirty minutes before he finally sent the boy away, and the other men that came with us turned around to leave too.

"Not you, Parque," the alpha said, and the man that led us in here stopped, nodding at his other men, who left him behind. "Let me touch it," the Alpha said, setting his eyes on Hayley and stretching his hand.

Hayley reached into her pocket and got the stone out. He must have looked at her because he sensed it on her. She dropped the stone into his waiting hands, and the alpha groaned a bit as he ran his fingers around the stone, nodding his head, and his finger brushed into each contusion. When he was done, he passed it back to Hayley.

"It seems the old gods have shined their mercy on us. The old ways will be back."

"So, you're going to fight with us to bring back the old ways?" I asked, thinking this might go easier than I imagined it would,

"No," the alpha said. "We don't get ourselves involved in the squabbles of the other werewolves. Not anymore."

"What do you have a huge army for, then? I can hear them training from here. Why did you gather all the clans together and make them into a society?"

“Because your people were killing us off. We moved away from your lands, and you still wouldn’t let us be left alone.”

“Those weren’t my people. They were the Tarloux, and that is why we are fighting them. To bring an end to their reign of tyranny. They have done enough.”

“You do not understand it, child,” he said. “Have you seen my people? Have you seen how small we are? We are like that naturally, which makes us the runts of the food chain. We are the lowly ones that no one really wants, but they can’t do away with us either because we are, after all, like them too. So, they kept us around for when we might be needed for wars and menial jobs. We left when we got tired of such a life, and we have made something for ourselves here—something my people love and enjoy. We don’t need the other wolves anymore. We are self-sufficient, and should you ever think of attacking, remember what you heard. You don’t want to go up against those men. They have blades for claws and stones for hearts.”

From his tone, it was rather obvious that we had wasted our time coming here, and the only reason they let us in was so we could hear their army and hesitate from attacking them. He also wanted to see the stone. We were done here and should leave.

“We need your help,” Hayley said just as I was about to turn around and head out.

“I can’t help you, dear lady.”

Hayley stepped closer to him, and he cocked his head, suddenly interested in her.

“We need you, or we’ll lose this war. I have a friend. He is one of you. His name is Ilad. He’s small and sickly and can fit into even the smallest space. The best spy I’ve ever seen,” she said with a chuckle and adoration in her voice. “He is also one of the best people I have ever met. He accepted me when no one would, and he stood by me even when the world stood against me. He was the one that sent me here. He told me his people were ready to fight. He said they wanted the old ways back. They wanted freedom again, but this isn’t the life you know.

Living in tiny spaces within the woods isn't the life you want. You love your buildings. You love dancing. You love having space. It is the life you've had to live because you were given no choice. He said his people would fight, and all they needed was a reason. Isn't a better life, a return to your old culture, a return to the life that brings the sun into your life reason enough? You help us fight this war, and there will be no other war to be fought. This is the war to be an end to all other wars. I give you my word."

The Alpha smiled at Hayley and moved away from her when he saw she was done talking.

"You speak well," he said. "But dreams aren't what we were made to chase. Hope doesn't feed us much. The trees and berries here do. But dreams do keep us awake. Hope does shine a light at the end of the tunnel. I'll speak to the other members of the community, and we shall decide whether or not to fight in your war."

"Give us a place to stay then while you make these decisions," I said.

"No," the Alpha insisted rather strongly. "You leave tonight. We do not take in sojourners. It is not our way."

I could tell there was no arguing that. We have to leave, and we'll do that without an answer. The man doesn't look convinced, and we'll do well not to rely on him.

"You've said your bit, and now you have to leave," the man said.

Chapter thirty-seven (Hayley)

Everyone was on edge. There was a war brewing, but we were far from ready for it. It was already on our doorsteps, and in the time we took going to find the segregated clans and return, the Tarloux had moved in on us, and now, we had lost the only advantage of the high ground we held before. We both had the high ground now, and it would be an equal fight in terms of terrain, but they had the larger number. I walked through the woods and past the camps as some of the soldiers looked at me. There was a scurrying going on just about ten feet from me. I was sure it had something to do with food, as we couldn't get enough of that. I looked up ahead, and my godfather, Kris, was walking towards me. I had tried to convince him to go to Michigan and stay with the friends he wanted to send me to when all of this had just started. It was such a long time ago now and a lost dream.

"They are waiting for you," he said when he got close to me but didn't walk away. He stopped in front of me and picked up my hand. "Your parents will be very proud of you, Hayley. They won't allow us to lose this war. Believe in that."

He let go of my hands then and led me to where the others were. I knew he meant well, but my parents wouldn't be fighting on the field. This was on me. I kick started this row of dominoes, and now, I was about to lead all these people to their deaths. I got to the makeshift table they had created, and they were all waiting for me. I walked over and stood beside Luke, who took my hand in his and squeezed gently. That simple touch sent jolts of reassurance through me, and I leaned toward him. With him by my side, I will always feel invincible. I looked at the others. Bonne was at the other end of the table, still studying the map of the area that he had made himself. Nothing is ever done with Bonne until it is totally done. He looked up at me, sensing my eyes on him, and smiled. He was here for his son and for his wife. To my left were Luke's lone wolf friends. They were here to shake away the disgust the Tarloux family has put on lone wolves. They

were here to regain their dignity and show the world know that being a lone wolf isn't something to be ashamed of. They have enough pain in their heart already; shame shouldn't be bundled up with it. To my right was Kris, the leaders of the three armies we've convinced to fight with us and the leaders of the smaller armies they brought with them. They make up the bulk of our army, and without them, we wouldn't even have a war to go to. Beside them was Ilad, he looked even smaller today, out of place, and there was a grimace of disappointment on his face. He'd thought his people would come to our aid. He knew that if we lost this war and he was found, he would be tortured and made an example. Snakes don't do well amongst werewolves.

That was everybody.

"Bonne," I said, looking towards him and nodding. He nodded back and spread the map he'd been studying on the table.

"We are here," he said, using a rook chess piece to represent us. "The Tarloux is over there." They were a knight.

"If there is anything we know about a werewolf war, and from what I've read, it is that there is no order to it. Whatever strategy we make, it is bound to come apart once we get into the grime of war itself. Survival kicks in, and our propensity toward anger and violence takes over. The one who can outlast the other is the one that wins a werewolf war, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't strategize. We have men who have been trained to subdue their instincts and to stick to form and order."

"What are our strategies then?" Patel asked. He still had that calm look about him, and it was reassuring for me. It was like these people didn't share the same fear as me. They believed so much in themselves and their ability to win this war. We weren't sharing the same burden. Everyone that will die in this war, whether we win or not, will be on my conscience.

"The Tarloux are making their way around us, going over the higher grounds," Bonne said and drew a semi-circle around us, showing the ground the Tarloux were covering. "They have a large force, which is why they can thin themselves out. But it

still makes them vulnerable. Ilad tells me they've taken seventy percent of their forces towards the mountain, which means they intend to attack on two fronts. From the top and from the bottom.

He drew that and looked at everyone to make sure they were listening to him.

"They are caging us in here," Bonne said. "And we'll be caught between two armies."

We should have attacked when everyone was telling me we had to. I wanted more armies, and now, I've got us stuck in a position of disadvantage.

"How do we deal with them then?" Gork asked.

"We use the stone," Bonne said and looked at Luke and me. "That is what they want from us the most, so while the war is on, they will have people coming for it. For you and Luke. We need you at the front of the battle."

"But we'll be with the stone," Luke said. "If they get to us, they'll get to the stone."

"You'll not be with the stone," Bonne said. "But you'll lead them towards it."

"What are you talking about?" I asked him.

"We shall discuss that later," Bonne said. "It will be a tactic to pull away a large force from the ones that attack from the top. They want you. They want the stone. You will lead them away to give the others a better chance. When you get to the stone, you will activate its power and use it to fight the force with you. The stone is the only chance we have against them. Its power is monumental."

"We'll have to face an attack on two fronts. Do you think it is a good idea to break up the squad?" Timothy asked.

"Yes," Bonne replied. "It is the best idea to break the squad. I grew up in the woods and know things the Tarloux won't, and Viper, who spent his time on the streets, won't either. For example, there is a tunnel from here to here."

Bonne drew a straight line leading from our position to a leeway behind the Tarloux army that would be attacking us from behind.

“It was all part of the plan to revitalize the reservation, but it never happened. Instead, trees grew on it. We’ll break the army into two. The first half will take the tunnel and attack the smaller portion of the Tarloux army. We should handle them with relative ease. The bigger portion of the Tarloux army will be led by The Twin. They like to be involved in their battles, and they will want the stone. Luke and Hayley will be their target. They will go after you and, in doing that, break up their forces even more.”

We spent the next thirty minutes talking about more strategic positions we could take and how to salvage our terrible position. In the end, things didn’t look as bleak as they did before, and I was beginning to see that Bonne’s plan might work. Just as we were about to call it a day, I looked at the map before us and the lines Bonne had drawn.

“Wait,” I said and pulled the map towards myself.”

“What’s here?” I asked, pointing at some drawings on the map that looked like ridges.

“They are valleys,” Bonne said. “They separate this high ground from that.”

“How far apart are they?” I asked.

“What are you thinking?” Luke asked me.

“A way to break the Tarloux forces even further. We need them thinned out as much as possible. I can see there is a way to get to the other side of the valley by going around it. But can one jump?”

“Yes,” Bonne said. “You can jump. But you’ll have to change.”

“We can’t use the stone when we change,” Luke said, putting a dent in my plan.

I sighed and pushed the map.

“It would have been a brilliant plan if you still had the stone with you. But to make our plan work, we need you to be far from the stone to begin with. I want them to sense that it isn’t with you and think you’re vulnerable.” Bonne said

“Alright, we stick to your plan,” I said.

“Good. Let’s all go prepare our men. We attack at the stroke of midnight. The war to put an end to all other wars!” Bonne yelled and howled.

His howling was so loud that it reverberated through the camp. Then someone howled back in the reply, and soon the whole camp was howling. We were ready for war.

Chapter thirty-eight (Luke)

There was a world separate from the one we were in currently. Beyond our tents, there were men going around, anxiety perched on their faces, hitting each other on the shoulder and encouraging themselves to prepare for war. But, in here, there was only bliss. There was just me with Hayley. She was wrapped around me, and I was inside her, stroking in and out and looking into her eyes, loving every moment of it. I touched her on the cheeks as she moaned gently and bit down on her lips. Over time now, I have come to know every part of her, every inch of her body I have come to learn and memorize. I knew what would spark her on, what would keep her on the path, and how to tip her over and have a flush with the highest peak of pleasure. I knew how to make her feel heavenly, and in turn, she makes me feel heavenly.

This is love. This is what I wanted. It is what I had wanted from the first time I set my eyes on her. I might have fought myself from going for it and pretended not to know why I was so intent on going after her, but this was it all along.

This moment made everything all make sense.

I kissed her hard on the lips and sneaked my tongue into her mouth, she welcomed it, and it found a home there. She opened her eyes and looked at me, reaching up to touch my face.

“I love you,” I told her as I stroked into her again, and she shut her eyes, pleasure flooding through her and biting her lips, catching her halfway through her reply. She didn’t talk again as I lifted her and placed her against the wall, her inner warmth and sleekness holding me tight. I ran my finger around her nipples as we both attained a tempo and a rhythm. We got it soon enough, and her moans were soon regularized, and she became short of breath.

We made love like we weren’t ever going to get a chance to make love again, and it was absolutely blissful. I felt alive, my whole body was perked up in want and passion, and it seemed

like it would never be fulfilled. I was on a rush, and I held on to her to keep myself steady. I pushed myself closer to climax, and she responded by slapping her body against mine. We went it with animalistic fervor, and the hunger in us could only be fulfilled when we both finally climaxed, and Hayley's moan broke out and must have filled the whole woods.

We both calmed down and fell back to the floor. We were satiated and now simply just enjoying each other's presence.

"I love you," she said finally, kissing me again, and snuggled closer to me, almost like she wanted to mesh into one with me. I loved it and kept stroking her cheeks.

"It is almost time," I said.

"We'll be together. We'll fight together. We'll finish this together. It started with us, and it'll end with us."

Before I could give a reply to that, the alarm went off, signaling it was twelve midnight and time to lead the attack. I stood up and threw Hayley's clothes at her. We both got dressed hurriedly and walked out of the tent, walking past men who were hurrying about to make it to their stations.

While we were making love like rabbits, Bonne had been busy making everyone ready. Hayley and I walked to the west of the camp, and our army was there waiting for us. They were all gathered together; to the left were Gork men, who were aggressive naturally, and it was hard to keep them collected the way they were now. Some of Patel's men in blue and gold uniforms were beside them. They all held a spear because they believed it was easier to fight with a weapon against men who had no weapons. I wasn't going to argue for or against the logic. They just needed to do a good job of fighting the Tarloux. Beside Patel's men were other soldiers whose crests and leaders I didn't recognize. Most of them were Patel's family men, and some were just families that heard we were going up against the Tarloux and wanted to help. Beside them were Timothy and some of his ranks. He would be leading with us. When he saw me, he smiled. A pedestal had been made for Hayley and me in front, and I walked to it. I needed to stir them up and get them ready.

I walked past the soldiers with Hayley beside me, and I realized this was the way it would be forever. Hayley would forever be beside me once this war was over. It made me smile because it was the perfect thing. I got to the front and stood on the pedestal, which made it easier to see the forces I'd be commanding. We are the ones taking the fight to the Tarloux, The largest force. To the far end, I could finally see the lone wolves. They were my own family, and I nodded at them subtly. They nodded back. Seeing them was a boost to my confidence.

I looked at the men before me. They all looked anxious, which was expected, but I couldn't pick out anyone that looked scared. That was a good thing.

"When we go out there to fight," I told them. My voice wasn't loud but carried well. I knew even those at the back would hear me clearly, which was what I wanted. "When you get out there, remember you're not fighting just for yourself!"

They growled, but it was subtle, and only a portion of Patel's men were growling. The Gork looked bored. They wanted to fight, and they wanted to fight now!

"Remember, you're not fighting for your glory. You are fighting so you can live!"

The growl increased, and Patel's men started hitting their spears on the floor, causing a thud that reverberated through the crowd and soon inspired the others to start growling.

"You are fighting so your children can grow to have a purpose and not become pawns for the Tarloux!"

It was louder now, and I was sure the Tarloux, who were just about two hundred feet from us, could hear it, and it was enough to instill fear in them. We sounded like a million men had gathered and were ready to fight. I walked down the pedestal and joined them, walking through the army and could feel the hunger burning in them. They all held a vial from Bonne's stash, and just about when the battle was to start, they would all consume it. It would greatly enhance their ability.

“You are fighting so your children won’t have to fight!” I said and hit some of them on the shoulder, causing them to growl louder. Now that I was in their midst, they felt even more invincible.

“When you get out there, remember, you are fighting to prepare a way for them! A better future. One where they assume autonomy and make a decision for themselves!”

The last growl went on and on, and it sounded like it wasn’t going to come to an end, then, slowly, it died down, and they all looked at me, waiting for the next command.

I let them marinate the hunger growing within them. I let myself feel it too, and I could almost touch it. I wanted to kill, and I have never wanted to kill so badly in my life. I looked up at them, and it was time.

“Now,” I told them, raised my hand up, and they went quiet. Not a single sound invaded the silence that filled the night. “Go out there and conquer!” I dropped my hand, and at that cue, they all ran past me, running towards the Tarloux camp, growling, howling, and yelling.

The war had started.

Hayley walked down and joined me as the men ran on, and soon the smell of blood filled the air. The Tarloux have come out to attack back. We had taken them by surprise, giving them very little time to prepare themselves. That will give us an edge, but not one that would last.

Timothy joined Hayley and me, and we watched the fight go on for a while as we walked toward it. There was no way to know who was winning.

“Stone bearers,” Timothy said and looked at Hayley and me. “No matter how this ends, it was a pleasure knowing you,” he said with a bow and charged forward with the army. I looked at Hayley and then back at the camp and wondered how Bonne was doing with the men he had led through the tunnel. I hoped they were doing well.

We charged on too, and joined the fight, throwing ourselves into the thick of it. The first wolf that attacked me had golden

eyes, just like Jade, and I pictured the boy as I snatched the wolf from the air as he was charging at me. I was doing this for him and the thousand other children out there who would become Tarloux henchmen if they weren't stopped now.

I grabbed him by the neck and hit him on the ground. He spun back up almost immediately and came for me, but I was ready. I moved out of the way, making him expose himself, and got him in the neck with my claws. He screamed, but it was caught halfway before he fell to the ground.

One down, thousands left to go.

This was why Bonne's idea was ingenious. We can't fight them forever, they were more numerous than us, so it was better to take the fight to where it mattered the most to The Twins.

I looked at Hayley, who already had blood on her claws, and pulled her to me.

"Come on," I told her. "Let's get to The Twins."

But we weren't going to have it easy. Just as we moved, three werewolves stepped in front of us, and I couldn't tell if they recognized us or were just hungry for a brawl. To my left, I watched as a Gork fought with one of the soldiers and kept punching him in the head until he broke under the force. Then he moved on to the next. Just as he turned around to fight the next werewolf, someone got him in the throat. A quick slice of the throat, and he was dead. To my right, a Kael fell down dead, and the reality of war hit me.

Men will die, a lot of them. I had thought of it earlier on, but it had been close to impossible to conceive just how much of them would. Now, I could see it, and it disturbed me. Weighing that fact distracted me for a while, and I didn't see the first werewolf attack. Out of my periphery, I saw a blob come at me, and I moved out of the way before he could hit me. I looked down at the werewolf, who was up already and coming for me again. The other two went for Hayley. I stepped closer to the first one that came for me, and my sudden aggression caught him by surprise. He tried to charge back, but it was too late for him. I held him by the neck and snapped

it, dropping him to the floor before moving on to the next one, pulling one of the ones fighting Hayley away so he faced me, and I clawed at his face, mauling him over and over until he fell to the ground.

I looked at Hayley, who was finally free and then looked around us. We had gotten into this fight on the edge of it, but somehow we were now smack in the middle.

The goal remained the same. To find The Twins.

We pushed through the thick ground, looking for a way out. It was hard because, at every angle, there was a werewolf fighting or reaching to fight us. This was a mess.

“We can’t get through,” Hayley said, and another Tarloux werewolf came for us again. Their red and black garments made them easy to point out even in the dark. I moved out of the way and left him for Hayley to handle, but there was another just to my left, and he was growling, his glowing red eyes burning with hate. I watched as he charged at me, but he never got to me. A Patel soldier knocked him out, nodded at me, and then turned around to keep fighting.

I moved away and saw if I could force a way out of there, but there was no way. We were stuck right in the middle of the battle itself, and we needed to be in front. That was Bonne’s plan. The Twins will see us better that way. Another attack was coming from my left, and I moved to evade that, but another came from the right, and I felt a claw reach into my gut. I growled in pain as I pushed the claw out, grabbed the werewolf that did it, and turned him around, hitting him on the first werewolf that came for me. I pushed them both to the ground and fell right with them. I bit the first one with my fangs right at the carotid and stuck my claws into the second’s eyes, blinding him before I stabbed him multiple times in the stomach. I stood up, the pain in my side burning. I growled and touched it. I was bleeding.

I would need to take Bonne’s concoction soon enough.

“We need a way out of here, Luke!” Hayley said as she struggled to keep up with the sludge of fighters keeping her busy. I needed to think of something fast. We couldn’t spend

more time in here, or there goes Bonne's plan. I looked at the werewolves around me. There were all different kinds. The Kael, the Gork, the Patels, even the Tarloux. Different werewolves, but they all had something in common. We have different cultures, and we fought for different reasons, but there wasn't much difference between us. We have more in common than we have differences.

And there was one thing we had more in common. Our origin. We all came from wolves, and all wolves will always respond to one thing. They can't help it.

"Luke!" Hayley yelled at me as somebody else came for her. Just as she fought that out of the way, another Tarloux soldier came for me too. They were everywhere. He swiped at me, but I got out of the way and tried to retaliate, but he was fast and ducked my attack with ease. He had a sleek smile on his face. I knew then that he was different from the others that had attacked me earlier today.

"It's you," he said, still smiling, and I wanted to wipe that grin off his face. "I would take your head to The Twins. A souvenir."

He came for me, his hands a flurry of movement. A gentle growl came out of me as I prepared my attack for him, but I kept moving back, aware of my surroundings, so I knew a Patel soldier just a couple of feet from me. I stepped back until my body hit the soldier and then used him to push myself forward. I went at the man and swiped at him, but he got out of the way, so my claws couldn't do real damage. It got him in the left eye and took a chunk of his cheek. If he survives this, his left eye will be gone forever. He groaned in pain but didn't let that stop him. He charged right at me, barely even recovering. I was ready for his attack, though, as I was watching him more intently, trying to figure out his movement.

But this was a war, and I didn't have time for that. I let him come at me, and when he was close enough, I pulled a Tarloux soldier who had been fighting a Patel and threw him at the soldier coming at me, disorienting him for a while before I stepped around them and got behind him. I had both hands around his neck and simply pushed my claws into his neck. I

didn't let him go, though. I held on to him firmly and pulled strength from his body.

We needed a way out, so this was it. I howled. Louder than I have ever done before. It was loud and reverberating. It went through the battleground, touching every werewolf in there. We can't help but be touched by a howling that loud.

They all stopped fighting for a moment, and I looked at Hayley. This was our chance, and we seized it. I pulled her towards me, and we pushed through the stunned crowd before they recovered.

Regardless of their allegiance, every single one of them looked at me, wondering what I would do next after the howl. A howl was supposed to be followed by an order or action of some sort, but I had none for them. We made a considerable distance before they recovered, but we had a path checked out before us already, and we just continued running and didn't stop, pushing people out of the way and swiping our claws at any Tarloux soldier that wanted to come for us—soon enough, they all stopped coming, and we pushed through them until we were finally in front and we stopped.

The battle plan on this was now behind us, and our target was before us. The Twins.

They were in some sort of carriage, watching the battle going on. We were about ten feet from them, but I could feel the cold emanating from them, and it made me shiver. Subconsciously, I moved closer to Hayley as though I wanted to get some warmth from her. The carriage opened, and the two of them stepped out and stood before us. They were old and wrinkly, but their lean structure gave off power, and I felt a deep reverence towards them. They looked ancient like I was standing before a source of great power but not as great as the moon stone, which was why they wanted it. They couldn't stand the idea of something more powerful than them not belonging to them.

“Can you feel it?” Hayley asked.

“Yes. Their power.”

“It is very vile.”

I took a step closer to them, bridging the gap between us, and Hayley did that too. The other carriage opened, and Viper stepped out of it. He looked different from the last time I saw him, but I couldn't put my hands to it. We stopped when we got halfway.

“So we meet,” one of The Twins said, and he looked at Hayley and me with some cold interest and disgust. “I can sense the old blood running through you, and it gags me.”

“Your blood gags me, too,” I told him.

“Ha, we are exchanging words like kindergarten kids. You do not have what I want,” the other said.

“No,” Hayley replied.

“Why don't you make this easy on everyone? Go get it, bring it to me, and I will put an end to this.”

“I have a better suggestion,” Hayley said, hate and anger growing in her voice. “How about you fuck off.”

“I see why James liked you,” the first Twin said. “Look around you; you cannot win this. Why delay the inevitable? Your silly plans will never work. You are kids playing an adult's game. You cannot survive.”

“We'll see,” I said and looked at Hayley. “Do you want your stone?” I asked them.

I expected a reply, but they said nothing, so I looked on and then took another step closer. Suddenly, they were all on edge, and I could see they expected me to attack them. I stopped suddenly, my smile getting broader. I was enjoying this.

“Come get it,” I told them.

We both turned on our heels and started running, leaving the battle behind.

Chapter thirty-nine (Hayley)

I looked behind me, and just as Bonne predicted would happen, The Twins split their army in two and sent the smaller half toward Luke and me while the others faced the men. It was an obviously terrible choice because we now had the upper hand on the mountain. We'll win and take control of the upper lands. If Bonne and the men he has in the tunnels win, too, we'll have the rest of the Tarloux army, which mostly now entail the ones they have sent toward Luke and me, caught between us in two positions. We might not even need to go on the battlefield with them again. There will be a big drop in the soldier's morale, and we'll cut them down from the inside out.

This might work.

The realization of that hit me with a sudden boost of energy. We could possibly win this, but I needed to play my part well. The easy part of the job had been done, and we've had them break the army in two. Now, all that was left was to make sure we reached the moon stone and activated its power to be able to fight this army behind us. But they aren't the target. Those wrinkly old men with the eyes of a snake and the looks that could kill were who we were after. We needed to kill them. You cut the head off the snake, and the snake dies. They were the head of the Tarloux family.

Even though I had no trees to help pull myself, I didn't feel any pain in my knees running. I was almost gliding through the air, and many times, I was tempted to look back and see how the army was faring, but that was none of my business now. Timothy led the charge, and he was capable.

I continued running, the air sweeping past me and hitting me in the face. It was getting close to morning, and the morning cold had dropped, so the cold air with a bit of humidity was what kept hitting me. The distance between us and the stone was about ten miles, and it would be close to impossible to keep running at this same speed. We'll need help soon, and we'll get that from Bonne's concoction. But in the meantime, I

concentrated on putting more distance between us and the force behind us. I could sense The Twins behind us. They were keeping close to us, and I guessed they knew we were leading them to the stone, which was probably why they were willing to risk breaking their army in two. They wanted the stone desperately and were willing to make desperate decisions to get it.

The sound of toenails on the ground soon filled the air behind us, and I looked at Luke beside me. We both understood what that meant. The werewolves have turned, and they will soon catch up with us. If we wanted to keep the pace, we needed to turn too or take the concoction. The best option would be to take the concoction and turn, but this wasn't the time. We had a plan. A partial deviation from Bonne's plan, but it was supposed to help us. It was a contingency in case anything went wrong.

Luke shook his head. We would not change and would stick to the plan. That meant we would have to fight, and it was still about five miles to the valley, on the other side of which the stone awaited us. We needed to push ourselves harder. And that was what we did. I put more effort into my heels and felt pain slip in. I was pushing it too hard but didn't let the pain get in the way. I have the strength to endure whatever pain the push throws at me. The breeze blew harder against my face, biting hard. I took it as a sign that we were now going faster, which was a good thing.

But there was no way we could beat fully turned werewolves. They were faster and stronger than us in all senses and could endure more pain and push themselves harder than we could. Soon, I could hear them closing in the gap between us, and the sound of their feet against the ground echoed in my ears. I knew it was a matter of time before we took the first attack. I looked at Luke again.

"Stick to the plan," he yelled at me, and I nodded. I had no design to deviate from the plan. I had not come all this way, lost so much, and been through so much pain to give it away so easily now. This, for me now, was a do-or-die affair. There were no in-betweens. I pushed on, and just behind me, I heard

the sound cut through the air and knew the first attack was here. I moved out of the way as the first wolf came at me. It missed me by a couple of inches and stopped in front of me. It was enormous in that deceptive way wolves usually were. I didn't stop for it. I ran on and ran into it, keeping myself steady. I knocked it to the ground and then jumped over it, and continued running. I looked to my side, and Luke was still there. He nodded at me. That was just the first attack, and that wolf wasn't done.

He was coming for me again.

We were about four miles from the valley.

The werewolf came at me again, but this time, he was followed by another, who went for Luke. The two of them were more ferocious, and their attack wasn't deadly, so it was pretty obvious that they had orders not to kill us but detain us, and then The Twins would torture the location of the stone out of us, but that wasn't going to happen.

As the fully turned werewolf went for my back, wrapping its forelimbs around my neck, I fell to the ground and hit against the ground. The force of my fall hurt it, and I heard a bone break. Its grip on me faltered for a moment, and I seized it, kicking it out of the way and punching it in the groin, and before I stood up and continued my run, I attacked it with my claws but could barely get any lethal attack as its fur was protecting it. It came for me when it seemed to have recovered from the sudden turn of events, but I gripped down with my hand around its neck, choking it as much as I could. I looked up and saw the other werewolves making a charge at us. They were getting close and even in the dark, and with my eyes glowing, the large number of them put fear through me. They have to be around a thousand. There was no way we were going to fight through a thousand and survive. No way.

I tightened my grip on the wolf's neck, and it struggled against me. I held it down and pressed down, putting so much strength into it until I heard a bone crack, then I let go and shifted away from it. Luke pulled me up, and we stood side by side for a while. There were no wolves close to us now, but they were gaining very fast.

“We have to keep going,” Luke said.

“There’s a lot of them. There’s too many of them.”

“I know. But we have to keep going. We can’t stop now, Hayley. Remember. Remember the goal.”

I remember the goal, but it was hard to keep up faith when you have this large number right behind you. I had become over-optimistic when it seemed the plan was going our way and hadn’t considered that The Twins might have a trick up their sleeve. This was their trick. To demoralize us, and I was helping them.

I turned around and faced Luke.

“Let’s go,” I said and held his hand. We started running. With our hands held tight, we drew strength from each other. We had exhausted some of our energy fighting the wolves that attacked us earlier, and now that we were on the run again, I thought we would tire out a bit, but the opposite was the case. We fired on, stronger than ever before. I could barely feel the pain in my heels that had started to grow earlier. I felt like I was floating as I pushed on. The wolves behind us didn’t matter anymore. All that mattered was the two of us, our hands joined, and the destination, which was now pulling closer to us.

We were just about three miles to the valley, and slowly it started to look possible, and once again, I was entertaining the idea that we would win the war. If things went all according to plan, there was no way for us to lose.

In the distance, I could see the start of the sunrise against the horizon. The golden yellow glow of the sun swam and swayed before us, and it was hard to imagine that we’d been at this for that long. It seemed that time just went zooming past us. The valley was becoming more visible, and we were getting close to the crucial part of the plan. To do that, we’ll have to let go of each other’s hands, and that worried me a bit. I didn’t want to do that.

“It’s time, Hayley,” Luke said, and I nodded at him. I realized that and forced myself to imagine the men behind us fighting

the remained of the Tarloux army, the men with Bonne fighting the Tarloux army at the leeway doing their part, and then there was me. This was my part of the plan, and I must execute it well. We were two miles from the valley now, and the stone awaited us on the other side. I wondered if The Twins who were somewhere behind us could sense it the same way I could sense it now. It felt like a beacon calling to me. I would answer it, but not just yet.

I let go of Luke's hand, and suddenly, the two of us went in opposite directions, running alongside the deep trench that separated this part of the mountain from the other part, and for a moment, the men were confused and didn't know who to follow. In that little moment of confusion, I put more distance between them and me. But soon, they split themselves in half again. One of the halves followed me, and the other went with Luke.

We've managed to break them up even further. Now, I was alone, and I had to focus. I ignored the force behind me and pulled together the strength that I could. It would soon be time.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the vial of Bonne's creation, taking a quick swig out of it before I continued running. The wolves behind me were closing in, but I didn't care. I turned around again and started towards the valley, and I could see some of them flanking me, and they must know that I intended to jump.

I could feel the herbs in the vial slowly enhance my senses, and the sound of pads stamping against the floor increased about ten folds, but so also did my strength and I became filled with an adrenaline rush, running faster than I had before. That had been most of my battle so far—running, and it had its purpose, so I was doing it right.

The power flooded through me, and I didn't care that the wolves were now at my heels. My concern was the approaching ditch, and as I got closer, I slowly reached into my being and started to turn. It was a deadly touch. The combination of Bonne's vial and changing fully. It would enhance me to a level I have never experienced before. I felt my body shift and go from a werewolf into a full-bodied wolf.

The way I perceived the environment shifted. The way I ran through it was different. And now I had not just the thought of a human I had that of wolves, and from my calculation, it was about time to jump.

I had the dexterity of a wolf too, and when I was just about half a foot from the ditch, I put pressure on my forelimbs and used it to push myself forward. Just about the same time, one of the wolves, coming at me from the side, made his jump, and it seemed like he was going to catch me halfway through the air. If that happens, we will both fall into the valley. If we didn't die from the fall, there would be a lot of broken bones.

But I ignored him. I had made my calculation, and I didn't want to be deterred from it. I have to make it to the other side and leave them behind, knowing they wouldn't be able to get to me and the time it would take them to go around the valley to get to me, I'd be long gone. They'll have the other option of returning to the battlefield, but that will take a long time too. I would have them in a dilemma. That was the plan. To break them with indecision.

The wolf coming at me missed me just by a couple of inches, and he tried to regain control of himself and turn midway in the air to fall against the side of the valley, but he was too late for that. He fell to his death instead.

I was midway through the air now, and for a moment, I thought I wasn't going to make it. The other end of the valley seemed so far away, and when I jumped, it pushed itself away from me suddenly, and I thought I had made a mistake. I thought I had put enough pressure on my jump.

And I was right. I was falling mid-way through the air now. I was falling fast, and I was falling hard, but then, my forelimbs connected with a part of the wall of the valley, and I immediately put weight on it and used it to push myself up. I continued that way until I was at the top of the valley.

I stood there and turned around to consider the wolves on the other side. They looked lost, and if I could smile, then I would have. I turned away from them and started towards the other side of the woods now, heading for the location of the moon

stone. I looked to the far end of the valley to see if I could make out Luke, but I couldn't. I didn't panic, though. He would make a better jump than I did. I was sure of that, and he would meet me at the location of the stone.

We were very close to victory now. So close that I could smell it in the air.

But there was something else I could suddenly smell in the air. It rushed me fast, and I moved back as though I had gotten slapped by it.

It was the same smell I perceived when Luke and I were faced with The Twins earlier. The smell of death itself. I turned around, and I was right.

I don't know how they did it. Magic or sorcery, but there were right there behind me. And the two Twins stood with Viper right beside them.

"Very impressive," one of them said. It was hard to tell the difference between them. They looked exactly the same way. "You have a lot of tricks up your sleeves, we see. Do you have any others, or have you come to the end of the road?"

It does look like I have come to the end of the road. I looked lost and couldn't imagine how fast my fate had turned. Everything was going splendidly until moments ago. I had a burning question in my mind. How did they do it?

I moved away from them instinctually, my hind limbs hitting a tree behind me. This shouldn't be happening. Panic was beginning to set in, and I looked around for Luke. He was still not any closer.

The trees around me started to move, and suddenly, the forest was filled with a different kind of smell. It was one I was very familiar with too. It was Ilad. He appeared through the woods, almost like a wraith, and stood beside me. He had a set look before him, filled with intention and purpose. He was a different boy from the one I had seen just hours ago.

"I told you all they needed was a reason, Hayley," he said. "I gave them one."

Suddenly they started to appear in the trees, and they filled them. Some of them walked behind me and stood there. There were small, but they were ready for war, and they weren't perturbed that they were standing before The Twins.

The segregated clans came after all.

Chapter forty (Luke)

I had it easy taking the concoction, turning fully into a wolf, and jumping over the valley, but when I got to the other side, I knew something was wrong. I could sense the panic grow in Hayley, and it felt like she was reaching to me, looking for me and calling for me. The only thing that mattered then was her, so immediately I got to the other side of the valley, I turned right and started towards her. I was just about twenty feet away when I felt them. Their presence was strong and intoxicating.

If they had made it to the other side already, then all the plans we've made failed. We haven't even gotten to the moon stone. How do we fight them without it? But I didn't stop. They were with Hayley, and she needed my help. It doesn't matter if there was no logical way for us to win this without the stone. What mattered the most was being with her at this moment.

I pushed myself harder and didn't feel any fatigue because of the vial and the wolf form I was in. It didn't matter that I had been running for hours. I was invigorated and ready for war. I got closer to her now, and she was not alone. That friend of hers, Ilad, was with her, and he looked at The Twins as though he could take them on his own. But he wasn't alone either. I finally saw them all, and they filled the forest in large numbers.

They came, that was the thought that rushed through me, and I sighed in relief, but it was only short-lived. It wasn't only The Twins and Viper that crossed the other side of the valley. I could see some more Tarloux soldiers moving in. The ones on the other side of the valley still remained there, so I didn't understand where these were coming from. But I didn't have time to get an answer to that as everyone collided, and another battle broke out here. There wasn't supposed to be a battle here. It wasn't part of Bonne's part.

This was where we recovered the stone and then returned and went in search of The Twins to kill them. How much things

change in such a little time.

I was about three feet from the battle and watched for a while as people fought and died on either side. There were many more segregated clan members than there were in the Tarloux army, so it was pretty obvious what the outcome would be. They don't need me.

I needed to move on to the next stage of the plan. It was time to get the moon stone. At that moment, Hayley looked at me and nodded. We were both thinking the same thing. This had gone on for long enough. It was time to put an end to it. Making a quick turn, I started towards the woods and the direction of the moon stone.

(Hayley)

I turned around at the same Luke did, but before I did, it was as though The Twins were before me one moment, and then the next, they were gone. I It was just Viper before me, and he started to chase me. I didn't care. I have always known how to handle him, and right now, there was a disparity between our abilities as I was fully turned, and he was still in his werewolf form. I ran towards the stone instead, hoping to get to it before The Twins did because if they did before me, this would have all been for naught. They were not supposed to be here, which was why we put the stone here. But they were, and we'd have to deal with that.

Running on my forelimbs and hind limbs made it impossible to use the trees to push myself forward, but I was doing just fine on my own and didn't need the trees. Behind me, Viper turned, and he started to catch up to me. I didn't like that. I wished he would just leave, but it didn't look like that was going to happen as he pushed himself against one of the trees and used it to lob himself in front of me.

Nice trick, I thought. But I didn't have the time for this.

I continued to push myself and flew over him, hoping to continue with my race. I couldn't feel or sense The Twins, which was a bad thing. But I could sense Luke, who was making a better distance than I was since he didn't have Viper dogging him. I landed behind Viper and continued running,

leaving him behind. The Twins must have set him on me to derail me. I suspected they had sensed the stone was close and had gone searching for it.

The race continued between Viper and me, and he kept using the trees to lob himself forward, but this time, he was getting in front of me. He was too much of a distraction, and I knew I better find a way to get rid of him fast and focus on the task at hand. I scoffed, and I stopped running since Luke was now closer to stone. I turned around and looked at Viper, who had stopped too and taken a stance before me. This was what he wanted, A fight between the two of us.

Was he looking to prove himself to The Twins, or did he just have a score to settle? I have never fought him in his wolf form, but I didn't expect it to be any harder than when he was in his werewolf form. He growled at me, telling me he wanted this and would savor it. The look on his face was that of someone that intended to win this.

Well, I had no intention of losing either.

He charged first, just as he always does, and I stood my ground, welcoming his attack. He came from the left, using the streamlined nature of the werewolf wolf form to his advantage, which made it easy for him to maneuver in the air. But I wasn't a fool. As he moved to the right again, trying to throw me off, I jumped right at him to tell him there would be no time for antics. I smashed into him midair, and we both collided on the ground. He pulled himself up immediately and came after me again. This wasn't like one of the drills that James put us through. This was life and death.

Viper's new charge told me all I had to know. He wanted this win badly, and he would be putting all his effort into making sure he got it. Beating me would crown him a winner. Killing me would disorient Luke, and then they could easily get to the stone, recover it and use it. This was all part of their plan.

He came at me with his left forelimb. I tried to get out of the way, but I wasn't fluid enough, so it hit me in the face, and with an almost unbelievable force. It knocked me to the ground, and Viper did the thing he had been doing with the

tree again. He used one of them to lob himself forward, and he lobbed right into me, knocking into me while I was still down and keeping me on the ground. I couldn't believe my own trick was being used against me. I wished I knew how to use it while I was in my wolf form.

Viper was stronger and faster than I expected him to be, which could only mean one thing. The Tarloux had a trick up their sleeves. If Bonne could enhance our strength and speed with his herbs, they could too.

I needed to focus on winning this.

Viper was on the ground and getting ready to come at me again. He wasn't even taking a break. Whatever was running through his veins was extremely powerful. Then I remembered one of the hunters that used amphetamines to fight against Luke and me. They had been strong and fast just like this, and they had a deathly determination about them, the same one Viper had on him now as he charged toward me for the fourth time in the last thirty seconds. No wonder he gained on me so fast. He was spiked up.

I paid attention to his movement, and just like before, he moved to his left again, favoring it for the second time in the day. He came at me, his jaws opened and his fangs ready to dip into me. I moved back hastily, but I smashed against a tree behind me, and he pushed himself forward, barely having dropped to the ground, and he was on me again. I had to lift myself up the tree, but my claws didn't do a good job of holding on. They held on strong enough for him to miss me, but I was falling to the ground soon enough, and he was right there waiting for me. Midair, I pushed away from him and landed on the ground just a couple of feet from him.

This was taking longer than I had planned, and I knew I had to put an end to it.

I let Viper come for me again, and just like before; he moved to the left again. His drugged mind, as focused as it was, was over focused, and that would be his downfall. He kept going left. I let him charge at me fully this time and didn't move out of the way until he was just a breath away from me. His jaws

were opened, his eyes wild and wide in anticipation, and I could picture him doing a glory dance when all of this was over. But it never got to that. I moved out of the way just in time, and he didn't have the grace to brake. He slammed right into the tree before him. When he stood up, he was in pain, and the top of his head was bleeding, but he barely noticed it. He was focused on me again.

When he came again, this time, I made the charge. I had the plan mapped out in my mind, which was clearer than his. I moved left just at the same time as him, which he kept doing to help with his movement in the air, and when he saw he wouldn't be able to attack me that way, he tried to change it, but he couldn't. It felt like he was stuck in gear, and I pushed my body into him, knocking him to the ground.

He was shocked, and the shock took a while to leave him. I took advantage of that, and I charged at him before he could recover and bit into his hind limb, dragging at its Achilles tendon until it snapped in my teeth. He howled out in pain and tried to stand up to face me again, but he couldn't do that on four limbs. One of them was destroyed.

I knew I had him now. I could kill him now and be done with it, but to what end? I have a lot of death on me already and didn't want to add Viper's. With a final charge before he could make up his mind and attack me, I went for the diagonal forelimb and snatched at the Achilles tendon on that limb, too, rendering him useless. He fell to the ground, whimpering. I was done fighting him.

I turned around and started towards Luke, covering as much distance as I could. Before I got to him, I could sense something wrong had happened. I had been focused on the fight with Viper that I forgot to sense what Luke was feeling, and now that I could sense it, I was washed with fear and despair. That couldn't have been what had happened. We were doomed if that happened.

Soon, I could see him a couple of feet from me, and he was standing there, the day's sun rising and shining on him, and he was looking at something on the horizon. I joined him and

looked at it too. It was The Twins. They had the stone and were looking down at the two of us.

We'd failed. We'd failed everyone.

Chapter forty-one (Hayley)

But this doesn't end this way. That was what I promised Nellie. There was no way this ended this way. I looked at Luke, who was fuming just like me. We didn't come all this way to be defeated and surrender to these two. It wasn't going to happen.

"We would love to fight the two of you," one of The Twins said. "But we have more important things to do and won't get involved in squabbles."

I wanted to reply, but a look at Luke told me that was pointless. They were trying to belittle us and make us think we wouldn't be able to fight them. But we will. He moved closer to them, his steps decisive and the growl coming from him clear. They weren't getting away without a fight.

The Twin holding the stone scoffed and walked back, placing the stone on the floor beside a tree. "I will be glad to put an end to you two vermin," he said, and they both stood side by side. Even though they both looked old, their mere stance was powerful enough to strike fear into me. But I fed on the fear and went in first. At the end of this, I would either be alive or dead, so I wanted to make it count.

I went for the Twin directly in front of me, and all he did was step out of the way and swab at me like I was a fly. I flew in the air and got smacked against a tree, thankful I didn't get any bones broken. I was up again, ready for another attack. At no point in this fight will I give up and get tired. At no point will I despair. I turned back at him and watched as the other hit Luke midair, too, sending him flying a couple of feet and smacking into the ground. They moved so fluidly that it was like they were one with the air. They moved into position and stood side by side as I dashed at them again, and there was no care in me that I would get it again. I just went at them, and just as I expected, one of them hit me in the chest, around the neck region, as I flew up, trying to get at him with my fangs. I fell

to the ground, and pain wracked me. It was intense, but not intense enough to stop me from getting up again.

Luke was up also now, and he was beside me. We were getting our asses handed to us. We needed to put in some fight. Show them we have the royal blood in us too.

Then I realized the answer to the problem. We have the royal blood in us, something that the Tarloux lacks and which makes us inherently better than them. We shouldn't be intimidated. They should be scared of us. I stepped forward, and this time, I let myself listen to the air around me, the trees, the soil, and even the birds hiding out in their nests. This was how to win. To be attentive. I went at them again and watched every move they made with intent. One of them stepped towards me, and he had his hand out trying to get me, but I was seeing everything as though time had been slowed down. I saw him move one step forward and use the other to keep himself rooted to the ground. They were strong, but not as strong as they made us believe. A large percentage of their strength was from their aura and the fear they could imbibe just by their mere ancient look. Just as I got to him, I dropped down, which was very easy for me to do since I was still in my wolf form, and I slid under him, going for his leg.

He realized what was happening just a moment too late, and I snatched at his Achilles' tendon, trying to pull the same trick I pulled on Viper. My teeth connected with it, but as I was about to pull it out, he snatched his leg out of the way and turned around, trying to get at me. I moved away from him and turned around to look at him. He was angry and hadn't expected that. I gave him as much of a grin as I could muster. He shook his leg as blood started to flow out of it. I looked at myself, and Luke had the same idea.

It was now as if, just as The Twins were unidentifiable on their own, we had merged into one too, one thought, one person. This was how we would defeat them. We were made for this moment. We were fated to bring an end to them, and that was what we would do.

We stood side by side, two huge wolves before two states, and the smug look they had on them was gone. They could see if

they didn't take this seriously, they would lose. I had almost gotten one of them in the leg, and if I had, he would have been unable to walk. That would be one less twin for us to fight.

I braced myself as I knew they would make the next attack, and they did. They moved together, the one mirrored the other, and as they did, they moved the air with them, gathering up dust and dry leaves on the ground around them, like a force field before them. They stepped toward Luke and me. We responded by moving to them, too, ready to attack. I took the one to the left, and Luke took the one to the right. I lifted myself up to be able to fight at face level as them, making myself appear big. I went face-in first, my powerful jaws looking to grab at his head, but he had other plans. He wanted to punch me right in the neck. It was a heavy and solid punch; should it have made contact with me, I might have gone down with a broken neck. I moved down just in time to avoid getting punched. But I was up again, looking to get his neck, but he was ready too, moving his fluid self out of the way, and we both came out empty in that attack.

Now that I could see they were touchable and not undefeatable, I was always ready to make another attack, and I did. I moved at him, trying to get at his face again as that was the fastest way to get this over with, but he was fast in recovery and was out of the way again, leaving me empty. Luke was beside me again, and he couldn't get an attack in either.

We needed the stone, I thought, and Luke agreed in my mind. It was the one chance we had at beating them. They were fast, and it seemed they would easily be able to defuse any attack we made at them. They will simply wait it out until we are tired and out of our wolf skin, and then they'll kill us. We couldn't let that happen. We needed to get to the stone as fast as possible, and I could see a path to it already. I looked at Luke, and the information was passed successfully. It would be a one-time try, and should we not get to it, we might as well have just signed a hastened death sentence.

We stood side by side and watched The Twins. The stone was behind them, and during the whole fight, they had made sure it

remained behind them. They had put it there because they thought this fight would be over as soon as possible. I was happy that assertion had been put to shame and they were now facing us and fighting for their lives just as we were. I stepped forward first and growled at them. Luke stepped with me, growling too. They growled back, their eyes glowing, their fangs bared, and their claws ready to tear into our skins.

I went in first, and that disoriented them. They had expected the two of us to come at the same time as we did the last time because it leveled the playing field, but I wasn't looking to level the field. I was looking to win. I moved closer to them again and suddenly charged. It was the fastest I had charged before, and I felt a big gust of energy rush through me. I pushed myself against the dirt, using my hind limbs as a crutch, and jumped as high as I could. Just as I expected, they both looked at me and realized I was going for the stone. One of them stepped back a couple of steps so that I would land before him.

I listened to Luke behind me. As soon as I made my jump, he made his jump too, and the second Twin, the one not with me, had to step back too to derail Luke's charge at the stone. Now, they weren't fighting us. They were protecting the stone, which made them slack and open for an attack. I landed before the first Twin and didn't go for the stone as he had expected me to. I went for him instead, and I could see the blood on the back of his leg. He was the same one I attacked earlier and almost got his heel. I went for it again, and he was too slow to react. I charged at him, and at the same time, Luke moved toward the stone.

The second wolf went for Luke to stop him from getting to the stone, while the other focused on me to stop me from getting to his heel. In that split second, when he got worried about his heel and lost focus on the stone, I made my charge.

I shifted away from him mid-attack, passing beneath him and going for the stone. He realized much too late what I had just done, and the other wolf was busy with Luke, so he was left with the charge to get me. He came at me, but I was focused on the stone, which was just a couple of feet from me now, and

I was charging at it with such a speed I felt the air go around me, and the leaves formed a sort of halo around me. When I got close enough, I leaped for the stone. I thought I was going to miss it, but I got it with my teeth and held it firm.

I moved away from the Twin who had come at me, and Luke squirmed away from the other, who was shocked, and soon we were standing side by side. I drop the stone in between us. Before they regained their focus, we activated it immediately. I bit myself hard in the limb until there was blood and then let it drop onto the stone. Luke did the same thing.

For a while, there was nothing. Just the bright morning sun, which was now shining with a strong intention, and The Twins stood in front of it, their vanquisher before them. They were yet to believe it.

Then the rush came. It was different from the other rush I had gotten from Bonne's concoction. This one was pure, and it felt like it came directly from the source of life itself. From earth, I felt it flow through me, filling me up with such an intense power that I thought it was going to break me. But I contained it.

I felt in total control of my being now. I wasn't just a werewolf that might be overtaken by its power. The first thing I did when I got familiar with the stone's power was to change back to my werewolf form from the full wolf form. It would have been impossible to do that without the stone. Usually, the wolf form gets exhausted, and I pass out and wake up in my wolf form again. Now, I had control and all the power and more that I had in the wolf form was in my werewolf form.

I walked with Luke by my side towards The Twins. I understood what it felt like now to be royalty. The pureness of the blood in me. That was all the stone did. It reawakened the power of the royal blood that had been dormant inside us for a long time. I felt like a ruler. We both did, and the first thing these rulers would do was vanquish their enemy.

The Twins stood their ground and tried to fight, but things were different now. The stone would have been useless to them because they weren't royalty. It was meant for Luke and

me. Made for us so we could defeat them. The first Twin tried to swipe at me, but I moved his hand out of the way and grabbed him by the neck. He didn't seem so worshipful to me anymore. He was just a mere werewolf now. I squeezed his neck, and his skin felt rubbery against my hand. I looked into his eyes as death slowly slipped out of him. This time, I didn't get a sick feeling in me because I was killing a man.

This was justified. This was a man that had killed so many and put even more in pain. He shouldn't be allowed to live. I dropped his lifeless body to the floor and turned to Luke, who had his claws in the throat of the other twin. That one dropped to the ground too.

We did it. We won the war.

I heard movement around me, and I turned back to see the members of the segregated clan charge through the woods. They were ready to continue the fight, but when they saw the Twin on the forest floor dead, they stopped. Ilad pushed his way through them until he was in front. He looked at me and then at the two men on the floor before he fell to his knees and bowed before Luke and me.

The other followed suit and bowed.

Chapter forty-two (Hayley)

I never thought a day would come when I would say I missed the woods, but that day was here. Standing there, underneath the cold breeze of the evening as we waited for the vines before us to open up and for the lost tribe to welcome us again, I closed my eyes and imagined what it had been like for the past months. It had been a wild journey, and things I would never have imagined happening for the life of me happened to me. The wild eye opener that there was a life beyond being just the Hayley that grew up on the street and got rescued by James. Now, I was the one that brought order back to the werewolf world, restored the royalty, and defeated an enemy to the peace of all the werewolves, who have reigned terror for far too long. I was now a queen or bound to be anyway, and my king was here beside me.

I squeezed Luke's hand as the vines before us shifted, and two men came out of it. They looked very happy to see us and led us into the village. The lost tribe welcomed us again, and Merine was there with all smiles. They had prepared for us, and there was a little party going on already.

"Would you like to rest a bit, or do you want to do it now?" Merine asked as he led us to the same chamber they gave us the first time we were their guest.

"I think we would like to do it now," Luke said and smiled. "There is nothing we would like more than to be bound together forever."

Merine nodded and tapped our hands before starting out of the chamber. "Wait here for a while, and someone will come and get you," he said and left us.

I was a bit anxious, but I didn't let it show. Our friends and family had argued to be here with us on this day, but we didn't know how many visitors Merine would allow, and he had been nothing but good to us, so we didn't want to put him in a tough position. This was the best we could do, and it would have to be enough for all of them and for us too.

The chamber opened again, and Yola walked in, smiling at us. He didn't have to talk as we knew it was time. We stepped out with him, and it was dark outside already. The streets were specially lit up by different lights than we'd seen here before, and from the chamber, there were people lined up on either side of the street, throwing flowers that smelled marvelous to the ground as we walked past. Someone was singing in the distance, and even though I didn't know they had that, some sort of string instrument was playing along with the song. It was a beautiful moment, and with all that had happened so far in my life, I thought this was the one I would have the clearest memory of. I would remember the faces of everyone I walked past, the sweet and genuine smiles they had for us, and those in front who were eager to set their eyes on us. They had seen us leave with the stone, but the couple that came back was different. We were now their leaders, and there was a reverential aura in the air that I could sense from all of them. They looked up to us like we were lords. That was something I wasn't so sure I would get used to.

We got to the front of the procession, which was at the same hilltop. Merine was there with two small werewolves dressed in fancy blue gowns and smiling. We stopped in front of him, and he asked us to kneel.

We did gladly. He collected a long rope made out of a plant string from one of the little werewolves and walked towards Luke and me. He picked up our hands and had us place them side by side in the air before putting the string on them.

"The tradition of marriage amongst our people is a sacred one," he started, and as usual, his voice boomed through the crowd. "We make commitments to each other just like the earth has made its commitment to us, and like the earth, we strive never to go back on that commitment. Do you two promise to work together, to serve each other, to love each other, and to never rescind the commitment you make with each other today?"

"Yes, we do," Luke and I answered together.

Merine moved one end of the rope from underneath our hands and over it, binding us lightly.

“May the earth bear witness to the promises you have made to it and each other today,” he said.

“And may she grant you the strength so desired,” the crowd replied.

He did the same for the other end of the rope.

“May the moon bear witness to the bond formed together,” he said.

“And may the strength of the bond never wane.”

He put his hands on our now bound hands and knelt before us.

“You are our King. You are our Queen. You are now the light through which peace shines on the land. You are our lords and our rulers. You are the cord that holds the unity on the land. Never break, never falter.”

He rose and then tapped us to rise too. “You are now married,” he said, and the crowd erupted.

Luke pulled me over and kissed me, but we barely had time for ourselves before the crowd overwhelmed us, and everyone came to say congratulations. I was happy, and for the first time, I didn't feel overwhelmed with the presence of so many people around me, looking to talk to me. It made me glad that I had them around me because I could see that these were my people. These were the people I was now charged with protecting, them and every other werewolf in the world. I felt very confident about how peaceful the next couple of years will turn out to be. I will be the best leader I can be to them. They deserved that and more.

We didn't get time to ourselves until midnight, and even at that, there was still celebration going on in the streets. Merine said they would keep at it till morning, which meant they would have a half-day tomorrow. Luke and I bade them all good night and thanked him for having us one more time. We talked in length before we returned to the chamber about the moon stone and why we thought it was best kept here with the tribe.

Merine argued that we deserve to be with it and that it was made for us, but we've seen the power it contains, we've seen

what can be done with such power, and we saw what power, which wasn't half of what is in the stone did to the Tarloux. We didn't want that to happen to us. We'd rather the stone stayed here, away from us and away from people who might misuse it. In the end, we got him to agree to keep it, and should there come a time when someone from the royal line needs it, they would have to go through the same tests that we did.

Now, we were back in our chamber, and I thought I would be tired from the travel and the party, but I wasn't.

"How does it feel to be married?" Luke asked me and held my hand, looking at me.

"I don't know, good?" I asked, eyeing him, seeing how he was going to react to that.

He pulled me closer to himself and kissed me hard until I moaned into his mouth. "How about now?" he asked.

"Perfect," I said. "There isn't anyone else I'd rather be married to."

"Me too," he said and kissed me again. This time, it wasn't just hard. It was urgent, filled with need and want, and he transferred it all to me. I felt myself go weak in the knees with want, and the memories of the past time we had shared together flooded through me. It was the best feeling in the world to realize that I would have a lifetime of those memories and feelings. I would get to relive them over and over again, and I would never get tired of it.

Even now, as Luke's hands searched for my breasts and he caressed them against my clothes, and I moved against his hands, I was happy. I kissed him harder and pulled my clothes over my head. I wanted to feel his whole body on me. I wanted to feel the warmth of his skin against mine. He helped me out of my clothes, and then I helped him out of his. We were both naked, standing in the middle of the room, our hands feeding on each other's skin and never seeming to get enough. I squirmed as his hand moved down my breast to my wetness. I clung to him and bit into my lips as his fingers grazed around my mouth, and he slowly let his finger slide into me. I tried to

get his hands out and put his hardness into me, but he stopped me and kissed me while smiling.

“We have all the time in the world to do that. Tonight, let me learn your body with my hands and tongue.”

He led me to the bed, and when we got close enough, he lifted me up and placed me on the bed gently, watching me as though he was seeing me for the first time. He kept watching until I almost shied away.

“You’re beautiful,” he said and joined me on the bed, kissing me on my fingers and then up my hand to my left breast and capturing my nipple in his mouth, rolling his tongue around it. “I can never get tired of you looking at you. It’s like I see you a new way every time I do that.”

I wanted to say something, but he stopped me with his mouth and kissed me hard. I moaned back as his finger grazed my nipples, setting me on fire as it found its way downward until it got to my mound and his thumb grazed my tender parts, causing a wave shock to pass through me. It wasn’t just him that saw me in a new way whenever he sees me, whenever he touches me, too, he did it in a way I didn’t know I could be touched. Even now, as his thumbs gently stroked me, I felt the bliss spread all over my being, and I felt like I was on a stairway to heaven. He kissed me and then started down my stomach.

I couldn’t take that amount of pleasure, so I moved his head away and pulled him closer to me. Yes, we have the whole time in the world, but I wanted him now. He had pushed me to the edge and had lighted an intense hunger in me, and now, there was a need to satiate the hunger.

“Make love to me,” I whispered to his ears.

“It will be my pleasure,” he said and slowly slid himself into me. I felt my world come together at that moment and everything fell right into place perfectly. I looked into his deep and soulful eyes. I loved this man, and he was the best thing the earth ever brought my way.