

ISA RINNER

BOOK 2 OF THE SILVERLAKE WOLVES SERIES

A FEMALE ALPHA

— FOR THE —

Lycan Prince



A FEMALE ALPHA FOR THE LYCAN PRINCE

BOOK 2 OF THE SILVERLAKE WOLVES SERIES

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ISA RINNER

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For my grandma, Alieh, who showed me that love doesn't know borders,
a day passes that I don't miss you.

For my grandma, Alieh, who showed me that love doesn't know borders. Not
a day passes that I don't miss you.

PROLOGUE

I make sure to get up every day before 6am, even on weekends. I go to the bathroom, shower, do my hair, and put on some makeup. Not too much, I prefer a subtle look. I choose my clothes and dress according to the image I have to portray. When I go downstairs, I join my father for breakfast. We are always up early, even now that he's handed the pack to me, he is sure to be there whenever I need him. I'm thankful for his guidance and the fact that he still supports me. Sure, we didn't have the tightest relationship while I was growing up, because he suffered so much grief over losing my mother and my little brother, but still... he tried his best. During breakfast, he listens to all my questions; we discuss problems and issues concerning the pack. Often my Beta joins us as well. When we talk, I try to listen as much as I can.

I smile.

I chat and make conversation with everyone, which I'm surprisingly good at. When I have a class to attend, I drive to campus, go to my classes, see my friends, and study. I have lunch, sometimes coffee. I never expect

make actual friends like Annalise, Harmony, Ella, Dave, and Finn. They are the people who just accept me for me, who don't even care for my rank. That's why that this time I can't tell them the truth.

I smile at everyone.

I go home and do my assignments. I talk to my father. I handle all my affairs, talk to my warriors and my Beta Harmony. I handle all my duties diligently and spend time on my training. I'm training hard to become stronger because I'm a she-wolf and an alpha.

I smile through it all.

Then around midnight, I take a shower and put on my pajamas. I go to bed. Only at night do I cry.

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AN ALPHA SHE-WOLF

CELINE

No one is supposed to see my tears, no one is allowed to see me cry. I'm a female alpha, a she-wolf occupying a position normally taken by male wolves. It's been so much work for me to gain my pack's respect and approval, but slowly they came around and started to follow me as if it were natural. Then surprisingly, a few weeks ago, my father handed over the leadership to me. I never expected him to do it. I thought he would wait until I found a mate, until I had someone at my side. I never believed he would trust me to lead the pack on my own.

His faith humbles me.

I can't just have it all ruined because my mate doesn't want me. He doesn't want me. He... he saw me and turned away. He saw me and didn't want me and that's my new reality. There is no denying it, no pretending that

going to be alright. I swallow down the lump in my throat at the thought of my mate and how he made it clear to me that he doesn't want me, and I will.

It's not your fault, my wolf Danica huffs. She is more on guard, more prickly recently since we met our mate. It's his!

Gladly, her temper is directed at him, not me. If it weren't for her support on my back, I'm sure I wouldn't be able to fight the mate-bond the way I do. *Why doesn't he reject us though?*

How would I know? She grumbles. We didn't do anything to him! He has no reason to hate us. He should be happy he is paired with us! You are the best human in this universe, and I'm obviously the hottest wolf ever.

Always trust Danica to make me feel like I'm actually someone special. *wish I could reject him instead, I mutter quietly.*

Danica stays quiet. She knows I can't reject him. *If you ever do, I will be weak on your back, she finally says.*

But no one else will have it then.

In my position, with all the handicaps I have—like being a female and a beta in a pack—I can't reject my fated mate. It's impossible. Even if he hates me, the pack can't. Not yet.

"Here you are, Alpha," my Beta Harmony greets me when I meet her. She is one of a few of our elite warriors for training. She always refers to me formally when others are listening, to make sure they know my rank, to show her respect for me.

I stretch my tense shoulder. "I can't wait to lay a few punches," I mutter under my breath. Sparring and training is exactly what I need right now. I start to train with Harmony first, noting how good she has become. A year ago, before I chose her for the beta position, she started training with the

ught of warriors, and it shows. She is a natural talent. All of her family members are never very gifted and a powerful beta family. Only her younger sister Annalise originally ranked omega because she wasn't born with any special gifts more...least not obvious ones, as we later realized. She is one of my closest friends and one of the most wonderful people I have ever met.

having “Switch partners,” I command.

by I do. My warriors follow suit. They are used to me not wasting many words talking a lot. I need to make sure they don't see me as too chatty.

He has I allow my thoughts to wander again. It helps me with keeping my mind busy. *are then* nothing puts me at ease like training. I'm tall and athletic, my body is strong and although my strength is not comparable to a male alpha's, I'm a great special. *If* fast. My thoughts drift off to Annalise again. Because she is the kindest and caring person she is, the Moon Goddess rewarded her with a powerful mate. *ill have* An alpha lycan of royal blood, who is fiercely loyal to her. Actually, he is my mate at her luna ceremony.

Well, at least one of us got lucky.

alpha to *Luna Annalise got a strong, intelligent, and loyal mate, Danica* and I tell us, *I* And we end up with his stupid little brother, Mr. Gloomy Head.

I wince at her words and deliver a punch that sends the warrior stumbling and away with me flying to the ground. The others around us stop and cheer for me when a split second, all of my problems are forgotten. It feels so good to be supported for them, and to have their support. Thankfully, we always supported our warriors here in Moon Blood, so the men are used to women fighting. As the alpha of the pack, I need to be one of the guys in a way, but I also have to look after the other she-wolves and omegas. I'm alpha and luna in one person, right now.

he elite “Oh shit,” the young wolf curses, rubbing his shoulder.

ers are “Did you dislocate it?” I ask, checking him over with a frown
nnalisetoward two of the more seasoned guys. “Elias and Garret, help him.”

ifts—at They both nod, approaching the young guy and helping him relo
friendsshoulder. He winces, but no other sound escapes his lips. He is new

training, which is why it will be even more interesting to see him losi
she-wolf and his alpha on top of that. This is always the most crucial r

ords orfor me to see if someone was worthy to put in a higher rank. To my s
he grins. “You have one powerful punch, Alpha Celine.”

hythm; Garret laughs while Elias pats his head. “You have no idea,” they te
strong, I smile at their banter. “You are Marcel, am I right?” I reach out n

gile andto help him up. He just joined the warriors. He is a young African-Ar
ind andguy, tall and very athletic. He joined Moon Blood a while ago with h

il mate.after the death of their parents.

7, I met Marcel nods, obviously happy I remember his name. I notice his ac
gaze. Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Harmony grin. *Got yourself,*

admirer? She links me.

grows. *Very funny,* I say, but sound amused. With Harmony, I can be myself

No, no, he is undressing you with his eyes, she teases. *Poor guy, h
parringcrush on the Alpha.*

me. For *Oh, shut up,* I chuckle and roll my eyes.

one of For a split second, I forget that I already have a mate. Yes, my life
femalebe so much easier with Marcel as my mate. Or Harmony’s and An

As thebrother. Or one of my colleagues at college. Or the waiter at the coffee
need tofrequent with my friends. Or the gardener at the public park.

person Why... why...? What did I ever do to him? Why doesn’t he want m



. I nod “So, what do you think?” Harmony asks me when we hit our usual bar with the other warriors. Some of the female warriors joined us, and the atmosphere is relaxed and chill. None of these people want to hook up with each other. They see themselves as work relations and friends. I love that it’s not just hanging out between everyone.

moment “About what?” I ask.

surprise, “Marcel,” she clarifies.

“He is good at offensive tactics but lacks defense,” I instantly analyze. In all, promising though. He is friends with Steve, right? When Steve is ready, I hope he will join the elites too.”

American She smiles proudly. “He and Steve are always playing football together. Steve is her brother and the youngest of the three siblings. Harmony, Annie, and Steve have always been a dream team, even when we were still kids. Whenever I see them, I feel slightly envious. Not the bad *f a new* envy though. I’m happy for my friend Annie for having such supportive siblings, and for Harmony for the same reason. It just makes me wish my own brother was still alive too. “Did you know Marcel is looking at *aving a* little sister all on his own?”

Annalise, and Steve have always been a dream team, even when we were still kids. Whenever I see them, I feel slightly envious. Not the bad *f a new* envy though. I’m happy for my friend Annie for having such supportive siblings, and for Harmony for the same reason. It just makes me wish my own brother was still alive too. “Did you know Marcel is looking at *aving a* little sister all on his own?”

“Yes, my father told me,” I admit. We both always try to be in touch with all pack members and know what’s happening in their lives. “He has a good guy to put his own needs aside to look after his teenage sister.”

Annalise’s “Gamma material?” Harmony asks me.

shop I I tilt my head thoughtfully. “I need to watch him for a while, but he’ll make the list.”

e? She hands me a glass of gin. I chuckle. “The hard stuff already?”

ar with “You look like you need it,” she muses. There is a pause. “Are yo
osphereCeline?”

1 other. “Yes,” I say automatically. I can’t remember a time when I ever ar
so chillthis question honestly.

Harmony stays quiet for a while, her brown eyes softening. “Reall
asks.

I shrug. What am I about to say? You know your sister’s mate,
ze. “AllLiam? His little brother is my mate, and hey, he doesn’t want me.

Steve is “During Annie’s and Liam’s wedding, you said you might have four
mate,” she says casually.

gether.” I look at her in surprise and slightly impressed. “How did you—”

rmoney, “Make the connection?” she pauses. “You are more stoic than I
were allfigured you were trying really hard to hide what you feel.”

kind of I don’t answer her.

portive “Did he... well...” she seems not to be too sure how to continue. I

ish myour close relationship, I’m still her alpha. She doesn’t want to upset me

fter his “Did he reject me?” I ask, not able to stop the icy tone of my voice
he didn’t. But he doesn’t want me.”

ch with “What!?” she exclaims, furrowing her brows. “Did he say that?”

to be a I grab her arm, eyeing her sharply. I can feel the blood in my veins l

Danica is struggling to get the upper hand to rip the world apart from

hurt by her mate, from being embarrassed and angry. She is an alpl

e mightand a very dominant one. “Harmony, no one can ever know abo

Promise me.”

Harmony is strong and confident, but she knows when to subr
shows me her neck to me immediately. “Of course, Alpha,” she promi:

For a moment, there is silence between us before Harmony breaks i

u okay, Maybe it's because she is a true beta. After all, she really knows how the mood and how to change it. "Food?" she smiles slightly, raising her head. "I feel like burgers and fries!"

"They have new sandwiches too," Garret hollers from the bar. "What kind of sandwiches?"

"Chicken, cheese, and avocado," he explains.

"You always get me, Garret," I tease. He is an old friend of my father's, and one of the guys I can feel comfortable around without giving him any wrong idea. Also, I know he is happy with his mate Elias and very loyal. Elias only joined our pack a few years ago, but easily worked himself into the ranks. He is younger than Garret and rather earnest for his age, but he is fair, and extremely good at what he does.

Garret and Elias exchange a gaze and smile at each other before giving me a silly victory sign and orders a sandwich for me.

"Next time, let's go to a steak place," Harmony suggests. "I'm so sick of these hipster places! What happened to some simple fries and beer?"

"No, I can't help but smile at her words. "Are you really Annie's sister?"

She laughs. "I think the hipster places are more Annie's friends' preference than hers. You are in her circle of friends, you'd know."

I chuckle. "I honestly don't mind either, as long as the food is good and I share that sentiment. The choice for a place is up to the others."

"When are you meeting them again?"

"Weekend, two weeks from now," I tell her. "For our regular meeting."

At least this will give me some distraction. I try to remain angry, to distract myself from Danica's anger and her hurt pride because it spurs me on. If it weren't for her, I would just curl up in my bed and cry.

I wish I could tell someone, but I can't.

to read Harmony looks at me again. She caught on to my feelings once more voice is intuitive like that, everyone in her family is. That's why she is fantastic beta, it's not just strength alone. I wonder how long I will be hide the truth from her, and how long I want to hide it.



her and
him the
y loyal.

MARIUS

f up the
is kind,

Out of all possible women, it has to be her. Celine fucking And almost spit out her name, even in my thoughts. My luna's friend, one best friends on top of that. She is a freaking ally to my brother, w Garret happens to be my alpha. This has catastrophe written all over it.

sick of
ference

I don't want a mate, never wanted one. The plan was to reject my n moment I met her, there was no other option for me. Whoever it is them and leave. Rip the bandage off fast. It will hurt for a moment a be over.

. Annie

But I can't fucking reject her. She has a name, she has friends in m she is not a fucking stranger. My older brother Liam, as my alpha wou my head for it. My parents, the Alpha and Luna of Silverlake, would h head. As open-minded as they are in other areas—I mean, my father a

ng." At
live off
for her,

Liam and Annie to become alpha and luna of a different pack, altho has trained Liam to take over Silverlake since he was born! My family never accept a family member rejecting their fated mate without a reas The mate bond is sacred to them. Liam didn't even bat an eye when his mate Annie and found out she was an omega. He was head over h

ore; shea little, weak omega she-wolf.

such a *Our Luna is not weak, she has kickass gifts, my lycan wolf able to intervene. He is pissed, ever since we met Celine, and I decided to approach her. Not approach her? You ran from her like a fucking cow hisses. And our Luna managed to free herself from her kidnapper helped to set Liam free when the old fuckhead alpha of this pack had her captive. They freed Red Claw together and became their alpha and she is weak, what the heck are you then?*

A flash of guilt hits me for having insulted Annie like that. She never said anything to me; she just happened to be my brother's mate. I have never been a person! I belittled any wolf for their rank... I don't know why everything riles me of her recently. Sometimes I don't understand myself anymore.

who just My Luna would be seriously upset and disappointed if she knew she was mated to Celine and chose to ignore her. Out of all the possible worst mates the Moon Goddess had to match me with, this is the worst choice possible. I reject her, she has this cold aura sometimes, she doesn't even smile. Why on earth did she never smile at anyone!?

Maybe because her mother was killed by rogues when she was a young girl, Cyrus snarls. Or because she is mated to us!? I wouldn't smile either if I were our mate.

ave my I choose to ignore him. Cyrus and I have never had the best relationship. It's a love-hate thing. He tends to call me out all the time for disobeying him. I remember my father back in the days when I was still living at Silverlake, for pushing my siblings away, for disobeying my new alpha, my brother, for insulting my mate. luna. He seems to be pissed all the time. One thing we share.

he met Normally he comes around eventually and picks me up again, but I feel for a slight feeling this time it's different. He wants Celine, and I don't. I

what it means for Cyrus and me in the long run, but I can't care about Cyrus just can't.

not to The new plan is to have her reject me. It's going to be simple. I do
ward, heanyway, so if she cries and sobs at my behavior toward her, I won'
*rs. She*I'm prepared. She can reject me and go for a chosen mate. She is Celir
*eld him*all, the apple in Alpha Cedric's eye, his successor.

luna. If The first she-wolf in many, many years to lead a pack.

The refined cold beauty with her perfect athletic body and those... b
ver didblue eyes. The elegant and dignified lady everyone seems to have t
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me up Well, I don't!

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what it means for Cyrus and me in the long run, but I can't care about that. I just can't.

The new plan is to have her reject me. It's going to be simple. I don't care anyway, so if she cries and sobs at my behavior toward her, I won't mind. I'm prepared. She can reject me and go for a chosen mate. She is Celine, after all, the apple in Alpha Cedric's eye, his successor.

The first she-wolf in many, many years to lead a pack.

The refined cold beauty with her perfect athletic body and those... beautiful blue eyes. The elegant and dignified lady everyone seems to have the hots for.

Well, I don't!

JAZZ

CELINE

The first thing I do every Friday evening is go through the schedule for next week. I make the first draft together with Harmony, in charge of border patrols, warrior schedules, and the like. I have no luna wolf, so whatever I would call my mate if he were at my side, so all the planning and scheduling is on me. I learned from my father though; he's managed to find a mate for many years.

The second thing Harmony and I do is gather my most trusted warriors around us and go through the details. Currently, my team consists of Elias and Elias, and sometimes my father. I don't want to bother him too much, but I know he is happy when I involve him a bit. Today, I've also added a new warrior to the group. He shows a lot of promising skills, and he was not upset when his ass handed to him by a woman.

We work through the schedule, there are always changes to be made. I need to consider that some people don't work well together. For training, I wouldn't care, but I only send those on patrols or missions together who actually get along. Then there are babies due, some wolves going to other packs, new members joining due to being mated to someone here, and others leaving for the same reason. Garret always fills us in on the newest gossip—even the ones in this pack likes him, and they tell him everything. And of course, we also have an extra schedule. By now we really work well together, and that's why Marcel fits in perfectly.

"I'm feeling so honored," he says when we are about to wrap this up. "Thank you, Alpha, for including me. I... I certainly didn't expect it."

I look at him. "Well, you showed potential, so I decided to give you a chance."

"And?" he looks at me hopefully.

rule for "You're doing well so far."

cluding "Yes, buddy," Harmony chuckles. "You passed the test. Well, almost."

yet, or "And what's the second part of the test?" he asks curiously.

ing and "Having a drink with the retired alpha," my dad chimes in.

without "If you are still standing after an hour, you are in," Harmony teases.

wolves Elias frowns a bit in confusion. "I didn't have any initiation rituals," he points out.

Garret Harmony rolls her eyes in mock annoyance. "Try to show five minutes of humor, Elias," she says, but there is no venom in her voice.

Marcel Elias is different, much more serious than the rest of us. He grew up in a very rough and deadly pack and their alpha is said to be cruel and he's the only one who survived.

During a summit, though, some of our high-ranking pack members were killed. Their deaths were a tragedy for all of us. Elias met Garret.

nade. I Marcel chuckles a bit, and I can see the tension leaving his body
ining I visibly relaxing. “I would love to take you up on the invitation. I will j
er whomy sister and tell her not to wait for me.”

college, “How is she settling in?” I want to know.

leaving “Oh, Jazz fits into any situation and adapts fast,” he smiles bright
veryoneeyes lighting up with love for his little sister. He and his sister only
ir teensMoon Blood a year ago. Jazz is seventeen now, and from the few time
nkfullyher, she seems like a fun and confident girl. “She adapts easily and
her wings so fast. She is doing well in school too, except for math.
ngs up.for setting her up with Valerie for that.”

“Ah, she is studying with Val?” I ask. “It worked out?”

you a “It’s perfect! Valerie is her age and so shy and soft-spoken th
contrasts Jazz quite a bit. They are getting along well, and Jazz is h
have a friend in the pack now.”

“It’s good for Val too,” Harmony points out. “She was very ill grow
st.” and never really attended school. It’s hard for her to socialize.” She
“And we all know whose sister she is,” she adds quietly.

I sigh. “Marcel, tell me if she gets bullied at all. She shouldn’t be pu
for her sister’s actions.”

ial,” he He nods. “I will keep an eye on her,” he promises.

Val... I know her well; in a way we grew up together because she is
utes ofthe daughters of my dad’s retired beta. His other daughter is my age, s
always with me growing up. Then she turned into a sociopath and tried
up in aAnnalise out of jealousy. All because Annie was mated to a strong
artless.alpha, Liam. Lauren couldn’t handle the jealousy and tried to destroy
ers metlife, and then Annie herself.

It still hurts to think about Lauren’s betrayal.

r. He is If it hurts me though, how does Valerie, as her little sister feel?

ust link My dad smiles a bit. “So, I can invite the young people for a drink
place? Give me the feeling that I actually fit in?”

“Oh, Cedric,” Harmony smiles slightly. She is one of the very fe
tly, histalks to him informally. He very much likes that. “You will always be
r joinedus.”

as I saw His smile grows a bit. “Then come on Harmony, grab the guys, a
spreadsthe way.”

Thanks “What about you, Alpha?” Harmony turns to look at me.

I close the folder in front of me. “I will come in around half an
would like to take a look at the surveillance cameras.” I look up at th
hat sheand notice for the first time that Garret seems a little distracted. He
appy tosaid much up until now. He is normally quite chatty and lightens
situation with his jokes. Now, he seems to be brooding over som
ving up “Garret, if you could please join me?” I ask him.

pauses. He looks a bit surprised, like I just pulled him out of his thought
course, Alpha,” he nods.

unished I send the others off with my father, promising that Garret and I wil
few sandwiches from the kitchen staff on our way back. Then both of
off to check on the cameras surrounding the pack house and th
s one of inhabited areas. The ones further away were serviced a few days ago.
she wassure to check them regularly.

l to kill “What’s going on?” I ask Garret bluntly. I’m not one for a pep
g lycanbeating around the bush, which is typical for alphas, as Harmony t
Annie’s remind me. She is far better at showing a sensitive approach. But G
one of my closest friends, I knew him when I was just a child. He
older than me and always watched out for me like a big brother.

“You noticed, huh?” he mutters.

“It’s hard not to,” I admit.

He pauses. “The usual,” he finally says.

I nod tentatively, I thought as much. “Garret,” I say quietly. “Elias is one of from a rough pack. No one has ever shown him love or kindness because he came here. Such treatment cannot be undone easily. You need to give him some leadtime.”

“I know,” he groans. “That’s why I’m not complaining... much. At least he’s already softened a bit.”

“See, he is making progress.” Elias has difficulties reading between the group lines or showing compassion or sensitivity, but I know he is empathetic. He hasn’t just used to hiding everything behind a calm and emotionless facade. Sometimes when he is with Garret... I can see him loosening up a bit. The last time I saw him laughing with you.”

“Yeah, progress... at a snail’s pace,” he deadpans, and I’m glad to hear some sarcasm in his voice. Garret is patient, more so than any other person I have ever met. He doesn’t tease Elias; he doesn’t try to make him jealous. He just grabs a reaction out of him. He would never do anything petty to hurt us, which is why Elias is slowly coming around.

“No one ever said love is easy,” I say quietly, not sure if I’m saying it for Garret, myself, or both of us.

“Whoever came up with that saying... I’m going to buy them a drink or two.”

I nudge him slightly. “Come on, let’s go back and grab some food for Garret. He’s heading back to the others.”

He grins, finally back to being himself again. “Wolves,” he jokes. “They can eat anytime.”



VALERIE

comes

before he

gives him

“I just don’t understand,” Jazz groans. “I hate math!”

and well,

I smile slightly. “It’s not going to be a problem, Jazz. You are smart shyly. “You will easily pass the next test.”

even the

“Just thanks to you,” she blurts out. “You are my lifesaver, Val! know where my brother found you, but I’m eternally grateful he did.”

c. He is surface.

I giggle. “Well, he asked Alpha Celine for someone to tutor you.”

t. “Last

“Best day of my life! I could have been stuck with a boring gran you are so fun and such a good teacher, Val.” Jazz beams. She always

to hear

what she thinks. She is so confident and happy-go-lucky—the complete opposite of me. Jazz has the wildest locks ever, wearing them confidently natural afro.

person Ialous to

hurt him,

We are both betas, though honestly I’m only beta because I have Otherwise, most omegas are stronger than I am. My wolf is still very

ing it to

too, we can’t even shift, but I love her, nevertheless. She is such a mental support for me and always encourages me.

nk,” he

Of course, I do. My wolf Ailia stirs slightly in my mind. *You are my human after all.*

od, and

I suppress a giggle. *It sounds like I’m your pet.*

“They

Ailia chuckles. *I’m just thankful to share the soul of such a kind human*

I’m sorry for being weak, I say. I know you are only weak because of

Don’t worry, she soothes me. We will get stronger. Just give it time.

“Hey Val, come back to me,” Jazz interrupts us.

“Sorry, I was talking to Ailia for a moment,” I admit.

“I can understand,” she smiles. “Our wolves are just the best.”

“I was so sure I would never have my wolf,” I admit.

“Because you were so sick as a child?”

I nod. “Bodily weak werewolves might never meet their wolf, you know.”

“It rarely happens though,” Jazz points out. “And see? You got your wolf too. Just like everyone else.”

I nod and smile.

I don’t know why Jazz always manages to make me look at the brighter side of things. I was bonded instantly because of our position with the other teens. Jazz is the only black kid in our group, and I’m the sister of a traitor, but no one bullies me, but Alpha Celine would never accept any bullying. She and her father, who always says complete truthfully in a gift, Annalise of Red Claw pack before she became a luna. All because the pack is so jealous of her being mated to a handsome lycan prince. Moon Blood doesn’t condone any bullying, let alone accept it, and Alpha Celine and retired Cedric made sure everyone got the message.

I’m a weak girl, a huge gift. We might not be bullied, but we are still outsiders. You can’t force anyone to like you.

“It was the best day for me too,” I say quietly.

Jazz studies me for a moment. “Val, it’s not your fault that Laurence is so crazy.”

I hang my head low. “She helped kidnap Annalise, knowing they planned to kill her.” I gape at Jazz with wide eyes. “How... I mean, how could she do that?”

“Some people are just like that, Val,” Jazz says softly. “It goes back to being jealous. She saw how the Silver Luna was mated to Prince Liam and she was jealous of me.”

mind, Annalise was just a pitiful, weak omega because Lauren wasn't see anything beyond rank and wealth. And then she lost it when Alpha befriended Annalise too."

"But still, Jazz, she was ready to get Annalise killed. How could this to another person? And to us? I'm her sister. Did she ever think of now?" Jazz shifts around a bit. "Honestly?"

ur wolf I nod.

"I... I don't think she ever thought about anyone but herself. How think in a tiny corner of her mind, she did love you and your parents. We eventually she was too far gone to even act on it anymore."

he only "In most other packs, my family would have been demoted," I lies us.sadly.

, Alpha "That's stupid," Jazz states forcefully. "You and your parents did er Lunawrong. Marcel told me he heard that your dad went to apologize ey were Harmony and the rest of Annalise's family. He said he even loes not Annalise's dad Brian the beta position. But no one there blamed him. l Alphaknow why? Because the moment he found out what happened, the r all of you found out, you did the only decent thing you could do: You anyone out there, apologizing for Lauren, and were ready to take responsibility are good people, and everyone knows it."

I have tears in my eyes at the end of her words. She is the only on n went talk to so openly and share my fears with.

"Now, stop crying," she says gruffly while reaching out her arms plannedyour sis Jazz a hug, and then continue to explain algebra to me." she?" I chuckle a bit and hug her back.

beyond "Hey, girls," Jazz's brother bursts in. "Sorry to interrupt you."

l. In her Jazz looks at him with a frown. "Marcel!" she scolds. "When will y

able to knock before coming into my room! Goddess, I'm a girl!"

Celine "I changed your diapers," Marcel defends with a pout. Despite being a strong warrior, he is also such a cute guy. I wish Lauren would have been like she does what Marcel is for Jazz. "And we shift in front of each other all the time?" There is nothing left to hide anymore."

"Ew," Jazz grimaces. "Don't remind me. Besides... that's not the point."

"Hm," Marcel blinks. "What do you mean?"

"We were sharing a very private moment," Jazz complains. "Ever heard of privacy, Marcel!? We could have been making out!"

"What?" I squeal.

Marcel raises his eyebrows. "Oh, sorry for disturbing your moment. Here, have some sandwiches, and then continue with whatever you were doing."

Jazz grins.

"Wait," I blurt out. "That's not—"

Marcel and Jazz just laugh slightly. "I was just kidding," Jazz says, soothing my panic.

Marcel looks at me with a smile. "Don't allow Jazz to tease you so much. You see, he says while tousling my hair softly. "And thanks for helping us out. I'll pay you, of course."

"No way!" I object.

"Of course I will," Marcel says with emphasis.

"No, I won't accept any money," I say with insistence and more confidence than I normally show. People easily overrule me all the time with this here... it's different. "Jazz is my friend. My best friend. Meeting him was payment enough for me. Because I was so sick growing up,

you ever

homeschooled most of the time. Now that I go to school, Jazz is there being an eye on me and help me around. It's give and take if you want the truth. Jazz stares at me with the funniest expression ever. "That's the most important point out of every sentence I've ever said at once," she declares suddenly, sounding impressed.

My cheeks flush, like *that's* the most important point out of every sentence I've ever said.

"Alright," Marcel sighs. "But then, I now officially adopt you as my new sister. You will get a birthday present from me, and something for graduation. And you will accept it. Oh, and in case Jazz invites you to go with us on a trip or for dinner, you will allow me to pay."

"Only if... only if my parents are allowed to pay for Jazz too when she comes over with me at my place."

Jazz rolls her eyes. "You two make sleepovers sound like a custody custodial negotiation!"

"Hey," Marcel points an accusing finger at her. "No cursing!" Jazz says, "Okay, but I still meant what I said."

Marcel and I exchange a look. I giggle slightly. "She is right in a way, but not much," Jazz beams. "Of course I am." She grabs one of her sandwiches. "It happened to your shoulder, by the way? You are avoiding moving it."

"It met with our Alpha's fist," he admits with a lopsided grin.

"Rough training?" Jazz asks worriedly.

He makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. "It's part of my training. It's not my fault. It's part of my progress. Or do you think these are magically appearing from nowhere?" Marcel shows off his biceps with a grin before placing a kiss on them. Jazz giggles helplessly at his antics.

Marcel is always so cute and funny.

For the first time in my life, I'm actually looking forward to a school year.

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CONFLICTS

MARIUS

I wake up to the sun tickling my nose, frowning slightly when I shit, that mix of tequila and gin was probably too much, but sometimes I just want the alcohol to make me feel numb. It's difficult for wolves to get drunk, but we can achieve it if we try hard enough.

I groan, sitting up a bit. Sometimes, I make sure to sleep outside the area in my own little apartment. Mostly when I go clubbing or hook up with girls, I don't want any pack members to know what I'm doing. It's not my business anyway. But I have the lunch shift for patrol today, and my brother Liam wants me to attend one of his meetings with his old ally Alpha later today. He will have my head if I'm late. It sucks having your brother as your alpha sometimes. It was equally shit to have my dad as my alpha though.

I should have hooked up with one of the girls from the club yesterday. I hate sleeping alone. At least for a moment these encounters fill the me. But now that I was cursed with the mate bond, no other woman could appease or appeal to me. No one compares to Celine.

I crawl out of my bed and grab my clothes, dressing silently. I slip on a pair of ripped jeans and throw my flannel shirt on before hurrying out of my apartment.

It's only when I start the engine of my car that my wolf finally decides to appear. *Finally, showing yourself?* I grumble.

Spare me your pettiness, he huffs. Why would I care!?

That's rough, even for Cyrus. I roll my eyes. *Aren't you supposed to have my back, Cyrus?*

We have a mate! He growls. *You can shove my support up your ass. I don't care.*

I move. *I don't want a mate, I huff. Leave me alone with that shit.*

It fuck, *That's because you are selfish and a coward,* he growls before retreating. I can't help but laugh. *That's because you are selfish and a coward,* he growls before retreating for a moment.

Nowadays, Cyrus only comes forward to insult me or piss me off in the packway. He won't listen to reason, he doesn't care. I don't want a fucking mate, I don't want a mate to be around me all the time, and I don't want to be controlled by someone else. I don't want a mate to tell me how I live and who I am. I saw what having a mate did to my brother. My brother was that cold distanced guy, then he met her, and look at him now, he has her in the palm of her hand. She made him open up to her. He looks at her like she is some sort of messiah who flew down from heaven on a pink cloud. She is the alpha, gracing us with her presence.

Our mates are supposed to bring forward our strengths and weaknesses. I don't care for any hidden potential. At least my brother

erday, I was an omega she-wolf. Granted, she turned out not to be as we
void in pathetic as I expected her to be. She's actually pretty cool and strong,
seems to I would ever admit that to anyone, but it went without saying that she
join my brother and become luna. But Celine leads a pack already, sh
go into agoing to give it up, which means I would need to move again.

t of my I brush through my hair, feeling a wave of exhaustion hit me.

I don't want a mate. I can't have one.

ides to I drive fast, reaching the pack house in half an hour, just in ti
breakfast. The guards nod at me shortly when I walk towards the bu
Liam and Annie have really worked miracles on the pack. When Lian
to have the old alpha and freed everyone from his reign, people here were s
without strength. They had been living in fear and suffering abuse fo
I don't The pack grounds were big, the numbers huge, but everything wa
down, old, or ruined. Now, over a year later, there are no traces of the
old tyrant left. The pack is flourishing. There are parks and playgrou
treating kids, a swimming pool, and every single house got renovated. There a
spaces for everyone.

n some When I step into the huge salon with the breakfast buffet, there are
mate. I of pack members in there eating and chatting. I move towards the
changetable, my heart sinking when I see almost everyone there. Liam look
ier—he briefly, his brows furrowed, but he doesn't say anything, just nods at
she has he knew what I was doing to Celine and why, he might snap my neck
s at her least punch me in a way that will hurt, a lot. Liam is an alpha throu
< cloud, through.

What can I say, our relationship has always been a bit strained. Lian
hiddengolden child, the powerful lycan, the one who managed to free this pa
's mate

black and white wolf with the awesome mate. And I'm just the black sheep, the bitter one who never succeeds at anything and doesn't even try.

"Good morning," I mutter when I sit down, hoping no one will talk to me.

"Hello, Marius," Luna Annalise greets me with a smile.

The others follow her example and greet me too.

Ella, the luna's beta and her oldest friend, just nods at me though. People hate me. She looks harmless at first glance, with her short hair and friendly smile. Truth is, she is like a rottweiler, fierce and easily pissed off, and totally intimidating to Annie. I'm not always very polite to my luna, and Ella doesn't take it kindly.

"There is plenty of coffee," Liam points out.

"Do I look like I need it?" I frown.

Liam just raises his brows.

"I'm fetching myself some tea from the kitchen. Anyone else wants some?" Jun, the young gamma and another loyal protector of the luna, asks.

Ella smiles. "For me, please."

"Me too," Liam agrees. "When you're in the kitchen, tell the others to prepare some more coffee for us, will you?"

Jun nods with a polite smile. "Of course."

"You're more silent than usual. Had a late night?" a female voice asks me. It's Aryanna, my brother's beta, a young she-wolf with an incredible fighting talent. He has two betas because the pack is huge and Liam is a strong alpha. He needs the extra support, especially in case he loses it and can't keep Fenris under control. "How do you like my hair?" she asks.

"Rainbow colors are the newest trend."

"It's hard not to notice," I mutter.

Ella glares at me, but Aryanna just laughs. "Someone needs to come

kid that for all your gloominess.”

“Don’t worry,” Annie chuckles. “It looks crazy. Crazily good.”

to me. “Yes Ari,” Ella grins, moving her hand to touch Aryanna’s hair pl

“I’m still waiting for the neon-yellow mohawk though.”

“There are limits to my art,” Ari laughs. “What do you think, Liam?”

robably “I think the kids in the nursery will love it,” he says dryly.

reckles. Annie elbows him a bit and he just chuckles.

ly loyal “Why is that even of interest?” I frown, wondering why the fuck th
like that about hair that much. Who cares?

Again, Aryanna doesn’t take my words to heart, she just rolls her e
chuckles. She never really takes me seriously.

“Ari, we need to go through the schedule of the patrols today. One
warriors got injured yesterday, so we need to reschedule.” Liam’s oth
some?” Dante, muses. He entwines his fingers with Ella’s. He is a serious gu
bit older than most of us.

“We can get to it straight after breakfast,” Ari reassures him. “
staff to covered for the morning?”

Dante nods. “Yes, we just need to go through the afternoon and e
shifts.” He shifts his gaze to Liam and Annie. “The pack wants to ce
to my next week,” he smiles slightly at them, his gaze warm. “It’s the anni
olf with of you taking over the pack officially.”

ge, and “Oh, right. You mean that pompous, overly long, and boring ce
ie loses with all the officials?” I say before I can stop myself.

e grins. “Hey, it wasn’t that bad,” Aryanna snorts. “It was long, but it mea
to the pack.”

Annie looks worried. “I didn’t know they wanted to celebrate. I
pensate have planned something had I known.”

Typical Luna Annalise. She's always thinking of everyone else's feelings. It's ridiculous. Not everyone deserves such kindness, just look at me. "I don't think you have to go out of your way, Annie," Ella says.

Liam puts his large hand on Annie's shoulder. She might not be the most stunning at first glance, but once you look two or three times, there's something about her. I wouldn't have said no to her had she not been my brother's mate. "Ella's right," Liam smiles at her brightly. He always fusses when he is with her. Is this how we are with our mates? Ugh. "Let's throw a huge party for everyone. Outdoors maybe. It's spring and the weather is great."

Goddess! Another freaking party? Seriously? Why? She beams, taking his hand in hers and entwining their fingers. "Barbecue," she muses. "Let's make it a summer festival." She leans forward, nuzzling her nose into his neck, smiling when he bends down to kiss her.

My goddess, I'm getting cavities.

She moves away with a bright smile and turns to Jun. "Jun?" "Yes, Luna?"

"I will probably need your help," Annie tells Jun. "We don't have a lot of time. I'll get together with the kitchen staff and see what we can do food-wise. I know food is the most important here. Don't want to start a ceremony without it."

The others laugh slightly. Even I have to smile at her reference to the last year.

"I could gather a few guys to help clear a space around the lake," she offers. "Have them bring chairs and tables, parasols, and the like."

"Fantastic," she nods. "Ella, I need you to help me with the planning."

feelings. looks at Ella through her warm eyes. “Unless you prefer to help the
know that’s more up your alley.”

Ella makes a dismissive gesture with her hand. “I can do both
ie most Anything you want, really.”

here is “So, we are set. Dante, Ari, and I are going to reschedule the patre
een my and then head out for a meeting, but if you need any of us later, d
; smile scared to ask.” Liam offers.

it’s just Dante nods, sneaking his arm around Ella’s shoulder and winking at
weather Liam nods contently before looking at me. “Marius, you help J
Ella.”

Even I know better than to go directly against the order of my
fingers. brother or not. Ella, however, looks like she rather prefers me to
e leans continents. And Jun just stares at me for a moment, like he wants to
i to kiss where to shove something unpleasant. As I said, they are not my bigge
I’ve probably insulted their luna one time too often.

The next few hours pass by in a blur. I help Annie, Ella, and Jun v
preparations. I hate to admit that I got kinda swept along with it. I
motivation and her joy pulled me in. She has that effect on people. Sh
e much is the perfect luna, not that I would ever tell her or anyone else.

pull off Ella is all smiles too. Normally she only ever smiles at Dante, or
rve any her small special circle of friends. “What about the guest list?” she w
know.

Liam’s “We really shouldn’t go overboard,” Annie muses. “It’s mostly
celebration. But I want to invite Liam and Marius’ parents and their sil
e,” Jun “Your parents too, Luna?” Jun asks with a smile.

“Yes, of course,” she nods. “I’m thinking about inviting Celine too
g.” Shean ally and a very good friend.”

guys. I Fuck, Celine.

“Celine?” I hear myself say.

, Luna. “Yes, I introduced her to you, didn’t I?” Annie wants to know. “During the wedding.”

l shifts I shrug. “I don’t remember.”

on’t be “You can’t remember Celine?” Annie asks in surprise. “She’s easily the most stunning woman I know.”

her. “Not my type,” I say before I can stop myself, but I can feel a twing in my chest for talking about her like she was just any girl.

“Sure, because the worth of a person is determined by being your alpha, not,” Ella rolls her eyes.

change She goes back to ignoring me now, and instead chats with Annie re-telling their recent shopping trip. And how Celine wants to pitch the idea to our fans about holding a friendly competition between our packs and allies.

Stop talking about her, for fuck’s sake!

with the My soul feels like it gets ripped into pieces whenever I hear her name. Eventually, Ella leaves to organize some things with our warrior pack. Annie, Jun, and I remain. Annie looks at me speculatively and is concerned.

maybe “What?” I mutter.

wants to “You are so quiet,” she points out thoughtfully. “Is everything alright?” “What the fuck? Why is she even worried?” “Sure,” I shrug.

a pack “Marius,” she starts, stopping to ponder. “I was wondering...”

things.” “What about?”

“Do you have anyone to talk to?” she asks softly. “Someone you can talk to. She is your problem with?”

Something in me clenches painfully. How does she know how alone

I go into defense mode instantly. “What?” I mock laugh. “Someone like me? Why would I talk to an omega wolf about my problems?”

She looks at me shortly before grabbing her folder again. “I didn’t want to talk to you, but you should talk to me, just someone,” she says evenly before she leaves the room.

Something inside me clenches again, she looked really hurt for a moment. Shit, I went too far. Before I can leave the room too, a deathly grip on my shoulder stops me. I turn around to meet Jun, the look in his eyes so cold it could freeze the fucking lake. He pushes me against the wall, making me growl in defense.

I expect Cyrus to come forward and kick him away since he hates being cornered or attacked, and I’m a fucking lycan with alpha blood. To my surprise, though, Cyrus doesn’t come forward. He stirs slightly, it seems like he wants to say something, but he can’t.

“Listen,” Jun hisses. “I don’t care if you are a lycan or not. If you insult her like that once more, I will rip your head off. I don’t fucking care who you are. Only brother you are or if you are a prince. You could be the literal king of the Moon Goddess’ son, and I wouldn’t care. You insult her once more and you will wish I’d told your brother instead of dealing with you myself.”

He pushes me against the wall once more before turning around and leaving the room.

My heart beats against my chest loudly. Fuck. Where is Cyrus? Why didn’t he come forward? I’m not scared of Jun. He is the gamma and a high-ranking strong wolf, but he is not stronger than I am. Jun doesn’t scare me, but the connection to my lycan does.

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THE WHITE WOLF

CELINE

I make sure to check the borders once every day. I need to let Dar anyway. She needs to run, and we need it for our connection other. Before I leave though, I pick up Harmony. She is visiting her pa discuss a few things with her father. He is currently assisting with b warrior training, together with Val's father. I want Val's dad to tal training one of the advanced classes. Brian – Harmony's fathe particularly good with teens. They find him cool and funny and naturally follow him.

Brian and Harmony are sitting in the garden when we approach. Celine!" Brian waves and beams at me proudly like I'm his daugh "You two girls are really something. My tough Harmony and you, the

Oh, and my sweet little Annie... a luna. Goddess, you've all come for me. My eyes are brimming with tears.

Harmony rolls her eyes but can't contain her amusement. Brian's a bit overdramatic in an endearing way.

"Steve is doing well, too," Harmony points out, making sure he isn't forgotten. He is the youngest of the siblings and finished high school a few months ago.

"Of course he is," Brian smiles happily. "He takes after me, naturally."

"Right," Harmony says dryly.

"Who takes after Dad?" Steve wants to know as he hurries down the staircase. He is dressed in his sports attire, probably heading to training. He started contributing a lot to the pack recently. He was always one of the guys, even as a teen, and now that he's turned eighteen and started to grow up like his wolf, he is showing a few nice muscles. I can't deny that Steve is genetically handsome and strong, but since he's Harmony's little brother, I feel like he's become my little brother too.

"You," Harmony chuckles.

Steve laughs. "And here I thought I looked like Mom."

"I'm talking about our strength," Brian splutters. "About our fitness abilities. Our fantastic looks..." He pauses. "No, scratch the last part. I'm hotter than I am." He wiggles his brows suggestively, making me and his kids groan.

Eventually, all of us head off, though not without him tearfully begging Harmony and complaining that he hasn't seen Annie for so long and that she should do something about it and invite Annie over.

"That's typical Dad," Steve says in an amused tone towards us once we're outside.

ar.” His “He’s so nice, though,” I point out. My father is nice too, but he has
been as warm as Brian. Dad barely hugged me growing up and rarely
always a interest in my worries. He was too caught up in his own sorrow after
my mother and brother.

brother “He is,” Steve laughs. “But on the rare occasion he gets pissed, he
school scary. Believe me, I know it.”

“He really does know,” Harmony says in a matter-of-fact tone.
y.” who was the rebellious kid?”

“I was not rebellious,” Steve hurries to say and suddenly sounds like
wn themuch to my amusement. “I was just testing my limits.”

g. He’s I raise my eyebrows while Harmony narrows her eyes. “That’s
ie tallerwhat being rebellious means,” she states.

raining Before Steve can retort, I put a stop to their quarrel. “It’s time we t
going toleave, Harmony. Steve, better go to your training or you will be late. C
eel likeleading the training today, and he tends to make everyone run extra
when they arrive late.”

“Goddess, I know! Thank you, Alpha!” He waves us goodbye
hurrying away.

ighting “Let’s get going,” I tell Harmony. We undress behind a few trees
Rosaleefrom prying eyes, before shifting into our wolves. Harmony’s wolf i
chucklebrown, strong, and quite intimidating, bigger than most she-wolves. M

wolf, Danica, is huge, as is usual for an alpha wolf, with strong lin
uggingmuscles, and she is all white with silver eyes. It’s rare for wolve
that shecompletely white, especially alphas, who tend to have black fur or

dark brown. Being a white alpha may be unusual, but hey, I’m a femal
we are reigning over a pack. I know how to do unusual.

Danica always looks so ethereal, Harmony links me as we run thro

is never forest. *She is such a kick-ass wolf.*

showed I can feel how pleased Danica is by Harmony's honestly meant praise losing admiration. She is not one to praise constantly, so her words always mean something. *I'm still trying to understand why she is all white.*

truly is *I don't think it's a problem, though.* Harmony points out. *You are crazily strong. Rare doesn't mean bad.*

"Guess *I know.* I feel at peace with what I am. I love my wolf dearly. She is my biggest support system, and I can always rely on her strength. *I just don't know, Brian, know more about what it means.*

Maybe Liam and Annie can help you? As a lycan, Liam knows a lot about exactly wolves. Oh, or you could ask his brother who is living in his pack... M

I can't help it. A growl leaves Danica's mouth when she hears his name. I can feel how Harmony, or rather, her wolf tenses up. She is silent for a moment before she speaks up again. *Alpha...*

rounds *Yes?*

Another pause. *I just wanted to... wait, there is Marcel.*

before A part of me is curious about what she wanted to ask me, but another part is just relieved that Marcel interrupted us. His wolf is on the bigger side, away from a beta wolf. I assume somewhere in his family lineage there is an alpha wolf dark-involved. He is promising indeed, and with the right training, he'll be in my own good. I pick up my pace and start properly running, Danica's large legs barely touching the ground. Sometimes it feels like I'm flying. Harmony is right behind me. Out of all the warriors, she is the fastest. She's not a beta at least as the others, more athletic, even in her wolf form. It works to her advantage sometimes. Marcel is slower but somehow manages to keep up.

If I wanted to, I could easily outrun them both. No one's ever been able to catch up to me as Danica. It's one of the gifts I was blessed with. The other is a s

mind. It sounds boring, but it becomes extremely handy in my p
ise and Wherever I go, wherever I am, my first instinct is to take notice
s mean possible dangers and various escape routes and estimate the strength c
around me. My mind plays through each scenario, making it easy to
re both any situation and opponent.

We are on the outskirts of the border when Danica's sharp sense
e is my something. Is it a scent? The hint of a sound? I'm not sure, but
want to instantly, making the other two stop alongside me.

Alpha? Marcel links me, sounding apprehensive. *What's wrong?*
t about I growl at him to shut up, focusing my senses on what I just...
arius? thought it was a scent first, but now that I think of it, it's more like a
name. I a sixth sense. I block out all the noises around me, just focusing on h
it for a ground feels beneath my feet and how my body moves with the wi
one with the forest all of a sudden. I allow my senses to take over a
me further along the border. I stop right before a river that crosses my
land. With one leap, I swiftly jump over it, finally reaching my destina
her part I turn to face the other two, who have been silently following me
de for *ahere!* I order.

a blood They swiftly follow. Once they reach me, we all shift back into our
e really forms, and Marcel hands us long shirts to dress in. He's been carryin
e pawsof clothes attached to one of his legs this whole time. The shirts co
nony is most important parts of our bodies. Marcel grabs himself a pair of pa
s bulkyof the bag to wear.

vantage I kneel at the spot I've just discovered. "A campfire." I frown.

Harmony's eyes check the ground further. "And a tent. There had
as fasttent here too."

trategic "Could it be kids?" Marcel asks, not sounding too convinced himsel

osition. “No,” I say in a matter-of-fact tone. “It took us two hours to reach anyplace, and we are three strong and highly trained wolves. Not to mention of those difficult terrain we navigated through just to reach the river and then come analyze over here. I know kids do stupid stuff sometimes, but coming here? possible.”

is catch “Do you think it’s a coincidence?” Harmony wants to know. “So that I halt passed by and just stayed here. We are pretty close to the pack border all.”

“That’s what’s worrying me,” I mutter. “It’s too close to the border. I felt. I overlooked.”

feeling, This is almost impassable terrain here. It’s rocky and raw this close to the mountains. Rough. Not even hikers pass through here. The path on the mountain is dangerous, and there is a cliff running along one side. The lead reason we don’t guard it as much as other parts, because no one in the pack’s mind would walk by here.

tion. “I will link Elias to gather some warriors and come here. He is a good . Come it’s his gift. I’ll let him roam the area and see what he can find.”

towards Harmony. “Make sure to gather our warriors tonight, everyone. We have the advanced and elite training. We need to tighten patrols and re-work a bag routes and strategy.”

over the “Whose lands are these behind our border?” Marcel asks, looking towards the mountains.

“No man’s land.” I point out. “It belongs to no one.”

Marcel carefully touches the ashes of the bonfire. “It still feels a bit like to be here he mutters. “It’s not been long since someone was here.”

“How come we can’t smell anyone?” Harmony queries. There is a faint f. her voice now, “We would have easily smelled rogues.”

ach this “Maybe they masked their scent?” Marcel offers.

tion the *These were no rogues.* Danica states.

rossing *How do you know?*

It’s not *I just know,* she states. *Don’t ask me how and why... I just know.*

The next few hours pass in a blur. Elias arrives with a few choice w
omeonethree male and two female. They are all excellent trackers. I join th
er afterrunning with them, and we find two more camps on pack land
following a path that leads into the mountains. The terrain is so
er to bethough, that we don’t make it far. However, we do come across on
abandoned camp at the foot of the mountain.

e to the Elias links me. *Shit.*

ver the *Indeed,* I add grimly.

It’s the How would they even move across the mountain? And cover their
ir rightA part of me wishes I could push the whole incident aside and label
coincidence, some rogues maybe? But I know better. There is too
tracker,going on here for it to be a coincidence. Someone has a plan and know
' I nodthey are doing.

ie from We leave the mountains before it starts getting too dark. It’s not
ork ourcan achieve anything immediately, and I need to gather more infor

Tomorrow, I will definitely give Annie and Liam a call to see wh
owardsthink. They might have more knowledge about what’s going on.

When we arrive back at the pack house, I send Elias home to ge
sleep. My father is already waiting for Harmony and me. Marcel be
warm,”head politely. “Alpha Cedric.”

He smiles a bit. “I’m not alpha anymore, no need to act so forr
/orry inright, Beta Harmony?”

Harmony chuckles slightly. “Right.”

When his gaze shifts towards me, he looks worried though.
happened?”

“Give me a moment to freshen up, then I will fill you in. Harmo
Marcel.” I turn towards my friends. “Go and get some rest too. A
warriors, something.”

the team, “How about you come to my place?” Marcel offers us. “My sister
before waiting for me anyway with her best friend. I’m going to prepare dir
rough, them, there’s enough extra if you want to join us...”

the more “You had me at dinner,” Harmony grins.

“Go ahead,” I nod toward them. “I will catch up with you later.” I
talk to my father and get his thoughts on today’s events first. With
experience leading the pack, and his usually calm demeanor, I’m certa
: scent? give me honest and good advice.

l it as a “And here I was, hoping we could sit and have a glass of wine tog
o much my father says with a smile. “But I like how you mingle with the pa
vs what the warriors. So, I won’t complain.” He pauses. “Much.”

I return his smile. “Well, you taught me that it’s important to get t
like we the pack members. But how about having breakfast together tomorrow
mation. “Deal.” He nods.

at they “Give me a few minutes to shower and change, then I’ll tell you w
found. Be prepared, though, you’re not going to like it.”

at some I shower fast and change into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeve
ows his blouse. I meet my father in my office to fill him in on what happen
rather, what we discovered. He is also concerned by the camps and wh
nally... could mean. “I’m impressed though,” he mutters. “How could your
even catch that something was off?”

“It was a feeling,” I admit. I didn’t tell the others, but with him

“What definitely share what really happened.

“A feeling?”

my and “Like a sixth sense,” I explain. “It’s hard to put my finger on it, but
And eat and I just knew that something was off. We focused on it, and our fee
us to the camp.”

Jazz is He leans back a bit. “Maybe it’s another gift you have.”
mer for “Maybe...” I say warily.

“Maybe it’s because you are a white wolf, Celine.”

I tilt my head, frowning slightly. That’s what I was wondering too
need to should I be worried?”

his vast “I don’t think so,” he shakes his head. “I strongly believe that your
in he’ll special. You are my daughter and of alpha blood, but there is also i
you. There’s this quiet dignity which makes others follow you, desp
gether,” not showing the usual dominant alpha traits.” He pauses. “I think y
ack and leading this pack fantastically. No one else would have found those

Once you did, you acted fast, smart, and with the necessary instinct to
o know your pack.” he sighs. “It’s a pity your mother can’t see you like th
?” would be so proud.”

Ever since Marius made it clear he doesn’t want me, my heart feels
what we been frozen, but hearing my father’s last words warms it up a little. “
really think so?”

d black He gives me a very rare, warm smile. “I’m certain.”

ned. Or An hour later, I’m finally meeting with Marcel and Harmony
at they Harmony must have gone home to shower and see her parents before l
sense to Marcel’s place, as we arrive at the same time.

Marcel opens the door with a beaming smile. “The girls already at
t, I can make sure there is some lasagna for you both.”

“And tea, hopefully,” Harmony teases.

“Plenty of tea,” he grins.

Danica He leads us inside his cozy house. For someone who is only twenty-two, raising his little sister essentially by himself, I am impressed at how much effort Marcel has put into ensuring Jazz is happy. The house feels warm and welcoming despite them being on their own.

“Jazz!” he hollers. “Come meet our guests and bring Val with you.”

Jazz arrives quickly. She is a stunningly beautiful girl with soft features. “Dad, slender yet curvy in the right places and has beautiful curly hair.

Marcel looks at her proudly. “This is my sister Jazz. Short for Jazmine.” He waves towards us. “This is Celine and Harmony.”

Jazz stares at him in disbelief. “I know,” she whispers.

“Oh right, I forgot,” Marcel facepalms himself.

Harmony and I chuckle in amusement.

Jazz greets us politely, “It’s an honor to meet you, Alpha Celine and Harmony.”

“Likewise,” I say back. “Marcel talks about you so much, we’re curious.”

She blushes slightly.

Marcel turns around a bit. “Where is Valerie?”

“Val!?” Jazz yells, waving towards the staircase until the well-known girl finally appears. She is small, almost fragile. Her light-toned pale skin is accentuated by her straight black hair, making it appear almost translucent. She looks much healthier now, which is such a relief to see. In a way, we grew up together. Well, Lauren and I did, but she was Lauren’s little sister, but I always doted on her. I guess losing my baby brother made me wish I had a younger sibling, and she filled that need.

“Hello, Val,” I say, turning to face her. She stiffens at the sound of my voice and her eyes seem filled with nervous tension. I soften my voice and sound as disarming as possible, “How are you doing? It’s been a while since we’ve much saw you. I heard you are going to school again, is that right?”

Valerie nods shyly.

She suffered from poor health for many years until she connected with a werewolf. Her body has grown stronger since then, but she is still weaker than most werewolves, average wolf. Our families have been close friends for many years. I don’t want Marcelme now to see her so scared of me.

“I can wait in the kitchen,” Harmony offers all of a sudden. She does it to make Val feel more comfortable. She is scared of Harmony, probably more than she is of me. After all, Val’s sister, Lauren tried to kill Annie a few years ago.

Her words seem to make Val sad instead of relaxed though. I don’t want to sympathize, in a way. She probably thinks Harmony blames her for Lauren’s actions.

“Everything alright, Val?” Jazz butts in. “You look like you are a loose bolt.”

“It’s nothing,” Val mumbles. She looks up at me shyly. “Hello, Charlie, mean, Alpha.”

“You don’t need to address me formally,” I point out. “You are like my own skin to me.”

Her eyes widen in surprise.

Marcel turns to his sister. “Come on Jazz, help me prepare some tea and suggest. And let’s warm up the leftover lasagna.”

“Sure!” she blurts out, eager to give us a moment alone.

For a moment, everything falls quiet around us. “Did you visit her?”

of my eventually. “Lauren?”

She nods her head sadly. “Just once... right after she did... what she I last guess I wanted answers. But it was so...” Val pauses as if she was about to say something that is too painful to tell me.

“What happened?” I urge her softly.

“She was crazy, yelling and screaming and insulting... everyone than she pauses, the memory making her skin so pale it looks almost translucent. It pains her to get scared and never returned.”

“Lauren was sent to the werewolf prison,” I point out carefully.

She nods. “I know. I think it will be easier for Mom too.”

“Val, no one blames you or your parents for Lauren’s actions,” Harmony says after a while. “It’s not your fault, you know that don’t you?”

She seems to consider her words before looking down again. “I’m trying to

I can wrap my head around it all,” she admits.

The conversation lulls into another awkward silence before Harmony grins, asking, “So, what happened to the tea Marcel promised us?”

“Right.” Val seems to wake up from her haze. “I will show you the kitchen.” Harmony and I follow her.

It sometimes feels like she is spun out of glass, Harmony links me mean it literally. Her body is just so fragile.

I nod. *I need to keep an eye on her. She is attending school again, and worried this might put even more strain on her.* Sometimes, I’m scared

Valerie will fade away and disappear into thin air. It’s unusual for werewolves to have so many health problems that cause them to be so small and

especially if they weren’t abused. Her parents always treated her with love and respect, and I know that Jazz and Val are practically attached at the hip

?” I ask If Val isn’t staying here, then it’s almost certain that Jazz is over at her

I'm glad she has Jazz, Harmony smiles. That girl has a fire in her
ie did. *I going to make school fun for Val too.*

about to *I hope so.*

She tested beta, didn't she? Harmony asks. Valerie, I mean.

I nod. *Yes, although her body is weaker than most omegas, she has a*
e." She *What kind of gift?*

cent. "I *We are not sure. The council member just tested her the way they*
minors when they are three years old. It was positive, but you know h
gifts are... sometimes it takes a while for us to even notice we have the

I know, Harmony agrees. Until I was sixteen, I thought everyone cou
armonyas fast as I do.

That's a pretty handy gift, indeed! I can't help but sound proud. *M*
aying tonight not be the strongest in body type, but she is one of my mos
fighters and is almost invincible, as her wounds tend to heal instantly.

armony "Tea, ladies?" Marcel beams at us when we come to the kitchen. *H*
us each a cup of tea.

way to *When Val takes a sip from hers, she starts coughing, her eyes w*
"What kind of tea is that?"

!. *And I Marcel blinks. "Oops! Might have mixed up the cups."*

Harmony sniffs at her tea and rolls her eyes. "Here, Valerie, take
and I'm will drink yours."

red that *"You really have the concentration span of a butterfly," Jazz comp*
olves to her brother.

fragile, *"Hey, don't bully me," he pouts.*

th love *We giggle at his silly pout. Being with family and friends helps diff*
the hip. own problems for the moment. The days are always filled with distr
place. It's the nights I fear.

; *she is* When I lay down and close my eyes, my thoughts are free to roam
are the moments I dread the most.

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When I lay down and close my eyes, my thoughts are free to roam. These are the moments I dread the most.

YELLOW EYES

MARIUS

I wake up with a pounding headache. Weird... because I didn't even last night. I was so tired from training that I ended up heading early for once. Today, I have to accompany Liam for work unfortunately, we are heading to Moon Blood of all packs. To Celine she know I'm coming? Maybe she requested my presence on purpose. Maybe this is all part of some elaborate scheme of hers?

As I'm slowly dragging myself out of bed, I feel something stirring in my mind. *Cyrus!?*

Yes.

I'm so relieved to hear his voice. I know we aren't really getting a moment, but my wolf is still a part of me and my soul. To have been silent for so long is concerning. *Where have you been!? I know you l*

right now, and it's not the first time you've refused to talk to me
couldn't even feel your presence at times.

I don't know, he says in a matter-of-fact tone. *It was as if I were sleeping?*

Yes, I felt so tired. I closed my eyes, and when I woke up again, I'd passed. He pauses. *Have you talked to our mate?*

No, I say shortly.

I can't believe you, he states. For the first time, he doesn't sound nearly disappointed. Something in my chest tightens at the tone of his voice.

You know my reasons, I mutter.

I do, he says. *But you need to understand that I don't share them. I need to go back to rest.*

Wait! I call out. *Already?*

I'm tired, he says, and he indeed sounds tired, much to my worry. I don't drink *I'm tired. Deal with your stuff alone for a while.*

to bed With that, he's gone again, and no matter what I do or say to bring him back, and back, he won't respond. I can hardly sense his presence. At least I know he's still there this time, but his being so tired and retreating so fast worries me. Does he have a purpose? no end. Cyrus and I might have our issues, but I need him. He is the one who kept me sane for years. Without him, I can feel the control slipping away from my fingers more and more.

It's still early, so instead of getting lost in my thoughts again, I pack up the kitchen and prepare myself some coffee. Then I grab my sketchbook and sit down at the kitchen table. I haven't drawn or painted anything in a long time. Mom loves my art and used to plaster the whole pack house with it. I hate me Silverlake with it.

But ever since I found my mate, my muse has left me completely.

. But I opening the sketchbook and searching for an empty space. I start scribbling and drawing mindlessly without even paying attention. When I look up, I've just drawn, a pair of eyes are staring back at me. Yellow, spiteful eyes. What!? No! I rip the page out and throw it in the trash. Fuck it! I should have tried to work on my art at all. For the rest of the morning, I just sit there drinking my coffee, trying to regain some of my composure and strength.

I don't join the others for breakfast today. It's not compulsory to eat together, but together, and we can all grab food whenever and wherever we want. I grab a sandwich on my way outside to meet with Liam and whoever else joins us for our visit to Moon Blood.

"Good morning," I say to the small group. There's Liam, Dan, and Aryanna waiting for me.

"Nice to see your sleep-deprived face," Aryanna jokes.

"Good morning," Liam says before I can even think about how to respond. Aryanna. Looking at him now, I feel something inside me churn painfully. He is still so patient with me, always was. And I can't help but hurt him now he is and over again. Yet, no matter what I say or do, he always has my back. I don't deserve him.

Liam grins at me now. "Prepared for the tornado?"

"What kind of tornado?" I blink, momentarily confused by his words. "Are we going to have bad weather?"

Liam nods in the direction of the parking space, where a small fire is burning and people are jumping around excitedly while talking to some warriors. "Is that Moon Blood?" I ask in surprise.

Liam chuckles. "She wanted to surprise you."

"Surprise me?" I furrow my brows. "You know I hate surprises!"

He shrugs. "She was set on surprising you, so if you want to argue,

ribbling it with her.”

at what Mom is so tiny; she’s almost completely hidden between those tall, scary. But once she sees me, she squeals and laughs happily, waving at me. I wouldn’t complete nutcase. She is so embarrassing, but I can never manage to sit there grumpy or annoyed around her. Today is no exception, as she pushes me through the others and throws her arms around me in a great big hug. “I haven’t seen you in a while, it feels like forever,” she pouts before drawing back and pointing an accusing finger at me. “Marius, you need to call more often!”

else will “We talked two days ago, Mom,” I defend myself.

“You called me once this week, and it’s already Friday.” She frowns, rolls her eyes, and puts her hands on her hips. She looks more like a pouf than an adult woman in her fifties. My mother’s genetics have always been a mystery to me, actually, to all of us.

answer “What about Liam? Does he call you daily?” I try to reason with her. “Liam has a pack to lead,” she says while tilting her head. “He has a lot to do, he can’t call daily.”

back. I What the heck? When did he actually use that cheap excuse, and how the fuck did she even accept it?

Before I can say or do something though, she turns to gang up on the others. “Right, Liam? Say something!”

Liam grins shamelessly at me before he pretends to be all serious and gives me a stern look. “Mom is right. You should at least call daily. Show some respect.” Next to him, Ari snorts while Dante grins, a little too amused.

I give Liam a dirty look, which just makes him grin more. When I manage to peel my mother’s arms from around me, I quickly move away, seeking refuge amongst the others. “Hilarious,” I huff towards Liam. The worst thing is that I can’t even be mad at Mom. She’s always been the

with us. Mom can't help but smother people in her emotions, and all guys always supported us unconditionally. Still, I need to try and save some pride like dignity.

to stay Liam's lips tug up in amusement, but to my utmost relief, he manages to distract Mom. "Look Mom, here comes Annalise. Seems like she's ready to see you go."

linger at Mom twirls around in search of Annie, who is now walking down the stairs. "Annie!" she squeals excitedly before running over and throwing her arms around her. "I'm so happy to see you."

shows her Annie hugs her back, smiling joyfully. "I'm happy to see you too, Flora." "We'll have such a nice day today," my mother muses.

it's been a "I hope so," Annie nods. "It's been a while since we had one of these family meetings."

she says. "I hope we will see a few new faces," my mother giggles. "I'm so tired of seeing the same old hags. I'm still traumatized from the last time they talked all about their sex lives. Besides," she beams. "No one is hotter than me. None of their men can compare to mine. He is the tallest, and strongest, and he can go for hours and—"

me with "She is going to talk about Dad's private parts any second," I breathe in slight panic.

and gives "Goodness," Dante groans.

and some Liam grimaces. "Mom," he says in a matter-of-fact tone. "Your guests are already waiting for you and Annalise."

and finally He looks at Annie, and she nods with a chuckle, apparently taking the hint. "Come on, Flora, let's go." She hurries to Liam for a hug. He kisses her passionately, taking advantage of the moment. Liam's never been this way showing affection so openly, but with Annie, apparently he doesn't mind.

d she's "Have fun," he says with a smile.

e of my She chuckles and whispers something only he can hear. It must have
good, though, because his eyes light up.

ages to My mother's gamma, Aurel, is indeed already waiting for them
eady to from my father, he is the only one who can handle my mother and her
antics. Ella and Jun, as Annie's beta and gamma, accompany them
own the increased protection.

ing her Just before entering the car, Annie smiles once more at Liam, then
goodbye to the rest of us. I automatically return the gesture without th
lora." Shit... by the time I realize my mistake, she's already smiled and disap
in the car. I let my guard down. I shouldn't do that. Annie is smart and
se lunasense for others' feelings. I can't allow her to see too much of what'
on inside me. She has this ability to hear more than what is said, like
sick of a sixth sense or something. It's scary.

told me As noisy as my mother is and as much as Annie's presence always
Elden to disturb me, once both of them leave, my sense of calm and conten
est, and leaves too. I'm suddenly feeling gloomy again.

Everyone starts climbing in the SUV. Just before I start climbing in
the outgrabs my shoulder. "Marius."

"Hm?"

"Is everything alright?"

mma is I'm surprised by his obvious concern, "Why are you asking?"

"Because you looked horrible when you arrived earlier and only pe
pity on when mom and Annalise were here. Are you sick? Do you want
uses her behind?"

one to This is my chance—the perfect excuse. I could tell him, yes, I'm
sick, stay here and not have to see Celine. To my surprise, though

myself shaking my head. "I just didn't sleep well," I say in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Alright." He nods before letting go of my shoulder. "Tell me if you feel off. No need to push yourself too much."

What... First Annie with her knowing gaze and her weird questions. Now Liam catches on too? His kindness makes my stomach churn and

chest tighten. Fuck, I can't have him on my back. I need to get my grip again. "Would you get off my back?" I huff. "I'm alright, and I didn't need your opinion on my health."

"You're impossible." Liam furrows his brows, his eyes darkening. "What did I ever do to you?"

I notice how Dante gets out of the car again, looking a bit nervous. "I assure Marius is just tired," he says warily.

Liam looks at me sharply. "Try to pull it together when we are around," he says shortly, but doesn't reprimand me further.

"I'm here to help," I defend myself. "Remember, that's the whole point of me joining your pack." I want to say more, but Dante shakes his head. So, Liam and I decide to take the hint.

Liam doesn't say anymore. He sits in the passenger's seat instead of at his driver. "Let's go, Emerson. Head straight to Moon Blood's pack first."

Emerson nods with a smile.

"How are the girls doing?" Liam asks Emerson once we are moving. I can see through the rear window how Emerson's eyes light up

Liam's interest. I don't even know how these two became friends. I'm feeling expected. Liam might be too arrogant to befriend his omega driver. "They're doing well. Daisy's so much better since we moved to Red Claw. Fl

-of-fact gone from crawling to running around, touching everything within
And Emily is going to start school next year.”

ou start “You’re kidding me?” Liam asks in shock. “Already? When did time
so fast?”

ns, and “I don’t know, but it did,” he smiles warmly at the thought of home
and my family.

uard up “When are you going school shopping?” Aryanna asks. “I promise
ask for I’d buy her a big girl dream dress.”

“I’ll call you before we go, Beta Aryanna,” Emerson promises.

“What “So, has she finally settled in with you?” Liam asks. “I was worried
moving packs and being adopted so close together would be too much
is. “I’m done.”

“She started calling me dad a few months ago,” Emerson admits proudly.
t Moon Dante perks up at his words. “That’s great, Emerson. I’m so happy
you.”

point of I’m feeling a bit awkward listening to their conversation. I feel
slightly should contribute something, but I don’t know what to say. It’s not
don’t care at all, but I also don’t care a lot. I’m surprised though,
and nod seamlessly Liam can communicate with everyone. When we were growing
k house Liam was always a bit distant. He had this alpha strength radiating from
him even when we were teens, so others didn’t dare to approach him
didn’t like making small talk, preferring to keep to himself mostly.

. It’s like he’s a different person now.

p from At Moon Blood’s pack house, we are greeted by two of Celeste’s
always warriors. One of them looks quite young, with brown hair and sharp
they are eyes. I know he’s their lead tracker, but I don’t remember his name.

our has “Alpha Liam,” he steps forward to greet my brother. “Thank you

reach.coming today.”

“Elias,” Liam returns, shaking his hand before acknowledging the passguy. He is just as tall but bulkier. “Garret.” He points toward us. “You my betas, Aryanna and Dante already. And this is my brother, Marius. He is little.” Elias nods and smiles. “We have seen each other on a few occasions motions towards the pack house. “Please follow me. Alpha Celine and EmilyHarmony are waiting for you in her office.”

I wait for the others to go first before following them inside. I try to and keep my mind off Celine, but the whole place smells like her. Fueled that intoxicatingly sweet scent of roses, a touch of lemon, fresh brushwood with all at just the hint of an ocean breeze. It’s so intense it takes my breath away.

Celine greets all of us but avoids looking at me, preferring to stare studly. She points somewhere behind me. Her expression remains neutral though happy forbesides the lack of eye contact, she doesn’t seem to be affected by my presence at all.

On the other hand, my heart beats so fast that I’m scared it will jump out like my chest. Damn it. Why does she have to be so beautiful and so graceful at how I’m focusing on anything other than Celine and how she makes me come up, ignoring the way her lips move and how her long blonde eyelashes flutter through gently whenever she blinks. She seems to be completely unfazed by my presence, talking mainly with Liam. I hate it. Something inside me wants to jump up and claim her as mine.

She is not supposed to look at anyone but me!

Get a grip, Marius! Focus. We can’t have her, and we don’t want her anyway.

Sometimes, I just want to hurt her, so she finally shows some emotion to me.

I can barely pay attention to what she's saying. Apparently, they've
the next some abandoned campfires on the edge of their borders, close
u know mountains. The fact that there wasn't any scent lingering around, des
" ashes still being warm is unsettling, though. The terrain is hard to
ns." He through. Whoever did this must have a few secret passages. I frown
and Bet thoughts, a feeling of dread settling inside. Something doesn't feel right

"I think we need to see the places you've found," Liam decides,
o focus frown gracing his face now.

ck. The "I was hoping you would," Celine nods. "Would you like to accom
od, and me now? I want to know your opinion."

." "Of course. I want to see it for myself anyway, in case this happens
are at a pack or our other allies." He and Celine stand up. "Ari can go with us
gh, and fast and agile."

by my Aryanna is up on her feet in an instant and nods eagerly, probably
for the long run awaiting her and her wolf.

o out of "Great," Celine smiles at Liam. "I'll take Marcel with me. Harmc
ceful? I stay here in case of an emergency."

ie feel, What the fuck... why is she asking Liam and that other dude?
; flutter completely ignoring my presence, like I'm not even here. She's very f
by my with that black guy... that Marcel. She wants them to accompany her
wants to of me. What is wrong with her?

No one seems to notice my inner turmoil though, least of all Celi
doesn't even notice I'm here. I'm still trying to reel in my anger
ant he notice they're gone, already running toward the mountains.

Meanwhile, Dante approaches Harmony, Elias, and Garret. "Elias,
on, any you tell us what you and the other trackers found?"

Elias nods, "Of course, Dante. I have documented everything. Co

found show you the images we have.”

to the “You have photos?” Dante asks in surprise.

pite the Garret smiles. Seeing such a tough-looking, muscular guy like him looks weird. “Elias is always prepared and pays attention to details,” I sound proud.

it. Elias returns his smile before leading us toward the office, where we prepare and plan their warrior training sessions.

Over the next few hours, I become engulfed in the pack’s issues and don’t notice how much time has passed. If it weren’t for my pounding head, I could easily keep going for a few more hours. Eventually, though, I start to notice something is wrong. He frowns. “Are you alright, Mari?” she asks. I shrug, deciding to play it cool. “Of course, why are you asking?”

“You’re pale. Liam was right, you don’t look well.”

Why are they suddenly all so concerned about me? It’s not their place to comment on my health. Why can’t they mind their own business? It’s just annoying and... unsettling. I feel my stomach start to churn slightly.

It’s just annoying, it’s actually a bit scary. That’s why I can’t afford to be friendly around Annie. If I am nice to her, she will try and befriend me and then she will know.

instead Shit, she can’t know.

No one can know.

ne. She Not Liam, not Annie. And especially not Celine.

when I I’m still wondering how to divert Dante’s attention when Liam comes to the rescue by linking us, saying that they are going to be back soon. A few minutes later, Harmony comes by to pick us up. “My parents would love to invite you all for dinner,” she explains with a warm smile.

me, I’ll Dante smiles gratefully, “Thank you, that’s really nice of your family.”

appreciate the offer, and I'd feel better if Liam and Ari eat something being gone for hours outdoors, before we head back."

n smile "Come." Harmony leads us out of the pack house. "Celine says t
ie says,back. We'll meet them at my parents' place before exchanging int
newly retired Alpha Cedric will come too."

re they Her family home is close to the pack house but secluded enough
them some privacy. It's a comfortable-looking house and exactly the
id don'tplace I'd imagine my luna to have grown up in.

lache, I "Alpha Celine." Harmony interrupts my thoughts, waving at the g
, Dantefront of us.

us?" I merge into the background instantly, avoiding any attention com
way, and let Dante reach the group first. Thankfully, distraction come
form of Harmony and Annie's father waiting for all of us.

place to "Liam, son!" Brian beams when we enter. He pauses. "Where
It's sobaby?"

It's not "Annie's not here," Liam explains patiently. "She went to a luna r
let mywith my mother."

and me, I swear, for a second, it looks like Brian is going to cry. "Rosalee m
favorite casserole."

"We eat casserole too," Aryanna intervenes with a bright smile. "I
to love it."

"Really?"

omes to She nods.

. A few "Good," he lets out a sigh. "Still, I was so looking forward to see
like tolittle girl." When Annie's brother Steve enters the room, he turns to
him. "Sorry Steve, Annie's not here."

ily. We Steve's face falls a bit. "Well," he sighs. "I guess it's just Liam an

ing afterthen.”

Liam can barely hide his amusement while Aryanna openly laughs
hey are to see you too, Steve.”

el. Our “At least you were mentioned by name,” Dante tells Liam with a ch

“Dad, Steve, get a grip, will you?” Harmony steps forward. “Liam c
to give some of the casserole home for Annie. Also, we’re all going over the
sort of week.”

Brian and Steve sigh slightly. It’s unbelievable that Brian is one
group in head warriors with his weird antics. And Steve is the epitome of pov
strength, why does he act like this in front of others? And why am I t
ing my one bothered by it?

s in the “Oh, Liam,” Rosalee appears in the living room, hugging Liam bef
greeted all of us. She smiles and radiates so much warmth, just like
is my They really do resemble each other... there is the same sense of kind
them. “Come on, all of you. My insufferable mate will fix you al
meeting drinks.”

Brian sneaks up and tackles her in his huge arms playfully. “Who
ade her calling insufferable, Rosy?”

“Ugh,” Steve grimaces. “Stop flirting.”

happen Harmony chuckles. “Dad, focus. The drinks!”

“Right, the drinks!” He turns around, pointing at Celine’s father, w
arrived. “Cedric, be prepared for the best gin ever.”

Cedric smiles. “You got something new, Brian?”

ing my “Only the best for the best,” Brian jokes.

look at The two men chat over their drinks, with Liam soon joining
Harmony, meanwhile, catches up with Dante and Aryanna. I ta
d them, opportunity to slip away for a bit and head into the garden for some fre

What I didn't expect was to be hit by the all-consuming scent of lemons. "Nicelemon, and that hint of the ocean breeze. Shit. Out of all the places she could be, it would have to be here. She's standing in front of a little flower shop, staring up at the night sky. She looks so beautiful in the moonlight, almost ethereal. She has such beautiful long blonde hair which she tends to tuck behind her ears when working. Her whole appearance and demeanor scream elegance. She would never dress skimpy or reveal too much; her style is more reserved and elegant and modern.

The mate bond is a traitorous thing. It keeps pulling at me, forcing me to seek her out whenever she is in close proximity. When we met for the first time, it was Celine who approached me, and I pushed her away. She tried for weeks to talk to me and reach out to me, then eventually, she stopped.

Annie, the fucking mate bond keeps pulling me towards her. Can't the Moon Goddess catch a fucking hint!?

Celine's head turns slightly when she notices my presence. "Are you here to talk, or is this just a coincidence?" she asks in a matter-of-fact tone. I shrug, willing my confusing feelings for her to go down. "Coincidence." I pause. "You know I don't want you."

"Oh," she chuckles bitterly. "I know. You've made that clear on several occasions."

"So what?" I huff. "You don't own me."

"You're right. I don't." She turns around fully now, her eyes scanning me from head to toe. She lingers on my face for a moment. "Tell me why?"

"Well, I like my girls cute and small. So, I guess you're just not my type." I say. It's not even true, but I want to hurt her. I want to hurt her so she'll leave me alone. But, at the same time, the guilt is eating me up inside, making my head spin.

f roses, I'm not supposed to feel guilty. I don't want her. I never wanted a mate and I could not be supposed to have one.

er bed, If my words hurt her, she doesn't show it. She never shows any emotion, so "If you want to talk about your usual affairs or ex-girlfriends, do so with me. I don't want to hear about your backfriends," she states in a calm tone. "I just want to know why you hate me. Shemuch?"

ved, yet I stare at her. What am I supposed to say to her? I don't even know what to say. I only saw her for a minute during Annie's and Liam's inauguration ceremony. I have no words I can say to her. I just shrug.

he first She frowns. "You don't know?"

ried for "I just don't want a mate," I say evenly. "I will never accept a fated mate."

But the "Then reject me," she says simply. Is it so easy for her? Her tone is cold. I nod and walk away.

"Why don't you reject me?" I ask in return. Something about her reaction makes me feel like I'm being rejected.

She shoots me a look I don't quite understand. She's about to leave. "Something when the door opens again, and Harmony peeks outside. "Dinner is ready," she says with a smile. Then she looks at me, her expression several surprised. "Marius, you're here too?" She pauses, and for a split second I see something in her eyes, but I can't quite put my finger on it. It disappears as fast as it came. "Come inside you two."

ing me I don't know where our talk would have led us had we not been interrupted. Celine follows Harmony back inside without sparing me a glance. When she'd moved past me, she was so close I was tempted to reach out and pull her into my arms. Maybe she could mend what's broken and spin me.

Maybe she could heal me.

ate; I'm No, she can't. No one can heal me. There is a tear in my soul, and
be mended.

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No, she can't. No one can heal me. There is a tear in my soul, and it can't be mended.

CONFLICTS II

MARIUS

“**A** witch, are you sure?” Annie asks in surprise when we gather for an emergency meeting at Red Claw, and Liam fills the other members in on what he discovered at Celine’s pack yesterday.

Liam nods, slipping an arm around her waist to pull her closer to him. When she sits down on the chair next to him, her hand resting on his knee. Liam makes Annie sit on his lap or anything in a meeting. He finds it disrespectful toward her, and despite my strained relationship with him, that’s something I really admire about him. Liam is straightforward and dominant, but he has a strong moral compass.

It’s the reason he can never know about Celine and me.

“I’m positive it’s a witch,” Liam explains. “She covered almost all tracks and scents. I assume there are wolves involved, but Fenri

definitely able to pick up the scent of a witch.”

“Witches don’t normally get involved with wolves,” I point out, r
my temples. The headache’s back in full force. It’s been gradually b
—since Liam first mentioned the witch at dinner last night. I don’t think
Blood has had to deal with witches before, unlike Liam and me.

Lycans are far more interwoven with other creatures than werewolves.

“That’s what’s unsettling,” Liam points out. “Witches normally l
themselves and stay in their covens. They mingle with humans mo
they do with wolves.”

“But what might they want from Moon Blood?” Ella asks.

Annie turns to look at Liam. “Were there traces around other pack
too?”

That’s a good question. Liam, however, shakes his head. “I called J
our other allies and no one found anything similar.”

r for an “Does this mean it’s against Moon Blood, specifically?” Annie
s in on worry.

My stomach churns slightly. Is Celine in danger? “They didn’t
im. She though,” I point out.

n never “Not yet,” Aryanna comments. “But they had enough camps aro
spectful borders to have spied on them for months.”

ething I “Ari,” Liam looks at her intently. “Do you still have your contacts
t has a the witches?”

“There is a coven with a few girls I’m friends with,” Aryanna s
course, there is. I’ve never met anyone with as many friends as Aryan
of their parents and Liam may have friends in high places, but Ari know
ris was shadier ones.

“Talk to them. See If you can gather some information.”

She nods.

rubbing “Moon Blood is an ally, we’ll obviously help them,” Liam points out. “However, even if they weren’t, it’s very concerning that witch is working with a group of wolves to spy on a whole pack. I’ll talk to Dante and see if he can gather more intel.”

“Don’t forget, your family is arriving in a few days,” Annie points out. We all stare at her. “Who is arriving?” Ella asks in surprise.

“You forgot?” Annie raises her brows in amusement. “All of you? Marius? You too?” When we continue to look at her dumbfounded laughs. “Your cousin from the Royal Council,” she chuckles. “Prince is coming with his beta and a few bodyguards. I’ve made sure to prepare guest suites for them.”

“Oh goddess,” Liam rubs his forehead. “Is that already this weekend?”

“I can’t believe I forgot that too,” I say in disbelief. The Council is in Paris, and as royal lycans, we are connected to them. Lycan alpha

Liam and my father have to pledge loyalty not only to their pack, but to the Council. They are both in line for the throne.

“Slipped my mind entirely,” Dante admits.

The others nod. “Same here.”

“Right,” Annie grins. “Just be glad you have me to spare you from the embarrassment of having them camp outside with only some measly bread and butter to offer. Marilou and Renata have already planned the menu. I have a whole team helping them. Renata’s going to handle most of it. If you have questions about the menu. Marilou is still in school, and I want to focus on her studies.”

“Renata?” I mutter.

“The head of the kitchen staff,” Ella says shortly.

“You don’t need to go above and beyond to prepare something great for him,” Liam says. “It’s just Eric. He’s mine and Marius’ cousin. It’s just an official royal visit, it’s a family visit.”

“You never know,” she shrugs. “He is also a Prince of the Council and might have official business to discuss.”

“Still,” Liam smiles slightly. “It’s Eric. He likes us. You don’t need to stress too much over it.”

“I know. But he was so friendly last year when we visited him in France,” she points out. “I want to return the favor.”

“What?” I ask in disbelief. “Eric? Friendly? You managed to befriend that arrogant dunce?”

Annie blinks, looking confused. “He was very nice to us and made sure everyone was comfortable. People showed me Paris. We even hit a few bars with him and his friends. And I had a personal tour of the Council chambers, even though we weren’t normally allowed. But Eric said, as Liam’s wife and mother, I can also welcome everywhere lycans are allowed to go.”

Liam nods his agreement, so apparently, it really happened like that. I look down when his phone starts ringing. “This is important; I need to take the call. Just continue without me for a few minutes,” Liam says as he walks out to answer his call.

I’m still confused, though. What the fuck? Eric doesn’t care for anyone outside of his closest friends. He is the typical stuck-up rich kid with a superiority complex. Ever since he was born, he was one of the favorite ‘golden’ children... already guaranteed a position on the Council; and Liam, only Liam isn’t involved in politics yet. But Eric, being an older member of the Council, is a young, strong lycan prince devoted to

great for cause. I've heard that now he is an adult, his opinion weighs so much more than he has a major say in the laws they establish for both werewolves and lycans.

And Annie befriended him? How the fuck does she always manage to get away with that? I rub my temples. "That's ridiculous. Eric is not one to make friends with anyone who grumbles. "Maybe he was messing with you? Gullible people are always an easy target for him."

Ella furrows her brows. "Don't make it look like Annie is an idiot just because she's a bitch," just polite and welcoming towards people like your mother is. She's outgoing and she behaves accordingly. Annie gives everyone a fair chance, and even Eric, why people naturally respect her, unless they are sociopaths." Wow, I'm pissed. "I've another question: Is there anyone YOU actually like? I'm sure I can find someone for you. Sure, I know you, it seems, you don't like anyone at all."

My friends. I frown, feeling pissed instantly. She has some nerve. In a far corner of my werewolf mind is this nagging voice telling me she is right, but I shove it aside. "I know, I know, but I'm all the times I've spoken to Annie, Ella's chosen this one to finally bite me in my face. I wasn't even trying to insult Annie. "I don't care for anyone but you. He opinion, Ella. I don't need to like anyone, and no one needs to like me. I don't want to take what you want to follow your luna like a tail-wagging pup, I don't care. To me, you're just nothing but—"

Dante rises instantly, his eyes flashing in an unusual spout of anger. "If anyone would be very careful what you say next," he hisses towards me.

with a "Dante, don't," Ella takes his hand to squeeze it. "It doesn't matter what you call me, I've chosen never to care what others call me." She turns to me. "But just so you know, I'm not like Annalise is my best friend. We were friends far before Liam came into the picture or anyone from your family. She had the backbone to stand up to their bullies despite being a 12-year-old omega she-wolf. So don't act as if you know me, or her, or anything about what we are to each other!"

that he I shake my head and furrow my brows. "You're being ridiculous."
ans. Jun opens his mouth, probably to say something. To my surprise,
je to dochooses this moment to interrupt us. "That's enough," she says, and I
ends," I brooks no argument. "We're just going to say more hurtful things no
ways anlet's leave it at that today before we say things we might regret." H
softens a bit when she looks at Ella, smiling at her. Ella returns the sm
t. She's nods.

ar Luna It's a clear order coming from my luna this time, and even I'm no
/hich is enough to ignore an order like that.

r, she's Annie falls into silence before she gazes toward me shortly.

Because She shifts her eyes away, probably to ensure that no one knows
going to link me. *No one will be able to help you if you keep everyone*
r of myout.

fast. Of *It's just the way I am*, I say evenly, but my heart picks up its pa
low upfilling me. She is far too attentive.

or your She looks a bit sad all of a sudden. *You're trying very hard to*
. If you *everyone believe that*, she says quietly.

you are I'm not sure what to say.

It's at this moment that Liam returns. He halts instantly, eyeing us
nger. "Ifrown. The tension has to be so thick; he could probably cut it with
"What's going on?"

er. I've Ella stands up and takes Dante's hand. He's still standing there, r
I know, punch me. I can see her eyes getting glassy while she looks at
nto the probably linking her. Annie gives her a nod. "Apologies, Alpha," Dar
p to my through gritted teeth. "We are stepping out for a moment."

if you I can see Liam's expression darken once Dante and Ella leave.
happened?" he asks sharply. He looks at me, Aryanna, and Jun. "Anyo

to answer?”

, Annie Jun looks torn. He probably wants to throw me under the bus too, but her tonesame time doesn't want to stir any more drama.

ow. So, Liam's eyes turn dark. He rises to his full height, slamming his paper gazethe desk. "I asked a question!" he roars. He's in full alpha mode now and from my father, he's the strongest alpha I've ever seen. He probably

Annie getting upset, which made him even angrier.

t stupid "Liam," Annie says quietly, her small hand touching his arm. "Alpha

Goodness, Annie might be able to hide my snide comments toward Liam

she's not going to hide this. Especially with so many witnesses around; she is when it involves her best friend and Liam's beta. Aryanna looks at me in a *locked* moment, she sighs slightly, but weirdly, she seems to look a bit encouraged.

Yeah, encouragement to bolt and stay the night away is what I need right now, fear before my brother might question me about my behavior.

Before I can come up with an escape plan, there is a knock at the door. *make* "Who is it?" Liam huffs.

"It's me, Marilou," a shy voice comes from outside.

Annie and Liam exchange a glance, her eyes turning glassy and filled with a wonder what she tells him because eventually, I can see the fury in her eyes. She's holding a knife, but she's toning down. "Come in," he says, his voice more controlled now.

Marilou nervously steps inside. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to... to do anything," she stutters. She is a sweet girl with fiery red hair and a kind smile. Annie, which is typical for omegas. "I'm coming at a bad time, aren't I? I'm not here to say Alpha. Luna."

"No," Annie shakes her head. "Your Alpha has his official consent. What hours for the pack now. You came at the right time."

me care Liam nods. "No need to apologize, Marilou." He's trying, but

sounds tense.

at the Marilou bows politely, eyeing everyone nervously. Thanks to her psycho alpha, she's scared of men. Annie knows it, so she takes the films onaway immediately by standing up and approaching her with a smile. "Asidesomething wrong, Marilou?"

bly felt "No," she shakes her head and blushes. "It's just... I talked to Rena she said I need to ask you before..."

a." "What do you need, dear?"

her, but "It's... I have two friends in school, they are girls from Moon ind andValerie and Jazz. We're working together on a school project ie for aextracurricular activity, but I wasn't sure if it would be okay to. rraging.pauses.

ght now Goddess, how does Annie deal with these kids? All this stutte unbearable. Everyone comes to her when they have a problem. A lur e door.is a pain in the butt.

"Valerie and Jazz?" Annie asks.

"Jazz is the sister of one of the elite warriors, Marcel. And Valerie gain. Iwell... Valerie."

his eyes Annie nods, she seems to understand what the kid is babbling about is understanding dawning in her eyes. Her eyes go glassy for a second disturbsame as Liam's, as they link each other again.

id aura, Liam nods curtly. "Your friends can visit, Marilou."

1 sorry, Annie smiles at her, "Just go through the usual procedure of no members visiting us and register them when they arrive. And tell one ultationreigning betas or gamma when they leave. Beta Ella or Gamma Jun n have the list with them."

he still She beams happily. "Thank you, Luna. Alpha."

When she has left, Annie turns to us. "I'll take my leave now too formerare still things I need to prepare for Eric's visit. Jun?"
tension Jun nods and stands up. He bows shortly towards Liam before fo
Is thereher outside.

Liam looks at Aryanna now. "Leave us," he says shortly. "I want to
ata, andmy brother."

Oh wow, just great.

Aryanna stands up, nodding politely to Liam. She throws me a
Blood.glance. *Head up, she links me. Even though you're an idiot, he's not g
for ankill you. Unbeknownst to yourself, he has a weak spot for you.*
.." she My lips tug slightly at her words. She's one of the most casual p
know. As soon as she's left, Liam brings me back to reality.

ring is "What the hell is wrong with you?" Liam hisses. "Annalise gav
ia's jobsummary, but I assume she left out a few details. I still heard enough."

"I honestly didn't mean to insult her this time," I say and mean it.

"This time?" Liam asks sharply.

ie... is I blink. "What?"

"You said *this time*," Liam states, his eyebrows furrowed. "Does thi
t. Therethere were more occasions I don't know about? Is that the reason Jur
id time,talks to you and Ella is close to punching you in your face?"

"You noticed," I stutter.

"Of course, I noticed!" he hisses in sudden anger. "I just didn't kn
on-packit was about my mate. Now I know. Fuck, Marius! You're my br
e of theknow we aren't as close as we were as kids, but you're my family. N
ormallyyou have to treat my mate, the woman I love, like she's beneath you?"

"I don't think she's beneath me," I mutter.

"What is it then? Is this about me? Do you want to hurt her to get

. There me?"

"No!"

llowing "Then what's going on? Because I don't understand what the he think you are doing." He looks at me insistently. "When I asked to talk to wanted to join Annie and me here at Red Claw, you said yes. I made clear to you that I would be your alpha here, and I specifically told you couldn't cut you any slack. You said you didn't mind."

a quick "I don't mind," I argue. "I don't mind your position at all. In Silv joining to Dad was my Alpha, here it's you. That's not the problem."

"Then what is the problem?" he demands to know. He sighs, softer people Itone. "You're spiraling downwards every day. You look like you slept in weeks; you are pushing everyone away who tries to be nice e me a You insult my Beta's mate. You insult my Beta, my Gamma, my ma weren't like this before! What happened?"

I'm not sure what to say.

"Mari, if you don't talk to me, how can I help you?" Liam asks quie

"You sound like Dad," I say. I feel tired. "You are not my father, Li is mean "You're right. I'm not. Because if Dad had even a remote idea abo a barely you're doing, he would kick your ass."

He's right. He absolutely would.

Liam looks at me. "Nothing? You have nothing to say?" He ow that "Alright, I'll tell you something: You insult my mate once more, and y other. I face my wrath. And it won't end with us sitting here discussing it. You Why do insult Annalise, and you won't act rudely toward her. If I see or hear again or get a hint from anyone that it is happening, you will face a pro He sits down, rubbing his forehead. "Just leave now," he huffs.

back at I sigh. I want to say something. I want to apologize, tell him it's

fault or Annie's, and that I absolutely hate the way I am right now and keep hurting everyone around me. But no words leave my lips. I stick you ready to leave the room. Before I can do so, Liam looks at me again.

"I love her from the bottom of my heart," he says quietly. "And I love you very much. You are my brother, Marius, my brother. Do you really not care?"

The tone in his voice is still angry but also sad. I swear I can feel something inside me break slightly at the way he looks at me.

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fault or Annie's, and that I absolutely hate the way I am right now and how I keep hurting everyone around me. But no words leave my lips. I stand up, ready to leave the room. Before I can do so, Liam looks at me again.

“I love her from the bottom of my heart,” he says quietly. “And I love you. You are my brother, Marius, my brother. Do you really not care?”

The tone in his voice is still angry but also sad. I swear I can feel something inside me break slightly at the way he looks at me.

AURELIA

VALERIE

“**I**’m so glad we have most of our classes together,” Jazz beams. “I really got lucky.”

“That’s true,” I smile happily. It’s so much more fun with Jazz. “I shares a few classes with us too. That’s cool.”

Like me, Marilou didn’t go to school regularly due to her past alphas tormented the pack. We bonded a bit because of our awkwardness with others.

“She said we can visit Red Claw today to work on our assignments,” she grins. “That’s cool.”

“Yep,” I nod, although I feel a bit nervous to see their luna, Annalis. All the history between her and Lauren, I wonder if she loathes me too.

We head towards our lockers when I notice a group of five guys staring at us. I try to ignore them at first, acting as if they aren't there. They whisper to each other loud enough for us to hear what they are saying, though mostly about me, and how I shouldn't be there, how I've got traitors behind my back.

Something inside me churns. I'd been feeling safe and relaxed because Jazz is here with me. I've been having so much fun with her and Marilou. I forgot who I actually am, whose sister I am.

Jazz grabs my arm and turns to face them directly. "What's wrong with you guys? Are you staring? Is there something on our faces? You look like you've seen a girl before."

I don't know why she's never afraid of anything. We are both seventh graders, but she seems to be so much more mature. She is a beta wolf, so she's tiny, but she's definitely not on par with these guys. Everyone around us stops in their tracks and stares. Some even giggle at Jazz's comment.

Two of the guys look a bit uncomfortable at the ruckus going on around them, but the other three glare at Jazz and me. The three glarers step forward. Jazz pulls me behind her and stands in front of me, looking the tall girl dead in the eye. "You need five guys to harass one girl?" she deadpans around them. More murmurs around us, and I notice how slowly a crowd seems to form around us.

"Listen," one of the guys hisses. "We don't have any beef with you, whatever your name is. But that bitch behind you... You know who she is. After she did. Let her come forward so we can deal with her and show her how we treat traitors."

"The heck I will," Jazz huffs. "She didn't do anything wrong."

"Jazz, Val..." Marilou appears in the crowd, pushing through the mass of

aring at “Oh, awesome,” one of the bullies huffs. “Just what we needed. N
isper to weak-ass omegas come crawling forward too.”

gh. It’s “You might want to watch your tongue,” Jazz says evenly. “She
lood in Red Claw, and her Luna is the very ‘omega’ you are supposedly tr
avenge. At least get your facts right.” She nods toward the two guys s
because behind him. “You are from Moon Blood like us. You know this he
lou that against our Alpha’s and retired Alpha’s command.”

My eyes widen. So that’s why they don’t participate. Moon Bloo
g? Why zero-tolerance policy toward bullying.

e never “She’s right,” one of the boys in the background mutters. “The red
from Red Claw; you don’t want to pick a fight with their pack. A
venteen, Alpha doesn’t want Lauren’s family to get harassed. Let them be, Don
ie’s not The guy—Don?—just rolls his eyes. “I’m not from your pack
ound us hisses. “I don’t give a shit, and I don’t care about the little red-haired
or the black chick, although...” He makes a vulgar gesture toward
around “She does get me riled up.”

orward. “This one is not interested in guys,” one of his friends snickers.

est guy Don raises his eyebrows. “Is that so? Maybe she needs a taste of r
i. to know for sure.”

to form What!? How dare they? I move forward, glaring at him. “Show he
respect.” I hate how small my voice sounds, and I wish I could have
th you, insults at him.

hat her “Oh, so that’s what’s going on,” Don sneers at Jazz. “You have the l
ier how that little traitor girl?”

“Believe it or not,” Jazz huffs. “Not everything in the world r
around your dick.” The crowd around us laughs again. “And people
asses.

low the friends with each other without wanting to get into each other's pants
you talking out of experience, and you guys fuck each other regularly?
's from Some kids around us laugh openly while others whisper and chuckl
ying to see a few filming the whole scene.

tanding Something in Don's eyes flashes now, something dark. He looks r
re goes punch Jazz, and I pull her back with me a bit. Jazz shoves me beh
again. "I don't care who you are or what you want," Don huffs. "I, he
d has a want to play with the little bitch behind you."

My heart sinks at his words yet beats faster at the same time. I
head is would be stronger and less awkward, but unfortunately, I am the way I
nd our Don comes closer and punches the wall next to Jazz and me. "Get
." my way, you little—"

," Don "I would be very careful choosing your next words, Donnan Mc
omega calm yet cold voice reaches us from the side.

ls Jazz. Don blinks, turning his head. To my surprise, the crowd parts
magically, all students shifting to let someone through. A tall, beauti
approaches us. Her whole body is athletic, showing off the long h
ny dick training she probably goes through. She has long, killer legs in
skintight jeans and the most beautiful hair I've ever seen on someo
r some long and black and falls down her back in slight waves. Everything ab
throws screams power. I can't believe she is just seventeen, like Jazz and r
eyes are blue, and the gaze in them is icy as she looks at Don.

hots for Don and the other guys move back from us instantly. "Lady Aurelia
"Just so we are clear, if I ever see you harass Valerie Wright or any
evolves friends ever again, you will need to deal with me." She says cool
can be doesn't yell, but her tone is threatening enough. "Am I clear?"

"We didn't know you were friends," Don stutters.

, or are “Even if we weren’t, it doesn’t give you the right to play judge and
” an innocent girl who is weaker and smaller than you. Or do you get a k
e. I canof doing exactly that?” she asks sharply.

Don raises his hands and takes another step back. “
eady tomisunderstanding,” he mutters.

ind her Aurelia looks at the two guys who have been keeping their dista
owever, respect that you tried to stop what’s going on, but you might v
reconsider who you acquaint yourselves with. Your Alpha Celine hc
wish I values in high regard, so do most of her pack warriors and official
am. turns to the crowd, eyeing them and searching for a small group of c
t out of They are looking nervous, and it seems they have been messed w

“And since we are already on the topic, my brother, Alpha Liam
ore,” a Claw, gave clear orders that omegas should be treated with respect. If
else here is going against omegas, I’ll tell him that a bunch of bullies
almost problem with his ethics and moral compass. You can discuss your issu
iful girl him directly.”

ours of This pretty much did it. A few guys rip their homework out of the o
1 blackhands and run away. No one wants to take it up with Alpha Liam in
ne. It’s The rest of the crowd claps and cheers before they slowly walk away.
out her going to be the hottest school topic for a long time.

ne. Her When they are gone, Aurelia looks at us. “Are you girls alright?”

The three of us nod in unison. I gather all my courage and step fo
.” bit. “Thank you, Lady Aurelia,” I stutter.

7 of her She snorts. “Stop the lady act. Nothing about me is ladylike, and I’
ly. She ‘technically’ a princess. I don’t live in a castle or anything.” Her
demeanor is gone suddenly, and she’s all smiles. “You are Valerie, rig

I nod, happy that she remembers my name.

l harass “And Marilou,” she looks at our friend. Marilou has tied her beautiful hair into a bun and she has freckles all over her face. She’s soft and slender, a true natural beauty.

‘It’s a Marilou nods, eyeing Aurelia through big eyes. “Please don’t tell Annalise.”

ince. “I Aurelia grins. “Why?”

want to “She will be worried then. And she’s always worried about me. I told her because I’m so quiet and scrawny.”

s.” She Aurelia smiles. “My sister-in-law is worried for everyone who is under my reign.”

with too. “The Silver Luna is so cool,” Jazz beams.

of Red Aurelia raises her brows. “I heard everyone is calling her that. A brother is the Silver Alpha?”

have a “Yes, because he freed himself from silver chains and because he is immune to silver,” Jazz explains.

“I see,” Aurelia chuckles. “And you are Jazz, right?” When Jazz shows her an appreciative smile. “You’re very brave, Jazz. It’s a lot to stand up for your friends like you did today.”

This is “Val is my best friend and the first person to accept me for who I am,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone. “I’m not going to leave her hanging just like that.”

ward a Aurelia seems to like what she’s heard. “You girls want to spend the weekend break with my friends and me?” she offers.

’m only “Why not,” Jazz grins. “Marilou thinks one of your friends is hot.”

er cold I can’t help but laugh slightly while Marilou blushes. “Do you like him?” she blurts out everything, Jazz?” she complains. “And I just said he’s cute!”

Aurelia grins. “Who do you find cute?”

iful red “Terry,” Marilou admits.

reet and She beams. “That’s great. Everyone always crushes on Nox or Lio. Terry is such a nice guy. He deserves some attention. I’ll make sure you’ll Lunasit next to each other.” She seems to be all into the idea, while I blushes further but nods in agreement.

Before we can follow Marilou and Aurelia, I grab Jazz’s arm to stop I guess “Thank you,” I say with a smile. “You are the best friend ever, Jazz.”

“You’d have done the same for me,” Jazz looks at me through her wide and bright eyes. “You stood up for me too.”

“I’m so weak, though, and I always seem to be rooted to the spot when something happens. I wish I’d yelled at him for insulting you the way he did,” I mutter.

She smiles. “You react differently to me, but that’s ok. You stood up for me, and that’s all that matters. Not a lot of people do that.”

I nod. “Best friends forever.” Jazz nods, “Best friends forever,” she repeats and grins. “And here I thought you only takes a only friends with me because of your crush on Marcel.”

I laugh. “It does help that your brother is cute,” I tease. “But it’s not because you are my best friend.”

ust like She grins, locking our arms.

“I’m sorry he outed you in front of everyone,” I say quietly. “That’s not lunchright.”

She shrugs. “I don’t like it either, but everyone already knew anyway.” She makes a dismissive gesture with her hand. “I have you and Marilou, and I’ll have to like me for who I am. That’s enough for me.”

’ Marilou turns around and waves at us. “Hurry up, girls.”

We nod, running to catch up with her and Aurelia.

I didn't know what I'd expected, but I happened to have a fun lunch
nel, but I'm a bit socially awkward normally, and meeting new people is diffi
you twome, but Aurelia's friends are really chill and nice. She introduces the
Marilou and vice versa. I know who they are already, they are the cool kids. Ev
naturally knows the cool kids.

op her. I just didn't expect the cool kids to be so normal.

"And did you make Donnie cry?" Lionel, a tall boy with alpha blc
honest wild blond hair, asks Aurelia with a grin.

"She absolutely did," Jazz chuckles.

it when "Oh, rich coming from the girl who insulted his dick," Aurelia grins
way he They all laugh.

Aurelia's friends are surprisingly friendly. I notice that Lionel is th
l up for guy with alpha blood. The others are all betas, just like Jazz and me. A
girl, the twin sister of the guy Marilou has a little crush on... she's an
It seems they all grew up together and have been friends since p
ou were school.

Marilou and I instantly hit it off with the twins, while Jazz seems
mostly along well with the guys. After lunch, they invite us to join their huge
in two weeks. Apparently, it's a major event for the teens of the pa
they are allowed to invite their friends to it too.

at's not "I'll ask my brother, but I'm sure he's okay with it," Jazz

"Silverlake is an allied pack, and I know there are a lot of kids from
y." She Blood joining the party."

and you Marilou smiles. "I'll ask my Luna."

Aurelia looks at her, surprised. "You..." she pauses. "You have
else to ask?" she finally asks, as subtle as you can ask someone if t
orphaned.

1 break. “My parents died when I was young,” she tells them. “An older lady cult forpack took care of me. She’s like a mom and granny in one person, m to usokay, really. She wasn’t allowed to adopt me though, because... well everyoneknow the story about my previous alpha.”

They all nod. I know that Aurelia was even part of the battle. She with the advanced warriors back then, now she’s training with the god andShe’s a living legend in our school.

“So, you have to ask the formal way,” Aurelia’s friend Nox mu doesn’t talk much at all, he’s rather quiet, a bit dark and gloomy, seems like a good guy.

“Yes.”

he only He nods his understanding. “It’s the same for me. I can sympathize And theannoying sometimes.”

omega. Marilou giggles. “Yes, but Luna Annalise is so nice to me. I can primarycome to her when I have any problems. She will always listen to me.”

Jazz beams. “Goddess, I almost forgot! I’ll meet her today. I’m so e s to getDo you guys know her?”

bonfire “Of course, they know her,” Aurelia laughs. “She’s my brother’s m ick andwife, after all.”

Jazz facepalms. “Right. I forgot.”

beams. “She’s pretty dope,” Lionel states in a matter-of-fact tone. “S 1 Moonsneaking out once and didn’t even bust us.”

“We got really lucky that time,” Aurelia admits. “We were in a rel phase back then and got into trouble all the time. We’d been in some no onepreviously. Had she told on us, my father would have been so pissed.”

hey are “Alpha Elden is always fair in his punishments though,” Nox says e

The twins grin. “Nox kisses the ground Alpha Elden walks on,” Te

y of the male twin, teases.

so I'm "He spared Nox's life, that's why," Lionel agrees while rolling his eyes. The others tease him a bit more. Only Aurelia smiles happily. She smiles like the fact that Nox is so loyal to her father and family. In her previous fight that's indeed something good. Their talk surprises me though... do elites originally betray the pack? He's still around though, and he has friends. He's even friends with the Alpha's daughter.

ses. He "Maybe there is hope for me too, in terms of forgiveness.

but he "After school, we head straight to Red Claw. We take the bus and reach the pack house in about an hour. Marilou shows us around. Both Jazz and I am in awe, the pack ground is huge and beautiful. I think they have over 150 members. Marilou leads us to meet her luna's beta first. It's surprising to discover that their hierarchy works a bit differently. Lycan alphas have always had more than one beta because of their strength and power, and their lunas have their own betas at their sides too.

excited. "Hello girls, I'm Ella," the luna's beta greets us with a smile. She has a short pixie cut and looks fearless and cool. "You must be Valerie and Marilou told us you were coming. You need to add your names to the register. It's just a formality. Our Luna knows who you both are." She leads us to look at Marilou. "Luna Annalise wants to meet you girls for tea and I'll see you later this afternoon."

Marilou flushes happily while Jazz is rendered speechless. A beta's afternoon tea date with the luna is not usual. I'm feeling a bit worried for obvious reasons, but it's time to toughen up a bit. Time to face Anna and deal with what my sister did.

venly. Ella notes our excitement. "But get your homework done first," she says sternly, the "Or I'll tell on you."

“Of course, Beta Ella,” Marilou beams before tugging us along.

“This day is crazy,” I mutter toward Jazz.

“No kidding,” she agrees. “First, Aurelia saves our butts, drags us to position, and invites us to that infamous bonfire, and now we are here, and later I’d like to drink tea with the luna. Someone pinch me to wake me up.”

“You aren’t sleeping,” Marilou says, radiating pride from seeing me stunned by Red Claw’s beauty and size. She introduces Renata to her adoptive granny. The elderly woman is super kind, with a hint of fire in her eyes. She feeds us sandwiches, cookies, and hot chocolate before shoving us into the kitchen.

Marilou lives with Renata in a cottage, so we head there for hours. We get a bit of work done, spending most of our time gossiping instead. It still feels so surreal for me to have friends like Jazz and Marilou, to be able to sit with them and chat and laugh. I never thought I’d ever experience that because of my weak health and then because of Lauren’s actions. But she has to know everything about me and accept me for who I am.

Eventually, we start talking about our favorite crushes. “Terry is so cute,” Marilou giggles.

“He was the male twin, right?” Jazz wants to know. “I’m so bad at names.”

I nod toward her. “Yes, that’s him. He’s sweet.”

“What’s your type, Jazz?”

“Well,” Jazz smiles nervously. “I’m not sure yet, but I’m really into Scarlett Johansson. You know... the actress? There is something so special about her.”

Marilou blinks. I can see the wheels in her head turn as she connects the dots. Apparently, she never heard any rumors, or she heard them yet :

them. After taking a second to digest this new information, she nods like them pretty and athletic,” she deadpans.

o lunch, Jazz and I chuckle.

we get “Beta Ella is hot too,” Jazz admits. “And I have the biggest girl c your Luna, just so you know. I’m already fangirling at the fact that g us so have tea with her later.”

us, her “And you, Val?” Marilou wants to know. “What’s your type?”

in her. “I like tall guys,” I admit. “Maybe because I’m so scrawny and we s out of should be strong but not too bulky.”

“A shoulder to lean on,” Jazz teases, and we all burst into giggles ag network. “Just not too alpha,” Marilou mutters.

stead. It “Alphas are hot though. Alpha Liam is... yummy,” I muse, and we able to again.

nce this “As long as none of you hits it off with Don, I’m alright,” Jazz grins at these Marilou and I look at each other and grimace. “No, thank you,” I mu

“I don’t even want to know how many places he already put his o cute,” Marilou curls her nose.

Jazz and I burst into laughter at her comment. It’s rare for her ad with something like that, but it’s hilarious and totally true.

“Maybe you will hit it off with Terry during the bonfire?” Jazz mus

We gossip and chat a bit longer before getting some more worl

Eventually, it’s time to meet the luna for tea and cake. Beta Ella pick lly into together with her mate, Beta Dante. We’re invited into the private hot and room, normally reserved for special guests of the alpha and luna.

Luna Annalise is waiting for us along with Gamma Jun. “I hope ects the hungry,” she smiles warmly at us.

ignored I expect Jazz to say something, but she’s so starstruck she jus

3. “You staring at the Luna. So, I take over and bow my head politely. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“Don’t mention it,” she chuckles. “Come, Valerie. You have to tell us how your parents are doing. My dad told me that he’s training the tee we will your father?”

I’m in awe that she even knows that. Which means she also knows my name. She knows who I am and doesn’t mind. Suddenly, all the tension and awkwardness is gone, and I can just smile at her happily.

Marilou nudges Jazz. “This is Jazz, by the way. She’s normally really shy.”

“Oh,” Luna Annalise beams. “I’ve heard about you. A little birdie told me you stood up to some bullies today! I wish I could have seen it,” she says.

“Me too,” Ella grins. “But I bet it wasn’t as cool as when you threw a can of pineapple at a dude who harassed me and accidentally hit him in the face with it. He got a huge bruise from it and was so scared of you that he avoided us from then on. He didn’t want to admit that a girl hit him and got away with it, and he got detention.”

Beta Dante raises his brows. “Why am I only hearing about this now?” Jazz suddenly wakes up from her daze and smiles broadly. “I’d love to hear more about this too.”

“Anything else you want to know about?” Beta Ella teases. “Now it’s your chance.”

“No, we shouldn’t...” I stutter.

“You absolutely should,” Luna Annalise says in amusement. “I can tell you’re all bursting with curiosity.”

“I always wondered how you and Alpha Liam met,” Marilou says. “There are a lot of rumors, so...”

you for “Oh, and I heard you are friends with a human,” Jazz muses. “That like an interesting story too.”

tell me Ella looks at the Luna with amusement. “Now even Dave is famous. ns with “The marriage proposal,” I hear myself say.

“Oh yes,” Marilou beams.

s who I Luna Annalise happily answers all of our questions and even w und fearknow some things about us. She seems to be genuinely interested in w do and what we have planned for the future. At one point, the Alpha not thiscomes to meet us—or steal some cake, as the Luna puts it. He reall imposing guy, his alpha aura easily dominating the room. He look told mescary, but he’s nice to us. “We are just here for some cake,” his Beta uses. confirms our suspicion.

ew that “Right,” Beta Ella retorts dryly. “For the cake. And here I thoug 1 in thecame because you wanted to see us.”

that he Beta Dante tilts his head. “That was a motivational factor,” he admit , so we Alpha Liam slips an arm around his Luna’s waist and kisses the side head. Aw, they are so cute. My heart melts at seeing them. He’s such /?” strong guy; scary, and with those fierce blue eyes. But he’s so sweet love towoman he loves.

One day, I want someone to look at me like he looks at her.

’s your We continue to chat all afternoon until Luna Annalise suddenly fall: “Is everything alright?” Gamma Jun asks worriedly.

“I’m sorry, I’m not feeling so well,” she mutters. “Give me a mom can seebe back in a minute, girls.”

When Gamma Jun gets up to follow her, Beta Ella shakes her head shyly.go, she’s not feeling well recently. I’ll check on her, you stay with the She grins at us. “Don’t mess with him too much.”

sounds We giggle, seeing the look of slight panic on his face.

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We giggle, seeing the look of slight panic on his face.

THE BLACK&WHITE

MARIUS

To say things are awkward between my family and me would be an understatement, but I'm used to it by now. I have a talent for stirring awkward situations. Unfortunately, Cyrus is still MIA, which isn't helping either. At least this time I can feel his presence. He just doesn't talk to me. I'm unsure if he's not talking because he doesn't want to, or because he can't. The first option would be worrying because although he's been nice to me before, the rift between us was never this big. The second option, however, would be even more unsettling.

I feel another wave of dizziness overcome me, making me sit down on the benches. I hold my head between my hands. Why am I like this?

No one will ever love you.

The words ring in my mind, cold and cruel, making me wince. My memory feels fresh, as if it happened yesterday. Fuck it, I groan. It's long ago! Get out of my mind!

“Hello, sunny boy—”

I jump up to my feet, spinning around.

“Goddess, Marius, it’s just me,” Aryanna looks at me in surprise.

“Sorry, I was just... thinking about something,” I say, trying to sound composed and aloof.

“No problem,” she smiles. “Good, I found you. Since you’re still alive, you can come with me tonight.”

“What?”

“I said since Liam didn’t beat you or kill you, you seem fit enough to accompany me on a mission,” she deadpans. “Or am I wrong?”

I feel a bit embarrassed by her witnessing my low moment before she acts as if nothing happened. In a weird way, she probably even understands why I reacted the way I did with her scary psychic abilities. This is a huge relief, however, she didn’t go out of her way to talk to me like she has done in the past. She probably thinks she’s annoying me. Ella has always kept her distance from me. As for Dante... that one hurts a bit, I have to admit. He hasn’t said anything about what happened, but he’s cold and distant, choosing to ignore me for the most part.

It's not like I don't understand why. Ella is his second chance mate after the first one died. He won't just let someone insult her or their relationship, even the alpha's brother.

“Hey, you still with me?” Aryanna’s voice reaches me again.

“Yeah, sorry. So, what did you want, Ari?”

“You’re coming with me tonight,” she grins. “I need a date. But do

ce. The the wrong idea, you're not my type at all. Too dramatic and gloomy was so cheerful guys and girls."

"Very funny." I roll my eyes. "How come you chose me? I thought wouldn't allow me on a mission after everything that happened."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, he wasn't happy, but we don't have many believable options. Jun is not twenty-one yet, and Dante doesn't fit the sound I'm heading to."

I look at her thoughtfully. "How come you aren't mad at me?"
ve, you "I'm mad," she says earnestly. "Dante and Liam are my best friends. Annie is my beloved Luna. So, I'm definitely mad. I'm just not as mad as Liam and Dante, and Ella. That's the difference."

ough to "And Jun," I add.

"Yes, your list is pretty long."

. Annie She isn't holding back, like usual.

rstands She looks at me. "Let me guess. You didn't apologize?"

s time, I shrug.

before. "Thought not. You never do, you never did. However, tonight I need distance. She pauses and grins. "That came out wrong. Cross out the last sentence, please."

o ignore I swallow down all the things I want to say to her and instead seem to be being professional. "Where are we going and why?"

after his "Clubbing. Dress casual and sexy. We are going to hit on some witch."

up. Not A club. Goodness, exactly the place I don't want to be. Before I met her and the stupid mate bond hit me, I liked going out for drinks and going to clubs. Clubs are always overcrowded. Neither Cyrus nor I like them. However, Aryanna asked for help, so I can't let her down. And I can't

on't get Liam down again. Goddess! I'm getting whiplash from all of

7. I like contradictory emotions and thoughts. But fuck, the way Liam looked yesterday when I left his office really imprinted on my mind.

at Liam We got along so well as kids, then we just... grew apart, I guess.

matter how bad things were, Liam always had my back in front of my other parents. The least I could do is go clubbing with Aryanna to finish the clubwitches.



ls. And

mad as

CELINE

I'm in the middle of going through the reports Elias' tracker team after rechecking the borders when there is a knock at the door. "Yes?"

"We're going out."

I look up in surprise when Harmony bursts into my office. "I can't do you." "got too much to do."

entence "Celine," Harmony looks at me through her honest eyes. "You've

working so much recently, and it's Friday evening. Let's hit the club

ttle for haven't been there in forever. Just us girls. Well, and Garret and Elias

guess we can take Marcel along too. This means it's not just us girls,

hes." going to be fun."

Celine I contemplate her offer, not sure what to say. I do want to go with

rls, but but at the same time, I don't. Ever since Marius happened, I don't f

much. doing anything at all. Everything feels like a struggle.

an't let "I'll make sure we get some margaritas," she lures me in. "And 'Sex

f these Beach.' Or do you prefer the 'Bend Over Shirley'?"

I at me I snort. “They do not have such a cocktail.”

“They absolutely do. I checked the cocktail menu beforehand. But no chucks. “‘Cum in my Panties,’ anyone?”

of my “No way!”

d some “Yup,” she smiles slightly. “I told Garret, and he was totally sold. That’s why the guys want to come too.”

“And here I was wondering how you got Elias to tag along.” I chuckle at her amusement. “But if Garret is so into it... There’s no way Elias let him do his own.”

Harmony gives me a devilish smile. Oh, she knows how to convince me. She gets serious again. “Listen, Celine. You’re my alpha and my best friend, and I love you as both. I think you’re fantastic. But you need a break occasionally to be at full strength and gather your senses.”

I sigh. “Alright, you convinced me.”

“Awesome! Get dressed. We’ll meet in half an hour. Elias promised, I’ve would drive us this time.”

“Half an hour?” I’m amused. “You have quite some trust in my ability to get ready. Where are we heading to?”

“Black&White,” she says.

“Okay, so it’s ‘less class, more sass,’” I joke half-heartedly.

but it’s Harmony grins. “They should print that on their t-shirts. I was going to say ‘take a spin, show some skin,’ but I like yours better.”

h them, I manage to get ready in half an hour. It helps that the club is more of an underground club, so it’s honestly not that complicated to dress for.

eel like I threw on a pair of black skinny jeans and a mesh top over a crop top.

κ on the I did some smoky eye makeup. I normally don’t show a lot of skin, but

like today, I want to be a bit more daring.

Harmony gives me the thumbs up when she sees me, and I can
d,” sheguys looking at me with wide eyes. Marcel even blushes a bit. Alrig
seems to be the right outfit.

“You better get us some really good drinks,” I mutter when I slide
d on it.backseat next to Harmony, and Elias drives off.

“Don’t worry, Alpha,” Garret grins. “Their menu is legendary.”
ickle in Elias grunts something inaudible. He’s only joining us to be the wa
n go onit seems. He has always preferred a beer in his favorite bar over going
club.

nce me. B&W is not what one would call a classy club. It’s dark and lo
: friend,looks shabby. That’s probably why it’s such a hipster place. There
a breakother thing about it ... it’s for everyone but humans. To the human e
club is invisible. That’s what makes it so appealing.

When we step down, my gift kicks in, as usual. Within secon
ised heestimated the number of individuals here, their potential strengths,
which species they belong. I know that none of them are allies of ou
ility tothere’s also no one from rival packs or covens. I take note of the em
exits and any other potential routes of escape, including doors lea
other rooms, plus the overall structure of the room. “It’s safe for now
Harmony and Garret.

ing for They both nod in relief. The other two look a little confused, but do
what I mean.

re of an “And there goes my hope to leave early,” Elias sighs.

: I just Harmony chuckles. “Don’t worry, you might just have fun.”

and put “Yeah...” he says without much conviction.

it I feel Garret seems to be loving it, though, and heads to the bar to get t
round. Meanwhile, Marcel looks around in awe.

see the “Your first time here?” Harmony asks him.

ght, this He nods. “I just heard about it. And Jazz told me that she wants to
here with her friends when she turns twenty-one.” He grins. “Now that
into theseen it, I’ll try to prevent it.”

“Aw,” Harmony mock sympathizes. “Look how cute and hypocritical
are,”

tchdog, Marcel flushes. “She’s my sister; I have to protect her.”

g into a “Yes, of course,” Elias mutters in annoyance. He seems to be questioning
his life choices right now. “Meanwhile, you can party here.”

ud and Once Garret returns with our drinks, Elias’ expression darkens
is one “There are only alcoholic cocktails. I’m driving, Garret.”

ye, this “Oh right,” Garret blinks. “I forgot. I’ll get you something else.”

“You don’t need to. I’ll head out and go to the sushi restaurant around
ls, I’vecorner while you guys party,” Elias offers.

and to “No way,” Garret makes huge puppy eyes at him. “You need to dance
urs, butme here at least once.”

ergency “Good grief,” Elias groans.

ding to “So, who’s here?” Marcel asks curiously, skillfully shifting the topic
;” I tell I take a sip of my Mai Tai while I consider. Wow, that’s strong. “

wolves, obviously, and a bunch of witches. Pretty sure I also saw someone
on’t ask “Everyone together in one place?”

“Yes,” I nod. “This is neutral territory. Vampires can visit too.”

“You’re kidding me!? Years upon years of treaty discussions, meaning
there’s a club where everyone can come and go freely, and no one
anyone else?”

he first “Life’s weird like that,” Harmony chuckles. She salutes me with her
before taking a sip. During the next couple of hours, we down a few

of drinks, with Garret and Marcel ensuring that our glasses stay full. It's a little bit of a comedown for me to get drunk, being an alpha. Harmony, Marcel, and I hit the dance floor, using each other as a buffer against unwanted attention. Even Elias is a little bit of a flirt.

Garret manages to convince Elias to dance with him. Elias indulges himself in a few casual looks noticeably relieved when Garret lets him go off to sit next to Danica to have sushi.

"Don't drink too much, please, Garret," Elias begs before he questions me. "Promise me?"

Garret nods. "Don't worry, I'll be careful."

It's a bit of a tease. Harmony and Marcel tease him a little, but as usual, Garret is so carefree and carelessly natured toward his friends that he just laughs it off. I let my eyes wander around the room casually. Suddenly, I can feel Danica stirring in my mind.

And the... No way... it's not possible...

I smell him before I see him. Of all the places in town, he has to be here... it seems like the Moon Goddess is really playing with us. I wonder how he got here without ever meeting my mate, and now that I know who he is, I can find him everywhere. He has this intoxicating scent of coffee, sandalwood, and vanilla. It's musky yet fresh at the same time.

There's no denying it. Once I've seen him, I can barely move my eyes away. Even if we were to be mates, I would consider him beautiful. Despite being an alpha, he's not bulky and rugged. He has soft, even features and long hair that he always ties back in a bun. It's a look I normally find attractive, but boy, does he pull it off. He's also sporting a beard that's perfectly trimmed, and it makes him look even hotter. He's wearing black jeans and a plain white, long-sleeved shirt. The outfit is simple and effective.

He's with Aryanna, Liam's beta. She immediately heads toward a group of

takes a girl she must know, while Marius mingles in the crowd. I can see a few girls instantly approaching him, giggling, and flirting. He's friendly with them, usually smiles and flirty glances. He must have said something funny because they all laugh. My chest hurts so much seeing him smile at the girls. I can't breathe.

Why is it that he can be so nice to others but doesn't have even one word of love for me?

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Why is it that he can be so nice to others but doesn't have even one ounce of love for me?

BATTLE OF MATES

MARIUS

I follow Aryanna into the club downstairs. She's wearing jeans, a top looks like a glitter bomb exploded on it. Once downstairs, I go to the bar to order our drinks while Aryana targets a group of young women. They all laugh and hug like they are best friends. I see her pulling one girl towards the dance floor, they seem to be pretty and a bit flirty. I know Ari doesn't date seriously, she's waiting for her destined mate and doesn't want her future mate to feel like there is no burnt ground to walk on.

I'm here for a reason too. Aryanna wants me to mingle with the crowd a bit and gather any intel on a witch possibly going astray, someone rumored to be working with a shady group. I will down my dislike of crowds, try

ignore those attempting to grope and touch me, and head towards a group of witches that I know are checking me out.

I ignore the rising disgust at having them too close to me, rubbing their bodies against me or touching me in any way. Ugh.

This is important. For once, I need to focus and do the job I came here for.

I flirt with the witches, making them feel like they have my undivided attention. I'm actually a bit surprised how little effort it took to get them talking.

Things are going well, but then I feel it.

Cyrus starts stirring in my mind, his senses on alert suddenly. There is one thing that can trigger his response like that.

It's not possible. No way. She can't be here!?! What the fuck is the Goddess thinking, throwing us together all the time? This is a fancy underground club, not a place Celine frequents. Not that I know her name and her

head to shit.

I look around, trying not to draw too much attention to myself. There is one woman here who is by far the most graceful. Classy and smart, without being snobbish. She compares to her.

I groan. Fuck, what am I even thinking?

I try to will my thoughts away, but suddenly the room feels even more suffocating than before, like the walls are getting closer to me. Oh no, no... My mind starts to spin. I'm an alpha's son, crowded rooms shouldn't bother me.

No one will ever love you.

"Stop it," I mutter as if it will truly stop my memories and thoughts.

roup of spiraling.

No one will—

ing their “I know,” I hiss.

To stop my destructive thoughts from flooding my mind, I look
re for. again. I notice how Celine leaves the room through a side door, an
divided attempt to flee from my thoughts, I follow her. Cyrus is pushing forward
at them much now it’s hard to control him. I’m not sure which one of us is
control anymore, him or me?

Exiting through the same door, I expect Celine to have left already
is only my surprise, she’s still here. She’s just leaning against the wall, her
towards the door. Cyrus takes control so fast I don’t have time to
e Moon properly. Grabbing her by the arm, Cyrus spins Celine around and p
reaking into him. She feels so warm against our chest. Fuck, she feels great.
r, but I For a split second, her expression is one of shock, but she recove
Celine places her hand on my shoulder and shoves me back with a str
didn’t know she possessed. Something in her eyes flashes before
ere she silver. She just let her wolf forward, and I’m surprised how effortless i
net, she Her wolf keeps staring at us. I can feel Cyrus going crazy in my
No one *Mate, mate, mate*, he repeats over and over again.

*Stop it, Cyrus. We can’t just assault her and force the mate bond
doesn’t want us.*

n more *You know what?* he yells at me. *She doesn’t want us because you r
please, for us! This is what you should have done when you first saw her! She
ouldn’t have wanted us then.*

With my entire remaining strength, I will Cyrus to the back of m
again, noting how he basically curls up there and shows me his back. C
ts from I let go of Celine instantly.

She looks at me thoughtfully. “Everything alright? Seems like you charming counterpart had control for a moment.”

Is she teasing me, or does she really deem Cyrus more likeable than I am? Goodness, why does she have to be so beautiful? She’s wearing her hair down tonight. It’s straight and looks almost golden. And she’s showing off her perfectly toned body in those tight jeans, and her freaking even impractically see-through. “I don’t want you,” I mutter more to myself than to her.

She laughs dryly, without any humor. “Yeah, I believe I received your back memo already. But thanks for the reminder.”

Her eyes darken before a flash of silver passes through them once she pulls her hair up. Other than that, her expression hasn’t changed. It’s so fucking hard to read what she thinks and feels. I’ve never met such a proud and stoic woman before. That’s so freaking annoying and hot at the same time.

Fuck, she’s hot.

I hate the mate bond.

Her lips... her freaking beautiful, perfect lips, and that scent of hers... even blame Cyrus anymore, I’m on autopilot. Without thinking, I find myself leaning forward and claiming her lips. She freezes before she pushes me away and punches me square on the jaw. I groan from the impact, my head spinning, sobering a bit. Shit, that hurt, but I deserved it.

“Just so we are clear,” she hisses. “Your wolf seeking my contact is not a good thing, but what gives you the right to touch me!? After all, I’ve been continuously reminded me every time we’ve seen each other that you want me?”

Yeah, even I know that wasn’t right. “Sorry.”

She stares at me, looking confused and bewildered. What? Be-

ir moreapologized or because I kissed her?

Celine breaks eye contact momentarily and sighs. She looks defeat
an me?this time, I've wanted to see her hurt, but now that she is, it doesn't m
ier hairfeel good like I'd expected. "You don't want me," she states. "At lea
ing offthe decency to stay away from me."

top is I nod dejectedly, watching her turn around and leave towards th
than toleading to the club. *And how was that better than what I did!?*
demands to know.

ed that *It wasn't*, I admit, carefully touching the spot beneath my left e
sensitive to the touch, and there is probably going to be one hell of a
e more.Good thing I have wolf healing and won't have to answer any qu
l to telltomorrow. However, I probably won't escape Aryanna's questions.

woman A glance at my phone screen tells me it's time to meet up with Arya
I head out. I don't want to go back in the club anyways. The fresh a
me sober up quickly while I reminisce about the evening's events. W
I thinking? Why did I have to make a move towards Celine like tha
. I can'teverything I've done to her?

myself I know I'm not a saint, but I'm not that bad of a person, normally.

ne back I take a deep breath. It's not important now, it doesn't change anythi
y mindwhat... I tried to kiss her. I probably still felt confused because of
previous actions. I was not being myself, definitely not.

t is one "Marius," Aryanna calls out as she approaches me. She looks lik
you'vehad a pretty good evening, judging by the smile on her face, at least or
u don'thas. She halts when she sees my face. "Goddess, Marius, are you alrigh

"Sure," I nod. "It's nothing. It's nothing. Someone took offense, is a

"You? Offensive? I don't believe it," she smirks. "Was it worth it? I
cause Iget some information?"

She probably thinks I got this in my search for information. She
ted. Allneed to know what really happened. Thankfully, I managed to do or
ake meright this evening and indeed heard something. “Rumor has it there is
st havecoven missing one of their witches lately and no one knows what happ
her.”

ie door “Great,” she beams. “I heard something similar. Do you know
' Cyruscoven?”

I smile and pull a card out of my pants pocket. One of the flir
ye. It'shanded it to me.

bruise. Aryanna grins. “Helps to be pretty, it seems.”

estions



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ir helps

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at, after

CELINE

When I return to the club, I feel... disoriented. Normally, encounte
Marius leave me hurt or angry, but this time I'm mostly freaking con
didn't mind his wolf seeking contact with me, and he didn't try to pus
ing. So, far. And if I'm honest with myself, part of me wanted to allow the cor
Cyrus's that Danica could have some peace of mind too. I never realized bef
e she's how much my bond with Marius messes her and Marius' wolf up too.

Danica told me how sweet his wolf is. His wolf wants us but can't h
ie of us and that's kinda... sad.

ht?” As for Marius suddenly kissing me, I don't get it. Was it because
ill.” dizzy from his wolf taking over? The contact felt good, so good it ma
Did you heart ache painfully from the loss even more. Why can't we ha

doesn't together? He repeats himself, over and over again, how he doesn't want to be a part of me wonders if he does so to convince himself and his work a small part of me.

ended to I hit him pretty hard, I think with a hint of guilt. Admittedly, part of me was paying him back for the weeks of heartache he's put me through, but I hate resorting to violence when there are other ways to solve a problem.

"Are you guys alright?" I ask once I reach my group again.

ty girls Marcel looks pretty spent, and Garret's even worse. Just Harmony and I still seem to be somewhat okay. Elias must have returned from his trip to the restaurant while I was outside and looks immensely annoyed... at Garret.

"Let's go," I say in a matter-of-fact tone. It's enough drama for an evening.

Thankfully, no one argues with me. In fact, Elias looks at me like a second coming, for finally ending this catastrophic evening. Harmony and I grab our bags while Elias shoves Marcel forward and throws one of his arms around his shoulder to support his weight. He still looks annoyed, probably because Garret got a tad more wasted than he promised he would be. "I really want to slap him," he grunts when we're outside, "But I'm afraid I won't remember it tomorrow."

h it too Harmony nudges him with her elbows. "Don't be so grumpy all the time."

ntact so "I'm not grumpy," he mutters. "Well, now I am. But normally..."

ore just Marcel opens his arms to the sky and beams a smile at the moon. "I will get more sex if you are less grumpy."

ave us, Harmony snorts while Elias throws Marcel a glare. "I'm getting more than enough sex, don't worry."

he felt "Moon Goddess," Marcel yells. "Provide Elias with lots of steamy sex to make my night."

ve this "Okay," I grab his arm and pull him along. "That's enough, or you're going to be a mess."

ant me, the one getting hit by Elias.”

If more “Thank you, Alpha,” he beams at me dotingly. “You’re so cool. M
from my previous pack was a dunce, but you’re smart, and tough, and
t of me and pretty. I’m so happy.”

h, but I Harmony giggles at my flustered face. I’m embarrassed, yet feelin
1. touched by the sentiment too. Everyone wants to be loved, I think,
alpha, I obviously want my people to follow me, but I also want them
y and I me and respect me because I’m good at what I’m doing and not beca
p to the scary.

ret. Elias shoves Garret into his car before freeing me from Marcel. H
vening, takes the back seat as well leaving me with the front passenger seat.

I’m the “The first one to vomit gets kicked out,” Elias huffs. “Unless it’s the
y and I or Beta.”

Garret’s “I don’t think the chances are high for me or Celine getting
pissed, Harmony says, amused.

ould. “I “Exactly,” Elias grumbles before driving off.

raid he He takes Marcel home first, and Harmony accompanies him to ma
he reaches his house. A very sleepy Jazz opens the door, probably l
time.” Marcel started singing to the moon. She laughs though, she’s such
sunny kid.

1. “You Afterward, Elias drops Harmony and me at the pack house. “We a
don’t worry,” I tell him.

ore than He nods with a smile. “I know.”

Harmony links our arms, and I nod toward Elias. “You and Garret g
sex and and get some sleep. It’s Saturday tomorrow, so take it slow.”

He nods thankfully.

ou’ll be Once they’ve driven off, Harmony turns to look at me. “Why don’t

to my apartment and have some tea,” she asks me softly. “To sober up a bit I alphaknew she’d noticed; she always notices. My encounter with Mar strong, shaken me up in too many ways. I was just lucky that the rest of ou was either too drunk or annoyed at the drunkards to realize.

I nod weakly. I can hardly keep it together anymore, and she probab and asit. The alpha suite is on the highest floor, the beta, and currently t to like gamma suites are on the floor below. That’s where we’re headin use I’m Harmony lives in this suite on her own. Once we’re inside, she switc the kettle before inspecting my knuckles. They’re already healing, armony obvious I punched someone. “What happened?”

“Made contact with a lycan’s face,” I answer evenly.

Alpha She stares at me in shock. “What?”

For a split second, I contemplate not telling her, shoving her asi ; sick,” telling her to mind her own business, but I can’t. She has been noth loyal and supportive of me, and I need to tell someone, or I’ll go cra concentration is already lacking, and I have both a pack to lead and ke sure problem to deal with. I need to get this out of my system to be able t because on the important things again. “It’s Marius.”

Even saying his name hurts.

For a moment, Harmony just looks at me confusedly before sh re fine, connecting the dots. I can see how her expression changes with the realization. “Goddess, Celine,” Harmony whispers. “Marius, is you The one who doesn’t want you?”

I nod.

“Shit. I... I don’t even know what to say. That’s why you kept it a Liam’s brother...”

“I can’t reject him, Harmony,” I can’t stop the tears burning in my

r up.” I wish I could, but imagine the political fiasco.”

ius has “Lord Elden and Lord Liam would understand.”

r group “Yes, but no one else would. I’m an alpha she-wolf; being a sl
weakens my position already. I can’t allow myself any weakne
ly feels mistakes. It would weaken my pack too. If he rejected me, it would be
empty as he would bear the consequences then. But if I reject my fated ma
g now. imagine what it could mean to the pack and me. The pack comes fi
ches on own feelings second.”

but it’s Harmony looks down sadly. “You’re right. It shouldn’t be that w
you’re definitely right. How is Danica taking it?”

“She has my back,” I smile at the thought of my wolf. “I... I thou
would push me toward him or that she would be weakened by the d
de, and but she’s not. He hurt her pride too.”

ing but “She’s an alpha wolf,” Harmony points out. “Maybe that’s why?”

zy. My “I don’t know. I’m still surprised she isn’t getting weaker by the dis
a witch I point out.

o focus “That’s interesting indeed. Maybe the mate bond is weak in itself?”

“No,” I shake my head, feeling bitter. “Believe me, it’s not. The hea
and the sorrow are real. It’s just that Danica shields me from going cra

e starts “And if you...” Harmony frowns, lost in her thoughts. “Find som
sudden replace him with?”

r mate? “What?”

“I mean, there is a reason Marius doesn’t tell anyone either. H
Liam’s wrath, and his father’s, and Annie’s. Rightfully so. He c
secret. himself whatever he wants, but he doesn’t want his family to think b
him. So, he won’t tell anyone. If you reject him and then take a man
eyes. “I

choice... wouldn't that be a solution? You could pretend it was the j along."

he-wolf "I could choose a partner," I mutter, bewildered. "I haven't even i sses or about that option."

e better, "I know this sounds out of place now, and you probably don't want ite, just about it after being treated like..." she pauses.

rst, my "Trash?"

"You deserve so much better," she huffs, anger flashing in her ey ay, but should kiss the floor you are walking on and be grateful for being m such a strong wolf and wonderful person. But it's his loss, not your ght she pauses. "What I'm saying is, once the heartbreak lessens... once y istance, open your heart to others again, why not allow yourself to look around

You are an alpha through and through. Men line up to be with you smiles. "Celine, you have a choice. And you have more than one choic stance," can go for a strong warrior to help you defend the pack, you can go fo to help you with strategy, a kind omega to be the luna of the pack Celine, you have so many options. I doubt Marius is aware of how irtbreak options you have."

zy."

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choice... wouldn't that be a solution? You could pretend it was the plan all along."

"I could choose a partner," I mutter, bewildered. "I haven't even thought about that option."

"I know this sounds out of place now, and you probably don't want to hear about it after being treated like..." she pauses.

"Trash?"

"You deserve so much better," she huffs, anger flashing in her eyes. "He should kiss the floor you are walking on and be grateful for being mated to such a strong wolf and wonderful person. But it's his loss, not yours." She pauses. "What I'm saying is, once the heartbreak lessens... once you can open your heart to others again, why not allow yourself to look around a bit? You are an alpha through and through. Men line up to be with you." She smiles. "Celine, you have a choice. And you have more than one choice! You can go for a strong warrior to help you defend the pack, you can go for a beta to help you with strategy, a kind omega to be the luna of the pack. Fuck, Celine, you have so many options. I doubt Marius is aware of how many options you have."

THE HEIRS TO SILVERLAKE

MARIUS

I've been haunted by the same nightmare for years. Yellow eyes staring at me. The look in them is one of malice and disgust. A menacing grin almost doesn't match the dispassionate voice, one devoid of any emotion.

No one will ever love you.

You are weak. Weak. Weak. Weak.

I'm weak.

My eyes snap open. Not again. It's been a while since I've had this nightmare. There is no fighting, no yelling. But still, there is this lingering sense of danger and threat that consumes my very essence, frightening and making it impossible to move out of sheer terror.

I crawl out of bed to grab a bottle of whisky, downing a few glasses dropping back onto the mattress. I don't normally drink alone, but I need it to sleep. I'm so drained. At least it will knock me out. The bruise—Celine's punch hasn't fully healed yet, and looks like it's going to last all night. That's way longer than my normal healing time. It should have long gone by now, especially considering I'm an alpha.

Eventually, the alcohol pulls me back into a deep, dreamless sleep that makes no difference. I wake up as tired as I was when I went to bed. However, I figure there's no use in trying to sleep anymore, and I drag myself out of bed to get ready for the day.

I'm earlier than usual for breakfast, and some of the others are already here. Aryanna is here, obviously happy that our little mission was a success along with Liam and Dante. Annie, Ella, and Jun are missing though that is surprising. Especially since Annie usually makes a point to eat with the rest of the pack. She thinks it makes her accessible and approachable and that considering the number of pack members normally hovering around her is probably right.

"Wow," Aryanna grins. "You look like shit, Mari."

I groan. "Thanks for the compliment."

She chuckles softly and hands me some coffee. "It's strong," she proclaims. Dante and Liam exchange a look between each other before Liam glances at me worriedly, but thankfully, he doesn't say anything.

When we were teens, Liam would come to me and ask what was going on. He'd want to know if he could help or if he'd done something to upset me. He didn't like that I was avoiding him. I'd cruelly push him away, saying mean and hurtful things on purpose in the hopes that he would stop bothering me if I was ok. Then one day, he did stop.

before I thought I would feel relieved, but now I realize that pushing him
at night, I just hurt more, and I have no one else to blame for it but myself.

From after breakfast, Aryanna and I head over to training. I might not look
like I can take all much at first glance, but I'm pretty strong and skilled. It comes naturally
to me because of my lycan alpha blood. I normally train under Liam, along with A
and the other elites. But the last few training sessions, I've felt my strength
waning, but it's weakening. I need to put a lot of effort into my training just to keep up
with the basic counterattacks.

Shit, why is this so difficult!?

I'm not sure if anyone noticed, but when I casually look around at
the end of training, I notice how Liam's gaze lingers on me. Why again do I
need to be my alpha? He knows me too well; sees too much of my
weakness, which is about rotten luck. Liam ends the training with some encouraging words,
and the rest know he's proud of his elites, they are fantastic. The other wolves from
the class gather around in a group to chat before they leave.

Liam links me. *A word, please.*

I sigh. Of course. I nod toward Aryanna. "See you later for lunch?"

"Yep." She nods and clasps my shoulders. "And I'm counting on you to
come with me when I visit the witches." She grins.

I nod and wait for her to leave before I approach my brother. He's
standing outside, leaning against the fence surrounding the huge park. The little
kids from the nursery are playing there at the moment, giggling and laughing.
Liam smiles as he watches them.

"Hey," I say, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He turns to look at me. "What's going on?" he inquires.

"What do you mean?"

"What is wrong with Cyrus?" he asks sharply.

n away How the fuck did he notice!?” “Cyrus?” I try to sound surprised but I thought I hid it better.

ook like “Your wolf is strong. I know that. What’s wrong with your connection, ally duehim?”

aryanna “I... I caught a stomach bug,” I lie. “And have trouble focusing strength isconnection.” I’m shocked myself at how real it sounds, at how skillful I’m careful of Liam not to touch me in any way though. Liam’s gaze detects lies when he touches someone.

Liam’s gaze softens. “Why are you here then? Go and take some rest, the endbrother.”

oes my “In battle, no one is going to consider if someone is sick,” I argue.

h. Talk “We are not in battle, though. Goodness, Marius, you don’t need words; I myself over training. If you’re sick, go to the infirmary and get some rest. Then go home and rest.”

He looks sincerely worried, and it makes me feel even guiltier. Liam can easily look through lies, but he doesn’t with me. He probably trusts me, but he thinks I wouldn’t just use such a stupid lie. “Lycans don’t get sick nor do you,” I point out weakly.

“Yes, they do,” he says. “It just doesn’t happen often. Maybe you caught the same bug as Annalise,” he muses, furrowing his brows even further. The kids looking even more worried.

ughing. “Annie is feeling sick?” I ask in shock. I didn’t even know. She’s been at a distance recently, and it makes my guilt grow that I didn’t notice. I realize that if she was avoiding me because of my attitude, I never even considered that there might be something wrong with her.

Liam reaches out his hand to touch my shoulder. I flinch back because I can’t touch me, instantly noticing the flash of hurt and shock in his eyes.

because I pull his hand back. “I didn’t plan on hitting you or anything.”

“I know,” I rub over my forehead. “Shit, I’m so jumpy at the moment.” He stares at me. “Did something happen? I mean, aside from you being sick?”

Why is he suddenly playing therapist with me? What happened to my Mr. Cold, distant and oblivious? Ever since Liam found his mate, he is suddenly in touch with his ‘sensitive side.’ Well, just because he found his happily ever after doesn’t mean I get to have mine. Some of us are just here to rest, broken to fix.



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CELINE

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I’m on my way to meet my friends at a sushi restaurant. It’s exactly the distraction I need after hearing that a witch is roaming my pack borders after my not-so-pleasant encounter with Marius. I’m ignoring the drama for now because I can’t even begin to deal with those emotions: does a witch want from Moon Blood? We are a normal-sized pack and there is nothing out of the ordinary with us—well aside from the fact that our alpha is a she-wolf with white fur.

Harmony insists on driving me, but when I ask her to join us, she declines and asks me to allow her to wait outside. She loves her sister dearly and would love to see her, we both know that, but she also knows this is not a family meeting but a meeting with my circle of friends. She

feel out of place there. I can definitely understand that, although I w
at.” have minded her joining us.

u being “Celine!” Dave is already waving at me the moment I step i
restaurant. I smile back at him instantly. Had someone told me two ye
o being that I would become friends with a human, I would have laughed. Lo
e, he’s long.

und his “Hi, Dave,” I pat his shoulder softly before turning to greet Finn.
just too Liam and Marius’ younger brother, the third-born son of Lord Elde
our age and started college shortly after Annie and Ella. Annie bef
him and brought him to the group, just like she did with me. Now that
about it, she kind of collected us all like stray puppies, a bunch of
souls, and gave us a place to belong.

“Looking good, Celine,” Finn grins. “Alpha rank suits you.”

Dave wiggles his eyebrows. “I always knew you were a powerful bi

I snort slightly at their words. “You are an alpha’s son too, Finn,”
ctly the out. After my talk with Harmony about my problems with Marius, I
ers and feel better about my situation. It helped to share my issues with son
Marius trust, in a way it was almost liberating. “A lycan on top of that.”

s. What “Yes, but I’m not sure if I have the drive to become a reigning alp
id there muses. He looks scary at first glance. His hair is dyed midnight bla
at their he’s covered in piercings and tattoos, but once you get to know hi
notice how caring, kind, and fun he actually is.

politely “I wouldn’t rule it out,” I muse. “Liam was supposed to becom
r Annie father’s successor, but he’s Alpha of Red Claw now. Lord Elden stil
ows this chosen a new successor.”

e would “Maybe,” Finn shrugs. “But Aurelia is making incredibly huge prog
a warrior. She’s fighting with the elites now.”

couldn't "Your sister?" Dave asks.

He nods. "She's turning eighteen soon, and she has some kickass
into the She's definitely made to be an alpha."

years ago "We'll see," I muse.

loud and "We'll see, what?" I can hear a voice behind me.

I turn slightly, noting that Annie and Ella managed to approach us
Finn is any of us noticing. Annie laughs at our surprised faces before
n. He's everyone. She just exudes warmth. I'm not surprised she was chosen
riended Moon Goddess to become the mate of such a powerful alpha like Liam.

I think "El!" Dave squeals and hugs Ella as well.

lonely "So, what will we see?" Annie asks curiously when she sits down
Dave and Ella.

"Who will become the next wolf leader of Silverriver," Dave says
tch." "Alpha," Finn corrects him, amused. "And it's Silverlake."

I point "Whatever," Dave shrugs with a grin. "Finny thinks he isn't su
indeed become alpha."

neone I "That's not what I said," Finn argues. "I said I wasn't sure if I h
drive and Aurelia might be better suited."

ha," he "I think you would both be good leaders," Annie says. "Aurelia is
ck, and the toughest fighters I know. And you are definitely a fantastic strategi
m, you "Hm," he hums. "I'm nothing compared to Liam."

"No one can compare to Liam," Annie points out. "And I don't s
ie your because he's my mate. I say it because everything about Liam scream
I hasn't He was literally destined to be an alpha, and there is no parallel unive
I can imagine where he would not be a leader of some kind."

gress as "You're right." I tilt my head, allowing her words to settle in. No
compare with Liam. He's one of a kind. He was destined to be an alp

like Annie was destined to be a luna. Things like this don't usually have as many gifts. Normally, young alphas grow into their roles and have to learn a lot. The same goes for lunas, who often don't even have time to prepare, they're just thrown into their roles blind. Liam and Annie are naturals; they were born to rule.

without “However,” Annie continues. “It doesn't mean that you or Aurelia aren't well suited to be leaders of your pack. I think you just don't see yourself in that role yet. That's the problem. You could do it though. You are a lycan alpha blood. So is Aurelia. You could both absolutely do it. The question is not if you can. It's do you want to?”

between Finn looks at her thoughtfully. “You're right,” he says. “I need to think about that for a bit longer.”

lazily. Hearing them talk about Finn's issues, I wish I could tell them more. But I can't, it's impossible. I don't want to put anyone in a compromised position. Finn and Annie, in particular, wouldn't be able to hide that from Liam, and I don't want any more drama in my life or in theirs.

have the “Marius would be the second oldest though, right?” Dave asks as if he's caught my thoughts.

one of I wince slightly at hearing his name but manage to keep a relaxed expression. “Years of practice at holding back my emotions come in handy. “The first child to a lycan alpha is said to be born blessed by the Moon God, which may explain that. It's said they are basically made to rule with a lot of strength. Powerful beast, and outstanding gifts.”

rise that Annie nods. “After Liam became alpha of a different pack, it raised a lot of difficulties for his parents.”

one can “Right,” Finn agrees. “My parents now need to find the most suitable alpha, just within us remaining siblings. Order of birth doesn't matter anymore.”

ppen... “So Marius is out of the running?” Dave wants to know.
ot. The “I think so,” Ella says in a matter-of-fact tone. She’s always pretty c
but areher opinion. “The way he is now, he isn’t suited to be alpha.”
born to “Why?” Dave asks.

“Oh, where do I start?” Ella deadpans. She must be fed up with
a aren’tthink. Marius is part of their pack after all, officially to help Liam, but
in thathis parents rather had hopes that Liam and Annie would be able to h
ycan ofwith whatever he’s battling. “He’s rude, careless, disrespectful, h
stion isfocus, and he’s a blatant womanizer. Well, at least he was until a few
ago. Haven’t seen him with a girl in months.” She pauses. “I don’t r
o thinkbe rude, and I don’t want to go too hard on him, but I had a horribl
once, which is why I think an alpha needs to have certain qualities.
1 aboutwerewolf packs would choose their heirs as carefully as lycans do.”
lifficult When she called him a womanizer, it hurt more than I expected
is fromknow it. I know he hasn’t saved himself for his mate, neither did I, b
been very careful with my sexual encounters. I just hope he did the sar
he justfact he hasn’t met anyone recently does set my mind at ease a bit.

Danica, however, is more hung up on the other things Ella mer
posture. *Wow, she grumbles. We got ourselves a real catch!*

irstborn *I’m sorry, Danica.*

less,” I *What for?*

ngth, a *I know you like Cyrus. I say carefully. I know Cyrus and you are
problem. Marius and I are.*

d some *Listen, we share a soul, Celine. And a man who doesn’t want yo
have me either,* she says in a matter-of-fact tone. *I’m strong. And so c
le alphaWe will get through this together.*

Annie sighs. “Marius has some issues we don’t know about. Ma

shouldn't judge too harshly," she points out. "True, maybe he could try direct input..." When Finn and Ella look at her with raised brows, she shrugs.

he could try a lot more, but for a split moment, when he agreed to join Claw, there was something in his eyes. Something determined and genuine. "Liam is just battling something, but unfortunately, he won't open up to us."

I think "He had a five-second moment?" Dave takes her hand and squeezes. "You are so sweet, baby."

as zero Ella doesn't say anything for a while, but I can easily notice her furrowed brows. She loves Annie dearly, like a sister, and since Annie became Luna, she's even more protective of her. I don't even want to know how she argues with Marius for being a jerk to their Luna. "You think, he is just battling something?"

"I'm certain," Annie smiles. "It's the reason Liam is so patient with it to. I Ella sighs and turns to Finn now. "In all seriousness, Finn, does Marius want to become alpha?"

ne. The Finn shrugs. "He claims he isn't interested, said it's too much responsibility. But Annie is right, it's hard to say what he really feels. I know?"

Ella sighs. "I know."

"Okay, enough family drama," Dave claps his hands. "Let's eat!"

Annie nods her agreement. "Say, Celine, is Harmony with you?"

Isn't the "Yes, she's waiting outside. She didn't want to join us."

"I'll say hello later," Annie beams.

u can't Finn rolls his eyes. "I guess our whole entourage outside can join you regularly too. We can just book an extra table for them next time."

I chuckle. "You came with your beta too?"

Maybe we "Obviously, Anders wouldn't let me come here on my own." Finn

any more, "But let's not talk about pack businesses anymore."

"Okay, "Yeah, instead, let's be impressed about Annie and Celine finishing Redcollege so fast," Ella smiles proudly.

Good. He "How did you even do that?" Finn shakes his head. "With the amount of work you've had to do, it's unbelievable you managed to graduate six months earlier than usual."

"We both did some classes online," I point out. "It spared us a lot of crowded driving to college. And I pulled a few all-nighters."

She smiles at me. "Same here," Annie chuckles. "But don't tell Liam." She smiles teasingly at Ella. "Or my Beta."

"Very funny," Ella mutters.

"My father pulled a few strings, and Liam's family did the same for him." It's not that they handed us the degree or something like that. But they allowed us to hand in essays and papers earlier, attend online, and take a summer vacation for special credits. It might be a bit questionable, but given the workload we both face, it would have been impossible to continue as a full-time student any longer.

"Annie, say, where is your other watchdog?" Dave asks. "I only see Ella roll her eyes and throw her tissue at him."

"Oh honey," Dave inspects her in awe. "These are some nice muscles you've got."

Ella wiggles her eyebrows. "Cool, huh?"

"Let me touch them, please, please, please." He makes puppy eyes at her, meeting her grinning when she gives in. She flexes her upper arm, allowing him to touch her biceps.

Honestly, I have to admit she's made some crazy progress in a very short time. Annie seems to think the same because she smiles proudly. "Ella"

a lot,” she explains, full of pride for her Beta. “She’s our second strongest female warrior after Aryanna. Liam said she’s a natural.”

Ella blushes a bit but looks happy about the praise.

“So, where is your other bodyguard?” Dave asks once more to Annie.

She smiles knowingly. “Jun is waiting outside. He didn’t want to be late for our friends meeting, just like Harmony and Anders.”

“Oh, really?” Dave perks up. He tilts his head. “If you excuse me, I need to go outside for a moment to have a cigarette.”

“You don’t even smoke,” Finn says dryly.

“How do you know?” Dave smirks. “I’m a mystery, you know.”

“Yes,” Annie says with a chuckle. “You are a chasm full of secrets.”

He grins. “Okay, see you in a moment.”

“Are you really going to sneak out right now to make out with you?”

Finn deadpans. “Subtlety has a new name. But it’s not Dave.”

We all laugh. Dave chuckles too before he heads out to look for Jun.

“I told me a while ago they only date casually. Jun hasn’t found his mate yet,” Ella says and doesn’t want to hurt Dave by going too deep into a relationship with her.

An evening out with friends has helped my soul to calm down a bit. There are many bonds in this world I’ve noticed, aside from the bond with our mates. There is the bond we have with our families and the bond we have with our friends. Both of which can be a huge support system when you need it. At her, I’ve just noticed that, in my case, both of these bonds are very strong. The bond with my friends is strong enough to dull the pain coming from my fractured mate but not enough to dull the pain completely.

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THE RACE

CELINE

I don't know much about witches or other creatures. If I'm being with myself, it never occurred to me that I should maybe read up on them to educate myself more.

"That's not your shortcoming, but mine," my father tells me while spreading jam on his bread. We habitually eat breakfast together on mornings, and I just finished sharing my thoughts with him, wanting to know what he thinks about it all. "It never occurred to me either."

"But these people inhabit the planet just like we do," I muse. "They have their own laws and social structures. Wouldn't it be important to know about them?"

"Absolutely," he agrees. "I really like your approach."

I nod my thanks as he hands me the basket of bread. "What do you think?"

“I prepared you to be alpha the best that I could. You’ve take
learned so much, but you are still open to learning new things. You le
pack in your own way, and I appreciate that.” He smiles brightly. “I
only I had a bunch of grandchildren roaming around the pack house...”

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, amused. “It was going so well up until yo
sentence.”

“Sorry,” he chuckles, and I’m happy he does laugh. For years he
grief-stricken that leading the pack, along with being a single fathe
almost every bit of strength he had. Now he seems to be slowly l
“You’re right, you still have plenty of time.”

I smile thankfully at him. He has never pushed me to find a mate. N
once. I know for other alphas, it’s an issue, but my father never inva
privacy. Maybe it’s because he lost his mate. The reason doesn’t
though, I’m just glad he doesn’t push—one less thing to stress about. I
honest a partner and starting a family should be something pleasant to
on them something others stress one into. “Dad, do we have hybrids in the p
shift our conversation back to the original topic. “I’m feeling embarrass
while even asking because I feel that’s something I should definitely
Sunday already.”

He blinks. “You think the weird movements around our bord
because of a potential hybrid in the pack?”

I shrug. “Could be.”

He tilts his head. “In this generation, we haven’t,” he says. “I do
however, that a few pack members around the time of my grandfat
mean?” mates that weren’t wolves.”

I stare at him. “Really?”

“Yes, but as I said, that’s at least two generations ago. During my re

over, the mates were werewolves.”

“And two humans,” I add.

“Right,” he nods.

“And if one is still considered a hybrid after more than one generation? What if our last task. “What if... let’s say... witches have a different stance? What if we deem someone a hybrid, even if only their grandmother was a witch? What if their powers manage to pass down more than one generation? The question goes for other species too.”

Dad was just about to sip from his coffee; now, however, he put his head back down in contemplation. “Goodness,” he mutters.

We stare at each other for a moment, neither one of us saying a word. Finally, I take a deep breath. “I need to look into this.”

He nods, eyes wide. “Give Alpha Liam a call or his father, Alpha Elden. Finding Silverlake’s library in Elden’s territory is huge. The lycans keep in touch with other species far more than us werewolves, they are bound to know more. “Good thing Liam and Alpha Elden are both allies,” I mutter.

“That’s your doing,” he says evenly.

“No, you were alpha back then, and—”

“No, Celine,” he says seriously. “You were the one who brought justice to Annalise. You didn’t rest until you knew what Lauren had done. You stood up despite me and found spies within the Red Claw pack who were willing to help you free Liam and save their whole pack. The fact that Liam sees you as a friend, and that Elden agreed on an alliance is your doing, and yours alone. I blush slightly. It’s rare for him to praise me like this... I mean, he never praised me before, but this time he’s commended my actions as an alpha and what I’ve done for our pack. It means so much to me.

“Sign, all

you,” I say sincerely. “But I was only able to do it because you’ve allowed me to make my own decisions.”

“That’s what every parent should do,” he chuckles. “I’m glad to see you’re doing it now, aren’t you?” I smile again, he points out.

“Wasn’t I smiling recently?” I ask, carefully so.

“You were,” he says evenly. “It wasn’t real though. As your father, I can’t tell. Was there something on your mind?”

“There was,” I admit. “There still is, but I can handle it better now. Since my talk with Harmony, I feel like I was able to let some of the pressure go.”

“It’s still there. Marius is still my mate, and nothing about the situation has changed, but accepting it for what it is has helped. Even without Marius wanting me, I still have other things going for me. I have a lovely coven, Elden, friends and a fantastic beta; I have a group of warriors around me which I’m starting to see as really close friends; I have my pack and the support of my people; and of course, I have my father.”

“That’s a lot. Other people have far less and are still thankful for what they have. I’m truly privileged.”

“Listen, Celine,” Dad says quietly. “I know I wasn’t always there for you when you were growing up.”

“Dad, come on, don’t go there. You lost your mate and child.”

“Yes, and you lost a mother and a brother. I shouldn’t have left you alone to grieve. You needed me to be there for you,” he argues.

“You cared for me,” I say with emphasis. “Sure, I might have felt lonely at times, and growing up without my mom was hard. But whenever I needed you, you tried to listen. You didn’t neglect me or abuse me like other parents do when they lose their mate. You’ve held this pack and yourself together.”

“You did the best you could do at that time.”

allowed “I still could have done better.”

“That goes for most people,” I say evenly. “Everyone comes to see you where they could have done better.”

He blinks at me. “That was a wise thing to say.”

“Right, and now enough with the difficult talk. That’s an alpha’s o I could joke lamely.

He laughs slightly. “Alright. Then tell me some gossip instead. I’m .” Ever out of touch.” His lips tug in amusement. “I heard Garret and Elias ain go. having a little crisis. And what’s this about little Valerie befriending M ion has confident and wild sister? Valerie’s dad was telling me all about it dur y mate weekly poker meeting. Oh, Brian was there too and said that Anni ircle off feeling well recently. What’s up with that? Come on, share some drar who I’m your old man.”

t of my I chuckle in amusement, deciding I can spare half an hour before

Liam and Alpha Elden to see if they can help me find the information I at they Two hours later, though, I find myself at Silverlake pack grounds t with Harmony and Elias. I called Liam first to ask his opinion, and for you me directly to his father. And well, now we are here to roam the libr talk to Alpha Elden in person.

Elden gives us the honor of greeting us in person. I consider Liam a u alone which is why I sometimes forget how scary and strong he is, but eye

with his father, Elden, I’m reminded that this is a family of royal lycan onely at “A pleasant surprise to see you both,” Elden greets Harmony and ame to shake our hands before nodding towards Elias. “And this young man?

: alphas “Elias. He’s one of my elite warriors and our best tracker,” I explain ogether. Elias looks a bit flustered to be face to face with the infamous Elder royal, but he keeps it together well, which is exactly why I chose

accompany us. “Oh, you’re a tracker?” Elden’s head perks up in interest as his dark eyes scan Elias from head to toe for a moment before he turns to the tracker. “Maybe he would like to join my team of trackers for today? They’re currently training, and they might be able to exchange some information with you in order,” I say, I can see Elias’ eyes basically beaming hopefully. I nod. “We don’t want to impose.”

feeling Elden grins. “You helped save my son. This is nothing in comparison. Family is everything.”

Harcel’s *If he knew one of his other sons is your mate, Harmony links me saying ourAnd behaved that way towards you, he would be furious.*

Harcel’s not *Yeah, I agree. No surprise Marius won’t tell him.*

Harcel with “Alright,” Elden nods toward one of his betas. “Vincent will show up around.”

calling Vincent grins. “Nice to see you again, Queen Celine.”

I need. I laugh. Despite Vincent looking like a scary skinhead, he’s actually together pretty nice guy. “I’m not a queen, Vince.” He always flirts with me, he sentreminds me of Harmony’s words about choosing a mate... maybe I should try andstart opening my eyes to other guys.

He grabs his chest dramatically. “To me, you are!” He looks at Harmony, his friend, with a wink. “You wouldn’t be too bad either.”

Harcel to eye “Thanks, Vince,” Harmony teases. “I’m very honored to be your mate choice.”

me. He “Hey, no one wins against Queen Celine.”

” We all laugh.

Harcel. “No offense meant,” Vincent promises.

Harcel, a true Elden rolls his eyes. “Just be glad that—for reasons unknown to me—that he found him to find you funny.”

est. His Vincent chuckles slightly and nods.

to me. “I can sympathize though,” Elden says to us. “I was hoping one day you would be fated to Finn, he’s been searching for his mate for two years now.” But so far, no luck.”

want to “He will find the right person,” I say with conviction. “He deserves the best.”

comparison. Elden smiles warmly. “That’s sweet of you to say.”

We wave Elias and Vincent off before Elden leads the way to their hidden library. His second beta, Calvin, follows us. Calvin is older than Vincent. He’s always seemed to be a really nice guy and has been with the family a long time. His hair is brown and cut in an old-fashioned style that suits him well. Elias with his even, soft features.

However, although I was originally happy to see him again, something just feels off. It’s like Danica is all tensed up around him. I don’t know what’s going on, but he’s suddenly giving off a bad vibe to me. I’m pulled out of my thoughts by Elden, showing us into the library. The space is huge, and I should be momentarily stunned silent as I stare at all the books surrounding us.

The library consists of multiple rooms that seem to span three floors. So much knowledge in one place!

With the help of the librarian, Harmony and I spend the afternoon in the library, reading and finding books. Good thing we can borrow a book at a time—there is no way to read everything at once.

Afterward, Elden and Calvin approach us again. “Did you find anything?”
“Plenty,” I admit. “Thanks for allowing us to borrow some books. Even though my head feels overloaded.”

—they Elden smirks. “I might just have the solution for you to clear your head.”
“Yes?”

His smirk just grows. “I heard you’re a fast runner, Celine?” he asks of you. I smile, noticing where this talk is going. “I’m fast,” I say with confidence now. He grins. “This just sounded like a challenge. How about a run?”

“That’s exactly what I need now!” I admit.

Yes, the Elden turns to Harmony and Calvin. “What about you guys?”

“In for it,” Harmony chuckles. “Although, I stand no chance against two.”

My family “Same,” Calvin agrees. “Have mercy for an old man.”

My incentive. “Oh yes,” Elden snorts. “Because you are so old!”

I’m only here for a Harmony smiles. “No chickening out, Calvin!”

It suits him. He smirks. “Don’t worry. I would never.”

Again, my skin crawls uncomfortably. I don’t know what it is. It’s nothing the same as always, but something about him just ticks me off for no reason. I really need this run, it seems.

Thoughts Elden was not kidding. He’s strong and fast. Lycans are huge. I saw him in his wolf form over a year ago when we fought Red Claw’s old alpha. Elden’s But now, I have time to examine how strong his muscles are when he runs so much and how big his wolf’s head is. Liam is a very similar build to Elden in strength and size. I wonder if Marius is the same.

I decide to focus on myself now. I don’t want to lose against Elden or anyone else. I’m fast, really fast—time to prove it. Danica and I tear through the forest, and I can feel my senses taking over. I see everything sharper, clearer. “It’s like paths open themselves for me, like the forest lets you through it toward my destination in the best way possible.”

Elden and I reach the pack house at the same time. I have just managed to tie with a lycan! The lycan of all lycans, on top of that. I can feel how

is. Danica feels, how the knowledge of having been on par with such a confidence. wolf like Elden just boosted her confidence.

Elden gives me some privacy to shift back into my Human form. Once we are dressed again, we sit down on the benches at the back of the pack waiting for our betas. Elden looks at me impressed. “You weren’t kidding, you were fast.” He nods his approval. “I have seen fast werewolves before, but nothing like you.”

“I’ve always trained my other disciplines well,” I explain to him. “Being a she-wolf, and being my father’s only successor, merely combat training wasn’t enough. I knew that, and I didn’t want anyone to take my place from me.”

He’s the “Your father said your gift is a tactical one?” he inquires.

I nod. There is no reason for me not to trust Elden. He’s probably the most trustworthy people out there, and Danica likes him too. She says he always had a good sense of people. “It comes in handy because it allows me to analyze a situation immediately, even in one-to-one combat.”

He runs. Elden stays silent for a while. “You being able to run so fast is more than just training,” he points out. “At one point, I fell behind because I took a path that was too narrow, but you... you raced through the forest like a pro were one with it. That’s not because of training. It’s more than that.”

“You think it’s another gift I have?” I ask carefully.

“Possibly.”

I can see Harmony’s beautiful brown wolf approaching us and look back to watch. “That wasn’t bad either.”

“No, considering she’s a werewolf, and the both of us went all out, it was a really good time,” he agrees.

“Harmony is great, she’s lethal,” I say with a proud smile.

strong “She-wolves like you and her are made to lead,” he points out. Wolves often focus on their strength alone. We lycans train differently since weis why Liam is such an all-rounder, all my children are. And y house, Harmony obviously had to train differently and strengthen your other dding,” too, knowing it’s better than relying on strength alone. You were born ing like an alpha, Celine. The Moon Goddess gave you all the talents and gi need to lead a pack. You are better than most other alphas, you are “I’m a better than your father, and he knows it; he told me so.”

training My eyes widen at his rare praise, and I smile gratefully at him. My position widens when Harmony approaches us, fully dressed now and with di her hand. Flora is right behind her, bringing some cake. I see Calvin appearing too, he stops in front of us and seems to link Elden.

one of Elden laughs. “Running really isn’t your strength,” he jokes. “Good she has everything else you do is fantastic.”

ows me Flora throws a towel toward Calvin. He shifts back and wraps it around hips. He chuckles. “I told you, have mercy on an old man.” He is more than Harmony. “But, Miss Harmony, considering you are a beta wolf, you chose to have some great abilities.”

like you “For your age, you didn’t do too bad either,” Harmony teases him.

Calvin chuckles. “I’ll excuse myself to get dressed now.”

“Join us for drinks later,” Elden tells him.

He nods.

look at my “So,” Flora puts the cake down before settling on Elden’s lap wrapping her arms around him. She’s a small woman, rather delicate that’s appearance, and she always looks so freaking young. It’s impossible Flora’s age. Annie always jokes that she ages backward. She looks

“Malefairy to me, with that long fair hair, those ethereal features, the big eyes, and her playful and giggly attitude. “You kids had fun playing?” Elden grins and kisses her.

“Oh, not that kind of game,” she beams. “Save that for later. We’ll have to beguile.”

He just chuckles. “We had a little competition. Celine managed to get the pack house at the same time I did.”

Harmony looks shocked. “Wait, you were on par?”

I nod, and her whole expression changes to one full of pride for her. “How are you so fast, Celine?” Flora asks curiously.

“I was just discussing that with Alpha Elden,” I tell her. “May I show you another gift I have?” I pause, my thoughts going back to how I ran through the forest, to how the forest reacted to me. “Sometimes, when I allow my thoughts to flow and my senses to take over, it’s like my surroundings respond to me. Like today, the forest answered and reacted to me.”

Elden stares at me. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just that, sometimes my surroundings help me,” I explain, frustrated that I don’t have the words to explain what’s really happening. “Pathways, branches seem to move. That sort of stuff.”

Flora slips off Elden’s lap and sits down next to me. Her eyes show a keen interest all of a sudden, her usual playfulness replaced with something more... curious, more knowing. She stares at me intently, and I can feel something changing in her eyes. It’s like she’s somewhere else.

“What is she doing?” I ask carefully, wondering what she’s looking for now and what she’s seeing.

“She’s doing her thing,” Elden sighs. “None of us knows how she does it. She always says she’s looking for signs. She says sometimes she’s

eyes...butterflies and fairies that lead her to hidden secrets.”

“Wait a moment,” Harmony intervenes. “She really sees them? It’s an act?”

Elden snorts. “No, it’s not just an act.”

Flora smiles, her eyes returning to normal again. She tilts her head.

“And?” Elden asks.

She giggles, poking his chest playfully. “Oh, nothing,” she claps her hands. “Let’s have cake.”

“No clue as to what she just saw?” Harmony asks quietly.

Elden shrugs. “She never says anything.”

“That’s because I can’t. It’s part of the rules,” Flora hops up from her seat and flutters around the table to make sure we all have a piece of cake.

There is some finality in her words. Seeing how Elden accepts her words is proof enough for me that she’s telling the truth. She probably wasn’t allowed to say anything. Whatever her reason might be.

Elden invites us to stay for the evening. There are a bunch of teens who were ostracized from other packs for their infamous bonfire. “Wouldn’t mind some advice on how to help,” he chuckles.

“Scared the teens will go wild?” Harmony grins.

“Tell me I’m wrong?”

“Absolutely not,” Harmony chuckles. “It sounds scary to have so many teens in one place.”

“I have help, though,” he admits. “My people are on guard. And Liam is one of his people.”

“And Brian normally joins you too, right?” I ask. “He told me he doesn’t visit Silverlake for the bonfire.”

He smiles brightly. “Thanks to Annie, her parents are part of my pack.”

now. Brian and Rosalee always go above and beyond themselves to help not just “They do,” I smile warmly. I still think Brian should have been originally. My dad chose Lauren’s dad because they were great friends. My father was a good beta too, definitely, but Brian would have been even better, I think.

Flora leaves us for a moment. When she returns, she looks at me conspiratorially. “I just took a look at your books,” she says. “I’ll add another one to it. Just to make sure.”

Elden looks at me insistently, like he wants to tell me something but I get the message though. That’s the book I need to pay the most attention to. I get up from my chair.

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THE BONFIRE

VALERIE

Jazz had me put on this tight blue dress which reveals way too much in my opinion. But somehow, she talked me into it, saying it would look hot with my skin tone. I feel a bit naked, but when Marilou sees me and gives me a thumbs up too, I feel a little better. If Jazz and Marilou both think it looks good on me, it can't be that bad. Jazz herself is wearing tight black pants with a glittery crop top, and Marilou chose a cute combination of a dark-green miniskirt and a tight white top, which goes well with her red hair.

Jazz did all of our makeup, as both Marilou and I have no idea how to do it on since we didn't go anywhere before starting this school. I sometimes feel like I've missed out on so much due to being sick, but now that I'm still young, and I can have fun now. Plus, I feel so grateful for Jazz.

healthy now, so I don't want to bitch or moan around and waste time sulky.

How much harder must it be for Marilou, though? She was treated like a slave under her old Alpha. Only when Alpha Liam took over did she finally turn good for her.

"You all look hot," Aurelia greets us. She and Nox have picked us up at Silverlake's pack border. Aurelia wears very tight black leather pants and a fitted gray top, revealing her perfect body. She always looks daring but not tacky. "Right, Nox?"

He nods and looks at me a bit longer than he does at the others, making me blush. "Told you," Jazz whispers at me.

Even now, a few weeks later, it still feels like an out-of-body experience. I can't be considered Aurelia's friend. But after our lunch in the cafeteria, where we hung out regularly, and she and her friends are so much fun to be around, I just clicked. She's nice, confident, and very straightforward. A bit serious sometimes, but I assume that comes with her position.

"Finally, you can see our pack grounds." Aurelia smiles proudly and leads us through the area. "The bonfire festival is in a clearing of the forest. Not far though."

"Hey ladies," Lionel jumps to our side from nowhere, making me blush slightly. I grasp Nox's arm without thinking. Once I realize it, I feel a bit embarrassed to put my hand on his arm.

"Sorry," I stutter, letting go again.

"Don't worry," he says with a smile. He's so nice. It takes a second for me to realize that he's truly a nice guy. He has these dark eyes and equal length hair, and tanned skin... he looks a bit rough with the scar across his forehead, but he is such a kind person. He's hot too, without any doubts. I'd be

being him if I were braver, but I don't want to get too close to anyone
moment. The thought is super scary. To imagine putting myself out there
I'd like trusting someone... it's... I'm not sure if I could do it.

things Marilou, however, doesn't seem to share my fears. She might be
awkward and shy at first glance like I am, but that's about it. Terry
up from twin sister, Tori are chatting with her now, and I can see her flirting a little
with Terry. We all know she finds him cute, a mutual feeling, it seems, but
it never Terry likes to return her affection too.

Aurelia and her friends weren't kidding, though. The party is huge
with more girls and guys from different packs, most of them seem to be
schoolers. I recognize some from our school, others I don't know.

ance to We find an empty table, covering it with our bags and jackets so
no one else will sit down there.

nd. We "Let's dance," Tori and Aurelia pull us up and head towards the music
where everyone seems to shake and move to some music blasting.

Jazz and I skillfully manage to pair Marilou with Terry while the twins
stick together and dance with Tori and Aurelia. Meanwhile, Nox and
Lion head off to fetch us all something to eat.

"It's good we have Lion with us," Aurelia laughs. "It's easy to spot
him in the crowd."

myself "True," Tori giggles. She is so cute with her heart-shaped face and
brown eyes. She ranked omega while her twin Terry ranked beta, which is
a rarity in our world. Twins mostly share the same rank, but none of her
glance seems to mind it even the least bit. "His hair is always so wild. Terry's
is dark a bit curly, but Lion... it's just... so much thick hair. I'm actually
a little bit envious!"

all over "True to his name," Jazz teases, and she is right. Even the color

at the blonde, like a real lion. “He looks cool, though. I dig the wild hair here and shakes her own locks a bit to emphasize her words.

“I want to touch it so badly,” Tori beams. “I mean your hair, not Licia a bit.” Jazz laughs. “Go ahead. I would never say no to such a cutie.” and his Tori blushes a bit, but then laughs too and carefully touches Jazz bit with “As I said... I’m envious.”

because “Same,” I agree, feeling how I’m getting a bit more relaxed. “My hair is flat and boring.”

There “That’s not true, you have beautiful hair,” Jazz defends me instantly. Aurelia “Your hair is fine,” Aurelia points out too. “I, for one, can’t stand skinny legs.”

that no “What!?” Jazz exclaims. “You have killer legs. They are long and your perfect ass.”

meadow, “Girl, being friends with you is so empowering,” Aurelia says. “Whenever we beat ourselves up over something, you’re here to rally us spirits.”

Lionel “I can’t help it,” Jazz grins. “It’s your fault for being awesome beautiful girls.”

him in We all giggle a bit at her words. Jazz is so confident. I wish I could more like her, but Aurelia is right... the way she accepts us all and her big we’re great does help a lot to boost my confidence. I can feel much is loosening up a bit and find I’m dancing with the girls without considering how stupid I may or may not look.

my hair is I’m oblivious to my surroundings as I dance, but then something catches my eye, causing me to look up. There are some guys standing over the side of the dance area, staring. They seem to be staring at me, and it is dark

r.” She good kind of staring. A chill runs down my spine, and I suddenly feel self-conscious and uncomfortable in my short dress.

m’s.” I try to shove the thoughts away. For once, I’m having fun, and I want to stay that way. I hate huge gatherings normally, but it seems, with the guys’ hair, it’s something even I like. Eventually, I forget about the guys and go back to dancing, that is, until I lose my group. While I’m searching for my group, the guy who was staring pops up. “Are you here alone?” he asks with a creepy smile.

.” What the fuck? He just saw me dancing with the others before, he says, and I’m not alone. “No,” I say shortly.

“Looks like you are alone,” he says.

l end at Another guy comes closer. “You’re cute. How about you hang out with us?”

laughs. “No, thanks,” I say, my nervousness growing. Why can’t they leave me alone? Something about them makes my skin crawl.

Get away from them, Ailia’s voice suddenly echoes in my mind. My tension must have put her on alert too.

“I need to go,” I say evenly, trying to return to a bigger crowd of people. One of the guys grabs my arm and tugs me back. “We asked politely, but you thinkshisses. “Don’t be such a bitch!”

y body The other one grabs my free arm. “Be happy we’re paying attention to you.”

“Leave me alone,” I breathe out, tugging at my hands to get them free from the guys. Shit, can I link Jazz here? My senses still aren’t sharp enough to use the mind link but only on my pack grounds.

not the It’s...

They tug me further away from the crowd. No, no way! “Stop!” I yell.

feel a sudden strength and anger in my voice. "Let me go!"

The guys stop for a moment. "Are you playing hard to get with us?"
I smile sweetly. It makes me sick.

"No, I want to go back to my friends."

"You could—"

A hand suddenly grabs the dude by his shirt and punches him, making him stumble back. "She said she isn't interested," Lionel says with a growl.

"No means no," Nox hisses.

The guy Lionel punched rubs his nose. I can see blood dripping on his face.
"Shit," he curses. "It was just a misunderstanding."

"You should leave," Nox says with finality in his voice. "Silver Princess is here too. If she sees you again, she will tell our Alpha."

"Fuck you assholes," the guy spits.

His friend tugs him along. "Come," he mutters. "Don't stir any trouble." He throws me a glare though, one full of venom.

I sigh in relief when they are finally gone, shivering slightly. No, don't cry now, no crying. The evening was so much fun, don't ruin it for everyone. Try as I might, I can't help it though; tears are burning in my eyes.
To my surprise, Lionel comes to my rescue again.

"Now, don't cry," he grins. "No crying today. You have a bunch of bodyguards around you."

Looking up at Lionel and Nox, I start to laugh a bit. "That's better," I nod in approval. "Let's head back to the others."

"Jazz is going crazy because you disappeared on us," Lionel explains.
Arriving back to the others, I feel the tension leaving me again.

"Some guys hit on her," Nox explains. Good thing they didn't end up with the whole pathetic scene. "They went overboard though and wouldn't

leave.”

’ one of “I’m alright now,” I smile and grab Jazz’s arm. “I had two body
save me.”

Lionel grins. “Only the best for my girls.”

Tori rolls her eyes.

ing him Aurelia remains quiet for a while. “Where are those guys now?”

“I told them to leave,” Nox explains.

She frowns. “Do you know the pack they are from? Have you see
ut of it.before, Val?”

I shake my head. “No, but they were really drunk.”

erlake’s “Are you worried?” Marilou asks, looking at Aurelia.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” she explains. “You guys continue to
I’m going to look around for a bit.”

y more “It’s my fault,” Nox says. “I told them to leave without getti
information.”

, please “No,” she shakes her head. “You and Lionel reacted the best w
n it forcould. Everyone is always smarter afterward.”

ty eyes. “Don’t go alone,” Lionel points out.

“I can come with you,” Nox offers.

l of hot She nods. “You stay with the girls, Lion. Nox and I will check out t
for a while.”

r,” Nox When I try to argue that she shouldn’t go to such lengths for me, sh
my hands and smiles. “That’s my job, Val. You are my friend, and th
is. is my pack. I’m the alpha’s daughter; I need to make sure there
potential threats. We have so many young people from allied pack
countertoday. I really don’t need a bunch of assholes acting out.”

: let her Jazz and Marilou nod their agreement and take my hands, leading r

to a few benches. "Let's have something to eat." Marilou smiles.

guards "I'll fetch you something," Terry promises.

A few minutes later, a young guy approaches from one of the stalls and says, "Here are some drinks for you ladies," he points at Terry, who is still waiting for some food. "Coming from the young man over there."

The cups have our names written on them, so I grab the one with my name on it. It's something with a strawberry taste. I beam happily, taking a sip. Taste is a bit weird, I think, but not too bad.

The next hour passes in a blur. We continue to dance a bit and taste some of the delicious food, but I'm starting to feel a bit dizzy. I stumble slightly, but the girls pull me along, almost falling face-first on the ground. Shit, I'm a bit party-dizzy.

"Are you alright?" Jazz asks worriedly.

ng any "Just feeling a bit dizzy," I say, not even trusting my own voice in that moment. Everything is spinning. I'm such a pathetic wolf, I can't believe I can't even defend myself against those idiots, then an hour later I'm sick.

"I'm not feeling too well either," Tori admits, and Marilou nods.

"Too many drinks?" Lionel asks, concerned.

he area Terry approaches his twin sister, taking her arm and examining her face.

"Tori, you didn't drink in secret, did you?"

ie takes "No," she shakes her head.

is here Lionel turns to look at Jazz. "Are you still feeling fine?"

are no "Yes, just a bit tired," she shrugs while making me sit down somewhere. "But we've been here for hours, so feeling tired is to be expected."

"Maybe it's the stress of the whole evening," Terry muses. "None of us is overmuch either, and we danced a lot. Could it be dehydration? I believe

when she says she didn't drink anything. Let's go slow, Dad'll have no problem if something happens to her."

"Here we go," Lionel nods. "Maybe we could organize them something to eat and drink in line. At the mention of food, I feel my stomach churn. "I need the toilet," I shout out.

Oh, Jazz gets the hint when she sees me turning green. "I'll come with you in a bit," Tori looks at her brother. "I think Marilou and I could do with some freshening up as well. We'll be back in a minute."

"A bunch of girls hitting the restroom together," Lionel groans. "What's so difficult about that ever taken only a minute?"

I feel like I'm feeling too sick to giggle at his words. To my relief, Jazz takes over, skillfully managing to half drag and half lead us to the public restroom. I don't know whether I should go for one of the sinks or head straight to the toilet cubicle, at least the room looks tidy. Tori drops her head down in front of the sinks and starts drinking from the tap. "I'm feeling so sick," I whisper, I'm breathlessly.

"Me too," Marilou breathes out. Her breath sounds a bit shallow.

We drink some more cold water out of the tap. Jazz coaches us through the process, instructing us to take slow, deep breaths before drinking some water. Meanwhile, she takes a towel, dips into the water, and wraps it around her neck. Tori is starting to look a bit better, unlike Marilou and me.

"Are you alright, Val?" Jazz looks worried. "Do you need help?"

"No," I press out. "Gimme a minute." I slam the cubicle door shut behind me before bending over the bowl and emptying my stomach.

I feel like I'm going to die. I hear another toilet door being slammed. Probably someone ate Marilou.

When I feel like there's nothing left in me, I get up shakily. Damn it, I

ly headhardly stand. Maybe I'm coming down with something... this isn't nor

I hear Tori and Jazz talking together quietly. Suddenly, their voices
—” off by a weird bumping noise, followed immediately after by another
' I blurtopen the door and stagger slowly outside. “Jazz? Is...”

I freeze, dread filling me at the sight of Jazz lying on the ground
ou.” lying next to her. There is blood on Jazz's shirt and on Tori's fore
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check on the girls, yet I can do nothing but stand here, rooted to the sp
hen hasheart hammers against my chest so loudly it feels like it's going to esc
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ght to awrapping around my upper body and locking me in place. Adrenaline
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mutter“Marilou, stay in there!” I yell. It's too late though, because she's
opened the door. Another guy appears out of nowhere and yanks her
the cubicle before quickly clasping his hand around her mouth.

ough it, A cloth is shoved over my mouth and nose suddenly, and even th
more.struggle to get free, I eventually feel my knees getting weak
l Tori'ssurroundings change to black.

closed

. Shit, I
robably

it, I can

hardly stand. Maybe I'm coming down with something... this isn't normal.

I hear Tori and Jazz talking together quietly. Suddenly, their voices are cut off by a weird bumping noise, followed immediately after by another one. I open the door and stagger slowly outside. "Jazz? Is..."

I freeze, dread filling me at the sight of Jazz lying on the ground, Tori lying next to her. There is blood on Jazz's shirt and on Tori's forehead. I open my mouth to scream, but nothing comes out. I want to run over and check on the girls, yet I can do nothing but stand here, rooted to the spot. My heart hammers against my chest so loudly it feels like it's going to escape any second. Finally, I take a shaky step forward, still feeling dizzy. "Jazz?" I whisper.

Before I can kneel down next to her, strong arms grab me from behind, wrapping around my upper body and locking me in place. Adrenaline rushes through me, clearing my head enough to do the only sane thing I can think of, "Marilou, stay in there!" I yell. It's too late though, because she's already opened the door. Another guy appears out of nowhere and yanks her out of the cubicle before quickly clasp his hand around her mouth.

A cloth is shoved over my mouth and nose suddenly, and even though I struggle to get free, I eventually feel my knees getting weak as my surroundings change to black.

AURELIA II

CELINE

Harmony and I are still with Flora and Elden. Vincent has joined his providing some comic relief, lightening the atmosphere by silly comments here and there. Calvin left earlier to roam the pack and keep an eye out for any trouble. We're busy listening to Elden's story about how they met when Elden's eyes go glassy a sudden. At the same time, someone from his pack approaches us running young guy—I think it's one of Aurelia's friends.

“Lionel?” Flora asks in surprise.

“Alpha, Luna!” he yells, clear panic in his voice.

Elden must have gotten some information through the mind link because he jumps up on his feet, his expression, one of worry. “What happened!?” he roars.

“I’m not sure,” Lionel hurries to explain. “But Tori and one of our
from Moon Blood were knocked unconscious.”

“What?” I jump up, dread filling me. One of the girls from my pac
to go through the names of girls at the bonfire today. A whole bunch a
Damn!

Elden stares at him, eyes darkening. “Explain,” he commands.
happened? Who was attacked? And how?”

Out of nowhere, I can see Brian approaching us. His normally
expression is replaced with a deadly serious one. “Alpha Celine,” h
without further ado. “It’s Jazz. She and the other girl were hit with
object. They are both in the infirmary right now. They haven’t wo
yet.”

Flora’s eyes widen in shock. “Goddess, what!?” she whispers.

“That’s not all,” Lionel blurts out, waving at us with both han
us and clearly panicked. “Two girls are missing. Terry and I can’t fin
making anywhere. They should have been with the others! Aurelia and N
grounds searching for them now. There was trouble earlier too. Goddess, I
len and wasn’t the same assholes from before,” Lionel starts muttering to hin
ill of a he paces back and forth, pulling at his hair in obvious confusi
ming, a frustration.

Flora approaches Lionel and places her hands on his shoulde
squeezes and gives him a sympathetic smile. He’s taller than she is,
manages to calm him down. It’s amazing how these lunas always ma
already slip into their supportive role, it’s like they give off a calming aura. *A*
What’s like that too. The rest of us tend to charge into things headfirst. I kn
Elden is probably so pissed he would have yelled at Lionel to spit out v
knows instead of trying to calm him. “Lion, you’re not making any

friends dear. What happened? And who is missing? Start from the beginning, alright?"

"I try." He nods, taking a deep breath. "My group was meeting with Jazz, Valerie, and I here. Marilou for the party. Marilou is a girl from Red Claw."

"Valerie?" I ask in shock and exchange a glance with Harmon. "What's something happen to her?"

"We were having fun, but at one point, some creepy dudes hit on Valerie, and I chased them away, but Aurelia felt something was off about them, so she started to look for them to make sure they left pack grounds."

Elden nods, most likely on par with his daughter's decision.

"The girls started feeling sick after a while and headed to the restroom."

When they didn't return, Terry and I began to worry and went to look for them. We found Jazz and Tori knocked out. Marilou and Valerie are missing. He pauses. "This is my fault!" he blurts out. "I shouldn't have let them use the restroom on their own."

"They were four girls together. Four." Flora says soothingly. "This is not your fault. No one could have imagined that someone would attack a group of girls."

"I agree!" Elden paces up and down, his expression angry. "No one could have predicted such an inconceivable attack. Do we know how they were drugged; sheit?"

I let Lionel's words go through my mind before I look at him inquisitively. "They all felt sick at the same time?"

"I promise they didn't drink too much," he blurts out, slight panic in his voice. "Jazz wasn't sick, just tired, but the other three felt really unwell. Honestly, we were with them all night, and no one drank that much."

"That's not what I was implying," I say, frowning deeply at him.

finning, thoughts.

Harmony looks at me in understanding. “That’s too much of a coincidence.”

“Jazz is a beta she-wolf, and she’s pretty strong. Her body could probably handle it better...”

“What do you mean?” Elden wants to know.

“Someone probably put drugs in their drinks,” I point out. I try to calm them and anger down so I can think rationally. “There’s no way they’d have all been sick at exactly the same time. They must have eaten or drunk something together.”

Brian looks at Elden. “Elden, Valerie was very sick growing up. I’m sure her body might not handle drugs well.”

Elden takes charge instantly. “Alright. Brian, would you go to the infirmary and tell me when the girls there wake up?”

Brian nods. “Of course.” He hurries off instantly. Having him with the girls sets my mind at ease. Jazz knows him; she will feel safe with him around.

“Vincent, gather our trackers and search the pack grounds for their scents. This doesn’t sound particularly well planned; they have to be somewhere.”

“Elias can help,” I throw in.

“The more, the better,” Elden agrees. “Lionel, you’ve seen these trackers. You know what they look like?”

When he nods, I jump in facing Lionel, “You can go with Harmony in his pack. Maybe you’ll spot them again.”

“Meanwhile, I’ll call Liam and tell him what’s happened,” Harmony intervenes. “The second girl missing, Marilou, is from his pack. After I’ve finished my own pack, I’ll head to the infirmary to the injured girls.”

Once everyone hurries away, I turn to Elden. This time the anger of a clear in his eyes, he was holding back before. I sympathize with his raw feeling pissed too. "I swear, if I don't kick some asses tonight, probably berserk," I mutter.

"Same," he huffs. "Whoever dared to come to my pack grounds and attack a bunch of innocent girls when they were so vulnerable... they will pay for it." "What's the plan?" I ask.

"I'll try and get in touch with Aurelia first," he says. "Let's see what she knows about the guys who were hassling Val earlier."

"She's really upped her game recently," I say, impressed. I remember when Annie and Liam started dating... she was a carefree and mischievous girl back then, not really sticking to rules. But now she's extremely dedicated to her training and passionate about what she does. She's quickly become one of Silverlake's elite warriors, and she isn't even eighteen yet.

There's a glint of pride in Elden's eyes at my words. "I agree. Let's see what she's found out. I swear... once I get hold of the little jerks who harass the girls, they can attack a bunch of teenage girls, they will wish they'd never set foot on my pack grounds," he growls.

VALERIE

guys?

I'm woken up by a dull, throbbing pain in the back of my head in harmony. In that moment, my thoughts are a mess. I was at the party yesterday, right? I must have drunk too much and passed out? Goddess! Mom and Dad are going to be so disappointed in me. I'll have to explain myself to them.

is very I'm definitely grounded. Ugh! Exactly what I need, not. For once, ge, I'mhas been going well, and now I have to go and mess things up by I'll godrunk at a party. I need to be a good child. Mom and Dad already ha child in jail. I have to make sure I stay good because I don't think thei I attackcould handle another bad child. It would break them.

y!" I sit up with a groan, trying to grab my phone from my bedside tal my arms won't move. They seem to be stuck somehow. Was I sleep hat shethem? I try to wriggle my fingers a bit. For a moment, I just sit here co I'm totally confused, just... confused... I still can't move my arms, nemberfingers touch the cold ground beneath me. Wait a second...

nievous My eyes fly open when the realization hits me, and I sit up, groanin dicatedsearing headache that starts to spread. That wasn't a nightmare I was me oneI'm not at home, I'm not drunk... well, at least I don't think I am.. wish I were in trouble with my parents and grounded instead of b et's seeTHIS kind of trouble.

io think "Look at that," a voice sneers. "Sleeping Beauty is finally awake." stepped To my side, I can see Marilou tied up and gagged on the floor. Hal top is torn, and she sobs quietly. A bruise is forming around her sh and one right below her eye. She tries not to look at anyone, curlin; much as she can.

Shit. She's here because of me. These are the dudes who hit on me the bonfire! They wanted me, not her. She's just collateral.

. For a One of the guys kneels in front of me, grabbing my hair and yank ? Did I forward. I wince, but try not to cry out in pain. It's the dude from b so mad from the bonfire when Nox and Lionel saved me. "Aw," he sneers. ' now? Told you, you shouldn't have rejected us." He grabs me by my "You should have been thankful that guys like us showed an intere

my life pathetic little omega like you. There were others before you, and we're getting sure to teach them a lesson too."

have one "The redhead's not bad either. Tim liked her and spontaneously took her heart too," another guy snickers. There are three guys in total, it seems. "Do you want to have a turn at her too, Greg?"

ble, but "Yeah, but she's for Tim first. He likes them fiery, and I owe him."

going on Marilou's gapes in panic, and she shuffles backward until her back hits the unfused wall.

but my Greg brushes his fingers across my face, his touch almost making me

I can't help but cringe at just this mere touch. How will I survive him if anything more?

having. "Oh, look how sweetly she's reacting to my touch," he grins, his

hand moving down to my neck. I tug at my restraints frantically, trying to

get my hands free, but there's no chance. The guy just laughs and tears my

clothing open, revealing part of my chest. My ears are ringing in panic, and blood

is rushing through my body, making my head spin. No! No way! No! I

can't help but scream, but I can't. I try to growl through my gag.

oulders "She's wild," the other guy laughs. "Should I hold her down for you

to get up as "No," Greg hisses. "I can handle her on my own." He grabs me by the

shoulders and pulls my head back. I want to scream in pain. "If you behave, it won't

be during hurt too much. Are you a little virgin, are you? Has no one touched you

before? Such an honor for you to have my dick as your first."

ing me Out of the corner of my eyes, I can see Marilou shifting around to

help me before...eyes are wide in panic. I know she wants to help me, but there's nothing

I can do. The third guy walks over to her and pushes her back, knocking her

throat back to the floor. "It's not your turn yet," he hisses.

rest in a "Poor little Os," the second dude sneers. "No one's gonna bother you

e made for you. You're not worth anything to a pack."

"Now spread your legs for me, bitch," Greg hisses. "If you behave, we might not kill you and dump your body afterwards."

No way! I'd rather die than have him rape me. A tiny voice in the back of my head is almost wishing for him to kill me, to end my miserable life. Then I think of Ailia, my parents, and my friends, and I suddenly feel a surge of determination for thinking this way, even if it was only for a second. A wave of determination comes over me. I am going to fight for my life, for Ailia, for my parents! I will not let these assholes defeat me if it's the last thing I do. His hands are strong, forcing my legs open. One of his hands reaches for my dress. I try to wriggle away from him, kicking and thrashing. When my feet hit something, I hear him groan before he yanks me up and slaps me hard. "Stop it, you bitch!" he hisses.

I don't. Like fuck I'm going to stop! I might be fragile and weak, but he's gonna have to knock me unconscious if he wants to rape me. He slaps me again with the back of his hand, making me gasp at the pain. I can taste blood clearly on my tongue.

"Man," one of the guys intervenes. "You are going to kill her or knock her out if you hit her that hard. Just drug her, and then have your fun."

"No," Greg yells. "I want her to be fully awake."

He's lying on top of me now; the weight of his body is almost suffocating me.

All I can do is try to thrash around as the tears flow down my cheeks.

"GREG!" The door flies open, and through my tear-struck vision, I see a fourth guy rushing in. "Wolves are coming. Pull your pants up. We're going to fight."

One of the guys kicks Marilou in her stomach, making her groan and look over in pain.

Greg growls and gets up. Before he leaves though, he pushes me
back now, making me roll over the ground and land on my stomach. He grabs my
hair again, pulling my head up to look at him. “If you or that other bi
back of anyone about what happened or who we are, we will come back for y
ife, but your other little friends.”

I feel guilty. My heart hammers so loudly against my chest I don’t even realize
I have no control of what’s happening. I just know that there are no hands on my body anymore. I
Aurelia, for the side and curl up a bit, not able to stop my body from shivering.

[I do! There are noises around us, a lot of shuffling. I can feel my arms
are suddenly freed from the ties, pain engulfing me as the blood rushes to them
around. Suddenly, I hear Marilou’s voice through the noise. “Goddess, Val, s
p again! Right...”

I open my eyes to find a man in front of me, freeing me from the
but he flinches and moves away from me. He looks vaguely familiar, but I can’t
I can’t put my thoughts in any order, let alone recognize him. My brain is running
fast and my heart won’t slow down. My vision is blurred from crying.

“Get away from her, Nox.”

Someone pushes the man out of the way by someone who crouches in front of
me. She smells familiar also. “Val,” she says softly. “It’s me, Aurelia.”

Who?

What...

Aurelia.

Oh, goddess, it’s Aurelia and her warriors. It’s her.

“May I touch you?” she asks softly.

I nod, whimpering as she carefully pulls me into a hug. My body
shivers so violently I have no control over anything I do or say. She
doesn’t speak, just keeps holding me in her arms. I cling to her like my life depends on it.

...e hard, on it, sobbing into her chest, while Aurelia keeps stroking my hair softly by my feels so warm and safe.

...itch tell “It’s alright,” she says softly, her voice trembling a bit.

...you and “They were about... to...” I gasp, feeling how my stomach churns.

“Aurelia,” Nox says, worried. “She is feeling sick. She—”

...what’s “Leave us,” Aurelia mutters under her breath. She reaches for
I roll to something.

“But—”

...s being “Nox,” Aurelia says with insistence and authority. “I’ll handle it. Cl
1. Then Marilou.”

...are you I can see her pulling a waste basket towards us. Before I can even
...what I’m doing, my body goes on autopilot, and I grab the basket, en
...e gag. My stomach into it. Shit, this is so embarrassing. Not only did I manag
...an’t get kidnapped and almost raped, but now I’m here in front of one
...ig wild, friends... embarrassing myself further. My stomach churns again
...realization of how helpless I am.

My ears start ringing again. Greg, he was about... his hands were...
...front of In my mind, I can hear Ailia whimpering slightly, her voice is
’ though. I can’t hear her properly.

“Why?” I hear myself sob between coughs. Why did they do that?

I feel another wave of nausea hit me. “I’m so sorry.”

“Everything is okay,” Aurelia’s soothing voice reaches me aga
...holds my hair back a bit, rubbing my back. There is no hint of disgust
...voice.

...body is I can feel her body turn slightly. “Can you get me a blanket, No
...doesn’t say. “Just throw it to me.”

...depends I flinch at the sudden movement but relax a little when I feel a

tly. She being wrapped around me. Its warmth engulfs me, lessening uncontrollable shivering. Aurelia still keeps rubbing my back. The basket has disappeared from sight, and my cheeks flush in shame again.

I'm able to think a little clearer now, and my sight is less blurry as it slowly comes back into focus. I can see Aurelia's worried face in front of me. Nox is standing a bit further away, looking equally worried. Around me, panic takes over. Where is Marilou? Where is she? Is she...
"Marilou?" I ask, panicked.

"She's alright," Aurelia says softly. "Look." She moves to the side and points toward the door leading outside. Marilou is sitting on the ground outside, a blanket around her and a female warrior attending to her.

Aurelia hands me a cup with liquid. "Here, drink this," she says. "I need to get an antidote in it. It will make the wolfsbane vanish faster."

of my Wolfsbane... right...

I burst into tears again. I feel so weak and pathetic. I couldn't even fight these guys. They almost raped me, and I couldn't do anything to stop them. Even without wolfsbane, I would have been helpless. I'm so so distant everyone for having to rescue me yet again. Oh, Goddess! The shame of being a wolf in particular. Ailia deserves so much better.

"Okay," Aurelia says with finality in her voice. "We really need to get out of here. She's shivering like crazy, and her heartbeat is erratic." She goes into shock.

"Should I carry her?" Nox offers.

"No, that's not a good idea now." Aurelia shakes her head, wrapping an arm around my back and another beneath my knees. "I'll carry her."

"No," I mutter, teeth chattering, "I'm too heavy, I—"

"I'm a lycan alpha," she smiles at me. "I'm strong, and you are my mate."

ing myVal. I can carry you.”

to waste I nod weakly, allowing her to lift me into her arms. In the back
1. mind, I register how strong she must be to be able to lift someone li
ny eyesSure, I might be petite, but still... lifting someone like this and carryin
t of meshows some serious strength.

I look “We are going to the infirmary immediately,” she tells ev
ie hurt?surrounding us. She looks at me. “Don’t worry. Some of my warri
chasing the guys and tracking their scents. So, let’s go and get you c
ide andup.”

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There is

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do it.”

friend,

Val. I can carry you.”

I nod weakly, allowing her to lift me into her arms. In the back of my mind, I register how strong she must be to be able to lift someone like this. Sure, I might be petite, but still... lifting someone like this and carrying them shows some serious strength.

“We are going to the infirmary immediately,” she tells everyone surrounding us. She looks at me. “Don’t worry. Some of my warriors are chasing the guys and tracking their scents. So, let’s go and get you checked up.”

A STRONG WOLF

VALERIE

I don't know how much time has passed, but I remember falling as Aurelia's arms and waking up in the infirmary. Marilou and I are thorough examination. An I.V. is put in my arm to flush the drugs out of my system while the nurse takes blood samples. Over on the other bed, a doctor is checking Marilou's cheek and shoulder for any fractures. Luckily, our injuries are superficial. It's the shock and fear that sit far deeper than the bruises.

Nox and Aurelia are still with us, and I'm glad they didn't leave me and me alone here. She looks at Nox now. "My mother?"

"The Luna is here already," Nox tells her.

My eyes snap open. Right. "Jazz and Tori." I look at Nox, panicked.

“They’re alright,” he tells me softly. “Got some bruises, but there
major damage.”

I nod, relief flooding me. At least the girls are alright. I turn my
look at Marilou. The nurse helps her walk towards me. She’s a bit stiff
her legs, but alright other than that, and the color slowly returns
cheeks. “I’m okay,” she smiles weakly. “Just the shitty wolfsbane r
with me and the other drugs. But the antidote works really fast.”

“It’s our own formula,” Aurelia says proudly. “We upped it a wh
when Liam and Annie were in danger.”

“See,” Marilou smiles at me. “We are going to be alright in a minute

“I’m so sorry, Marilou,” I mutter. “This is all my fault.”

“No,” she shakes her head wildly, her gaze sad. “It’s not... I know
like them. To them, I’m just a lousy omega.” She looks sad and broke
a sudden. I only know stories about her pack before Alpha Liam kil
sleep in previous alpha. The fact that this is not the first time for her to deal wi
given a an attack is terrible and infuriating. And incredibly sad.

I reach out my hand to take hers, squeezing it lightly.

Her lips are quivering.

“There’s nothing wrong with being an omega,” Nox says gently. “
an any an omega, and she is great. And you’re great too, Marilou.”

Marilou blushes a bit; she looks away from him and down at her fi
Marilou want to tell her that rank means shit. Look at me, I’m a beta wolf, y
didn’t even notice. We are certainly not their first victims, and I dou
only stick to omegas. But no words leave my lips, my brain still fe
mushy to form a coherent sentence.

“Thankfully, you came in time, Aurelia,” Marilou says.

She’s right.

was no My guilt is almost devouring me. They thought I was an omega sh
I'm a beta, yet I come across as so meek they didn't even consi
head to anything else. And Marilou got dragged into this nightmare because of
I really need to change. I can't continue to live like this.

After an hour, we can both leave, much to my relief. I hate hospi
I spent half my childhood in one. Just the smell now gives me the sh

Aurelia makes sure I get to see Jazz first though. She's sound asleep,
she looks fine.

Luna Flora is here with us too. She's the cutest being I have ever se
there is just something so surreal about her. "Okay, Jazz and Tori ne
rest," she says while fluttering around us. Marilou giggles a bit. "A
we guys girls need something proper to eat and something warm to drink.
I'm all of going to the dining hall so you can eat something."

"Are you girls ready to meet the others?" Aurelia asks. "We really
I wish we knew what happened so that we can catch whoever attacked you."

Marilou and I exchange a look of panic.

"I know you aren't ready yet," Luna Flora says softly. "W
I understand, we don't want to push you, but I'm scared they will—"
"Tori is "They told us they would kill everyone we know," Marilou
suddenly. "If we tell anyone."

Something flashes in Aurelia's eyes, something dark and angry.
I've never seen her wolf on the surface before, but I'm sure she has to be k
I bet they're strong. "Listen," she turns to face us. "They are a bunch of patheti
I wish we knew what they did today indicates they have any st
allies, or even much intelligence as a group. They're just bullies who s
to scare you and make sure you won't talk because they know we w

ie-wolf.them otherwise.” She frowns. “Goddess, I’m so pissed! I’ll make su
der meget punished for this.”

me. Luna Flora pouts. “You are truly your father’s daughter.”

However, something about Aurelia’s confidence seems to be con
pitals. Ibecause I find myself nodding. “I’m ready,” I say. It’s the least I can
udders.nothing else, I can make sure this piece of trash doesn’t touch any
but shefriends.

Marilou and I follow Aurelia and the Luna to the pack house. F
en, andthere, I can see Marcel, he’s running towards us. “Valerie!” he
ed their“Goddess, fuck, no way... Jazz?”

nd you “She’s in the infirmary,” I tell him immediately. I can see how worr
We arepissed he is.

“Whoever did this is going to pay,” Marcel growls.

need to Aurelia nods. “I’ll make sure they pay.” She makes sure to have so
accompany Marcel and lead him to Jazz before walking us to the dinin

I half expected it, but I’m still a little surprised to see everyone
e fullyrank in here. Alpha Celine and Beta Harmony are here along with A
father, Alpha Elden, and his beta. I turn to see Luna Annalise coming
blurtsdoor behind us.

“Marilou,” Luna Annalise hurries to my friend and hugs her, and
I havehappy she has someone here for her. I know, being an orphan, she’s
ick-assbeing on her own, but having her luna come in person just to make su
c weakalright is truly heartwarming.

trength, Before I can savor the moment, however, my father’s voice c
aid that“VALERIE!” he yells and pushes past the warriors surrounding the
will findand rushes towards me, my mother right behind him. They hug me so
that I have a hard time breathing. But it feels so good. As much as I

re they being touched by strangers, being hugged by my parents always set
ease. I pull back a little and look down at my clothes. I'm so glad
gave me something else to wear. Especially since my father's eyes
tagious immediately darkened at the sight of my bruised face, I can't even be
n do. If I imagine what he'd do if he saw what they did to my clothes.

of my They reluctantly let me go when a servant server brings some food
Marilou and me. I can see Alpha Celine exchanging a glance with
halfway Elden, who nods at their unspoken conversation, both of them looking
e yells angry. I wonder what that's about.

Luna Flora comes over to me and presses an ice pack to my face.
ied and "The wolfsbane must be slowing down the healing process," Alpha
explains quietly, and diplomatically. She could have just told everyone
truth that even without wolfsbane, my wolf and I struggle.

someone "I'm sorry. My wolf and I are so weak," I admit.

g hall. "Everything has a reason," Luna Flora says calmly, looking at me
of high warmth in her eyes. "You might have suffered from poor health
Aurelia's growing up, and maybe you and your wolf are still healing from those
g in the but it doesn't mean you are weak. Strength comes in all forms; you only
to find yours."

I'm so I can see everyone hesitating to start the questioning because of me
used to a deep breath. "I'm ready," I say. "I just don't know where to start."

re she's "Start with the guys hitting on you," Marilou nudges me softly.

I nod, telling them about the evening and how they circled me around
cuts in, dragging me away. I can see Nox's eyes widening. He'd saved me from
e group that time, but he didn't know the whole story. He thought it was just a
tightly of guys being a bit too pushy.

I loathe "I knew it," Aurelia mutters under her breath.

s me at “Yes,” Alpha Elden tells her. “Good thing you went with your gut for Aurelia. He nods at me, and I can see him trying to soften his expression as he had apologize, please continue.”

begin to Marilou and I tell them about how we spent time with Terry and about the drinks we’d had.

ood for “The part with the drinks,” Alpha Celine interrupts us. “That’s the part Alpha particularly interested in.”

g pretty I blush. “I swear, we didn’t drink much. We—”

“No, no, don’t worry,” Beta Harmony smiles at me. “That’s not we’re worried about. We know you girls didn’t do anything wrong.”

Alpha Celine I nod in relief, feeling my mother squeeze my shoulder softly in support. I lean against her. “I don’t understand...” I say, a bit confused.

“Who got you the drinks?” Alpha Celine asks.

I blink. “Terry,” I say. “He ordered something and had it sent to us.” Aurelia looks at her father with conviction, “I bet it was a trick. I swear on my life for Terry,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone. “He never does something like that.”

Alpha Elden looks at her for a moment and then nods at her. “Go and go ask him what really happened.” He turns towards Lionel. “He’s waiting. I take the moment, right? Go and fetch him, please.”

The room falls silent as Lionel runs off and stays that way until he’s bringing Terry with him. He looks very confused, his expression unreadable when he sees us. “Goddess, I’m so glad you’re alright!” he blurts out and I were worried as hell.” He turns to search for Marilou, his eyes light up in a bunchup when he sees her.

“I’m okay,” she stutters and blushes a bit.

Alpha Elden’s stance relaxes visibly. “Terry, we all know you’re

feeling.” involved in this, but I need to clear up a few things that happened at the
a bit. “So, did you order the drinks for the girls?”

“Drinks?” Terry blinks. “No, I didn’t order any drinks. When I returned
Lionel from getting food, they already had something to drink, so I assume
bought them something.”

part I’m Lionel looks at him in confusion. “One of the guys working there brought
drinks over and said they came from you.”

“No, I was standing in line for food.”

at what “Who was the guy who brought the drinks?” Elden demands to know

“I think it was one of the younger guys... Ollie, I think.” Lionel must

support. I “Okay, so can we talk to Ollie then?” Alpha Celine asks.

“Absolutely,” Alpha Elden agrees. Again, he sends someone to find
young guy who served us the drinks earlier tonight. Again, we wait, and
’ time I’m feeling more relaxed. My parents are here, along with Alpha
would and Beta Harmony. And everyone is trying to find out what happened.
would my mind at ease.

Terry explains that Ollie is a young beta, only fifteen, and this was his
job, let’s job to earn some extra money. When he appears in the dining hall, he
with Tori nervous and jittery. An older guy accompanies him. It seems like
organized the stalls and the staff tonight and has come to support Ollie
returns, inquiry.

relaxing Alpha Elden asks him about the drinks again. “One of Terry’s friends
: “Lionel another pack bought them,” he hurries to explain. “And said Terry
lighting them to be delivered to the girls.”

Terry looks confused. “What friend? I didn’t have any friend
another pack coming tonight.”

weren’t “But he said Terry bought the drinks. That they are friends.”

e party. “And you didn’t find it weird?” Elden demands to know.

Ollie blushes and shakes his head. “This happened a lot this evening returnedstutters.

ed Lion “Alpha, I apologize for speaking out of turn,” the guy who came with bows a bit. I think he’s an omega, going by his aura.

brought Alpha Elden rubs his head. “Go ahead.”

“Ollie is right. It happens all the time.”

“Don’t you verify that claim before you hand out drinks?” Luna wants to know.

ses. The guy seems to shift around nervously.

“Talk freely,” Alpha Elden encourages him.

atch the “I would,” he answers honestly, “as I don’t like giving out drinks but thisseeing their license or before verifying such a claim, but there are hundreds of Celinekids at these parties, and we are just a few people at the stands. Most of the time, all we can do is trust the kids.” He flushes. “I apologize for bothering others for my own shortcomings.”

his first “No, that’s not your fault,” Alpha Elden sighs. “Making sure everyone lookssecure is on me. I’ll make sure that you have more people next time like heAnother sigh. “And next time, tell me sooner when you are having trouble in this trouble!”

Ollie looks nervous. “Will I get punished?”

ds from “No,” his Alpha says. “Being gullible is not a crime. You were not involved in what happened tonight. You can leave.”

He seems beyond relieved, bowing a bit before leaving.

s from “I can’t believe it’s come to this, but it seems from now on we will train everyone working these events on how to identify and prevent dangerous incidents,” Aurelia points out. “I really think it’s necessary, Dad.”

“I hate to admit it, but you’re right.” Elden furrows his brows. “Al-
ng,” he says. “Weas wolves, we should be better than this.”

“The wolves are not the problem,” Luna Annalise says evenly
with him. “The problem is we are humans sharing a soul with a wolf. Wolves are a
they aren’t vicious or unnecessarily cruel. We humans are.”

The uncomfortable truth, I think. She has a way of saying things
might not even see or realize.

Flora “We have no clue which pack they belong to?” Alpha Celine asks
frown.

“Oh,” Aurelia speaks up again. “I have an idea. They already tried to
Val before, and it felt off how persistent they were, so I tried to gather
before information. There were some witnesses, and they said they ar-
reds of Midnight River pack. I didn’t know at first that the two incident
t of the connected, but...” She scribbles something on paper. “Marilou, you s-
lamingsaw some tattoos. Did one of them look like this?”

Marilou throws a glance at the paper and nods. “Yes.”

thing is Aurelia hands Elden the paper. “Midnight River pack. That’s the
time.” tattoo.”

staffing “Fantastic,” Elden looks at his beta, something dark flashes in hi-

“Vincent, call their alpha!” He turns to look at his daughter. “Aurelia!”

“Yes?”

ere not “I’m proud of you,” he says. “You took control of the situation fi-
beginning and went with your gut feeling. You have been doing th-
recently. Also, when you realized what had happened, you arranged
have to instead of going into an unknown situation on your own. Great plann-
ite-rape good senses. You acted like a true leader.”

Aurelia blushes, something I haven’t seen her do before... ever.

though, you,” she says, beaming proudly at her father’s and alpha’s praise.

Alpha Elden and Aurelia both get that glazed look, which indicates they are being linked. It’s from one of their warriors who were sent to chase the animals, and his asshole friends. They’ve indeed followed their scent to Midnight River Pack’s borders.

Alpha Elden nods at Aurelia. “Vincent just linked me to confirm that the alpha is aware of our presence at his border and our intentions to fight with the culprits suspected to be involved. Go, tell our warriors at the border that Midnight River’s Alpha is waiting for you. You lead them from there and don’t miss a hit on the culprits.”

Aurelia looks at him surprised. “I can lead this mission?” she asks. “Can you help me find the men who attacked Val and Marilou?”

Alpha Elden exchanges a gaze with his beta and nods. “Yes. I trust you can do this were you.” He pauses. “However, you have a decision to make. You can’t just lead them. You need a pack friend. Finn already chose years ago; just like him, you need a pack friend too.” I have no idea what they are talking about, but she does. She sighs a bit. “Lionel,” she says. “You are great, strong and loyal, and you’re my pack friend, but you have alpha blood in you, and we don’t know if you will lead you away to another pack one day.”

Alpha Elden nods. “I knew you would say that,” he says evenly. “Don’t worry, Aurelia, I still have your back. Terry and Tori too.”

She smiles in relief, before turning towards her father. “I choose you, Noctis, as my beta.”

“What?” Nox blurts out. “Are you for real?”

Alpha Elden explains. “He already almost died once when he protected the pack and you’re his backup. His troubled past makes him sensitive to others, but he will be a great help.”

Alpha Elden seems content. “You have my full support. Now go.”

Once they are away, he lets out a deep sigh. "I think all we can do is wait." He approaches me now, crouching down a bit. I can feel myself getting a bit nervous. He's extremely imposing, after all. One of the strongest guys I have ever seen. I'm not as scared as I should be... I have already seen his son Liam. I guess you get used to their huge men eventually. "May I?" he asks.

I nod. He cups my chin and turns my head to the side a bit, inspecting that face. "Did she get the antidote for the wolfsbane?" he asks.

Luna Flora nods. "That's the first thing both girls received."

He frowns a bit. "Do you normally heal so slowly, child?" he asks me.

I notice Alpha Celine suddenly standing behind him and resting her hand on my shoulder, encouragingly at me. "Yes," I stutter.

"Valerie was very sick as a child. She had a disease that targeted her lungs," my mom explains quietly. "She was homeschooled until recently. Everything got better when she connected with her wolf. She smiles at me, brushing over my head.

"The pack doctors didn't know if she would have a wolf at first," Celine explains. "But luckily, our fears were unfounded."

"Can you shift?" he asks me.

I shake my head. "I tried once, but my body couldn't take it, and Nox...told me to stop."

"Mind-link?"

"Only when I'm inside our pack," I flush. Goddess, I sound pathetic. "I'm just weak..." I stutter, feeling embarrassed by being so weak.

"No," he says evenly. "The presence of your wolf is strong, which I'm wondering."

My eyes snap up. For a second, I look him directly in the eye, and he

now is thoughtful. Panic fills me. Shit, I just looked one of the most powerful parentsever in the eye. I'm so stupid.

He chuckles though. "Lycans might be extremely territorial, but would be mind someone looking at us. That's a weird thing only werewolves should do."

"Valerie's wolf is strong?" my father asks, surprised. I'm so grateful to my parents. My father was Alpha Cedric's beta back then, and no werewolves from such powerful families don't want weak children, but he always accepted me the way I was.

"I can feel her wolf's presence," he tells us. He looks at me again, nodding. "I can feel her. Strong and fully there. She's as strong as any other beta wolf."

My mouth drops open. "What..."

"But where do her issues come from then?" Alpha Celine asks the question. I don't dare to ask.

"I can only guess for now," Alpha Elden says. "Maybe because she was very sick while growing up, and it takes so long for her to heal fully." Alpha He tilts his head and lets go of my chin. "You are a beta, right? You're a beta?"

I nod.

"Do you know what your gift is?" he wants to know.

"Unfortunately not," I say honestly. "Back then, they said my gift would need time to develop. Maybe the test was wrong?"

"No," he shakes his head. "The test is not wrong. The Lycan Council is responsible for it, and they have a bunch of very powerful witches who are my mates. A very gifted elder created the test. It works on hybrids and werewolves of all kinds. It's able to depict even the slightest hint of a gift." He pauses. "I don't look like a massive fan of it though, because it divides our society."

l alphas “Yes,” Annalise agrees. “In a way, that’s how it is. However, the test is not bad, but the human side of us is responsible for making more care than it is. And for taking it as an excuse to deem others worthless.”

seem to “But what is it for then?” my mom asks quietly.

Luna Annalise smiles. “It’s to determine if a child has a gift. Some gifts are useful for hard to control. When you know it’s there, it’s easier to learn how to use it normally.”

they’ve Alpha Elden smiles at her. “My daughter-in-law is right.” He looks thoughtfully. “Maybe your gift will give you the answer to why you have weaker health and why you are facing more hardships than others.”

” “Like a handicap?” Luna Annalise queries, “Then, if we think logic means she has a special gift, which is why she has a disadvantage in certain areas.”

I look at her surprised. After all, she’s the Silver Luna, immune to the was and alpha’s orders. But I didn’t know she could connect the dots like that. Or...” does.

I tested Alpha Elden seems to be surprised too. “That’s what I have been thinking too. As always, you never cease to surprise me, Annie.”

She chuckles. “I just stated the obvious, Elden. Don’t make it special.”

It might He shakes his head in amusement but doesn’t say anything.

“Val needs someone to help her connect with her wolf,” Luna Florentine uncovers her eyes, snapping out of the daydream she has been in for a while and staring at them. It’s as if she’s looking at something no one else can see. She turns to Alpha Elden with a glint of something in her eyes that I can’t quite put my finger on. “I’m serious.”

He nods tentatively. “My wife is right. Maybe that would be a good idea.”

st itself How about I train with you?" he offers.

out of it My dad freezes at his words, eyes wide.

Luna Annalise laughs. "He didn't mean the kind of training w
punches her around," she chuckles. "Don't worry. I'm training with h
gifts are and I can promise you he's a fantastic mentor."

handle Again, Elden seems to be amused. "She's right. I'm talking about
training to help her connect with her wolf."

s at me "But I couldn't possibly..." I blush. "You have so much work c
i are of plate. And I'm just a normal girl."

"I have enough support here," he tells me. "My daughter is ob
cally, it ready to take over some tasks, so is my son, Finn. I would have aske
n other to do it and work with you, but he's the one who has a lot on his han
now. I can spare some time." He raises his brows. "I have to wa
o silver though. I like my trainees to be on time, be prepared, and d
ike she homework."

"Now that's not going to be a problem," Alpha Celine points
hinking amusement. "Valerie is always on time, and she's a very diligent s
You'll more likely have to make sure that she doesn't overdo it. She'
: sound really well with her studies."

I blush at the sudden praise.

"Another reason why we are so glad she befriended Jazz," my moth
ra says, with a smile. She chuckles. "We were hoping for her to do a few
; at me things. But she never does."

Alpha "Like Annie," Beta Harmony grins. "She never did anything stup
/ finger one time she did sneak out to a party, our parents couldn't even preter
mad."

od idea. Luna Annalise laughs. "Yes, they half-heartedly grounded me for

or something like that. I think Mom was so relieved that she rather wanted to reward me with a present.”

here he Luna Flora crosses her arms in front of her body. “Elden, why do you want obedient children!? It’s your fault, it’s the alpha blood in them! I wanted a cute omega daughter or a sensitive beta son, but no...”

mental He grins, much to my surprise. “Sweetheart, you are of alpha blood.”
She pouts cutely. “Don’t divert the topic.”

on your He grins, pulling her into his arms. It’s funny to see such a petite girl being lovingly held in this strong man’s embrace. But it’s kinda cute to see someone who has previously never dreamed about having a mate, but seeing everyone around me be so happy with theirs... makes me wish to find that special someone too.

ds right “Now, I think it’s time the girls get some rest,” Alpha Celine points towards the bedrooms.

rn you, “You can have one of the guest rooms,” Luna Flora offers.

o their My parents nod in relief, and my mom smiles at Marilou. “May I please come with you? I would like to accompany us?”

out in Marilou beams. “Really?”

student. “Yes, of course. We are happy to finally meet you.”

s doing As we prepare to leave, I can see my Alpha looking at Annalise. “What about you?” she asks with concern, “Are you alright? You look a little pale again?”

ier says Luna Annalise sighs and shakes her head. “The usual,” she says. “I’m a bit stupidworry too much.”

Judging by Alpha Celine’s expression, she’s very worried though. I don’t want to hear any more of their conversation as my mother pulls Marilou and I away, happy to spoil us for a while.

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CONSEQUENCES

CELINE

Annie always tells us not to worry, but we do. She's really looking recently. Maybe I'll invite her over later with Ella, just us to check she's alright. For now, though, Elden and I need to handle the other girls. We sent Marilou and Val away with Val's parents, because we know Aurelia might be back any moment.

None of these girls needs to face their perpetrator again. I'll make sure they never see them again, let alone fear them!

Once the girls are away, I shift my attention back to Annie. "You're not feeling well last week either," I mutter.

"Is that true?" Harmony asks, suddenly worried. I sometimes forget we're sisters.

She shrugs. "It's not that bad. It just comes and goes."

“Do you have a lot on your mind?” Harmony wants to know
stress?”

“Nothing in particular. There is always some drama going on in a
—She sighs. “Then there is the whole issue with Marius.”

I didn’t expect to hear his name now. I honestly was so engulfed
whole incident with Val and her friends that, for a split second, I’d fo
about him.

Elden suddenly shifts his attention back to us. “Marius?” he asks
frown. “What did my son do now?”

Annie looks at him with a smile. “Nothing. He and Liam had
argument, nothing major.”

Elden raises his brows. “You are a terrible liar, dear.”

She sighs. “Okay,” she gives in. “Maybe it’s not nothing. But Lian
to handle the situation on his own. He says it’s his pack, and Mari is a
ng paleit.”

girls, to “Goodness,” Elden groans. “My wife is right. I wish we had at le
tack on child with beta or omega blood. Nothing but troubles.”

ve both “I’m always right,” Flora pops up at our side and smiles brightly.

“We have more pressing issues now, though,” Annie points out. “L
ire they worry about my health or Liam’s brother.”

I beg to differ. Her health is important, and the issues with Marius
weren’t troubling too, but there was a certain finality to her voice that non
wants to argue with for fear of upsetting her.

get they Vincent interrupts us. “They’re back. Aurelia managed to capture
guys. Their alpha is here too.” He grins. “He’s not happy. We expect
to argue with us on their behalf, but he didn’t. Seems to be pretty pisse
pack members.”

“Any “Let’s get this over with,” Elden orders.

Harmony, Annie, and I follow him to his office, but Flora stays pack.” There is an adjacent meeting room which he leads us into. Aurelia is there waiting with Midnight River’s young alpha. I know him, it’s I in this we did a couple of our Alpha training sessions together. He’s only e forgotten and took over his pack two months ago. I’ve always thought of him a a rather decent and respectful guy.

with a Vincent was right, though. He looks completely pissed. “I just believe it,” he mutters. “I deeply apologize for my pack members, a little Elden. To you too, Celine.”

Elden blinks, surprised by his politeness. He probably expected mo especially considering he’s such a young alpha. “Well, I appreciate t n wants reacted so fast,” he tells him.

part of Lucas nods. “The guys in question are between eighteen and twenty he tells us. “Something like this has never happened before, ast one knowledge.” He frowns deeply. “However, I did hear some other con rumors.”

“I’m not surprised,” I tell him with a frown. “Everyone knows that et’s not are treated like crap in Midnight River pack.”

“Is that true?” Elden asks me.

s sound “Yes,” Lucas admits. “Unfortunately, it is true.”

e of us I nod. “It’s the reason my father never allied with their retired alpha.

Lucas sighs. “I can’t change everything in just a few weeks,” he say all four “That’s true,” Elden nods. “But this here, this is a very serious crim ted him need to put your foot down.”

d at his “I will,” Lucas says grimly. “My mate is an omega she-wolf. I had her until I became alpha, or she might have been killed.”

Elden shakes his head in disbelief. “So, where are the guys?” behind. “Before you bring them in, you should call Val in here,” Annie says already We all look at her in surprise. “Excuse me?” Elden blinks. “What?” Lucas— “She needs to be here,” she tells us. eighteen “But she’s already experienced the trauma of—” Harmony starts. s being “Yes,” Annie interrupts her. “What she experienced will haunt her while, but she needs to see that these four boys are nothing. That it can’tweak and pathetic and that they are going to act like cowards in front. AlphaValerie is a very smart and rational kid. She needs to see it with her eyes. Make her see how they will whimper and beg for their lives.” re sass, “Honestly,” I tilt my head. “I can see why every pack should have a hat you “Who knows which lucky guy will fill that position in your pack?” smiles. y-two,” Your son, I think, your son should fill the position. I don’t say it to myjust smile nervously. I can see my reaction has surprised him. Damn! cerningneed to put my guard up again. I distract everyone by sending Harmony fetch Valerie, asking her to make sure that Val’s parents stay behind. omegaseasier for Val if we mind link them and explain everything separately.



.”

VALERIE

s.

ie. You

I’m surprised I’m allowed to be here when they question the guys assaulted Marilou and me. I thought they’d do it all behind closed doors to hide pretend nothing ever happened. Part of me loathes the idea of seeing

again, but another part of me wants to make sure they have the right gear that Alpha Celine and Alpha Elden will punch them from here to the moon.

Harmony and I arrive at the meeting room to find everyone is there. The four guys are chained in silver, something that fills me with satisfaction. Fun, huh? A few hours ago, they had Marilou and me tied up for a while. I'm surprised by how pathetic they look. I thought they would be taken care of by the others. They are more imposing, but now that they have no drugs and no tricks, they are just plain.

My own "You know Valerie already," Alpha Elden deadpans.

"Well..." Greg stutters.

Luna." "Is this them?" Alpha Celine asks me.

"Elden I nod. "That's him," I point at Greg. "He said I should feel honored if you would be my first..." I pause. "Well, add something vulgar to the end."

though, "Really!?" their Alpha looks at them with disgust. "That's the guy I really kidnapped? She's half your size! You should be ashamed of yourselves."

mony to "It's not our fault," Greg hurries to explain. "They wanted it. You know, it'll be like you've seen what they were wearing!"

"What!? That's your excuse?" Annalise rises to full height. She's not just a woman, she's an omega, but seeing her like this shows the power she has in her role as luna. It's a bit intimidating, but also amazing. It reminds me of what Luna Flora said earlier... that different people own different kinds of strengths. Maybe I can find my strength too. "I don't care if they were tied up with dollar bills attached to their boobs., No one has the right to touch them against their will."

ys who "So, revealing clothes was the reason you 'had' to knock two of them out unconscious and abduct two others?" Elden demands to know. His voice is low and dangerous.

guys and draw and dark now, sending a shiver down my spine. “You hit them
soon. baseball bat!”

already “I wasn’t involved in THAT,” one of the guys blurts out. “I didn’t
th grim anyone unconscious!”

up. “So, you are saying you would never do something so horrible as
killer and girl? But it’s alright to rape someone?”

are just “We thought they were omegas,” one of them hurries to explain. “They
worthless!”

“You really don’t see how you are digging your graves deeper and
do you?” Harmony asks in disbelief.

“I’m an omega too,” Luna Annalise says coolly. “So, in your mind
that he would be okay to rape me? I’ll make sure to pass that on to my mate.”

” “Yeah, he’ll find it hilarious, just like I do,” Elden says. Surely, even
girl you four idiots can tell by the tone of his voice that he doesn’t find it re
s!” funny.

should “Our wolves took control,” the other guy says in panic. “We lost control
Silence follows their words. The adults are just exchanging a few glances
ot a tall it’s hard to read what they think.

she has in *That’s a lie, Ailia tells me. I linked their wolves when they tried to
s me of themselves on you. They were disgusted but couldn’t take control of
inds of humans.*

she naked I wonder if I should tell the others when Alpha Celine speaks up. “
th them think we are stupid?” Her whole aura changes, I can feel her alpha au
across the room. It makes me want to bare my neck to her. “We are
o girls wolves. You are in a room full of people who have wolves.”

voice is “She’s right. You are just insulting our intelligence now,” Elden

“Alpha Lucas, they attacked four girls on my pack grounds. Two girls

with a still in the infirmary for that reason. They drugged them, abducted them, and attempted to force themselves on them. They show zero respect and think they are above our laws.”

“No,” one of the guys whimpers. “We didn’t mean to hurt them.”
to hit a “That’s not true,” I say quietly. “They were talking about other girls who were not the first they’ve hurt. They were boasting about it.”
they are Greg pales instantly.

“You also thought you could get away with this by threatening deeper victims, telling them you would kill all of their beloveds, eh?” Aurelia says with venom in her voice.

Logic, it Alpha Elden and Alpha Celine exchange a gaze.

While I still wonder what they are planning to do now, Luna Annalise intervenes. “Let’s go, Val. I think we’ve seen enough.”

Automatically I nod, relieved. I hate these guys with a passion, but I’m not sure I can see anything gory. The Luna leads me out of the room. I can hear them begging for their lives, wondering how they could be so pathetic and cruel. “Why just me?” I ask Annalise. “Why didn’t you ask Marilou to come too?”

She sighs. “Marilou didn’t need any proof. I’ll tell her what happened of their that it’s over. But you... you wouldn’t have believed it if you hadn’t seen them with your own eyes.”

Do you That’s true. I blush. “Luna A—”

from “Just call me Annie. I’m not your luna, and you don’t need to be so close with me.”

I nod, my heart warming instantly. She’s so nice. “Annie... I... I’m sorry for what Lauren did, and that Mom, Dad, and I didn’t notice how she was and—”

two of Annie chuckles. “None of that was your fault, dear. But I appreciate your gesture. Lauren has been punished. She’s not a danger anymore, anyway, she was just a pawn herself. I’m really happy with my life,” she says to me. “I don’t think of Lauren at all, or of what she did.”

is too. I “How did you manage to move on?” I ask quietly. “And forget?”

“I didn’t forget,” she tells me earnestly. “The past is always part of who we are, we can’t ignore it, but we also can’t allow it to tie us down. I have my own friends, and Liam to help me cope with everything. Just like you have your friends, and Liam to help me cope with everything. Just like you have loving parents and friends to help you get through this.”

I let her words sink in. Admittedly, it will take me a while to fully wrap my mind around what she just said. But her words make me feel better. “I’ll turn to see Jazz and Tori,” I say.

Annalise smiles. “I’m sure that’s possible. Let’s get Marilou and I want to see your friends.”

the guys

how after

with Luna



CELINE

ended and

it’s seen

After dealing with the four morons, we all headed out for a break to get some fresh air.

formal Alpha Lucas will have to handle it from here on, but our verdict was that they were all of them dead. Lucas needs to involve the Council for an actual death sentence

I’m so help. His lie-detecting gift comes in handy at times. If they are getting crazy

iate thehaving already raped and assaulted so many she-wolves and young
nd in a will mean the end for them.

he tells It's getting late, so Harmony and I have decided to drive back to
Blood in the morning. In the meantime, we all head to the dining hall
dinner together. Jazz, Tori, and the rest of the teens join us too. The
us. We finally allowed to leave the hospital and are happy to catch up on every
family, "How did you girls meet?" Flora asks Aurelia as we all take our
... you the table, "You never told me."

"In school," Aurelia explains. "Annie asked me to keep an eye on M
rap my And then I stumbled over an awesome scene where Jazz was putting
"I want their bullies in place."

"I still think it would have ended badly if you hadn't appeared," V
then go quietly, "and told the guys off."

Her words instantly raise my interest. Harmony looks annoy
Enough drama already! This makes my whole story with Mariu
ridiculous in comparison. "Please don't tell me it's someone from
Blood who bullies others," I groan. "I hope I don't have to have th
again."

"No, no, the guys from our pack... they tried to stop the other guy..
Val hurries to explain.

and to "Well," Aurelia mutters. "They did the bare minimum of staying
trouble and told him to shut up... once."

s to see "I agree," Marilou says evenly. "It's not like they went out of their
entence help."

iam for I'm so close to getting pissed again when Flora shifts the topic, re
uilty of juicy details about her love life. It's hilarious, especially since Elden i
completely unfazed, whereas the girls blush bright red.

girls, it Eventually, we shift the talk toward more serious topics again. “

look at Annie. “Recently, Aryanna went to the Black&White. She s
Moonmight have a lead. Something about a missing witch?”

to have Annie sighs. “Unfortunately, it was a dead end. Ari investigated
y wereand talked to said coven. But the witch really just took some time
ything. travel. Apparently, not unusual for witches.”

seats at I massage my temples a bit. Shoot, I had hoped this would l
somewhere but seems like it might be a lone witch or maybe a secre
Marilou.behind her. When I notice that Jazz, Val, and the other kids sudden
one ofworried, I decide to shift the topic yet again. “You girls looking for
your birthday?” I ask. “It’s in April, right?”

Val says Jazz beams. “Yes, can’t wait for it. Finally eighteen!”

“It’s going to be great,” Val smiles.

ed too. “You’re all so lucky,” Aurelia sighs. “I’m going to be the last in the
is lookturn eighteen. Sucks to be a summer child.”

l Moon “Why?” Elden chuckles a bit. “It’s not like a few weeks will ruin a
hat talkfor you.”

“I agree,” Nox smiles warmly at her. “Lion and I will be turning e
. Don,”in May and June, so... you are just a very few weeks behind us.”

“And the rest of us still have one more year to go,” Marilou giggles.

out of Aurelia raises her brows. “I hate to lose.”

“That’s my daughter,” Elden nods at her last words, making Flora
way toeyes.

We others laugh a bit. I can’t help it. It’s cute how Elden dotes
vealingShe’s his only daughter, so it’s only natural, I guess. She also se
remainsresemble him quite a bit in her behavior and characteristics.

Before we wrap up the family dinner, Finn surprises us. “I didn’t ki

Say,” I were having a party,” he chuckles as he walks into the dining room. I said she like he attended an official meeting, he is wearing a suit, a white shirt tie... it’s a stark contrast to his tattoos and piercings, but he can pull it off further I’ve never seen him dressed like that. By the gazes he receives from the teenage girls on the table, they are quite impressed too. Tori even blinks a bit, although she should be used to seeing Finn around, and Val and Jade lead us at him in awe.

“Does this run in the family?” Jazz asks into the silence.

Ella and Harmony burst into laughter. “I thought the same when I saw them the first time,” Harmony admits.

“Right?” Jazz looks at her. “I mean, you have the super-hot, stoic imposing oldest brother, Mr. Stoic-face.”

“He’ll love to hear that,” Annie chuckles. “I’ll make sure to tell him that.”

“Then the second oldest with that hot hipster look. Even the rest in anything face looks good on him.”

“Best description of Marius I’ve ever heard,” Ella gasps for air.

“Jazz...” Val whispers, tugging at her arm. She looks slightly pale. “Are the painkillers messing with your mind?”

Jazz ignores her. “Then the edgy guy who looks like a movie star plays in a rock band. Aurelia looks like a supermodel, and the twins have that classic heart-breaker look going for them.” She frowns. “The Moon Club was really generous in passing on these family genes.”

“Pity Dante isn’t here,” Ella giggles. “He would have loved to hear this.”

“Well, there is nothing I can say against all of that,” Harmony chuckles. Elden has been listening with a stoic face, but now he snorts and shakes his head.

t seemshead in amusement. “You are a force to be reckoned with, Jazmi
t, and athank you for the compliment, I guess.” He smirks. “It’s all been mi
l it off.Flora’s doing.”

om the Aurelia looks slightly grossed out at his words, making us all jus
ushes amore.

zz look Finn looks confused, but as usual, his humor wins over any confu
surprise. “Nice to meet such a fun group. You must be Aurelia’s friend

“I told you they’d make a lasting impression,” Aurelia tells him dryl

1 I saw Finn grins, sitting down next to his parents. Soon he engulfs them i
about his meeting. Seems like he met some of Elden’s business p
ng, andtoday. Meanwhile, Harmony and I continue to catch up with Val, Ja
their friends. It’s been a long while since I had time to hang out with th
im youin my pack, so I enjoy it quite a bit.

After dinner, we all retire to our rooms. Now that everything is se
ig bitchwant to look at some books and spend some time with Ella and Annie
getting some well-needed sleep. Annie is looking pale again as she
down on the sofa next to me. It’s just us three. Against my better judg
nicked.just have to ask. “What’s that story about Marius about?” I ask them.

Annie sighs. “He just doesn’t like me,” she mutters.

ar who “He doesn’t like anyone,” Ella argues.

ave that “We had a little situation... and he got into a fight with Ella and
hoddessand he might have said a couple of hurtful things. Liam was not amuse

I sigh. I know we are only technically mates, but I still fee
ur all ofembarrassed. What’s wrong with him? So many people genuinely li
and care for him, and he just pushes them away. “And what happened

des. “Nothing,” Annie shrugs. “I think he’s battling something int
akes hisWhatever he’s facing, he doesn’t want anyone to know. I’ve asked I

ne. But be patient with him for a little longer.”

ne, and Is it because of the mate bond, I wonder? Is he acting out because so much distance between us? But then, he’s the one who doesn’t want to laugh not the other way around.

“He’s not feeling well either,” Ella points out. “Dante told me that about his difficulties during training and that his wolf seems to be weakened.”

“Is he?” I frown. “Really?” Against better judgment, I’m feeling worried. “I don’t want him to get hurt... Ok, a small part of me might hate him and want to see him in pain sometimes, but, if I look past my own hurt feelings, a big part of me doesn’t really want to see him like that. He appears to be stressed, and downwards.”

“Maybe he has the same stomach bug as Annie,” Ella muses.

“You’re still not feeling well?” I ask in worry.

“Annie rubs over her head. “I don’t know,” she mutters. “Sometimes I feel fine before, but then I just eat or smell something, and then I feel...” her voice drops off.

“What?” Ella presses.

She stares at us. “Goddess... I... no... what? I thought...” She rubs her forehead with her palm. “I’m so stupid. It’s unbelievable.”

I’m surprised by her reaction until it slowly sinks in. “No wonder, Dante, wouldn’t Liam have noticed the change in your scent?”

“I don’t know.” Annie shakes her head. “It’s a weird lycan thing... but before you were pregnant, during a bit of a stable period of the pregnancy, your body won’t change its scent. It’s like him to protect the future mother from possible attacks.” She pauses to rub her head. “What’s next?” “I’m only off birth control for a few weeks. I, I need to make sure,” she says finally.

“Liam to...” “I’m sure someone has a pregnancy test here, somewhere,” I muse.

“No, no way I’m going to ask someone here. Elden and Flora will find out there is for sure. And I want to tell Liam first, in case it is true.” Her eyes light up with sudden joy. “Goddess, I can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“Maybe one of us can get a test?” Ella muses, before she frowns. “I don’t want to raise suspicions about Dante and me, and he might hear about it. I really don’t want to raise his hopes already.”

“Same here. I don’t need the rumors,” I mutter. I consider the situation for a moment before I nod. “I have an idea.”

“Spit it out?” Ella smirks.

“When the girls disappeared, I asked Garret and some of our warriors to come for support. The others already left to protect our pack, but Garret is still around.” I smirk. “He’s trustworthy.”

“Good idea, Celine,” Ella giggles.

I suddenly feel like a teen again, a bit secretive and giddy. I link up with the pack and head downstairs, careful not to meet anyone. Garret is already waiting for me, eyeing me nervously. “Is everything alright, Alpha?”

“This is a top-secret mission,” I tell him.

“We are not going to a bar, are we?” he asks warily. “I think Elias will be mad at me for last time.”

“No, don’t worry. I need you to drive to town and buy me something from the drugstore. I would do it myself, but it’s more discreet if you do it.”

He blinks at me, both curious and appalled. “What am I supposed to do?” “A pregnancy test.” When he stares at me, eyes wide, I chuckle. “I’ll be there, idiot. Once you have it and are back, link me. Don’t tell anyone else. That’s an order.”

He nods, looking at me curiously. He must be wondering who I’m

find out this for. But I don't tell him. This is Annie's secret to tell.

It up in An hour later, Annie, Ella, and I celebrate with orange juice and cocoa. Annie seems like all the tension has left her. She was probably so worried about being sick all the time. Now she knows why. She is making plans about it. To tell Liam... she wants to make it a romantic candlelight dinner and surprise him in a cute way.

tion for Eventually, we all go to bed. The events of the day and my thoughts about Marius keep me awake though, so I grab one of the books I borrowed from Elden.

riors to I lazily start skimming through it, too tired to read anything for long. I almost put it away again when my eyes catch a footnote. I read it.

I read it again.

And then again.

Garret I'm suddenly fully awake. When I look at the cover, I notice it's the book Flora gave me containing an old collection of myths and legends. I open it for me, page and study it again, my eyes growing wide.

Hybrids Type 1: Werewolves x Witches. Genes carry on to the second and third generations. Werewolf genes dominate in terms of looks. Often, the colors for wolves, such as pure white. Enhanced senses. Enhanced wolf eyes. Eye color of wolves not black but silver.

ing from I close the book again. That's basically me in a nutshell. But I'm not a hybrid. Mom was not a witch. I'm sure she wasn't. But it said "witches don't buy?" runs in the third generation too... so... was one of my grandparents...

Not for I feel completely taken aback by the sudden realization. Was one of my parents a witch? Did no one know, or did no one tell me?

I... I'm a hybrid?

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mom's

THE JUVENILE PRINCE

CELINE

“**W**hat?” Harmony stares at me, eyes wide. “Wait... what...?”
I just told her what I discovered last night, or at least, believe I found out. She’s my most loyal ally and has become my best friend. If I can’t tell her, then I can’t tell anyone. “I had pretty much the same reaction.”

“But is anyone in your family a witch?” she asks in shock. “If it were, why did Alpha Cedric never tell you?”

I frown. That’s a question I have been turning over and over in my mind. Why wouldn’t my father tell me? Especially since we were just discussing the topic a few days ago. He was completely oblivious to it. “I don’t think he knows,” I point out.

“But was your mother a hybrid?” she wants to know.

I rub my temples. "From what I know... no."

Harmony pauses, looking at me thoughtfully. She reads the page found for herself. "Okay, don't take this the wrong way. I'm just your devil's advocate. Are you sure you are a hybrid?"

"No." I shrug.

"So, let's say your mother was not a hybrid. How can we work out if you are? Let's make a list of all the points that make it more likely that you are a hybrid."

"I have heightened senses," I point out. "Elden clearly said it's more than just a werewolf gift."

She nods. "And Flora handed you that book specifically, which heavily weighs a lot."

"I am a white wolf."

"You are a white wolf."

"And I have silver eyes," I point out. "When my wolf comes to the surface, what I mean is my eyes don't turn black; they turn silver. I always thought it was just a quirky feature, but what if there is more to it?"

Harmony tilts her head. "Celine," she asks quietly. "Let's forget all the possibilities at the moment ignoring the fact that your father has no claim if it's true, your mother might not have been of witch blood... what does your gut feeling say? Do you feel like you're a hybrid?"

I look her in the eye. "Yes."

"Then let's assume it's true," she nods, and I like that she's taking me seriously. She's not trying to talk me out of it, and she doesn't shove her own instincts aside. That's why Harmony is such a great beta, she always has your best interest in mind, but also the packs. "Who can you talk to?"

"My father... but I doubt it would lead me anywhere."

“What about your grandparents?” she asks me.

“Dad’s parents died when I was young,” I explain. Dad and I have been playing our own for a long time. Besides, from what I have heard, my grandfather was a real jerk. He suppressed the pack omegas and didn’t care for lower ranked wolves in general. That’s pretty much the same issue Alpha Liam faces with his pack now. It probably wasn’t too different in Moonlight when you were at twenty years ago when my father took over.

“And your relatives from your mother’s side?” Harmony asks.

“My granny died,” I say, feeling sad. I always felt a strong bond with her. “But Grandpa is still around. He likes to keep to himself, though he doesn’t really like huge gatherings. Dad has been trying to get him to live with us, but he prefers his cottage in the forest. We visit him regularly and...” my voice trails off.

“He doesn’t sound like your typical werewolf,” Harmony points out, thoughtfully.

“No...” I say distractedly, as the wheels in my head start turning. It’s just a fog is slowly clearing from my mind, and I’m finally seeing what was hidden in the other front of me all along. I always felt that Grandpa living on his own was a little weird, but now that I see it in context, it’s so obvious that something was off. “I’ll give him a call and tell him we’re coming to visit.”

“Today?”

“No,” I sigh, not able to hide the fed-up tone in my voice. “Today, my cousin from Europe is arriving. Remember? Seems like he loves parties. Liam and Annie are throwing a party in town, and we’re invited.”

“Oh shit, I forgot about that,” Harmony sighs. “A social outing.”

The party is being held in one of their properties in the city. Basically anyone with a senior rank and name is going to be there. I need to attend.

also a good opportunity to meet some of our allies and maybe form some alliances. It's just... "Marius will be there," I mutter. "Just what I need right now."

lower-
Lucas
Blood



MARIUS

with her. My cousin Eric is arriving today. Liam and Dante left a little while ago with some warriors to pick him up from the airport. He's Dad's nephew, but he's... Let's just say he grates on my nerves sometimes. I've never been along with him, but he and my younger brother Finn do since they're of a similar age, and apparently, he was really nice to Liam and Annie when they visited him in France.

He has this juvenile, teasing attitude that annoys me to no end. He's sarcastic and seems to take nothing seriously, and wherever he goes, there's a little women giggling and gushing over him. They're like moths to a flame. Goddess above, how am I going to survive his visit!?

Annie's busy planning some welcoming lunch for Eric, and if that's not bad enough, then there's a major party being held in his honor tonight!

Ugh. I wish I could bail on it, but Dad called this morning and told me exactly what he would do to me if I didn't show up. It wasn't pretty.

The place is buzzing already, and Eric hasn't even arrived yet. Most of the kitchen staff are already up and running around like headless chickens. For the goddess' sake, it's just Eric!

and. It's

me new To keep some distance from everyone, I've retreated into my room and rightsafe haven. Huge gatherings make me nervous, and without Cyrus around back me up, it's even worse. I try to focus on my sketchbook for a while, but my hands drawing on their own. It's like I'm in a daze and my thoughts are going to places they shouldn't.

I can see them in front of me again, those yellow eyes, the voice of the person who ruined my life. Fuck! Why can't I stop thinking about it! For so long, I was able to blank it out of my mind, but now I'm losing control.

It slips out in my nightmares, and more recently, it's started invading my daydreams. It's like I can't find even a minute of peace anymore.

I groan in frustration before drawing the only thing that gives me at least a moment of peace. Her beautiful face, her bright eyes, the quiet dignity of the image I just drew, closing my sketchbook in frustration. My screen doesn't do Celine justice.

Marius, Aryanna links me. They are about to arrive any minute.

I sigh, resigned to my fate of having to spend the day in the company of others. Well, at least it will take me out of my head. I throw my sketchbook on my table and make my way downstairs. When I arrive, the others are already waiting.

"Ah, here you are," Annie smiles at me before turning to Ella. "Linker linked me."

Ella rolls her eyes. "I bet he's going to get on my nerves again."

"You say that now," Annie chuckles. "But you love Eric."

"It's hard not to like him," she agrees.

What... even Ella likes him? She doesn't like anyone, but Eric is my favorite. That juvenile idiot! Before I can even fathom that thought, the door flies open and reveals the person in question. "Hello, everyone"

om, my exclaims loudly, a shit-eating grin on his face as he spreads his arms
ound to a dramatic gesture.

ile, my Next to me, I can hear Aryanna snort. “Eccentric much?” she w
ts kept towards me, she sounds amused though. “Cute, in a way.”

I just shrug. What am I supposed to say!? How’s Eric cute!?

e... the “How old is he?” Aryanna wants to know.

’ For so “I’m not sure,” I admit. “Twenty, I think.”

.. “Doesn’t look bad,” she continues to ponder, as usual, succumbing
ling my so-called ‘charm.’ “Tall, handsome, gorgeous wavy hair, and those ma
cheekbones. Very French,” she analyses. Does she even know wha
: least asaying?

. I stare “I know,” Ella answers, amused. “He truly looks like Prince Ch
ibbling The textbook example of a prince on his white horse.”

I snap my head to the side to stare at her. I can’t even believe w
hearing!

pany of “Absolutely,” Aryanna chuckles.

chbook I can only shake my head in disbelief.

iers are “Look who is here?” Eric grins and opens his arms towards An
Ella. “My two favorite women. Annie, my beautiful rose, come to my
am just I can’t believe what’s happening, but my sister-in-law is indeed h
jerkface Eric, patting his back, and giggling. And my brother just stand
and merely rolls his eyes like it’s normal? When he hugs Ella next, and
shows a similar reaction, I’m so close to losing it.

Why the fuck does this guy get away with everything? I know he’s
s in her and blood-related, but Liam is one of the most possessive guys I kno
ne door Eric freaking hugged his mate. And Dante might pretend to be a n
!” Eric kind beta, but no one would dare to look at his mate usually!

open in I'm still struggling to keep my composure when Eric turns to me, his eyes widening. "Goodness, Marius!" Before I can react, he's hugging me. He whispers "I haven't seen you in forever," he exclaims. I return the hug, realizing late that I've indeed just hugged him back.

Get a grip, Marius. Rule number 1: Never get too close to anyone.

If you aren't close to anyone, you won't get hurt.

Easy as that. A simple rule. And I can't even stick to it.

g to his Eric pulls back and raises one of his perfect eyebrows to look at me. He's masculine, grew tall and handsome. Wow, I like that look of yours. The long hair, the beard. Hot. Almost hipster, but you can pull it off."

"Did you just call me a hipster?" I ask in disbelief, too flabbergasted to even react angrily.

Eric seems to be completely unfazed by my question. "A hot hipster, that I'm grins and turns to his entourage. "I have brought my beta with me," he exclaims while making a dramatic gesture toward him like he's a character in some ridiculous movie. "Some of you guys know him already. Emilien."

I don't know him, but Annie and Ella nod and smile at him. "Welcome, Emilien," Annie says with a little bit of a smile. "Thank you for the warm welcome," Emilien says with a little bit of a smile. "exudes calmness and a certain stoicism that Eric always lacks.

hugging "And here," Eric pulls two twin girls in front of him. "Are these your advisors. Elise and Elodie." He grins. "They are sisters."

l Dante Ella laughs. "You don't say?" she teases before she approaches them and hugs them. "Nice to see you again!"

family, "We just came for you, Ella," one of the twins giggles.

ow, and "And we were curious to meet your man," the other grins.

ice and "Plus, we can't let our silly prince roam around on his own."

As usual, Eric doesn't get angry. He seems to enjoy their teasing.

e, eyes “You know them already, Ella?” Dante asks with interest.
tightly. “Yes, when we all visited France, I sometimes stayed in the Co
ing toomain building. These two showed me around a lot. And hey,” Ella
“They are fellow Els, after all. Elise, Elodie and Ella.”

I’m so bad with names that I’m not sure if her joke will confuse me
me to at least remember their names start with El. Against my
judgment, I turn to Eric curiously. “You already have advisors?”
e. “You “Of course, I have advisors,” he grins and clasps my shoulder
air withalready regret talking to him. “Every prince and princess of the C
does.”

isted to “Interesting,” Aryanna chimes in. “I didn’t know that.”

“Eric is working for the Council,” Liam explains to her, and agai
er,” Heoriginal intention, I listen to his words closely. “He doesn’t have a pa
ne,” hedoes he live in one. Well, I guess you could see the Council as a kind c
acter inbut strictly speaking, it isn’t. Every high-ranking member there has a
1.” their bodyguard and an advisor for political affairs.”

varmly. Finally, an answer I can understand. Liam has always had a tal
ow. Hesummarizing things well and getting to the core of it. I nod quietly,
that a few others who were confused nod too. Without intendin
ny twosuddenly feel a sense of pride forming toward Liam. He’s such a stro
smart leader.

he girls I’m shocked at my own thoughts though. Like...what the heck...
got into me today?

“You will be happy to know, Eric,” Liam tells him with a c
“Annalise has organized a party for you tonight.”

Eric beams happily. “Awesome, Liam, thank you. And are n
beautiful flowers going to participate as well?” he teases Ella and Ann

Ella rolls her eyes. “Well, it’s not like we have any say in the Council’s deadpans.

I grin slightly at her words, but Eric doesn’t seem to take it to heart. He just laughs. He’s never one to be upset or easily offended.

“Who knows...” Emilien tells him with a smile. “Maybe you will find a better mate here, Prince Eric?”

“Yes, you might get lucky here,” one of the twins says—Elise or Emilien, and I whoever. I can’t tell them apart anyway.

“Oh, you are hoping to find your mate?” Liam asks.

Eric shrugs. “Isn’t that everyone’s hope?” he asks in return, sounding surprisingly serious all of a sudden.

Is it? To my surprise, I can see every unmated person in the room nodding, not including Aryanna and even some of the staff who have been serving drinks. Am I really the only one who doesn’t want a mate!? Even Eric, with his playful womanizer attitude, is longing to find his other half.

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DRAMA AT THE PARTY

MARIUS

Eric is naturally chatty and easily carries on any conversation, so I have always found difficult to do. Honestly, I'm just not interested in what people have to say, which is why I suck at small talk.

Annie makes sure that our guests are settled in, and we all head off ready for the party tonight. I wish I could get out of it, but it's important. Eric is my cousin and a very high-ranking member of the Council. Be like my anatomy where it is.

My brother Finn is coming too, but my other siblings are still eighteen and can't attend... lucky them. Mom and Dad aren't coming using the excuse that they're too old for partying. Dad made a big speech at lunch, saying Eric must come to see them tomorrow to catch up. It's ridiculous. I swear Mom and Dad think the sun shines out of Eric.

An hour before we set off for the party, I'm getting ready, dressing more elegantly than usual with a pair of black dress pants, a white dress shirt, and a tie. That needs to be sufficient. But how the fuck do I tie this tie!? I have no idea what to do with it. I've never liked wearing ties, but I've never quite bothered to learn how to put one on.

I contemplate what to do for a solid five minutes before swallowing my pride. *Do you have a moment?* I link Liam.

Sure, I'm ready anyway. Should I come up to your place?

Yes.

A few minutes later, Liam knocks on my door and enters. When I see that Liam is dressed similarly to me, I feel relieved. He didn't go overboard either. I strongly dislike these social events. Can't we just go to a pub!

Liam immediately understands why I called and spares me the embarrassment of asking for help. He just takes the tie off my hands and wraps it around my neck. "You and your ties," he teases.

"Well, what can I say? I'd rather burn them all."

Liam grins. "Me too."

"Just don't take advantage of my vulnerability now and strangle me. I'll hear myself joke."

Liam grins. "Tempting," he smirks, adjusting the tie a bit too tight around my neck. When I scoff at him, he just smirks and loosens it. When he is finished, I turn to look in the mirror.

"Not bad," I muse.

"Yeah, when you put some effort into it, you manage to look somewhat presentable," Liam deadpans.

"Very funny," I snort. "You're one to talk."

Liam just chuckles before leaving me alone again. He says he wants

ing a bit and check on the others. I shake my head in amusement. My brother
ss shirt, me laugh sometimes. I'm about to grab my keys when it strikes me.
s stupid just joked around with Liam. That's not me.

em and What am I doing? I've tried so hard to keep my family at arm's length
can't allow this to keep happening. I brush through my hair in exasperation
g down just... I can't have them know. I'd rather have them hate me than have
find out the truth.

The party is being held in one of the penthouses Liam and Dad own
rent it out to high-ranking visitors or for fancy parties. When we arrive
see that a lot of people are already here. I can see a lot of pack members of Red Cl
erboard also Silverlake. There are also quite a few wolves from my father's
? Liam's allies. There's definitely Moon Blood wolves here, as I can see
ne the Harmony, at least. And my father's old friend Jace sent some of his
ids and members to the party too.

My gaze lingers on Harmony. She is currently chatting to Finn. Did
not come? I don't know why, but the fact that she might not be here
me.

me," I Finn greets us as we enter the huge dining room, his face lighting up
grin when he sees Eric. He introduces Harmony to Eric, who obviously
tightly compliment her looks as he does with every female, it seems.
t again. understand why no one ever seems to take offense to it.

Eric and Finn immediately start bantering back and forth, joking
like they're besties, with Eric making fun of Finn's piercings and
newly teasing him for his fancy clothes. "Tore another hole in your face
grins.

"What can I say?" Finn smirks. "I'd like to go down with style."
ts to go "And my dear old Uncle Elden doesn't mind?"

“He gave up,” Finn chuckles. “You’re one to talk.”

“Why’s that?” Eric asks.

“Man, the pants are okay,” Finn teases him. Indeed, Eric is wearing dark-blue pants. “But that long-sleeved dress shirt and the violet tie. I vest... that’s bold!”

“You’re just envious because I can pull it off,” Eric winks.

“I am!” Finn laughs slightly. “Honestly, I am.”

Eric squeezes Finn’s shoulder before they stop their mutual teasing, a lot turn to more serious topics.

“So, how far up the line are you for the throne now?” Finn asks Eric.

“Why?” Harmony interrupts Finn. “Are you interested?”

“No way,” Finn snorts. “I think I’m somewhere in the top 200.”

Liam chuckles, and Eric grins. “Liam and I are in the top 50, I believe.”

“Dad is higher,” Liam muses.

“How come?” Harmony asks curiously.

“Because he’s a direct descendent of one of the five royal families. His grandparents were both lycan royals and alphas. It doesn’t get any more with that. The royal rank goes by power and bloodline, not necessarily following the first come, first served principle.”

They discuss some political affairs of the country, which is boring.

Eric breaks away to mingle with the crowd. I turn to look at Annie, E around Harmony, finally deciding to ask the one burning question I’ve had since Finn arrived and showered the women with compliments. “How come none of the girls are annoyed when he flirts with you? I thought most of you would be turned off by that?”

Harmony doesn’t answer. I notice how she hardly looks at me, which surprises me a bit. She is normally very chatty. Oh well, maybe

distracted. Annie, however, takes my question seriously. “Good question actually. Now that I think about it... you’re right. I normally don’t like simple compliments, however... Eric never compliments a woman in a colorful way,” she explains thoughtfully. “He never says things like ‘Oh, you’re hot in that dress.’ Or anything suggestive. He doesn’t really hit on you,” she continues, to my surprise. “He comments on color choices, how we look, our hair, how we look so confident, or how we radiate strength, or how things and really goes well with our hair color or skin tone. He underlines things that we put in effort into and like to have others recognize.”

“She’s right,” Ella agrees. “I would be so pissed if he only looked at my butt and boobs, but he doesn’t. He commented on how strong I look compared to a year ago when we visited him and how much confidence I radiate in my dress, and yes, I find that very empowering to know someone is taking notice.”

“He’s far less superficial than people give him credit for,” Harmony says. Ourout. Oh, she was listening to the conversation? She bows her head and says, “highly you’d excuse me?”

Annie nods. “We need to catch up later.”

Harmony squeezes her hand. “Definitely sis.”

My eyes roam the room like I’m searching for someone. I realize I’ve been subconsciously searching for Celine all night when I find her. She’s hot, and everyone takes notice of her when she enters a room. Goddess, she’s so perfect! That luscious long hair, which is normally straight, has been curled slightly for tonight. Her face is perfection... she’s the queen.

Eric is talking to her and shaking her hand, and I don’t like it. I can see she’s showing she introduces herself to him and how she laughs at his ridiculous

question, Celine doesn't laugh very often, and it pisses me off that he's managing to sleazy easily. I swear, if he puts his sleazy fingers on her, I'll—

shallow *Finally, come to your senses concerning our mate?* I can hear Cyrus look somind. He seems to reemerge whenever Celine is around. Other than this," she hardly ever shows herself anymore.

did our *You have some nerve. You basically go silent on me for weeks, and then you pop up all of a sudden?*

we put *Don't make this my fault,* he tells me. To my surprise, his words lack venom or anger. He sounds tired. *I'm weakened, and it's all your fault.*

I at my I hate that he's weak, and I hate that it's the fucking mate-bond response I look for it. Celine doesn't seem to be weakened at all. Why are only Cyrus affected?

others My gaze shifts back to her. Emilien has joined Eric now, and he seems to be captivated by Celine's beauty too.

7 points Fuck it! I need a distraction.

bit. "If The distraction happens to be a cute brown-haired she-wolf who happens to be staring at me and smiling. Okay, time to flirt. If Celine can flirt with me, I can definitely do the same. I can be charming when I want to. I soon hear a girl giggling at my words. I have pulled her away from the crowd and into a hallway that's not too crowded. Her voice is grating to my ears, and she's tall, nothing more than to push her aside and leave.

1 room. When she touches my chest, I can feel Cyrus roar inside of me. He's not straight, I shove him to the back of my mind, trying to lock him out. I need a distraction. I can't have Celine on my mind all the time. I just can't.

To my shock, I suddenly feel her presence close to me, and when I hear my gaze from the she-wolf whose name I can't even remember, I can't help but smile. She's standing to the side. She looks at me, her face and eyes don't give a

ed it soaway. It pisses me off that she can be this way, so powerful and di
even when her mate is flirting with another woman.

s in my “Is there something wrong?” I snap, cringing a bit at my own hostile
that, he “No,” she says evenly. Other than that, she doesn’t seem to react. F
gaze rests on me before she turns away to walk over to Harmony. W
*nd now*she remain so unfazed? What’s wrong with her!?

I try to focus on the girl in front of me again, but it’s hard. S
ack anyCeline’s scent lingers in the air, and the way she looked at me just n
. imprinted itself into my mind. I’m no longer paying any attention to
onsiblein front of me. She keeps giggling and telling me something, but I car
is and Ipretend to be interested. Then suddenly, her small hand is on my tie a
me forward, meeting my lips with hers. What in the actual FUCK!?
eems toshocked I need a moment to process what’s going on.

To my surprise, however, someone else interrupts us before I c
away. And again, this someone is Celine. “Sorry for interrupting yo
as beensays evenly.

. Eric, I “What?” the girl snaps at Celine, and part of me wants to strangle
ave theusing that tone with her. “Can’t you take a hint?”

d into a “Oh, I absolutely can,” she deadpans. I can feel the alpha aura ra
. I wantfrom her, and the girl flinches. “But you are blocking the path
restroom. Maybe you would like to take your flirting to a more private
hates it. Wait, we are right in front of the toilets? I look to the side and notic
l this. Iright; we are basically blocking the path to the restrooms.

Celine stares at me for a moment, then she turns to the girl. “Leav
I shifttells her, and the girl scurries away. I’m not even sad she’s gone; I don
see herher anyway. I only want Celine. Fuck it, I only want her. For a m
nythingCeline and I keep looking at each other.

gnified, “I wonder what I did to you?” she says, taking me by surprise. She s
me; her eyes are a darker shade of blue than my family’s. Liam’s e
e tone. almost icy. Hers are like an ocean, deep and comforting. “For montl
ler cooltried to approach you and talk to you. All I wanted was an honest ar
/hy candiscussion with you, nothing more. But you never even gave me the
to talk to you. You pushed me aside at every possible moment. All th
o hard.I have been wondering why? What did I do for you to hate me this
ow hasWhat did I do to have you treat me like I don’t exist? And you know v
the girljust realized that I didn’t do anything at all.” She furrows her brows
i’t evenare just pathetic!” she spits out.

nd tugs I feel my heart break at the look in her eyes. For a split second, she
I’m soguard down, and she looked hurt, like something in her just broke. And
me who broke it. I planned to make her hate me, but now that she
an pulldon’t feel good.

u,” she She turns on her heels and leaves, returning to the crowd of peop
eagerly greet her.

her for When I turn around to grab a bottle of wine to drown my sorrows
catch a pair of brown eyes staring straight at me. They belong to a hu
radiatinghuman guy I know all too well because he just happens to be best
to thewith my Luna, which is probably why he’s here now, the only
area.” amongst us. Next to him is Jun, who just keeps staring at me. “Wait...

ce she’srasps out. “It’s you? You’re the mate who doesn’t want her? But y
Liam’s brother! How can you break Celine’s heart like that!?! She’s
re,” shewonderful person. She cares deeply for her pack, she’s fair and smart.’
i’t want “If she’s that great, why don’t you go for her?” I huff, pissed at l
moment,talks about Celine with such fondness. I don’t care if he’s gay or not.

Dave looks at me, sudden anger flashing in his eyes. “You—”

stares at Jun takes his hand, interrupting him successfully. "Come," he says
yes are "Let's go."

hs, I've "He's not your mate, you know that?" I ask Jun.

id open "Dave might not be my mate," he says calmly. "But he healed a par
chance I didn't know was broken. No matter what the goddess has planned
is time, even if I find my mate, even if we break up, I'll never forget what he
much? me. I can treat someone with respect even when they are not my ma
what!? I can't, even when they are."

s. "You I have nothing to retort, nothing.

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Jun takes his hand, interrupting him successfully. “Come,” he says quietly. “Let’s go.”

“He’s not your mate, you know that?” I ask Jun.

“Dave might not be my mate,” he says calmly. “But he healed a part of me I didn’t know was broken. No matter what the goddess has planned for us, even if I find my mate, even if we break up, I’ll never forget what he did for me. I can treat someone with respect even when they are not my mate. You can’t, even when they are.”

I have nothing to retort, nothing.

ALL-GIRL MOVIE NIGHT

VALERIE

“I can’t believe it,” Marcel blurts out, eyes wide. “The princess is a person!”

Aurelia blinks at him in surprise. “The princess? Is that suppose me?”

“Marcel,” Jazz frowns. “I told you, try not to act weird for at least minutes. You promised!”

Marcel grins. “Sorry, but you could have prepared me better.”

“I told you who she is,” Jazz argues.

“I thought you were joking.” Marcel groans. “Princess, I’m sorry I didn’t prepared anything.”

Aurelia just laughs slightly. “Please, I’m just Jazz’s friend, and grateful to be invited to your place. My whole family is celebrating v

cousin today, but minors can't attend. Really, I'm happy I can't
instead."

Marilou and I exchange a glance and giggle at Marcel's expres-
sheer disbelief. Eventually, Jazz manages to calm him down and she
out of her room. Jazz invited us girls to an all-girl movie night where we
bring a movie of our choice. Aurelia's brought an action movie with
gratuitous violence and sex. I haven't heard of it before, but apparen-
like Game of Thrones. Marilou and Jazz went for rom-coms, Tori's got
fantasy, and I chose a Sci-Fi horror.

Aurelia looks at me, surprised. "That's a genre you like?"

"Don't get her started," Jazz grins. "I have to watch every Sci-Fi
with her, and she loves the ones where some unknown species are on
and kills everyone. We've watched every Alien movie like... three times

Aurelia grins. "Cool, wouldn't have thought you were a fan of the
here in here, what do they say about still waters?"

For the first hour, we just chat and eat. Marcel made pizzas for us, and
and I baked cookies. Tori brought some salty snacks along, and
provided popcorn—she claims she can't cook to save her life. Mar-
ast five however, shocked us all by bringing along a bunch of perfect mini-
"My new creations," she says proudly.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better after the other night, Val," Tori
out. "And you too, Marilou."

I tilt my head, considering, "I think it helps that they caught the girls
fast," I admit.

"Have you started training with my dad yet?" Aurelia asks.

I nod. "I thought it would be a lot more physically exhausting, but
most part, we meditate, and he shows me techniques on how to get rid

be her stronger.”

“He’s pretty demanding,” Aurelia points out. “I apologize in advance if he ever yells at you or asks too much.”

I shake my head. “Nah, he’s great and so nice to me.”

Aurelia grins. “Yeah, that’s because you always come to training and do all the exercises diligently.”

I blush a bit. Of course, I do. Alpha Elden is going out of his way for me, and I don’t want to belittle his efforts or insult him by not even

Furthermore, it would put shame on my pack and family if I failed lessons.

“Say... Jazz, your birthday is soon, isn’t it?” Tori shifts the topic.

“Yes!” Jazz beams. “Finally, eighteen next week! Oh, and Val’s birthday is the same week.”

“Really?” Tori’s eyes go wide. “I didn’t know that! But that’s cool, both turning eighteen soon. I still have a full year to go.”

“Me too,” Marilou sighs. “At least we’re stuck waiting together, Tori.”

Aurelia tells her. I know she’s going to turn eighteen a few months too. It’ll probably be a pretty big event. She is Alpha Elden’s only daughter, and her pack really cherishes her as their sole princess.

I love sharing a birthday week with Jazz, though. It’s going to be so much fun. “We could celebrate together,” I offer towards Jazz.

“Goddess, yes! Let’s throw a joint party,” Jazz beams.

“I think that’s a cool idea,” Marilou points out. “I can make your party whatever you want. Anything specific you want?”

We start planning our birthday party, going through the people we want to invite. The list is longer than I thought it would be, but I have made a few new friends recently, and then there is family to invite too. Even

we ask Marcel what he thinks about our plan, and he's totally on board if hehe idea. He promises to talk to my parents too and make sure to find a location. "I wanted to throw you a party anyway, Jazz," he smiles.

"Really?"

on time "Of course, you're my cute little baby sister!" he says with emphasis.

Once he leaves, Aurelia chuckles. "My big brothers are exactly the helpThey always spoil me."

trying. "You have a whole bunch of them to deal with," I grin. "Doesn't theseannoying?"

"Not really," she muses. "Finn is a teddy bear when it comes to me younger brothers. And the age difference to Liam is quite big, so he's birthdaypampered us younger ones."

"You're kidding?" Marilou asks curiously. "My Alpha?"

you're "Yes, he always tried to protect us," she laughs. "And when Dad was at one of us, he would always try to diffuse his anger. He always pretended to be oh so scary and rough, but he has always had our backs."

when in a "Oh, that's right, you have two younger brothers, don't you?" Jazz Elden's"We sometimes see them in school."

"Yes, the twins. They are super sweet and fun." She smiles. "Dario is so much quiet and shy, while Felix can be slightly obnoxious. But I love my siblings and feel so thankful for having them around. Well, sometimes things get tough with Marius, he can be a bit difficult, but I think he just likes being difficult sometimes."

Marilou nods thoughtfully. "I don't see Marius around much though I want toheard he's in the elite warriors and pretty good."

quite a "And he is hot," Tori points out.

ntually, "Super hot," Marilou adds.

rd with I nod. "I agree."

a fitting "I'm more into Finn," Tori giggles. "He looks so tough with his tatt
piercings, but he is such a nice guy."

"The twins aren't so bad either," I muse.

s. "Could you stop, please," Aurelia grimaces slightly. "My brothers
e same. asexual to me," she groans.

"Yeah, mine is for me too," Tori sighs. "Everyone thinks Terry is
t it get don't mind it so much, but Goddess forbid someone tries to hit on
goes ballistic."

e or my "Yeah," Aurelia mutters, immediately agreeing with her. "Older b
always turn into the biggest idiots then. I can sympathize. Should have seen
Marius', and Finn's reactions when I had my first date. The poor guy
hiding in a cave somewhere, I think."

was mad "Talk about double standards," Jazz agrees.

ends to Marilou and I exchange a short glance. She's a single child, and I'm
but Lauren isn't around for obvious reasons, and well, even before, w
z asks. have that much of a loving relationship. I sometimes wish I had a
brother protecting me and meddling with my business.

is a bit You always want what you don't have.

all my "Terry is really cute, though," Marilou muses after a while, maki
except, groan.

still... I The rest of us laugh. "Is there anyone you like?" I ask Tori.

She shakes her head. "No, not really. What about you?"

h. But I I shake my head.

Aurelia tilts her head. "Same for me. I mean, I went on a few dates
but I don't want to get into anything serious until I meet my mate."

"Oh," Jazz beams. "Is this the part where we talk about sex?"

I groan. "Jazz!"

ooos and "What? Don't tell me you aren't curious?" she smirks.

"Yes, I kinda want to know too," Tori admits.

Marilou grins. "Me too."

are all "Fine," I give in. "Then I'll start because I have nothing to tell. I was
sick most of the time until I turned sixteen. And I only started going to
cute. A few months ago. So, I've never had any chance to meet anyone."

me, he "Same," Tori admits. "But I did go half the way if that counts
something... If any of you tell that to Terry, you're dead. Just saying."

brothers giggle. "But yeah... I don't have much experience."

Liam's, "That's nothing to be embarrassed about," Jazz says. "There is no
one is still wrong. You do you, and that's perfectly fine."

"And you, Jazz?" Aurelia asks.

"I... I had a few dates," she looks a bit flustered. "You know, I... I
not, girls?" When Aurelia nods, she seems to be relieved. "Well, I tried
e didn't things with my last girlfriend, but didn't go all the way."

n older Marilou tilts her head. "You know that things were tough in Re
before Alpha Liam and Luna Annalise took over? So, there was this ni
and he was into books too. We met secretly and we eventually had sex
ng Tori I look at her in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes," she blushes. "It wasn't overly fantastic or anything, and I
wasn't all that ready, but he was nice. And at that time, I was scared t
of our alpha's men would catch me and have their way with me,
wanted to have that experience with someone I liked, someone who w
and all, gentle."

My heart breaks slightly at her words. How scared she had to be t
that way.

“What happened to the guy?” Jazz asks carefully.

“He found his mate this year and moved to another pack,” Marilou says when we look at her. None of us is sure what to say. “Don’t worry. I’ll deal with it. He was just a friend, really, and he deserves to be happy.” She looks pretty bit flustered. “After all, I want to find my mate too.”

“You will,” I say with emphasis.

Marilou squeezes my hand before turning to Aurelia. “Now you!”

“This better be juicy...” Jazz smirks.

“Why do you think I have so many juicy things to share?” Aurelia asks. We all know.

“Well, because of your alpha heritage,” I point out.

“And you’re hot,” Jazz adds.

“You come off so mature,” Marilou adds.

“But if you’re a virgin, it’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Jazz hurries to say. Aurelia blushes a bit. “I swear if anything we talk about leaves this room or you tell my brothers...”

“Our lips are sealed,” I giggle.

“Okay... it was similar for me, like for Marilou. I... I tried a few times with a friend... you could say we had a friend-with-benefits thing going on. I know, my family holds the mate bond in high regard, and so do I. I don’t think I want to get serious with anyone. So, I only dated loosely.”

“So, who did you date?” I ask thoughtfully. “You said it’s a friend?”

“Well, we’re friends now,” she muses. “Solely friends, with no benefits.” Jazz, Marilou, and I exchange a gaze. “It’s Nox?” I ask curiously because they seem so close.

“No! Nox is like a brother to me.”

“Oh, maybe Terry?” Jazz wants to know, ignoring Tori’s grimace.

seems like such a sweet guy. He would never hurt anyone.”

shrugs “No, not Terry.”

’m fine “Then it’s—” I stare at her, eyes wide. “Goddess, Lionel!?”

looks a When she doesn’t say anything, we laugh and squeal to the po
Marcel carefully knocks at the door and peaks inside. “Sorry, I just
someone died because you screamed like crazy.”

“Get out of here,” Jazz laughs. “This is a girls-only zone tonight!”

He pretends to be hurt by her words, pouting a bit, but eventually
wants to with a laugh. When he’s left, I turn to Aurelia again. “Sorry, I know
bit too much sometimes.”

“No,” she shakes her head. “This is really nice. Before you came
Tori was my only female friend. I was mostly hanging out with guys
enjoy that too, but it’s so nice to be with girls too sometimes.”

o say. “So, back to the topic,” Tori grins. “I didn’t know you and Lion
s room, thing?”

“Well, we dated. That’s how we got to know each other,” she t

“Obviously, it wasn’t more than something casual. He is waiting for h
7 thingstoo. Now we’re just friends.”

ig. You Jazz, Marilou, and Tori try to squeeze more information out

I don’t Meanwhile, I feel a shudder going down my spine. I’m not sure why,
suddenly feeling cold. Really cold. I shiver slightly, letting my gaze
, through the room. When I turn to the windows, I can see it clearl
:fits.” silver eyes, gleaming like they are illuminated by the moonlight, and
because lingering in the darkness.

A feeling of dread and horror fills me, my body tensing up for a
before I let out a scream. I scream and scream. The girls try to talk to
ig. “He

I barely notice them. The only thing I notice are these gleaming eyes, dark vile, that seem to bore themselves into my mind.

Marcel burst into the room. “What happened!?” he yells. “Val!” I point at the window. The face is gone, but the presence still thoughtmaking me shiver.

“Fuck.” Marcel rips the window open to look outside. I can see how his body is all of a sudden. He closes the window again, pulling the curtains in front of it. “Stay inside, girls,” he orders. “I’ll link the guards.” It only takes minutes for Marcel’s and Jazz’s house to be surrounded by other wolves. Jazz makes sure I’m wrapped in a blanket; I can feel her along nerves. She doesn’t question what I saw, or if I saw something at all, and I was my imagination. She would never doubt me. Everyone needs a friend like Jazz in their life.

Eventually, Aurelia leaves the room and heads outside too. The voices. Alpha Celine is suddenly there, and Elias is with her. Marcel leads us into Jazz’s room, and she kneels in front of me. “Where did you see someone, Valerie?”

“At the window,” I stutter. “Second floor?” Elias mutters. “Is it possible?” “If she said she saw something, then she saw something,” Jazz says in a matter-of-fact tone.

Alpha Celine frowns and opens the window. She turns to us. “Elias!” He nods, shifting into his wolf form and approaching the window. He crawls out of it, but instead of jumping down, he seems to climb up the wall. For a while, no one says anything. I’m scared to death, seriously, but I’m more afraid that I made a fool out of myself, and everyone here thinks that I’m a nutcase and a psycho like my sister...

turning *You're not going crazy*, Ailia's soothing voice reaches me. *I*
presence too.

Elias' wolf jumps back into our room, mind-linking Alpha Celine.
lingers,it," she huffs.

"What's going on?" Marcel asks, concerned.

w tense "Someone was on your roof," she explains, her eyebrows furrow
curtainslooks scary all of a sudden. "But their trace is gone. Elias can't fo

Whoever it was, they are not on pack grounds anymore." She turns to
ided byknow you're scared, Valerie, but I need you to tell me everything you
eel her I do. I start with the feeling that crept over my spine and how sor
or if italerted my wolf. I explain the gleaming eyes and how there was just t

a friendof a face noticeable. It only strikes me now that I'm the only one who
this presence. I'm the weakest pack member here, yet only I could se
ere arevoice my concerns toward Celine. "Isn't that weird?" I ask.

el leads Alpha Celine looks at me thoughtfully. "Maybe that's your gift co
you see the surface. Alpha Elden has been training you, after all."

"I will work harder," I tell her with emphasis. "Maybe if we knew w
gift is... it might give us a hint."

She shows me one of her rare smiles. She's not a smiley person, n
rys in aeither, but just not the overly joyful type of woman. But this smile
her eyes. I always feel a little shy in her presence because she used t
" close to Lauren, and Lauren just took advantage of Celine's rank. But
ow. Heall the things that happened with Lauren, Celine has remained ki
pwards.supportive toward me.

oy now, "I will call my father," Aurelia says into the silence. "If the trace
e thinksfresh, he might be able to help."

"Please do so," Alpha Celine nods. She leaves the room, and I can h

felt the giving commands to some of her warriors.

“They are nervous because they don’t know what the person was he
“Damn Marilou mutters. “And who they are after.”

“What about Aurelia? Maybe someone is targeting her... she is
ranking princess, after all,” Tori says nervously.

ed. She “I don’t think she’s the target, though,” Marcel points out. “It
llow it. coincidence that she is here. But you’re right. We need to pay attentio
) me. “Ithe possibilities.” He’s making sure we get something warm to dri
saw.” looks very worried though. After all, this is his house.

nothing “No one will hurt Jazz,” I tell him quietly. “I promise. I... I would
the hint allow something to happen to her.”

sensed “That’s so sweet of you to say,” he says, and going by his expres
nse it. I really is touched.



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hat my

CELINE

ot cold

I’m pissed. With freaking capital letters. Not only did I have to r
reaches Marius tonight and see him making out with some random she-wolf
o be so met... now my pack seems to have a serious problem. I can’t
despite someone dared to set foot on pack grounds and stalk a bunch of kids. T
nd and that I don’t know who they are is even more unsettling.

I make sure everyone is set for the night. Alpha Elden came in pe
is still see if his daughter was well and brought Finn with him. I put everyt

ear her

his and Harmony's capable hands before making the journey I should be for," done immediately after reading the book Flora gave me.

I don't take the car. It wouldn't reach his cottage even if I did. Better a high-need a good run now to clear my mind. Instead, I shift into my wolf bag of clothing attached to my leg, and decide to run. I'm faster this way so it gives me time to think.

Even though I still have no idea what I'm going to say once I reach him. My mind is blank. It seems to be empty and yet overflowing with everything that happened.

My grandfather lives in a cozy little cottage in the middle of the forest. I've always felt happy and relaxed there, but after Granny died, part of that peace and calmness seemed to have disappeared. Grandpa stayed there, feeling a bit lonely, and although Dad offered for him to move to the pack he declined.

I shift back into my human form and swiftly dress in the clothes I brought. I barely make it to the door before it opens a crack, and Grandpa is outside. He has aged a lot, and seeing him always gives me a stabbing pain in my chest. Sure, he's a bit of a lone wolf and quirky, but I love him so much. After Mom died, I spent a lot of time in this place, and he taught me so much. He lost a daughter, yet he made sure that I was happy. I wish he could just live with Dad and me. He's the only part of Mom that's still left in my heart.

"Celine?" he whispers. He sounds tired but not surprised. "Grandpa," I look at him, his expression one of worry, and suddenly all my walls crumble. My mate doesn't want me and goes out of his way to show me how much he despises me. I will never be loved. Harmony never had a choice, but I don't want a choice. I want my mate and nothing in my life. And I hate that I feel like this even though he's broken my heart.

"Celine," he mutters again. "You're trembling, child. Come in."

ld have “Grandpa,” I look at him, needing to know the truth. I need to f
tonight. I’m living with the secret concerning my mate already, I w
sides, I rest of my life not to be a lie anymore. I’m not sure if I can handle
form, a person close to me disappointing me. “Was granny a witch?”
ay, and “What?”

“Am I a hybrid?” I whisper. “Was granny a witch?”
y mind “No,” he says, and I almost feel my world break a little more
l today. however, he looks at me, serious all of a sudden. “Your grandmothe
orest. In normal werewolf. I’m a witch.”

s peace Wait... what?
ing sad My mouth drops open. “You... you’re a warlock?”
house, “No, while warlocks practice witchcraft, they are often tied to democ
way,” he shakes his head. “I’m a normal witch.”

rought. “But I thought male witches don’t exist!”
a peeks “They do, although it rarely happens,” he points out. “Normally, th
feeling children are born without the gift, but it can happen.” He smiles. “I
him so strong though. Female witches are stronger.”

it me so I start to shiver slightly, although I’m not feeling cold. “Why did
e would ever tell me?”

life. “I... I thought it didn’t matter. Your grandma knew, and your m
my dear daughter, she wasn’t born with the gift, so I assumed that...”

y I feel “The genes live on to the third generation,” I point out. “I’ve only
way to out recently. I... I thought all the things I could do were because of m
7 says I blood, but...”

ne else. He looks at me in shock. “You were born with the gift!?” he looks
a bit. “Come on inside, dear. It’s cold, and I don’t want anyone to hear
I nod, following him inside. Grandpa leads me into the cozy livin

and outland prepares some tea for us.

Want the “Tell me everything,” he says once he’s sat down.

another So, I do. I tell him how I realized the forest might communicate with me and how I can run faster than other wolves and my senses are enhanced about what Elden and Flora told me.

“You can communicate with the forest spirits?” he asks in shock.

. Then, I blink. “I don’t know what it is I can do; I don’t know anything about powers. I grew up thinking it’s one of my gifts as a wolf.” I nudge him. “Now it’s your turn.”

“There is not much to tell,” he smiles. “I was born into a pretty powerful coven, but as a male descendant, I was not powerful. I have only veins of magic in me. I lived with them, and they were kind to me, regardless. When I grew up, I met your grandmother and discovered I was her mate. I fell for her and left the coven to be with her.”

the male “But why do you stay so far away from the pack grounds?”

I’m not “Things were different back then,” he explains. “And mixed marriages were prohibited in many packs. The lycans were different and didn’t have a natural respect for the mate bond, but the werewolves? No way would they have accepted us being together. Moon Blood was particularly conservative...back then. So, your grandma and I, we stayed away from the pack grounds. We made up a story about how I was too weak to shift. And well, we just lived our lives... your granny would still go and fulfill her pack duties. She’s a very strong she-wolf, and no one really worried about me.”

“Dad doesn’t know,” I say, dumbfounded.

around “No, your mother was born without the gift of a witch, so we decided not to stir any more trouble than necessary.” He sighs. “Your father’s father, your grandmother’s grandfather, was a dunce, a true bigot, and racist. What a

person... he already thought low of your mother because she was not a
rank and because he thought I was a weak wolf... and that it ran
with me, family.” He sighs. “I’m glad things look brighter nowadays. You led,
and never wanted your grandmother to give up the life she used to live,
women in your family are all equally stubborn.”

“And what kind of magic can you do?” I ask curiously.

“My coven was practicing magic coming from nature itself,” he explains
softly. “Which is another reason I don’t mind staying here. I feel calm and powerful
in the forest.”

I notice how he said he doesn’t mind... but it’s not like it would be a
little choice, I think. Now that I know who he truly is, I will try even more to
When I him come live with us. “Grandpa,” I take his hand into mine, noticing
deeply thin the skin feels and how fragile his fingers are. Every time I see I
seems to have gotten older. Who knows how much time we have left?
to know about my gifts. And I would love it if you came home together
and me.”

“I can help you contact my old coven,” he promises. He seems to be
old they that I have inherited his powers. “But coming home with you... I
am sure.”

“But it’s not a no?” I point out.

He shrugs.

“Grandpa, would the witches of your old coven attack us?”

He blinks before shaking his head. “As a witch, I’m a bit wary by
but I don’t think my coven would ever do something like that, especially
not considering you’re family.” He looks at me. “Celine, there is something
near, your though. I know of at least one other witch who lives in your pack, a
hateful just like you. I have received news about her recently...”

of alpha My eyes widen at the revelation. "Who is it?"
in the
know, I
but the

explains.
protected

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to make
ng how
him, he
"I need
ier with

e happy
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nature,
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ng else,
hybrid

My eyes widen at the revelation. “Who is it?”

THE FALLOUT

MARIUS

Liam's asked me to come to his office, and I just know that shit is going to go down. It's the morning after the party, and I'm not sure whether Jun and Dave told the news to the others, but I know they did.

With a deep sigh, I open the door to Liam's office, closing it behind me. I lean against it. Dante is here too, looking at a few folders and maps. Dante nods shortly at him, and Dante walks into the adjacent meeting room, leaving me and Liam alone.

Liam looks at me for a long while without saying anything at all, but there are so many emotions swirling in his eyes. He looks shocked, disappointed, pissed... and maybe a little worried.

"Is Celine Anderson your mate?" he finally asks. "Is it true that she's your mate, yet you keep disrespecting her? Because I can't quite believe it."

brother would treat a woman that way. Mate or not.”

What am I supposed to say now? I can't deny it, can I? No, I can't deny it, and I hate that he knows. I hate that he will be disappointed—hate that I feel affected by his disappointment. “It's true,” I admit quietly.

“You lied to me,” he huffs, his eyes are a shade darker than usual. “You trusted you, and you lied. You told me over and over again that you're sick. But the reason your wolf is weakened is because you're ignorant about the mate bond!”

“But she isn't affected,” I try to defend myself. “Her wolf is still strong!”

“How ignorant are you?” he spats out. “Do you hear yourself talking? Of course, she isn't affected! She and her wolf accepted the mate bond for it is. You are the one who doesn't want them. Why would they get punished for not being wanted!? They've done nothing wrong. They didn't go about their way to hurt you.”

Wait... it's my fault that Cyrus is so weak? I... what....

“Why didn't you reject her if you didn't want her?” Liam inquires. “She would have gotten a second chance mate, for sure.”

I know I'm coming over really bad in this, and now, on top of being leaving I look like a coward too. I didn't want a mate, yet I couldn't let go either. In a way, I desperately clung to her. “She could have rejected me either way,” I say defensively, mainly to diffuse my own confusing thoughts.

He glares at me. “In a world dominated by men? She's a female leading a pack, she already gets judged left and right, and every one of her moves is watched and scrutinized. Rejecting her fated mate after she's taken over the pack could have meant her political downfall.”

I stare at him in shock. I wasn't aware of how difficult things were

“What?”

fucking “She knows all that, which is why she’s at least tried to keep her head, and I while you’ve hurt her over and over again. Do you even know what it silently rejected does to your mate?”

sual. “I I want him to shut up, just shut up. “Do you?” I dare him.

u were He looks at me coolly. “No,” he says evenly. “Are you aware that doing the go of your mate like this will mean there might be no second chance for you?”

I going I flinch slightly, before I keep chanting my mantra in my head.

want a mate... I don’t want a mate... I don’t want a mate... “I don’t want a mate? Of mate.”

or what “You don’t want a mate, yet you’ve intentionally made her suffer for months instead of setting her free.” He furrows his brows. “Not to mention you have been awful to everyone around you. Why do you hate Cecilia so much?”

“I don’t hate her!” I say with emphasis. She’s the most beautiful, graceful woman out there. She’s tough yet kind to her friends. I have never fought against her personally.

g a jerk, “What’s wrong with having a mate? I know how strong the mate bond is of her and I’m not surprised fighting it weakened your wolf,” he frowns.

l me,” I “You wouldn’t understand.”

Liam is quiet for a moment before looking at me again. “Try me.”

e alpha His words take me by surprise. “What?”

tep she “I said, explain it to me. I’m here. I’ll listen,” he says earnestly. And she’s just the still looks pissed—with capital letters—he seems to will his anger down.

for her. I was not prepared for this. I thought Liam would blow up in my face.

at me and kick me out of his office, but definitely not ask for my re: ad highopen my mouth. A part of me wants to tell him everything. I just want it beinggo, I want it to be finally out there so that I can get rid of the suff feeling inside me. But then the usual feeling of fear and shame fill close my mouth again, turning away from him. I hate how awful I : lettingeveryone at the moment and how I keep hurting everyone around me nce forcan't seem to stop myself. "I just don't want her."

"You really have no reason?" he looks at me in disbelief. "Do yo I don'thow many offers she is receiving now that she is an established Alp want aeveryone's realized she is actually capable?"

"Offers?"

ffer for "Of wolves who want to become her chosen mate," he points out ention,that she's established her position, it's become acceptable for her to line soyou."

"No!" A sudden wave of horror hits me. Other wolves are after her ful andmy fucking mate, and they want in her pants? They only see her bea nothingher rank, but there is so much more to her! "Why would she even c that!?"

ond is, "Are you serious?" his voice vibrates in suppressed anger. He's gett up with our conversation. "You fight the mate bond, tell her you don her, and when she tries to move on, you won't let her? Did you ever c her feelings?" He pauses, his eyes boring into me. "I know you're something and that you think it's so bad you can't share it with me," lthoughto my surprise. "And I can't believe you truly want to hurt her."

notions I feel my nerves tensing, my defensive mechanism kicking in insta has become second nature to me over the years. No way. I can't allow ce, yell

asons. I know. No freaking way! “What do I care?” I yell in sudden fury. “You to let it would bang and mate just any slut, like you?”

locating I can see wrath pooling in his eyes. Before I can even react, he has grabbed me by my shirt and slapped me hard. I flinch at the impact. Oh, shit, that’s what hurts more though, is the way my brother looks at me. But momentarily, feeling dread settle inside me. Please don’t hate me, just hate me... Liam is my last safety net, I can’t lose him.

u know Fuck, what the hell am I even doing here!?

ha, and I should have just told him everything. I should have just said what’s on. Maybe... maybe he would have believed me.

Dante appears from behind him. He looks torn, though. Like he’s unsure. “Now how to proceed from here on.

o reject “I don’t understand,” Liam yells and shakes me. He looks furious. His control is slipping. “What did these two innocent women ever do to you? She’s treated like this by you!? How do they deserve the pain you keep inflicting on them? Do you realize how much you’ve broken your mate?”

onsider “Liam,” Annie’s voice reaches us. I didn’t even realize she had come into the room. She grabs his arm to make him let go of me. She always does this, protecting everyone. Why? Not everyone is worth protecting. She doesn’t want to look at him, probably linking him. “There is something I want to tell you,” she says. “I want you to be fully here for it, Liam.” To my surprise, his expression softens. I don’t know how she does it. She’s the only person who can do that. He says Fenris that way. “Leave for now,” she says and turns to look at me. His expression is firm, it’s hard to read what she’s thinking. “And just so you know, neither is Celine.” Oh shit, she heard me. That wasn’t part of the plan. She shouldn’t have been here. The gaze my brother throws me says it all.

I think I



grabbed

at hurt.

I still

st don't

ANNALISE

Liam's grip on Marius' shirt loosens, and Marius tumbles free. I j
him to leave for now. I know he is battling something. I know somet
someone scarred him so deeply that he shoves everyone around him
s going but I can't believe he just called Celine a whore. That he would ev
something like that.

ncertain

Thanks to the whole ruckus, Aryanna appeared too and stumbled rig
the scene. She is smart enough to put two and two together and
ous, his sincerely worried now.

ou to be

I'm still feeling torn between being pissed at Marius for what he s
ting on feeling sorry for how he self-sabotages himself.

me into

But I have a different problem at hand here for now.

es that,

Liam has turned his head to me. His eyes are dark, indicating that hi
e keeps Fenris is on the surface. "Hello, my Alpha mate," I whisper as I approa
ll you," and take his face between my hands.

is grasp

He growls both in appreciation of me touching him and in annoyanc
stopped him from laying down the law in front of his brother. "Ma
rein in grumbles. "What did you want to tell me?"

er gaze

"Can't you guess?" I purr, leaning closer against him, so his nose is
I'm not in my hair.

lanned.

He takes a deep breath, obviously wanting to say something w
all. stiffens. He sniffs again.

“It’s barely there, isn’t it?” I smile. “I didn’t notice myself for a while. Now that Fenris is distracted, I turn to Aryanna.

You are... A smile lights up her face. *Goddess, Luna, congratulations. Thank you, Ari. And now I need you to do something.*

Anything, she promises.

Go and look for him. I say. And prevent him from doing something stupid. Are you serious, Luna? She wants to know.

I know he fucked up, I tell her. *But he needs someone now, and he needs you more than anyone else here.* I pause. *I’m mad too, but he’s not sabotaging himself, Ari. Something is seriously wrong here, and I’m worried that if we don’t make him open up, we might lose him forever.*

Aryanna nods at me before turning on her heels and silently leaving the room. I gesture towards Dante to leave too, and he follows my command, briefly stopping to smile at me.

“And now that we are alone,” I look into Fenris’ eyes, waiting for him until I can see how one eye turns from black to ice blue. They are both mine now. “We are expecting a baby.”

Before I can even say anymore, Liam and Fenris have grabbed me and twirl me around before pressing me against their chest. “Is this true!?” he blurts out.

“It’s why I was feeling so sick,” I chuckle. “When I stayed the night at Silverlake with Ella and Celine, it finally occurred to me to take a pregnancy test. I wanted to surprise you with the news today, but well...”

“I’m still surprised,” he says, his hand brushing over my back gently. “I can’t believe I didn’t smell it,” he laughs.

“I researched it,” I admit. “Seems like pregnancies with royal blood involved work differently. The scent stays covered until I enter a safe space.”

le.” the pregnancy.” I wrap my arms around his neck. “So, I assume Lycan is happy too?”

As! Again, something dark twirls in his eyes, and Fenris growls content. *beautiful mate*, he links me. *I couldn't be happier!*

“No one knows yet, right?” Liam says hopefully. “And you didn't *stupid*. any screenings?”

“I would never do that without you,” I smile. “And no one knows *he trusts* Celine and Ella because they helped me sneak the pregnancy test *is self-* Silverlake's pack house without anyone noticing.”

scared Liam looks at me now, like he is searching for something in my eyes. “I know this happened very soon, Annalise. We only just recently stopped taking the birth control when you finished college. I'm more than ready to be a father. I'm beyond overjoyed, but I know you are still young and—”

His concern touches me, and I make sure to put his mind at ease. “I thought I wasn't ready,” I tell him. “But once I got the news, I was overjoyed. I'm absolutely ready for this!”

All kinds of emotions pass through his eyes, and eventually, he looks at me and a bit teary-eyed. “We are going to be parents!” Then, all of a sudden, Liam beams at me with a broad smile. He is not one to smile a lot, so seeing him like that warms my heart and makes me fall in love with him all over.

right in

test. I



ntly. “I

MARIUS

Lycans

stage of

my hot For now, I retreat to the pack's park, the huge one. Some of the members have started a little farm with a petting zoo for the kids. There are chickens and lambs roaming around and two alpacas. Hunting them is forbidden. I sit down on one of the park benches next to the fence, watching the chickens peck at another.

When I close my eyes, I can see Celine's eyes in front of me, and not just the pain in them when that she-wolf kissed me. I feel tired all of a sudden, like I've felt angry and frustrated, but now that it's blowing up in my face, I just feel tired. I wish I could cling to my anger instead, but even my anger seems to dissolve into thin air.

I rub my forehead. Fuck, what am I doing? Wouldn't it have been better if I told Liam everything? I got so used to hiding it all, to make sure no one would notice what broke me, that the lies have become my second nature. "I wish Celine seems to be lost to me. And I'm not sure anymore if the bond between a betrayed family is repairable."

Were I younger, I would probably contemplate just leaving and starting over. I'm still being dramatic about everything. I'm still being dramatic, but leaving is the only option anymore. I never felt happy at Silverlake pack, even though I was living there. But when Liam and Annie took over Red Claw and asked me to come with them, I felt I could start over here. I really like this pack. I don't often show it, but I feel at home here. I could have started over... if I had met my mate.

Now, I don't know how to make things right again. I don't even know if that's what I truly want.

"Hey." Aryanna suddenly appears next to me and presses a can of beer against my cheek. I flinch slightly, but the cool bottle feels good.

the packburning skin. Liam hits fucking hard. Ari sits down on the fence, her legs are dangling slightly. She points at my face. "Is that Liam's handprint?"

strictly I sigh.

catching "You made him snap. You must be very proud of yourself," she deadpans.

"Very funny," I mutter.

she looks "I'm not joking," she says evenly. "I wonder if you understand why everyone here is so pissed or why everyone kinda is?"

on my face, I shrug. "I went against the mate bond."

my anger "No," she shakes her head. "You really don't get it. You know why everyone here rejects our mates. It's a way out for us for whatever reasons. But what's better if you're so angry about is how you went about it." She looks at me. "Mari, no one's right how you've treated her. It's just not right."

she says. "I know," I admit quietly, for the very first time since I found out that Celine is my mate.

"Listen, I'm not going to lie. My sweet Luna asked me to come and see how you are doing," she says to my surprise. "I was glad she was happy about that order. However... she suddenly told me she said she believes you are sabotaging yourself."

I look at Aryanna in horror. This is exactly why I kept my distance from Annie. I knew she would eventually start asking uncomfortable questions. "Also, she's pregnant, and you don't deny a pregnant woman," she says in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Wait," my head snaps up to look at her. "She's what?"

"That's what finally gets me a reaction?" Ari grins. "She's pregnant. I thought she wanted to tell Liam during a candlelight dinner today and on my round of steamy fun, however, she told him earlier, it seems."

I can't fucking believe it. They are having a baby... I know Liam can't

know if

"That's what finally gets me a reaction?" Ari grins. "She's pregnant. I thought she wanted to tell Liam during a candlelight dinner today and on my round of steamy fun, however, she told him earlier, it seems."

er feetwait to have a child with her, and now they will be parents. “I’ll be
uncle,” I say, still shocked. “I’m a terrible person.”

She blinks. “Wow, that was a quick change of topic.”

dpans. “I’ve let everyone down, including my pack and my family.”

“Annie thinks you have your reasons,” Ari points out.

he’s so “And what do you think?” I want to know.

“That you don’t know what the fuck you are doing,” she shr
sometimes wonder how much you must hate yourself for lashing out a
we canas you do.” A pause. “Seems I agree with Luna Annalise. In a way, yo
Liam ishave your reasons, but I bet you don’t even understand them yourself.’
it’s not I stare at her, shocked at her honesty. “Are you excited to meet yo
one day?” I hear myself ask her. I can’t bring myself to react to her p
out thatwords. Also, it just struck me that Cyrus went silent again.

Liam is right. It’s my fault he’s hurt. In a way, I am continuously
nd lookmyself.

sn’t too “Excited for my mate?”

trongly “Yes. You seem to love your freedom,” I shrug. “And you lov
without any ties. So, I wondered, would you be happy to meet your ma

ce from She raises her brows. “Hell yes,” she says. “I can’t wait to meet my

ons. “You aren’t scared to give up your life?”

says in She laughs. “No, why would I? Besides, why would I be giving
life? Mating is the same as any other relationship. It means compro
but also gaining so much more out of it. Take Liam, for example. He
gnant. Ifor Annie to be ready before introducing her to his family and pa
after abefore marking her.”

“Wait... what?” My head snaps up to look at her. “He didn’t m
ouldn’tinstantly?”

ome an Aryanna blinks. “You didn’t know?”

I shrug helplessly, realizing I never really asked or paid attention.

“They were seeing each other for around two months, or maybe before he marked her. And he did it because she wanted him to.”

Liam is a freaking lycan alpha, one of the most possessive wolves because of his genes alone. Yet he waited for his mate to come around ugs. “Iready before marking her?

t others “Did it never occur to you that you could have asked Celine to gi ou mustsome time?” Aryanna asks suddenly. “That you have issues you are l ’ with and need some time to sort them out? Did you never think it cou ur matebeen a good idea to talk to her and share your doubts about having a reviousTo maybe just get to know her? You know, communicate like an adult.”

hurting “No,” I admit quietly.

Fuck, what did I do?

“Figured,” she says evenly.

e being Aryanna doesn’t say anymore, but she keeps sitting there right next ite?” She opens her own can of beer, sipping from it. I rub my head betw mate.” hands, my thoughts swirling in all kinds of different directions. M should have told Celine everything... or Liam... or my parents. I fee up mylost my momentum when I could, and then day after day, month after mising,year after year, it got more difficult to talk. I thought when I pushed ev waitedaside, and they would stop asking me what was wrong, then it wo ck, andeasier for me. But it isn’t.

It doesn’t change what happened.

ark her The past is still there, living on inside me and eating at my hea sanity, and my ability to have any relationship.

I wish Cyrus would be here so that I could share my thoughts with him. But he isn't, and it's my fault that his presence is so weak. But even without him, being here, I still know what he would have said: Was keeping it all really worth it?

Yes just Is it worth it to lose it all?

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I wish Cyrus would be here so that I could share my thoughts with him, but he isn't, and it's my fault that his presence is so weak. But even without him being here, I still know what he would have said: Was keeping it a secret really worth it?

Is it worth it to lose it all?

THE HYBRID AND THE WITCH

CELINE

I told Liam and Elden about my planned trip to the coven. I don't have a backup, though, because I don't think it would be a good idea to go to a coven with a group of warriors behind me. However, when Liam offered to send Beta Aryanna with me, I agreed. Having his beta around might cause some tension, especially since she knows her way around witches and can mingle well with all the other species.

Other than Aryanna, I'm only taking Marcel along. Garret and Elden are staying behind, and Harmony too. I told her what I'd found out from my grandfather, making her the only one who knows the whole story, except from my grandfather. I know she doesn't like staying behind while I visit the coven on my own, but eventually, she understood my reasoning.

They won't hurt me because, in a way, I'm one of them.

Once downtown, we head to the address my grandfather gave me. I honestly didn't know what I expected... a cave maybe... or an creepy basement, but I certainly didn't expect their coven to be on the floor of an apartment complex.

We ring the doorbell. After a few seconds we hear a crackling coming from the intercom, then a voice calls out. "What's your concern?"

"I'm Celine Anderson," I say without further ado. "My grandfather brought me to you. His name is Justus Carmine."

There is a long pause, I can hear someone breathing through the intercom, then there is whispering—another pause. Eventually, the door in front of us opens, and a woman with shoulder-length black hair steps out. She checks me over with a frown, her eyes begin widening as she does so. Do you recognize me? "And the others?" she asks.

"They are with me," I say.

The woman tilts her head, nodding towards Aryanna. "I have seen her pop up in an allied coven. She can enter, but he—"

"His name is Marcel Sanders," I explain evenly.

She frowns, checking him again. "You are of witch blood," she states in a matter-of-fact tone. "But as a male descendent, you are not eligible with a gift. Fine, he can enter too."

She opens the door for us to enter. Following her inside, she leads us to an elevator, which she uses to bring us to the top floor.

"But... I'm not a witch," Marcel breaks the silence, sounding surprised. "And none of my parents were."

"It sometimes leaves out a generation, like in Celine's case," she tells me, surprising me by addressing me so informally. She is not being inquisitive, though, it's more like she addresses me as a friend. "Only females"

me. Hybrids, so your father and you aren't gifted. But I assume you're ancient, Jazmine is."

the top "How do you know about Jazz?"

She shrugs. "I just know."

sound When we enter the apartment, she steps aside. "She's here, Jade." I
n?" another woman approaching us. She's tall and regal and looks both
er sent and old at the same time. It's incredibly hard to tell her age, she might
her mid-forties, but at the same time, it's obvious she has been around
tercom, time.

it of us She approaches me directly, opening her arms. "Celine!"

ocks me I look at her dumbfounded, not ready to let my guard down yet. "A
oes she are?"

"I'm Jade." She smiles. "Justus' mother."

I swear at that announcement, I almost drop to the floor in
er with Aryanna's eyes widen too. "Isn't Justus your grandfather, Celine?"

I nod, dumbfounded.

She just smiles at me, taking me by my hand and leading me further
uddenly "I was hoping we would meet one day." She chuckles, shaking her
blessed slightly. It's a very light blonde, edging into silver. "My boy told
would be coming," she explains.

is to an Having someone refer to my very old grandfather as a boy she
funnier than it is. "Why... why do you look so young?" I finally dare
ncerely "Grandpa looks his age, and... well..."

She smiles sadly. "That's because he's a boy. Our sons unfortunately
lls him, don't inherit a lot of our powers. He still has some gifts, but other than
npolite, he's like a normal human. Only our daughters are born with the full power
can be

er sister a witch. It's the reason why all hybrids are female. The gene is so powerful it reaches the third and sometimes the fourth generation."

"Jazz is half-witch," Marcel stutters. "I never... thought..."

"Your grandmother, young man, was a powerful witch. She gave birth to me and lived in the human world. Although your father wasn't a hybrid, he passed on the gene to your sister. Jazz is different to Celine, though."

"I'm so confused. I have never really studied witches. "How come?"

"Witches are born into different covens," she explains. "Our coven includes witches who can communicate with the spirit world and nature. Have you ever sure you've experienced that already?"

I nod.

"Jazz's ancestors, however, are from a coven practicing more of what you would consider traditional magic. Brewing, herbalism, even some medicine. Of course, not every coven can do spells. If Jazz polishes her natural gifts and learns how to do actual magic, she could be strong."

"See, I always told you, you have a tough sister," I nod with a smile inside toward Marcel.

He smiles slightly. "She's the best."

"Do you have a problem with your sister being half-witch?" my great-grandmother inquires.

"I'm starting to wonder how Dad will take all of this..."

Marcel shakes his head. "I just need to wrap my head around it and then I'll tell her. She doesn't know yet."

"Do you need help with that?" I offer.

Again, he shakes his head. "No, Jazz and I are always really honest with each other. A while back, she came out as gay to me. So, now it's my turn to be open with her."

verful it “Your sister is a lesbian hybrid witch?” Aryanna asks with a grin. “I want to meet her. Where is the line? She sounds like a powerhouse, my type.”

irth to a “Lucky for you, she turns eighteen this week,” I tease her.

brid, he Aryanna gives me the thumbs up while successfully ignoring M’s glare.

“Say, Jade,” I say carefully, not sure what to call her, but she sees me with Jade. “Are hybrids going to live as long as witches?”

ire. I’m Jade shrugs. “No. Actually, not even all witches can get as old as I do as the members of my coven. Hybrids usually have a normal lifespan depending on their other half.”

hat you Thank Goddess, I really don’t want to roam the world alone for centuries without my loved ones. “So, Jazz has silver eyes too?” I ask Marcel.

gift and He frowns. “I’m going to be honest with you. It’s been a year since I met her wolf, and yes, her eyes are silver when she shifts, but I didn’t pay a smile attention to it.”

“But her fur is not white?” I muse.

“No, she has brown fur, but her ears and paws are white.”

for lack Aryanna smiles. “Cute.”

Jade chuckles a bit. “You can’t go by the textbook for every hybrid. The textbook tells us. “Celine fits the textbook of a hybrid like hardly anyone else. Normally, you get the hint that something is different about you through your powers. Admittedly, it’s more difficult for werewolf-witch hybrids, as they don’t have gifts too.” She sighs. “I can’t believe Justus missed the fact that Jazz was born with the gift of a witch.” She looks at Marcel. “Did your grandparents never wonder about Jazz?”

He smiles sadly. “They died when we were young.”

'Fuck, I "And your sister... did you ever think she was maybe a tad more p exactly than normal?"

Marcel needs a moment to answer. "I... she has a lot of knowledg herbs," he explains slowly. "Without ever studying them. I believed i Marcel's be another one of her werewolf gifts."

"And the eyes?" Aryanna asks now. "Hybrids have silver eyes, alwa ms fine "Yes, that's the only steady constant," Jade points out. "But i because they are hybrids."

I am or Wait... what? I thought it was a hybrid trait... she must have sen e span, confusion because she looks at me with a smile. "Witch eyes are silver of us. It doesn't matter if you are a hybrid or a full witch. If you are bo enturiesthe gift, you have silver eyes when you activate your powers. And l you are werewolves, you always activate your powers when shifting she got your nature." To prove her point, she shows us. The air around y much warmer, humid even, making Marcel sweat slightly and Aryanna shift uncomfortably. Jade's eyes flash in a beautiful silver... just like n when I shift.

Jade smiles, her eyes turning back to their usual blue color.

I need a while to allow this information to settle in.

id," she There is another burning question though. "Jade," I start quietly ie else. didn't you reach out to me?"

gh your "We don't interfere," she explains. "It went unnoticed by us that yo wolveshybrid. Your alpha blood makes you powerful, so I'm ashamed to ad hat you we thought all your gifts were coming from your wolf side. Admit d you didn't know that your fur was white and your eyes silver." She "Justus kept sending photos to us, though."

"It makes so much sense now, Celine," Aryanna mutters. "The f

powerfully you are so powerful as a werewolf..." She tilts her head. "You have shown so much inner strength, you're a great leader, and no one in your pack has any questions about your rank because you have these kickass gifts."

"That might be right. It makes much more sense now. I have been able to easily take out all male warriors thanks to my gifts. Part of it might have been because of my witch genes and—"

"It's not," Jade shakes her head. "Your witch blood has nothing to do with being able to take over the pack. The Alpha blood in you is strong, and you are a very capable fighter. The gift that tells you what your opponent is planning for is a wolf gift."

"I'm not a hybrid, I would have been able to take over the pack. That means a lot." It's in But—"Did you just read my mind?"

"I apologize," Jade smirks. "An old habit."

"Say, Jade, do you know about the witch who stepped on our pack guard's foot and got awfully close to Marcel's family?" When Val mentioned silver eyes, I thought it might be a hybrid, but now, after talking to Jade, she could also be a full-fledged witch.

"She nods. "I have heard from my own spies." When I stare at her. "Why surprise, she just shrugs. "I have witches all over the country. Don't worry, we respect the laws of other species and would never interfere or spy on you. You are close, but we have good ears and eyes. It's important for me to know what's going on around the country."

"I'm not sure," I ask. "Do you know who it is?"

"Unfortunately not." She sighs.

"And what are they after?"

"I'm not sure," she admits. "I have a vague idea," she admits. "I'm just not"

always enough to share it.”

ur pack “They are not after me, are they?” I want to know. I would endanger my own pack.

ily take “No, no witch would be as stupid as to attack a hybrid who happens because of an alpha wolf.” She shakes her head.

“Jazz?” I ask.

with you “That’s a possibility, of course,” she admits. “However, personally, and you they are after the other girl.”

s might Marcel and I exchange a surprised glance. “Valerie?”

“But why? She’s not a witch, is she?” I inquire.

being a Again, Jade shakes her head. “No, this kid is a normal wolf. How t to me. my suspicion is correct, it’s her gift that’s really special.”

“Alpha Elden of Silverlake said something similar,” I point thoughtfully. “About her gift being special.”

grounds “Alpha Liam believes the same,” Aryanna points out.

she had “Elden, the Lycan Crown Prince, is a wise person,” Jade says with ide, she “He always has been. And his son inherited quite a lot of his wisdom.”

“Crown Prince?” Marcel asks.

her in “Technically, Elden is one of the direct successors to the throne worry, explains. “The lycan throne is currently vacant. The Council rule t to watches over the throne until they find a worthy successor. Elden’s c what’s are very high... well, unless he doesn’t want to take over, which is likely the main problem at the moment.”

Aryanna stares at her. “Prince Eric is here,” she says quietly. “I thought was just to see his family and maybe find his mate... I completely forgot he is a Prince of the Council and a very important Council member. He’s certain just here for a simple visit...”

“The juvenile prince might appear silly sometimes, but he’s not an idiot,” Jade points out. “He’s smarter and more cunning than the other members. And he wants to see his uncle on the throne. Eric is here to help his family and look for his mate, but also to talk to Elden.”

“Wow,” Marcel mutters toward me. “Politics.”

“Yeah, good thing we aren’t directly involved,” I whisper back. “I think turn towards my great-grandmother again. “About Val’s gift...”

“Yes,” she nods and takes my hand. “I want to talk to you in private. It’s just a suspicion, but if you or Elden could prove that it’s true, you need to keep it a secret, no one can know about it, for now.”

“I nod. “You can trust me.”

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I nod. “You can trust me.”

FAMILY DINNER

MARIUS

The main door of the pack house flies open, and Eric waltzes in with the biggest grin on his face. “Good morning, family,” he cheers looking up at the sky. “Good morning, sunshine.” He kneels to be eye level with Annie’s stomach. “Good morning, baby.”

Annie giggles and pats Eric’s head while he’s kneeling. She hasn’t smiled a lot lately, and it’s really affected the rest of us. I’ve never noticed how much it influences the pack when the luna isn’t feeling well, not to mention how important it actually is to have a Luna who is warm and caring, who connects with the pack and reassures them by being there for them.

I feel like a stupid asshole for all the attitude I was giving her when she was obviously tired and unwell just because she tried to be nice to me. Ever since news of her pregnancy broke, the pack’s gone baby crazy. E-

warriors are training extra hard, especially Ella and Jun, preparing to the Luna and her unborn child against any danger.

“Babies,” Annie corrects Eric with a smile.

Babies? She’s having more than one?

Eric blinks. “Wait... what!?! You are carrying twins? Or triplets?”

Annie’s look of horror is kind of hilarious. “Thank the stars, no tr she laughs. “Twins are enough. Lycan twins on top of that, which is v body has difficulty adapting.” Her smile falters a little as she continue sorry for letting everyone down recently.” I feel surprised at her Who’s she letting down?

Liam immediately slides an arm around her waist and pulls her i arms. “You’re not letting anyone down. You are gifting me two babies a miracle.” He peppers her head and face with kisses until she laugh struggles to pull away.

with the “Two Liams are growing in there?” Eric asks, pointing at Annie before with his eyebrows raised. “It’s no surprise you’re feeling the side ef on eye-pregnancy.”

“We haven’t revealed their gender yet,” Annie giggles again, an smiled looks relieved at her sudden change of mood. Seems like she is before having these infamous pregnancy mood swings people keep talking or how While I watch her going from happy to sad to happy again, I wond ningles Celine would be if she had our baby. I blush a bit at my own thought to get ahead of myself. So far, we haven’t even talked properly.

en she At this point, me saying hello to her and her answering without pu e. Ever me would be a major milestone.

ven the Liam stands and looks around, eyeing all of us. “Ready to get going Liam and Annie take one SUV together with Ella and Dante. The re

protecttake the second car. I notice how Jun barely even looks at me as we
Aryanna, however, acts normal.

I sigh inwardly. This is going to be a great family dinner... my
invited all of us, and I'm dreading it already... it's going to be a c
Liam's barely talked to me since our altercation. He's also making sur
iplets," away from his mate, which surprisingly hurts, but I can't exactly blai
why myfor it.

s. "I'm How do people make up after an argument? I have no idea.

words. I suck at understanding people. And at social interactions.

Aryanna's words still ring in my ears. Why didn't I just talk to Cel
into hisbe upfront about my doubts like the adult I'm supposed to be? In all f
s, that'sI think Annie was right. I did sabotage my own happiness.

ghs and The drive to Silverlake doesn't take particularly long, as we are nei

Oh well, time to get this show on the road. If only Cyrus were with
's bellyhe is still hiding somewhere in my mind, and for the first time in many
fects ofI'm left to fend for myself.

We're barely out of the cars when my mother skips down the pack
d Liamstairs and spreads her arms like she's going to hug us all at once. It's
alreadyfunny to see Mom squeeze Liam, like he's still a little boy. She
, about.compared to him. When it's my turn, I just let it happen. There's n
er howdenying my mother... it's impossible. It's like a crime against humanit
s. Way "You've grown a beard," she beams at me. "It suits you!" She pur
fist in the air. "You look so mature with it."

inching "Thanks, Mom," I say evenly, noticing Aryanna grinning at us.

Thankfully, my mother soon loses interest in me and my looks and
?" a beeline for Annie. "Say it, say it," she begs. Here we go...

st of us Annie chuckles, "Prepared to become a grandmother?"

get in; My mother squeals so loud that my father and Finn come running the pack house. “What happened!?” my father yells in panic.

parents Aurel, my mother’s gamma, turns to look at them. “Nothing outlisaster.ordinary,” he says calmly.

e I stay “Elden!” my mom blurts out, completely oblivious to the fusme himcreated. Dad stares at her in confusion, but still on alert. “You won’t it.” She tugs at Annie’s hand. “Say it again, please, please, please.”

Annie smiles brightly and looks at Liam. He puts his arm around shoulders and smiles proudly. “Annie is with child.”

ine and “Fucking finally!” Finn blurts out.

airness, Mom glares at him. “No cursing in front of the soon-to-be baby!”

He grins. “Sorry.”

ghbors. My father’s eyes light up too at the news before he engulfs Annie me, butLiam in a hug. Then his attention shifts to me, squeezing my shoulder y years, “Good to see you too,” he smiles. “It’s been so long, we almost forgot you look like.”

κ house I’m not sure how to reply. A bit surprised he is greeting me so warm alwaysthought he would be tearing my head off. This can only mean that e’s tinyhasn’t told him anything yet.

o point “Ready for the next part of the news, Flora?” Annie asks with a grin ty. My mom slaps her hand against her chest. “There’s more?”

nps her Annie raises her hand and points out two fingers.

Mom looks sincerely surprised—which is surprising in and of itself her connection with the spirit world usually gives her a heads up, and l makesmost of the time, she knows all kinds of things before anyone else, in the person involved. Seeing the honest look of surprise on her face is even more hilarious—even my father chuckles.

out of “Twins,” Mom whispers before raising her arms and doing a silly dance. “Double grandma to be!” she twirls around to eye Finn and me. “Of the Marius, you’re next! I want to have more grandchildren ASAP!”

“And how exactly do you think I will accomplish that?” Finn grins. “She’s not like I can just pop them out.”

“Not my problem,” she pouts. “Get moving you two, and find your mates!”

Her last words make me flinch slightly, and I notice how Annie and Dad look at each other. It feels like there is an air of awkwardness lying around us for a moment. I’m not sure if Mom caught on, but Dad did notice. He looks at Liam questioningly. To my surprise though, he doesn’t say anything.

“What’s for dinner, Aunt Flora?” Eric booms, breaking the silence with a beaming smile. It looks a bit forced, though. “It smells heavenly.”

“Oh, my dear,” she smiles brightly. “I’ve had all your favorites prepared for you.” Eric grins and offers his arm, which she takes with a giggle. Dad even bats an eye at them, and I’m not even surprised anymore. Apparently, Eric gets a free pass to touch everyone’s mate.

“He’s always had an uncanny ability to diffuse any tension without a word,” Liam mutters towards me as if he could read my thoughts.

I nod, dumbfounded. It never struck me that this might be Eric’s way of dealing with tense situations. Thankfully, everyone is heading inside, chatting about the fabulous dinner my mother has just announced. I notice Finn looking over at me for a moment. He doesn’t say anything, but he shakes his head disappointedly.

“Oh shit, I forgot... Celine is his friend. I wonder if it was Dave or Jack who told him about her being my mate?”

Aryanna and I are the last to follow. “Moon Goddess, help me,” I mumble.

victory “I don’t think the Moon Goddess can help you,” she points out in a . “Finn,of-fact tone.

“Well, thank you for the pep talk.”

is. “It’s “I don’t feel like giving you a pep talk. I’m just being realistic,” she

“At this point, you can only help yourself. Don’t you see that?”

mates!” “See what?”

d Liam “Everyone was ready and willing to help you all this time. B ngeringcouldn’t because you wouldn’t let them in. You weren’t ready to ad surehelp.” She tilts her head. “So, ask yourself, are you ready to accept hel

, LiamAnd think about what kind of help you truly want. No one is going to help you anymore. You need to be the one to reach out this time.”

: with a I look at her, completely dumbfounded. The wheels in my head are excruciatingly slowly at the moment. Aryanna doesn’t give me any ared.” consider what she’s just said. She just links our arms and leads me i doesn’tpack house.

arently, For a second, I tense, a feeling of dread settling in me. It’s almos cold hand grasps my heart, taking my breath away.

effort,” Aryanna notices my discomfort and lets go instantly, eyeing m worry. “Is everything alright? Marius?”

way of “It’s nothing,” I breathe out.

happily A shudder runs over my spine. Goddess, how I hate this place. I l [noticefamily, I might not show it, but I do. This place, however... I want t but heand never return to it again.

I swallow thickly, my eyes roaming the area but there is no one w un whous, and once inside, I can only see my family, much to my relief.

Aurelia greets Liam and me with a warm hug before turning her a utter. to Eric. They exchange hellos and joke around together like they a

matter-friends. I'm sincerely shocked at how much she's grown since I last saw her. So have the twins, for that matter. Felix is almost my height and I could easily imagine him running across the sand with a surfboard under his arm... like some dude out of a freaking commercial. Dario doesn't look as big as Felix, and he's still got that quietness about him. I don't think he's actively avoiding people like I do; it's just his thing.

But they seem to be. It seems like I've missed so much of their lives while I've been wallowing in my own misery. Especially when I see Liam interacting with them so easily, inquiring about their lives, asking Felix about his last offer to join the baseball team in school. He knows a lot about them and what they've been up to, and he even seems to know all about Aurelia's training schedule.

I've been so preoccupied with my own shit, I completely forgot to talk to my siblings.

Never in my life have I been happier to be around other people than I am right now. Eric and Annie diffuse most of the awkward tension. "How do you know I was pregnant, Flora?" Annie asks after a while.

Mom smiles. "You mean aside from the obvious reasons, like you were sick a lot?"

Annie looks a bit flustered but then chuckles too. "Yeah, it was obvious..."

Mom stirs her soup absent-mindedly, "The light is strong in you, Flora," she mutters more to herself than to us.

Aryanna looks at me. *The light?* She links me.

I wish I knew what she was talking about, I answer honestly. *Most of the time, I have no idea what she's saying.*

Mom smiles. "You all overestimate me sometimes and think I'm the best at everything."

aw her everything. Well..." she tilts her head. "Some things I know for build. I through... my connections. But other signs I can only interpret under his experience, and then... unfortunately, when it's about my own flesh and blood, my gift doesn't work at all." For a brief moment, her gaze links with mine, and she looks almost frustrated. Like she wants to read me but can't.

"The light that surrounds Annie was so strong, plus there seemed to be an extra light coming from inside her body, I just knew she had to be pregnant with child."

At that date, "My gift works similarly," Dad agrees. "There's a lot of interpretation about it." "So, how far along are you?" Aurelia asks into the lingering silence.

I about Her question raises a whole bunch of additional ones from Felix and

Dario... and my mom. Annie answers them all. I'm so thankful that the spotlight is on her. It makes it easier to fade to the background. That is

we start dinner, and Annie has to excuse herself after only a few spoonfuls of soup. "I'm sorry," she sighs. "But—"

How did "Don't be, sweetheart," Mom chimes in. "I know the struggle. Come with me." Mom stands up and takes Annie's hand. "I'll show you a room where you can relax a bit."

Dad looks worried when he sees Mom and Annie retreat. He turns to the twins. "Please join your mother and see if she needs anything for Annie."

"Scared she might tell Annie too much about her own past experiences with lycan babies?" Felix grins.

Dad sighs. "You have no idea..."

They both nod, eager to help. Once they have left the room, everyone is left in the quiet. My father looks at all of us expectantly.

"And," he says after a while into the silence. "Anyone care to fill me in on why I can cut the tension with a metaphorical knife right now?"

certain No one talks, but I can see Eric sighing slightly. He seems to cont
t from if he should do or say something, but Emilien shakes his head at him.
ish and “And how are you guys doing?” my father inquires further, loo
gers on Liam and me.

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“What can I say?” Liam mutters, obviously aware that our parents easily see through any lie. “Could be better.”

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To my surprise, Dad leans back a bit. “Alright,” he nods. “I can respect that.”

Liam nods thankfully, smiling shortly. “Excuse me for a moment. I would like to see if my wife is alright.” He looks at Eric, raising one of his brows. “Please help us and enlighten everyone with one of your wonderful stories.”

“Absolutely! Can do.” Eric grins. “I was waiting for my moment to shine. How about I tell you all about the time I was accidentally imprisoned in Paris?”

Aryanna looks at him, a smirk curling her lips. “Oh yes! I want to know more about that. Particularly the part about it being an accident.”

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

VALERIE

“I can’t freaking believe it. We can finally celebrate!” Jazz
“Here, grab one of the baskets, Val.”

I nod, nudging her softly. “Or what? Will you curse me if I don’t?”
We both giggle.

“Very funny,” Marilou comments dryly. “You’re so mature.”

“You sure you are older than us?” Tori grins.

“Hey, show your elders some respect,” Jazz demands with a grin.

Jazz and I look at each other and high-five. We’ve been celebra
week. Jazz’s birthday was on Monday, mine was Friday, and today it
time. I’m not into parties, but Marcel and my parents went out of their
organize something for us—at such short notice too. My parents v
supportive when they discovered I actually wanted to celebrate my b

this year. I've never been one to celebrate, nor do I like being the center of attention, but ever since I met Jazz and my other friends, I feel like things are changing.

"You really don't mind?" Jazz whispers towards me, sounding nervous.
"What?" I blink. "That you are half-witch?"

She nods tentatively.

"Just when I thought you couldn't get any cooler," I sigh dramatically. "You tell me you're a hybrid and can actually learn magic... like Potter. No, like Hermione!"

Jazz smiles at me, her eyes lighting up with relief. I'm surprised to think it might bother me that she's a hybrid. Marcel told her as soon as he came back from visiting the coven with Alpha Celine. It took a while to grasp what he was saying, but overall, she took it surprisingly well. It seems like she always felt something was different about her.

beams. "When is Aurelia coming?" Marilou wants to know.

"She and Nox will come a bit later," Tori explains, waving when she sees Lionel and Terry approaching us to help with the preparations. "Something about a family drama. Or dinner. I'm not sure, could be both."

Lion catches her last words and rolls his eyes. "They always have some kind of drama going on. It's not surprising, considering the vast number of siblings in that family."

ting all "Lucky her," I sigh. "It must be fun to grow up with so many people around you."

way to "I have one," Tori mutters. "And he's bothersome enough."

vere so "Hey, I heard that," Terry pouts. "I just don't want anyone to have a birthday sister!"

"Or date her," Lion adds.

enter of “Or look at her,” Jazz adds.

ie I am I nod. “Or talk to her.”

“Or be in a room with her,” Marilou concludes.

ous. Terry flushes. “I’m not that bad.”

“Aurelia’s brothers are all alphas by blood,” Tori sighs. “But the baby her as much as Terry babies me.”

atically. “Yeah, well,” Lion rubs over the back of his head. “I mean, not g Harrylie. Aurelia is tough as fuck. She can kick most of her brothers’ asses

you are more cute and sweet. I would protect you too if you were my s d she’d Tori narrows her eyes at him. “You’re not helping.”

n as he “Don’t worry,” I grab her arm. “Tonight, we will party our asses c for herthe guys aren’t allowed to complain.”

well. It “Yes, we’ll dress in our hottest outfits and be the queens of the night grins.

There is no doubt in my mind that she will make sure we are. Jazz : he seesme her dress already. It seems like Marcel went shopping with h he saidbought her exactly what she wanted, no question. A short, tight, blue, h.” dress. On anyone else, it might look tacky, but Jazz can easily pul e someAdditionally, Marcel gifted her with a beautiful necklace with a perfe nber ofattached to it. It fits her dark complexion perfectly.

I went for lavender this time. It’s tight but not as revealing as the la rothersI wore because I didn’t want to worry about bending down or dancing.

“Tonight, we won’t worry about anything,” I whisper towards Jazz.

She nods. “No thinking about our finals for school.”

urt my “Or about any training to discover my wolf’s gift.”

“Or about studying magic.”

“Or Lauren.”

“Right,” Jazz chuckles. “Tonight is a worry-free zone.”

Marcel and my parents rented the basement of our favorite restaurant in town and had it turned into a huge party area. The owner, a fellow wolf and was happy to give us the whole place for the night.

My dad doesn't All our friends are coming plus a few other pack members we've

Alpha Celine and retired Alpha Cedric are coming too... I tend to forget that my dad was the beta of the pack before Celine took over and Hester replaced him. He's still close friends with Celine's family. Neither Jazz nor Ister." have much family, but we are both happy to have such amazing friends and mentors.

Eventually, Aurelia pushes through the crowd. “Hello, birthday girl,” she grins, spreading her arms wide to hug us.

I laugh, happy that she's made it. She's brought Nox with her; he's nodding our way in greeting. “Solved the family drama?”

Aurelia rolls her eyes. “No, but when do we ever?”

Nox grins at her words.

More and more people drop in as the night progresses. Quite a few of my out-of-school friends are coming tonight. I was a loner for a long time, but Jazz and Ruby helped me learn to socialize, and I've even managed to befriend my group in school without her help.

Marilou stuck to her promise and prepared the most amazing cupcakes and muffins for us. Eventually, Jazz and I manage to sit down to chat with our closest friends for a while. It's fun. I can't help but notice Lionel is flirting a bit with me. Compliments still make me feel uncomfortable, but I know he would never push himself on me against my will. Meanwhile, I'm looking at Marilou dreamily. She's wearing a tiny green dress, which

perfectly with her fiery red hair. “You look very beautiful tonight.”
Italian stutters.

ner is a She beams in joy. “Really? You too.”

“How about a dance?”

invited. “Sure,” she takes his hand, allowing him to pull her towards the mixer
get that the room. It’s been turned into a dance floor.

army I exchange a glance with Aurelia. “They are so sweet,” she whispers

zz nor I After a while, I notice the door opening, and an elderly woman
ands and alongside a younger woman with awesome dark-blue hair. It’s short

length and rests on top of a series of tattoos. She looks athletic, confident
ls,” she maybe even a bit crazy... the good kind of crazy though, not insane

“Who are they?” I ask curiously, surprised that I recognize neither of them
smiling Maybe they are friends of Jazz?

“The young woman with the blue hair is Aryanna,” Aurelia explains

“She’s Liam’s beta. We came together. She had to head off to pick up

elderly woman before joining us, though.” She grins. “She was part

of our family drama tonight.”

Jazz has “Oh, right! I knew she looked familiar,” I chuckle. “She had a different
y choir hairstyle last time I saw her.”

“Yeah, she changes it frequently.”

kes and “And the older woman?”

with our “Oh,” Jazz chimes in, watching how said woman joins Marcel and
irting a Celine. “That’s Desmona. She’s from the coven my grandma belonged to

now she explains. “She’ll be my mentor.”

erry is “Cool,” I mutter. “Did you already talk to her?”

ch goes “Just briefly last week.”

Aryanna seems to be about to follow the elderly woman to greet

ht,” he Celine and Harmony when she stops suddenly. She sniffs at the air s
turning around and scanning the room as if she’s searching for someo
eyes are darker now, and her stance is more alert.

She freezes, her eyes suddenly lingering on Jazz.

iddle of Could it be?

“It smells really nice,” Jazz mutters under her breath. “Like cinnam
s. coffee... and roses.”

appears “No way,” Aurelia states breathlessly.

oulder- I grab Jazz's arm. Goddess, that’s so cool! I nudge Jazz. “Jazz,” I w
ent, and nodding toward Aryanna, who is approaching us now.

e crazy. Jazz blinks in confusion. “What...” she stutters.

f them. Only when Aryanna is standing right in front of her, does realizatio

in. Aryanna’s face lights up with a bright smile. “Look what I’ve four
explains. chuckles, revealing her perfect white teeth. “A diamond in the rough

up there reaches out to take Jazz’s hand and pulls her up. “And how beautiful sl

t of the Jazz finally regains her ability to speak. “You’re not too bad yourse

states cockily, making Aryanna smile even broader.

ifferent Aryanna squeezes her hand, smiling widely. “I assume you’re J

Marcel’s sister, am I right?”

“Call me Jazz,” she offers. “You’re Aryanna?”

“Call me Ari.” Aryanna looks at Jazz almost dreamily. “Care to dan

l Alpha Jazz nods eagerly, following her mate to the dance floor.

ged to,” immediately pull each other in a close dance, Aryanna’s arms circling

waist, pressing against her body, while Jazz has hers around Aryanna’s

fingers entwined. They look like such a power couple, both tall and att

radiating confidence, strength, and passion.

t Alpha A lot of passion.

lightly, “For a white girl, you dance well,” Jazz teases.

ne. Her Aryanna flashes her a smirk and removes one hand from around her waist. She grabs Jazz’s chin and makes her look up. “You are exactly my type,” she grins before pulling her into a kiss.

“The funny thing is,” Alpha Celine chuckles behind us. “That Aryanna has been desperately wanting to meet Jazz ever since she found out that she was a half-witch and a tough girl.”

“That’s fate,” Tori beams.

“Absolutely,” Aurelia agrees, grinning at the surprised expression on the faces of her other friends. “What? Of course, I believe in fate too! And in romance.

“Jazz deserves to have the best mate,” I say with emphasis. “This is the most perfect!”

“Well,” Marcel mock-complains. “There goes my dream of becoming an uncle.”

“Sperm donors are a thing, honey,” Aryanna shouts from the dance floor. “Otherwise, make some children yourself.”

Jazz laughs. She looks so happy, it warms my heart. I love Jazz in a platonic way, obviously, and I wish her nothing but happiness in life, but it means that she will be leaving Moon Blood to be with Aryanna.

“Ah, youth,” Desmona, the elderly witch who accompanied Aryanna, sighs. “I remember when I was young and full of passion and sex drive.”

They Marcel groans. “Could we please not talk about my sister’s possible Jazz’s life.”

’s neck, “Didn’t you just say you wanted to become an uncle?” Harmony asks. “How exactly did you think that would work?”

“Hey, you can want one thing and hate the other,” he argues.

“Did anyone else come here with you?” Alpha Celine asks the

woman, slight concern in her voice. “You’re hopefully not on your waist tonight?”

“No,” she says. The woman shakes her head. “I’m not alone. Alpha Liam has sent his warriors with me and his brother Marius. They’re waiting outside.”
Aryanna has I swear, for a split second there was a flash of shock in Alpha Celine’s eyes. I’m not sure why she is so surprised, but the moment passes as if it never came.

Thankfully, Aurelia diffuses the growing tension by patting my shoulder. “How about you guys offer Val, Tori, and me a dance?” she says with a teasing smile.

“Absolutely!” Lion extends both his hands, taking mine and Tori’s and leading us to the dance floor. Nox and Aurelia follow suit. Ignoring Marilou and Jazz, we are not in for a flirty dance though, we just shake and jump around for the fun of it.

We are so engulfed in everything that no one notices the atmosphere changing slightly. Only when the ground starts to shake do we stop dancing. In a second, I’m confused, looking around. The room has gone dark and even in a sudden. A power outage? Earthquake?

The ground shakes again, noises coming from outside. “It’s an earthquake,” Aryanna yells.

Like a flash, Alpha Celine shifts and runs outside, Harmony right behind her. Marcel is guarding the entrance, baring his fangs, and growling.

I’ve still not fully grasped what’s going on. My mind and body are on autopilot. I feel a hand grabbing my arm. “Stay down,” Aurelia calls to us. “Lionel, stay with them! Nox, come with me.”

Lion takes Tori and me by our arms and tugs us toward the corner of the elderly room. I can see my mother sprinting towards me in panic. There are

ur ownscreams, and shattering sounds. Things break. My wolf senses are s
though, that I can't make much out in the darkness. It's like an out-c
one of experience, like I'm not even here. As if my body and mind are numl
' can only watch on in horror.

Celine's But then I see them. Those silver gleaming eyes from our all-girls
ast as itnight. They are glowing through the darkness from the other side of th
staring right at me. They seem to suck me in like they want to enchan
Nox'shypnotize me, and obligingly, I'm becoming dizzy all of a sudden.

he asks I hear a scream echoing throughout the room, breaking my trance.
I know that voice like none other. "Jazz!" I yell.

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screams, and shattering sounds. Things break. My wolf senses are so weak though, that I can't make much out in the darkness. It's like an out-of-body experience, like I'm not even here. As if my body and mind are numb, and I can only watch on in horror.

But then I see them. Those silver gleaming eyes from our all-girls movie night. They are glowing through the darkness from the other side of the room, staring right at me. They seem to suck me in like they want to enchant me or hypnotize me, and obligingly, I'm becoming dizzy all of a sudden.

I hear a scream echoing throughout the room, breaking my trance.

I know that voice like none other. "Jazz!" I yell.

VALERIE'S GIFT

CELINE

I rush outside to find Liam's warrior that came with Desmona facing a group of rogues. Marius is cornered by a guy in a dark cloak and to be unable to move or shift. Fuck. *Harmony*, I mind-link my bet. *Liam's warrior!*

Of course, Alpha, her strong wolf rushes toward the cornered man and lunges toward one of his attackers.

Marius' attacker has erected some kind of barrier around them both that is preventing my warriors from getting through to help. I know I should rush to his defense immediately, but I'm ashamed to admit that I'm hesitating for a split second.

I force myself to shake off the feeling. He's still my friend's brother and another friend's son, and no matter how hard I try, I can't hate him. (

my eyes, I let my senses take over. Danica stirs inside me, growing s
as her senses sharpen and enhance.

Time slows down around me, and I can feel the cool, hard
—steady under my paws as I walk silently toward the man. Is this wh
meant when she said I could communicate with the spirit world and u
my surroundings and nature's element such as wind, earth, and w
guide me? I keep moving forward, deciding to put faith in my instincts

At first, the barrier tries to push me back, but Danica's instructions g
the confidence to try again. *Go, just walk forward*, Danica's voice
through my mind. *Pretend like the barrier doesn't exist*. I feel someth
changed in her, there's something in her voice and in the nature
existence. She's still Danica, but somehow, more.

Suddenly, a pathway opens up through the barrier as if it was waiti
in front of me all along.

ling off I lunge forward, attacking the man who is trying to kill Marius. He
l seems time to defend himself as he's too surprised by my attack to realiz
a. *Help* through his barrier. His bones crush beneath my paws. My plan to
him alive falls flat, unfortunately, as I watch his head smash agai
ian and asphalt of the parking lot. He's not coming back from that.

I step back, taking a moment to come back to myself. *Alpha, c*
, which *alright?* Harmony links me.

ld jump *Did you get hurt, Alpha?* one of my warriors asks.

ng for a Another one looks at me in awe. *That was so cool. How did you do i*

There is no time for this now, I answer them shortly. *Make sure th*
her and *no more rogues around!*

Closing Once my warriors are busy, my gaze shifts toward Marius. His e
wide, and he looks shocked, but he's also showing a hint of guilt.

stronger There's no time to exchange words with him or even ask if he's al
hear more commotion coming from inside the restaurant and rus
asphalt through the door just in time to see Aryanna and Desmona fighting a
at Jadewitch. She screeches in pain as Ari lands a direct hit to her chest. Th
se both looks around in panic, probably noticing that she and the remaining
ater, to are outnumbered. Ari lunges to try and stop her from escaping, but the
witch disappears into thin air at the snap of her fingers.

give me I don't have time to linger on her escape though, and instead, race
echoessome warriors with the few remaining rogues in the room. It was a fair
ing has job, I realize, and somewhere in a corner of my mind, I get the feeling
of hera bit too easy.

"Alpha!" Marcel calls out, pulling my attention away from the scene
ng here Marcel is on the ground next to Valerie and holding Jazz in his arm
look closer, I see that Jazz has blood coming from a wound in her st
has no "One of the rogues attacked her," Marcel growls between gritted teeth.
e I got I shift back, slipping into a shirt Harmony throws at me before h
capture towards Jazz. Aryanna pushes past me, falling to her knees beside he
inst the "Jazmine," she blurts out, panicked. "You're hurt!"

I kneel down beside them to check Jazz. Val has her hands pressed
ire you the wound, eyes wide in panic. Her skin starts turning even paler than
once again looking like she's made out of fine china. Suddenly, her
become labored like she's been running, while Jazz, on the other
that? appears to be calming down. "Val," Jazz whispers as she tries to get u
ere are to be held in place by Marcel. "Valerie, I'm... I'm fine."

"What...?" Marcel stutters.

yes are Aryanna's hands quickly move to her stomach before carefully
Valerie's hands aside and checking on her mate's injury. Apart fr

right. I spilled blood, there is no sign of a wound anymore.

back My eyes widen. Jade, my great-grandmother, was right in her assumption. I catch Val in my lap as she slumps down from exhaustion. She's a witch, one of the very few wolves who have the power to heal others.

rogues "She is here," Valerie mutters tiredly, barely conscious.

young "Who?" I ask, alarmed.

Valerie points towards the door leading to the restaurant's kitchen. The light there is off, lulling everything into darkness, but in the darkness I can just make out a pair of glowing eyes. "She's the one who was watching it was before," Valerie whispers. "At Marcel's house."

Silver eyes look straight at me, and for a moment, I think I can see the outline of a smirk in the darkness. I'm up on my feet instantly, ready to attack. As I stare at her with my senses on full alert, but before I can move, she disappears. "Fuck," I curse.

My body shudders in relief as her aura vanishes with her. The witch was giving off an intense aura of power, stronger than both the warlock and his mate outside and the witch who vanished when Ari kicked her. She seemed able to fade in and out like the Cheshire Cat. With no scent and her camouflage against stability, she's like a chameleon. Turning back to Val and the others, a strange, foreboding realization settles in. That's the witch who spied on Val and her friends, she's been coming on to pack grounds undetected.

hand, "Do you think she saw Valerie healing Jazz?" Marcel whispers.

up, only I feel more dread settling inside me. Defeating our attackers was too easy. "I think the whole purpose of the attack was to find the healer," I huff.

moving How did they know there is a healer living in my pack, though? From the great-grandmother knew, Danica points out. *Other powerful witches*

know too. Maybe they just sensed the presence of a healer in our pack options. set out to spy on us.

healer, Goddess, no, this is the worst-case scenario. Our enemies must have sensed there was something different about Val, and now that she has been seen for herself that Val truly is what they were hoping for, she's in danger. But from who? Who are 'they'?

When I think *Valerie is the reason we were spied on*, I mutter as realization settles in, I can't help but shift my attention back to Valerie, noticing that she has fallen unconscious. She is like a little sister to me... I won't allow anyone to harm her for whatever reason.

When I see the "Let's get her out of here," I decide, and nod towards Val's father. He carefully takes her into his arms and picks her up. She looks so small and frail against her father's body. Now everything is starting to make sense.

Healing is a rare ability, a strong ability. Val was weaker growing up because the werewolf needed so much more power to grow. Her human form is weak because all her strength has gone into her gift.

When I see Aryanna hug Jazz tightly. "I've known you for like five minutes, looking you've already given me the biggest scare."

Despite the tense situation, we all chuckle slightly.

When I see Jazz, "If you think that's the worst scare you can get," Marcel teases. "I certainly don't know my sister well enough yet."

While the others chat, my gaze locks on the elderly witch. Desmond looks uneasy, I worried. "Let's get this child to a safe place," she mutters. "I'm not sure what kind of forces are after her."

"You're right. And I know the perfect place for now," I say, and nod towards Val's father. "Follow me."

I lead them outside to my SUV, signaling Harmony to start the engine.

... and everyone climbs in. Meanwhile, I grab my phone and call Garret. I give a brief rundown of what happened today. "What?" he exclaims. "Alpha, are you alright? Do you need me to come for backup!?"

"No, I need you to stay and protect the pack! Harmony and I will be in danger for a few hours, and I need you as our backup in the pack. I want you to stay with Elias with a team of trackers here," I tell him. "And an additional team of warriors who will accompany the remaining guests home from the party."

"Of course, Alpha. Elias and his team will be here in half an hour to hunt minutes maximum."

"Good. Marcel will wait for Elias here and give him the details." When I hang up again, I turn to look at Marcel. "Did you hear all that?"

He nods.

"I want Elias to roam the whole area, not just the restaurant, and search the surroundings for anything they can find. Anything that might identify attackers or give clues as to why they were here. I want regular updates, and command."

"Of course, Alpha," Marcel agrees. "What can I do to help?"

"Clean up the mess here and talk to the restaurant owner. We'll compensate him for the cost of any repairs. Also, make sure to remove the bodies of the rogues once they've been thoroughly searched and have a look burned. Our warriors will be here soon. They'll help you." I pause. "But make sure everyone else gets home safely," I tell him.

"I could help too," Aryanna offers. She has an arm around Jazz. "My original plan was to take Jazz with me to Red Claw tonight. But I can't stay a little longer to help you out for a night." She smirks. "I'm strong."

I feel instant relief at her offer. Aryanna is a kick-ass warrior. Lian

he him after as his beta... it says a lot. "Thank you, Ari."

ha, are "Awesome, I'll call Liam and get his approval, but it shouldn't be a problem." She tilts her head. "I'll make sure Jazz and Desmona get to the pack grounds safely, and then I'll return to help Marcel. I have some experience with getting rid of dead bodies."

eam of Jazz snorts and Aryanna shows us a lopsided grin. "Well, that can't be wrong, I guess."

our, 40 "Marcel, make sure you and Elias keep me updated!" I tell him once I'm waiting for him to show a reaction that he understood. Once he nods, I go back to my own task and usher Val's parents into the car with Val. Desmona is happy to stay behind with Jazz and Aryanna. She came here tonight because she wanted to meet Jazz and introduce herself, then maybe talk to her about the coven her grandmother used to belong to. I figure it's not a bad idea to have her stay with Jazz tonight.

ify our Just as I'm about to take my seat next to Harmony, Marius grabs my arm. "Celine?" he asks.

I sigh, nodding towards Harmony to give me a few minutes, before I turn to look at him, brows furrowed. "Is there something you need?" He lets go immediately. "I apologize," he says evenly. "I didn't realize I touched you against your will... and I apologize for the other night... I know, I know, never, normally. Last time too."

ut first, He's talking about the night when he kissed me in that underground without my permission. "I know," I say because it's true. He might be a bit of a jerk. "My things, but he's definitely not one to force himself on others, unless you have a different opinion... that one he forces onto anyone, it seems.

There is a long, awkward pause between us.
n chose "Why did you do that?" he asks finally.

“Do what?” I ask shortly.

’t be a Marius looks away from me. “Save me,” he says quietly. “You ever back toup your secret. You’re probably a hybrid, aren’t you?”

a lot of I shrug. There is no need to hide it anymore.

“So, why?”

me out “Honestly, I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I wish I could say didn’t hesitate for a second, but I did. A part of me still wishes the e more, Goddess would take pity on me and give me another, better mate. Bec I returnbe honest, you’re absolutely shit as a mate.” I pause. “But I couldn’t nona isdie. It wouldn’t be right.”

ecause His eyes go wide at my explanation. Maybe I should have filter about words, but I didn’t want to. Honestly, I deserve to tell him how I true idea to regardless of how he takes it. He hasn’t considered me or my feelings

expect him to be pissed at my words, but surprisingly, he isn’t. He ju ny arm. solemnly. “Thank you,” he says. “I’ll call Liam and ask him to send s our warriors to Moon Blood, just in case. The rest will accompany me.

turning “Where to?” I ask.

“We will be driving behind you in case someone attacks the girl ag: nean to says evenly. I realize this is the longest and most civil conversation I would ever had. “I’ll call my father to tell him we’re on the way.”

“How do you know that’s our destination?”

nd club “I figured it’s either Liam or him, but since Dad has been training e many and has a lot of knowledge about hidden gifts and our connection it’s his wolves... I figured...”

I nod curtly, “Thank you.” I honestly can’t bring myself to chat any with him. Seeing him have a smart and thoughtful side and that he’s : an impulsive, petty asshole makes everything so much harder.

It reminds me of what we could have had.

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ONE STEP AT A TIME

CELINE

As always, Alpha Elden shows his deep-rooted kindness as he wakes us and brings Val and her family inside to keep safe until things calm down. “A healer, huh?” he looks at Val, who is deeply asleep in her brother’s arms.

“You knew, Alpha Elden?” I ask in surprise.

“I had a feeling,” he admits. “But now that I know for sure, it will be easier for me to train her gift.” He frowns. “What worries me is that there was a staged attack on her and her friends.”

“You think it was staged too?” I want to know.

“Sounds most likely,” he admits.

“But how could they have known?” Harmony asks.

“Jade told me there were rumors concerning a young she-wolf with a healer gift,” I say quietly.

“There are many ways to find a special wolf,” Elden points out. “I could have used a spell to locate a certain gift, which might have led to your pack in the first place. They might have even seen Val accidentally healing someone before, without her or anyone else realizing. They even have a wolf within them who can find and track other wolves’ gifts.”

“But why is someone after my daughter!?” Val’s mother whispers.

Elden looks at her sadly. “Healers are rare,” he explains. “And if someone is desperate enough to heal a beloved... well...”

“How about just asking then!?” Harmony mutters under her breath.

Elden tilts his head, contemplates, but then gives us an answer. “I probably don’t want to hear. “Some things cannot be healed, Harmony says. “And Valerie, as a healer, cannot blindly intervene with fate. It comes why her body was made weak. All healers are that way. Healing will take a toll on her body, it’s to prevent her from abusing her gift. Her father’s while her gift is strong, she’s not a miracle worker. She can’t bring the dead or heal just any fatal wound or illness.”

“You think someone wants to do that?” Val’s father wants to know.

Elden shrugs and looks at me. “I don’t know. What are your thoughts?”

“I think someone is desperate enough to try,” I say. “When people have nothing to lose anymore, they are dangerous.” I pause, looking at my father. “I won’t let anyone take her, Dan. I won’t rest until we find who is after her.”

He bows his head gratefully. “I know.”

We are still in the middle of discussing the different possibilities when we start speculating about what this group might want from Val when Marcel

with the calls me. He comes to the point immediately. "Alpha," he says. "Everything you asked. Everyone returned home safely. I talked to the restaurant owner, thankfully he is one of us, and we also dealt with the rogues." He pauses. "Elias wants to talk to you."

Now it's getting interesting. "Good job, Marcel," I tell him before handing over his phone to Elias.

I wait a few seconds until I can hear Elias' deep voice on the other line. "Alpha, I searched the whole area. The rogues didn't leave any traces, nor did the witches."

"Do the rogues belong to any specific group?" I ask him, well aware some rogues stick together and build their own little camps and packs. "Possible, but I can't say for sure. They had no tattoos to indicate they belong to a group, although they were too well organized to be wolves."

I sigh. "So, we have nothing?" "I'm not sure... I might be imagining it..."

"What did you find?"

"It's only been a faint scent, very faint," he admits. "But when I showed me where Beta Aryanna fought the witch, I thought I picked up a similar scent to the ones at the campfires. It could be a coincidence though." I frown, tilting my head slightly. Elias is one of the best trackers I've met. He is a very rational guy and would never be led by assumption. Whoever says he was able to pick up a scent, I'm a solid 80% certain to find something about it.

"Thank you, Elias," I praise him. "You and Marcel both did a great job tonight."

"Thank you," he stutters, suddenly sounding slightly embarrassed.

We did. When I hang up again, I'm in deep thought. It's has to be connected to everything that's been happening lately is connected with each other: the deadcampfires, the witch spying on Jazz and Val, and the attack today.

I have any proof beyond Val recognizing the second witch and Elias. I can't pick up a faint scent, but my gut feeling tells me it's all connected for a reason. Just... why? We have been speculating about the whys, but with no facts. We also don't know who is behind the attack.

"What did you find out?" Elden wants to know.

I tell him briefly what Elias just told me. "Am I reading too much into this?" I want to know.

"No," he says shortly. "Definitely not. I find it very concerning."

"I need to talk to my allies and fellow alphas later," I point out. "We need to be prepared in case a bigger attack is coming."

Again, Elden nods his acknowledgment. "And you?" he looks thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm half-witch myself," I say dryly. "But you knew that already." He chuckles under his breath.

Valerie's parents, who have been listening in silence, now stare at me in surprise. I ignore their looks. "You stay with your daughter," I tell them. "Harmony and I will go back to Moon Blood and tell everyone."

"Tell them what?" Dan sounds nervous.

"The details about what happened tonight. And that their alpha is a hybrid," I state dryly. "The pack needs to know."

Dan nods at me encouragingly. "They might be surprised, but after a great job in, they won't mind," he says.

"I hope so."

"Alpha Celine," Dan and his wife exchange a gaze. "Thank you

ected...everything you're doing for Val. It means the world to us."

er. The "Dan," I say earnestly. "Val is a pack member, and it goes without I don't that we protect our pack."

picking I would be a shitty alpha if I didn't.

r some Harmony and I finally make it out of Silverlake and are on our way ve have Moon Blood. There is one stop we have to make first, though. I tell H.

to drive by the cottage in the woods, well, as close as we can drive. W

to go by foot down the last section of the path. When my grandfathe

ch into the door, I don't leave any room for discussion. "I need you, Grandpa

him with emphasis. "I'm not asking you to live with me. But I need

come with me to the pack and stand next to me when I tell everyon

ve need hybrid."

He looks at me in surprise. "You have embraced it?"

at me "It's what I am," I say, surprised by my own words. Honestly, I

that discovering my heritage would be a bigger shock to me. But rath

idy." feeling shocked, I feel relief from finally having some answers. My

was a wonderful person, and my grandfather was nothing but kind to r

t me in not ashamed of them, so why should I hide who I am?

I them. Grandpa nods. "How could I deny you such a wish?" he whisper

beautiful, strong granddaughter." When I lead him to the c

acknowledges Harmony. "Another strong and beautiful woman," he sr

ia is a "Mr. Carmine, you're a charmer," she chuckles.

He winks at her. "Call me Justus, child."

it sinks On our way home, I link my father. He's the only one I don't wan

into this pack meeting unprepared. I only give him the basic info, the

will hear during the pack meeting.

ou. For When we arrive at the pack house, everyone is still up and clearly r

about today's events. I had a feeling it would be like this, which is why I don't want to postpone my announcement. Everyone gathers together in front of the pack house, I note how some of the older wolves—my father included—are surprised to see my grandfather.

I step onto the little podium so that everyone can see me. "What I am about to tell you," I start. "Is something I've only recently discovered. We have reassured, that today's happenings have nothing to do with this news. It happened today was an attack aimed at a member of our pack. I value every one of you equally, and I will not sit back and allow anyone to attack this pack or the members of this pack!"

The pack members nod in agreement as they clap and cheer.

"Over the last few months, I have been searching for information on intruders whose campfires were found at the bottom of the mountains on the edge of pack lands. They appear to have been spying on one or more members of this pack, and now they have openly attacked us at another earlier this evening. During my research into this group, I also uncovered some information concerning our pack.

"You all know that my grandfather, who reigned over this pack before me. My father, would not allow mixed marriages or matings between wolves of different species. He reigned without mercy and was adamant they were not going to live in this pack.

"Well, I have discovered that mixed matings did, in fact, happen during my grandfather's reign and without his knowledge or permission. Some of the wolves that you all know and love in our pack, are, in fact, hybrids."

"Of course," Garret jumps in instantly. He always does it during tense situations as he's extremely good at reading the mood. "A few of our nervous members found their mates within other species. It's normal."

Why I “Yes, but it wasn’t considered normal back then, so those relationships in front to remain hidden. So much so, that we may never know the full extent included whose family was hiding their heritage.”

My father nods his agreement.

“But I have recently learned of one in particular. My mother was a blood wolf,” I state.

The crowd falls silent, and my father stares at me shocked. “What?”

“She didn’t even know it herself,” I explain. “And although she had no witch blood, she didn’t inherit witch powers. However, I’ve recently

discovered that I do have some witch power because the genes were passed down a third generation.” I turn to look at my grandfather. “Someone

on the pack might know my mother’s father, my grandfather. He stays away from the pack because he’s afraid we won’t want him here. He was my grandfather’s mate and a witch’s son.”

“So that’s why,” my father mutters. “I always wondered why you preferred that tiny cottage in the middle of nowhere.”

“The fact that it is possible to inherit genes as a third-generation witch before my could mean that there are more families with hybrids living among us and anyone suspects they may be a hybrid or have family members that could be never hybrids, you are welcome to come and speak with me at any time. I am

to assist in researching your family tree so that I can help you connecting my roots. Don’t worry; most of the gifts you saw me develop are from my wolf. Only a small percentage of what I can do is from witch

However, I am aware that my being a white wolf, along with the color of my eyes, and my ability to use nature’s elements in my favor, come directly from my witch ancestry.”

“So that’s why!” Garret sighs. “I swear.... I knew something was different

lips had about you. I mean, that day when we ran through the forest, and content of raining... we were all soaked, yet you remained dry!”

“And you weren’t surprised!?” Elias asks in disbelief.

“I thought she ran so fast that she outran the rain,” Garret argues.

a half- Some pack members laugh at Garret while Elias sighs and rolls his

“She’s a werewolf, not The Flash,” he says.

More laughter roars through the crowd.

and half- “You never know!” Garret says with conviction, ignoring Elias’s

recently pussed expression. The crowd, however, continues to laugh even louder

passed I feel a sense of relief flood through me as I notice the tension subsiding

of you wanted to tell everyone and be honest about who and what I am.”

from the directly at the pack members, wanting them to see my sincerity. “Nothing

other’s changed for me. The pack comes first, as always. And I intend to nurture

witch gifts, now that I know what they are, to further strengthen the pack

referred Harmony looks back at me, “I, for one, don’t mind who or what you

know that you will continue to lead this pack with fairness and strength

of my You’ve never let us down. You could be half alien, and I wouldn’t mind

it us. If Murmurs are going through the crowd, and people are nodding.

would be you, Harmony, thank you, I think.

happy “She’s right, Alpha!” one of the guys suddenly hollers. “We don’t

object with that you’re a hybrid. You’re our Alpha!”

gifts I “Yes,” another one cheers. “It’s even better this way! We have a powerful

half blood alpha, and it makes us a powerful pack!”

of my I can’t put into words how relieved and thankful I feel, and how

ly from a mom of this wonderful pack. *Told you*, Danica says. She sounds happy to

The Moon Goddess really blessed me, I admit. I have you for my

different have my gifts helping me to be a good alpha. I have friends and family

it was now I've found out about my roots and can protect the pack even further.
It's a shame our mate sucks, Danica deadpans.

Well, we can't have everything.

I'm proud to be your wolf, Celine, Danica says, puffing out her cheeks. I'm always happy to be with you. But the progress and development you've gone through in the last few years... that's what's making me the proudest I've ever been of you. You faced Lauren and punished her for her crimes to serve justice, while I slightly defended Annalise even though she was still thought of as a weakling. When you grew more and more confident with your own decisions, a pack of wolves was following you. "The pack faithfully following your orders... You say the Moon Goddess is looking at you more than others, but I think you simply made the best out of the gift she's handed you."

I'm not one to tear up easily, but at Danica's words, I have to fight back. I don't want to allow them to fall from my eyes.

You are. I

strength.

and."

Thank



MARIUS

't mind

I feel fucking miserable. I've hurt Celine so much, yet she saved me. She didn't have to. But she did. I stuck to my promise and followed her to Silverlake, where she left the healer girl in my father's care.

Dad also stuck to his promise and didn't inquire about what was going on between Liam and me. It doesn't make me feel any better, but at least I know now, I can act normal until I figure out what I want and how I need to protect my family, and

er. “She needs to train her gift,” Dad announces to Valerie’s parents as Celine and Harmony have left.

The girl’s father, I think his name is Dan, nods in agreement. “You can’t allow Val to fall into enemy hands. Whatever you need me to do, I will do to protect her. I’m so proud of who she has become. Val thinks she’s had to be so strong to overcome Lauren’s betrayal and then she’s had to do everything possible to connect with her wolf.”

Her mother nods. “Valerie is all we have left, she’s the center of our world. We will support her through this new challenge. What do you need us to do?” “Nothing,” Dad smiles, pleased by what he’s heard. “She just has to do it for herself, which I know she will. In my whole life, I’ve only had two other trainees as dedicated to gaining control over their gift as Valerie. One is my son Liam, the other my daughter Aurelia.” He pauses. “In addition to training her mental strength and helping her wolf develop, she should train her body too. How about adding her to one of Moon Blood warrior classes?”

I blink at him. “Training with the warriors?” I don’t know this girl can’t help feeling worried. She’s one of Celine’s proteges... she should be hurt.

Celine would be upset if she got hurt.

my life. I shake my head, trying to focus again. This Valerie girl looks like she could break any moment. She’s fragile.

Dad chuckles at our confusion. “I don’t want her to become a warrior, but she could use some confidence there. I know my warriors would be happy to help a sweet girl like her develop some fighting skills, and I bet it’s still worth the deal. Moon Blood. She could train with Marcel, Garret, and Elias. She knows them and trusts them.”

as soon as Dan nods, the idea growing on him. “I trust your judgment, Alpha. You and Alpha Celine. Whatever the both of you suggest, we will go. Yes, we try.”

“I’ll do it.” The plan, for now, seems to be for Val to stay on either Moon Block or Silverlake’s pack grounds together with her parents. She will train hard, trying and gift with my dad, but go to warrior training classes in Moon Block. She will obviously need to attend school, but not without protection. In this world, other girl, her friend, the black girl, is apparently a hybrid too. She probably do with some protection too.

After staying the night in Silverlake to keep my promise to Celine, I finally have to head home early. The drive back to Red Claw has my thoughts run over the place. Cyrus is still very quiet, unable, and unwilling to help me. “In my mess. No matter what I’m doing, I can see Celine’s face in front of me. It’s a permanence in my mind... her dark-blue eyes and the way Blood’s turn silver when her wolf comes forward. Her regal features, her dignity seems like I won’t ever get her out of my mind.

She deserves the best, and I gave her the worst. I ball my hands in my pockets. She deserves more, much more. The least I could do is stop running from her and instead be honest. She might not want me after I tell her everything. She will probably deem me pathetic and weak, but still... like she *You’re weak.*

No one will ever want you.

I shake my head like the voice will disappear if I do. Most of the time I’ve kept to feel disgusted by myself, fuck, I hate myself more than anyone else does. Similar at still... she deserves to hear the truth from me.

The next chance I have, I’ll ask her for a private talk.

Back at home, the first thing I do is check the weekly schedule.

Elden. Maybe work will put my mind out of its misery. Scanning for my name on the roster, my eyes suddenly widen in surprise. I don't take time to think and head off in search of the person who normally plans the schedule for the pack's or Dante and Liam.

werewolf I hesitate momentarily. I'm not ready to face Liam yet, not before I've gathered the courage to ask for his help. So, I decide to search for him. The instead, I find him walking towards one of the training halls.

he could "Dante," I hurry after my brother's beta. He stops in his tracks, turning to look at me. I flinch slightly at his gaze. I can almost taste his disappointment. "It's so strong. I can deal with anger, but this... "I've noticed that I don't want to do any patrol duties or security tasks involving Luna Annalise."

me sort "Yes," Dante says shortly. "Alpha Liam doesn't want to take the risk in front of her." "Risk?" Something inside me clenches. Does he believe I would harm her? "She's with child, Marius," he says evenly.

ity... It "Does my brother honestly believe I would hurt his mate and my Luna?" I ask in disbelief, unable to keep the hurt from my voice. I realize I suck at this. My brother, I suck as a pack member, and definitely as a mate. I tend to scare away everyone around me, especially those I like. But surely not even he, despite our recent clashes, would believe I could harm his pregnant mate. "Would he?"

Dante looks at me for a long while, then he sighs, his gaze softening. "He doesn't think you would willingly hurt her, but he doesn't trust you. I don't want to stress her unnecessarily and put a strain on her nerves." He looks at me hesitantly. "Annie is not feeling well recently. Marius, can you help her? Can you guarantee us that you won't say anything to stress her?"

I swallow thickly. "No," I admit quietly, deciding to be honest for once. "Then I would advise you to accept his decision." He looks at me

ame onhint of sympathy, but doesn't say anything more.

onsider I sigh as I watch him walk away. I know he's right. I didn't do anyt
ile. It'searn a spot in the Luna's closest security team aside from being the
brother. I have stressed her more than any other pack member, and Li
ore I'vefinally had enough. Protecting his unborn children and his mate is
: Dantepriority.

I know all that, but it doesn't mean I like it.

ning to On my way back to the pack house, I bump into Aryanna. She mu
ntment,just got home since she is climbing out of her car. "Oh, sunnybo
r't havechuckles when she sees me. "Are you sulking because your brother i
with you, and people for once, are actually pissed?" she deadpans.

k." "Something like that," I admit. I look at her. She looks so happy. "
m her? you found your mate."

"I did," she beams. "It's Jazz, Marcel's sister. She's so fun and c
una?" Ifantastic."

ick as a "I'm happy for you," I say, and mean it for once.

alienate She looks at me surprised. Apparently, words of empathy are not u
Liam,me. "Thank you," she smiles.

it mate, "Celine saved my life," I hear myself say.

"I know," she says quietly.

g. "No, "I've hurt Liam and Annalise over and over again, and I've insult
u not toeven though I knew she was Dante's second chance at happiness."

at me "I know that, too."

onestly "I'm not good with people." I point out. "I don't know how to make
right again."

nce. She looks at me. "Is that what you want to do?"

with a I shrug. "I don't even know how to start."

“Then for once, do what you’re supposed to do,” she says. “Do yo
thing to You might not be guarding the Luna right now, but Liam is not an ic
Alpha’s knows you’re a capable warrior, which is why you’re still on im
iam has patrols. Don’t mess it up.”

his top I tilt my head a bit, allowing her words to sink in. “And then?”

“Come,” she says. “Let’s have breakfast together. A good cup of
and some food do miracles sometimes. And then your life coach, A
st have will make sure to help you get your shit together.”

y,” she I smile back at her and nod. Just take one step at a time.

s angry

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ute and

sual for

ed Ella

e things

“Then for once, do what you’re supposed to do,” she says. “Do your job. You might not be guarding the Luna right now, but Liam is not an idiot. He knows you’re a capable warrior, which is why you’re still on important patrols. Don’t mess it up.”

I tilt my head a bit, allowing her words to sink in. “And then?”

“Come,” she says. “Let’s have breakfast together. A good cup of coffee and some food do miracles sometimes. And then your life coach, Aryanna, will make sure to help you get your shit together.”

I smile back at her and nod. Just take one step at a time.

A FAMILY UNITED

✱ CELINE✱

I find my father in the kitchen of his suite, trying to prepare. He has made it a habit to sometimes cook for himself, saying he wants to learn something new and be less dependent on the kitchen staff. I don't buy his excuse; I have another idea as to why he wants to learn how to

“Might be better if you put salt into the water for the noodles,” I grumble. I approach him. “Haven't I taught you anything?”

He chuckles. “Is that your witchcraft talking, or did you actually do another gift? Cooking.”

“Neither,” I smile. “It's called common sense,” I tease.

He smiles in amusement. “The moment they become alphas, they show their respect towards their elders.”

I laugh a bit. “Come, my well-respected elder, sit down. I shall help you.” When he makes space for me in front of the stove with a relieved sigh, I give him a curious glance. “Who are you planning on wooing with your cooking, Dad?”

He looks like a deer caught in the headlights. “No one,” he mutters.

“Is it the lady at the bar?” I ask him. “The one who always flirts with you?”

“No, you’re getting things wrong. I—”

“The owner of the little café!” I exclaim.

His cheeks flush red. I can’t remember the last time I saw my dad so embarrassed. “It’s not like that,” he mutters.

“But it’s fantastic, Dad!” I exclaim. “You deserve to be happy! He is Mona, right?”

He looks at me surprised and a bit relieved. “You don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” I say excitedly. “It would make me happy if you had a second love.”

dinner. “Her mate was human,” he explains to me quietly. “She lost
wants to sickness. She’s a bit older than I am, but I don’t mind. We’ve sort of
’t quite over our mutual experiences, and well... she’s not my second chance
cook. anything, Celine, but she makes me happy.”

n when I switch off the stove and turn to him. “Dad. Mom passed many years ago.
You held it together back then for the pack and for me. You don’t owe
discover us an explanation over who you want to date. If Mona makes you happy,
you make her happy, who am I to judge?”

lose all Dad smiles at me, and for the first time in a long while, his smile
his eyes. If Mona is really able to heal him and help him overcome his pain,
then it would make me one heck of a happy daughter. “Now, if only
p you.” cook for real,” he chuckles. “Maybe I should have our kitchen staff
smile, I ___,”

th your “No!” I blurt out. “She is going to love you cooking for her. It doesn’t
to be perfect, it’s just the gesture and the kind thought that’s going

her. You can make your spaghetti and add a salad to it, and some ice cream with strawberries with whipped cream, that always gets them,” I point out, questioning why I’m giving my father tips about how to seduce his interest.

I just want this to work out for him. Mona is a nice woman, a little snooty but also very kind. She’s only ranked omega, and I love that my father, a former alpha—doesn’t mind that about her. In a way, this makes me a little nameproud to be his daughter.

“Ok. You’ve convinced me,” Dad says with a smile. “Show me how to make spaghetti carbonara,” he tilts his head. “It’s one of Mona’s favorites. We spent the best part of an hour trying to find the best recipe, trying a few that Dad thought he could make. I’m not a particularly good cook to myself, but seeing how Dad is giving his best, I kinda want to learn some basics too. I doubt I’ll ever cook for Marius... but... you never know. *He should cook for us, Danica grumbles. If he doesn’t want to be our servant.*

I have to suppress a laugh at her words. It’s rare for her to joke about any off-kiltered-up mate bond. However, last time I met Marius, our conversation, and so civilized, it surprised me. I only know him angry and dismissive, and even, but to talk to him normally was new.

I sigh inwardly. Goddess, what am I going to do about this mate of mine? After Dad and I wrap our cooking lesson up, it’s time to set my plan into motion, the actual reason why I’m visiting him tonight.

“Dad,” I start, deciding to approach the topic head-on. “Are you shocked?”

“About what?” he asks.

“About me being a hybrid.”

ream... He shrugs. "To me, you will always be my wonderful and clever da
out, notThe one person who kept me sane when I lost your mother and broth
is lovecould be a full-fledged witch, and I wouldn't mind."

Relief washes over me. "And are you ready for a family reunion?"
hy, and "As ready as I can be," he chuckles.

er—the "Then please come with me," I say.

feel so He raises his eyebrows. "Oh, you were talking about now?"

"Well, I hate procrastinating," I smile. "Let's get it over with."

how to "Alright," he nods. "Actually, I'm looking forward to seein
ites." grandfather again."

ig out a We chat happily together as he accompanies me to my office. On
d cookwe head towards the comfortable sitting area where one of my kitch
n somehas placed some tea and apple pie. Harmony is already here, waiting v
grandfather.

ir mate, "Cedric!" Grandpa exclaims. They haven't seen much of each oth
the years due to my father being constantly busy and attending t
out ourbusiness, while my grandfather chose to live in the middle of nowhere
ion waspast, they only ever saw each other briefly during the holidays.

rrogant "It's good to see you, Justus." Dad smiles and exchanges a half-sic
with him.

nine!?" "Listen, Cedric," grandpa starts immediately. "I never meant to lie
originalor hide stuff from you, but back in those days..."

"Please forget it, Justus," Dad sighs. "You gave me the biggest gift
i't youever ask for: your daughter. Had my father known she was half-wi
would never have let our relationship happen. I would have feared
life."

"I know," Justus said seriously. "That's why my lovely mate k

ughter hidden from the pack too. A werewolf without a wolf is still better
er. You witch.”

I don't interrupt their little encounter, glad how smoothly it is going. My
father is an intelligent man, and I know he connected all the puzzle
together pretty fast. It makes me happy he doesn't hold any grudge
Grandpa for having to make such difficult decisions.

There is a knock at the door, interrupting their chat. They eye me curiously
while I just smirk at them.

g your “Come on in,” I say, standing up.

“Are we expecting someone else?” Dad asks.

arrival, “Yes, we are,” I smile slightly when the door opens. “Just
en staff accompanying our guest.”

with my “Is she?” Dad looks at me curiously, and eyes the door where
she is
standing now. She has started training to learn some witchcraft
over Desmona and will mainly learn about herbs and potions. She will
be in the pack Moon Blood until she graduates high school, then she plans to move
to the Claw with Aryanna.

“Alpha Celine,” she beams at me. “Marcel and I picked up your
led hug She's here.”

I nod. “Let her in.”

to you I'm barely able to hide my grin when Jade enters the room, spread
her
arms out wide to hug me. She looks her usual self: regal and dignified.
I could dear!”

itch, he “Great grandma,” I chuckle. “Jade.”

for her Grandpa looks at us in shock. “Mom!? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, sweetheart, Justus.” Jade turns towards him, her eyes wide. “
elegant lovely surprise.” She approaches him swiftly, pulling him into a hug. I

than weird to watch because she looks so much younger than him, but I
they are used to it.

ng. My Harmony and Dad, however, stare at the scene with their mouths
pieces open in shock. “Mom?” Dad mutters. “Did you just call her mom, Just
against “Wait... you’re truly related?” Harmony inquires.

Jade lets go of Grandpa and looks at them. “I’m Justus’ mother
triously witch, we age slower than humans. And even slower than wolves.”

Harmony nods tentatively while my father still needs some time to
the situation. I decide to load his plate full of pie. Eating always helps
distract his thoughts. After the second piece of apple pie, he looks
Jazz is carefully asking Jade and Justus questions about their life before Jus
Grandma, and why he’s aging, but his mother is not. He also asks ques
Jazz is about me.

ft with It’s getting late, and my father looks at Grandpa insistently. “You w
stay in here, Justus,” Dad says in a matter-of-fact tone. “I know you’re
to Redfather, but as my beloved wife’s father, I want to protect you and ha
around. Do you truly not like being in a pack, or did you just hide
r guest forest out of fear of discovery?”

“I like the forest,” Grandpa answers warily.

“Oh, please,” Jade rolls her eyes. “You don’t like the forest so mu
ling here you want to live there on your own, having nothing to do. Time
d. “My changed. Come back to the pack. Your granddaughter and your son
live here.”

“That’s right,” I decide, adding fuel to the fire, “And you would be
help.”

What a “Really?” he asks me, slightly skeptical.

t’s a bit “Of course, I need someone to help with my newfound powers,” I t

assume “I can’t always ask Jade to rush here and train with me, after all. And always visit you in your cottage. I have a pack to lead.”

is wide He tilts his head. “That makes sense.”

us?” Jade looks at me, raising her brows and giving me an impressed look

“We would be really happy to have a man of your knowledge in this . I’m aHarmony adds earnestly.

Grandpa considers our words for a moment, then he nods. “Well, h o graspI say no to that?”

ed Dad Dad sighs slightly. “I should have had Celine ask from the beginni calmer, mutters.

tus met “For real,” Jade grumbles. “It just takes his granddaughter praisi uestionsand another pretty she-wolf telling him he’s awesome... and he ag stay.”

will stay We all laugh at her pissed-off expression.

not my

ive you

e in the



VALERIE

ich that

as have “Okay, guys and girls,” Garret approaches everyone with a broad

-in-law while tugging me along. I’ve always been a bit scared of him because

bulk and height, but now that I’ve gotten to know him better, he look

like a soft giant, like a sweet teddy bear. “As I’ve already mentior

a great have a guest in our class.” He grins, nodding at me. “Our little Vale

train with us. By now, you all know she’s a healer because this pac

keep a secret to save their lives.”

ell him.

I can't Everyone laughs at his words.

"Our little gem here can't shift yet, but we are hoping to slowly get She's training wolf-less, so I want you to show her some of your moves."

pack," Alpha Celine deliberately put me in the advanced class because she on having the class help me and teach me as a group. She and Alpha know can think that would be way more effective than if I joined the usual basic classes where everyone is still learning and trying to progress fast.

ing," he "And now guys, and only the guys, raise your hands." Garret puts both hands in the air, showing them what he means. Everyone else follows him "Perfect," he states. "Keep these to yourself and not on Val!"

agrees to Everyone bursts into hysterical laughter, some of the female warriors to find his joke particularly funny. Even I can't help but giggle slightly.

I was so scared to train with them, but now that I'm here and Garret introduced me so casually, I don't feel anxious at all. I'm here to learn all, and they are all eager to help. It seems each and every one of our warriors is honored that our Alpha deemed them worthy of this task. I'm damned if I don't put 100% effort into this.

First, Garret puts me in a group with three female warriors to show some moves while the others proceed with their normal training. The first smile out what the others are doing and why it's working so well for them. I smile e of his improve my posture, my breathing, and my footing. Eventually, as more switches the teams up, and I'm now with one male and a female warrior. I'm ed, we guy is a bit older, and I know him. He's a friend of both my father and Annalise's father. He immediately gives off that fatherly vibe toward me. I'm rie will Annalise's father. He immediately gives off that fatherly vibe toward me. I'm k can't

I finish training with a good feeling inside. I don't think I did amazingly well, but I don't think I sucked either.

“Is our little warrior coming for a drink with us?” one of the guys b
t there.me. They’re all smiling at me like I brightened up their class just by
ur bestthere.

“Hey, Pete,” Garret hollers from the side. “What did I tell you
ie planskeeping your hands to yourself!?”

a Elden The others burst into giggles again, and I grin too. “I would love to
eginnersincerely. “But the Alpha thinks my life might be in danger. It’s safer
to stay on pack grounds.”

oath his “Val’s right,” Garret says, his voice now serious. “I’m going to acc
ollows.her back to her family and friends right now.”

The others nod in understanding.

rs seem “Don’t worry, little one,” one of the she-wolves says. “We will wat
’. you.”

rret has One of the guys flexes his muscles, making the others laugh again.
rn afterdamned if we don’t protect our little princess.”

if these “Awesome,” Garret says dryly. “I will take the princess with m
will beCould you wannabe princes and kings be so kind as to put all the equ
away?”

ow me More laughter.

y point I look at him in amazement. He’s the perfect teacher; fun,
1. Theymotivating, and he makes sure things get done. No one was slack
Garretduring training. If all teachers were like him, I think everyone would
or. Thisstudy.

ier and “And how did you like your class?” Garret asks while he walks me l
ne. “It was great,” I say with emphasis.

azingly He beams at me. “Really?”

“Absolutely. I know I will never be an actual warrior... but everyc

seems also nice and tried so hard to make me feel comfortable. And you're
y being good teacher," I blab along, feeling super excited about something for

Garret looks sincerely happy. "Thank you for saying that. It means
1 about Valerie."

Garret takes me home, where I have a swift lunch with Jazz and
," I say who tell me all about Celine's great-grandmother visiting last night
for my parents drive me over to Silverlake for my training with Alpha

Recently, my days have become incredibly busy, but I don't mind. My
company was so dull just a year ago, so this is a nice change.

I don't know what it is, but today I'm full of confidence. "I think I
it today," I tell Elden before we can even start properly.

He raises an eyebrow. "You want to try?"

"Yes," I nod firmly. I've spent the last few sessions concentra
"I'll be meditating, focusing, and connecting with Ailia. Alpha Elden's wolf h
a great help. It would be easier if I had a mate... he would strengthen
ie now and me further, but since I don't have one yet, I have to manage on m
ipment "Do you have any pack members with a minor wound?"

"Sure," Elden nods. To my surprise, he takes a knife in his hand and
it into his palm. "Here." When my mouth drops open, he grins. "I
strong, nothing for me, child. Also, I heal fast, so don't overthink it."

"Okay," I nod, pressing my hand against his wound. When Jazz w
love to pain was flooding through me, I acted on instinct, but now...

Healing is part of you, Ailia tells me. It comes naturally to us.
back. *overthink it.*

"Focus," Elden's voice reaches my ears. "Listen to what your wolf
Let Ailia guide you."

Imagine the skin of his hand, she mutters. I close my eyes, only liste

such a her voice. *The bones and sinew stretching along it. Feel it. Feel wh* once. *knife cut through, like a string was torn apart. Now, imagine it being* is a lot, *little strings torn apart that want to reconnect again.*

I do. I imagine the blood vessels, the skin, and how everything Marcel, connect. I'm feeling warm, but other than that, nothing happens. I o before eyes again. "I'm sorry, Alpha Elden, I thought—"

Elden. He chuckles and pulls his hand away from mine, showing it to me. My life only dry blood on his skin, but the wound is closed.

My mouth drops open. "Did I...?"

can do "Yes, you did," Elden says. "You—"

I let out a squeal of joy before throwing my arms around his waist, hugging him. When I notice my father hurrying to the room, worrying on something might have happened, I run towards him and jump into his arms. "I did it!" I blurt out. "I healed his hand! And I did it consciously! Grandma Ailia Ailia is the coolest wolf ever!"

my own. *Thank you,* Ailia says with a broad grin.

Dad smiles. "I'm so happy, honey."

Dad slams his hand on the table. Elden nods his approval and smiles warmly. "You did really well, Val. This is he says with emphasis. "You've managed to do the hardest step. Now you know how it works, it will get easier every day."

as hurt, "You feel a bit warm, Val," Dad mutters worriedly while touching my forehead.

. *Don't* "I felt a bit dizzy while healing Alpha Elden," I admit.

Mom approaches, looking me over with a worried look in her eyes. If she says she has thoroughly checked me over, she smiles in relief. "Just a little rest will make you some tea and soup later, sweetheart."

coming to "That's your body reacting to your gift," Alpha Elden explains

ere the “Never forget that your gift comes with a price.”
lots of I nod at him. “I won’t.”

should
pen my

There is

ist and
ed that
s arms.
oddes,

child,”
ow that

ing my

s. Once
fever. I

to me.

“Never forget that your gift comes with a price.”

I nod at him. “I won’t.”

SCARED OF LOVE

MARIUS

I wake up screaming, panting heavily as sweat drips down my forehead. That nightmare again, the same fucking nightmare every time. The eyes, staring at me, haunting me, the voice taunting and vile. And just then, I'm frozen. I can't move, I can't fight, I can't do anything. I'm rooted to the spot, horrified and scared like a little child.

The child in me that never grew up.

Standing up, I walk over to the sink and grab a glass of water, feeling myself wobbly on my feet. And shit, I feel both hot and cold at the same time. Am I developing a fever? What is going on? Is that yet another punishment I have to endure for denying the mate bond the way I did?

Cyrus? I whisper, unable to hide the desperation in my voice.
answer me. Please.

I swear I hear something in my mind, a very distant voice. More like
of it than an actual voice.

Then I'm greeted with silence again.

Shit. It feels like Cyrus can't even reach me anymore. Like his presence
getting weaker and weaker by the minute. I'm terrified of that thought
to talk to Liam or my father, they know more than anyone else how
connect with our wolves. I should have done so from the first day, but
too ashamed of how I treated Celine to face them.

But there is no hiding it anymore. I need to come clean and admit
badly I've handled the mate bond. I only hope that the family bond is
enough for them to look past my behavior and they will help my wife
me.

I drag myself back to bed. Tomorrow. I'll talk to Liam tomorrow,
while drifting into another restless sleep.

rehead. It's morning, yet I can barely drag myself down to breakfast. Em
ie same Emilien are currently sitting at the alpha's table together with Ella and
ust like having their breakfast. Ella feeds Dante a bit of her toast with honey
'm just Dante peppers her with kisses. For the first time in a long while, I put
own petty feelings aside and realize how lucky Dante is for receiving
second chance mate. He truly deserves it.

finding I hear Eric's teasing comments towards them, cheeky, but never vile
e same "Morning," I mutter as I sit down with my cup of coffee, feeling
another disturbing their moment.

Ella stares at me. "Good grief, Marius," she mutters. "Are you a
Please You don't look too good. Do you need something? Should we take you to
infirmary?"

I would have never done that, I think. Showed concern about someone

... a hint who's hurt me and those close to me before. I try to think about what I
... have done if the roles were reversed. Would I have asked her how she
... Would I have cared? I don't know the answer to that. And that thought
... presence is scaring me more and more. I wasn't like this before; I was far
... . I need empathetic. When did I numb down so much that I've become so ind
... we can and spiteful towards others?

... it I was "Marius?" Dante nudges me with a worried expression.

... "I'm sorry, I just dozed off." I rub over my head. "Didn't sleep too
... to how again."

... ; strong Eric frowns when he looks at me. "Does this happen regularly? I
... olf and get yourself checked, Mari? I could call someone if you want?"

... Another person being nice to me, even though I haven't ever been
... I think, them.

... "Why don't you take the day off?" Dante suggests.

... ric and "Yeah, I could take your shift," Ella offers.

... . Dante, Goddess, were they always this kind? Somewhere in the distant corner
... ey, and my mind, I remember several instances proving they were. They've
... ush my get through to me for a long time, and then I pushed it too far. "No, it's
... iving a Being outside in the fresh air might clear my mind fog," I admit.

... "You could switch with Ella though," Dante agrees. "She's supposed to
... :. running some errands today in town. You would still be in the front
... bad for Meanwhile, El can do your patrol duty."

... "That would be really good, actually," Ella smiles at Dante.
... ight!? someone went a bit wild yesterday, Nefeli really wants to stretch her
... u to the and run with you for a bit."

... "Oh," he raises his eyebrows. "So, now you're saying it was me who
... omeone wild yesterday?"

I would he felt? “Obviously, it’s your fault,” she deadpans. “It’s always the guy’s fault.”
he felt? “Right,” he laughs and kisses her softly.

ought is I smile at them. “Alright, how can I say no to such an offer?”
r more shouldn’t sabotage another man’s sex life.”

ifferent Dante snorts, while Ella rolls her eyes.

This is the most normal conversation we’ve had together in a year.
kinda nice. Goddess, I’ve been such a shitty person during the last
oo well months. My poor pack members deserve an award for sticking with
my pitiful behavior.

Did you



nice to

VALERIE

ners of “I’ll be so glad when we are done with finals,” Lionel sighs dram
tried to while he walks us to our next class. “I just want it to be over.”

’s okay. “Me too,” Jazz agrees with a sigh.

“Me three,” Aurelia chimes in.

ed to be “Me four,” Nox adds.

esh air. “Me five. I think we can all agree on that,” I admit. I love studyin
don’t like exams or tests. We’re almost done with everything, though

“After is only one final left.

er paws “At least we’ve already done math,” Jazz says.

“Let’s celebrate,” Lionel offers, “Are you training today, Val?”

to went “No, both Alpha Elden and Alpha Celine gave me the day off to fo
school and then have fun with my friends.” I smile brightly. “Re

ult.” party.”

“We could grab some dinner,” Nox offers. “And visit Silver Lake. A manatural lake, I mean. You girls haven’t been there yet.”

Jazz and I exchange a glance and shake our heads. Silver Lake? I’ve heard rumors about how beautiful it is, like a picture out of a fantasy book.

It feels “Great idea,” Aurelia smiles. “We should ask Marilou, too.”

ast few “And Tori and Terry,” I muse.

me and “Yeah,” Lionel grins. “We have to invite Terry if Marilou is coming.” Nox elbows him but can’t hide his grin.

“Ok. We just need to focus for two more hours,” Aurelia commands, opening the door to our classroom. “Last exam. Then we are free of school for the rest of our lives.” She pauses. “Well, aside from college, of course, but that’s something else!”

All I have done during the past few weeks is stay on pack grounds (officially) at school. Whenever I met up with my friends, it was always in the safety packs or at school, where there are guards surrounding the building. There’ve been no more incidents, and I’m starting to feel more relaxed.

We have our English exam now, but I’m not stressing too much as it’s my best subject. By the looks of it, everyone else in our group seems to be writing lots, so they must be doing alright too. I’m finished before the others, but I so I hand in my paper and leave the classroom, deciding to wait for them outside. Originally, I planned to grab something from the vending machine, but my bladder demands a detour. I hurry to the toilets, already planning to do in the afternoon with my friends. We are going to have so much fun, and tomorrow it’s back to training, which currently really motivates me.

ocus on As I wash my hands in the sink, I hear the restroom door opening ready to me. “Mama?”

I pause at the sound of a small voice, my gaze snapping toward the
ce. The little girl is standing there, she's crying. And her arm—it's bleeding! "

little one," I carefully walk towards her. "What happened, dear?"

ve only She looks at me, her face tear-struck. "Mama?" she cries.

ook. "I'm so sorry, I'm not your mama," I say softly. "What does sl
like?"

The girl suddenly looks scared of me, and turning on her heel
;." straight out of the restroom again. There are drops of blood on the
where she was just standing. Goddess, I need to make sure that she's
s while I can't let a little girl run through the school, hurt and lost.

school I chase after her, following the drops of blood she's left here and
course, which thankfully makes it easy to follow her. As soon as I find her, I

her to the school infirmary. I rush outside through an emergency exit,
or go toward a small backyard. There are no pupils here normally, it's just
y of our staff working in the school.

There's I search frantically, relieved when I see the girl running towards th
cans. "Hey, little girl! Wait, I won't hurt you," I beg her to stop, as I c
it's my to chase.

s to be Turning around the corner makes me freeze on the spot. The girl i
others, and in her place stands a middle-aged man. I don't know him, but he c
e others cafeteria staff or even a janitor. "Excuse me," I mutter, confused. "I
achine, see—"

ig what *Run.*

ch fun, That's Ailia. *What?*

e. *Run!*

behind I don't question her. My wolf has good instincts, that's what Elden l
me repeatedly since we started training. Time to trust her. I turn on my

door. Aready to run back into the building, when I feel something lunging at n
'Oh no,the side.

“Don’t hurt her!” the man yells. “I want her unscathed!”

Wait... What!? They’re after me!? Goddess, I’m so stupid! The li
ie lookwas probably just a hallucination, and I followed it like a dumb idiot.

There is no way these guys are dragging me off anywhere! Who
s, runsman, anyway? I try struggling against the second guy’s grip, attempt
groundbite his hand, but he just laughs. There is something sinister in hi
alright!practically feral. There’s a scar gracing half of his face. He looks str.

me, ready to punch. Better to be hit than be dragged off to an unknow
d there,as far as I’m concerned. I continue struggling against him, yelli
I’ll takescreaming for help. Hopefully, someone will hear me!

leading “Val?” I hear a familiar voice. I turn around, gaping as I see Jazz ap
for theShe must have followed me. I don’t know how or why, but maybe sor
alerted her.

ie trash “Jazz,” I scream. “Go and get help!”

ontinue She pauses momentarily to take in the scene, before nodding and :

back toward the building entrance. Just as Jazz is about to reach the
s gone,woman appears out of nowhere and punches her in the face, knock
ould beunconscious. Where are all these people coming from? Who are they!?

Did you I scream, “No!”



MARIUS

was told

y heels,

ne from I'm heading through the town, regretting taking Ella up on her offer to swap for the day. Seriously, nothing is more tiring than playing deliver the mail. However, Dante was right: At least my body can relax for a while.

ttle kid My last stop is school, the one place I loathe most. I don't have too many memories of my school days. It's a mixed school... there are plenty of werewolves here too, so we always had to hide our wolf side. As an alpha, no one bothered me, but I also didn't make many friends. Besides my mischievous eyes, always in trouble for talking back to the teachers or for defying them. At one point in time, they called my parents every week.

n place, Now, I have to step into this rat hole once again to grab a few things and Annie. A few Red Claw members are graduating this year and Annie wants to hold a party for them, which is why I'm supposed to contact the school principal to grab the graduation details and gather some of their documents. I want to make sure she gets all the names and dates right.

Walking the corridors is like a trip down memory lane. Oh, here... I got into a fistfight. And here I kissed that cute cheerleader. Oh, I had to rush to the toilet. Here... detention. And here is where a whole group of kids ganged up on me, and Liam had to intervene.

ing her Wow, I feel like I'm sixteen again. I can definitely do without this fight. Time to hurry up and get done with everything as fast as possible.

Heading toward the staircase, my ears catch some faint noises. I know Cyrus might be weakened, but my senses are still enhanced. Is someone screaming? I could swear I just heard someone yell and scream for help.

Frowning, I concentrate all my energy on the direction I think they are coming from. I follow them downstairs, taken aback when I see the girl, Jazz, running through the corridor and past me. I notice her in the hallway because Ari has talked about her nonstop and showed me a cute self-

offer tomade together. Jazz doesn't notice me though as she's running full
ry boy.toward a door leading outside.

The noises are getting louder. I drop everything in my hands at on
he bestfollow Jazz outside, arriving just in time to see Jazz being knocked c
enty offemale rogue. I instantly recognize her as one of the rogues from th
a's kid,night, because Aryanna showed me like fifty pictures of her, taken
, I wassecurity camera during the birthday party attack. And on further insp
I thinkValerie is being held captive by some other rogue punk. She's strugg
escape his grip, but she stands no chance against him thanks to his s
ngs forsize and strength over her. Next to him, is an old grandpa who's c
e wantswatching the scene unfold.

ecretary "Hey!" I yell at them. "Let her go."

. Annie Valerie tries to reach for him, grasping at something around his ne
tugging at it. But the old geezer just pushes her hand away, smiling
. here I "It's okay, child, you're safe."

l sex in My stomach churns at the way he's looking at her. In what kind of
roup ofworld is he living? Sugar daddy dream world?

I'm about to shift when a small arrow hits me. A growl leaves my l
eeling. feel the venom spreading through my body. Wolfsbane. Scumbags!
work out the direction the arrow came from... but there is nothing, no
frown.standing there. I narrow my eyes and glare toward the two men. "Y
omeonedie for this, assholes. What sort of pathetic scumbags attack a bu
p... teenagers?!"

sounds The old geezer looks taken aback at my words. But he shakes it off
e witchgo," he mutters. "Make sure he doesn't follow."

stantly, The rogue who knocked out Jazz lunges at me now, but even w
fie theywolfsbane in my blood, I easily knock her aside. Then more rogues ma

I speed appear, there are now five of them circling me. Their putrid scent is getting on me, and with the wolfsbane slowly taking over my body, I don't see a chance against this many. Where the heck did they appear from? Cut off by a wall. Shit, there must be a witch involved in this attack, just like the attack at the other Valerie's birthday party? Maybe if I can find and take out the witch, the rogues will lose some of their strength.

As if on cue, a hooded creature steps out of the shadows near where the arrow was fired from. Has she been there all this time? She must have superior magic to cloak herself from being seen. She's wearing a long cloak, like the casual ones of those Halloween costumes. Her eyes are gleaming. "Get us out of here, the sugar daddy wannabe commands.

She nods, snapping her fingers.

The older guy teleports away as the second one grabs Val tighter and looks at me calmly. "Bye, wolfie," he smirks.

"Val!" I yell. They must have drugged her because her body seems to be struggling, but my mind still works surprisingly well.

They are taking Val with them. She is valuable to them, and the older guy makes sure she didn't get hurt. They need her! "Val!" She forces her eyes to open to look at me. "Nobody hurt me," I say, hoping she will understand. I've heard she read a lot growing up. I hope she has read the Old Testament. "Nobody is killing me. It's nobody."

If only I could mind-link her.

She looks at me, confused at first, before there is understanding. "Let's see. Good. At least she got it.

The witch stares at me like I've lost my mind, then she smiles and snaps her fingers again.

I try to fight my way through the rogues surrounding me, but the

...tting toeasily pushes me back. I can only watch as the guy holding Val and the
stand ateleport away with her.

I punch one of the guys and kick another, trying to focus and gat
ttack atstrength. There is still one girl here, who needs me to be strong. If I
:ch, thenow, it could mean the end for Jazz too, and it might further mean the

her mate Aryanna, my only real friend. I can see Jazz stirring out
iere thecorner of my eye, her eyes opening slowly. I maneuver it so that one
ve usedguys punches and sends me flying to the ground right next to her.

ike one “Stay down,” I whisper to her. “Pretend to be unconscious.”
f here,” “But—”

I figure I’m not getting out of this alive. I consider how to tell her, b
I just say it. “One of us needs to tell the others what happened to Val.”
id grins Her lips quiver, and I can see tears of fear in her eyes. In resignti
closes them again, pretending to be unconscious.

is to be I jump to my feet, lunging toward two of the rogues at once. I mi
gly fast.look like it, but as an alpha’s son, I’ve always trained hard. Wolfsbane
. fuckerI can remain upright a bit longer. I scream profanities at them, making
er eyesbe as loud as possible, hoping someone might hear me. If it doesn’t s
erstand.it might save Jazz.

dyssey. I slam one of the rogues to the ground, choking him as I straddle hi
I can feel his body convulsing beneath me however, I struggle to h
when I feel something sharp penetrate my side. I blink in confusion, n
; in hershifting to my side, noticing a knife stuck in my ribcage.

My grip on the guy’s throat loosens.

before “Enough,” the one who stabbed me pants heavily.

Hah, at least I’ve worn them out.

e group I grab at my side, trying to pull the knife out. It’s silver, shit... a

the witchspreading through my body extra fast. With wolfsbane dulling down my wolf senses, it's like I'm a normal human. I feel my eyelids growing heavy and darkness engulfing me.

I give up. I hear more noises, loud ones. I wonder what's going on, but I can't find the strength to open my eyes. I can sense the rogues that were circling me, but they're all gone. Did they just leave? I wonder why?

One of the rogues says, "At least they've forgotten about Jazz."

They forgot.

Thankfully.

"Marius," I hear a voice beside me.

But then I force my eyes open and see it's Jazz, looking at me in horror. "Help! Hang in there! Marius, please." She's crying.

And then she says, "Ari has gotten herself a good mate, I think. She seems like such a nice girl, and beautiful and brave. Ari deserves to have such a sweet mate."

I might not be able to see, but I close my eyes, only remotely noticing the extra voices around me. Whether or not, I'm too tired to look, so tired.

I'm sure to die. I have never wondered what dying might feel like. I did sometimes have me, with the thought of not being in this world anymore, and I admit that sometimes I've wished I could just leave, but I never actually wanted to. I just didn't want to die. I just wanted others to notice me.

And then I realize I'm still alive. I thought it would feel peaceful, but in truth, I just feel lonely. For the first time, my gaze regrets start to fill me.

I see the faces of all my loved ones. My family and my siblings, those people who've remained at my side no matter how awful I was to them. I see Liam trying to talk to me over and over again, more patient than any other alpha would be. And Annie, with her ever-so-kind eyes looking at me and it's with concern. And Eric, who just laughs when I say something stupid.

all mysmacks my shoulder good-naturedly. And Aryanna and Dante, and m
; heavyfellow pack members.

And lastly, there is Celine's picture in front of me. She's dressed in
't bringflowy summer dress, walking along the beach. She turns to look at m
me arein her long blond hair. She brushes some of it from her face, a
expression lights up with a smile as she sees me.

I would have liked to see her smile at me like that. Just once.

There is a boy at her side, maybe five years old. He holds her ha
he... he looks just like me. Is this the future I could have had?

I should have talked to her, I think. I should have been honest with h
'I'll get When I saw her for the first time and felt the bond, I was happy. Fo
second, I was able to feel happiness and thankfulness for the Goddess
ice girl,blessed me with a mate, despite how ugly, broken, and sullied I am.

Then I realized what it would mean to have a mate, the things she
ne. Butnotice and see, even if I tried to keep them a secret.

I don't hate you, Celine. I never did. I love you. But I was too sc
es playlove anyone.

nit that

to go. I

ear and

and all

o them.

ian any

g at me

pid and

smacks my shoulder good-naturedly. And Aryanna and Dante, and my other fellow pack members.

And lastly, there is Celine's picture in front of me. She's dressed in a long, flowy summer dress, walking along the beach. She turns to look at me, wind in her long blond hair. She brushes some of it from her face, and her expression lights up with a smile as she sees me.

I would have liked to see her smile at me like that. Just once.

There is a boy at her side, maybe five years old. He holds her hand, and he... he looks just like me. Is this the future I could have had?

I should have talked to her, I think. I should have been honest with her.

When I saw her for the first time and felt the bond, I was happy. For a split second, I was able to feel happiness and thankfulness for the Goddess to have blessed me with a mate, despite how ugly, broken, and sullied I am.

Then I realized what it would mean to have a mate, the things she would notice and see, even if I tried to keep them a secret.

I don't hate you, Celine. I never did. I love you. But I was too scared to love anyone.

THE PENDANT

CELINE

I am outside on the terrace, lounging on some pillows. I've made a lot of time training my witch gifts outside, mainly because I feel so much more in touch with my surroundings out here. Jade and Grandpa are here, so I've found some ways to meditate and collect my thoughts.

As the alpha's firstborn, I have been gifted with quite a few werewolf skills, and some of them require me to be mentally strong, not just rely on having a strong body. I think this added mental strength has made it easier for me to focus and concentrate.

I feel my body relax as both my mind and Danica's become calm. My fingertips start to feel all tingly, like there's static electricity in the surrounding air. I hear the wind whistling around me and can feel the branches move and jostle as the occasional squirrel rushes over the

many heartbeats of my pack members slowly meld into one harmonious sound. Far away, I can hear the river that crosses through the pack. Despite the distance, it sounds so loud and strong that I can visualize water flowing and ebbing its way through the landscape. I can actually maneuvering around a tree trunk lying across the riverbed, as it slowly swirls in little pools where the tree blocks its path. A bird is sitting on the trunk, watching and waiting, then with one skilled movement, it comes down, angling a fish out of the river.

“Stretch your mind further,” Jade says quietly, not to disturb my thoughts. “Take your thoughts as far as they can go... across the borders of the pack.” I follow her voice, using it as guidance through the mist of my thoughts. “Focus on one sound first.”

I do as she says, focusing on just one thing, a car. Someone is sitting in the car and honking impatiently. I fix my thoughts on the car and allow them to drift along with the man. We drive through the buzzing town. I leave him behind and hear some children laughing, following them instead. They are heading to a burger place, chatting about the exams they’ve just finished.

“Try to focus on a place now,” Jade mutters. “Allow your thoughts to be carried to this place. Don’t attach them to any particular people or places anymore.”

I do as she says again. I stop following the kids to the burger bar, instead move my thoughts back and try to think of a specific place like Jade’s home. My thoughts could reach as far as the school. My eyes close as I concentrate on the school’s location, recalling the scents there, and how it felt walking through the halls every day.

Suddenly, I feel like I’m standing in the corridor of my old school.

consciousness, and I'm actually here, looking around, carefully walking through the halls. A bunch of kids come running towards me, I try to move as they easily run through me.

Right. I forgot. I'm not really here.

I look through one of the doors and into a classroom. Jazz is in the top of handing in her paper. She walks out of the door and straight through duckshalt for a moment. She appears to be slightly confused. I wonder if my presence.

Deciding not to follow her, I walk further along the corridor but "jack." when I suddenly feel a jolt. An overflowing feeling of panic, something scared, no, terrified! I don't know what to do with the overwhelming of fear and panic invading my mind. I try to cling to the place, but I can't hold on much longer. The panic I just felt has disrupted the flow of my thoughts. I'm not strong enough to meditate through it. I hear a scream when I It sounds like...

No, it can't be!

With my remaining concentration, I link Jazz before my mind drifts to be *Valerie's in trouble! Ground-floor. Get help.*

I see Jazz spinning around, like she is looking for me, but she's been rational and clever. She stops focusing on locating me and instead, I quickly to my message. I see her running away toward Valerie. Just before I am pulled out of this place completely, I feel another presence steady in my mind holding me in place. It feels like the pull of the mate bond is kicking in. Marius is coming down the stairs. I'd recognize him anywhere, I know those hair tied back into a bun, a beard gracing his otherwise soft features. He looks tired and ragged. Has he always been that pale? My feelings are raw. I open my meditational state, and against my will, I feel my heart breaking for him.

through I see his gaze shift towards Jazz. He catches on to the urgency too a
ide, butto follow her.

“Marius!” I cry out.

My eyes fly open for real this time, and I am back in the pack lands
de, juston the ground. I need a second to steady myself, before jumping up.

gh me, “You did so well,” Grandpa mutters in awe.

she felt Jade eyes me over worriedly. “What did you see?”

“I need to go!” I yell before shifting into my wolf form. Fear and di
: freezeme. Valerie’s scream is still echoing in my head, and Marius... I
eone ishorrrible feeling, a foreboding feeling that something awful is happ
amountgrab the small bag I always carry with me in case I have to shift and l
I can’ttime to undress.

of my As werewolves, we learn to be practical and prepared... we ca
l. around naked in a human city, after all.

Then I start running and run as fast as I can.

*Harmony, I open the mind-link to my entrusted team. Some
s away.happening at the school. Emergency alert! Get there immediately, as
you can! Elias, follow her! We might need your tracking skills.*

always Yes, Alpha! They say in unison.

l reacts Dad, Garret, Grandpa, I need you to protect the pack. Ask Jade
before Iyou.

ring me Are we under attack? Dad asks.

ng in. I don’t think so, but you never know. I’m running fast, faster than
his longrun to the city would take a skilled wolf approximately half an ho
le looksDanica has already reached the border within minutes.

in this Now that I’ve reached the human town, though, I need to be more
n. here, remaining in the shadows so as not to alert the humans. Marc

nd runs *Alpha Elden and Alpha Liam! Tell them something's happened to*
The school is under attack.

I don't close the mind link just in case there's an emergency call o
, sitting someone else, but I don't focus on it anymore. I just need to reach the
as fast as possible. I don't even know how fast I am moving, but eve
around me blurs by in a flash. I allow my senses to take over again
might not be much nature in a city, but it's enough for me to reach out
read fill With one huge leap, I clear the walls surrounding the backyard
have aschool, my vision zooming in on a group of guys looking up at me,
ening. I before vanishing into thin air. One of them held a knife.

ave no "Alpha!" Jazz yells, crawling to a person lying on the ground.

No, I yell in my mind. It's him!

n't run I swiftly shift back, throwing my bag towards Jazz and having her j
my clothes while I check over Marius. She hands me a long t-shirt
which I put on swiftly. "No," I mutter, carefully pulling Marius into m
thing's I grab a clean shirt from my bag and start pressing it against his wound
fast as "They injected him with wolfsbane," Jazz hurries to explain. The
bruise forming around her temple. Someone must have hit her too.
have Valerie!" her voice is high-pitched and panicked.

to help "I know," I growl, angry that we didn't see such a trick coming.

"They were teleporting, and I don't know what... but they had other
helping them," Jazz blurts out. "I am so sorry, Alpha! I couldn't do ar
ever. AI—"

our, but "Jazz," I order, interrupting her apology before it goes any further. '

no time for this, I need her help now. "Go back and find the headmas
carefulis a wolf too. Tell him what happened. Fast! Backup is on its way,
el, call need someone with medical expertise here ASAP."

Valerie. Jazz jumps to her feet, looking relieved that she is able to do something. “If you find Aurelia, send her to me. As a lycan, she might know what to do.”

“Yes, Alpha!” Jazz hurries away.

I feel bad for pulling Marius’ sister into this, for making her see him like this, there we go. I’m sure it will break her heart. But I can’t focus on anyone but Marius right now. He is the one bleeding to death here, and I can’t allow anything to happen! He is my mate, possibly the shittiest mate in the history of mankind, at least in the very questionable top ten, but I won’t allow him to die.

I can’t let him pass on with so many unresolved issues between us.

He’s so weak, I can feel him fading away. Even with wolf strength, he shouldn’t be this weak. I cradle him in my arms. “You tried so hard to pull me away, Marius. You were so determined to deny the mate bond. Look at you now, it’s done to you. Was it truly worth it?” I whisper. “Don’t you dare let me go, my arms now.”

I’m so focused on slowing the bleeding that I only realize I’m not alone when Aurelia gasps in shock. “Goddess,” Aurelia hurries to my side. “Their hands are trembling slightly. “This... no...”

“Aurelia,” I keep my hands pressed against Marius’ wound. His breathing is shallow, sometimes he coughs, but he doesn’t seem to realize our presence. Not even through the mate bond. “I need your help! Any suggestions would be great now.”

Aurelia’s mind kicks into emergency mode. “We have three nurses,” she explains hurriedly. “One of them is a wolf, she is from my sister. He can get her here!”

Finally, something to feel hopeful about. “Fetch her and have her here! And call your father and tell him he needs to come ASAP.”

ing. Aurelia doesn't hesitate, rushing away. "I can help too," Jazz whispers what to I glance at her, noticing how pale she looks. "You can help by down."

"But—"

im this "If you collapse here, it won't help," I tell her.

Marius She nods, not arguing any further, and instead sits down on one w it tobenches, resting her head between her palms.

ates, or Marius groans slightly in my arms. "Marius?" I whisper. "This w so like you to leave me now," I mutter. "Probably just to spite me."

He doesn't seem to hear me at first, but then I hear a barely au ane, he"Celine..."

to push "Yes?" I ask hopefully.

ok what There is no reaction coming from him anymore. His lips are ave meslightly, but his chest is barely moving.

"We're here," Aurelia yells, much to my relief. She rushes towards it alonea nurse right behind her.

de. Her The nurse pushes past her. She puts the first aid kit down and kne to us, her hands instantly roaming Marius' upper body. "Alpha," she l eathingme nervously. "Please, allow me."

esence. It's only then that I realized I growled at her. "I apologize," I say s wouldwilling my instincts down. "Please, do what you need to do."

I watch her skilled hands remove the shirt wrapped around Marius' schooland inspect it. She works fast and efficiently, cleaning and disinfecti y pack.remove any remaining silver. Aurelia and I assist her as much as v though I doubt either of us is of great help.

help us. To my utmost relief, I hear heavy footsteps behind us. I toss a quick at the door, noticing that Elden and Liam brought their betas and s

ers. their warriors; their eyes widening at the sight of Marius in my arms.

sitting Aurelia moves to the side slightly so that Elden can see what's happen

“Marius!” Elden yells in horror as he runs toward us. He kneels instinctively grabbing Marius’ arm. “How could this happen?” he b
out.

of the “Fuck,” Liam curses when he looks at his brother.

The nurse has managed to slow down the bleeding and is now tr
ould bestabilize his body for transport. “We need to get him to a pack hospit
she mutters. “I can only do the very basics here, and a human hospit
dible...no use.”

Liam nods. “I’ll get transport here within the next couple minut
turns to his beta. “Dante!”

parted Dante doesn’t wait for instructions, he just nods his understandi
grabs his phone, scurrying to the side to talk without disrupting us.

us with Elden carefully looks Marius over, noting the gravity of his woun
face is riddled with worry. He touches his forehead gingerly while
als nextthe nurse, trying to stop his wound from bleeding out.

looks at “Wolfsbane,” I mutter. “He’s not healing fast enough.”

“We have to get him to Red Claw’s pack hospital as soon as po
firmly,Liam urges, looking scared and worried. “I...” he shakes his head. “I
have tried harder to get through to him.”

wound Elden takes a deep breath. “You did all you could,” he says. “If ar
ng it toI’m the one to blame. But there is no time for regrets,” he says. “W
ve can,other priorities at the moment.”

Right on cue, Dante approaches. “The infirmary is expecting us, tl
:glancedoctor has been informed of his injuries and what to expect on
ome of

Medics are preparing your car so that we can transport Marius back
ening. Alpha Liam. Fifteen minutes maximum.”

down, “They have five,” Liam orders. “No more.”

breathes Dante nods before hurrying away again, probably to check on his v
and have the medics work faster.

Elden lets out a deep breath. “Tell us what else you need, Celine,”
ying toto my surprise. “Valerie is still missing and in danger too. My warri
al fast,”help.”

al is of I nod, realizing I’ve been focused solely on Marius, and turn to A

“Ari, would you please talk to Jazz? She was a witness and has alrea
es.” Heme some of what happened. But it might help to get her to repeat it,
she’s remembered more now.”

ng and “Aurelia and I will join you. Maybe we can help.” Liam says an

towards his sister, Aurelia nods in agreement. I know Liam probal
ds. Hiswants to distract her from the scene, but he’s right, with his and A
helpingskills, they might be able to extract more out of Jazz than the others. A

nurse would probably feel better if she isn’t surrounded by four very s
Alphas.

ssible,” Aryanna looks horrified. “Jazz was on the scene? Did she get hurt?”

should Aurelia looks at her and shrugs helplessly. “A little,” she admits.

“Goddess,” Aryanna breathes out. “I thought I felt something off! I
ything,mark her ASAP; our bond is not strong enough otherwise.”

we have “Dante, stay with my father and Celine,” Liam tells his beta, who l

returned again, before hurrying towards Jazz. She is currently sittir
ne packbench further away from the scene, pressing some ice against her fo
arrival.She looks a bit shocked and worried. Aryanna pulls her into
immediately.

safely, The place is buzzing now, everyone is taking care of something. So
is guarding the school door to make sure no prying students or teacher
join us outside. I shift my attention back to Marius, gently brushing m
warriors across his forehead. Elden's staring at me like he's trying to solve a
puzzle.

he says "He is your mate, isn't he?" he asks evenly.

ors can I nod quietly.

"What an idiot," Elden groans, rolling his eyes. "His wolf is we
ryanna because he fought the mate bond. I knew it! Cyrus isn't hiding, he l
dy told can't come forward, he is almost dead. That's why Liam and Ann
maybe been so upset recently."

I stare at him in surprise. "Just because of the mate bond?"

id turns "The mate bond means even more to us than to werewolves,"
oly just explains. "It's sacred. Rejection is a way out, but if we just ignore
urelia's suppress our beasts to a point they might never recover."

And the "Maybe I should have tried harder," I admit quietly. "Maybe I could

stressed "No," Elden interrupts me. "There are things that are out of your o

Celine. And you are not responsible for Marius' self-sabotaging action

looks sad. "We all know he is battling with something, but no one h

able to reach him. Maybe none of us tried hard enough, maybe we

need to have done better. But I promise you, when he wakes up, there is no

anymore."

has just Something about his words feel oddly comforting to me. He belie

ing on a can save Marius.

rehead. Part of me wishes to go with Marius when they've finally stabiliz

a huge enough for the ride to the pack hospital. The bond is pushing me to sta

to him, even though we've done nothing but fight with each other. H

Someone else, he might not want me, but he is my mate. However, I can't just try to get everything to go with him. Valerie is a member of my pack, I'm her right hand and while Marius is being attended to right now, Valerie is still missing. I don't know what her kidnappers will do to her.

Liam leaves with Marius, so at least I know he is in good hands.

Meanwhile, the rest of us have gathered around Jazz. She's told us everything she saw, she's described the men and women rogues as taken down, and the special powers they seemed to have. She also explained how Marius appeared suddenly, and how he begged her to stay down and be sure that Jazz remained off their radar.

In a weird way, I feel proud of him. He might have been a douche to me, but when the shit hit the fan, and they didn't look like they were going to let Elden win, he did his best to defend and protect Jazz.

"They were barely holding him back," Jazz mutters under her breath. "He fought so hard against them, even after they injected him with wolfsbane." "Marius is a lycan with alpha blood," Elden tells her quietly. "I know he might strike others as weak, but he isn't."

"This is my fault," Dante says quietly. "He was looking really sick and I've been so I offered for him to swap shifts with Ella. I should have forced him to take the day off and come here myself instead." He pauses. "My wolf is hiding and healthy now that we found our second chance in Ella."

"No," Elden shakes his head. "Everything happens for a reason. An alpha who hasn't been so stupid as to allow his wolf to get this weak, he would have easily overpowered everyone. I love him dearly, but he is responsible for his own choices. It might sound cruel to you, but he needs this wake-up call." Dante nods tentatively.

I shift my attention back to Jazz, "You said there was an older m."

ist droptem?”.

r alpha, Jazz nods, her fear now turning to anger. “He seemed like their ng. WeWhat a scumbag! He wasn’t even doing anything, just standing the giving out commands, that coward. I wish I could have kicked him stupid face.”

told us “We will find her, Jazz,” Aryanna rubs over her back. “And then y best shekick him in his stupid face.”

ed how “You said he looked shocked when Marius called him a coward for d madeValerie with him?” Elden asks.

She nods.

owards “He probably thinks he has the moral high ground,” I mutter. “I going toactions are justified.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve feared from the beginning,” Elden r rs. “He“Someone lost in their grief will think their mission justifies their actio ne.” “But Val’s only recently started her training,” Jazz mutters. “Wha My soncan’t help them?”

I exchange a gaze with Elden. “Let’s hope they don’t realize that k today,mutters.

to take Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Elias returning. He ha strongcombing the area for traces. We know they teleported away, but you know if they might have left something behind.

d if my “Did you find anything?”

ld have “I am not sure.” He shows me a necklace with a pendant. “I fou for hislying on the ground. From what Jazz explained, it must be the sp ill.” captured Valerie. But it could also be from one of the students at the sc

I open the pendant, eyeing the photo. There is a picture of a man in an witha young girl. He has his arm around her and is smiling at her loving

she is his biggest treasure. “Was this the guy?” I ask Jazz.

leader. Jazz takes a long look at it. “I can’t say for sure, everything happened fast, and I was out of it for a while,” she admits. “The man in the photo in his looks a little broader, his face is rounder, but he could be. That scar he has on his neck, I think he had the same.”

you can “Good enough for me,” I state.

“For me too,” Elden nods.

not taking “I will give it to Jade and Desmona, they are both capable witches. They have a few tracking spells.”

Elden nods, but before he can say anything, his phone starts ringing. “Like his Liam,” he mutters and walks out of hearing range to talk to him.

My heart picks up pace. Goddess, don’t let it be because Marius is dying. I would feel it. Our mate bond might have been weakened, and I might not feel much of his pain through our bond, but I would still feel it if he crossed the line into death. Wouldn’t I?

“Anything I can do to help, Alpha?” Elias—fortunately—interrupts my thoughts.

“Yes, take Garret with you and dig through all the city archives. I have a photo, or rather, for the people in it. This is not an amateur photo; it was never a professional photographer took it. I know this is a stretch, but she might be his daughter, or maybe a niece or other family member. If our assumptions are correct, and if someone close to him is sick, there might be information at the local hospitals we can use. Use all our contacts. And go back ten years ago during your research!”

“School.” Elias nods, not even commenting on how much work it’s going to be to comb through so many hospital files of underage girls with diseases, especially accidents.

I turn to my beta. “Harmony, I need you to contact a professional photographer, someone who knows and deals in photography. We need to know the date and where this photograph might have been taken. Then we may be able to dig up the photographer.”

Harmony nods. I have Elias snap a picture of the pendant and the inside before gingerly removing the photograph for Harmony to have. “Make sure you don’t lose it.”

Maybe “Yes, Alpha.”

I originally planned to head back to Moon Blood and talk to Jaig. “It’s Desmona in person, but Elden approaches me wearing a serious look.

He said that Marius’ condition is critical. He is in a coma. The silver has seeped throughout his body. He has received the antidote for the wolfsbane, but the werewolf is weak and is struggling to heal him.” He pauses, turning toward the rest of the group. “Aryanna, you and Dante need to go back immediately.

You need to make sure the pack runs smoothly while Liam tries to revive Marius.”

“How does Liam want to do that?” I ask breathlessly, my anxiety getting the best of me. “Save Marius?”

“Liam’s wolf, Fenris, and my wolf, Regis, they are very strong. I might be my firstborn, and ruling over a pack is his birthright. This is why he is more powerful than his siblings. Both of us have trained to connect with our wolves and control their powers. Just like you, Liam has rare gifts.”

“He can tell if someone lies or tells the truth,” I point out.

“Yes, that’s one of his gifts. But he and I... we can also connect with our wolves in a special way. We can reach out to their wolves and... or fatal them.”

I blink at him. “Wait... what...?”

l about “That’s how I helped Valerie connect with her wolf,” Elden poi
ow the “He wants to try it with Marius now, although it’s difficult when a
ight be this weakened. He wants to guide him back into Marius’ conscious
least partly. Enough to get Marius through the worst.”

e photo I feel hope rising in me. “Do you think it will work?”

ve with “Celine.” Elden looks at me, a plea in his eyes. For the first time, he
himself to show weakness in front of me. He takes my hand in his. “
my son was cruel to you, and I don’t know the extent of what he has
ide and hurt you. I won’t ask you to forgive him, and I won’t ask you to acc
. “Liamback as your mate... but...”

spread “What can I do?” I look at him firmly. “I will never let any of you d
but his He smiles his relief, and I notice Aurelia looking at me thankfu
rds the “You just need to be there with Marius, so that his wolf can fe
diately. presence.”

to save “That’s all?” I blink. “Of course I can do that. I’ll go back with A
now. Just the pendant...”

growing “I will take it to your great-grandmother,” Elden promises. “Aureli
will accompany Jazz back to Moon Blood and talk to the witches there
Liam is also ask Flora to use some of her powers to possibly find some hints.”

s much I smile genuinely at him. “Thank you.”

with our “No,” he shakes his head. “Thank you!”

th pack

. guide

“That’s how I helped Valerie connect with her wolf,” Elden points out. “He wants to try it with Marius now, although it’s difficult when a wolf is this weakened. He wants to guide him back into Marius’ consciousness, at least partly. Enough to get Marius through the worst.”

I feel hope rising in me. “Do you think it will work?”

“Celine.” Elden looks at me, a plea in his eyes. For the first time, he allows himself to show weakness in front of me. He takes my hand in his. “I know my son was cruel to you, and I don’t know the extent of what he has done to hurt you. I won’t ask you to forgive him, and I won’t ask you to accept him back as your mate... but...”

“What can I do?” I look at him firmly. “I will never let any of you down.”

He smiles his relief, and I notice Aurelia looking at me thankfully too. “You just need to be there with Marius, so that his wolf can feel your presence.”

“That’s all?” I blink. “Of course I can do that. I’ll go back with Aryanna now. Just the pendant...”

“I will take it to your great-grandmother,” Elden promises. “Aurelia and I will accompany Jazz back to Moon Blood and talk to the witches there. I will also ask Flora to use some of her powers to possibly find some hints.”

I smile genuinely at him. “Thank you.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “Thank *you!*”

ODYSSEY

VALERIE

I'm woken up by a throbbing pain coming from the back of my head like someone's hit me too hard during training. Opening my eyes to avoid any dizziness, I can just make out my surroundings in this dark room. Unlike the last time I was abducted, I don't feel the need to scream instantly... I feel scared, but I feel like I'm still in control of my emotions.

I'm mostly just pissed. Like... Hello, I'm Valerie. Welcome to my kidnapping this year. Nice to meet you!

It's not a freaking competition, Val! I'm not trying to get in the Guinness Book of Records for the most kidnappings in a six-month period.

Apparently, I never learn.

At least you're being sarcastic, Ailia chimes in.

*I can't believe it. As soon as I'm out of here, I'm gonna up my trail
no one will ever kidnap me again! I grumble.*

I like your fighting spirit, Valerie. Keep it up! Cheers Ailia.

I'm a bit surprised myself. Shouldn't I be scared?

*I like you better with a cool head, she says calmly. So don't question
you feel so composed. Maybe it's because you know they need something
from you, she points out.*

*I nod. They've provided me with a room and a bed. There is even a desk
and a little bathroom. I look around and take in my general surroundings.
The windows are barred, and I'm sure the door is locked, but still...
furniture, and my basic needs appear to be covered. I don't think they
go to these lengths if they truly wanted to kill me or hurt me.*

Don't forget what Marius told you, Ailia says.

*He quoted Odysseus, I mutter. When Odysseus was captured by the
cyclops. It's Polyphemus, he said his name was nobody. When he hurt Polyphemus
slowly Polyphemus claimed to the other cyclops that nobody had hurt him,
and he simply walked away. I pause. I'm not sure if I understand... What does Odysseus
panic tricking the cyclops have to do with anything? Aside from...*

ons. A trick... Odysseus used a trick to escape Polyphemus.

*second Odysseus was known to be cunning. He was famous for his sharp mind
for his strength. You could be the same. Alpha Celine and Alpha Eldredge
to The convinced that our attackers need your gift. Stall for time, pretend you
riod. help and play your cards right. Ailia pauses before continuing with
insistence. Valerie, they didn't inject us with wolfsbane, they didn't cut
in silver. You have your full strength. They need you, always remember...*

*I nod, carefully getting up. I'm a bit wobbly on my feet, but I manage
walk around the room. It's still dark outside. I shove the desk over*

ning so outside wall and climb up to look through the window. What is this even? Where am I? It's like I'm in a castle tower, really high above ground. There are cliffs leading down a mountain. I climb down again head towards the door this time, tugging slightly at it just to check to see if it's really locked.

nothing Okay, I knew there wouldn't be an easy way out, but I still wanted to be sure. Now I need to work out how to play my cards right, as Ailia put it. I need a blanket need me for my gift. The problem is... I'm not sure if I'll be any use to her findings. I've only started training recently, and I'm still not really sure what I can do there. My best option is to try and find a way to stall for time...

no would I sit down on the bed, legs crossed, while eyeing the door. I don't know how long I keep staring at it, but eventually, I hear keys being turned.

The man who walks in is the same man I saw when I followed the cyclops girl. I figure she was probably just an illusion. A cheap trick, and I feel like I've been played. I examine the man carefully; he's older, maybe a bit older than my dad. He's so gaunt and pale, like he hasn't eaten or slept for days.

dysseus I decide to go for a direct approach without provoking him too much. "You brought me here, right? My head hurts, I hope you can at least get me some water?" I ask coldly.

ind, not The man looks contrite and guilty. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

on were "Why am I here?" I ask with emphasis. "Why did you abduct me?"

you can "I didn't abduct you," the man huffs angrily. "I just need to borrow your help."

h more Borrow? I'm not a freaking book! Also, does he really believe that I can use me here, and then return me to my pack? He's seriously lying to me. I hate that. Yet, in his eyes, I see pure anguish, like something deep inside of him is slowly being torn apart.

to the He probably lost his sanity a while ago. "You could have asked me for help."

s placehelp,” I say. “I would have helped, if I could.”

ove the The man shakes his head fiercely. “You wouldn’t have.”

ain and “We’ll never know now.”

hat it’s I don’t know why I’m feeling so calm. Maybe it’s Ailia helping me

fact that I know he needs me alive and that I’m here for a reason. I can

o make any weakness or fear. Meanwhile, I know that my friends and family

it. They’re looking for me. I have people I love, and who I deeply care for, and

o them. They deeply care for me too.

can do. I stand up and walk towards the man, noting how he steps back as

afraid of me. “Why am I here?”

ow for “You...” he pauses, before turning on his heel and rushing out:

slams the door roughly, hurrying away like he’s actually afraid of m

at little get someone to bring you water and food shortly.”

ll for it. I sit back down on the bed and sigh. I’m alone again. I still don’

d. He’s what he wants from me. The sooner I know, the sooner I can figur

plan.

1. “You

ie some



CELINE

you.”

he will Aryanna drops me off right in front of Red Claw’s infirmary. I sta

himself. with mixed feelings... there is just so much running through my hea

him is now, my feelings and thoughts are confusing me to no end. I’m wor

both Marius and Valerie, pissed that someone abducted a pack memb

me for now here I am... about to save the life of the man who doesn’t want m

Things really haven't gone as planned.

I call Harmony on my phone. "I want everyone available and ready for search for Valerie," I remind her. "I will be there as soon as possible."

"Of course, Alpha. Everything is set into motion already. I will make sure everything is on track until you return."

"Link me if you need or find anything," I say.

"I will."

There is no postponing the inevitable anymore, so I head into the infirmary. It seems I'm already expected as a nurse hurries toward me and then leads me into a private and secluded area of the hospital, where I assume they keep patients who need intensive care.

"I'll be here. This area is empty most of the time, it's only really needed when there's an attack."

But now my mate is lying in one of the beds with various tubes attached to his body, one of which I recognize as an IV. The beeping machine next to him is keeping track of his fickle heartbeat.

My heart aches at the sight. I have no idea what to do. Should I touch him? Would it help him to hear my voice?

Before I can do anything, I have to get my wolf to agree to work with me on this. The mate bond affects both of us.

Danica, are you in this with me?

I don't really have a choice, she grumbles. Stupid mate bond.

In a way, it's hilarious that my wolf is the one who dislikes the mate bond while I'm more accepting and positive toward it. Isn't it normally the other way around? But then again, there is nothing normal about my love life.

"I know you feel hurt, I tell her softly. *But I cannot do this without you.*

"I'm with you, Celine, she points out. *Whatever you do or decide*

always be with you. And I might not like his human form, but I do like

ready to *You like him, huh?*

He's cute, she admits.

ll keep *A lycan wolf, cute? I chuckle.*

He is, she emphasizes. He pretends to be all gruffly and grumbly, look from me, and he's wagging his tail.

Our conversation gets interrupted by Liam coming to the room. "He came," he states the obvious, looking both relieved and a little surprised, bows, "Not coming was never an option," I admit.

where I "Thank you," he says quietly, while putting a glass of water on the table and some... candy. I wonder what he needs that for? "Not everyone there is have been so gracious."

"It's not about pride anymore when someone is close to dying," I mused quietly, my stomach churning slightly. I eye him curiously. "What next to need the candy for?"

"In case I feel dizzy," he explains. "It's going to boost my blood sugar in case." He pauses, looking at Marius sadly. "The last conversation with Marius... we fought," he admits to me. "I hit him."

with me "Considering you're an alpha, I'd say it took you a long time to say that quietly. "You're a great brother, even to Marius, and I'm sure he won't hold it against you."

Liam smiles a bit at me. "Thank you," he says, though I'm not sure he's thanking me for. He takes a deep breath, and I see the tension easing in him. "Let's start."

e. "What can I do?"

u. "Just sit next to him," Liam tells me and pulls a chair towards the

o *I will* me. "And hold his hand. The skin contact will help. Let's hope with y

Cyrus. your wolf at his side, we can reach out to Cyrus. We need him Marius.”

“And you?” I ask as I sit down and make myself comfortable. I figure I better be comfortable enough to sit here for as long as Liam needs, *but one* maybe even a few hours. I take Marius’ hand into mine, feeling how his fingers are compared to mine, and how beautiful his hands are. I have never. “You had a thing for beautiful hands.”

“I will do the same,” Liam tells me. “Just that my wolf, Fenris, can go further. I will use the sibling bond to delve into his mind.”

“You can do that?” I ask in surprise.

“It’s not easy, but yes,” he admits.

I’m stunned, despite Elden explaining it to me previously. I didn’t know it was even possible, and I have never heard of such a gift. It’s amazing, at the very least.

Liam catches my surprise. “Only royal lycans can do it,” he explains, just getting himself a chair. “But it takes a lot of training, and some can be better than others.”

Liam sits down and takes Marius’ other hand into his. “We need to be physically close for this to work,” he tells me, motioning for me to lean forward a little in my chair. “Just like Marius and I are brothers, Fenris and Cyrus are brothers too. We are going to the place between waking and sleeping to try and connect with both Marius and Cyrus using our combined sibling bond.”

I don’t really understand how this is supposed to work, but it’s not time to ask questions. I sit quietly and allow Liam to focus on his work. As he does, Liam’s whole body relaxes into itself, looking calm and collected.

I, myself, make sure not to let go of Marius’ hand for any

to heal occasionally stroking my free hand across his cheek or resting it against his chest. My mind drifts back to our first meeting, and how painful that was. I figure I'll do all the things that have happened between us since. When I look back at it, it hurts me... I remember seeing the haunted look in Marius' eyes. Every now and then his guard would drop, and for just an instant, it was like he'd forgotten about me and everyone else, and the loneliness would seep in. The pain radiating from his soul in those moments was immense.

And I will wonder who or what hurt him so badly. Is it the reason why he's so distant in return? Was there a woman once in his life who broke him?

I know that it's not my fault. I tried to reach out a few times, I never let my emotions get the better of me or lash out at him. Well, not much, at least I don't know it. Maybe I could have tried a little harder?

But then... why should I be the only one to fight for the mate bond?

And what am I going to do now, anyway? What will happen if he wakes up? Will he continue resenting me? If he does, should I reject him? If he does free us both from this mate bond he obviously doesn't want? And if he doesn't... what will I do then? Do I even still want him?

I'm getting a headache from your thoughts, Danica complains.

I'm sorry. I just wish I knew what to do.

There is a pause. *You have a big heart, Celine,* she says to my surprise. *Whatever you do, I will have your back. If you want to give him a chance, I might not like it, but I will give him one too. If you don't... I will accept it. It will hurt us and share the pain with you.*

All these options don't mean anything unless he wants us, I point out. *There is still the possibility that he truly does not want us to be his mate.*

He does, she says quietly.

How can you be so sure?

inst his *The one time that Cyrus was able to reach out to me, he might or mi*
as, and have told me that deep inside, Marius wants you, but he is scared, she
though, Her words surprise me. *And you're only telling me this now?*

I again, *Actually, I shouldn't have told you at all. This is something you l*
to hate have to solve. But he can only truly be our mate if he faces his past
radiating honest with us. There is no other option for him, or you. I don't kno
happened to him, Cyrus never said. However, his past might expl
hurt me *behavior towards you, but it's not an excuse, and it shouldn't influen*
feelings.

r let my I'm about to ask for more information, but Danica suddenly perks
at least. starts concentrating on something I can't feel or see. Liam must have
Cyrus in the depth of Marius' mind. I decide to keep quiet so that Dan
focus her strength on her mate instead.

once he I don't know how long I wait, but suddenly, I can feel Marius' skin
him and warmer in my hand, and tiny sparks are shooting up my arm from wh
e want touching him. It's got to be the mate bond coming back. It's both a b
and a curse, at least for Marius and me. The sparks are weaker than
and nothing in comparison to the time he kissed me, and the electrici
his touch almost drove me crazy. It's faint and barely there, but bett
urprise. the coldness of his skin before.

nce... I I smile.

ot that it Suddenly Liam gasps, and his eyes snap open. He's panting l
frantically looking around the room, his face a picture of pure horror.

out. But "Liam?" I mutter.

2. There is so much going on in his eyes. Shock, surprise, anger, pain.
"What happened?" I urge him. "What did you see?"

Liam stares into nothingness for a while. "It's... I'm not sure." he

ight not the silence lingering. Then his hands clench into a fist. “Someone has admits him deeply... but I can’t see it clearly,” he frowns, looking annoyed doesn’t know for sure what happened. A shiver goes through his body humans feel it, however. We can only wait, Celine. Marius will need to be the : and i tell us what truly happened. I promise... once he is awake again, I’ll w what sure he finally stops running away.”

ain his I look at him in surprise, feeling a deep sense of dread settling in ce your me. If whatever it is has shocked Liam this much, it has to be really b eyes wander from Liam to Marius. Even now, in his sleep, he up and tormented. Despite my anger at how he’s treated me, I suddenly feel a found pissed at whoever or whatever has caused him to be this broke uica can whoever it is that’s hurt him... I’ll make sure to kick their asses!

getting
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pauses,

the silence lingering. Then his hands clench into a fist. “Someone has scarred him deeply... but I can’t see it clearly,” he frowns, looking annoyed that he doesn’t know for sure what happened. A shiver goes through his body. “I can feel it, however. We can only wait, Celine. Marius will need to be the one to tell us what truly happened. I promise... once he is awake again, I’ll make sure he finally stops running away.”

I look at him in surprise, feeling a deep sense of dread settling inside of me. If whatever it is has shocked Liam this much, it has to be really bad. My eyes wander from Liam to Marius. Even now, in his sleep, he looks tormented. Despite my anger at how he’s treated me, I suddenly feel more pissed at whoever or whatever has caused him to be this broken. And whoever it is that’s hurt him... I’ll make sure to kick their asses!

DUMB AND DUMBER

CELINE

It's been around fifteen minutes since Liam's mind meld with Marius. It's left him looking tired and unusually pale. I guess spending some time in someone else's conscience took a toll on him. He hasn't elaborated any further on what happened inside Marius' mind, and it's almost like his imagination to run wild. I desperately want to pester Liam for more information, but I know he won't tell me his brother's most private thoughts. I wouldn't do it either.

And frankly, I'd prefer to hear the truth from Marius anyway. If Darius is right, and he truly wants us, that's the least he can do.

My thoughts go back to that haunted look I would see in his eyes sometimes. Did someone hurt him physically? Maybe he was cursed.

maybe it's something more personal, like psychological abuse...
bullied so badly that it scarred him deeply, as Liam said?

Goddess! Not knowing is driving me crazy. At least on the upside, i
Marius is recovering, albeit slowly.

"He's still weak," Liam explains, finally allowing himself to lean
his chair. He looks tired, worried, drained, but also slightly relieved.
is not fully recovered, but at least his presence is partially back. It'
Marius now, he has to travel the remaining path back to the world
living on his own."

"Is it okay for me to leave so soon?" I ask him, feeling torn. Par
wants to remain by his side, but as alpha, I need to join the search
missing pack member. I have a responsibility towards my pack, and
like a sister to me. She needs me now more than Marius does.

He nods with a smile. "Don't worry, I understand. You're an alp
ius, and have your pack to take care of. I would do the same."

o much "He won't be alone when he wakes up, will he?"

borated "He will be asleep for quite a while longer," Liam tells me. "And I f
eft my you, someone will be here for him the moment he wakes up."

r more I feel relieved. Not just because I have a pack member missing and
oughts. my pack is out looking for her, but honestly, I have no idea what I wo
to Marius when he wakes up.

anica is Maybe it's alphas in general, or maybe it's just me, but I tend t
awkward situations worse rather than better.

is eyes Liam insists that I grab something to eat before I leave, and he sen
ed? Or to join me. Aryanna and Dante are busy with the pack, and Liam is
need of rest after spending so much time in Marius' mind. As I stan
leave, Liam reaches out and gently grips my arm. "I promise you, C

was he won't let Marius keep distancing himself from everyone. No running anymore."

It seems I nod tentatively, not sure exactly what Liam is trying to tell me with. I'm glad he's set on helping Marius and getting him to open up, but will you come back in promising me?

"Cyrus There's no time to linger on this. I need to hurry back to my pack Alpha. I stop to quickly grab something to eat on my way to the parking lot, where I'll be already expecting me.

"Prince Eric at your service!" he announces, spreading his arms with a flourish and bowing dramatically, "I'm here to save the wonderful Celine and her pack from my in distress, kept captive like a princess in a castle."

Liam Val is "Wow," his Beta Emilien says dryly. "That's a whole new level of dramatic."

Oh and The twin advisors, Elise and Elodie, chuckle at their antics as we get into the car. They don't really talk a lot, and during Eric's part of the conversation mentioned that they spend most of their time mind-linking with each other. They said they're just so used to sharing their thoughts this way that they don't keep the mind-link open between them at all times. They probably don't even realize they're so quiet since their heads must be full of chatter. Eric would say me from the passenger seat.

I can't hide my amusement at his antics, either. I have a feeling Eric would make get along really well with Dave. "I appreciate the help," I admit and turn my attention to his beta and the twins in the back seat. "Thank you for helping Eric."

in dire Eric examines me briefly. "Smiling suits you, Alpha Celine. You should do it more often," he says, his voice more serious than before.

Celine, I "I'm trying to. So how come you're helping us?"

g away “Well, Liam needs to rest after diving into my insufferable cousin’
and the others are holding down the fort here, so to speak. But see, th
ith this. positive in being fated to Marius!”

hy is he “And what’s that?” I ask against my better judgment.

“It means you’re fated to a member of my family. So, more time to
ASAP. I in my glorious presence,” he grins and winks.

Eric is Emilien sighs. “How did you just make this about you, Prince Eric?”

“It’s a gift,” he grins.

ide and I roll my eyes and give him a narrowed glare. But as always with E
damsel impossible to be angry with him. He’s never obnoxious or offensive,
never crosses a line. He just has the ability to read the atmosphere p
evel of and act on it. I think it might even be one of his gifts, and the reas
doing so well with the Council.

all pile “Seriously, though. Thanks for your help, Eric,” I say genuinely.

y, they

1 other.

at they

it’s even

winks at



VALERIE

I don’t know how much time has passed, but eventually, someone
would food and water. The food isn’t even bad, and there’s no wolfsbane in i
urn my been a stronger she-wolf, I would have been able to flee from this pla
all for even without the wolfsbane, my body is weak, for reasons I understand
should now, but still... right now, it really sucks.

It seems like the douchebag who kidnapped me wants to make sure
full access to my gifts. The someone who brought my food, howev

s mind, new face... and definitely a weakened wolf. A pale young boy, pro
ere is ateen. He wears a silver collar, and his eyes look at me sad and dull.

“Hello,” I say carefully when he quietly enters the room again to
the empty plate. I didn’t want to eat at first, but Ailia told me to keep
o spend strength.

The boy looks at me, surprised for a second, before lowering h
” again. “The master said you should eat,” he mutters before retreating a
“Wait!” I call out to him.

ric, it’s He looks over his shoulder, nervous. “I can’t stay too long,” he s
and herubbing over his arms. His shirt slips over his shoulder, revealing fres
erfectly marks. “Need to go.”

on he’s I carefully step towards him, stopping when he shuffles towards th
like he’s afraid of me. It’s the first time ever that someone is actually
of me... it should have been an empowering feeling, but it isn’t. “I
going to hurt you,” I say softly.

He shakes his head, as if he doesn’t believe me.

“What’s your name?”

There is a long pause. “Luca,” he finally whispers before dashing
the door and throwing the door close behind him.

I’m left in silence again. Fortunately, I grew up pretty lonely, ar
e brings then, I didn’t even have a wolf. At least now I have Ailia to talk to. I
t. Had I to be thankful that they didn’t dull my senses with wolfsbane.

ice. But The fact that I’m still no closer to knowing what’s going on worr
d better I’m pretty sure I’m here because of my healing gift. They probably a
Jazz’s and my birthday party to test my abilities. And, of course, I jus
e I have prove them right. Okay, I might not be at fault for that, especially
er, is a didn’t even know I was a healer. But then I went and fell straight in

bably a next trap by chasing after the little girl in the restroom at school. I didn't consider that it was weird for a little kid to be roaming the corridors, pick up no one else saw her walking through the school. I also didn't call anyone up my backup. That was just stupid.

So, shame on me.

is gaze But I can't change that now. The only thing I sincerely hope, to the gain. of my heart, is that neither Jazz nor Marius got hurt.

My trail of thoughts gets disrupted by the door opening. A young man stutters, enters, but he's not being restrained like Luca, he also doesn't look like he recognizes him as the one who was with the old guy during my abduction. He is the one who grabbed me and brought me here. His touch was rough, and he is at the door, of anger, and now he's staring at me with his eyes full of disdain.

I'm scared "Come with me," he huffs. "My father wants to see you."

I'm not So, he's the old jerk's son? Madness runs in the family, it seems. I have to follow, well aware I shouldn't try to put up a fight yet. He shoves a bag over my head to prevent me from seeing anything and roughly yanks me along.

out of I'm not sure how long we walk for, but we take a set of stairs down and then walk down what must be a long corridor. A door opens, and he yanks me back inside. He yanks the bag off my head, and I blink to re-adjust to the light, my eyes finally falling on the old man.

He doesn't even bother to look at me, just nods toward a bed in the corner of the room. "Heal her," he commands.

attacked With that, he turns and leaves the room together with his son, leaving me behind. I look towards the bed, confused. My wolf senses might be different since I'm more than a normal wolf's, but I'm positive I don't sense another person in the room. I move closer to the bed, swaying in shock at what I discover. It's

It's even probably my age, lying there. Her eyes are open, but she isn't looking at me or that anywhere. Tubes are stuck to her body, presumably to feed her. I sit there for one moment nervously, carefully touching her arm. It's cold, so cold. There is no warmth. I feel nothing. How did they do that? How are they keeping her body warm? I look into the empty eyes of a girl who left this world a long time ago, a bottom soul that's not been allowed to rest peacefully.



ing man
is shy. I
action...
and full

CELINE

“And you’re certain?” I ask Jade again.

I get up
a duffle
thanks me
be away from the pack right now, they need their alpha.

We’ve just arrived at Moon Blood, and I am surprised how relieved I am to be back. I feel myself steady, like I’ve regained my inner balance, and I wonder how my being here has done the same for my pack members. It’s not surprising that when I was away from the pack, they needed their alpha.

forward,
pushes
the light,
was taken.

We head straight to my father, Grandpa, and Elden—all three are in the middle of a deep discussion with Jade and Desmona. It appears that the witches were able to cast a spell that revealed the location of where the body was taken.

middle
Jade nods. “I’m certain, dear. My magic doesn’t lie.”

“In the mountains?” I repeat again, completely spellbound.

ring me
weaker
here.

Desmona gives me a crooked smile. “I’m more doubtful, but the master believes it’s true, and I can’t compete with the confidence of an old witch,” she smiles.

is a girl,
“Ancient master?” Grandpa asks, surprised. “Mom is older than you

looking “Your mother is around 1000 years old, Justus,” Desmona points out.
wallow Grandpa’s mouth basically drops open, mirroring all of our expressions.
thing, I “981 years, please.” Jade tosses Desmona a glare. “Don’t make me
orking? older than I am.”

ago. A Eric gives her a playful smirk. “You look good for your age.”

“Well, what can I say? I’ve had some work done.” She chuckles.
grandfather rolls his eyes, which is hilarious, considering he looks twice
age. She turns to me, “So, honey, you can definitely trust my magic.”

“What’s the issue with the mountains?” Eric wants to know.

I point in the direction the mountains are located. Even from this distance
they look rough and impassable. “I see,” Eric frowns.

“The man had a witch helping him, probably more than one,” Desmona
says. “We know that for certain, as we saw two during the girls’ birthday
I am to party. She’s probably enchanted and cursed the whole area around
id I see mountain.”

good to “I agree,” Jade nods.

“If there is a castle somewhere up there or a house, there has to be
e in the entrance though,” I point out. “And there’d have to be some documents
he two about a building being up there. They couldn’t have used spells to create
e photo since the beginning of its existence.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Elden nods. “Would it be possible for
witches to find the entrance?”

“It should be,” Jade nods. “But it might take a few hours, and we
ancient need some help. We’d need more energy to find it. If Celine is really
a very probably wasn’t masked when it was built, but still... it has been hidden
many years, maybe centuries... it would have become one with
?” surroundings.”

t. “And we’d need someone to take us to the mountain base,” D
ons. points out. “I’m too old to teleport.”

e sound “I’ll tell Marcel to bring the truck,” I nod. “Some of my warrior
 accompany you for safety. As for the extra energy, what do you need?”

 “Justus needs to come with us,” Jade says. “He has witch blood in h
es. Mymight not have any powers, but it’s my blood running through him
rice herborrow some of his strength.” She looks at me. “You’re needed he
 sweetheart, but maybe you can lend me the twins?”

 “The twins work for Prince Eric,” I tell her.

istance, Eric raises his brow and turns to his twin advisors. “Elise and Elodie

 “Sure, we can help,” Elise starts. “But—”

esmona “—what do you need from us?” Elodie finishes.

irthday “Twins are said to have mystical powers,” Jade points out. “Belie
nd thenot, there is something magical about your mind bond. I just need to
 some of your energy.”

 “Would that be okay with you, Prince Eric?” Elise asks.

o be an “We will be careful,” Elodie adds.

entation Eric nods. “You can go, but take Emilien with you.”

cover it Emilien looks torn. “And leave you behind?”

 Eric beams a smile at him and puts an arm around mine and
for youshoulders. “I have two alphas protecting me,” he winks.

 Elden snorts. “You’re of alpha blood too. You can protect yourself.”

ould “If my king says so,” Eric says sweetly.

right, it “Goodness,” Elden groans. “Drop it already.”

den for “By the way, I’m going to stay here until you accept the throne,
with itsEric says, sounding pumped.

 Elden almost looks defeated. It’s a rare sight, but Eric is a forc

Desmona reckoned with. Smart, cunning, a bit sly... and always underestimated. I know that his surname is Félin. French for feline predators. How fitting. Eric stretches. "Show me a photo of the girl, will you? I would know who we are searching for. And maybe I could pick up her scent somewhere too?"

"Right," I nod. "I forgot you've never met Val." I mind-link Jazz, my her bring her phone with photos of Valerie and one of her sweaters. Jade is eager to help she arrives within a couple of minutes. When she shows some photos, Eric beams at us. "What a beauty, she has that Snow look going for her."

"You're aware that she's being held captive, and we are on a mission," Elden points out, slightly annoyed. "And that it's not some bazaar."

"Absolutely," Eric nods. "We need to find that beautiful rose." He frowns and grabs the sweater Jade hands him, taking a careful sniff. He blinks, looking a tad confused, before sniffing at it again.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, alarmed.

Eric frowns. "I... no," he mutters. "It's just..."

"What?" Elden looks at him too now.

"Nothing. Let's just find her fast." Eric hands the sweater back to Jade.

With Jade and Desmona attempting to reveal the entrance to the castle, the rest of us can only wait, so we work through various attack and defense strategies. There will be a witch waiting for us, for sure. But what else? Eventually, Harmony returns from the city. She found Uncle, a historian and archivist, who told her that the photo could be around eight years old. Seeing as it's a relatively recent photograph, she passes it to be

dated. I info on to Elias and Garret, who are heading to a newspaper archive
g. to do further research on the people in the photo.

like to “Maybe she’s the one he wants to save?” Elden mutters. “The love
nt frommate will push us to our limits, but the love for a child might make
even further.”

having “What are you thinking?” Eric asks.

zz is so “That he’s desperate and hopefully, Valerie will play her cards right
ws Ericneeds them to believe that she’s useful to them,” Elden points out.

r White Eric looks really worried. “We shouldn’t be just standing around
there anything we can do?”

rescue Not really, I want to say, but my phone rings, cutting me off. It’s C
sort of ID, so I answer it without delay. He talks fast, filling me in on what
discovered. They found a very similar photo to this one in the archive
ignores the photographer’s name on it. According to Garret, it’s a strange old
il sniff.human, who lives alone on the outskirts of town. He and Elias went
him, but he refuses to talk. “What’s his name?” I ask.

“Evans,” Garret answers, sounding annoyed. “Frank Evans.”

“Goddess,” I sigh. “Mr. Evans? Exactly what I don’t need an
exhausting day.”

zz. “You know him, Alpha?” Garret asks, surprised.

stle, the “I wouldn’t say I know him, but he’s... infamous,” I explain.

rescue “Really?” Garret sounds surprised. “What for?”

se, and “For being a disgusting creep,” I point out. Mr. Evans has always
an oldcreep, and a jerk... and a major womanizer. He isn’t just a photograp
five to he also owns one of the bars in town. A few years ago, I went there
sed the date... and then never again. Later, I found out that a lot of women ha
similar encounters with him.

anyway He's gross.

I contemplate my options. Jade and her group are trying to find our entrance to the mountain, but she said it will take hours. It's still the afternoon, and I don't want to sit by and do nothing. I strongly believe knowledge is power, and the more we know about the man behind the abduction, the better.

Light. She "I'll be there in half an hour," I tell Garret. "Just make sure Evans leave."

d. Isn't "Of course, Alpha! We'll be expecting you."

Once I've hung up, I repeat what Garret told me to the others, then Garret's at Harmony. "They clearly need more girl power," I say in a matter they've tone.

es with "Oh," she raises her brow. "Do they?" She smirks. "So, it's the two man, against Evans?"

t to see "You think we can win against him?" I grin.

"With the right weapons, we can," she wiggles her brows.

"You have five minutes to prepare your weapons," I tell her. "We'll meet back here."

We ignore the confused looks of the guys and hurry to get dressed. I wear a light blue sheath dress, making me look like the most clichéd sexiest ever. And Harmony wears a tight, thigh-high pencil skirt, a white blouse, and fake glasses. On our return, the others look at us like we've lost our minds. "Do we need to practice?" I ask Harmony.

her, but Harmony looks at me. "Oh, Celine, darling," she giggles and beams at me with a "Let's just go with the flow."

ave had "Harmy," I say, brushing through my hair and flashing her a shy smile. "You're my best friend. No man will ever come between us."

Harmony clings to my arm. “Aw, I love you too, Ceci.”

ind the At that nickname, I almost snort.

ll early I nod at her. “Perfect!” I say in a matter-of-fact tone.

ve that “And that’s going to work?” Elden asks in disbelief.

d Val’s “Absolutely,” I say with conviction. I will do just about anything

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“Absolutely,” I say with conviction. I will do just about anything to get Valerie back as soon as possible, and if it means Harmony and I need to play dumb and dumber, the cheap erotic version, then so be it. Garret is convinced that the old photographer knows something, we just need to make him talk to us.

HENRICK SULLIVAN

VALERIE

The moment the door opens again, I lunge at the old man and grab him by his collar. I feel anger in me, stronger than I have ever felt before. “You’re not in a position to judge!” I yell. “This poor innocent soul... you’re sick!”

The man takes a step back and smacks my hand away. “You’re not in a position to judge,” he says coolly.

“What you’re doing is a crime,” I huff.

“Shut up,” the son yells, grabbing my arm and tugging me away from my father. He slaps me so hard that I fall to the ground. I feel warmth running down my nose. Wiping it with the sleeve of my sweater, I ignore the pain and keep glaring at these two psychos.

Maybe not the smartest thing to do, but damn it, I’m so pissed.

“You purposefully keep her in that state! That’s heartless and sick.”

“YOU—” the younger one yells. “What do you know!?” He’s suddenly hovering over me, then kicks me in the stomach, making me gasp. Before I can recover, he steps on my arm with so much force the bones crack—I scream out in pain, and momentarily, everything in front of me blurs.

He’s going to kill me. Shit, he’s really going to kill me. Instead of the relief I’d expect to feel from this revelation, extreme anger bubbles through my veins. I’m so angry that I’m not even scared for my life anymore.

“She can’t move on from here—and it’s all your fault!” I scream. My whole body is rapidly heating up like an oven, and my fingertips start to tingle like there’s a wave of energy streaming out of them. I’m not sure what my son sees in my eyes, but something must have frightened him, because he suddenly steps back from me.

“She can’t save her,” the son grunts, this time at his father.

Grab him. Think, Val, think.

How? Pretend. Be Odysseus.

“I did not say that.” I clench my teeth, clasp my arm to my chest, and scramble to my feet. “I said you’re insane. Heartless, and sick. But I never said I can’t help her.”

“Shut up,” the son hisses again, approaching me once more.

I raise my good hand at him. “I would advise you not to do that,” I say in a matter-of-fact tone. “Or everything is lost.”

“What do you mean?” he huffs.

Right... what did I mean? What did I mean?

“My gift heavily relies on my well-being, and on my strength.” I furrow my brows, trying not to show how surprised I am by my lie. “And you’re reducing my abilities.”

uddenly “Don’t be stupid. You’re a wolf, heal yourself,” he grumbles.
for air. “I can’t heal myself,” I lie. Well, technically, it is not a lie. My
s break.unfortunately, given me the disadvantage of being weaker than othe
comeshealing is slower too. But they don’t need to know these details. “I
myself, it will drain all of my energy, then I won’t be able to heal
the fearelse.”

id rises The old guy looks at me, his eyes wide in horror as his gaze shifts fi
ymore.face to my arm. Then he turns to his son. “You idiot!” he yells.

im. My The young man tries to move away, but his father catches him by th
tinglingand punches him with his fist. I grimace at the sound of it. Say goo
that theyour perfectly straight nose, dude.

ause he The man pushes his son away. “Make sure to get her back to her
unharmmed! And then send Luca to treat her wounds!”



est, and

CELINE

I never

As we knock on Mr. Evans’ door, Harmony and I exchange o
say in a meaningful look, nodding our silent agreement of the plan to each oth
take up sultry stances in our slutty outfits, with boobs and hips juttet c
extra wide smiles on our faces so that Mr. Evans gets a good view
opens the front door. I don’t normally wear pastel blue and the only r
furrow have the dress I’m wearing is because it was a gift from Lauren back
you are day. I honestly forgot I even had it, otherwise, I would have already c
it with any other clothes I don’t wear anymore.

“Hi, Mr. Evans,” I chirp. “I’m Celine!”

gift has “And I’m Harmony,” Harmony giggles in a flirtatious way. She’s g
ars. Myone of the least giggly girls I know, so the fact she pulls it off now im
f I healme.

anyone I tug at my dress as if I’m trying to stop it from riding up in a see
innocent gesture. “We’re from Discovery Lifestyle.”

rom my “We are interviewing lots of local celebrities from our town,” H
adds with a beam.

e collar “Would you let us have the honor of interviewing you?” I beg
dbye toblinking up at him through my fake eyelashes.

We both look at him wide-eyed, making sure to smile sweetly. W
r room,Evans doesn’t know is that my team is watching our performance from
distance away. I might not be able to see them from here, but my en
alpha hearing picks up their reactions.

“I can’t believe this is working...” Elias mutters.

“That’s just so wrong,” Garret sighs.

*“It’s worth the trouble, if it works,” Eric adds. He’s sounding
serious now, and almost worried.*

*“I will lose my tiny remaining faith in humanity if this actually v
ne last Elden says dryly.*

er. We I block them out to focus on the task before me. Mr. Evans mig
out, and narcissist and a misogynist, but he’s also known to have a perfect m
v as he Or at least, that’s what the rumors say... let’s hope it’s true.

reason I His face contorts into a smile. “Come on in, girls. Would y
k in the something to drink?”

donated “Thank you,” I smile brightly. “I’ll have whatever you drink.”

“Just water for me,” Harmony giggles. “I need to watch my weight.”

“Ah,” Mr. Evans looks her over. “You’re perfect the way you are, so not to be jealous of my affection toward Harmony.” I look at him, pretending to be jealous of my affection toward Harmony.

He looks me over hungrily, and for the first time ever, I’m glad my flirting with Marius and me are so rocky. Because flirting with this asshole is both wrong and dirty. I should think of a way to put a stop to this sleazy behavior in the future... but unfortunately, being a sexist, slimy pig isn’t officially a crime...

Let’s get this over with fast, I think Harmony.

Yeah, I swear, my muscles hurt from all the fake smiling, and I’m getting a headache from his cheap aftershave.

The moment we get what we need, I’ll have Garret call and pretend there’s a family emergency, I promise.

We spend an hour with Mr. Evans, hearing him boast about how good he is, all the while flirting with him and giggling over his stupid jokes. I feel like I’ve lost a few brain cells just by being here. It feels like an eternity has passed, and we’re only just starting the fake interview. I begin by asking some general questions, making sure to stroke his ego as much as possible. “Then we show him some of his own photography work we’d googled for you here and ask about the composition and lighting choices in each one.” Blah.

Then lastly, I show him the photo Garret and Elias found. It’s almost identical to the one in the pendant. He looks surprised. “I just love you like one...” I make sure my expression is one of bliss and joy. “Family photos always get to me, you know? The stories behind them... and you manage to convey so many feelings through this photo. Can you tell us the story

so sad in “I’ve never heard of this family,” I mutter. “Sad stories are my
thought I’d heard them all.”

kins. “It “They didn’t live in town. He has a mansion in the coun
ughter.somewhere up a mountain or something like that. Weird dude
s just apossessive. I swear his eyes turned black sometimes. His son seemed
an anger problem too. The little girl here was pretty scared of him.”

iddies,” Wait? He has a son!? “He had more than one child?” Harmony asks
I would “There were two boys with them. One was older, and I think the ot
a similar age to the gorgeous little Ciara here, maybe a bit younge
e smilesEvans muses, “Yeah, the younger boy was definitely still a child, an
r to thequiet. He wanted to have his photo taken with his sister too, but Henr
ughterhis older son didn’t allow it.” He shrugs. “He looked sad, but what c
picture.do?”

Maybe try to help them? I think to myself. Help two children wh
ier. I’mobviously caught in a toxic relationship with their father and were a
ie thingtheir older brother?

f young Mr. Evans changes the topic and starts rambling on about other
sexualindicating he has nothing more to add.

Good, we can finally leave this place. I mind-link Garret to phon
ything,few minutes later, I present Mr. Evans with a sob story about my very
older sister, who needs my help because she doesn’t feel good. An
ok thatmention she was very single? And beautiful?

ng up.” Mr. Evans lets us go, wanting us to promise we will be back later v
ore hernon-existent supermodel sister.

Once outside, we wait until we walk around the corner before lettin
exuallydeep breath. The guys are already waiting for us, eager to hear w

forte; I discovered. Harmony shudders in disgust. “Yuck,” she mutters.
gross.”

tryside, I pull my fake eyelashes off. “I need to scrub myself after that experi
; quite I sigh.

to have “Did it work?” Elden asks. “Did he tell you anything?”

“Yeah,” I grimace, thinking of the way he salivated over us and
. talked about that poor little girl. “We have a name, a motive, and w
her was the general location. Jade was right that he’s probably living
r,” Mr. mountain.” I pause. “Also, I’m sure he’s a wolf.”

nd very Harmony nods. “Mr. Evans mentioned his eyes turning black som
ick and and his older son was hard to control.”

can you “What?” Eric exclaims. “And my poor rose is in there with them? W
to get her back fast.”

io were I look at him thoughtfully. Could it be... maybe... I shrug it off
frail of He’s right, getting Valerie out of there is our top priority. She might
to stall them, but eventually, they will realize that she can’t bring b
things, dead... or whatever state Ciara is in. Mr. Evans said she was close to

Who knows, maybe this Hendrick’s mate was a human, and so Ciara
e us. A have a wolf. Therefore, she got sick. Her mother doesn’t seem to be
y single anymore, either. A genetic disease would have to run in the family.

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VALERIE

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“I feel Luca doesn’t look me in the eye. He keeps staring at the ground while he tries to tend to my broken arm. Thankfully, he’s given me some patience,” and he’s now trying to put my arm in a splint. It hurt so much at first, but the pain made me dizzy, but eventually, Luca finishes, and my arm is safely in a tight bandage. Now I just need to wait for the painkillers to kick in some more.

I look at Luca thoughtfully. “You’re good at this,” I nod toward the splinted arm, “You know what you’re doing.”

He shrugs. I keep looking at him, noticing a bruise on his face. It reminds me of the last time I saw him—poor kid.

“I’m Valerie,” I say softly. “Thanks for helping me, Luca.”

He looks up, surprise in his eyes, before casting his gaze back down at almost like he’s afraid he would get hurt if he looked at me for too long, though. “Did they hurt you?” I ask carefully.

“No more than usual,” he mutters. I notice, however, how he’s keeping his hand firmly against his side.

“And what’s wrong here?” I point at his side.

He looks down. “Lenny kicked me.”

“Who is Lenny?” I want to know, although I can already guess the answer. “The one who broke your arm,” he mutters.

“May I?” I ask softly. When he nods, I lift his shirt, noting in horror how many scars he carries. I don’t say anything though, instead focusing on the darkest bruises on his side. If I’m careful, I can heal him a little without sabotaging my health too much. I need to practice my gift anyway. I rest my hand against his side and feeling the warmth there. I do the same way I did with Elden, but I am careful not to heal him completely.

I pull my hand away before it’s fully healed, but I can see that the s

While helightedened from severe into mild bruising, and Luca's stance and br
killers, seem more relaxed.

that the He looks at me stunned. "Thank you," he whispers.

resting "Just don't tell anyone."

kick in He shakes his head. "I won't!"

"Luca?" I pause. "Who is the girl in there?" I ask softly.

rds the "That's Ciara," he mutters. "My sister."

Wait... what!? He's part of the family too. It means, the old fucke
wasn't father... I look at him wide-eyed, touching his neck carefully, the re

of the silver collar too visible. "But why are you here... like this... and

He looks sad, and tired. "Mom was human," he mutters. "She died
wn. It's rare sickness. Ciara has no wolf and got the same sickness."

g. "And she died," I mutter.

"Dad couldn't live without them," he says quietly. "And I'm j
ing his enough."

His words make my heart ache. He's a lot younger than Ciara w
now. To imagine what he went through in his teens. How long has l
mistreated for? How long has he suffered? "And Lenny?"

answer. "Half-brother," he mutters. It's obvious he doesn't even want t
about him.

or how "And you?" I asked softly. "How old were you back then?"

on the "Eleven," he says. "It's been six years since Ciara became like this.'
without So, he's only seventeen now.

I focus, "My heart broke at their deaths, but I wanted to let them go." He
o it the slightly. "She's... Ciara... I failed her as her brother. Look how she

y. She's..."

kin has "Is this why they keep you chained up?" I ask carefully.

eathing He shrugs, but nods eventually. He looks at me fearfully. “What if
when father realizes you can’t save Ciara?”

So, he knows?

He seems to catch my surprise. “Any sane person can tell,” he whispers.

I squeeze his hand. “We have to be careful, Luca. Don’t say or do anything
out of the ordinary. I will think of something.”

He nods, his expression more hopeful now.

er is his Once Luca has left me again, I’m alone with just my thoughts and
mnants Until a few minutes ago, I thought it was only my life on the line... but
l...” there is Luca, an innocent child who has been abused for years. And
from a whose soul can’t rest in peace.



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CELINE

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We are on our way back to the pack, and Harmony and I are debriefing
others on what we’ve learned.

o think Elias looks confused by all the information we’ve just dumped on
He’s probably shocked that Harmony and I were able to extract so
information without resorting to violence. He’s always had a
, straightforward approach as a tracker. Most of the time, Elias has to deal
with only one task, one focus. Instead of going in with fake stories and gro
winces coaxing the information out of him, I’m guessing he would have preferred
is now. storm in and beat the information out of Mr. Evans, if he could.

happens Garret, however, has already processed and moved on to our challenge. “Our only issue is that we don’t know who else is working for the Henrick guy. Jazz was unconscious for most of Val’s attack, so she doesn’t know much about the guys who were with him when they kidnapped Valerie. I hold back, letting Harmony lead the conversation. “We know the least one witch with them,” she points out.

Garret nods. “We don’t know much about her, let alone her POV on Ailia.why she’s helping him.”

“That is a problem, but we have Jade and Desmona to help us,” Harmony points out.

They continue to go through the pros and cons of a direct attack while I keep listening. Elden throws me a curious glance from the driver’s seat, probably thinks I’m listening diligently to my team’s discussion on the course of action. In a way, I am... but not just because of our current situation. I’m actually observing my team and how they strategize because I still haven’t chosen a gamma for my pack yet, so the position still needs to be filled, and soon. I have narrowed down the possible options to three with the most potential: Marcel, Elias, and Garret. All of them have the skills and abilities, and they have proven themselves time and time again. My main focus is still on saving Valerie and getting rid of this lingering threat, but at the same time, I need to keep an eye on pack business... and how these three act in a stressful situation is going to be a vital factor in my final decision.

“Jade said that if she and Desmona can manage to lift the barrier, they will know more about their witch counterpart,” I explain to them, joining in their discussion.

“So, they might know which coven she’s from?” Harmony asks.

ir next “More likely what her powers are.”

for this “Why can’t Desmona tell that already?” Garret asks. “She was , doesn’twhen they attacked at Jazz and Valerie’s birthday party.”

/al.” That’s something I had wondered for a while, but Jade explained it re is at “Desmona said everything happened so fast that day, and let’s not for the witch remained hidden until the end.”

vers, or “And now?” Garret wants to know. “What’s the plan?”

“I don’t think we can cover all the possible eventualities,” I say. “ armonygoing to prepare for the most likely emergency scenarios, but then we head out.”

while I Elden nods in agreement. It’s not wise to rush into any situation l eat. Hebut at the same time, we will never be prepared for every possibility he nextcan’t let Valerie stay trapped much longer.

current We are just arriving at the pack grounds when my phone :cause IRecognizing the number, I answer it immediately. “Hello Liam.”

ds to be There is a short pause before... “No...” I can hear a quiet, rathe varriorsvoice. “It’s me, Marius.”

antastic My heart stops beating for a moment. I just did not expect him to c ain. MyI’m not sure what to say, so I stay quiet.

; threat, “My phone got crushed during the attack,” he mutters. He sounds t l seeingjust woke up... and asked Liam to give me his phone. The rogu r in myattacked the kids and me...” Another pause.

Wait, he’s calling to give me information? Does he remember som en they “You know who they are?” I ask.

finally “No, but I saw their tattoos. Like a pack tattoo.”

“What did it look like?” I ask.

“I will draw it and send it to you now,” he promises. He sounds so

can't help but worry that he needs more rest. But at the same time, I need to
with us picture.

"Look after yourself," I say quietly.

to me. "Yes," he answers awkwardly, and then after another pause. "Thank
get that Celine. I know you didn't have to... Thank you."

When I hang up, I feel really conflicted. A part of me knows I should
care and that it's just the mate bond making me feel this way. But
We are part of me knows that the mate bond exists for a reason, and it is true.
have to I still don't know what I'm going to do about the whole issue with
but saving Valerie comes first.

blindly,

7, and I

rings.

or weak

call me.

tired. "I

es who

ething?

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I still don't know what I'm going to do about the whole issue with Marius, but saving Valerie comes first.

GRIEF

VALERIE

I gently rub Ciara's hand, hoping the gesture will reach her soul and ease her pain. I don't even want to imagine how haunted she is. It's so devastating it must feel to be stuck in limbo, trapped between life and death with no escape. I need to find a way to release her from this dark magic.

My arm still hurts from earlier.

I am sorry I can't heal you faster, my dear, Ailia whispers.

Don't be. I shake my head. You are so strong and blessed me with so many gifts. I don't feel inferior anymore. It is as it was meant to be.

You've come a long way, Val, she says softly.

Because of you, and because of my friends who have accepted me the way I am. And my parents. But Luca and Ciara... they have no one except for their insane father and their cruel brother.

They have no one. Poor Luca, in particular. He has been forced to
this place for who knows how long, watching his sister's living
deteriorate while his brother continues to beat him senseless. Every time
him, he has new bruises and cuts on his body. This morning when he had
my breakfast, there were welts on his shoulder from a whip.

Luca's brother has left me alone though, probably too afraid of his
and what he would do to him were I to get hurt.

I keep rubbing my thumb over Ciara's hand. There is no wolf for
connect with, but if I try to reach out to her with my mind, I can sense
there is a small fragment of her soul stranded deep in the absolute
nothingness. I don't know what I can do to help Ciara; I would need
Liam or Alpha Elden to guide me. I can heal a few cuts and slightly
wounds but guiding a soul... that's nothing I've ever touched upon.

Henrick makes me sit with Ciara every day, from breakfast until d
and ease don't really mind, because being here means I won't be disturbed by
or how Henrick or his older son. Lenny... It's weird. He is such a sca
d death aggressive guy, yet he has such a friendly sounding name.

c. Wish he had more Lenny in him and less asshole.

When the door opens with a squeeze, Lenny—otherwise known as
—waltzes in and pulls me away from Ciara. He is always rough but
o many sure not to cause any real injury. He never talks, which honestly
bother me at all. It's not like I have anything to say to him either. He t
short glance at Ciara's body and grunts. He probably doesn't give a
e way I about her.

or their On our way back up to my room, which I now know is indeed loca
tower, we pass Luca, carrying a tray with plates. He trembles in fear v
sees Lenny. He visibly tenses, and his whole body seems to recoil

live inThe tray wobbles in his trembling hands before falling to the
corpshattering the plates into hundreds of tiny shards.

ne I see Douchebag reacts fast, grabbing Luca by his shirt and shoving him
broughtthe wall. He lets go of me to slap Luca, hard. There's blood oozing
Luca's nose as he gasps for air.

father, "Stop it!" I yell.

"Why?" he huffs at me. "I should just kill the scum."

r me to Shit, what am I going to say without blowing our cover!? Damn i
ase that"But... but who will bring me my food then!?" I hear myself say. "You
oyss of Wow, Val, that's the best you could do? Nothing else came to you
l Alphathan that? To my surprise though, douchebag lets go of his brother.
biggercooking," he hisses.

Yeah, cooking isn't your biggest problem; your pea-sized brain is.
inner. Ithrows me a secret glance, showing me a very short smile before scra
y eitherback into the kitchen. When he does so, I notice how Lenny has his
ury andhis pocket. There is a clicking noise to be heard. My eyebrows shoot u
sight of Lenny pulling a tiny chain from his pocket... there are a har
keys attached to it.

asshole *Ailia, I mutter. Did you see that?*

makes *Yes, this is what we need to escape!*

doesn't

tosses a

a damn



CELINE

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when he

in fear.

ground, Marius stuck to his promise, and a few minutes later, I have a picture in my inbox. It's a drawing of a tattoo. He must have scribbled it down fast, but the detail is incredible. I didn't know he could paint or draw, but it's clear from this that he's talented.

Another message follows.

It's me, Liam. Marius told me to send this to you ASAP. Does it help?

I show the picture to Elias. "Can you work with that? Ever seen this tattoo before?"

Elias furrows his brows before he nods. "Absolutely! That tattoo was in my mind by members of a rogue camp that terrorized a village close to my old pack. I hate when I was still there. They moved to another area before we could reach them."

Luca I have to give it to Elias. His past experience living in that dangerous pack sure does come in handy sometimes. So does his good hand as a tracker. He's not only able to track scents and other clues, but his photographic memory means he can remember locations, important symbols, and helpful signs. He once told me it's like a film flashing in front of his eyes.

"My contacts told me they have seen them occasionally in the area further away from town," he mutters. "They must have finally regrouped and reformed, since they were almost wiped out by my old pack."

"Can you find them?" I ask. "We need to eliminate them before they can act as Sullivan's backup."

He nods.

"How long will you need?"

"If I set off immediately, I will be with them before you reach Sullivan's hideout."

"Choose your team, and head out immediately," I tell him. "I don't

in my mind you not to take any unnecessary risks, do I?”

yet the “No, Alpha, I know what I am doing,” he promises. “Do war survivors?”

“No,” I say earnestly. “Unless there are prisoners or children. Take with you; he has a sense for that kind of thing.”

Elias hurries away to gather his team. I take a moment to reply to Liam.

This helps a lot! Thank you.

I send the message to him, before adding with a sigh,

Say thank you to Marius.

And then, because I just can’t help myself, I add,

How is he doing?

Liam’s answer comes swiftly. *Glad it helped! Good luck, Celine.*

shady, need backup, call me. Glad my father is with you.

Another message follows, *Marius relieved he was able to help eidetic sleeping now. The road to recovery will be long for him.*

I nod to myself, feeling relieved. I try to push my feelings for Marius as the last thing I want is the mate pull kicking in again because my woods, shown five minutes of decency towards me.

Still, I’ll never forget Marius lying there on the brink of death, and

Liam was so pale and haunted by his discovery when searching through Marius’ mind. And then there is what Danica said about his wolf, his something changing Marius into the person he is now.

I shove my thoughts aside for now. Valerie needs her alpha, not a lone pup. Harmony, Elden, Eric, and Garret are coming with me to meet the Henrick group at the base of the mountain. Unfortunately, I can only bring a few of warriors with us in order to keep the element of surprise. I need to

stealthy, silent killers this time. We arrive at the foot of the mountain and discover that Jade's found a way to break through the barrier.

Desmona is sitting in one of the jeeps resting, a warm blanket around her and a flask of tea in her hand. My grandpa is sitting next to her, looking exhausted. It's obvious that their age is affecting them. Meanwhile, Jade and the twins are standing in their assigned positions. Jade has drawn a circle into the snowy ground, with each of the girls now occupying a position within the circle. There are several runes between them, all of which are glowing.

As I approach, Jade turns to me. She points at a fourth circle, and when I start questioning it any further, I take up a position there. I wasn't expecting to participate in the ritual, but I'll do what I can.

If you can't see, close your eyes, Danica says. Have faith in us.

I do, feeling how the air around me sizzles, and the energy bubbles around me like a kettle that's letting off steam. It's completely quiet around us, not a single creature or plant moving in the wind. Jade's voice breaks through the silence, chanting spells in a language I can't understand. For the first time I can remember, I feel like I need to let go of my control, and allow things to happen to me, and around me. I allow the atmosphere to pull me in.

When I open my eyes, it's like the curtain has lifted. Instead of the thought terrain that was in front of us, now there is a physical barrier, the one preventing us from moving further up the mountain. I don't see the terrain anymore, and I feel some invisible string pulling me out of the circle and toward the barrier.

It's completely silent except for the sound of my breathing, the beating of my heart, and Danica inside my mind. *Have faith in yourself, Celine said only faith in yourself.*

I reach my hand towards the barrier. Did mom really have to die? I

tain to sure why I think of her suddenly, but I can't stop my thoughts from
through my mind. Could I have protected her had I known about my
and her? Could grandpa have done something? Whose fault was it that she
looking should have been able to use my powers. Dad should have saved his
hazz and Grandpa should have protected his daughter. And Jade... she should
a huge been there for all of us.

ing one. *Let it go, Danica says quietly. Let it go, Celine. Accept it for what it
An accident. An accident, and it's no one's fault,* I think bitterly.

without *Yes.*

cting to *I wish she were here, I whisper. I needed her. With growing up, lea
pack, handling dad... Marius. I wish she were here to help me.*

Me too, Danica says soothingly.

es over *I miss her, I mutter. I want my mom.*

und us, *It's okay. The pain is a part of you, and always will be. Allow it to
through of you.*

rst time When my mother died, I cried, and then I never cried again. Never I
nings to anyway. I made sure to be the daughter my father could rely on. To
successor he needed. To take responsibility for the pack as everyone e:
a rough me to. I was the perfect daughter, the diligent student, the responsib
e that's and never once did I show anyone how I truly felt.

others I follow Danica's guidance, allowing myself to feel everything I ne
cle and keep locked away inside. I feel sorrow for my mother, who I still

much. I feel the pain from my broken mate bond. Finally, I feel in
ating of anger and hurt towards Marius, who should have loved me uncondi

2. *Have* and filled the void in me but refused. Maybe that's what I needed to

wanted a mate to fill a void that no one could fill. Even if things turn c
am not with us, this part of me will always be missing.

running My senses return to normal as I reach my hand toward the barrier. My gifts? watch it burst around me. I turn to see the others are deathly silent around me. Jade, however, has tears in her eyes, and I wonder how much she felt while watching me right now.

“Let’s go,” I say.

And just like that, the moment is broken. Everyone scrambles to the door, except for Grandpa, Desmona, and Jazz, who I order to stay behind. “Can you help?” Jazz begs, “Alpha?”

“Jazz,” I say earnestly. “We don’t know what awaits us in there, I don’t want to take the risk. Besides, Valerie will need someone waiting for her once we get out. Bring her something warm to drink and a blanket once we have her.”

Jazz nods her head with a sigh. “I understand.”

Jade steps aside for me to go first. “Lead the way,” she tells me.

I nod. This time it’s so much easier. Just like during my meditation.

Jade, I allow my senses and instincts to take over. My instincts will not like that betray me, I realize. I trust them to keep me safe.

The path in front of me magically opens, the wind pushing me in the unexpected direction.

With the spell around the mountain broken, a path reveals itself.

leading up to an old castle high on the mountain. Before we walk any further, a woman with black hair blocks our path, her eyes flashing silver. “You are not to enter,” she hisses. “The master cannot be disturbed.”

I notice a second woman standing behind her. If I remember correctly, she is the one that Marcel and Aryanna fought during the birthday party. She looks anxious, and I doubt she has much to say. I turn to the black witch. “The master?” I raise my brows. “And what did the master permit you?” I ask coolly. To my surprise, she looks flustered for a moment.

ier andfuck's sake, is everyone going nuts recently? All this crazy shit beca
nd me.wants this man! "Love?" I conclude dryly.

or saw She glares at me.

"He will never love anyone," I tell her. I might not know much
Henrick Sullivan, but I can take a wild guess that he's a lost cause.

air feet, "Sina, let's just go," the other witch whispers. "This isn't our battle.

"But I "Shut up," Sina huffs. "Remember, you have nothing more to lose!
you have left."

cannot "That's all?" Jade intervenes dryly. "It's just you two and a bu
ut herewolves?" She laughs. "Wow, I won't lie, this is kinda anticlimactic
eyes flash silver, and a smirk curls around her lips. For a second, the
her eyes makes me shudder. She pushes past me. "Let me take these two
she says evenly. "You go ahead and save the kid."

on with "Are you sure you don't need help?" I ask in surprise.

ll never "Absolutely certain." Jade turns to look at the witch. "Now, yo
bitch," she hisses, and suddenly she is nothing like the kind, cool
ne rightwoman we all know. "I will show you what happens to someone
threatens my family."

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VALERIE

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When the door to my room opens, I am surprised... it's long past
and normally no one visits me, not even Luca... it's too dangerous.
surprise, it's Lenny. What does he want?

use she “If you want me to go to Ciara, I have to decline,” I say firmly. “My energy needs to recover.” None of them needs to know that using my powers weakens me a lot. The fact that I am still feeling so well is because I haven’t really done anything down there with Ciara.

“You know,” he says, sitting down on my bed. I jump up to move away from him. “I couldn’t give a shit about Ciara. She has always been a little bitch, but you... you look weak like her, but you aren’t.” There’s something so creepy in his eyes, it grosses me out. “I have not found much of yet.”

Of course, he hasn’t! The Moon Goddess would never mate anyone as weak as you. Even my sister is too good for him, and she is a freaking socialite.” “So, how about,” he stands up and approaches me. “The both of you burn everything down here and leave. You just need to let me mark you.”

WHAT!?

I have to suppress a gag. Excuse me while I throw up! Never in my controlled will I let this asshole mark me. I would rather kill myself before that happens. “What about your father?” I ask him daringly. “And your brother about Ciara?”

Lenny seems to be far away in his thoughts. From what I can tell, he probably always had this violent streak in him, but having not socialized and growing up here with his violent father... it’s probably enhanced his mental issues. “Ciara was a weak little human,” he spits out. “Let them die. And Luca? That little sissy? Why would I care!?”

I notice how he doesn’t mention his father. He is either too loyal to the family dinner, too scared, or both. “Well,” I say evenly. “I can’t leave here; I have to do my job. Your father asked me to heal his daughter.”

He grabs me by my waist and pushes me against the wall. It makes

y. “My gasp in shock. His nose is so close to my neck, to my marking spot. No way. Panic fills me. There’s no one here to help me. I am all alone. I haven’t— Wait. No, I’m not. I have Ailia. We won’t give up without a fight. If I fight for myself, I will do it for Ailia, and Luca, and Ciara. Using a strategy I didn’t know I owned, I shove him away from me before punching him in the face. A weak, stupid face.

There is— Something flashes in Lenny’s eyes. He is back in front of me, slapping me so hard I taste blood in my mouth, and my ears are ringing. My vision blurs from the pain, but I try to will it away, to stay focused. As my focus returns to this Lenny is like a wild animal. He’s lost his mind completely.

Path! Before I can think of a plan, Luca rushes into the room. He jumps on Lenny’s back and tackles him. “Leave her alone, you sick bastard,” he yells. “Oh, I see,” Lenny sneers. “You want this precious little wolf for yourself? You think she would choose you over a man like me?”

I watch them struggle against each other. Luca is weakened by the wolfbane and the silver collar, but he seems so angry, all his suppressed emotions coming forward and giving him an adrenaline boost. He is as ruthless as Lenny though.

Lenny will easily kill his brother with no regret. There is no way he would ever wouldn’t. And then? What will he do to Ciara? And his father? And I have to help Luca. I can’t just let Lenny kill him.

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gasp in shock. His nose is so close to my neck, to my marking spot. No way, no way. Panic fills me. There's no one here to help me. I am all alone.

Wait. No, I'm not. I have Ailia. We won't give up without a fight. If I can't fight for myself, I will do it for Ailia, and Luca, and Ciara. Using a strength I didn't know I owned, I shove him away from me before punching him in his stupid face.

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Lenny will easily kill his brother with no regret. There is no way he wouldn't. And then? What will he do to Ciara? And his father? And me? I have to help Luca. I can't just let Lenny kill him.

BALANCE

VALERIE

My heart hammers in my chest like it's about to escape any moment. Luca and Lenny are rolling across the floor. Luca is clearly not a match for Lenny, even though he's trying. The years of abuse have weakened him, as has the silver collar, and he is much younger than Lenny. He can't match Lenny's overly aggressive streak.

Lenny is a true psycho.

Fear crawls over me, and I'm not sure what to do or how to get Luca and myself out of this situation. My wolf is a healer, it's a passive gift. It can't fight... not much, at least, and definitely not enough to take on Lenny.

Soon Lenny is hovering above Luca, easily pressing him to the floor. He then he wraps his hands around his neck. I wonder why Lenny hasn't shifted

maybe he forgot... maybe he's scared that their father would notice...

he can't... I don't know... but even in his human form, he's strong.

Seeing Luca struggle and gasp for air kicks my senses back in and toward Lenny, tugging at his arms. "You're going to kill him," punching his back and shoulders repeatedly.

But Lenny is so out of it that he doesn't even acknowledge my presence.

My fear vanishes all of a sudden, and instead, a new feeling starts to creep over me. It's foreign and unpleasant... I feel so much anger and hatred for this man. For the things he has done to his younger siblings... Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remember when he thought no one was looking, he would stare at Ciara with a smug smirk. What did he do to her when she was still alive? What did he do to Luca?

And then there is Henrick. That sick bastard, who keeps torturing my mother and daughter.

minute. *Allow it to happen, Ailia says to me, her voice low and even. Think about it, they did. Are you the first one they brought to this place? What happened to the ones before you? Allow these dark feelings and emotions to grow. It's alright to feel anger. It's alright to feel desperate and infuriated. These are your emotions, and they are part of you. Light and dark always be balanced, even within ourselves.*

I do what my wolf tells me to and allow these feelings to take over. I can't deny acknowledging them as part of me. Seeing Luca on the ground fighting for his life is enough to push me over the edge. "Let go of him," I yell in sudden fury and grab Lenny's arm.

Lenny groans in pain, letting go of Luca and clutching his arm. He gasps for air. "What..." he breathes out in pain. "... did you do?"

He collapses on top of Luca.

maybe My eyes go wide. Did I do that? But how?

I can heal... and hurt?

l I rush I stand there rooted to the ground with wide eyes, while Luca
I yell, Lenny off him. "Valerie." He coughs and grabs my hand to pull me wi
"Let's get out of here. He's only unconscious. Who knows how long
ence. last?"

rawling His voice and touch bring me back to the living. I nod. "Wait a mon
tred for call out. I search through Lenny's pockets, grabbing a bundle of key
etimes, him. Luca blinks rapidly as he realizes what I'm doing.

l a sick "Which one?" I ask him.

e do to He knows what I'm talking about without saying it directly. He poi
small key. I tug off the chain and put the rest of the keys in my pocket.
his son freeing Luca from his silver collar. The skin beneath it is scarred ar
He's probably had to wear this for years.

of what "Come," Luca hurries to the door.

ened to I follow him swiftly. I'm so ready to leave this awful place!

in you.

! These

need to



CELINE

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e gasps

It should be more difficult than this, I think, as we push through
men who guard Sullivan's castle. It's just a few rogues who carry the
symbol Marius sent me earlier. As we move closer, it's evident h
down this place is.

I don't even want to imagine the terrible things that might have happened in there.

pushes Before we'd started the raid on the castle, I'd received a message from him. Elias stating, *Everything is under control, Alpha. We got most of the enemy; it will only be a few escaped. Will follow them with Marcel to make sure they don't ambush you.*

ment!" I Henrick was relying so much on their magic tricks that they didn't have many guards around the castle. In a weird and twisted way, I think Henrick Sullivan thought it was his Goddess-given right to abduct her and use her gifts. Maybe he thought we wouldn't even bother to look for her. Jade was right... this is kind of a letdown. Harmony and I could have probably taken down this place on our own. But I definitely shouldn't complain about a fight being too easy.

My men rush in different directions to ambush every possible guard. We were prepared for traps and for allies and anything else that Henrick might have. But it seems the pitiful witch and her boss, Sina, the lovesick creature were the only ace they had up their sleeves. Judging by how Jade handled these two around, I doubt they will be a problem for much longer.

I send Garret and one of our teams off to secure the basement. Prince has asked to be on my team, as we are going to concentrate on finding her. Most of us have shifted, with only a few remaining in their human form as a safety measure in case the enemy has a few tricks up their sleeve that affect our wolf form. I link Harmony and the others. *Follow me, I can find her the same way Valerie's scent.*

ow run *You can smell her, Alpha?* Harmony asks.

Sort of. It's more like my witch senses are telling me where she is. I lead them before taking the lead. Eric and two warriors, who are all still

ppenedhuman form, follow us.

We easily take down every guard we see. Some shift into wolves, some from to hit us with weapons. But they are weak. It's obvious they have rogues trained their wolves or their senses.

Why don't Fuck, this is easy, Harmony mutters while knocking two rogues

Behind us, Eric hits one guy with his elbow while kicking another. It's not even an elegant martial arts move. He doesn't even break a sweat. Eric isn't like underestimated because he's not as bulky as most alphas normally are. Valerie Liam once told me that not all lycan alphas are built the same, and that's for her. strength comes from all kinds of places. Eric is proof of that, just like I would have friend Finn is too.

couldn't When we head up a staircase that leads into a tower, I link my other

Report.

heard. We *The outside area is secured*, one of the warriors responsible for the courtyard answers.

razy one, *Your grand-... er... Jade*, another warrior links me, obviously confused. *What to call her, has the witch under control. The other witch surrenders without a fight...*

ice Eric *No issues anymore in the main building*, my biggest group reports. *Garret, no silver bullets were injured by enemy guns. But nothing major. No silver bullets.* It's I nod in relief. *Garret!?*

yes that *The basement is secured*, Garret links us, but his voice sounds strained. *1 detect* But? I inquire.

We found the girl, Alpha, the one from the pictures. The daughter.

know what they did to her, but... she's dead, but also not dead...

s, I tell *Just keep the area secured*, I tell him. *This is something we will handle in their lycans and the Council look at.*

The further up we reach, the more Valerie's scent hits me. There are some tryscents mingling with hers now. It seems like there are male wolves everywhere...



VALERIE

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There is yelling downstairs and a huge commotion happening outside. I can feel a strong presence around us, and I can smell wolves from my

They're here! They came! Relief fills me. Suddenly, I pick up another scent with them... something sweet, like cherry blossoms and oranges... and

chocolate. I take a careful sniff, my heart skipping a beat.

"What is it, Valerie?" Luca asks nervously.

"Just a heavenly scent," I mutter. It can't be... can it?

He gasps. "Do you think...?"

"Maybe," I shrug. "But let's hurry."

"What's going on down there?" Luca asks curiously.

"Wolves from my pack," I say proudly before flushing. "And son Luca hasn't met yet."

He nods, relief clear in his expression now that we obviously have located the

We make our way further downstairs before a tall figure suddenly blocks our

path.

"Where do you think you're going?" Henrick hisses at us. "And you're

traitor," he yells at his son. "You're my biggest mistake. It should have been you, wolf-less and sick, not her."

re more My heart breaks a little for Luca. No one should ever hear something around that from their parents. My sister, Lauren, is a traitor, yet not even

darkest hours did my parents stoop so low as to call her existence a mistake.

Henrick is not finished though. “You’ve always been useless.” Henrick continues his rant. “You should have been there for your sister, help her save her.”

“No,” Luca says quietly, much to my surprise, looking at his father now. “That’s what you should have done. You should have been there to help her.”

tside. I Seeing Henrick close-up, he has lost most of his scariness to my pack. obvious this man is broken, and most likely, his wolf is broken too.

er scent lost everything due to his own actions, and there is no peace in his soul and dark Luca behind me, which must look funny because I’m smaller than him.

don’t care. Luca hasn’t had anyone to protect him. It’s about time. “I’m sure Ciara finds the peace she deserves,” I tell Henrick, my eyes flashing with anger. “As for you, I make no promises.”

I don’t know if my gift will work as it did with Lenny again. I’m not sure how I did it before, but I have to try again. However, before I can

neone I I’m distracted by the asshole, aka Lenny, as he comes running down the staircase with a knife in his hands. “I’ll get rid of them for you, Father.” Luca hisses.

packup. “Oh, now, you want to get rid of me?” I huff. “What happened to your family because you wanted me? You begged me to come with you.”

cks our Something about everyone being worthless, and you not caring about you, you weaklings like Ciara. Have you changed your mind in the last thirty years or do you just have a very poor memory?”

“What?” Henrick turns to look at him and hisses. “You said what!?”

ing like “You really believe this bitch!?” Lenny growls.

in their “I absolutely believe her,” Henrick turns to Lenny, his eyes glir
stake. fury. “It seems like all of my children are useless, but you’re the worst
ss,” he I take a careful step back, holding my breath while keeping Luca
ping tome. Nothing happens for a second, then both men lunge at each other.

is brutal and strong, but Henrick is obviously more experienced. I ca
directlywho will make it out of this fight, and I really don’t care.

iere for Whoever survives will be killed later, anyway. I can already feel a g
wolves running toward us. At this point, I’m just trying to buy us mo
ne. It’s“He called Ciara a worthless bitch,” I yell towards Henrick. “And t
He hasdeserves to die because she’s weak.”

l. I pull Henrick’s eyes flash with anger, and in a sudden burst of hatred,
n. But ILenny to the wall and slashes his neck with the knife. Luca gags beh
ll makeand turns to look away. Before Henrick turns his attention back on
hing instrong wolves rush past us with a few warriors trailing behind them.

I instantly recognize the wolves.

ot even Celine is the white wolf rushing towards Henrick before biting d
1 begin,his arm to force him to let go of the knife. Then Harmony jumps or
wn thehim, making him fall down. I can see Henrick struggling, yellir
ier,” hehissing. But then... he gives up.

Just like that. It’s like all the fighting spirit has left him.

litching Celine shifts, grabs a long shirt from the bag she had attached to h
th you.and swiftly throws it on. “Tie him up,” she commands the warrior
; abouthurry to oblige.

minutes, Then she turns to me. “Val!” She cries out, hugging me.

She came. They all came for me. My eyes fill with tears. “Alpha.”

’ “It’s okay,” she says with a smile. “We will take care of the res

pulls away from me and looks at Luca. She seems to be surprised in apparently puts two and two together. "Take the boy with you. This side leads to the outside. We'll be right behind you."

I nod. There is nothing I want more than to just get away from this Lennyspin on my heels before I catch that scent again. It's even stronger now. "I can't tell here again," I whisper. "That scent..." I pause. "Mate!" I call out,

Celine and Harmony look at me in surprise.

Running up the stairs comes the most beautiful man I have ever laid eyes on. He looks like someone out of a catalog, so surreal, with slightly wavy hair, strong cheekbones, dark eyes, and dark eyebrows. He looks so

He's tall and athletic but not bulky. I don't like bulky guys, anyway. He is dressed well too, which is kinda cute, considering he has just been found. He runs towards me, opening his arms, and I jump into them like a heroine of some cheesy, sappy love story.

But heck, I don't mind.

"I knew it." he lifts me in his arms and twirls me around before he exhales a shaky breath. "I knew I would find you here, my little Snow White."

"My name is Valerie," I giggle.

"I know." His strong arms pull me even tighter into his embrace.

"And you? Who are you?" I mutter.

"Eric," he says. "My name is Eric Félin."

her legs,

is, who

it." She

pulls away from me and looks at Luca. She seems to be surprised but apparently puts two and two together. “Take the boy with you. This staircase leads to the outside. We’ll be right behind you.”

I nod. There is nothing I want more than to just get away from this place. I spin on my heels before I catch that scent again. It’s even stronger now. “It’s here again,” I whisper. “That scent...” I pause. “Mate!” I call out, making Celine and Harmony look at me in surprise.

Running up the stairs comes the most beautiful man I have ever laid eyes on. He looks like someone out of a catalog, so surreal, with slightly curly hair, strong cheekbones, dark eyes, and dark eyebrows. He looks so regal. He’s tall and athletic but not bulky. I don’t like bulky guys, anyway. He’s dressed well too, which is kinda cute, considering he has just been fighting. He runs towards me, opening his arms, and I jump into them like I’m the heroine of some cheesy, sappy love story.

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“Eric,” he says. “My name is Eric Félin.”

WALLS I

CELINE

“**H**ow long have you known?” I ask Eric. He’s still holding Valerie in his arms, not letting go now that he’s found her.

“I had a feeling when I took in her scent from her clothes,” he says. “Like... my wolf was telling me to tag along. An instinct, you know?”

They look so incredibly sweet together, my heart melts at the view. Valerie is like a cute little porcelain doll version of a she-wolf, the textbook example of Prince Charming, especially in appearance. Everything she’s been through, I’m so happy that she’s found her mate.

Stepping outside to meet with the others, I see Garret has already organized the warriors back to the grounds with the prisoners. We need to determine what we’re going to do with them. Valerie brings us up to speed on everything that went down.

castle, and tells us about Ciara, who has been kept half alive through magic.

“Shouldn’t the spell be lifted now that we’ve got the witch?” I ask. He had been outside guarding the surroundings while we raided the castle, making sure we weren’t ambushed.

Elden sighs. “It’s not that simple, unfortunately. I will take a look at her now and see what I can do to help her.” He looks worried. “Then I’d go and see how Marius is doing now that he is awake. I need to reassure myself that he is alright.”

“We can deal with the rest,” I reassure him. “Thank you so much for your help. I know how hard it was to tag along with us, while you knew you needed help too.”

He smiles a bit. “I promised you, didn’t I? You saved my son, and now you’ll make sure to assist me in freeing Valerie. But now my son needs Valerie in too.”

I nod, and Elden turns to look at Eric and smiles. “Your trip really turned out successful this time, hasn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” Eric agrees, as he kisses Valerie’s hand. “And now Eric could just convince my king to take over the Council, my mission is fully accomplished.”

After Elden throws his hands into the air in slight annoyance, shaking his head.

“You’re unbelievable,” he mutters.

I chuckle, not saying anything... yet... but I’m with Eric on this. He’ll pack over the Council as the king would be Elden’s birthright, and he would do a fantastic job. I think he knows that already, and once Silverlake has found his successor... probably in either Aurelia or Finn... then maybe he will change his mind.

gh dark We make our way back down the mountain to meet with Jade and the others while Elden goes to help Ciara. He reassures me that he doesn't need Elden's backup and will call some of his warriors to come, so that I can deal with the castle's aftermath of Val's abduction, while he helps Ciara. They will accompany him to Liam and Marius.

at Ciara Leaving Elden behind, we arrive at the bottom of the mountain to find everyone like toothers super excited by our successful rescue of Val... especially when they see Valerie and Eric together. Jazz screams in joy and jumps on Valerie to hug her. "You've got yourself an actual prince!?! Woohooo girl, hot!" Valerie stares at her. "Prince?" she stutters. She looks at Eric. "Prince?" Marius He winks at her. "Oh, did I forget to mention that?" He combs through his hair in a dramatic gesture. "It must have slipped my mind. My apologies, I told sweet angel."

eds me Harmony and I exchange a grin. Valerie has yet to see Eric at his best, well, Eric. She's in for a big surprise. He's very capable and charming, but also sassy and cunning. It's exactly that kind of laid-back prince charm attitude that Valerie needs to bring her further out of her shell.

ow, if I Jade crosses her arms in front of her body as she stares at Eric. "How will you be? You've just found your mate in a freaking castle, where she was a captive?"

is head. "Like a fairytale, isn't it?" he beams, a sassy grin on his face. "A beautiful maiden was locked up like Rapunzel at the top of the tower, waiting for her prince. I should have called up to her: 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let me come and do your hair!'"

ound its Jazz and Garret burst into hysterical laughter along with Valerie, and Eric smiles at her adoringly.

Jade just groans. "Wolves," she mutters, annoyed. "Justus," she t

and their grandfather. “I need a drink. Better make it strong.”

“I don’t need Grandpa looks amused. “What are we doing about them?” he asks, pointing at the two witches Jade captured. The younger one had surrendered nearly on, looking glad the whole ordeal was over, but the other one... she fought to the bitter end and now lay motionless on the ground.

“Is she still alive?” I ask.

“Yes,” Jade shrugs. “But I’ve made sure she can’t move. I’ll open a portal and have some of my coven take them. I know this is your fight, Celestine—they are witches, and I would prefer if I could bring them in front of your council.”

“Actually, that’s very much in my favor,” I tell her. I have no idea how to deal with witch criminals, and prefer she and her coven deal with them.

“You can open a portal?” Harmony asks in surprise. “Why couldn’t you... have done that before?”

“It’s not that simple,” Desmona jumps in to explain. “We need to have visited the place at least once in our life before we can connect it to a portal. We can’t put portals in places we don’t know.”

“Really?” “Makes sense,” I nod.

“While Jade deals with the witches, Elias, Marcel, and the rest of the coven will join us. I make sure to have some of the warriors patrol here at our border. My case Henrick has any more allies lurking nearby.

Henrick is being sent directly to the nearest werewolf prison instead of downcoming with us to our dungeons at Moon Blood. There are a few other prisons scattered around the world. We only use our dungeon for prisoners we intend to question, or those we think might be able to rehabilitate. Those who eventually return to pack life—they will be held for a short-term punishment to—or in case there still has to be a decision made regarding their guilt.

But there is no way Henrick will be going anywhere soon. He asks, locked up in the werewolf prison and dealt with by actual judges.

Luca is an entirely different issue, though. One glance at the poor boy and I know he's suffered. Valerie explained how he helped her defend her. He looks timid and broken, and his wolf has been locked up ever since he woke up. It will take some time for him to heal and regain a portal strength.

"You know, Alpha," Harmony says, "Now that we're losing Jazz to our own Claw pack and Valerie to the Council... we could do with an additional member."

I look at the boy. "How would you feel about that?"

He flushes and looks at the ground. "Will I be locked in a prison cell?"
"Of course not. You will be a normal member of the pack like all of us. If possible, you will go back to school or learn a trade. The only thing I want you to do is get counseling from one of our therapists."

He looks at me, eyes wide in hope. He probably thought we would lock him up or ditch him. Poor soul. "Can I really stay?"

"If you want to, I'll allow you to become a pack member," I repeat. "My team helped to save Valerie and were an ally to her when she needed one."

He flushes. "Thank you, Alpha," he whispers.

"My sister is going to stay with her mate starting next week," Marcus says. "My house is big, so you can stay with me, if you like? I'm pretty cool."

"Cool people don't call themselves cool," Garret teases.

I notice Elias approaching Garret, checking him over with a frown. "Are you hurt?" he asks.

"No," Garret snorts. "Me not hurt, caveman."

Elias blinks in confusion while the rest of us chuckles in amusement.

is best I look at Marcel while the others are distracted. “Thank you for you
Marcel. You are truly kind.”

oy, and He bows his head, blushing a bit. “It’s nothing.”

ier and

oked up

gain his



MARIUS

to Red

al pack

It’s been days now since I woke up for the first time and drew the
for Celine. I believed I would have recovered by now, but I still feel
and weak, and every time I try to get up, I get an earful from my broth
l?” the doctors... and the nurses... and Aryanna... and literally anyone
of us. If walks by.

Mom has spent the last few days here, refusing to move from my side
kill him was here for a while, too. I didn’t hear one word of complaint from her
accusations, no lecturing, nothing. He was just here for me. He told
t. “You everything about the mission to free Valerie, the reasons why she
kidnapped, and how Celine freed her. I thought when he mentioned
he would take the chance to reprimand me for being a shitty mate to her
el says. again... he doesn’t blame me for anything.

.” I’m sincerely shocked... is this really my father?

.” Goddess.

1. “You Now that I’m doing slightly better, Mom has left too, promising
would be back the moment I need her, but I’m actually glad about
alone for a while to sort my thoughts and feelings.

t.

ir offer, All my emotional walls have come tumbling down, one by one. A single layer I've put up to protect my soul has shattered, and now I'm here, stripped bare for the whole world to see. My mate helped Liam save my life, despite how badly I've treated her, and my brother saved me, though I've hurt him so much. My wolf is still here, albeit weaker and asleep.

I don't even know why I fought so hard against their love anymore. I'm just so tired of pretending, tired of struggling against my nightmare memories, tired of fighting against fate.

I've felt dirty and sullied for so long. I just don't know how anyone can love me. I've tried to wash the filth away. First, with actual water, then with soap, and scrub it off until my skin was raw and bleeding, then later with bleach. I've had sex with random women and drinking alcohol. It didn't help. Every time I would wake up the following day, still broken, dirty, and unworthy.

de. Dad However, when Liam connected with my mind and saw the disgusting things he wasn't supposed to see... he wasn't immediately repulsed. He didn't dismiss me, even though he knew my dirty secret. He visited me every day, and there was never any judgement in his eyes.

Celine, And I don't even fucking know why he doesn't judge me.

her, but I'm tempted to revert back to my usual habit of hiding in my shell. I know I should but then I remember how it felt to watch my life slipping between my fingers and to nearly leave this world, never knowing peace. I see Celine's face in my mind, and the vision of our future children.

me she That's it! Enough wallowing in regret! I kick my blanket away, tug it being out of my arm, and get out of bed. I manage to sneak out of my hospital room and further down the corridor before bumping into a familiar figure.

"Okay dude, you shouldn't be up," Aryanna says, crossing her arms.

. Everyfront. “Thankfully, one of the guards just linked me that you were tr
n lyingleave without the doctor’s approval. And now you can just turn
ave myand...”

ie even “Aryanna—” I say, reaching out my hand. “Please.”

ied and She stares at me, and lets her arms drop. “What’s wrong?”

“Take me to Liam, please.”

re. I’m “Mari,” she says softly. “Just link him. He will be here in a minute.”

res and I look at her. “Please,” I say, not sure if she understands or if she

how important this is to me. To my surprise, she grabs my arm and s
e couldme.

ying to “I’ll fetch you a walking stick,” she tells me. “If you leave while I’r
eddingI’ll chase you down and whoop your ass.”

ld wake I chuckle, ignoring the pain it sends through my body.

I keep my promise and wait here for her. She returns quickly, and w
gustingour way toward Liam’s office. Thank Goddess there’s an elevat
by me.sweating, and my legs are trembling by the time we reach his office.

d every Aryanna looks worried. “I knew this was a bad idea,” she mutters.

“I take full responsibility,” I tell her. “And I promise I’ll be back
once I’ve talked to Liam.”

l again, She nods and sighs.

fingers,

smiling

; the IV

al room

arms in

front. “Thankfully, one of the guards just linked me that you were trying to leave without the doctor’s approval. And now you can just turn around and…”

“Aryanna—” I say, reaching out my hand. “Please.”

She stares at me, and lets her arms drop. “What’s wrong?”

“Take me to Liam, please.”

“Mari,” she says softly. “Just link him. He will be here in a minute.”

I look at her. “Please,” I say, not sure if she understands or if she realizes how important this is to me. To my surprise, she grabs my arm and steadies me.

“I’ll fetch you a walking stick,” she tells me. “If you leave while I’m gone, I’ll chase you down and whoop your ass.”

I chuckle, ignoring the pain it sends through my body.

I keep my promise and wait here for her. She returns quickly, and we make our way toward Liam’s office. Thank Goddess there’s an elevator. I’m sweating, and my legs are trembling by the time we reach his office.

Aryanna looks worried. “I knew this was a bad idea,” she mutters.

“I take full responsibility,” I tell her. “And I promise I’ll be back in bed once I’ve talked to Liam.”

She nods and sighs.

WALLS II

MARIUS

I take a deep breath, gathering my courage before knocking on the door. I expect him to call me in, having already recognized my scent. To my surprise, he opens the door himself, staring in disbelief. He looks deeply at the walking stick in my hand, and my trembling figure probably the sweat... and I bet I'm grimacing in pain too.

I'm a sight to behold, for sure.

Celine darling, you've got the hottest mate in the universe!

Liam looks to Aryanna in question, but she just shrugs. I hope he'll give her shit for accompanying me. "I thought it'd be better if I can get him, rather than he tries to come here on his own later," she admits.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" Liam asks me, slightly annoyed.

"I can't."

“Why?”

“Because you know,” I say quietly.

Liam stares at me, his gaze boring into mine before understanding settles in. His gaze softens, and he opens his door further. “Come nods towards Aryanna, who leaves, before leading me toward the sitting in his office. He fetches some water after helping me get comfortable. “Nothing but trouble with you,” he mutters under his breath. “How your mate will be able to control you.”

“Let’s see if I still have a mate,” I say, my voice hoarse at the thought of maybe having lost Celine forever.

He doesn’t say anything and just sits down opposite me. I gather my thoughts briefly before breaking the silence. “You know, don’t you?”

He nods, the look in his eyes turning sad. “I saw glimpses in you and put two and two together...”

Liam’s “I felt you in my mind... when I was dying.” I was drifting through the darkness, when I felt Liam breaking down my walls, one after another, as he attempted to guide my wolf and me back to my body. He did what he had to do... and to save us.

Liam reaches out his hand as if to touch me, then drops it, looking at me with a question in his eyes.

“Are you not touching me because you don’t want me to think you’re using your gift on me, or because you think I won’t like it?”

“The latter,” he admits quietly.

“I don’t fear your touch,” I mutter.

“But you’ve already recoiled from me once before,” he points out.

He’s right. I did that once after training, but it was more an instinctive reaction due to being drained and tense. “That was different.”

Liam looks down at his fingers. "Mom and Dad were so busy preparing for all the powers that come with being the first-born full-blooded lycan, finally no one realized you needed us." Guilt flashes in his eyes.

"It's not your fault, Liam, or Mom and Dad's," I point out. It's true. I envied my siblings for living in peaceful ignorance. I wished for something to save me, and when no one did, I succumbed to my fate. Mostly, I hated myself though. I hated myself so much at one point; I wanted them all to despise me. I wanted my family to despise me the way I despised myself. I was ashamed of my siblings, and I was absolutely shit to my parents. I neglected myself. I stopped training... I did everything to make them hate me, but to my surprise, they're all still here.

"I should have paid more attention; I should have seen what was going on in your mind..." Liam looks pissed all of a sudden, his eyes shifting between black and their usual blue color. "Shit. I should have helped you. I swear, I would have burned everything down for you. If you'd talked to me, I would have believed you."

"I thought no one would ever believe me," I mutter.

Liam looks sad. "I know."

I look down at my hands. "I was so ashamed. I was a boy, and omega blood. It's pathetic... it shouldn't have happened to me. I should have been stronger. I... I'm so weak."

"You were a child," he says with emphasis. "What happened to you was a crime. A disgusting crime perpetrated by a weak, sick bastard who abused you without mercy. It's wrong, inexcusable, and none of it was your fault. It doesn't matter if you are a boy or a girl. If you're an alpha, a beta, a gamma, or even if you are a child or an adult... it shouldn't have happened to you. It shouldn't happen to anyone."

ring me “I’m having a hard time accepting this,” I admit quietly.

an, that “Marius,” Liam says softly. “You need counseling, a professional v help you deal with the past.”

e that I “I know,” I say.

eeone to “You do?” he looks surprised.

blamed “Did you think I would fight you on this?” I smile slightly.

to hate “Yes, I absolutely thought you would,” he says. “The last time A hed outsuggested you talk to someone, you blew up in her face.”

duties, I blush. Right, I forgot about that. “I’m ready to accept help now,” I

r shock, “I can’t live like this anymore. I almost killed Cyrus and myself, I’ve

Celine away... and when I almost died, I couldn’t even understand wh ing on.doing it. I don’t think I’m worthy of Celine’s love or any mate in ge ack andbut I took her choice away from her. It’s on her to decide if I am enou ld haveme.”

d have Liam stares at me in surprise. “You’ve done a lot of thinking.”

“I’ve had some time to think,” I say bitterly. Time I could hav helping Celine free Valerie. It’s another thing she’s had to do on he Celine doesn’t need me, it’s me who needs her. That’s the real wake-u of alpha Deep inside, I know I should have died a few days ago, and t ve beenGoddess is giving me a second chance to change my life and finally f past.

u was a I intend to make as much out of it as possible!

rsaulted Again, the silence consumes us, before Liam announces, “Ma er yoursounds nervous, “please allow me to handle this. Let me talk to our beta, orand put a stop to the vile scum that dared to hurt you like that... I p ened toyou I’ll deal with it sensitively.”

I sigh. “I wish we could just move on from it,” I mutter. I ki

couldn't, but still... it's bad enough that he knows, and that I will need who can Celine. But what will Dad say? Will he judge me?

Liam looks at me sadly. "What if there were other victims? What still are? What happens to them if we stay quiet?" My gaze snaps up in horror. I have never thought about that. Never once did it cross my mind that maybe I wasn't the only victim. "You think there are more?"

analyse He swallows thickly. "You're an adult now," he says, and again I flash to black, before he forces his wolf, Fenris, back again. "What had I admit when you were no longer of interest to him anymore?"

pushed Guilt and disgust settle in me. I never considered that the monster I was jump from me to another kid and have his hands all over them. Funeral... they going to stay quiet and suffer in silence, just like I did? I take a sigh, not shuddering breath. It's time to man up—Liam's right. I can't allow myself to go through what I went through. "Do what you need to do," I tell him.

"Will you tell me who it was?" he asks tentatively, soft almost. "I can't see it in your mind."

on my own. I swallow down my fear and shame, all the things that made me cry out from everyone. I'm still scared that Liam won't believe me, but I know that the fear is all in my mind. If I ever want to heal the bonds to my family and face my past, I need to face my past. "Yes, I'll tell you everything," I say quietly. "Just give me a moment to rest and sort it all out in my own mind, please."

Liam nods. "Of course, get some rest, and I'll meet you in your bedroom," he says. "Thank you for your trust, Marius."

parents I look down at my fingertips. There is no running away anymore, I promise. But Liam is right, there are probably more victims to protect. "I'll get your thoughts and link you once I'm ready."

new he Liam smiles at me, and I could swear he looks proud. I don't even

d to tell why he could feel proud of me, but well, big brothers are a riddle some

I watch as he mind-links someone.

if there “Who did you just link?”

to him “Doctor Lavard,” he says evenly.

y mind “Snitch,” I mutter.

He snorts before looking at me again. “Marius,” He looks directly
his eyes now. “I am incredibly sorry for what happened to you. But you l
ppened understand that it doesn’t erase the fact that you’ve hurt others. I do
about me; I’m your brother, I’ll stand by your side always. But Annal
: would friends, and especially your mate. Two wrongs don’t make one right. I
ck! Are me you will do better.”

a deep, “I know. What happened to me is no excuse for how I’ve treat
thers to around me,” I smile grimly. “I thought if everyone hated me, they
leave me alone, but it just made things worse.”

ouldn’t “Making amends with them is not going to be easy, Mari,” Lia
quietly. “But I’ll help you as much as I can.”

hide it “I know. And thank you.” I pause. “Do you think Celine will accept
ow this He stays quiet for a while. “I’m not sure,” he says warily, and I’m
d mate, doesn’t lie to me, even if it hurts. “But she was here to heal you, and I
st give part of her is still clinging to the mate bond. Just be honest and genui
her. I think your honesty might make her give you a second chance.”

ospital I nod. “I promise I will try to move forward from today on and do
to make amends,” I say, and for once, meaning it. “I was wondering w
figure start. But I think I’ll talk to Celine first, and then...” I look at him, ho
her my will give his okay. “After being a shitty brother, an awful son, a p
brother-in-law, and a hideous mate, I thought I could try to be a good
n know at least.”

times. His lips tug slightly. "I like that idea. But the next time you throw a
of insults at yourself, I'll kick your ass."

I chuckle at that thought, before noticing that Dr. Lavard is standing
door. His expression is unreadable. "Lord Marius, I see you've e
again. Please allow me to accompany you back."

y at me "I promise it won't happen again," I say.

ave to "Yeah," the doctor frowns. "My son keeps telling me the same, ar
n't carefive."

ise, our Liam grins.

romise I make puppy eyes at the doctor. "Please don't put me in the r
corner. I promise I'll behave."

d those Liam groans at my silly joke, while Doctor Lavard rolls his eyes an
wouldlike he's contemplating a career change. Yeah, I have that effect on pe

Back in my hospital bed after being lectured by one of the nurs
m saysfinally alone with my thoughts. This is it. I decide to take the risk and

Celine. She deserves to feel the full power of the mate bond from m
me?" should have been from the start, even if she ultimately rejects me. It'
glad hetime I put my fears aside and show Celine the respect I should have gi
know afrom the start. She is my everything, and I was wrong to deny her.

ne with But, before Celine can accept the mate bond, she needs to know tl
about me, my past, and why I behaved so badly. In order to tell her th
ny bestneed her to agree to meet me, which will be a whole new level of c
/here toconsidering how I've treated her.

ping he I grab Liam's phone, the one he lent me, until I can get min
patheticpondering for a moment before swallowing my shame and pressing
l uncle,button. My heart picks up pace, almost jumping out of my chest.

What I didn't expect was for her to answer the call.

a bunch “Hello Liam.”

“No,” I stutter. “It’s me...” And then, like the biggest idiot ever, “M
; by the There is silence between us.

escaped “Why are you calling?” she finally asks.

“I, I still owe you a thank you...” I mutter, like that’s the reas
calling.

id he is “You don’t need to thank me,” she says.

Fuck Marius, spit it out. “I’m calling because... well, I should hav
this a long time ago,” I admit. “I’m ready to tell you everything. To
naughtymy disgusting behavior and apologize for hurting you the way I
realize now that I should have just talked to you the instant we met.”

d looksimagine how she looks right now, the look in her eyes, her exp
ople. “Celine, I will do anything to make it up to you. Please give me a c
es, I’mAnd I’m not just talking about being mates, but... in general.”

l accept “I don’t know, Marius,” she pauses. “Because I don’t know you
ie, as itknow about you is what has happened during our encounters the
s aboutmonths, and none of it was pleasant. I don’t know how you are wi
ven hersiblings, or with your friends, or how you were as a kid. I just don’
you. All I have is the mate bond.”

ie truth “Can I invite you for a coffee? No date,” I say quietly. “I kno
ough, I wouldn’t accept a date, and I would never insult you by asking for c
lifficultthis. I just want a chance to explain, please. I’ll tell you everythi
happened. Just... not over the phone. It doesn’t feel right.” I pause, not
e back,silence. “I understand if you refuse. Because I know if the tables were
the callI would not be half as gracious of a person as you are.”

She takes a while to answer—a long while. Minutes pass before she
sighs. “Once your doctor allows you to leave the infirmary, message

tell you the time and date. And that's only because I'm curious about Marius." you have to tell me. Don't waste my time."

"I won't," I promise.

There is silence between us again, before I finally decide it's about time I'mput my fears aside, stop being a coward, and show Celine the respect I have given her from the start. By accepting her as my mate, I will put her out there... I don't want a way out anymore; I want to accept her on the doneconditions.

explain Even if she will deem me weak after our talk.

have. I If she rejects me, I'll bear the brunt of it.

I try to "Celine," I stutter. "I'm going to do something now, and I want you to know that this is in no way supposed to pressure you. I just want you to have a chance?that I accept you as my mate, without any conditions, even if you don't want me. I don't expect an answer from you anytime soon." I take a deep breath.

All I "I, Marius Alcott, accept you, Celine Anderson, as my mate."

se past "Marius," she sounds stunned, and then her mind-link comes through. "you really just do that?"

t know How did you know we can mind-link? I reply, too shocked to say anything else.

ow you Annie told me about it when she met Liam, she explains calmly. I nod like I'll see you in a few days.

ng that She saves us further awkwardness by saying a short goodbye to me, hanging up and cutting the mind-link. I'm in shock from what just happened,She didn't reject me on the spot... I can't believe it. I know if it were me, I would have rejected her instantly, without a moment's hesitation. I'm finallyright; the fact that I was hurt so badly is no excuse for hurting another person.

me. I'll She might not be head over heels to meet me, and she only

ut whatreluctantly, but still, she is giving me the chance to explain myse
chance, and I'm eager to take it.

After talking to Liam and calling Celine, I feel so drained, I can't
t time I eyes getting heavier. As I'm drifting into sleep, another voice pops i
shouldhead. One I haven't heard in a long time. Too long.

myself *Fucking finally, you twerp! Ah... it feels so good to be back.* Cyrus
withouthimself on his back, rolling around and scratching his back. *Happy
your favorite pain in the butt back?*

I sit up at the sound of his chirpy voice. I know Cyrus was weaker
my recent actions, but I didn't think he could recover so quickly
you tostronger than I gave him credit for. *Cyrus!?! Is that really you?*

o know *Yeah, unless you've recently started hallucinating or hearing im
i't wantvoices, it's me.* He deadpans.

breath. I can't even put into words how relieved I am to hear his voice. *I hu
admit.*

gh. *Did You did. You were so caught up in your pain and guilt, you almost
killed. Do you know how it feels to be forced back into the abyss
nythingmind? I couldn't do or say anything. I couldn't even come out to figl
ass.*

Alright, To my relief, his words lack any venom. *Thanks for returning and
my back.*

before *Hey, who said anything about having your back!?! Huh? I may l
opened.now, but my main goal is to make sure you don't fuck up our last chan
e me, Iour mate!*

Liam is *I have a gift for fucking up everything, I admit.*

person. *Yep.*

agreed *Any chance we can go back to you being more civilized? I ask*

If. Onecareful smile.

He grunts. *Prove to me you are not an ass anymore, and we'll see!*

feel my *It's good to have you back, I say.*

nto my Cyrus is quiet for a moment, then grumbles and grunts a bit. *It's good to have you back. I missed your grumpy ass.*

throws

to have

ened by

. He is

imaginary

hurt us, I

that got us

of your

heart—you

having

come back

to be with

with a

careful smile.

He grunts. *Prove to me you are not an ass anymore, and we'll see!*

It's good to have you back, I say.

Cyrus is quiet for a moment, then grumbles and grunts a bit. *It's good to be back. I missed your grumpy ass.*

PRINCESS

VALERIE

Mom hugged me for ten minutes straight, only letting go when she demands he has a right to squish me too.

“Thank you, Alpha,” Mom cries when she faces Celine. “Thank you for bringing her back. Celine... thank you.”

“Please, there’s no need to thank me,” Celine says. “Valerie is a valuable member of the pack, as are we all. It’s my responsibility as alpha to keep every pack member safe, whether they be omegas or higher ranked. I would have gone to war to get her back,” she smiles. “But to be honest, she needed much saving.”

Harmony nods with a smile. “Yes, due to some very quick and clever thinking, Val managed to outsmart her captors.”

“And almost managed to escape on her own,” Celine points out.

“But I had a lot of help from Luca. He saved me.”

“I think it’s rather that you saved Luca,” Eric beams at me, pride in his eyes. “My princess is the best.”

I blush at his words, smiling from his praise. He looks at me like a personal angel, and it’s so sweet.

“Your princess?” my dad looks at Eric with wide eyes.

“Err, yes,” I straighten my clothes nervously and approach Eric, who pulls me into his arms. “I’ve found my mate, it seems.”

“Au contraire, darling,” he smirks. “I found you, my little Snow White.”

“Half an hour ago, you called her Rapunzel,” Harmony teases.

“My mate can be any princess she wants,” he exclaims. “She will stay in my heart.” He looks at my parents adoringly. “Thank you for bringing a wonderful person into the world.”

I don’t know if I should cringe at his words or find him hilarious. I mean Dad’s sure how he does it, but Eric can get away with saying just about anything.

Anyone else would sound way too cheesy or embarrassing, but you for apparently, can’t help but be charming and alluring. It’s a talent.

In my mind, I can feel that Ailia is head over heels for his wolf and so valuable. His wolf’s name is Caius, and it seems they are constantly linking each other to keep each other safe already.

“He’s a good man, Valerie,” Ailia chirps. I have never heard her so carefree. “Strong and sincere, and funny. He will make us laugh every day.”

I’m relieved she’s so enamored. My wolf’s approval means more than anyone else’s. We both need to like our mate.

Dad is left speechless, but my mom recovered fast. She smiles brightly and winks at me. “It seems like your life won’t be boring anymore.”

I can't help but return her smile, grinning like an idiot. She's right. I can't believe how drastically everything has changed for me. I should be traumatized by everything that's happened, and maybe it will all come crashing down on me eventually, but... I'm here now, free and healthy, well, aside from some minor injuries... and I have my friends, my family, and now my mate. And I have these awesome gifts. I'm truly blessed. I'm so blessed. And so thankful for everything. I'll make sure to cherish all of it.

Eric's beta approaches us. I've only seen him briefly up until now, but haven't been introduced to each other yet. "This is my beta, Emilien," he announces to the room, but looks at me in particular.

Emilien smiles warmly at me. "Lady Valerie, I'm overjoyed to make your acquaintance."

Did he really just lady me? "Likewise, Beta Emilien," I stutter. He turns to Eric. "Prince Eric..." his voice trails off, but he smiles warmly at Eric... He seems to mind-link him.

Eric squeezes his shoulder. "Thank you, my friend."

Mom and Dad exchange a look. "Prince?" Dad mutters.

To my relief, Celine steps in to explain. "Valerie's mate is Eric, the prince of the Royal Council."

Mom looks at me in surprise. "The Council? An actual prince... how can that be?"

"He's Alpha Elden's nephew and Alpha Liam's cousin," Celine explains to me further.

Now I'm also surprised. I didn't know that. Well, technically, I've only known Eric for... an hour or something. But still... "Emilien, the prince, Elodie and Elise, and I are not part of a pack," Eric explains. "We be

I can't the Council. You could call it the royal pack, but it's not quite the same old feelpack. Emilien is my beta because it's easier to grasp his position than I come to know his high rank, but in reality, he's actually my first advisor in political...issues."

family, "It makes sense that you and Valerie were mated to each other," He muses.

cherish it "Yes, Val's gifts are strong, almost too strong to belong to one pack. The Council is a very important measure of protection for you, Val," but we nod.

1," Eric "Now, now," Eric intervenes, "This is a discussion best left for another time and place. For now, I'd really like to take my beautiful mate to the infirmary for a full check-up, as she so blatantly refused earlier." He looks at me and reaches out his hand. "May I, darling?"

I'm not sure how to react, mainly because being the center of attention always embarrasses me. To save myself from more teasing comments I take Eric's hand and let him lead me outside. He looks me over with a quick glance. "Your arm, Princess; why are you hiding it?"

I'm surprised he caught on. I have been careful to hide my hurt from Félin, wanting to avoid any more drama and worry. The plan was to talk to my parents and then go to the infirmary... secretly.

. and a "Show me, please," he says softly.

I lift my sweater, revealing my arm to him. During the last couple of weeks, it explains it's managed to heal a little, especially with the herbs Luca used to reduce the swelling and with his skill at bandaging it over and over again. The only flash of anger in Eric's eyes as he carefully examines my arm. "What's this?"

belong to "Luca's brother," I explain. "He's dead, Eric."

me as a Eric sighs. "Come, let's get you checked over." He puts his arm around me and pulls me closer. "I'm sorry you went through all of this," he whispers into my hair.

I can feel my eyes filling with tears. Great, five minutes ago, I was boasting about how I don't feel traumatized, and now...

The whole time I was abducted, I clung to every ounce of strength I had. And not wanting to show any weakness, but now it's beginning to hit me. Celine's fear, the anger, the horror of what I saw there.

Eric doesn't say anything but hugs me tighter. Great, we've only been together a few hours, and he has already come to my rescue because I was kidnapped, saw me hurt, and now I'm sobbing into his chest.

"Eric," I mutter, suddenly feeling insecure again. "I don't heal very fast. I'm not like other wolves. I can't... shift. My arm was broken on my first night at Henrick's castle, and it still hasn't healed fully."

I grasp his hand. "And?" Eric asks, obviously confused, and he pulls back slightly to look at me.

"Is that going to be a problem for you, me not having a strong warrior's arm," I mutter. Please say no, please say no.

He stares at me for a while, then he bursts into laughter. "Okay, fine. Let's get you to the infirmary, and then I'll show you how I'll take care of you when we are alone," Eric wiggles his eyebrows at the mere thought of being alone together.

I blush. "I'm being serious."

"Yes," he nods, looking earnest now. "Be glad I'm so head over heels for you, princess that I don't answer your question seriously now."

My cheeks flush at his tone. Wow, he's kinda hard to read, that's for sure. It's difficult to tell if he's angry, upset, or just teasing me. I look

and mehim, enjoying how tall he is. I love tall men, it seems. Tall French
whispers apparently. I think I've found my type. I grasp his shirt between my
pulling him down while standing on my tiptoes. He's surprised, but
I was my lead, his hands cupping my face and pulling me into a soft and
kiss.

I had, He nuzzles my nose with his and chuckles. "I have no resistance
ne. The you."

I smile.

known "Come, Valerie, let's get you checked over, and then the pack will
e I was celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

ry fast. He looks at me, amused. "You being back, I guess," he states. "The
first day that the threat is gone. Us. Also, I heard your and Jazz's birthday party
crashed, so this may or may not be a second celebration for you girls."

look at I'm surprised. "Really!? Thank Goddess you told me, I'm not going
surprises."

wolf?" I "I had a feeling," he grins.

"I hope this time nothing will happen..." I mutter.

ay," he He squeezes my hand. "Nothing will happen," he says with emphasis
v I feel one will ever lay their hands on you again, as long as I'm here
tion of breathing." Before I wonder if he's just being a typical prot
overprotective alpha, he adds: "Besides, the Council takes the protection of
special wolves very seriously."

eels for "Oh." I nod, because I have no idea what else to say. Then it suddenly
strikes me. Eric lives in France. The Council is there, and he's a Prince
new for Council. I don't know how I feel about moving. I love my pack and
k up at family so much, but at the same time I can feel Ailia in my mind, relief

h men, the knowledge I'll be somewhere safe. A pack can't ensure our safe fingers, way Eric spoke about the Council hinted at there being more special follow there. Perhaps I could mingle with them and find out more about my gentle process.

I push these thoughts aside for now. I don't need to make any c against decisions right now. I do decide to immediately go on birth control

It's good timing, as I'm heading to the infirmary anyway. I do want c one day, but not now.

wants to



he fact
rty was

CELINE

Normally I can run on a high energy level for a long time, but I adm tired now. Today was long... first saving Valerie, then dealing w aftermath of Henrick's actions and having him escorted to the prison. mention, getting together with Elden and Liam, making sure Ciar finally rest in peace. Then there was the situation with Luca, talkin is. "No everyone... and finally, Marius' call.

I'm not sure if I did the right thing by agreeing to meet him, but always gone by the credo of at least allowing someone to explain their even when they've fucked up majorly. I don't like running from c talks, and I don't intend to start now.

But I feel exhausted.

"Here." My father hands me a glass of his favorite gin. "You look l need it."

ty. The “Thank you,” I mutter and clink glasses with him. “Just a bit tired
wolveslong day.”

yourself in “You’ve done well,” he tells me, his eyes full of pride.

“I had a lot of help,” I point out.

difficult “Help you wouldn’t have received without such strong allies.
though.gathered a lot of strong people around you, Celine, and that’s something
childrenproud of. You’ve accomplished a lot in a really short time.” He smiles
you happen to be even stronger than I thought you would be.” He
“Celine, even if your brother would have been alive, there is no way
else, but you could have become alpha of this pack. You were never
reserve solution.”

I smile at his words. “I think I’m starting to understand that now.
Thanks for telling me, though.”

it I feel We stay silent for a moment. “Not a day goes by that I don’t miss
mother,” he tells me. “And I blame myself for not protecting her better
with the

“It’s not your fault,” I tell him. “There were times growing up
Not to needed someone to blame, that included myself, but we both know that
a could no one’s fault. It was just a tragic accident.”

ing with He takes my hand and squeezes it. “She lives on in you,” he says.
“Every time I look at you, I see her eyes looking back at me. She will
I have be gone completely.”

ourselves, “Sometimes my memories of her seem blurry,” I admit, unable to stop
difficult voice from trembling. “I can remember her smile and the times we
together, but occasionally it’s like I can’t remember how her voice sounds
or if my memories are all correct.”

like you “Whenever you feel that way, I can share my memories with you,”
me. “You are not going to forget her, Celine. You are just moving on.”

after that's healthy."

"You should too," I tell him. "You deserve a second chance for happiness. Invite Mona over next week."

He looks at me surprised. "You remember?"

You've "Of course I do," I smile. "I want to get to know her too."

ing to be "What about you?" he finally asks me directly. "Who is the guy with the scar?"

pauses. I sigh, but I honestly don't feel like hiding it anymore. "Marius. No one else."

ver the His eyes widen. "What?"

"We are fated mates, but for reasons unknown to me, he didn't want to be with Dad. Dad tried to talk to him a few times, but he would never listen. He wasn't ready to be a mate, but I think there is something tragic hidden deep within him, something you weren't ready to face or share."

:" "And he is ready now?" Dad wants to know. "To share his past with me?"

when I "He said he wants to talk to me, and tell me everything," I admit. "It wasn't his fault."

it was "Even if it's true that something tragic happened to him, it's not okay if he's treated you," he states, furrowing his brows.

quietly. "You're right, it's not. I don't even know if I'm going to accept him as a mate," I admit honestly. "He fought the mate bond for so long."

"You saved his life, didn't you? Is this what's made him change his mind?"

I frown. It's a question I have been asking myself. Does he think I'm a coward now that I helped save him? Is it because of a weird sense of obligation? Or is there more to it? "I'm not sure. I think it's more than that. Maybe he thinks I might have made him feel guilty, but I think there is more to it."

on, and "I hope so," Dad muses. "At least then, it wouldn't be a feeble chance."

mind, because you deserve more than that. Tell me if he hurts you again.
happiness. I'll punch him."

I grin. "You will punch him?"

"Absolutely!"

"You will punch a lycan with alpha blood?"

he hurt "Without thinking twice," he says.

I chuckle. "Alpha Elden's son?"

Liam's Dad grins. "You think I'd let anyone stop me?"

The thought of my father showing his protective side makes me

"Okay, dad, thanks. That definitely cheered me up."

at me. I He smiles. "No, seriously, Celine, I have your back. If you need r
it's nice, say. But knowing you, you'll probably want to deal with it on your ov
nothing Just know I'm going to respect your decision... whatever it is."

I nod. "Thanks, Dad." I'm so grateful for having him by my side,
you?" allowing me to handle my private drama on my own. "I think I'm r
get back to the party. Let's celebrate."

ay how "Great, with you around, I feel less weirded out by our family," he j

Again, I have to chuckle. "You mean Jade?"

as my "Jade and Justus... I can't help it," he smiles. "But I'm glad Jus
finally agreed to live with us, and that you've found the part of your
nge his that we thought was lost. Although your great-grandmother looks my a
confusing."

ie owes I can't help but grin. "You will get used to it after a few weeks."

gation? "I have no doubt I will," he smiles.

saving When we reach the party—it's actually just a simple get-together
pack and a few of our friends from other packs, with a barbecue and
ange of snacks and drinks—I watch my father go chat with Liam, who c

ain, and Elden's place. Liam briefly called me beforehand and told me that his
are there to watch over Marius. Annie really wanted to come tonight
accompanied her. Something seems to be a bit off with him though
looks worried and thoughtful, and I wonder if it has anything to do
Marius.

I make my way over to my friends. Annie's chatting with Ella and
while Harmony is dancing somewhere with a cute guy from Red
finally letting loose after the last few weeks of turmoil and drama.

I laugh. "Annie!" I approach my friend and hug her. Her pregnancy is
showing now, and she has some color in her cheeks along with
me, just pregnancy glow. She finally looks happy instead of sick like she did
from first beginning. "You look so good."

She beams at me. "And I feel really good too, Celine. My body
and form adapted to the pregnancy."

Ella still looks worried. "Flora said that it's normal for her body to
at first because she carries a lycan alpha, but..."

Finn nods. "Yeah, Mom said it's because a werewolf needs to
order to carry Lycan pups first, and that now she has, we don't need to
status anymore."

"We obviously still do, though," Ella mutters.

"Obviously," Finn agrees.

Annie grins. "Everyone around me is constantly doting on me. You
believe it... yesterday Liam carried me up the stairs."

I laugh. "I'm not surprised. He keeps looking over at you," I tease
for the "But that's nothing new."

"Yeah, but now it's even worse," she says, but she looks happy with
him, so I assume she enjoys his attention quite a bit.

parents “And you still won’t tell anyone the gender of the twins?” Finn t, so hemaking huge puppy eyes at Annie.

h... he She chuckles. “Nope, that’s my secret. It’s fun seeing every lo withcurious.”

I laugh at Ella and Finn as they start pestering her with more ques d Finn, understand how she feels. It must be fun to have everyone makin l Claw, assumptions and guesses like that.

Aryanna approaches us with a big smile. She’s in a particularly goo s reallybecause Jazz is finally moving in with her, and they are going to colle th thather stuff over the next few days. “What did I miss, girls?”

l at the “Just the usual,” Annie chuckles. “They are talking about my huge t

“Aw, who can blame them.” Aryanna beams. “I can’t wait for tw finallyLiams or Annies to be bustling around the pack house. The whole already anticipating their birth.”

struggle “No pressure, really,” Annie snorts.

I look at Aryanna. “You will watch out for Jazz, won’t you?”

dapt in “Absolutely, I promise. My hot little witch will be safe with m o worrywaves in Jazz’s direction. Jazz is currently on the dance floor with ’

Both of them look so relaxed and happy and full of life. “The Moon C blessed me with a beautiful and strong mate.”

“Yeah,” I smirk. “And me with an overly complicated and dram 1 won’tbrooding lycan prince.”

The others blink at me before bursting into laughter.

ise her. “I promise, he’s not that bad,” Aryanna grins.

“I’d better stay out of that conversation,” Ella snorts.

mile she Annie smiles. “Liam told me he’s really trying to be better. F released from the hospital soon.”

n asks, “And?” Ella eyes me curiously. “Will you give him a chance?”

“For now, I only promised to meet with him,” I admit. “I’m not sure. Considering everything else, I’ll just wait and see.”

As we continue to chat, Liam finally gives in to his pull toward Annie. He sneaks up on her from behind. He tugs her into his arms, smiling brightly. She squeals in surprise. She pats his arm. “Overprotective alphas are the worst.”

“Oh, are they?” Liam wiggles his brows and kisses the top of her head. “Just be glad that pregnancy hormones make me horny,” Annie teases.

Liam’s eyes light up, while Finn gags at the prospect of his brother being horny. “Anything sexual?”

“It’s so cute to see how Liam is putty in her hands. He’s such a control freak. He’s so stoic normally, with a touch of dangerous undertones about him, but he’s so sweet with Annie.”

I can’t believe how many people I’m suddenly surrounded by; how many friends I have made.

“My life before Annie, Ella, Dave, and Finn was so dull. But everything changed with our first meeting around three years ago.”

Tomorrow I’ll have to face difficult decisions again. I have to think about what I should do with Marius and how to handle the new political connections that come with Valerie being tied to a member of the Council. Plus, I still have to decide on a gamma for the pack.

But for now, I just want to relax.

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THE GAMMA

CELINE

The morning after a pack party is usually accompanied by headache hangovers. Werewolves don't get drunk easily, but when things can get pretty wild. And that's exactly what happened last night. Fortunately, I didn't drink much last night, so at least I was feeling pretty good during our training session just now. Harmony looks a bit worse for wear. I have to give her credit, as she didn't let it slow her down during training.

She's one of very few, though, who managed to keep it together. All of my elite warrior group look groggy and completely green.

I cross my arms and stare at the sorry group I've been torturing with speed and strength training for the past hour. "You know, if you want to pass all night without a care, you must be able to work and train hard."

following day. Anyone have any good reasons for not training at their

I look at one of my warriors who stands the closest to me. “James?”

“No, Alpha,” he groans. “Aside from me being stupid. The last time that bad, I was sixteen.”

The others agree.

Well, at least they are honest, I think with amusement, “Be glad I’m in a good mood.” I’ve decided for once to cut them all some slack. Their unwavering support of me as their alpha, along with their unyielding commitment to this pack and their strong work ethic, has been tremendous. It’s only because they had an opportunity to relax and celebrate our recent achievement with their packmates. As a way of thanking them, I add, “We’ll cut training short and will add the missed hour to tomorrow’s session in order to expect you all to be better prepared.”

A sigh of relief goes through the group.

While going through next week’s training schedules with my team, I notice how quiet Elias and Garret are being. For a moment, I think it was because Garret had overdone it last night, like the others, but he seems to be fully here physically, but mentally he looks distracted and tired. He hasn’t said a single word yet.

Meanwhile, Elias keeps throwing glances Garret’s way every so often. Almost doesn’t say anything either.

Oh great, the drama with these two! I wish Marcel were here to lighten the mood. But he’s the only one with an actual reason for skipping training today—helping Luca settle into the pack, and I felt it was important that Luca not be left alone during his first few days here.

I link Harmony again. *What’s up with the boys this time?*

Harmony shrugs. *The usual, I think. They had a little argument last*

best?" *during the party.*

Do you know what it was about? If I know, I can at least try to help. I hit it sympathetic toward their current situation. In times like these, I really miss having a mate. I lack luna capabilities... for real... I've never put my thought into the job of a luna, but whenever I see Elden and Flora, and Sam and Annie, I realize how important the lunas of a pack are. They are loyal, never-unapproachable, and sensitive and have a feel for the pack's mood. Commitment they're not afraid to point out when their alphas miss something. I'm only fairlucky that Harmony, Garret, and Marcel are helping me with the luna's along and we can divide them between us for now, but it's not the same. today's *I'm not sure, Harmony admits. I didn't want to pry, but when I stepped into them yesterday, it seemed like Elias was jealous. You know how he can get when he misunderstands something.*

I know.

I can't *Should I talk to one of them?* She offers.
I thought *I think it over for a moment. No, not now. I'll try to ask Garret and he didn't.* later. I frown. *Harmony, I don't like what Elias' pack did to him. He's emotionally scarred, and it worries me.*

Do you want me to look into it? She asks. *He's originally from Blood Snow, but pack, right?*

Yes, but do it discreetly.

When the *I always knew that Blood Snow was ruled with an iron fist, but I didn't think too much about it. Elias joined our pack as soon as he met me. He isn't. Thinking back now, it's weird how fast he left his old pack. It was still during my father's reign, shortly before I took over. Elias' old alpha visited the summit, and brought some of his high-ranking pack members with him and a few guards. Elias was within the guards. When he met Garret the*

dropped everything and joined him. He didn't even return to his old
toe a bitpack up his things. If I had to take a wild guess now, I think mayb
ly misswouldn't have been too accepting of him being mated to another guy
t muchhimself still struggles with it, although he told me once that he'd
or Liamknown he was gay and that he knew he'd never be mated to a woman
e moreWhat worries me more is how hard he is on himself. Garret has broke
s. Plus,many of his walls, but not all of them.

I'm just It's a long path, it seems, and I'm starting to question why it's taki
s tasks,so long to heal. What the hell is going on in Blood Snow?

While everyone else headed to the pack house for food, Garret dec
*umbled*skip lunch and go for a walk. I figure this is the perfect opportunity
*intense*with him and easily find him sitting at a bench in the park a few m
later. "Hey, sad man," I sit down next to him, and hand him one
sandwiches I'd brought along.

He smiles thankfully, unwrapping his sandwich. We munch on our
*about it*quiet companionship before he asks, "Why is it so difficult?" he mutter
n. *He's* "You mean Elias?"

He shrugs.

d Snow "What happened?"

"The usual."

"Okay..." I start carefully. "Elias comes from a different backgrou
I didn'tgrew up in a ruthless pack, where men, in particular, had to show
Garret.feelings aside. You know that better than I do."

ll under "He doesn't talk about it much," he admits. "But when he does, I
ited ancould go there and beat them all bloody. He grew up as an orphan, c
s alongknow? He told me that, apparently, as an orphaned wolf you either fig
iere, heway up the ranks, or end up a slave. They're mistreating the orphans,

pack to they have weak blood in them because their families died. They even be they their omegas. He was beaten regularly as a child, and if he cried, he'd y. Elias some more."

always "Emotional wounds like that need time to heal," I say softly, but ins by fate. raging. I had a feeling things were bad in Blood Snow, but I never n down how awful they truly are. "He's slowly healing from a huge trauma."

"I know," he admits with a hint of a smile. "It's just... sometimes I g ng him along the way, and I don't always know how to handle it."

"Then tell him," I urge. "Tell him when he hurts you! His trauma n dided to the reason he hurts you sometimes, but it's no excuse. You're still a to talk with feelings, and you're allowed to feel hurt and angry too."

minutes "I don't want him to get fed up with me," he admits.

of the "Did it ever occur to you that maybe the Moon Goddess mated you because you're exactly what he needs? The mate bond works both w food intell him. "Most of the time, Elias probably doesn't even realize that he rs. shitty to you."

"True," he muses, before he chuckles slightly. "Thanks for the Alpha. I can't believe I needed someone to pep talk me."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a figure approaching us. Well, t fast. I stand up quickly. "Harmony's calling me," I lie.

ind. He I link Elias as I start to walk toward him, *try not to fuck it up*.

re their His eyes nearly pop out of his head, which almost makes me chuckl not used to me intervening in their relationship. He bows hi wish I respectfully, then nods.

did you "When you two are finished, join us in front of the pack house. I'm ght your an announcement in an hour," I tell them as I walk away.

saying On my way back to the pack house, I think about the advice I ju

enslave Garret. I genuinely believe that Garret and Elias were mated for a reason. If that's the case... what reason did the Moon Goddess have to mate with Marius?

side I'm We are not particularly a match made in heaven... but maybe we are different from Garret and Elias. There are things Marius is hiding, underlying trauma he couldn't talk about before. I know that, although I don't know any details. I hope he sticks to his promise and is honest with us when we meet.

might be Elias and Garret arrive at the pack house just in time for the meeting. I have these meetings regularly to discuss milestones achieved and other things within the pack. This is also the time when new pack members like Lina are introduced to everyone. Today, I have something else I want to tell everyone. I've left it until last on the agenda. Only Harmony knows what I'm going to say," I say, and she can't help but shoot me a beaming smile as the rest of the pack arrives.

"Before you all go back to your work, please allow me to give you a piece of news for this week. It's taken a while for me to decide who will hold the position of gamma of this remarkable pack, but I have finally made my decision on the perfect candidate." I smile slightly. "You all know Marcel well, and I think he will do a fantastic job as my third in command. Garret, come on over."

side He's The crowd goes crazy at the news. Garret is probably one of the most headlined people in the pack. He's genuinely nice, fun to be around, and a warrior. It took a while to decide, and I wanted to give everyone a chance. Marcel was a close second choice, but he lacks experience and isn't good at making decisions without me prompting him.

st gave However, he's very skilled, which is why... "Furthermore," I continue,

on. But “Marcel Sanders is officially promoted to elite warrior status and will be within charge of some training classes.”

Again, the crowd claps and cheers. Similar to Garret, Marcel is well-remembered for his kind and warm nature and hard-working attitude. I wait for the other pack members to finish congratulating Marcel and Garret for a while, but I don't call an end to the meeting. For the first time since I've known him, I am once again rendered speechless. Only after everyone has left, he addresses the group.

“Did the others know?” he asks us curiously.

“No,” I smile. “I only told Harmony.”

“Congrats, man!” Marcel beams.

“You'll be fantastic,” Harmony agrees.

Garret blushes from all the praise. “You don't know how much this means to me. Thank you! I won't disappoint you, Alpha!”

“You're perfect for the job,” Elias agrees with a proud smile.

His words make Garret blush even more.

“I'm counting on you, Elias, to keep him in line,” I tease.

“I've got your back, Alpha,” he nods.

Garret rolls his eyes. “That's the last thing I need. Dude already knows how to handle controlling issues.”

“Well, now he's sleeping with his boss,” Marcel teases, making everyone laugh.

“That's awesome,” Elias chuckles, nudging Garret with his elbow. “I think, everyone. We have a woman for an alpha, who is also a hybrid, a fair woman for a beta, and a gay guy as gamma.”

“And the black dude is an elite warrior,” Marcel adds with a grin.

Elias smirks. “It seems we did something right.”

Harmony and Marcel chuckle, while Garret looks at him with wide eyes.

now be “You made a joke,” he mutters. “I can’t believe it. Please say it again so I can record it!”

ill-liked The rest of the day is busy, and I barely have time to think about anything besides work. Eventually, I drag myself up to the alpha suite, finish up, before duties much later than I thought I would. I notice that I have a notification from Garret waiting for me on my phone. I freeze when I see who it’s from.

the topic. Marius?

Hey Celine, I didn’t want to interrupt anything important by messaging you. I’m leaving the hospital next week. I would really appreciate it if you would allow me the opportunity to both apologize to you again and to myself. Let me know the place and time that best suits you, and I’ll be there.

; means I put my phone aside and shuffle into the kitchen. I definitely need to eat before dealing with this, I think to myself, while rummaging through the kitchen cupboards until I find a box containing chocolate bars. I grab a Bouquet of Blooms and am about to close the box... before taking another one.

I promised myself I’d give him the chance to explain himself. I don’t know how I feel about Marius anymore, but I definitely want to know what his problem is. This is important to me too. Part of me thought he was just playing around again, promising something he wouldn’t keep to. But in the end, all this time, he’s serious.

I’m feeling unusually nervous, shaky, and anxious as I grab my phone. “Just again.”

the bride, a Next Friday, 3pm, at Starbucks.



the eyes.

so that I

VALERIE

nything

ing my

essage

The party yesterday was fun, but today is going to be busy. I'm
Jazz move some of her stuff to Red Claw, and so far everyone has been
welcoming to her. Her mate Aryanna is the Alpha's Beta, and as he
Jazz is now a higher rank too.

-linking

t if you

explain

there.

a snack

igh the

nty and

But what makes me really happy, is how sweet Aryanna is toward
and how well these two get along. It's so obvious that they are so
They are both confident and straightforward, not to mention friendly
helpful... and strong.

't know

hat his

as just

t seems

Aryanna is well-liked in her pack, and already a bunch of people offered
help move her stuff. They've even held a little surprise greeting for
welcome her as Aryanna's mate.

"Do you think we overdid it?" Jazz asks Aryanna. We've just finished
decorating the apartment with Jazz's stuff, and since Jazz has a thing for
and cheesy decorations, there is now a huge unicorn clothes rack at the
entrance, replacing the old one.

phone

Aryanna grins. "I love it," she winks at Jazz. "I always needed more
my life."

Jazz laughs and moves in for a kiss while Aryanna pulls Jazz in for
It's nice to see them both laughing and smiling at each other. "I like
don't think it goes with my hair color," she says. Aryanna has her hair
to a dark green ombre.

"Next time, you need to go for a fiery orange or red," Jazz muses.

"If that's what you want, I'll give it a shot," Aryanna promises.

Jazz turns to look at me. “Thank you for all of your help today, Val. I smile. “Anytime.”

“Maybe sweet Val will need help moving soon too,” Aryanna says with a very suggestive smirk. “I know for a fact, that a certain hot French guy is very happy to have found his mate.”

“You and Eric are getting along pretty well, right?” Jazz asks me with a hopeful smile.

There is no denying it. “I’m crushing hard on him,” I admit excitedly. “He is so nice and charming, but also really understanding, and I love that little accent he has,” I ramble. “Oh, and he’s really funny too, and—”

“Sweety,” Aryanna grins. “Don’t ever tell him that, please, or we’ll hear the end of it otherwise.”

Jazz beams. “I’m expecting details!” she exclaims.

“Tonight,” I promise. “We’re meeting up with the others, and Tessa and Marilou have already been bombarding me with messages.” I chuckle. “The guys have too, but they are trying to be very subtle about it.”

“Same with me,” Jazz laughs.

“I think only Aurelia is truly holding back.”

“That’s in the princess’ nature,” Aryanna explains to us. “She has always been like that. She would never pry into her friends’ private matters.”

“Yep, she’s cool,” Jazz agrees. “Well, not as cool as Luna and I are, obviously, or my mate,” she adds, batting her eyes at Aryanna.

Before they start kissing again, I grab Jazz’s arm and pull her away. “Okay, enough flirting,” I laugh. “We need to get going, anyway. It’s time to choose a movie, and I don’t want to miss it.”

Jazz grimaces. “Please don’t let it be one of your gory horror flicks.”

I beam at her. “It’s not gory, I think. Well, not much, but I heard it’

” to be pretty scary! Can’t wait to watch it.”

Aryanna laughs. “Alright girls, Marilou already linked me to say with awaiting for you. One of the pack warriors will drive you to Silverlake guy is Aurelia and the others. Have fun!”

The whole way to Silverlake, Marilou keeps bombarding us with a questions. I’m glad Jazz is here because I still don’t want to talk about happened with Henrick Sullivan. Fortunately, most of her questions are ly. “He our mates, which neither of us mind answering. The questioning does at cut there because the moment we get out of the car, Tori starts. “I can’t it,” she blurts out as she squeezes the life out of me, and then Jazz, ‘ll never happy for you two! Tell me everything. EVERYTHING!”

Nox and Lionel are trying to act nonchalant, before Lion gives in craziness and starts teasing us for having landed a prince and a high-ori and beta. Lion used to flirt with me before. I didn’t take him too serious e. “The am relieved he hasn’t taken it to heart that I’ve found my mate. He genuinely happy for us. It reminds me of something Aurelia said about before... how they were friends with benefits, but didn’t want to be because they are waiting for their mates.

always Nox smiles at me, “Prince Eric is a decent guy,” he says quietly w others focus on Jazz. It’s typical for Nox to wait until everyone nnalise, finished talking before adding his thoughts. He tends to be quieter an reserved than the others.

away. “I still can’t believe it,” I whisper back.

my turn He looks at me thoughtfully. “Are you worried?”

“It’s just... I haven’t told him about my family background yet,” I n

” Nox considers this. “Let’s talk about this later,” he offers. “I th s going about time I tell you my story. Maybe it will set your mind at ease.”

I'm surprised by his words. Aurelia once hinted that Nox came by she'spack when he was around ten, and Alpha Elden mentored him, but to meetknow much more. This is not the time for that kind of talk anyway, l

Aurelia is approaching us along with her mother and brother. It's is withrealize, the one who looks a bit edgy and dangerous, but is actually ut whatnice.

e about Aurelia smiles warmly. "I had a feeling the noise here had somethir n't stopwith you arriving," she teases.

believe "Can you blame us?" Tori beams. "Jazz is mated to Aryanna, is "I'm socool?"

"It is indeed cool," Finn points out with a soft chuckle.

1 to the "And Val, you're with Eric, huh?" Aurelia asks curiously.

ranking "A new addition to our family," Luna Flora beams, "Eric is my n y, but II'm so happy he found his mate. He's been traveling all over the : seemslooking for you."

out him I smile. "Is that true?"

e more Finn nods. "It seems like us lycans tend to get a bit... desperate at he says with a sigh. "Myself included."

hile the "You'll find your mate," Aurelia points out. "Just like me. It's just else istance yet." She sounds pretty confident, which is encouraging. I kn id moreother friends aren't eighteen yet, but the fact that Jazz and I have fo mates so quickly is quite unusual. We are truly lucky, and I don't wan it in their faces.

"Oh, Aurelia, sweetheart, I can't wait for you to find your bette utter. Luna Flora beams. "We'll get to go wedding dress shopping. Oh, an ink it'sfather will walk you down the aisle, it will be wonderful." She twirls .

"We need a winter wedding for you!"

to their “Mom,” Aurelia raises her brows. “Please take five steps back. I
I don’t found my mate yet. And even if I did, I’m not sure if I even want
because married. Isn’t marking and mating enough?”

Finn, I “But I want to go wedding dress shopping with you!” Luna Flora
y really “That’s not fair! You’re my only daughter!”

“Okay, Mom, calm down,” Finn grunts and pats her head teasingly
ing to do so tiny. It’s funny how all her children easily tower over her.

We all laugh at the two of them. Terry, however, addresses Marilou
n’t that haven’t found your mate yet, have you?” he asks, sounding almost ner

She shakes her head. “Not old enough yet. I still have a year.”

Terry looks relieved. “Me too,” he says.

They smile at each other carefully and a bit bashfully. They are
ephew, together! I hope that maybe the Moon Goddess has destined them f
: world other, but unfortunately, you can never know what she has planned.

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around.

“Mom,” Aurelia raises her brows. “Please take five steps back. I haven’t found my mate yet. And even if I did, I’m not sure if I even want to get married. Isn’t marking and mating enough?”

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SHOWDOWN

VALERIE

Two movies and three cocktails later, I decide to head out for a drink from the movie. Aurelia has just put on some epic historical movie and my head was spinning from all the drama, murder, and betrayal in it.

That's why I prefer simple: Give me a dangerous axe murderer, screaming cheerleaders, or alternatively, a gross monster tearing through town.

Nox has joined me in the corridor outside Aurelia's apartment door. Leaving school, her parents have placed her in this very spacious apartment which, along with her impressive warrior skills, has led to the rumor that she is in line for a high position in the pack. I know her brother Finn is older than her, but it seems like they are both being considered for the alpha position.

They are officially siblings and rivals at the same time, yet you'd never
it since they get along together so well.

If this were Lauren and me, I bet Lauren would have done every
her power to sabotage me all the way to the top.

“Need a break too?” I ask Nox to break the silence.

“Yeah, that, and I'm hungry. I guess I'll fetch something to
everyone.”

“Great,” I beam. “Need help?”

“Yes, please. The kitchen is closed now, but we can grab something
the smaller kitchen next to the private dining halls. I know Aurelia and
siblings keep some emergency snacks there.”

We walk in silence for a moment before Nox asks, “You know
something about me is different, right?”

I shrug. “Aurelia never gave details. She only said you joined the
a break your early teens.”

He nods thoughtfully. “I know you think that because of your sister
bloodline is tainted and that you don't deserve the good things happen
; some you.”

“Didn't you get hurt too?” I ask. “When Lauren helped Anna
kidnapped? I heard you almost got killed.”

He sighs. “So, you know what happened?”

“Aurelia was hurt too,” I mutter.

“But Lauren's actions have nothing to do with you. You are your
person,” he points out.

I nod tentatively. “I'm starting to realize that now. It's still
sometimes, but... it's... I haven't told Eric yet. I'm a bit scared
reaction.”

er know “Prince Eric won’t judge you for what your sister did.” He pauses. ‘
talk much about it, but my past still haunts me too, so I know how yo
hing inAt least you never did anything wrong.”

“And you did?” I ask curiously.

“I grew up with a cruel father, who happened to be my alpha too
eat forexpains. “He’d hit me and torture me, calling it training. When I was
sent me on a mission. I was supposed to assassinate a strong alpha
another pack. I managed to get onto the pack grounds and sneak up o
ig frombut he noticed me. I mean, of course, he did.”

and her My mouth falls open. “Wait... what...?”

“That alpha could have killed me, probably should have killed me,
ow thatdidn’t. He saw the kid in me that had been brutalized and tortured his
life.” He smiles. “I owe Alpha Elden my life. I don’t know what he saw
pack inat that moment, but I’m glad he did see something because he spa
life.”

er, your I’m honestly surprised. Nox is well-respected in the pack; he’s A
ning tobeta and one of her most entrusted friends. Alpha Elden seems to tr
too. He almost died for Luna Annalise and seems loyal to the alpha
nie getNo one seems to question him anymore, and I’m sure it had to be h
him in the beginning.

I let his words sink in while we take the last few steps to the kitchen

“If I can be forgiven, why can’t you?” Nox asks.

ur own I smile, but before I can say anything in return, we hear noises
from the room adjacent to the kitchen—it’s the private dining room
ll hardalpha family, in case they host important guests or want to dine on the
of hisIt’s soundproofed, which makes me wonder why Nox and I can h
voices.

‘I don’t We both exchange a gaze. “An attack?” I whisper.

ou feel. “No, I would have been linked,” Nox shakes his head.

“Let’s take a look,” I whisper. “Maybe someone needs our help.”

As we creep towards the door, Nox pulls me over toward a small v
,” Noxthat overlooks the dining room. It’s cracked open, which explains v
ten, heheard the noises. It also gives us a chance to eye the whole dini
ia fromwithout being seen. “What about our scent?” I whisper.

on him, Nox shakes his head. “The kitchen’s full of scents from all kinds
members. They won’t notice us especially.”

I nod, turning my attention to the dining room. Inside we can see
, but heElden and Luna Flora there, Lord Finn, and Alpha Elden’s Betas Cal
s wholeVincent. “What’s going on?” I mutter.

v in me Nox frowns. “I don’t know, but it looks like something is abou
red mydown,” he whispers.

“Why did Liam ask us to come?” my ears pick up Lord Finn’s wor
urelia’srequested the five of us to be here in person, but no one else. Not eve
ust himhigh-ranking members. Did he say what it’s about?”

family. “No,” Luna Flora looks worried. “He just says it’s an emergency, a
iard forhe hung up. I couldn’t even ask him anything. It’s very unusual for I
act this way.”

. Alpha Elden crosses his arms in front of his body, and clearly
displeased at being summoned at such an ungodly hour witho
comingexplanation.

i of the I want to say something to Nox, commenting on how it’s weird t
:ir own.even the gamma is there, but my words stick in my throat as Alph
lear thestrides into the room with Beta Aryanna and Beta Dante in tow.

Aryanna earlier today, and I'm sure she didn't have plans to come. Something must have happened since then.

"Your mate's here too," Nox whispers, and points toward Eric, who is in the window of the room right after Alpha Liam. Now I'm sure that something terrible is going on. Eric didn't plan to come here tonight. He told me he was going to meet up with his beta, the twins, and some other friends he hasn't seen while. They'd even booked a fancy restaurant. Besides, I may not know Eric for very long, but I know he wouldn't lie to me. Luna mentioned this was an emergency meeting. What's so important that Alpha Eric cancel all his plans?

Right now, he's looking deadly serious, and there is no hint of his smile on his face.

Aryanna's not smiling like usual either.

But the worst expression is on Liam's face. Even from a slight distance. "He can easily feel his angry aura. His wolf is showing through his eyes, and it's terrifying. Liam rushes across the room, ignoring Alpha Elden and Luna. When they try to ask him what's going on. Instead, he grabs Beta Calvin by the collar and smashes him against the wall.

"Liam!" Luna Flora shouts in surprise.

Alpha Elden approaches them cautiously, his brows furrowed. "What's this about!?"

Liam completely ignores them, grabbing Beta Calvin by his throat. "You or did you not touch my brother?" he yells, pressing Calvin even further into the wall. "Did you lay your sleazy hands on one of my siblings?" Liam and I exchange a surprised glance. What... wait... WHAT? "I saw way," I whisper, shocked.

Nox looks horrified. "It can't be... Beta Calvin would never... I mean

ie here. “Sh,” I whisper, trying to hear what’s happening. Other than him, I
too shocked that someone close to us can be a monster. If I know or
o enters for sure, it’s that people can hide their true nature if they choose to.

rible is Suddenly, Eric’s serious expression makes more sense now.
going to Alpha Elden stops in his tracks. “Excuse me?” he asks, his voice
ven in a low.

ot have Liam ignores him and stares Calvin down instead. His eyes are pitch
a Floradark veins popping around his neck. His lycan wants to take control.
it made some of it in Marius’ mind, and he finally gave up your name to do
bellows at Calvin. His alpha aura engulfs almost everyone around him.
is usual eyes don’t leave Calvin, who looks deathly pale. “Don’t even c
weaseling your way out of this, you fucking rat. You can’t lie to me!”

That’s news to me. It must be one of his gifts.

tance, I “No...” Nox mutters under his breath, his eyes wide in horror. “It c
nd he is true...”

Flora as I don’t say anything, but I doubt Alpha Liam would accuse any
by his something if he wasn’t certain. I can’t bring myself to move, transfixed
the events unfolding before us.

Beta Vincent is staring in horror at his fellow Beta. His body sh
“Liam, involuntarily from Alpha Liam’s intense aura. “No...” he gasps, “Te
isn’t true, Calvin? Tell me it’s a misunderstanding.”

it. “Did “Talk!” Alpha Liam shouts in fury. He pulls Beta Calvin away fr
’s headwall, only to slam him back against it once more. I can see th
ings?” crumbling from the impact.

!?” “No “It was long ago,” Beta Calvin breathes out while gasping for air.

“It wasn’t that long ago,” Alpha Liam yells. “You only stopped w
an—” was a teen. Besides, what does it matter? It could be an eternity ago

I'm not would still rip you apart for it!"

ie thing Beta Calvin's face changes. He doesn't look like the friendly and
uncle anymore. Instead, his eyes are cold and detached.

"He was just a little child!" Alpha Liam screams, slamming him i
scarily wall again, "An innocent little kid! And you violated him. You rape
How could you do that!?"

black, The room falls silent at Alpha Liam's words. Luna Flora's hand
"I saw down to her sides, her eyes shut. She trembles slightly.

ay," he "He was such a pretty child," Beta Calvin finally says, his voice
im. His and detached as his eyes.

consider I want to throw up.

"I'm going to rip your dick off, you fucking bastard!" Liam b
slamming Beta Calvin's head into the wall yet again.

can't be Alpha Elden recovers from his initial shock and disbelief. I didn't l
was possible, but he looks even more furious than Liam. Luna Flora
one offirst though; she pushes past him and goes straight for Beta Calvin. T
ixed by nothing ethereal or sweet about her anymore. Liam moves aside for
silver strings of light suddenly surround her. She forms them into
adders objects right before our eyes. She's somehow holding a dagger mac
ll me it the light, stabbing it forcefully through Calvin's hand and essentially
it to the wall, before wrapping another one of the strings around his ne
om the skin blistering under the effect of the silver. He screams in pain.

ie wall My ears start ringing with the realization of what I just heard. Alph
is yelling now, mostly profanity and threats. Finn was horrified at fir
shocked, but now even his anger is slowly bubbling to the surface.

when he Amidst it all, I suddenly feel a hand wrapping around my mou
, and lluscious scent engulfing me... I was so absorbed in the scene unfoldin

didn't notice him leave the room, let alone approach us. Nox's cheeks
d quietguiltily at the revelation that we've been caught eavesdropping. "I'm
Prince Eric," he whispers. "We were coming to the kitchen when w
into thethe commotion ...and then..."

ed him! Eric removes his hand from my mouth and places a finger over h
signaling us to stay quiet. He quietly leads us away from the kitch
ds dropcloses the door, and we can no longer hear the others. "Uncle Elder
needs to check for people in the kitchen in future," he mutters.

as cold Eric takes my hand and starts leads us upstairs to one of the empty
rooms.

"I'm sorry," Nox apologizes again. "It's not right to eavesdro
ellows,thought there might be an attack at first. And then..."

"I know," Eric says. "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone." He pause
know itsorry you two had to witness that," he says quietly.

. moves Nox looks horrified, sad. "Beta Calvin... he's... he's always be
There isrespected, and then he did... that's just... how could he?"

her as "I don't know," Eric says quietly. "He is a monster."

o actual I'm taking a wild guess that we haven't even heard half of the st
le fromMy stomach churns when I imagine the things Beta Calvin probably
pinningMarius.

ock. His Eric looks at us. "Just keep it to yourselves for now, please."

Nox looks at him nervously. "I can't keep this from Aurelia," h
a Elden"She will never forgive me if I keep this from her. I will lose all the t
st, thenhas in me, and rightfully so. If you don't want me to tell her, you are g
have to use an alpha command on me."

th. His Eric shakes his head. "Then link her and take her somewhere awa
g that Ihere. You can tell her," he orders. "But make sure she understands th

reddento keep this private. We're still looking for other possible victims. E
1 sorry, this is Marius' story and his trauma, and we should respect his
e heard privacy." He pauses. "It was our mistake not to check if the kitch
vacant beforehand. It's the only room that wasn't checked before
his lips, arrived." He looks at Nox consideringly. "Can you assure me that
en. He will keep this secret?"

1 really "Aurelia is like a second alpha to me," Nox says, sounding piss
someone would even suggest that Aurelia couldn't keep a secret. "She
lounge thinks of the pack first, and she would never spread rumors or secrets."

Eric smiles and nods, allowing Nox to rush off to find Aurelia.

op. We When he's left, Eric pulls me into his arms. He's shaking a little.

Marius, and the others... they are like siblings to me. I'm an only chi
s. "I'm know? It's just my father and me, and we don't get along all that well.

Marius and I haven't always gotten along perfectly, but he's family; I
en wellare. When Liam told us what had happened to Mari today, I couldn't
it... I just... I wish we'd known sooner!"

I hug him tighter, brushing my fingers gently through his hair.

ory yet. "When Liam connected to Marius' mind, he saw snippets o
7 did to happened to him in the past, but it wasn't until today that Marius
opened up to share the full extent of what happened to him, and the r
his rapist." He almost stumbles over the word rape. "Shit," he curses, r
ie says. over his forehead. "Liam doesn't know if there are more victims w
rust she know about. All these years, this monster has lived under this roof, r
going to Goddess knows what. I don't even know how Uncle Elden and Aur
will handle this."

ly from I rest one of my hands against his chest, trying to give him some
ne need energy. I don't know if it will work, as it's not a physical wound I'm l

Besides, but I figure it's worth a try. Eric seems to get calmer after a while. "That's right, it's toone's fault," I say quietly. "No one knew, Eric. Perpetrators like Beta aren't supposed to know what they are doing and how to hide it. He's disgusting and vile, more so for what he's done."

Aurelia "Calvin has special gifts," Eric says bitterly. "Camouflage is one of them. He is the perfect perpetrator."

I stare at him in surprise. So that's how he hid it from everyone? Always a vile, disgusting creature!

"Valerie, I'm trusting you to keep what you've heard between us," he says gently, taking my face between his hands. "I think Elden and Flora, and Liam, children, deserve to have some privacy to deal with this in their own world, you know they will respect Marius' wishes to handle it quietly."

I nod. "Of course." I pause. "Eric," I mutter quietly. I know this is the best time or place for this revelation, but I feel so emotionally raw that I just believe to say this, or I'll chicken out again. "I need to tell you something."

He pulls me into a hug again. "Go ahead," he whispers into my hair.

"I'm sure you've heard about Luna Annalise being kidnapped back from what they first met, and how she was almost killed."

Eric nods. "Of course."

"The girl who orchestrated it and helped capture her was my sister."

Eric looks at me thoughtfully. "And? Why are you telling me that? We don't want to sweet little princess on the pea?"

I'm being called fairytale names again, I think, with a careful smile. "I don't want Floradon't mind?" I want to know.

He looks confused. "Mind? Why would I? You didn't do it and obviously you can't choose your sister."

I don't know what it is, but my eyes fill with tears. I lean against him,

his is no chest and allow him to pull me into a hug. “Thank you,” I whisper.

Calvin

will pay



of them.

FLORA

What a

It’s been hours since I left the dungeons. After I slammed a kn
Calvin’s hand, and later used it to slam it into his nether regions, I de
us,” he
needed to retreat, or my all-consuming wrath would kill him be
nd their
suffered enough.

way. I

I know Elden left the dungeons, although he didn’t link me. I
doesn’t join me in our suite. Men. Like I wouldn’t notice his troubled f
not the
through the bond. The creatures of light surrounding me spread a l
st have
some trail toward the direction he must have disappeared into. I’m
some silky lingerie and don’t bother with changing. I just wrap a b
around me and follow the light.

k when

Come, they whisper.

Flora.

Giggles surround me.

Flora, Flora, Flora.

his, my

My lycan stirs in my mind. Celeste used to be wary of the beings c

o. “You

She wanted to chase them away at first, but eventually accepted that w

iously,

entity. She, I, and these mythical creatures of light. *Mate needs us,*

s broad

mutter. Her coat has a very rare shade of light grey. Depending on
and how the sun or moon shines on us, it can change its color from
silver or even sparkle slightly in the light as if there were crystals on o

“Luna.” Gamma Aurel must have noticed that I’m leaving the pack. I have a very strong bond with him—ever since he saved my life. Aurelia was still in my womb. A bond of deep-rooted friendship bloomed between us. He is more than just a gamma and friend; he is a loyal protector and knows what and who he is protecting.

“Not now,” I tell him.

He stares at me in surprise. He is not used to me being so serious and direct at me with conflicted feelings.

“Trust me,” I whisper. My skin glows slightly under the moonlight. It’s hard to tell if it’s illuminating me or if I’m illuminated from inside.

Aurel knows my secrets better than any other pack member, and he looks back now.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

I smile at him and make my way away from the pack house and toward the forest.

Like Elden can hide from us, I point out toward my lycan.

The Beta hurt our pup, she says, and her voice is broken. She lets her head hang down. I feel my chest clenching in pain at the sorrow and horror she had to endure without me noticing. I should have noticed; I’m his father. I knew something was amiss... I first thought a girl had broken his heart. I thought his mate might have rejected him, but I didn’t imagine the hell I had to live through for so many years.

I was blessed with so many gifts, but none of them work with my Celeste bloodline.

Guilt and anger gnaw at me, but I will them down. Neither Marjorie nor Elden will benefit from my breakdown.

We’ll hurt him in return, I reassure Celeste. *We will make sure he*

house. *ever have a single happy minute in his life. And we'll be there for c
e whenand mate. We cannot succumb to the darkness of desperation.*

ssomed I find Elden easily. He is at our special spot right in front of Silve
servantsitting on a rock and just staring at the water. The little beings of ligh
around him. There is darkness surrounding him, like a monster that
claws in his flesh and tries to suck every joy and love out of him. I h
d lookshim, wrapping my arms around him from behind. The light arou
expands, reaching out for him too and wrapping him up like a blanket.

ght, and When we were teenagers, Elden grew and grew into a tall and
de. But alpha, while I remained his tiny, itty-bitsy girlfriend. But it doesn't
ie stepsmy arms are still big enough for him and our children. His big hand
out, touching my arm and gripping it like he was holding onto life itsel

I crawl around him so that I can kneel in front of him.

owards *I failed him, he links me.*

My heart breaks at how broken his voice sounds. It's the second tim
that I can feel it scattering into pieces. I left him alone down there w
er headmonster because I wasn't strong enough to stay in control.

Marius *How will he ever be able to forgive me?*

mom. I I grab his face between my hands and force him to look at me. His e
heart, I wet with tears. It's been a long time since I've seen him crying. He
he had raised that way; he wasn't allowed to cry, his father deemed it a we
but I remember every single time he broke down in my arms. No o
y directhim the way I did. I kiss his cheek softly. "It doesn't work that v
whisper sadly. "For now, Marius needs to learn how to forgive himse
ius norlearn that he is not to blame for what that monster did to him. He need
given the time to heal and to mend his broken bond to his mate."

e won't Elden's dark brown eyes bear into mine now. "He blames himse

our pupasks.

“Calvin made sure to break his mind,” I mutter. “That’s why we can’t allow ourselves to drown in it. Marius is fluttering now, and we can’t fail him a second time. He will need time. Elden has it—do you give it to him?”

I can feel how torn he is through the bond we share.

“He is terrified,” I mutter. “Liam called me and asked me to give him time. He is not ready to open up yet.”

“What if we will lose him?”

“We won’t, but we need to abide by his rules and allow him to do his reachpace.”

Elden wraps his arms around my middle, pulling me closer. I run my fingers through his long hair. I love his wild look, the long black hair, his serious face, all his scars and muscles. He is mine, all of him is mine, and today is his sorrow and pain. I allow my light to engulf him further.

“You’re doing it again,” he complains, but his voice is less strained.

“You can break down tonight, all you want,” I tell him. “But tomorrow we need to be sure to be at the top of our game again.”

I can feel his big hand, stroking my hair. “And you?” he whispers.

I can feel tears filling my eyes as I rest my head against his chest, and the mate bond to do its magic and lull me into a feeling of safety.

Elden and I have is useless when we can’t protect our children.

It is not your fault, a fleeting voice reaches me. *I’m so sorry I could not protect myself and this pain from you.*

There were times when I was angry at her, that she wouldn’t wait ahead sometimes, that she wouldn’t share all she knew, but I’ve changed.

“If?” he

understand her reasons for not intervening in our fates more than she
e can'tand the difficulty of her existence.

s needs Warmth lingers around me, my head feeling a bit lighter. I can fe
en, canI'm drifting into a state between sleeping and waking, the little
fluttering around me and settling down not to disturb me anymore. El
picked me up, and I can feel how he is carrying me back to the pack
m someHe lays me down on our bed before disappearing into the bathroom. C
returns, I make sure to hug him close to me again, feeling his bi
wrapping around me.

it at his "It will be alright," I mutter against his chest. "We are family. W
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understand her reasons for not intervening in our fates more than she has to and the difficulty of her existence.

Warmth lingers around me, my head feeling a bit lighter. I can feel how I'm drifting into a state between sleeping and waking, the little beings fluttering around me and settling down not to disturb me anymore. Elden has picked me up, and I can feel how he is carrying me back to the pack house. He lays me down on our bed before disappearing into the bathroom. Once he returns, I make sure to hug him close to me again, feeling his big arms wrapping around me.

"It will be alright," I mutter against his chest. "We are family. We'll get through this."

MOM

CELINE

“**L**ook at that belly,” Dave coos when we make it toward the suite. “I can’t wait for a bunch of cute little Annies to be around.”

“Or a bunch of little Liams,” Ella muses.

Dave grins. “You’re still keeping the gender a secret, huh?”

Annie smiles brightly. “Yeah, I have way too much fun watching curious everyone is.” She rubs over her belly and shuffles around the bed. She’s invited us all for breakfast, something we haven’t done together quite a while. We used to have breakfast or brunch at college all the time.

“I can’t believe that Dave as a human is officially allowed on your grounds,” I tell Annie in awe.

She and Ella exchange a grin. “Yes,” Annie says in her best business tone. “That’s because I told Liam either you all come here, or we meet outside the pack borders, pregnant or not.” She laughs. “You should have seen Liam when I suggested leaving the pack grounds while heavily pregnant.”

Her pregnancy is indeed progressing fast. She’s carrying alpha pups and her pregnancy will be short. Five months maximum. However, considering she’s having twins and her body has to go through so many changes so fast, it’s probably in quite a lot of discomfort regularly. “And you convinced Liam to ask curiously.”

She smirks at us. “Well, let’s just say, I have my ways.”

Ella groans while Dave and I burst into laughter. We take a while to get down, eventually though, I notice that one member of our little clan is missing. “Where’s Finn?” I ask curiously.

Annie tilts her head, and there is something in her eyes I can’t quite read. “He’s coming a bit late today.” She looks a bit thoughtful, sad almost. “They had some family issues, but he said he was running late today.”

“Yep,” Dave throws himself on Annie and Liam’s huge sofa. He stretches himself out and grins, probably happy for the rare opportunity to be on the pack grounds. There are definite perks to being friends with the luna. “I texted her earlier and asked if I should pick him up, but he said he would be here for me. Two of the croissants are for him, though.”

Ella smacks his legs. “How about helping us set the table then, instead of letting our very pregnant friend do it?”

Dave grins and jumps up, throwing one arm around Ella and one around me. “Sorry, Annie,” he looks at her bashfully. “I would hug you too, but my guy doesn’t like to smell me on you.”

ss tone. Ella raises her brows. “And you think Celine’s and my guys would side the that?”

his face “Well...” Dave’s voice trails off. “Not so sure about your sugar-dad but as for Celine’s dude... to notice my scent, Mr. Charming would, so the actually come near our darling Celine, after all.” He pauses, furrowing her brows. “He is hot though! Between his grumpy yet sassy look and it, she’s edgelord appearance, it’s hard to decide.”

iam?” I Annie chuckles. “Like you wouldn’t choose Finn over anyone anytime.”

“What can I say?” Dave smirks. “The edgelord is my weakness.”
to calm Against my better judgment, I have to grin. Dave has the uncanny ability to still make things sound hilarious, even when they aren’t. He makes me laugh even when the topic really isn’t funny.

put my “When are you meeting him?” Annie turns to look at me.

t later.” “Meeting who?” Finn suddenly appears at the door. He’s smiling, but I can see the exhaustion behind it and the sadness in his eyes. Annie said there were some family issues going on. I hope it isn’t too bad. They did have a rough stretch recently and could do with a break from the chaos.

on pack “Her mate,” Dave says while giving Finn a half-hug. “Hey man.”

ted him “Good to see you, Dave,” Finn smiles, before hugging the rest of the pack. “You’ve decided to give my brother a chance then?” he asks me in surprise.

There is a hopeful expression on his face. It’s sweet how they all always stick together, even when they are fighting.

“It’s not a date,” I try to explain. “Marius asked me to give him the go-ahead to explain himself.”

out your “I think that’s good,” Annie points out, groaning as she tries to stretch her back muscles. Dave immediately sits down and starts massaging her back.

ould likeback. “I think it’s important to allow someone to explain, even when t
something wrong.”

ldy, El, “Yeah, who knows what reasons are behind his actions,” Dave
need totoward me.

ring his I nod. I’ve decided to definitely hear him out. He is still my mate, a
Finn’sand I know something keeps bothering him, although our mate bond
weak over the months that I can hardly feel him through it.

ne else “Honestly,” Finn sighs. “I envy you for your issues. Because at le
have found your mate...”

I’m not sure what to say to him, because I know how nerve-wrack
bility tocrushing it can be to search for your mate, knowing they are somewh
laugh,there, but not being sure when or where you will ever meet

Fortunately, Annie is here to help. She always knows what to sa
touches Finn’s shoulder, squeezing it. “Finn,” she says earnestly. “Th
ut I canperson out there who is destined for you. You will meet her. I’m sure
ey haveand I know she will be wonderful.”

e a few He smiles at her. “Thanks, Annie.”

“What about you, Dave?” Ella asks into the silence, a worried exp
on her face. “You and Jun...”

of us. Dave stays quiet, which is pretty unusual for him. Annie and Ella ex
urprise.a glance. “What’s wrong?” Annie urges softly.

ys stick “Nothing,” Dave sighs a bit. “To be honest, we broke it off.”

“What!?” we all exclaim.

chance “I knew you would react like that,” he says defensively. “But I’m no
mate. We kept it strictly friends with benefits, and we’ve just cut
atch outbenefits part for now. We’re still friends. I love my Jun, just on a p
ing herlevel now.”

hey did “But...” Ella’s voice trails off.

“Jun’s a great guy,” Dave says seriously. “He will meet his mate c
musesfor sure. And I’ve seen what the mate bond did to Marius and C
someone fights it. Never in my life do I want to be the reason for so
fter all,else’s suffering. Never! When Jun meets his mate, I want the other pe
l got sofeel loved and welcomed and not have to deal with a guy Jun just date
frankly, I deserve better too.”

ast you “Maybe you’re someone’s mate too,” Annie muses. “You never
Considering how well you know our world already, I wouldn’t put it j
ing andMoon Goddess to pair you with a wolf.” Her comment is innocent e
iere outbut there is something in the tone of her voice... like she’s certain tha
: them.will be someone’s mate.

ay. She “Now that would be fun,” Dave chuckles. “But I’m just a human
ere is athat ever happen?”

of that, “Of course it does. It doesn’t happen often, but it does happen,”
points out.

I nod my agreement. The fact that Dave and Jun are not m
ressionheartbreaking, but at least they are both realistic about it. I honestly ju
Dave to find happiness too. You never know what fate has planned
xchangeyou though... I never thought that my own love story would turn
complicated.

My thoughts return to Marius while the others are chatting about
things. I can’t help but feel slightly anxious about our meeting. I can
ot Jun’sstell what I’m hoping for.

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MARIUS

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The talk with Liam drained me like nothing else, but I'm eternally thankful to him for listening, and letting me say things in my own time. He spent hours in my hospital room, and not once did he react impatiently or frustrated with me, nor did he push me to talk before I was ready. We

spent almost a day planning Liam's next steps and how he would corner Calvin.

Liam kept all his emotions in check, though I could tell he was nervous. Cyrus could feel it through the sibling bond with Fenris. Fenris is a good wolf, a leader, and he is fucking protective over his family and pack.

Even though it was draining, it also felt so liberating. I was so scared

he wouldn't believe me, even after he saw into my mind. But he did, he believed every single word I told him. And I feel fucking stupid now for not

said anything earlier. Even as a teen, he probably would have believed me, and he has his lie-detector gift on top of that! Had he not believed me,

he would have just told him to use it on me... and fuck it! I could have ended my misery.

That monster manipulated you, Cyrus hisses angrily. He made sure you couldn't trust anyone, not your family, not me, not even yourself.

I sigh. Maybe Cyrus is right. And it's not like I can go back in time to change anything...

Liam told me what happened when he confronted Calvin, how he refused to give him a chance to lie or think of any excuses. Calvin even admitted what he did, which I never expected him to do. I've had my phone switched off for the whole night, mentally unable to take any calls or re-

messages. This morning, I realized that Mom and Dad had written me messages, so has Finn.

Liam managed to keep his promise to me though, and while the thankful message me, they haven't bombarded me with visits or calls yet. I've spent deal with everything at my own pace.

or get I'm just packing my stuff from the hospital room, finally allowed to 'e spent back to my apartment in the pack house, when Liam mind-links me.

vin. *I'm sorry I couldn't stop her,* he links me. *I don't think anyone could raging. not even Dad.*

n alpha I'm a bit confused. *What do you mean?* He doesn't need to answer l the door to my hospital room flies open, and Mom rushes in. *Okay d Liam mind.*

elieved *I'm sorry.*

having *No, don't be. It's alright.*

d me... I cut the link to focus on my mother, and suddenly, I'm so glad t I could didn't give a shit about Liam promising to keep any visitors away fr ded my "Mom," I say, tears filling my eyes.

ire you She pulls me into her arms. "My baby," she sobs. "I'm so sorry. something was off with you, but never in my wildest dreams..." she

"I'm so sorry."

time to She wraps her arms around me tighter. It feels so good, the kind o only my mother can give me. She doesn't say anything else, and I'm g e didn't doesn't. I don't want to answer questions or explain anything.

itted to "If only my gift would work on family members," is the only th witcher whispers.

ad any "It would still have happened," I hear myself say. "He would have way around that," I say bitterly. For years Calvin had tormented me,

several was clever and sly and cunning with it. He was able to hide it from my
despite being bonded as his beta. He worked around every obstacle..
they did scares me to imagine what else he might have done, and who else he
want to have... had in his claws.

I swallow to stop my thoughts from spiraling downwards again.
to move Mom seems to get it because she doesn't say anything else, just he
until I feel the tension in me subsiding. Then she pulls back and allow
d have, start gathering my stuff again. I decide to change the subject and light
atmosphere. "Are you staying for coffee?" I ask hopefully.

because "I can stay for however long you want me to stay," she promises.

; *never* "I don't want to steal you from Dad for too long," I smile carefully
my relief, she plays right along, joking with me.

"Oh," she smiles a bit. "Don't worry. I know how to make it up to h
I grimace. "TMI, Mom, too much information!"

hat she "You haven't even heard anything," she chuckles.

om me. I frown as I realize my tiny mother wants to take my bag for me. "
can carry my stuff on my own."

I knew "You were just sick," she argues. "And almost died! I'm strong en
pauses. carry your small bag."

This just feels so wrong, but unfortunately, there is no way my motl
f peace listen to anyone if she has her mind set on something. We walk mos
glad she way to my apartment in silence before I can't take it anymore and just

ask. It's the one thing I didn't even dare to ask Liam. "How did Dad ta
ing she "He is devastated," she admits quietly. "You should have seen wh
father did to... him."

found a "He's not mad at me, is he?" I ask nervously. I'm glad that Calvin
and her age, but I still need to know what Dad truly thinks about me. My bigg

y father is that he will think less of me as his son.

. and it She blinks. “Why would he be?”

e might I contemplate telling her my fears, but I know she would tell him that I’m not sure if I can have that talk already. “Nothing,” I mutter. “Just thinking...”

olds me “I don’t know what exactly you’re afraid of,” she admits quietly. “I should talk to him when you’re ready.”

ten the “I know,” I admit.

“It took a lot of convincing from Liam and me to keep him from here,” she explains honestly. “He wanted to come here the moment he got out, so did I, but I had a feeling it would be too much, too soon.” She walks into my apartment and puts the bag down while I close the door behind me. Once I have my attention back on her, she takes my hands into her palms. “I’ll handle it for you, for now, and make sure your father gives you the space and time you need, until you’re ready. But I assure you, he won’t disappoint you. These demons haunting you... a part of them will go away after you talk to him.”

ough to “You think so?” I ask carefully.

She nods.

her will Calvin kept feeding me doubts about my family throughout the years. It started when I was just a small child, around five or six years old, convinced that my father and Liam would look down on me. They would be disappointed in me, and strong alpha wolves like them would judge me for being so weak. I was wrong about Liam, because he’s been nothing but supportive of me. I felt like he hasn’t judged me once. He was horrified and angry, but not at me.

est fear Maybe Calvin was wrong about Dad too.

“This fucking asshole,” I suddenly blurt out. “He’s controlled me for years and taken away my chance at having relationships with everyone else, and me.”

Mom’s hands tighten into fists. “He won’t hurt you anymore. I’ll make sure he gets what he deserves... and it will be slow and gruesome,” she says with an unusual amount of venom and contempt in her voice. She takes a few breaths, forcing her anger down. “Is this the reason...” she says suddenly. “That you never chose your own beta?”

Her question surprises me. It’s been so long since someone asked me that I never chose a beta. Liam had Dante assigned to him very early. I’ve heard stories of how Dante visited Liam as a baby, and immediately felt protective over him, and later Liam chose Aryanna himself. Finn chose Anders as his beta. The latter was a few years older than Finn and had protected him from a few bullies in school. They bonded over time, and their bond was natural. And Aurelia recently chose one of her best friends as her beta. I kept telling everyone that I just hadn’t clicked with anyone yet and I’d never felt bonded to anyone like they said I would, but the truth is I don’t even want to look for anyone. I was so scared of being hurt or shunned.

I swallow hard, realizing Mom is still looking at me. “Yes,” I say quietly. “I didn’t want anyone to get too close to me.”

Mom looks sad but doesn’t comment further. Wanting to lighten the mood again, I decide it’s finally time for that coffee, as I’d originally promised. I shuffle into the kitchen, preparing two cups for us.

“Mom,” I say, breaking the silence, “I’ve been pretty mean to everyone around me.”

“Don’t worry,” she smiles. “No one holds it against you. Your father is going to be there for you and help you through this. You’ve had to deal

or years many things on your own until now, things that no child should ever
around face.”

I stare at my coffee machine while contemplating my next words. “
I make I’m the black sheep of this family,” I admit.

he says “Is that how you feel?” Mom asks with concern.

is a few “Isn’t it the truth?” I ask, my apprehension clearly showing.

all of a “It’s true that you and your father have fought a lot in the past, a
you’ve approached things in a different way to your siblings, but nei
ne why nor I, ever saw you as being anything less.”

e heard “You must be kidding me?” I turn to face her, but she doesn’t lo
etectiveshe’s joking. “But I’m the weird child! The college drop-out. I’ve been
himself to everyone for longer than I can remember, and I never trained as m
against was supposed to.”

d grew She sighs. “And if you asked Finn, he would say he is the weird one

a. “Finn is not weird,” I huff, surprised that he would even think that.

nd that “Of course he isn’t, and neither are you. But if he were here, he wo
I didn’t that he is the one covered in tattoos and piercings, the rebellious te
l. never fit in. He feels out of place, a lot,” she tells me. “And Dario wo
I admit the same about himself.”

“Dario?” I stare at her. “Why does Dario feel like a black sheep?”

e mood “I’m not sure,” she looks sad. “But I’ve learned from this experienc
nised. II realize I would rather push my way into his life and risk angering hi

let him suffer on his own in silence.” She smiles at me. “I bet if you
everyone Liam, he would say that he felt like he was somehow less than everyo

the odd one out with his almost untamable beast. He was the one you
amily is pushed too hard and tormented with extra training.” She takes my

al with

have to “See? You’re not the only member of this family with doubts and fears if you’re not the only black sheep, it’s less lonely, isn’t it?”

‘I know My eyes fill with tears again. “So, I have a place in this family?”

“Of course you do,” she insists. “All of you have a place in this family. Doing things that are unusual or following your own path, doesn’t make you are a lesser member of this family. You’re just as important as any of my siblings, and you matter to your father and me as much as everyone else. I’m eternally thankful for having you as my son, and I wouldn’t swap you for any other child. I don’t expect perfection from my children. I just want to see you like you to be happy.”

I didn’t even realize how much I needed to hear this. Me and my siblings... we’re all black sheep amidst a pack of regular lycans due to our royal blood and our extra strong lycans. We all struggle and feel out of place sometimes. And maybe I did step out of line more than the others, but it doesn’t seem to matter. They are my family, and they have my back, just as I would say I have theirs.

“Let’s have that coffee now,” I say, feeling the weight I’ve been carrying finally lift off my shoulders. I feel... lighter.

“Would you like me to keep you company for today?” Mom offers more.

I get flustered as I carry out her cup of coffee, carefully bringing it to her. “I... I would love for you to stay, but... you know... I have a date, but it’s actually not a date. It’s—”

Mom squeals so loud I almost drop the coffee. “You’re meeting your father? Yes, yes, yes, yes!” She jumps from one foot to the other excitedly, hugging me.

I sway a bit, unsure how to react while precariously holding the cup.

ars, and from her, so it doesn't spill all over her accidentally. "It's not a date
her. "I'm not sure if Celine will ever want me as her mate again."

Mom beams at me. "I think she will," she tells me. "It might not be
family. convince her, but I'm sure she'll give you a chance. She is so calm and
can you headed, and she knows how it feels to grieve. She will be your
of your counterpart." She smiles brightly. "I'm so proud of you for finally
lose. I'm clean with her."

ou with Her optimism is contagious. For the first time in days, I'm feeling
it all of more positive about my meeting with Celine. Maybe Mom is right...
she will give me one last chance.

and my And if she does, I'll make sure not to blow it!

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Mom beams at me. "I think she will," she tells me. "It might not be easy to convince her, but I'm sure she'll give you a chance. She is so calm and level-headed, and she knows how it feels to grieve. She will be your perfect counterpart." She smiles brightly. "I'm so proud of you for finally coming clean with her."

Her optimism is contagious. For the first time in days, I'm feeling slightly more positive about my meeting with Celine. Maybe Mom is right... maybe she will give me one last chance.

And if she does, I'll make sure not to blow it!

THE NON-DATE

MARIUS

I guess Celine suggested Starbucks instead of another coffee shop because she didn't want our date... not-date... to feel too cozy. It's definitely more casual and less personal at Starbucks. I wish we could meet somewhere else, and in better circumstances. If I could, I would just hold her hand, buy her a coffee to-go, then take her on a romantic picnic date.

But it's not possible for now, and I have no one to blame but myself. At least she agreed to meet me. This is my last chance to convince her I'm worthy, I know it. There won't be another one.

I was so excited and nervous about today's meeting that I'm here twenty minutes early. I'm not sure where and how I should wait for her without looking like a crazy nutcase. I feel out of my depth here. I'm nervous about a date being so awkward. I'm considering going inside and ordering a coffee.

cakes and cookies, but I don't want Celine to think I'm patronizing
ordering for her. Shit, why is this so complicated?

Well, you made it complicated, Cyrus grunts.

I can't even argue with that; Cyrus is right. *I need your help here, I
If I start to fuck up, I need you to push me in the right direction.*

Yeah, because that's worked so well in the past.

*Listen, I know you're disappointed in me, I say, noticing how Cyrus
only one I haven't really apologized to yet. I'm sorry for the way I've
you. I wasn't a good partner, but I want to do better. So, are you in th
me?*

*That's all I wanted to hear, he says, sounding content for once. Ju
there and message her that you're waiting inside, because you're
sure you both have a place to sit, so you won't need to wait for a tal
her if you should go ahead and order something.*

*That's good, thank you. I can't believe I need my wolf to give me
tips. What has my life become? Cyrus needs to tell me how to woo my*

*That's because you never dated anyone, he chimes in again. Hittin
random person in a club is not the same as dating and courting so*

*You've never actually taken the time to get to know another person
self. At you haven't allowed yourself to get close to anyone.*

He's right, I have zero experience... not only in courting a woman
any relationship. I decide to accept Cyrus' advice and do exactly v

said, pleasantly surprised when Celine answers my text asking me to
for her, black coffee for her and that she's happy with any cake I choose.

Fortunately, Starbucks isn't too crowded at the moment, and I ma
occupy a nice little table that feels a bit more private. While standing

for our coffee, I feel my anxiety rising again. I don't just want to ;

her bypiece of cake, or something that I like; I want to get something that *sh*
I scrutinize the display case where the cakes and cookies are. All c
look fine to me... there are a variety of chocolate cakes and fruity pies
mutter.off to the side, there's a lonely plate of healthy-looking berries and c
cookies. It's like no one has ordered them so far, and my heart ac
them. No one wants them...

is is the I frown at my thoughts. What the fuck am I thinking? I'm about
*treated*the most important talk of my life, where I'll have to tell my mate
*his with*rapist has broken me to the point where finding her was a trigger that s
spiralng into a deep depression... and I'm standing here feeling so
*st go in*fucking oatmeal cookies!

making The cashier clears her throat, signaling me it's my turn. I order our
*le. Ask*and then take a piece of every cake and cookie they have... just to be s
Then I return to our cozy little table, and wait...

dating Celine arrives right on time, and she looks so beautiful it takes my
mate. away. She's so tall and elegant, even in a pair of jeans. She's wearing
*ng on a*top, perfect for a warm day in June, and a long golden necklace. Her
*meone.*tied back into a long ponytail. She always emits a dignified, strong aur
*before,*alpha aura is so freaking hot.

“Hi,” she says when she sits down opposite me.

, but in “Hi,” I answer awkwardly. “Thank you for coming.”

what he She nods in response. Then her eyes spot the plate full of
order a“Seriously?” she asks, amused at my obvious indecision.

I shrug. “I started overthinking it. They are having something
nage tomaroon theme week, but I wasn't sure if you're into maroon-colored c
; in lineI decided to take the scones too, but then I thought they might be t
get anywhich is why I ended up taking the cheesecake and apple pie as well.”

she likes! “And that one?” she asks, pointing at the piece of the super-healthy
of the oatmeal cookie.

... and I feel a bit flustered. “Well, I felt a bit bad for it... it seems no one
oatmeal today, and everyone kept ordering everything else. So, I took pity
for Wow, awesome, here I am, finally meeting my mate, and what am I

Telling her, I felt sorry for a cookie.

to have “I like oatmeal cookies,” Celine says quietly.

... that a Cyrus puffs his chest proudly, my inward rant pausing at her word
sent me something right? Really?

... sorry for We sip our coffees, and each choose something from the selec
treats. Celine’s chosen the scones and the oatmeal cookie, while I’ve g
coffee, the apple pie. We don’t say anything, not until Celine finally looks up
sure. ... and I know it’s time. “Tell me why we are here and what’s been go
with you. I promise I will listen.”

... breath I shift in my seat nervously, trying to think what to say as I stare
a white empty plate.

... hair is Celine sighs deeply, looking a little fed up.

... a... her I’m panicking again. I can’t afford to blow this. Get it together, I
Get it together, now!

“Wait,” I hurry to say, before she can tell me she is leaving.

“Just... don’t play games with me, Marius,” she says, her tone ev
f food. her guard has gone up. I can’t blame her for not trusting me.

“I don’t want you to pity me,” I finally hear myself say. I really do
called don’t want her to give me a chance because she pities me. I want her
take, some a chance because she wants to. I want her to want me.

... oo dry, “Why would I pity you?” she says, her annoyed expression morphi
one of contemplation.

7 sugar- “Please. Just promise me that whatever you decide... you won’t d
of pity.”

wanted She seems genuinely confused by my words, allowing them to
on it.”before she nods. “Alright.” She nods.

doing? “When I was a child...” I shift around nervously.

Just tell her, Cyrus says, his tone for once encouraging. Seems li
little talk we had really helped to bring him back on my side. *Being h*
ls. I did*the best you can do now. She will respect you far more for being hones*

“My father’s old beta... you know Calvin?”

tion of She nods cautiously, looking a little apprehensive. “I’ve met him
gone fortimes.”

o at me, It’s clear she doesn’t like him very much. Is her apprehension ov
oing onI’m about to say, or that I’m talking about Calvin? Suddenly, my blo
cold, and I’m terrified that he’s done something to Celine. Fuck hi
e at mytouched her, I swear, I’ll go berserk. “Did he do something to you?”

Celine blinks in surprise. “No,” she says. “It’s just... I had an eerie
when I first met him and continue to feel it every time since.”

Marius! I don’t freaking believe it! It’s not possible, but I don’t see an
explanation for it. The mate bond must be truly strong if it made her q
the man who sexually abused me, even without knowing it. If the bon
ven, butstrong, I’m not surprised it almost killed me.

Celine looks worried now. “Why would you think he did somet
on’t... lme?”

to give I take a sip of my coffee. Alright, here goes nothing. I owe it to her
her the truth.

ing into *Just tell her like you would tell a patrol report.* Cyrus encourag
Make it clinical, rational, like you’re talking about someone else. It

o it outeasier for you. Like ripping off a band-aid.

I nod.

sink in “He’s always been a close friend of my parents from before I was b
sometimes watched over me when my parents and Liam were busy. I
to look at me... in a weird way. I noticed, but didn’t know what it n
like thatdidn’t know it was wrong back then. Sometimes, his hands went plac
onest isshouldn’t.” I swallow hard as the memory flashes through my mir
it. terror and the pain I felt at the time, and how scared I was, thinking it v
fault, that everyone would blame me. “When I grew a bit older, he sta
1 a fewtouch me... in a more direct way.” I pause.

Celine stares, her mouth falling open in shock. “W-wait a moment
er whatstutters. “What...?” Her eyes flash silver as her fingers clench int
od runs“That fucking monster!” she hisses. Her genuine reaction gives
m if hecourage I need, and words start to flow.

“It started with touches here and there, you know, as a kid you son
feelingdon’t understand what’s going on. You know something is wrong, bu
same time, you don’t understand what or why it is. I just knew that
y otherwas my father’s friend, my family’s friend. He was there for Christn
questionholidays, for birthdays. He was like a member of the family. I
d is thisunderstand... He was very careful with his actions; he’d let mont
before touching me again. Now I realize that he did that so that in my
hing tomy childish mind, would think everything was normal again. He’d ma
I wouldn’t tell anyone. Then one day, when I was fourteen, he plied r
: I owealcohol, and then... he went all the way with me. I couldn’t even screa

“That piece of shit!” she spits out, fury flashing through her eyes. ‘
ges me.believe he would do something like that! Where is he now!? I would
will behave a word or two with him and give him a piece of my mind!” Sh

the little fork in her hand tightly, like she wants to drive it through his eye. Cyrus is swooning over her reaction. “What a vile, disgusting piece of work. I knew something felt off about him when I saw his slimy smile used just had that deceiving aura around him.”

The fact that she feels so angry for my sake makes me almost want to cry in relief. For many years, I was scared that my mate would blame me for what happened and would think I’m disgusting. I’m not sure what to say. Celine looks at me again, flecks of silver in her eyes still showing she’s about to anger. “Where is he now?” she growls.

Oh shit, she is hot when she is angry.

“Liam handled it for me,” I tell her quietly, hoping she won’t demand to see his fists. “He went there with his Betas and they detained him.” I pause. “I’m not sure what exactly happened. I want to hear yet.”

“Eric was there too?”

“To represent the Council,” I explain. When I told Liam everything Calvin was so close to running there and killing Calvin on the spot, but I wanted him to play it smarter, to make sure we find others he hurt...

...he didn’t have other victims. We discussed everything beforehand... he passed to our family’s pack lands. “Politics,” I mutter. “It sucks.”

She nods tentatively.

I’m still not sure how I want my parents to handle the situation. I don’t want to kill him without a trial, but it would look bad in front of the pack. He’ll announce what he did without saying my name, but it would raise questions.

“I can’t and I doubt it would remain a secret that it was about me. With Eric, I’d love the option to have the Council handle Calvin, which would probably be the worst outcome for him... The Council is able to free his wolf spirit from

is head. to actually turn him into a human, to strip him of his powers and gifts. trash. I me wants to see him suffering through them, but the other part of n uile. He scared. It might be the worst outcome for him... but also for me. It mean an open trial, and I'm sure Calvin would make sure to anno t to cry everyone that it was me he raped and molested.

me for Never once did he show me any mercy. He isn't going to go down ay. blurting my name out to everyone.

xtreme For now, he is in Silverlake's dungeons at the mercy of my pare Beta Vincent. Liam swore to me that Vince honestly didn't know w fellow beta was up to. He tested his reaction when he outed Calvin. rem me glad that at least one of my father's betas didn't betray us.

nd Eric. "I'm so sorry, Marius," Celine breaks the silence, her voice quiet, t I don't in her eyes sad. "This has to be so hard. I can't even imagine how har to be for you. You're so strong for how you handle it."

"I've hid it for so long," I admit. "It feels scary that other peopl ing, henow. Liam and I don't know if there are more victims... If they are, ve both fault."

in case "No, it's not! It's not your fault. You're not responsible for his a fore heshe says. "It's his fault, that disgusting psychopath."

"Liam and I weren't sure if Calvin... if he had any of my brothers know..." I finally say it out loud.

d could "Oh no," she says quietly.

e could "Liam had Finn present when he confronted Calvin, but it seems Fi estions, genuinely shocked. Thank Goddess."

ve have "And the twins?" she asks carefully.

r be the "We haven't told them yet," I admit. "I think Liam wants to q m him, Calvin and see if he touched any of them." I pause. "Aurelia knows

Part of Nox overheard the commotion and told her.”

She feels “Oh shoot,” she mutters.

She would “At least it saved me the hassle of telling her myself,” I sigh.

She once to “The beta’s bond to their alpha,” she muses quietly.

“As it should be,” I say bitterly. “Not like Calvin, who betrayed his without my father.”

Celine rubs over her face. “Honestly, now I wish I had suggested a private setting for this talk.”

She/that his “You couldn’t have known,” I tell her.

I’m so “I apologize for asking this now...” she looks at me. “Is this the reason you didn’t want me as your mate? You can be honest. If it had anything to do with me at all... if there was something else that I did or—”

She/it has I shake my head. “It had nothing to do with you,” I interrupt. “I thought I couldn’t ever tell anyone... that...” I find it difficult to find the right words, to explain what I felt. “I was so weak, Celine. I should have stopped him. I should have yelled, should have told my parents.

“The alpha’s son, a lycan with royal alpha blood, a fucking prince, for god’s sake!” she/it has “It shouldn’t have happened to me. I should have been stronger. I was so weak.”

She/... you “What?” she jolts back, shocked. “This is not your fault! He succeeded in manipulating you as a child and gaslit you. He made you believe you were alone. That’s how these predators normally do it. Marius, you’re a beta. Nothing can excuse what he did. And you, you just tried to deal with it the only way you knew how. You were just a child, Marius. Being an alpha has nothing to do with it.” She pauses. “Did you think you could not allow yourself to be close to anyone?”

She/though. “I never wanted a mate,” I admit. “Because my mate would find

knew I could hide it from everyone else, but my mate would something was wrong. It would eventually slip during a mind-link. nightmares and occasional panic attacks. But..." I look at her sadly. not an excuse for how I've treated you, or for the disrespect I've shown bond to She is silent for a long while. "I can't deny that you hurt me," she "You really went out of your way to push me away. You could have done a more in a civilized and respectful manner that you needed more time, that you issues to solve. I would have given you the room you needed."

"I was too caught up in my own mind," I mutter. "I was panicking, son you're right. It's not an excuse." She tilts her head. "I'm glad you told me, because now, at least I understand the reasons behind everything."

Before I can react, Cyrus makes his presence known, at least for me. "I'll be out here for a minute," he suddenly exclaims. *Don't blow it.* "What!? Where are you going?"

Linking my woman. Danica! Cyrus looks like I truly just asked the oddest stupid question ever. *I can leave you unsupervised for five minutes, can't I?* I'm so He doesn't give me any time to react, and instead blocks our connection for a moment. Maybe it's better that way. I'm talking to Celine here, and I have to be able to communicate with her without completely losing her wolf, and I have to be able to communicate with her without completely losing her backup from my lycan.

I look her straight in the eye. "I know I would deserve it if you reject me with it theme," I say nervously. "But I hope you don't." The mere thought of her rejecting me and choosing another man is soul-crushing, but I have to not stop her. My past and trauma are no excuse for how I treated her. I'm an absolute shit mate, and if Celine weren't the level-headed person she is, I would have rejected me long ago. Another woman wouldn't have agreed

noticemeet me here at all. However... “I really do want you, Celine,” I
I havehonestly. “I... I always wanted you, and I always will. I want you to
“That’ssthat. I’m thankful the moon goddess chose you as my mate, although
n you.” nothing to deserve you. I know it’s selfish, but I’m not ready to give you
admits.can’t even ask for your forgiveness because there is too much to forgive
told meif you allow me to prove my worth to you and that I’m a better mate
you hadwhat I’ve shown you so far... then I promise you, I won’t fuck it up again

She looks conflicted and torn, and part of me is thankful that she
ng. Butjust agreed out of pity. If it were just pity, she would have already said
can’t promise you anything,” she finally says. “I really can’t. Not yet. I
least, Ivery honored that you trusted me enough to share your past with me. It
a lot to my wolf and me. Danica is inside me, reaching out to your
She shifts around in her seat, her face scrunched in deep thought, making
wonder what kind of feelings she is battling with. “I’m willing to give you
chance to live up to the promise you just gave me now. At least for Danica
ie mostsake.”

’t I? I’m so shocked that my mouth drops open. I was so sure she would
nectionup and walk away, and that would be it. I feel a tiny spark of hope light
, not tome. Even if it might be a long path to acceptance, and even if she still
onstantentirely made up her mind, she’s giving me a chance. The only one
surprised than me is Cyrus, who has frozen in shock.

rejected Quite literally. He has popped up in my mind, just to sit there, eyes
of herjaw dropped open.

no right I take a deep breath. “Allow me to start anew.” I reach out my hand
was antowards her to shake it. “I’m Marius Alcott, second Prince of Silverlakes
is, sheI live in my brother’s pack though, Red Claw, originally to support him
greed todon’t think I’ve done too well up to now.”

tell her Her lips tug a bit, and I could swear there was a hint of a smile. She knows my hand, and I can feel the sparks through the bond. “I’m Celine Angh I did reign Alpha of Moon Blood, and half-witch. I have problems with you up. I others... just so you know. We’ll start as friends, I... I can’t promise. But, more than that yet.”

than “That’s already more than I expected,” I say, trying not to sound happy. “I’m more persistent than you think I am,” I add, with a hint of I haven’t She looks a bit surprised, which is new and great. I can’t wait to say yes. “I’ll have some more in the future. Now that I have a foot in the door, I’ll make I... I want to treat her like the queen she is.

It means Silence engulfs us for a moment, and it’s a bit awkward, until Celine can.” at me again. “Marius,” she pauses, looking at me through her beautiful eyes. “You told me what happened to you, and I’m relieved and thank you for what you did. I understand everything far better now. I know there is much more to your story, you aren’t ready to share yet. Please don’t feel obliged to share more than you can. If I ever ask too much, tell me to stop. And if you stand ready to talk, I’ll listen, but you don’t need to force yourself to do that. I don’t need to prove myself to me that way.”

I haven’t My eyes widen at her words. I was prepared for her to ask me questions, but she pepper me with them. The fact that she just said she’s willing to wait for me to come around makes my heart swell. At the same time, I feel so relieved, so wide, again. I wronged her so much, yet she’s here and ready to start anew. I’ll start as friends... or distant acquaintances. Hey, I’m taking whatever she offers me. At least it means she’s talking to me.

the pack.

and, but I

Her lips tug a bit, and I could swear there was a hint of a smile. She takes my hand, and I can feel the sparks through the bond. “I’m Celine Anderson, reigning Alpha of Moon Blood, and half-witch. I have problems with trusting others... just so you know. We’ll start as friends, I... I can’t promise you more than that yet.”

“That’s already more than I expected,” I say, trying not to sound too happy. “I’m more persistent than you think I am,” I add, with a hint of sass.

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Silence engulfs us for a moment, and it’s a bit awkward, until Celine looks at me again. “Marius,” she pauses, looking at me through her beautiful blue eyes. “You told me what happened to you, and I’m relieved and thankful that you did. I understand everything far better now. I know there is much more to your story, you aren’t ready to share yet. Please don’t feel obliged to tell me more than you can. If I ever ask too much, tell me to stop. And if you’re ready to talk, I’ll listen, but you don’t need to force yourself to do it. You don’t need to prove yourself to me that way.”

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THE THUNDERSTORM I

VALERIE

“Come, my princess.” Eric takes my hand and runs across the park with me. What sounds like frolicking through the courtyard during our romantic picnic date is actually us being chased by rain. We are so engrossed in conversation with each other that we didn’t sense the approaching thunderstorm until the first raindrops started to fall.

Eric’s perfect sandwiches and tarts he’d prepared for our picnic, are now a soggy mess drifting away in the flood. “The poor food,” I groan, saying I won’t be able to taste it all.

I squeal in surprise as Eric scoops me up in his arms. “We are far away, princess,” He grins.

He’s right. His long legs take us from the park right to the entrance of the hotel in a couple of minutes. Even with Eric running so fast, we are b

completely drenched on arrival. I start laughing when he puts me down. “Your wet T-shirt look suits you,” I tease, my eyes taking in his rugged physique. The white shirt sticks to his body, revealing the outline of a nice set of muscles. I should feel embarrassed undressing him with my eyes, but I’m not. I’m not the only one taking advantage of our wet clothing sticking in the right places, judging by Eric’s gaze on me. Unlike me, he does nothing about it; he’s too much of a gentleman.

“There is no way we can drive back in this storm,” he points out, furrowing his brows as he stares in the direction his car is parked.

I nod. He’s right; the rain is so heavy we can barely see a few feet ahead of us. Also, the wind is picking up, indicating that the storm is coming and fast. It almost feels like monsoon season, which is crazy since we don’t have them in this region.

A smile curls around Eric’s lips as he looks at me. “I think I’ve found a perfect way to get dry, have food, and continue our date.”

“How?” I ask curiously.

Eric points at the hotel behind us. “What do you think?”

It’s a classy hotel, one I’ve never stepped foot into before. I can’t describe it. I’m curious. “Let’s do it,” I agree.

The receptionist looks surprised to see us dripping from head to toe. Eric’s charm works miracles, along with his wallet, which obviously helps.

Ten minutes later, we have the key to a room... or so I thought. I’m a bit naïve that I didn’t even notice what Eric booked us into. “Eric,” I say.

“This is too big!”

“It’s the executive suite,” he explains. “Alternatively, we could have the presidential suite or the terrace suite. It’s raining, so no need for a car.”

n. “TheAnd I thought the presidential suite might have been over the top
ysique.purposes.”

abs. “Oh, and this isn’t?”

ot. And He chuckles. “How about you stop complaining and enjoy the mo
t all theA soft smile curls his lips. “This trip hasn’t cost me anything up un
n’t saybecause I’ve stayed with Liam and Annie at Red Claw. Allow me to
you. After being kidnapped, you deserve it.”

its out, I allow his words to sink in, before taking a deep, calming breath. “

I say, blushing slightly and feeling like a kid in a candy store. I sp
in frontnext hour inspecting everything in the suite while Eric dries himself of
ng hardbathroom. Once I’ve finished awwing and oohing at everything, I e
e don’tlittle discovery adventure with a hot bubble bath. There’s even a
bathrobe to wrap myself in afterward. I feel so good I can’t even p
got thewords how good I feel. After all the stress and fear I’ve suffered over
few months, I feel like I can finally let everything go.

Weirdly, everything that’s happened, as scarring as it has been, h
made me grow and shaped me into a stronger and more confident perso
ny that Finally, I feel relaxed enough to join Eric for our belated afternoon

Eric seems happy to see my genuine excitement over the hotel suite. S
toe, butso, he doesn’t even tease me about it, which is really sweet. We cha
/ helps.random things as we eat. I try some of the red wine Eric has ordered, ,
was socan’t stand, much to his amusement.

mutter. Eventually though, we touch on more serious topics. “Tell me

Paris,” I say after a while. “That’s where you live, right?”

ave had He nods. “Yes. The Council is based in Paris. There is no way
terrace.explain Paris though... I would rather show it to you.”

I smile. “Paris, huh...”

for our “I’m aware of how far away it is from your home. And you already I travel a lot,” Eric admits. “And I realize how much I’m asking of you would really love for you to come to Paris with me... And I would ment?”take you with me on all my travels for the Council, if you’re up for it.” til now It’d be sad leaving my pack behind, my parents in particular, but si pamperbest friend Jazz is moving away to Red Claw anyway, and I’ve nev anywhere, I think I’d like to travel. “I,” I lower my gaze. “I wa: ‘Okay,”growing up that we never even traveled within this country, but I end thedreamed of it... and I really want to see the world.” I blush. “That so if in theselfish though, doesn’t it?” Eric takes my hand. “Do you know why and mythe Moon Goddess fated you to me?”

i fluffy I shake my head.

out into “Because I don’t belong to any pack. I belong to the Council. Bei the lastme means that you won’t belong to a pack either. If you stayed in a pa would continue to be at risk from those who would want to use you f as also gift.”

on. “What do you mean?” I ask curiously.

picnic. “Henrick Sullivan is just the tip of the iceberg,” he explains. “The p o muchis in the core of any special gift. Pack members will rely on you to c it aboutand you will probably see it as your duty to heal and help them, which which I drain you. Enemies will want you. Your pack is a good one, with people, but you never know how fast things change.”

o about “I will put a target on their pack,” I muse. “When others know I hav gift, they might come for me.”

I could He takes my hand in his. “I’ll make sure nothing like this happens.”

“You said there are more wolves with special gifts at the Council?”

He smiles. “You certainly won’t be alone.”

I know, My heart makes a careful leap. I'm going to see the world... I think about it, but I would never leave my hometown. I can't describe this incredible happiness that's pulling me to visit all the places in the world I've only ever seen in pictures of.

Once my father says, "Will you come with me, Valerie?" he asks nervously.

Ever been there? "Yes," I say without further ado. "I would love to."

It's so still. He goes completely still. "Really?"

Always. "Yes. This will always be my home—"

And so. "And we can visit as much as you want," he points out.

I think about it. "But... it's like the world is calling to me, as weird as that sounds. A long pause. "There is just one thing..."

"And what's that?"

My education. "My education," I explain. "I would love to study."

Of course, you say. "Of course," he smiles. "I will support that anytime. What do you want to study?"

"I would like to study medicine," I admit. "I think I could really benefit from it."

He nods. "That's a fantastic idea. You can further your current education with training at the Council too."

I beam at him. "Really?"

Yes, the Council is used to protecting and training wolves with special gifts. They would be jumping over the moon to help you," he smiles. "Imagine there being not one Elden to train you, but a whole bunch of them."

I can't believe my luck. "This sounds fantastic." My mind trails off. I own. The prospect of traveling with Eric, studying medicine, and training to learn more about my gift... makes me feel so motivated and excited.

ought I suddenly. I will miss my parents and friends like crazy, but I can feel them come and visit them, and my parents can come to me whenever they want to be seen. Eric takes a call from Beta Emilien as I contemplate my future. He's looking at me and smiling while they talk. My gaze wanders to the window, watching the thunderstorm continuing outside. I feel so cozy and warm in here. I feel my attention being drawn back to Eric as he ends the call with Emilien. I can't get over how a few weeks ago, the mere thought of ever being touched by a man was scary to me, but with Eric, my body craves every part of it so much.

“Eric...” I start to say, then pause as Ailia retreats to the back of my room to give me the privacy I need.

He looks up from his papers, gaping when I drop my bathrobe to the floor and stand in front of him naked.

I usually tend to overthink everything, but since meeting Eric, my natural instincts have started to take over, and I'm finally ready to let them benefit me. A year ago, I would have never been this bold, but after everything I've been through, I want to experience everything so much more intensely. Eric stands and comes to me, scooping me up in his arms. I wrap myself around his waist, the rough texture of his clothes against my naked skin turning me on more. When he sits me down on the bed, my fingers find a special way to his belt and undo the buckle. His eyes flash with what I assume is pleasure as I begin to unbutton his shirt. I slowly reach for the button on his pants. “Eric presses me down onto the mattress, eager to take control.

He doesn't ask about my sexual history, and I don't ask about his. I'm a half-breed, a half-and-half of an androlycan with alpha blood, and a Prince of the Council, yet my past and all of my experience doesn't seem to matter to him. My heart swells with

always know that he would have accepted me with previous boyfriends
want. He would accept me with none.

As taking Eric's fingers glide over my exposed skin. "Goddess, Valerie, you
are heavy beautiful." I close my eyes, and he kisses my lips, my cheek, my
feel my before moving downwards. The stubble of his three-day beard scratches
me. I just skin, and it's the best feeling ever. His fingers eagerly tease and squeeze
touched of my nipples while his lips suckle the other.

He leaves a trail of kisses down my belly until reaching my private
him so He leaves a trail of kisses down my belly until reaching my private

Taking one of my legs, he gently lifts it and kisses along the inner part
of my thigh. His ministrations make me writhe on the sheets, battling the
spread my legs for him. I try to stifle my moans.

"You're still too tense," Eric teases. "It means you're not aroused enough
me floor

Let's fix that." He whispers. "Open up for me, I would like to taste your
body's His husky voice makes my core pulsate in anticipation. I spread my
feet out for him, and he places them on his shoulders before his head dips
between my thighs. I can feel his lips and tongue against my clit, lick
now. kissing me gently at first, before he adds more pressure with his tongue
my legs shocked at how sensitive I am, the sparks from the mate bond intensify
my body feeling. I feel one of Eric's fingers entering me, making me arch my
back and their "Eric," I moan. "This feels so good."

I can feel his mouth widen in a grin against my skin before he doubles
his effort, pleasuring me with his tongue and finger. I give in to the
sparks of pleasure, closing my eyes and relishing in the feeling. When
He's a finger suddenly hits a certain spot inside me, I gasp, pushing back against
his fingers for more friction. "Eric," I breathe out, my fingers waving
in the air downward to brush through his hair. "More," I beg. "I want to feel you
me."

just as “Whatever my princess wants,” Eric smirks.

He removes his boxers in record time, not giving me a chance to take your whole form. Part of me wants to touch his proud erection, the other part wants to feel him inside me. He’s hovering above me, my legs back on his shoulders again. I should feel exposed by the way he has me spread open, but I just don’t care. I want to feel his thick cock deep inside me. I grab his hair and pull him downwards into a kiss.

“You’re so hot, Val,” he growls, a hand moving under my back, the other massaging my breast. “You have completely earned me. So beautiful, and sweet, and hot, and smart.”

I feel his erection poking at my entrance, entering me slowly and steadily. It doesn’t hurt as bad as I’d thought it would. There was just a short moment of discomfort, but it’s gone fast.

“You too,” I gasp. “You’re hot, beautiful, and smart.” Maybe I should appear to him dirty things, and comment on how great his dick feels inside me. Right now, all I can tell him is how I feel. He seems to like it though, because I’m picking up his pace, his hips snapping forward with more fervor. I wrap my arms around his chest, trying to feel as much of his skin against my back as possible.

I love how I can feel him inside me and all around me. “More,” I whisper. “Eric, please more!”

“Fuck,” Eric pants. “Val.”

He fucks me relentlessly now, hitting that sweet spot over and over until I’m starting to see stars. “Mark me!” I choke out. I know I can’t mark him yet, because I can’t shift, but I still want to carry his mark! I want to be connected by that unbreakable bond.

He doesn’t need any more invitations. The instant I said it, I f

elongated teeth against the tender nape of my neck, grazing the mark
e in his first before biting down on my neck. For a moment, it feels like the
part just freezes around me. The noise of the rain thudding against the windo
: on his even Eric's carnal moans disappear in this blissful moment. Instead
oen, but sparks going through my body and the bond snapping fully into
him by connecting me to Eric and his emotions. I feel it all suddenly, his l
want, and his love for me. The sensation makes me nearly pass out fi
holding bliss. It's like I've lost control of my own body. As I cling to Eric's ar
chanted body arches, and I feel my orgasm tear through my body, making me
out his name.

eadily. I

would,

ould tell

But for

ause he

rap my

nine as

' I beg.

r again,

't mark

nt us to

feel his

elongated teeth against the tender nape of my neck, grazing the marking spot first before biting down on my neck. For a moment, it feels like the world freezes around me. The noise of the rain thudding against the windows and even Eric's carnal moans disappear in this blissful moment. Instead, I feel sparks going through my body and the bond snapping fully into place, connecting me to Eric and his emotions. I feel it all suddenly, his lust, his want, and his love for me. The sensation makes me nearly pass out from the bliss. It's like I've lost control of my own body. As I cling to Eric's arms, my body arches, and I feel my orgasm tear through my body, making me scream out his name.

THE THUNDERSTORM II

CELINE

I thought I would have enough time to run to my car and make it before the thunderstorm struck full force, but one glance at the clouds tells me otherwise. Thick raindrops are starting to fall, and I can't see anything beyond the wall of rain.

"Celine!" Marius yells, rushing back towards me through the heavy rain. We'd just bid our goodbyes—with me still second-guessing all the decisions I've made today. I'm surprised to see he's come back so fast. "Let's get out of the rain," he tells me. "You would be driving right into the epicenter of the storm if you left now."

He's right, driving back to Moon Blood would lead me directly toward the thunderstorm. "Did you just come back to tell me that?" I ask.

A strong wind picks up, howling around us. “What did you say?” I
toward me. “I didn’t catch that.”

“Why did you come back?” I yell through the noise.

“There is no way I would let you stay here in the rain on your own
says, looking around frantically. Starbucks is overcrowded right now
seems like he is looking for an alternative. He points at the building
right. “Come on, let’s get in there!”

“The indoor aquarium?” I ask, surprised.

“It’s the closest to us, aside from Starbucks,” he explains. “The
restaurant or coffee shop is further down the road; we’d be drenched
time we reached it. Besides, who knows if there is even space there.”

He’s right. “Let’s go,” I agree.

We both take a deep breath, and I count down from three, before
off and race toward the aquarium. The last time I visited it, I was still
at home. It’s a beautiful place, with a huge indoor aquarium, and it’s a popular
blackspot on normal days. It’s completely deserted though. “We are not
soon today,” the security guard at the entrance tells us.

Marius looks at him beggingly. “We have nowhere else to go
in the rain,” he explains. “I will pay for our visit, but please let us in.”

I notice a few other people running toward the aquarium too. They
get out have had a similar idea.

The guy looks at us and then at the storm outside. “Yeah,” he
“Can’t send you out there. At least you don’t look like serial killers.”

I smile at him. “Thank you, that’s very kind!”

He warms up under my smile. “No problem, missy. The restaurant
open today, obviously, but there are vending machines.” He lets us
small crowd of five people behind us in and leads us toward the main

He calls the aquarium. It's so weird to be in here now. While it's completely indoors, we can see the weather outside. It's a bit scary, almost like we're surrounded by the forces of nature. "You a couple?" the man asks us.

"No," he says. Marius shrugs. "I'm working on it," he states.

He has some nerve! I can't help but snort. Once we are on our own, he makes his way toward a vending machine and gets us two cans of soda and two Mars bars. Then we sit down on one of the benches to wait.

"Looks like we won't be leaving this place anytime soon," he says, and he can barely hide his joy at that thought.

I sigh. What has gotten into me? One part of me feels giddy to be here with Marius, and to see him actually putting effort into this. Then another part of me still feels wary and disappointed by how he treated me before, and yet another part of me feels so pissed about everything he had to endure as a child.

I decide to talk it out with my better half. *I don't know how to feel about all this, Danica...*

That's okay, she says. You don't need to rush anything, and we can take our time. You don't need to figure everything out at once.

The mate-bond is exhausting sometimes, I mutter.

Could you leave him though? After everything he's told you?

I shake my head. No, I admit, feeling how the fury inside me is growing again. Calvin. That vile creature. I knew something felt off about him even try to imagine what he did... I have to fight all of my instincts now and run to the dungeons of Silverlake and give him a fucking piece of my mind. How dare he hurt an innocent child. How dare he hurt our mate! Danica growls.

Right then, the indoor aquarium is illuminated by lightning, reminding

indoors, that I'm indoors right now... surrounded by humans.

ounded I can't let her out right now.

We'll make sure to make him pay, she huffs.

I nod, allowing my thoughts to calm down a bit. *I didn't give Marius chance just out of pity, I finally admit. It's... I can understand him now. I can still remember how I was back when my brother and Mo*

Everyone handles pain differently. I just wish he wouldn't have been so kind and heass to me before.

You know, Danica says after a while. You said you would give me chance as friends. Start from there. There was a reason you gave him part of promise to try. It's okay to feel hurt, but don't base your decision on pride.

are as a *If this doesn't work, then we will both get hurt, I point out.*

I know, I'm still not happy with the human, but his wolf is genuinely loyal about and he promised me his human is whole-heartedly in this. I think it's worth trying.

certainly I rub my temples. She's right. I gave Marius my promise that we could become friends for now. Retracting from my promise now would leave a bad taste, besides... I don't want to retract. I want to give us a chance. I want to see if there is still a glimmer of hope for us to make it

growing I'm too proud, and I know it. It's my alpha blood making this even harder, but to for me. I have forgiven my father for neglecting me for years, and my grandmother for not being in my life at all, and my grandfather for leaving me. I have even forgiven my pack members for questioning my authority because I'm a woman.

This here is different though. I assume that's because we are not expecting him to be by my side and accept and cherish me. But he didn't

that hurts me more than anything else.

I would have cherished and loved him, and helped him through his as well as I could.

Marius a Still, I genuinely want to give him a chance... or I wouldn't be here better can work on everything now, and maybe we both needed to have our *m died* bond almost be severed for us to grow into the persons we are now. *such an* my grief without relying on my mate, and he faced his trauma depending on me.

him a There is just one more thing I need to know. It's something I had *m your* mind ever since I saw Marius kissing that she-wolf.

on your "Say... Marius," I start earnestly. "How many women have you been with since we found out we were mates?" I know, technically, I would have known if he betrayed the bond, but our mate bond became so weak over time *y good*, can't be certain unless I hear it directly from him. I feel like I need to be *s worth* able to move on together with him. I know he has been quite a womanizer before, and I assume it's been part of his coping mechanism *ould try* the years of sexual abuse he faced. Betraying the mate bond is grounds *ld only* wolves... yet I want to know now instead of later, even if it will slow down *both a* our progress.

t work. "None," he says promptly.

t harder "What!?" I look at him, surprised, not allowing myself to succumb to *y great-*glimmer of hope. "I promise, I'm not asking to hold this against you. I *ying to* want to know so we can move on from it."

city just "I'm not going to lie," he says quietly, looking flustered. "Right from the *beginning*, when we first met, I was so shocked at having found my mates. I *nates.* I rushed away, ready to grab the next-best woman. But she didn't accept *l't.* And

me at all, and I left without doing anything. I couldn't get you out
traumahead... all the time, I kept thinking of you."

It's still bad enough that he tried, but I admit to feeling relieved
ere. Weleast he respected the mate bond a bit. "And that girl you kissed during
ur mateparty?" I ask curiously.

I faced He winces. "I didn't want to kiss her," he stutters. "I know I
withoutpathetic, but she kiss-attacked me out of the blue. I... I did flirt w
though."

on my "Why?"

"I was jealous because you were so... beautiful, and everyone at th
en withnoticed how beautiful you are," he points out.

e felt it "You're aware of how pathetic that reason is?" I want to know.

e that I "I'm absolutely aware of it," he admits. He turns to look at me, his
know tosincere. "I did a lot of shitty things, and I'm not denying that I se
iite theconsidered making this mistake too. But I haven't had sex with anyor
m fromwe met."

ave for I let out a shaky breath. "Okay," I say, more to myself than to him.

v down "I didn't realize how much I had been suppressing what happened

he says after a while. "How deep this trauma really went. Then whe
you, it all came to the surface again. And you took the brunt of it
o to theforever feel sorry for that."

1. I just I rub my temples. "Alright," I say after a while. "We need to make
break here." He looks at me, shocked and horrified. I shake my head.

t at thenot what I mean," I reassure him. "We both know what's happened
ate thatthe last few months, and that things haven't run smoothly between u
peal toI'm sure there will be times when we need to sit down and talk about t

of mythere is no use in bringing it up and rehashing the bad memories during meeting.”

ow. At “Are you sure you’re alright with this?” he asks, looking at me and Eric’sIt surprises me to see him so insecure around me. For the first time aware of just how many emotions he has suppressed during the soundmonths... and now, he suddenly seems so vulnerable.

with her “I might backpedal occasionally, and be petty sometimes over the admit. “But for now, I would like it if we just got to know each other our recent history. I know nothing about you, and you don’t know the partyabout me either. So, that would be a good start. Let’s pretend we have history with each other, and just found out we are mates.”

He nods, his eyes lighting up with hope. “I would love that.”
gaze is We fall into silence again, but this time it’s far less awkward. When I seriouslyback at Marius, I can see how he’s staring at the illuminated water and the fish swimming around. He looks so beautiful, and graceful.

first time in a long while, I allow myself to look at him properly, to his beautiful and soft features, his graceful body, the perfectly tu to me,”beard... and those eyes. Deep, beautiful, but with a hint of sadness.

n I met The room itself is dimmed. Lightning strikes close to us.

. I will “This is like something out of a horror movie,” he mutters all of a sudden. “Absolutely,” I agree. “Is this the moment we get attacked?”

a clean “Where is the axe murderer going to strike next?” he asks.

“That’s I laugh. “I didn’t know you were into horror movies.”

during “I’m not,” he chuckles. “I hate them, I always get freaked out. And the is. Andthe gory stuff too.”

his, but “Then what kind of movies do you like?” I want to know. “Action?”
“Nope,” he shakes his head. “I like arthouse movies.”

g every I stare at him. “No way! Like those complicated, artistic dep
movies?”

iously. “Exactly,” he grins. “I also like classics and theatre, and even some
ne, I’mEric does too, so the last time we met up, I actually went to the ope
re pasthim. We watched a Richard Wagner play.”

“You and Eric?” I say in disbelief. “I can see Eric visiting the thea
past,” Iopera, but you?”

outside “I’m not lying,” he grins. “We watched Lohengrin.”

v much “You’re telling me you sat through almost four hours of opera?” I c
ave noto question him.

He grins. “Hey, what have I ever done for you to question me like
he asks. Before I can even open my mouth, he raises his hand in c
1 I look“Forget that I asked that.”

ound us I raise my brows at him, but don’t comment. “Richard Wagner,” I s
For thea while, chuckling softly. “I can’t believe it.”

take in He wiggles his brows. “I’m full of surprises.”

rimmed I look at him, amused. “I’m starting to realize that.”

idden.

d I hate

,

I stare at him. “No way! Like those complicated, artistic depressing movies?”

“Exactly,” he grins. “I also like classics and theatre, and even some operas. Eric does too, so the last time we met up, I actually went to the opera with him. We watched a Richard Wagner play.”

“You and Eric?” I say in disbelief. “I can see Eric visiting the theatre and opera, but you?”

“I’m not lying,” he grins. “We watched Lohengrin.”

“You’re telling me you sat through almost four hours of opera?” I continue to question him.

He grins. “Hey, what have I ever done for you to question me like that?” he asks. Before I can even open my mouth, he raises his hand in defense. “Forget that I asked that.”

I raise my brows at him, but don’t comment. “Richard Wagner,” I say after a while, chuckling softly. “I can’t believe it.”

He wiggles his brows. “I’m full of surprises.”

I look at him, amused. “I’m starting to realize that.”

SISTERS

CELINE

The storm whipped through the forest with a lot of force, but fortunately it didn't do much damage. There were just a few trees knocked and the river closest to the mountain flooded into a nearby meadow. We were able to clear the damage within a few days.

No pack members were harmed, thankfully, which is all that matters. It's a little damage to some homes but it's nothing we can't repair.

"Does this mean you were stuck inside with Marius for hours?" asks me in surprise. I've finally told him what's been going on in my life. Harmony knows everything already, but I've decided that Garrett, the pack's gamma and my third in command now, needs to know too. He's my gamma after all, that's why he's my gamma after all.

I snort, "Yes, but after the initial shock, it wasn't too bad."

“Do you think it will work out between you?” Harmony asks me.

“I have no idea.”

“Just let me know if and when you need me to kick his butt,” Garret with a grin. “Or, in case you want me to hold a match-making party with all the eligible single wolves out there. We could literally do a wolf version of *The Bachelorette*.”

“Yes, Garret,” I state dryly. “No.”

I decide to ignore his teasing comments and head over to see Mar Jazz. Jazz has moved to Red Claw now, and today Liam will make official pack member. She is here to say her official goodbyes to everyone. I’ve already reassured her that she will always be welcome in this pack and wants to visit or return for whatever reason. The obvious bite on her shoulder tells me she’s already been marked, so I’m assuming things are going well between her and Aryanna. Not that I had any doubts.

Finally, “Don’t be a stranger,” Harmony says and squeezes her shoulder.

And over, “Yes,” Marcel hugs her once more. “This is your home, and you have your big bro here. Don’t abandon me totally, or I’ll be lonely.”

Jazz smiles as tears fill her eyes. “I owe you everything, Marcel,” she says firmly. “You took care of me when Mom and Dad died, and you’ve been the best older brother a girl could ask for. You will always have Garret in my life, and I expect to see you at least once a week.” She turns her attention to Luca, who is standing next to Marcel, looking a little lost.

“Luca,” Jazz smiles brightly at him. “Please take care of my big brother. I trust you? Like you did for Val.”

Luca’s eyes widen at the familial responsibility she is giving him, and he nods firmly. “Of course, Miss Jazmine,” he says.

That’s a smart move from her, I think. We are all well aware that

saved Luca, but she encouraged him to stand with her against his brother in order to escape. We need to make sure he never forgets how she was.

Luca has settled in here over the last week. He's even started training Marcel and Garret to help him connect to his wolf. His wolf has been suppressed by the silver collar for so long that it will take a while for it to come forward.

Aryanna packs the last of Jazz's bags in her car before joining us. She pulls Jazz into her arms and smiles brightly at Marcel. "We expect you on everyone for lunch, Marcel, and you too, mini warrior," she winks at Luca. "You know if she come too."

Luca looks a bit confused, but returns her smile and nods.

We all watch Jazz drive off, waving until the car has disappeared from sight. Valerie wasn't here to say goodbye, but that's because she is at Red Claw with Eric anyway. She and Jazz will have plenty of time to say their goodbyes. I'm assuming that Valerie will soon be leaving us for Paris. She hasn't officially announced when they are going yet, but my gut feeling says it won't be long. Maybe a few days?

Harmony, Garret, and I go back to organizing the usual training schedule. As we head outside for a break, and to catch a few rays of the afternoon sun, we see Eric dropping Valerie off at her parents' house. They are sharing a lengthy, passionate kiss when Harmony cries out, "She's marked! Come on, brother, look how happy she looks."

We watch Val run off toward her parents' house, smiling widely. "I think I've ever seen her so relaxed or joyful before," I point out.

"You've known her since her birth, right?" Garret asks.

I nod. "She was like a little sister to me, you could say. I've always

her and on her. Looking back, I think Lauren was always jealous of my
brave relationship with Valerie.” I’m really going to miss Val when she leaves.

“I would be happy to leave with that hot mate of hers too,” Garret says without dryly. “But don’t tell Elias I said that,” He adds quickly.

is been Harmony and I exchange a glance and chuckle. “Our lips are sealed,” I promise him to Harmony promises.

“Speaking of Elias...” I start.

He pulls Garret looks at me curiously. “Yes?”

Sunday “I think it might be time to start digging into what’s happening in the
of you can pack, Blood Snow. Something feels off.” I look at Garret. “Prepare Elias for
that talk. I don’t want to hit him out of the blue.”

“He doesn’t talk about his past much,” Garret confesses.

from our “I know, and I respect his trauma and his desire for privacy, but I
staying know what’s going on there. I have an awful feeling about it. From the
to say he has told us, and the few things we’ve managed to gather, the behavior
is. Eric that pack is very unsettling.”

ing says Garret nods. “I’ll talk to him. I think he trusts us enough to share some
not all, of what happened to him there.”

chedules. “If you need help, let us know,” I offer.

on sun, Garret smiles slightly. “Even if it might get ugly, he won’t ever harm
aring a Elias... he... you know he accepted me as his mate right away, and
Oh, and Blood Snow doesn’t accept same-sex mates. Okay, his emotional acceptance
took a while, but he was so ready to leave everything behind and come
‘I don’t Moon Blood with me from the beginning.”

“Subconsciously, he was probably relieved to have a way out,” Harmony
mutters.

s doted “Even more reason to find out what the hell is happening there,” I say

y close The other two nod. “You can count on me, Alpha,” Garret promises
es.

I have so much paperwork to do that I head back inside and lock m
t pointsmy office for the remainder of the afternoon. I’m surprised by the
beeping on my phone at 6.30pm, reminding me that I’m supposed t
sealed,” Valerie’s parent’s house for dinner in 15 minutes with Harmony and D

It smells wonderful when we arrive, like roasted potatoes and lamb
Eric is in the sitting room drinking a glass of wine with Val’s father.
my father greets his old friend happily, then turns to Eric. “Prince E
his oldgreet him with a smile and a slight nod.

lias for “Come on in, everyone,” Dan waves at us.

Why did they invite me? Harmony asks as we step inside. *This is b
a family dinner. Am I not out of place?*

*I think we are invited because they have to discuss something offic
e piecesus,* I point out. *Besides, Dan and your dad are old friends too. He’s p
avior injust being nice.*

She smiles and nods. “Where are the girls?” Harmony asks while m
ome, ifaccepts a glass of wine.

“They are busy gossiping,” Dan chuckles.

“We are not!” Val peeks into the room, her eyes lighting up when s
urt me.us. “Alpha Celine, Beta Harmony, it’s so nice of you to come.”

I can’t believe this bubbly, energetic girl in front of us is Val. She’s
eptanceso much recently that I hardly recognize her from the frail and timi
ome toknew growing up.

“Please, no formalities tonight,” I chuckle.

armony “She’s right,” Eric chimes in. “Everyone, please drop the titles.”

Everyone agrees to drop the formalities just as Betty calls us to the
ay. table. Dinner is pleasant and informal, and it’s nice to see Dan and my

look so relaxed and happy. As beta and alpha, they both went through tough times together. Betty is mostly smiling too, but occasionally I can see her smile waver as she looks over at her daughter. She's not sad per se, but I assume it's not easy letting go of a child.

As the meal draws to an end, Eric's posture changes slightly in his seat, drawing our attention to him. He puts his arm around Valerie's shoulder. "Dan," he looks directly at me. "Celine, Valerie and I have something to tell you. Eric," he turns his attention to Val, who nods and throws him a loving glance.

They are both so obviously smitten with each other. I'm surprised when Valerie starts speaking instead of Eric. "I wanted to tell you myself. Dad and I already know. I... I'll be going to Paris with Eric."

I nod and smile. "I had a feeling you would say that."

"Really?" She looks relieved.

"Yes, Eric is a prince of the Council. The Council will be a wonderful opportunity for you to grow and strengthen your gift," I say.

Harmony nods in agreement. "That's fantastic news, Valerie!"

"I'll also be studying medicine," she explains, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Eric and I already looked at some universities. There is an international university that teaches in English, but I'll obviously want to learn French too."

Eric takes her hand into his, and beams at her. "And Valerie will be growing training with some of the mentors of the Council. Uncle Elden already has a few of his most trusted friends, and they will make sure to take her under their wings."

"It feels a bit weird," Val admits. "I'm so sad to be leaving this home behind, but I'm also looking forward to all the new challenges."

"Honey," Betty pulls her daughter into her arms. "We will visit you often as possible, and we expect you to visit us too. We just want you to be happy."

h somehappy. And as hard as it is to let you go, your father and I are so happy
can seeare going to spread your wings.”

ie, but I Dan nods. “You’ve always been a light in our life. Even though you
often sick as a child, you always had a kind word for everyone, and
his seat,gave us your smile. After what happened with Lauren, you were our p
der andsupport. We are so very proud of the person you have become.”

” Eric smiles warmly at their words. “Please do visit us regularly. You
g gaze.that my mother died long ago, and I’m grateful to finally have a
ren Valagain.”

d Mom Dan and Betty nod at him. “You will treat her well, won’t you?” Da
“Of course,” Eric beams. “She’s my princess, after all.”

“How long until you leave?” I ask.

“Three weeks,” Eric explains. “I’ve extended my stay a bit lon
nderfulValerie to say her goodbyes. Then we will travel to Spain for a few
have a meeting there, and Val’s agreed to accompany me. In the futu
hoping Val would not only join me on these trips as my mate, but I w
ith joy.to become an active participant in my meetings too.”

nal one Val flushes a bit. “I’m kinda nervous about that.”

“I don’t know much about the Council,” I tell her, “But Liam and
will bementioned that Lycans are far less patriarchal than werewolf clans. I’
y spokethey would be very interested to have you participate, especially cons
Valerieyour gift.”

“I told you,” Eric nudges her playfully. “Besides, Elodie and Elise
s placethere too. I bet you will become fast friends.”

“Friends with the double trouble?” Harmony grins. “Annie said that
you asyou and your Beta call them.”

u to be “I can’t deny that,” Eric chuckles. “After the meeting, we will stay

happy you days to see Barcelona, and then it's back to Paris and into our new

Also, I think Uncle Elden is slowly wrapping his head around the
you weretaking over the throne. He just wants to make sure his pack has a su
alwaysfirst."

pillar of "So, your trip really was successful," Harmony grins.

Eric smirks. "I'm one lucky man, aren't I?" he looks adoringly at hi
u know "But finding Valerie was the best part."

family Later that evening, when the group moves into the living room for d
catch Valerie eyeing me. *Can we talk?* She links me. *In private?*

n asks. I nod, curious about what she wants to tell me. We tell the other
heading out for some fresh air—they barely notice we're stepping
anyway. Only Eric looks knowingly at us and nods to Val encouraging
ger for curiosity grows. "Alpha," Valerie starts once we're outside. "I... t
days. Isomething I want to tell you. I think you should know."

ire, I'm "What do I need to know?" I ask, worried.

want her "Lauren wrote to me."

I stare at her. I don't know what I'd expected, but certainly not the
did?" I ask, not sure how to react. Suddenly, I wonder how it wi
l EldenMarius and I work things out... will he be the pack's luna then? V
d thinkknow how to deal with these awkward conversations?

sidering "She apologized," Val adds, shocking me further. "You know, M
Dad barely visit her, but they see it as their duty to at least check on he
will be few months."

I nod tentatively. I'm not a mother yet, so I can't truly understand
's whatparent would feel in such a situation, but I can see why they still
obligation and responsibility to at least check on their imprisoned daug
y a few "Mom told me that Lauren..." Val swallows thickly. "She isn't rea

reality to see where she went wrong. The results of the psychological screening idea of us that, unfortunately, she has sociopathic tendencies. She won't be access the prison ever, I think. However, Mom said I'm the only one Lauren worry and concern about."

"You're her sister," I muse. "Lauren never showed it, but she d is mate about you."

"She knows I found my mate," Val explains. "She doesn't know w l rinks, I but she knows I have a mate. She wrote me a letter, and said she's ha me, and hopes he treats me well. She apologized for being a bad sist s we're she said she doesn't expect a reply. She just wanted me to know t ing outwishes me all the best." Val pauses. "Is it bad that I feel happy that m gly. My sister wrote to me and showed me that she cares, at least a bit?"

here is "Not at all," I reassure her. "What do you want to do now?"

"Nothing," Val smiles a bit. "I'm happy to know that she loved me least, but for now, I need to move on. Maybe in a few years, I'll ansv but not now."

it. "She I smile at her, feeling proud, as if she were my own sister. I sti ll be if believe how much she's changed from being a shy and anxious chi Will he confident young woman. As for Lauren, I'm not sure what's truly goir her mind, but I'm glad she was able to provide Val with the clos om and needed.

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"You're her sister," I muse. "Lauren never showed it, but she did care about you."

"She knows I found my mate," Val explains. "She doesn't know who it is, but she knows I have a mate. She wrote me a letter, and said she's happy for me, and hopes he treats me well. She apologized for being a bad sister, and she said she doesn't expect a reply. She just wanted me to know that she wishes me all the best." Val pauses. "Is it bad that I feel happy that my crazy sister wrote to me and showed me that she cares, at least a bit?"

"Not at all," I reassure her. "What do you want to do now?"

"Nothing," Val smiles a bit. "I'm happy to know that she loved me a bit, at least, but for now, I need to move on. Maybe in a few years, I'll answer her, but not now."

I smile at her, feeling proud, as if she were my own sister. I still can't believe how much she's changed from being a shy and anxious child to a confident young woman. As for Lauren, I'm not sure what's truly going on in her mind, but I'm glad she was able to provide Val with the closure she needed.

CRAVINGS

MARIUS

I don't know how Liam did it, but none of my siblings have come to me about what happened to me. I'm sure they all know, but none of them tell me any differently. Yesterday, when I briefly visited Silverlake for a moment with the guards, I heard that Calvin is gone. They told me that my parents were furious with him, something about a major betrayal, and that he is now locked in the dungeons.

It's the main gossip of the pack, but they don't appear to know any more. No one knows it's because of me.

I'm not sure I want to know what truly went down between my parents and Calvin. Eventually, I'll need to know... but for now, I just want to ignore that he exists. I'm not sure what my parents will tell the pack, or how they

to look for other victims. I will have to talk with them one day, but I do it at my own pace, and I'm glad my family is giving me the space I

After taking my first steps toward getting Celine to forgive me, it's time to apologize to someone else, someone I haven't treated well from the first moment we met. I wander through the pack house, noticing how the pack members actually greet me. Some of the elite warriors from my old group call out to me and ask me when I plan to join them again.

Their kindness is really humbling... and puts me to shame. I wasn't used to being much around the pack before, I didn't even try to mingle with anyone, but they still treat me as one of them. For the first time ever, I take the opportunity to greet them back properly and exchange a few words.

I finally reach the alpha suite, knocking at the door before I can say a word. I guess myself. I'm shocked that Dante let me pass him in the corridor. I knock now. I'd have thought he would at least ask where I was going. I knock on the door. Liam told him it's okay in case I came by.

He opens the door. "Yes?"

"It's me," I answer nervously. "Marius."

"Come in."

I open the door, pausing before entering. "I'm surprised you are allowing me to come in," I mutter.

Annie rolls her eyes. "Believe me, I would throw a punch at you if I could. Unfortunately, I can't move an inch."

She's sitting on the sofa, her massive belly preventing her from getting up on her own. I scan the room and see that she's alone. "Why didn't you call for help?"

"Goddess, no. Ella fusses over me like a mad woman. Aryanna is reading tons of pregnancy literature and enlightens me with all kinds of

want to details I never wanted to know. Liam acts like I'm sick. Jun stares at me in need. I've grown a second head, the poor kid, and Dante decided he needs to step into his fatherly role and lectures me every chance he gets." She grabs her wand from the stick and points it at me. "Just grab the other end and pull me up."

How many I smile. "Will I get punched if I do?"

training She narrows her eyes. "Help me up, and we will see."

I approach, grabbing Annie's arm and helping her to her feet. I don't do anything surprised Liam is getting nervous; she is really far into her pregnancy with me, yet "If anyone ever tells you being pregnant is fun... don't believe them because of me. I'm massive, my feet are swollen, and I look ugly."

"You look beautiful," I state calmly. It's the truth.

second- "I'm humongous. I don't walk anymore, I waddle."

for just "Should I carry you?" I offer.

assume "Absolutely. I'm so heavy right now I might throw your back out if I carry you back in hospital again." Annie snaps sarcastically, before she turns to me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to take my anger out on you."

"No, please be my guest. I deserve it."

"It feels good to lash out at someone." She sighs dramatically.

allowing "What's wrong with Liam? I bet he'd happily take your anger."

"That's the problem. He doesn't even bat an eye at my insults. He looks at you, but takes it all in stride." She furrows her brows in annoyance. "Seriously, it doesn't matter what I say or do, it's all..." she pauses, lowering the volume of her voice.

... "Mate needs us."

you call I laugh at the way she tries to imitate Fenris.

"You are going to be wonderful parents," I smile at her, my gaze shifts towards her belly. "Twins, huh? And you still won't tell anyone the gender of the kids."

Her eyes glint in mischief. "It's the only power I have over everyone."

me like pats my arm. “So, make me some tea, then you can sit down and take a what’s happening with you and Celine.”

walking “Don’t you want to hear my apology first?”

She smiles. “I don’t need an apology, I get it. Look at me just now, I look a bit flustered. “Being super bitchy, and I’m only pregnant. I’d be lying if I said that I fully grasp the horrors you’ve been through,” she admits. “I’m not one who hasn’t experienced abuse can truly understand it, but I’m sorry now. Thank you for facing your past and working hard to overcome your trauma. It takes true strength, and I know you’ll be a good mate to Celine now.”

That is so like her to say. I nod, thankful for how easy she’s making it for me. “I will try.”

“Oh, and before you go, give me your chocolate bar. I can smell it in your pocket.”

and put “I’m pretty sure that was on Dante’s no-go list,” I muse.

sighing. “Don’t argue with a pregnant woman, and give me that freaking chocolate bar, now!”

I hand her the chocolate bar with a chuckle. “How about I get some food to bring us lunch?” I offer. “I haven’t eaten anything, and Marilou told me on my way up here that the kitchen is making wraps today.”

He just Her eyes light up at the idea of lunch. “Really?”

usly, it “Yes, what fillings do you want?”

tone of She tilts her head, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Well, how about chicken, cucumber, pineapple, broccoli, and gorgonzola... oh, and M&M’s. I must have looked at her horrified because she suddenly bursts into giggles.

shifting “You should have seen your face just now. Liam looked the same when he looked at you the first time.” She laughs. “No, I don’t want anything that’s too sweet.”

She “Make it chicken, broccoli, and gorgonzola for me. Tell them to heat it up for me.”

tell me gorgonzola though, just to be safe. Oh, and maybe some nachos... and definitely olives!"

Still weird, I think, but wisely don't comment on it. I link the kitchen," she and ask them to bring lunch upstairs. They are super keen to pamper me lying Luna, so not even ten minutes later, two guys are at the door with outfits. "No They also brought some freshly baked apple pie for us. "We just made you proud Luna," one of the young guys beams at Annie. "We thought maybe you would like it."

Her face lights up with a bright smile. "That's so sweet of you, Toby." "I have to go," he beams at her before leaving with his colleague in tow. "I have to go home." "How do you remember everyone's names," I point out, impressed. "I learned that skill from your mother," she starts munching on her chocolate. "I learned that skill from your mother," she starts munching on her chocolate sighing happily. "Flora always told me it's important to mingle with the crowd, to know what's going on and treat everyone as individuals. She said it's so important to connect with them."

"Smart woman," I state dryly, making Annie giggle slightly. "I'll be here for you." "We sit down to eat together in companionable silence. After a few minutes Annie looks contemplatively at me before saying, "You know, you can come to me if you want to, Mari. If not, that's fine too."

I decide to go for it. Annie knows about my past, and the fact that she is not judgmental at all makes this so much easier. I don't say much about Calvin, and rather focus on Celine and why I was so scared of the match with Ms. "I keep my eyes on Annie as I talk, noticing how she nods here and there and giggles. Sometimes, she subconsciously touches her belly. I'm reminded of the time when I did vision I had when I thought I was dying, something I haven't told anyone about. "You know, when I almost died," I tell her, "I always thought that moment would feel like a relief, a comfortable and warm numbing drug."

l olives, everything, but it was the exact opposite. I felt cold and dark. And the
this dream...or vision.”

en staff “What of?” she asks me softly.

er their “I saw Celine,” I admit. “We were on a beach together, and s
ir food. smiling. You know, she doesn’t smile a lot, but this smile... it was re
de this, she was holding a little boy by his hand.”

be you Annie stays quiet, just listening.

“It showed me what could have been if I hadn’t fucked it all up,” I a
y.” “No. It showed you what can be, if you don’t fuck up again,” she c
no ideame.

“Do you really think that’s possible?” I ask skeptically. “I know C
r wrap, agreed to talk to me, and she said she’s willing to try and build some
ie pack, friendship. But going from here to... there...”

aid it’s “It might be a long journey,” she muses. “But it’s not impossibl
maybe you almost lost her, Marius, and you almost broke the mate bo
it’s not too late. Celine is still here, and she is willing to give you or
minutes, chance. But she is an alpha wolf, and you know more than anyone hov
can talk and strong-headed you alphas can be. But also, you know how impor
mate bond is to an alpha, and how protective they are over their ma
t she is pack.”

n about I smile. “I’m very aware of that,” I say. “I won’t fuck it up again.”

e bond. “Please try to understand. Celine lost her mother and little brothe
d there. she was young, her mother was literally slaughtered by rogues in front
hat one and Alpha Cedric was so consumed by his grief that she practically l
anyone. too. He never lashed out against her or anything, but she was left a
y death deal with her grief for years. Celine basically raised herself. She’s ac
own of strong and tough that we tend to forget that she might have h

in I had emotional wounds. Her heart and soul are not invincible. Celine carries
inside her that doesn't just disappear with time. Perhaps another
might have been quick to forgive you, but it's the pain and feeling
he was abandonment that makes her so wary and skeptical. It's why she's so
al. And herself and others, sometimes." She pauses. "Maybe that's why the
Goddess fated you to each other. You both carry deep wounds that
might not understand... sure, there is a difference in your trauma
admit. wounds, but you can help each other to heal with time. You just need
correct each other in."

I take a moment to absorb everything Annie has just said and realize
Celine's right. Annie always had an uncanny ability to see through the outer
kind of people and find what's really going on under the surface, I think. She
born to be the luna of an important pack. "At the moment, it's the thing
e. Yes, keeps us together," I admit quietly. "But I don't know how to go from
nd. But "Yes, you do. You just told me you met for coffee and then spent
ie more afternoon in that aquarium together. You reached out to Celine and
v proud honest with her, and because of that, she's giving you a chance. So,
tant that taken the first step. Just make sure to invite her out again soon."
tes and I smile at her encouragement. "Thank you."

We move over to the couch to continue chatting, but it's not long
Annie starts yawning. I offer to make some tea, but by the time I'm back
r when it, she's already fast asleep. I chuckle, sitting down on the ottoman
of her, linking my brother that his mate is tired and probably needs him to co
ost him rest with her. I'm guessing Annie sleeps better when Liam is close by.
alone to Needless to say, Liam arrives not five minutes later. "I see you've
ting some sweet mate to sleep?" Liam teases. He carefully scoops her up
er own arms, smiling warmly when she snuggles against him in her sleep.

s a pain I chuckle. “Happy I was able to bore her,” I state dryly. We slip into comfortable silence, until I clear my throat. “Thank you for saving me from the clutches of Liam.”

hard on “Anytime.” He shrugs. “You’re my brother.”

the Moon “I want you to know that you are a great brother,” I say honestly. “The others were my safe place for years.”

na and Liam seems slightly pained by my confession but smiles thankfully. “Smooth and Marius are things going with Celine?” he finally asks.

“Smooth and Marius don’t go well together,” I joke lamely. “You know she’ll know that by now.”

shell of He rolls his eyes. “I really want Celine as my sister-in-law,” he states.

he was “I’m working on it,” I promise. “I was so focused on staying away from her that I completely ignored how awesome she is. She’s saved me here.” twice... she killed the wizard who was attacking me, and then came to my aid when I needed her the most. Her pack really looks up to her, and I know she’d be a great werewolf.”

you’ve “Are you ready to become her luna?” he asks.

I shrug. “I would be honored to stand by her side.”

He tilts his head. “A luna is very important to the pack, Marius. I know it’s rare for a male wolf to take that position. You don’t even need to call it a job, but the role itself is incredibly important to any pack. You definitely won’t be overshadowed. Look at Annie. Without her, I couldn’t rule the pack. She is just as important as I am.”

“Do you think I could do it?” I ask curiously. “You can be honest with me. Do you think I have it in me to become luna?”

in his “When you forget to be an asshole, you are actually quite fun to be around. You can be gentle, and you have a sense for other people’s emotions.”

into a “Really?” I ask skeptically. “Most of the time, I have no idea what my life, doing. And I definitely can’t take on the role Annie or our mother are c

“You don’t have to,” he says. “Female alphas lead differently than male alphas. With the luna rank, it’s the same. What’s more important is that you fill the role in your own way, so you can help lead the pack and smooth your alpha’s edges.” He shrugs. “Celine and her high-ranking members are covering the luna tasks at the moment, but it’s not the same as having an actual luna.”

“I never thought about it like that,” I admit. “Thanks for the insight. It helps a lot.” I chuckle. “Now I just need Celine to accept me. That should be easy... not.”

He laughs. “Good luck with that.”

“Wow, yeah, thanks for the brotherly advice and the vote of confidence,” I roll my eyes.

He chuckles. “You want brotherly advice? I have some for you.”

“And what’s that?”

“Be yourself!” he says. “There is no use hiding who you are or pretending to be something you’re not. Improving yourself is one thing, but you don’t need to become a whole different person. From what I can see, you are perfect the way you are, you’ve just strayed from the path a bit. Celine couldn’t be straightforward and honest; she will appreciate you being that way too much like I do.” I raise my brows. “That’s actually not bad advice,” I smile.

with me.

around,

“Really?” I ask skeptically. “Most of the time, I have no idea what I’m doing. And I definitely can’t take on the role Annie or our mother are doing.”

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YELLOW EYES

MARIUS

*H*is face is hovering above me, fingers clasped over my mouth. “I don’t want to scream, do you?” he whispers, one of his hands brushing over my cheek. “What would your father say if he saw you lying on the floor? His own son.”

There is a car approaching the pack house, the light of the car flashes into my room and, for a moment, illuminating his eyes in an ugly yellow glow.

Calvin’s normally calm face contorts into a nasty smirk when he sees the terror in my eyes. Not again. Please, don’t do it.

I thought this was over. I stupidly believed he’d lost interest in me.

I was just starting to feel a bit confident again.

“You are so pretty,” he whispers in my ear, making my body convulse with disgust. I go to scream for help, but no sound escapes my lips. I

something is physically stopping me from being able to move or talk, and my thoughts are left free to run wild.

Please let it be over fast.

His eyes turn to slits at the smell of my fear, like a predator hunting prey.

I wake up gasping for air. Get out of my head, get the fuck out of my head. Why is he still haunting me in my dreams!? I try to calm myself down, but my wolf keeps repeating to me over and over, that I am alright, I am strong, I am not weak, and that I was just a child. His soothing mantra reminds me that he manipulated me into believing I had nowhere to go, no one to ask for help. He lied.

I stand up, making my way to the kitchen, and pour myself a glass of water.

Suddenly, I hear another voice in my mind. One I didn't expect to hear. "You all.

fingers Marius, what's wrong?

like this? Wait!? Celine? She must have felt my terror through the mate bond.

Marius? Talk to me!

flashing Fuck, what the hell am I going to do now? This is exactly what I was trying to avoid. She was never supposed to feel or see my nightmares. I start to panic again. Maybe if I stay quiet, she will believe I'm asleep and—

threatens. Talk to me, or I will call Liam and tell him to go and check on you.

I take a deep breath, remembering the advice Liam and Annie gave me earlier. Especially Annie's words about Celine fearing abandonment. It strikes something deep inside me. It's like my own fear. I can't lock her out.

You would send my brother to check on me, but you won't come yourself.

only my ask, mainly to say anything.

No!

Why not?

It's a one-hour run to reach you, she says, her voice hoarse. I'm fast, but I can't fly. I need to make sure you're ok now, and not in an hour.

Her words make me smile a little. She sounds so raw and worried, like her wolf talking through her? It's very direct, even for Celine. I sit down with my glass of water, finally noticing how I am calming down again. I hear Calvin she felt my panic, but I can't deny that hearing her voice is helping. I admit, I have a recurring nightmare, I admit.

There is silence. *Oh*, she mutters. Her voice softens, and I can hear the sound of Celine returning and less of her wolf. Did her wolf push through because she was worried for me? If yes, then not all hope is lost for my future. *I'm so sorry, Marius. Do you want to talk about it?*

I debate with myself. How much did you see?

Not much, just his eyes... she admits. I felt your pain through the lens, but it was like... it felt like you were being attacked, but not really.

Probably because my pain wasn't physical, I muse. You instinctively sensed something was wrong, but at the same time, could tell that I wasn't panicking because I was being attacked. I pause. That's what I was afraid of...

That your mate would feel and see your nightmares? She asks, and I realize how shocked she made the connection so fast.

Yes. I never wanted anyone to see or know.

I think I understand you better now, and your reasons for avoiding me are not wrong. None of what this monster did to you is your fault, and I would never blame you for it. I wish you would believe me when I tell you that you did nothing wrong. I think you're weak for what you had to endure, she adds quietly. But I

*that no matter how often I say it, your mind hasn't accepted it y
pauses. Do you want to talk?*

Are you going to be mad if I say no? I ask carefully. She has just
st, but I talking to me again, and I don't want to lose her by closing off.

Not at all, she says to my surprise. *I will never pressure you into re
. Is this anything you're not ready to show me yet. You just tell me at your own
own with* I am sincerely shocked at her words. *I don't deserve you,* I mutter,
ate that the good old self-hatred hitting me again.

g me. I *Maybe you don't. Maybe you do. Maybe we deserve each other, s
evenly. I am here, nevertheless. I'm not sure why, but I can't let go eit
r a hint* *Please don't feel guilty into accepting me,* I tell her, *I'm not an obi
because you have to endure.*

re with *You're not an obligation,* she tells me. *It's just... I can't take
another person who's close to me. So, I've promised myself to at least
I smile at her honesty. I am sorry I woke you up.*

bond. It *Oh, I wasn't sleeping yet. I'm still working.*

I glance at my clock, telling me it's way past midnight. *Wow, you
ly knew go and get some sleep.*

t really *I don't sleep a lot,* she admits.

Wait, did she just hint she isn't sleeping well either? *Great,* I state
id I am *We are a real match made in heaven.*

Seems like it, she says, sounding amused.

I'll go to sleep now if you do, I tell her.

me, she She seems to ponder it for a moment before... *Alright, that's a deal.*

nothing *See you tomorrow,* I say.

d never *Tomorrow? Wait... you are coming to the pack meeting? I though
realize* Liam.

et. She I smile a bit. *No, I asked him to send me.*

Alright, she says after a while. She doesn't sound angry or dis started though. I am intrigued.

I'm happy I managed to make her look forward to meeting me, eve vealing just for work. *Sleep well, Celine.*

pace. You too, Marius.

feeling



he says I promised Liam I would put more effort into mingling with the pack her... intend to keep that promise. Which is why I'm up early desp ligation nightmare, and I kinda feel refreshed, much to my surprise. I assum

something to do with the little midnight chat I had with Celine. I losing shower, dress in my usual clothes, and head down to the ground floor try. breakfast with everyone.

Normally, I would arrive late to avoid seeing many people. Arrivi early means the place is crowded, but I don't mind. I make a beeline need to the alpha's table and wish everyone a good morning.

If anyone's surprised by my greeting, they don't mention it. I re blessed. Who else would be so lucky to have their family, colleagu e dryly. fellow pack members treat them with respect, even after they've actively alienating them for months, and, in some cases, years. I chat f with Annie and Liam, who look relaxed today. Annie's body seems adapted well to the pregnancy, and it shows in the way she is glowing.

Aryanna and her mate Jazz join us. I recognize Jazz from the attac school—and from the hundreds of photos Aryanna showed me wh t it was visited me in the hospital. Jazz is a true beauty with her radiating smi

brown eyes, and natural afro, which she has tied back. She recognizes me because she points at me excitedly. “Marius! You saved my life,” she says out loud. “I’m Jazz, by the way. We haven’t been introduced officially yet.”

“Nice to finally meet you. I am Marius. You showed some guts at school,” I grin and elbow Aryanna, who is sitting down next to me. “Huh? So, she’s the hot mate you were talking about non-stop?” I look at Jazz, “I’m not kidding, Aryanna was talking my ear off about you constantly and I mean... Every. Waking. Second.”

As always, Aryanna is not embarrassed to be called out for her attitude toward someone. She reaches out her hand to touch Jazz’s cheek affectionately. “Yep, no denying that. I got myself a hot little half-wit quickly.” I wiggle my brows. “Cool.”

“I said the same,” Ella says with a grin. “She got herself a kick-ass mate. Pity, I’m so normal in comparison. Poor Dante.”

“You are not normal at all,” Dante intervenes on cue. He takes her hand toward his, they are always very subtle about showing they are a couple.

Goddess, these men are whipped.

You’re one to talk, Cyrus teases. You even daydream about Celine, and Celine. Celine. Celine!

I ignore him, mainly because I have nothing to say in my defense.

The next surprise, though, is approaching us in the form of Eric—the person I should probably apologize to for being an ass. His being here

what’s surprising though, it’s the cute little she-wolf next to him. She looks at the healer girl who got abducted from the school for her powers. I’m pretty sure her name is Valerie. She greets us all politely before hugging and squeezing Jazz from behind. Both girls laugh, and Jazz pulls her down to sit next

My gaze falls to her neck. She’s marked.

me too, “Moon Goddess have mercy,” I breathe out. “When did you all find the blurtsmates!?”

’ “Well, Sleeping Beauty, it happened while you were out of the picture at your deep slumber,” Eric grins.

. “Jazz, I snort, pointing my fork at him. “Careful, or she might find out how over at of a pain you really are,” I tease.

stantly, Eric grins. “Too late. She’s stuck with me for life.” He puts an arm around his mate and nuzzles his nose into her hair.

fection Valerie turns to look at me with a warm smile. “Thank you,” she says with a cheeky grin. “For your advice.” For a moment, I’m confused about what she’s talking about. “It was Nobody,” she finally says, and there is a hint of pride in her voice.

Odysseus, just like you told me to.”

ss cool “You did it!” I return her smile, relieved that my advice helped her.

have time to do more for her than that, but I’m glad she made the most of her hand in it.

“She tricked them left and right,” Eric says with pride. “Thanks for your help, her this advice, Mari.”

ine. Oh While the others go back to their breakfast, I talk with Valerie, who tells me how she tricked her kidnappers. Also, she seems to share my love of

Greek mythology, well, mythology in general. She has a vast knowledge of another Egyptian and Aztec mythology too. It’s fun talking about literature

is not someone who has the same interests, and it makes me a bit sad that I

ie’s the Eric will move to Paris soon. But who knows... maybe I will make many

ttly sure friends soon? I’ve never put effort into making any friends or getting to

ueezing someone. Maybe letting go of my past will also help me approach other

to her. Liam and Annie had been engaging in a talk with Aryanna and Jazz

to get to know the latter a bit. Eventually, though, Liam turns to me. “[

and your before you head to Moon Blood today, we need to have a word about the most important points to be discussed today. I think Celine wants to structure in a particular pack.”

I nod in understanding.

As much as Ella looks at me, raising her brows. “You are going to Moon Blood?”

“Yes, Liam chose me to represent him in our meetings with them, around evenly, hoping the others won’t tease me for taking any opportunity.” Celine.

As Ella doesn’t say anything, but she and Annie exchange a look about. “I mean, I see Dante trying to offer Annie some disgusting-looking food. I was telling her all the awesome ingredients it contains. Annie scrunches her nose at it, which I can fully understand. It stinks of sweaty socks.

I didn’t I look at Ella. “I pity you already,” I sympathize.

It’s out of surprise, both she and Annie burst into hysterical laughter. Dante is giving flustered. “I’m not that bad,” he mutters, sounding slightly offended.

“I appreciate you looking after me, Dante,” Annie says warmly.

There she Ella pats Dante’s arm. “Believe me, Annie is a saint. I won’t be.”

Laughing for We all laugh again.

On the edge of Later that day, after talking with Liam and organizing a few things, we go with a few wolves from our pack to escort me to Moon Blood. I can’t help but be giddy and excited by the prospect of seeing Celine again. We can’t be together for now, and maybe I can show her there is more to me than I know an asshole... or being pitiful.

As I say, Hopefully, she will start to like me... for me.

And, trying

Marius,

out the
research

,”

,” I say

7 to see

glance.

ing tea,

er nose

to my

2 looks

I chose

but feel

n work

n being

GARRET

VALERIE

I wake up, stretching my tired limbs. Eric and I spent the whole afternoon and evening in bed, with Eric cherishing my body in every possible way imaginable. Speaking of my handsome mate, where is he? I shift around in bed to see Eric standing on the balcony, stretching and gleaming at the sunset sky happily... in all his naked glory. I blink at the sight. I am not surprised. I should feel amused, surprised, or turned on. My expression must have said all my thoughts because he smirks knowingly.

“Sorry, darling,” he says. “I always sleep naked.”

“And do you also walk around naked all the time?” I deadpan.

He laughs. Apparently, I said something funny. “Would you like to walk around naked constantly?” he wiggles his eyebrows and turns his back to me in glory towards me, wiggling his hips slightly.

I burst into hysterical laughter. I should be embarrassed, but dang
so hilarious. I would never have expected the renowned Prince Eric
such a dork. And he is so cute and hot too. Ah, I have it bad for him. M
trail over him again, ogling down from his athletic body to his long, p
shaped legs...

And that butt!

Oh, and his fingers, those long fingers that can tease and pleas
endlessly.

Dang it, now I am definitely turned on.

“Eric,” I breathe out. “Come to bed.”

He’s obviously noticed my change of mood because his eyes are
now, staring lustfully at me. He is next to me in an instant, grabb
ankles and yanking me forward and into his arms. I wrap my legs
him, my fingers digging into his shoulders before claiming his lips hur
take control, dominating him for a moment before he draws back
smirk.

“Forget foreplay. Just take me,” I whisper, not even questioning a
what’s gotten into me.

“Turn over,” he breathes out huskily.

I drop down onto my back before hurriedly rolling onto my stomac
doesn’t even wait to undress me fully, just pulls my pants off. Eric
himself between my legs, forcing me to spread them open wide. This
a stark contrast to the gentle way he treated me last night, but fuel
turned on. The way he manhandles me just makes me even wetter.

He growls, grabbing my hips and pulling me up to him before enter
in one steady thrust. I moan at the feeling, grabbing the sheets betw
fingers. Eric’s hand is between my shoulder blades pressing my upper

it, he is down, while his other hand moves to my lower back to keep my bum
c to be a few minutes, the room is filled with our moans and the sound
ly eyesslapping on skin.

erfectly I feel my orgasm coming up fast, almost too fast. I should be emba
by how much he turns me on, but I can't bring myself to care. I bala
weight on my right arm, while I move my other hand between my leg:
ure memyself. Eric must have noticed because he groans, his hips moving
than before, one of his hands following mine to start pleasuring me th
before moving upwards again, squeezing my breasts, and pinchi
nipples.

darker I feel the first wave of my climax approaching, my toes curling as e
ing mywashes over me. I scream Eric's name as I come. He thrusts into me
arounduntil I suddenly feel his seed filling me. Eric drops down next to me
igrily. Iback, panting heavily.

with a "Fuck," he curses, not using his normally cultivated way of exp
himself. "That was hot, baby."

nymore I nod sleepily, still lying on my stomach. Too tired to move a m
smile contentedly when he pulls me in his arms and against his
peppering my head with kisses. I giggle, kissing his chest in return.

ach. He "I wish I could keep you with me in bed for the whole day tomorro
: settlessighs dramatically.

is such "We can't!" I laugh. "I need to meet up with Jazz, and then train fo
k, am IAnd you need to go to that meeting with Alpha Liam and the others."

He nods, brushing over my arm lovingly. The gesture is so soft
ring mesends butterflies through my chest and belly. "It's going to be a c
een mymeeting."

er body "Why's that?"

up. For “It’s about a pack in the far north where they are thought to abuse
of skinomegas and enslave weaker pack members. These things are never p
to deal with.”

irressed I nod. “I understand.”

nce my I play with his fingers. “Do you think I will ever be able to shift?”

s to rub “Why are you asking that all of a sudden, princess?”

g faster I sigh. “I just feel bad that our wolves can’t meet,” I admit.

ere too, “Valerie,” he says softly. “Caius and I are overjoyed that we found

ing mydoesn’t matter to us that you can’t shift. But to answer your question,

the Council might be able to help you with that. And even if you w

uphoriaable to shift, it doesn’t matter. Caius and I accept you anyway.”

: harder I nod. I truly believe him when he says he and his wolf love me th

: on hisam. Yet, I promise myself that I will train and get stronger, and eve

I’ll be able to shift so that Ailia and Caius can meet in their wolf form.

ressing



uscle. I

: chest,

MARIUS

ow,” he

Moon Blood pack is a beautiful place, I think to myself as I drive t

the pack lands. It’s not as big as Silverlake or Red Claw, but it has a
or a bit.

feeling to it. Not that Silverlake or Red Claw aren’t beautiful plac

: that it just... maybe it’s because my mate is here, but I always feel at

difficult whenever I step foot on Moon Blood pack grounds. It puts my mind

to be here.

se their Silverlake was my home, but Calvin ruined it for me. Red Claw was pleasant to be my second chance, but I didn't really take it, I have to admit. So so fortunate as to have another opportunity to find a place where belong? Moon Blood could be my third chance at finding happiness. A time, I'm eager to take it.

The newly announced Gamma Garret greets us on arrival at the pack and leads us into the building. He has a warm and welcoming you. It surrounds him, despite looking fiercely strong. However, I know that I think not his, or any of Moon Blood's ranked member's favorite person on't be moment. By now, everyone must know that Celine and I are fated

They probably also figured out that I wasn't about to win any 'greatest way in the universe' prize.

Eventually, "Would you like some coffee or anything else before we start Marius?" Gamma Garret asks me. Despite his impeccable manners, I miss the fact that he addresses me as formally as possible.

"I'll have what everyone else is having," I tell him. "Thank you for asking." I pause. "The pack house is beautiful," I finally state, deciding to win him over with kindness. Besides, it's true. It looks like a building I find in England during the Georgian period.

Garret beams proudly. "Yes, it's rare to have such a pack house," I smile through smiling brightly. "Most packs go for fancy or modern pack houses, but a homely is a more classically designed building. The building has brick as it is, it's material, as is usual in the UK. We would have gone for a wooden building but unfortunately, wood is not the safest."

at ease "I do like wooden buildings and cottages," I point out, "But you're right. Wooden buildings have a high risk of catching fire during an attack, and it would be devastating to lose such a beautiful pack house."

s meant Garret nods, looking slightly surprised at my remark. “You really I
uld I beplace, hey?”

I truly “It’s beautiful,” I say honestly. “There is something so calming abo
and thispack.”

“That’s because it’s close to the forest. There are many trees and
k housenature.”

ig aura “Almost idyllic,” I muse. I never thought I would be one for a lot of
at Iambut I can feel a certain draw to this place.

at the Before we reach the meeting room, Garret looks back at me. “Just
mates.you the heads up,” he whispers. “Retired Alpha Cedric is going to
st mateattendance too.”

“Oh shit,” I mutter. He is Celine’s dad, and by the way, Garret warn
t, Lordhis presence, he must know about Celine and me. I feel my anxiety ris
I don’tat least Garret has given me a moment to prepare for it. “Thanks for th
up,” I say, looking directly at him. “I really appreciate it. Thank you.”

you for “I don’t know why, but I couldn’t let you go into this totally unpre
ding toGarret sighs. “Alpha Celine doesn’t talk much about her private lif
g you’dknow you have been meeting... and my gut feeling tells me that eve
you will join us here.” He pauses. “I don’t know what position you wi
ie says,but you’re the alpha’s mate, and as a gamma...”

out ours “You might be assigned to me,” I continue his thought. “I wouldn’t
ts mainI say thoughtfully. I like this guy. I’m sure we could get along.

ild, but “Much to my surprise, I don’t think I’d mind either. I thought you
be more of an ass,” he says.

e right. “Thanks man,” I chuckle.

, which He grins, “You’ll regret the day I become your gamma.”

“Oh really.” I wiggle my brows at him. “Let’s see who regrets it firs

like this Garret smirks. "It's a bet."

Before I can add anything more to our newfound banter, Celine appears out of nowhere. I can feel her presence and her intoxicating scent. The mate I've been pulling me towards her like a magnet, and I wish I could just pull her in. I've been a lot of farms. "Are you two already planning on how to make my life miserable?" She teases, much to my surprise.

In my nature, Garret looks at her in mock innocence. "I would never."

"Right," she raises her brows. "Don't drag Marius to the dark side just to give you a taste."

It's to be in Garret clasps his chest, pretending to be shocked. "Alpha, how could I believe I would ever do that!?"

As a result of "Right," she chuckles.

It's interesting, but I'm not sure what to say or do, I'm too scared to break the ice. Something about her gamma being here with us apparently has her let her guard down. It's the first time she's joked with me, and it warms me more than I expected. "that she's allowed herself to relax in my presence."

Her smile, but I Her smile is truly beautiful.

Eventually, "I see that you and your warriors arrived safely," she says to me.

It will hold, I nod, smiling awkwardly. "I'm thrilled to be here. I hope I can be of some help."

Celine tilts her head. "I'm sure your knowledge as a lycan will come in handy, but I'm sure your knowledge as a lycan will come in handy."

"To be honest, it's more Liam's knowledge that will come in handy. I'm sure your knowledge as a lycan will come in handy."

She looks at me consideringly before coming to some conclusion. She nods her head and smiling. "I'm sure you've come well prepared."

Her faith in me further motivates me to give my best. She's right; I'm not. "I'll come prepared. For the first time in my life, I took a task seriously, and I'll do it right."

time to brainstorm and research it. I also consulted those with more knowledge than I have on the topic, such as Liam and Dante, to corroborate my findings.

into my I don't want to let her down.

able?" Soon, others arrive at the meeting room interrupting my moment.

Celine. I'm living off these little moments with her like she is my constant.

It's always a little easier to breathe when she is around.

de with Cedric Anderson finally joins us, greeting everyone politely and giving

daughter a warm, affectionate smile. He doesn't say much to me, but I could tell you admitted to feel relieved about.

As the meeting starts, Celine and her ranked members describe the suspected situation at the Blood Snow pack. I'd heard from Liam that the pack were ruthless, but when Elias starts sharing his personal experiences with the pack, it proves that they aren't just brutal, they're cruel.

It's just as Liam thought, the Alpha and his ranked members are using their powers. "Another power-hungry alpha and his team of beta followers..." I mutter in disgust.

Celine and Cedric both nod, looking equally pissed at what they've heard.

come in "So, did I get this right? You had to battle for your position," I summarize.

"The winner would get a better life. The loser..."

," I tell "The loser was killed by the Alpha," Elias explains. "I was just an orphan."

and normally orphans don't get the chance to challenge anyone for a position. "Orphans become pack slaves," Elias answers. His voice is even, and controlled, but something in his eyes is raw and angry.

I have His anger feels familiar to me, as it comes from a place of helplessness and desperation.

1 more Garret reaches out his hand, intertwining his fingers with Elias'.

ver my “And the omegas?” Celine asks.

Elias sighs. “Omegas are treated a little better than the slaves, but they don't have many rights. They are only allowed to do cleaning work, and not with slightly better accommodations. They do count as pack members, but not like the slaves have no rights at all. If a warrior kills one of them, it will be a matter.”

ving his I stare at him. “That's just sick.”

which I “It is,” he mutters. “Besides, the Alpha has his own methods of vetting the ranks of his members.”

ibe the “What kind of methods?” Celine blinks. “Surely, there is just one test that they

at they “He tests normal pack members as you would expect. They get the same education, and tasks assigned depending on their rank. Women are only allowed to enter the pack house,” Elias explains.

abusing “Wait... what?” Cedric stares at him. “Are you telling me the pack house is only for the males?”

He nods. “The only females allowed in the pack house are the slaves. We've just omegas, as they are supposed to cook and clean.”

“And what about the test?” Celine urges. “You said the Blood Snow Ceremony has a special way of doing the test for their orphans?”

“The orphans are forced to shift in front of the entire pack when they are sixteen and connect with their wolf spirits. It's then that he decides their position. Only if they look really strong, like I did, do they have a chance for a normal life. The others are treated like garbage. Needless to say, most of them become slaves.” He pauses. “I don't know more than that, though. I can't say what happens after this ceremony.”

“Do you know any details about the ranked members?” Celine asks.

He shakes his head. “While I managed to fight for a warrior rank wasn’t much. I was just a normal warrior. I wasn’t even living close by the stillpack house, and I was never involved with any pack business except hunting and such. I have no idea what they do with the slaves or what’s really going on where once you look beyond the surface.” He pauses. “I just know they wouldn’t reach old age,” he says quietly. “They normally die from the bad conditions.”

“Blood Snow is known to be a problematic pack,” I mutter. “I talked to both Liam and Eric about it. Eric said the Council received some complaints about Blood Snow recently and wants to investigate it themselves.”

“The question is: Do we want the Council to intervene?” Celine leans back a bit. “Or do we want to be the ones who do this? What are your basic opinions on the matter?”

I like how she asks for her team’s opinion. Not only does it show that their opinion matters, it also makes her a smart leader.

Garret tilts his head. “I personally would feel more comfortable dealing with the situation first, to avoid unnecessary casualties. The Council might send an army, but it would be a safer option if they allow us to send a team of alpha Blood Snow to investigate first.”

“I agree,” Harmony says. “If it were only us in Blood Moon investigating, I would have suggested letting the Council handle it. But now, we are not on our own...”

“You’re right; you won’t be on your own,” I interrupt her. “I will handle the orphans for sure, Liam too, and I can talk to Eric about it,” I point out. “It doesn’t seem like an either-or decision. If we tell him we want to research and investigate what’s happening, we can do so with the Council’s approval and help.”

Celine nods at me, and I’m relieved she accepts my offer for what

, it still instead of thinking that I am trying to undermine anyone.

to the “If the lycans are with us, it changes our approach. We can research patrols Snow personally, that way,” Celine muses. “Why don’t we form a team?” she offers. “Let’s bring this matter to Eric, Liam, and Elden and see if their packs would be willing to join us. We could put together a team containing representatives of all three packs. With your help Marcel might convince them.”

“I don’t think you will need to do much convincing,” I say. “My father and Liam have high morals. Personally, I really like the idea of the joint team. I will definitely talk to them about it.”

Celine nods thoughtfully. “Harmony, Garret, and I are needed here and I don’t feel comfortable sending Elias to investigate.”

Elias opens his mouth to say something, but she shakes her head. “I know that Snow was a traumatic experience for you, and I am not sending you to relive it.”

“What about Marcel?” Garret suggests.

“Not a bad idea,” Celine nods. “I was also thinking about asking Steve. He is strong and eager to prove himself, following his sisters footsteps.”

“Steve?” I am surprised. “Isn’t he your younger brother, Harmony? He is investigating, Steve a little too young for such a mission?”

She smiles at my concern. “He is eighteen and has graduated from high school. And Celine is right, he is full of energy, strength, and motivation.”

Celine nods. “Steve is desperate for a chance to prove himself. He has worked hard during training, has improved rapidly, and I think it’s a good idea to give him this opportunity. He can be impulsive, but Marcel is one of the elite warriors and will keep Steve in check.”

“Good,” I nod thoughtfully. “I will talk to Liam and my father about it.”

know my brother Finn is currently searching for his mate, and I think Bloodmission might be something he would like to take on to clear his name. I'd like to do a joint mission, but I'll ask him first before making any promises on his behalf. I'd see if everyone agrees on this current strategy and soon starts discussing team options.

Once the meeting is over, I get the feeling that I may not be as helpful as before. I'm even asked to stay for dinner, which my fellow vampires and I happily agree to. We're sitting at the alpha's table as Celine's team. And when Garret shows me where to grab something to drink, I notice he's following us.

"Marius," he says. His voice calm, yet firm. He doesn't need anything more. I know what he is thinking.

"Alpha Cedric, I give my word."

He nods. "Good."

I can see in his eyes that he doesn't fully trust me and plans to keep an eye on me. I'm glad he doesn't intend to intervene in my attempts to mend my relationship with Celine. Neither he nor Harmony have been disrespectful towards me, but their trust won't come easily. I don't blame them though.

Once he has returned to the table, Garret looks at me in confusion. "What was that?"

"A conversation?" I offer.

"You didn't even exchange ten words!"

"It was more than enough," I say with a grin.

As the evening begins to wind down, Celine motions me to follow her. She leads me outside to one of the nearby parks. It's small and currently deserted.

but idyllic. I wonder what she's up to. "Marius," she says. "I have a favor to ask from you."

such a “What can I do for you?” I ask, curious as to what she would want from me. Whatever it is, I’ll make sure to help her.

half.” “Danica wants to come forward,” she says, much to my surprise.

g all of “Danica?” I blink, while my charming lycan counterpart pops up in my mind at the mere mention of his mate’s name. “Your wolf wants to be with her?” I feel nervous, but if this is what she wants, I’ll talk to Danica.

warriors She shakes her head. “I think it’s a bit too early for that,” she suggests, “What I meant was that I would like to give her a moment with Cyrus.

Cedric At her words, I have to fight hard for Cyrus not to hijack my mind and take over. *Human*, he growls at me. *I love you, but if you don’t let me near her, I’ll bite your ass!*

Don’t worry, I chuckle. *Like I would dare stand between the two of them.*

“Cyrus and Danica have never really talked to each other,” I admit.

“It’s such a nice thought to give them this moment.”

a close She smiles at me. “I think she and Cyrus deserve to hear each other talk about everything we’ve put them through. All this had to be so hard for them, but I don’t think we should shift, but I want them to be able to have a moment together.”

“What “Yes,” I say softly. “I really owe that to Cyrus.”

Cyrus’ joy at my words is palpable.

I am lending you my body, bro, don’t do anything stupid, I warn him. *Never! I would never do something Danica doesn’t like.*

Celine’s eyes take on her silver shade, indicating that Danica is in charge. I close my eyes, allowing my wolf to take over before hiding my face from the back of his mind to allow him a moment alone with his love. They will have a few minutes together, but I assume they won’t need more for now.

Unlike Celine and I, they’ve loved each other from the first moment on.

t to ask Cyrus never fought the mate bond. I did.

 Cyrus takes Danica’s hands into his, carefully tracing her palm v
 fingers. “Forgive me, mate, for letting you down,” he says in his low,
) in my voice.

talk to “It’s not your fault,” she claims. Her voice is similar to Celine’s,
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reet my reaches out her hands to trace his jaw. “Please tell me he has lear
 lesson, because Celine is the most important person in my life.”

you. “He has,” he promises.

quietly. “I can’t let her get hurt again,” she insists.

 Cyrus intertwines their fingers. “I promise you, he won’t.”

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Cyrus never fought the mate bond. I did.

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"I should have been stronger," Cyrus exclaims. "I should have fought harder to be the mate you and Celine deserved."

"You were strong. You saved yourself and your human," she smiles. She reaches out her hands to trace his jaw. "Please tell me he has learned his lesson, because Celine is the most important person in my life."

"He has," he promises.

"I can't let her get hurt again," she insists.

Cyrus intertwines their fingers. "I promise you, he won't."

THE MINT CHOCOLATE-CHIP GIRL

MARIUS

I wanted to meet with my father, but only under my conditions. I had a perfect plan on when and how to talk to him, but unfortunately, it never went as planned, and suddenly we have an emergency meeting to discuss the issue of Blood Snow pack.

There's a big part of me that considered skipping this meeting, but I remember that Celine, Garret, and the other ranked members of Moor are depending on me to see this through.

This is not the time to chicken out.

I meet Dad right in front of Liam's office. I'm nervous because it's the first time I'm seeing him alone after everything with Calvin came out. I've feared his reaction the most. He is the strongest alpha I know. Heck, when the time comes, he will probably be chosen to sit on the lycan throne. I know

no one expects me to follow in his footsteps. That burden rests on
shoulders, but still... I am his son.

And I'm nothing like him.

I asked Liam to tell everyone I wasn't ready to see anyone, and
promised to make sure Dad gave me some space to come to terms
everything. My family tried to call and message me on a few occasions
to ask how I am doing. But I still haven't been able to answer any of
yet, aside from my mother.

Why is it so hard to talk to my family, let alone see them?

*You fear their rejection more than anyone else's, which is why
pushed them away. But you are scared without reason. Liam never
you, why would the others?* Cyrus chimes in, apparently with a new
Buddha mentality.

What the heck, Siddhartha... since when did you find your Zen mode
and this in disbelief.

, things *Danica likes intelligent men*, he explains in a matter-of-fact tone.

address *Wait, you are playing Buddha because of a chick? What happened
before hoes?*

t then I *Speak for yourself, human. I am a wolf; my woman is definitely
1 Blood priority.*

I sigh inwardly. Well, yeah, he has a point. I can't even argue with
Celine is also my top priority.

the first *There's no time to change plans because my father has noticed my a*

always *"Dad," I stutter. "Hi! I... I probably should have returned one of
hen the calls, I was really busy—"*

ow that *He stares at me, before he approaches me with long strides. I freeze,
he's going to yell at me or punch me or something similar, but to my s*

Liam'she pulls me in tight for a hug. "I am so sorry," he mutters. "I should have noticed, but I didn't. I've failed you."

"What...?" I stutter, helpless at his sudden burst of emotions. My dad Mom was never the hugging type. Aside from the initial shock, I suddenly feel a strong sense of calm washing over me. Mom said that he wouldn't disappoint me. She said he could chase some of my demons away. Maybe she was right. "It's not your fault. I... was too scared to talk to anyone about it."

Before my father can answer, I hear the door to Liam's office open. To my relief, Liam steps outside. I think he heard us talking. I look at him pleadingly, *Liam, please, give me a hand here!* He looks at me, *judged* "Aw, you need my help?" He smiles like the demon he can sometimes find. "What with?"

Don't be an ass!

"? I ask "Oh, I'm the ass?" He raises his brows.

Okay, I know I have been a jerk to you, but if you help me now, I'll owe you one.

to bros He smirks. *Fine.*

"Dad, Marius, you're here early," he acts like he's just seen us. "Why are you waiting outside? Come on in. I can offer you coffee."

My father indeed lets go of me and nods. "Thank you."

him, as "So," I sigh in relief. "Can I stop worrying that you're going to disappoint me?" I ask, honestly relieved by his reaction.

arrival. My father turns to stare at me in disbelief. "What!? Is that what you're so afraid of? Is this why you didn't want me to visit you?"

Liam furrows his brows and stares at me. *I can't believe you. You asked for help, scared for help and then made it worse yourself.*

surprise, *Shit, I got carried away!* I want to facepalm inwardly. *It slipped*

ld have *didn't mean it to.*

No, Liam sighs again. *Your fears and doubts are valid, and you're father right to have them, even if the rest of us might be shocked and finally feel unwarranted.*

appoint "I can't believe you thought that," my father says quietly. "I would be right. think less of you, and certainly not for such a reason. The only one less of is *him.*" He spits out. "I can't believe I trusted him; I should have known."

at him "No one knew," I say quietly. "He was good at hiding it."

Dad's eyes focus somewhere behind me, as if gazing off into the distance. "No one can take away this guilt from me," he finally says solemnly. I swear he has tears in his eyes, and something about seeing him so sad makes me sad too. He is always strong and confident... and so certain about his decisions. It hurts to see him like that.

promise "Dad," I mutter.

"He was my beta," he says bitterly. "I assigned him to be in charge of the children's training because I thought Vincent would be too rough on you. Why are you had only used my gift on you once, I would have known."

"You've never used your gift on us. Well, aside from that one time you got abducted," I point out. "And for the most part, I'm glad about your inheritance attempt to lighten the atmosphere. "The number of times you would have seen me sneaking off pack grounds... I would have been grounded until you were grandpa."

I toss a glance at Liam.

sked me "No kidding," Liam adds, catching on fast. "Or when we snuck into the wine cellar."

l out. I Dad scrutinizes us for a moment, his jaw tensing. He knows we're

trying to distract him.

have a “I know I’m going to regret asking this,” I mutter. “But were there
id them boys? You know, other victims?” Liam and Dad go rigidly silent. \n
saying anything, I just know. An almost suffocating sadness fills me. “
d never fault.”

I think “Why would you think that?” Dad exclaims in shock.

ld have “Because I stayed quiet. And my silence gave him the chance to j
others,” I say bitterly.

“No. Your speaking up now has saved all his future victims,” Liam
istance.out.

I could Looking at Liam, I’m unsure if I’ll ever be able to see things the
l makes does, but it feels good to hear him defend me.

in his “How many boys?” I ask nervously.

“Two,” Dad answers. “I’ve already talked to their families and p
them with all the help and support they’ll need. Flora is constantly cl
e of my on them.”

ou. If I “And did he...” rape them, I want to say, but can’t.

Liam guesses my thoughts, nevertheless. “No,” he says immediately
e Liam At least that’s something, though it isn’t much. I feel anger bubblin
that.” I surface. “Where is that scum now?”

ld have “In the dungeons,” Dad answers. “Your mother castrated him, I thi
il I’m a that I checked, but after what she did with her silver knife, I doubt
much left.”

I snort, “Right...” But when Liam and Dad remain quiet, I pause, b
nto the at them. “Wait a minute. You’re not joking?”

“Why would I joke about such a matter?” Dad asks evenly.

are just “It wasn’t a pretty sight,” Liam muses. “But very satisfactory.”

My jaw drops open. My cute, innocent, bubbly mother... did what? The other "Marius," Dad says. "I want you to know that I won't decide anything without concerning Calvin without you. You have the final say in what happens. It's my him. If you want to kill him, you can. If you want me to kill him, I will. If you want him to have a trial... consider it done. It's up to you if you want to involve the Council, or if you have another idea... I'll make it happen." "Really?" I ask, eyes wide. "What if I can't decide immediately?"

Dad's gaze is soft when he looks at me. "You can take all the time you need. He's not going anywhere."

I take a deep breath, trying to calm down the whirlwind of my emotions. I still feel sad and guilty for the two boys falling into Calvin's claws, but I'm also thankful that Dad's handled it all and given me the time I needed.

As for Calvin... I feel a grim satisfaction wash over me that he can't provide again hurt anyone the way he did me.

I feel like I need a break though. A break from talking about this nonsense. "Why don't we go for dinner later?" I offer my mother. "Just you, Mom, and I?"

Dad looks surprised. "Are you sure you want that?"

"Yes, but under one condition."

"And what's that?"

"I don't want to talk about Calvin," I state. Even saying his name makes me sick.

Dad nods. "Of course."

"Just..." I avoid looking at him. "Let's go to a restaurant. I don't want to meet at the pack house."

There's a hint of sadness in my father's eyes, but he nods. "Sounds good. I will have Vincent book a table for us at a nice restaurant."

Liam nods his approval at me, somehow managing to look both impressed and proud, which is new. He has looked at me thoughtfully, encourages me to even... but not proud. I guess there is a first time for everything.

When Eric joins our meeting, we all turn professional again. I fill in on what was discussed at the Moon Blood meeting. “Celine has helped a lot in the last few months,” Liam points out. “While it’s true that we’ve freed Valerie, it’s also true that if it weren’t for Celine, we might not have been able to save Marius. No offense, brother.”

“None taken,” I say. “It’s true. I... Listen, I am not going to beat the bush. I have a lot to do to make up with Celine. So, I would like to hear her, and if she thinks it’s better to research before we let the Council place, then I am going to support her.”

“She wants to minimize any casualties,” Eric says, “And I agree with me. If I set the Council on Blood Snow, we don’t know what the ranked members of Blood Snow, and particularly the Alpha, will do to the poor wolf’s father. I have enslaved.”

“I have nothing against supporting Celine,” my father adds. “She is strong, and capable, and hopefully, my soon-to-be daughter-in-law. I wish more werewolf packs had alphas like her.”

Liam nods his agreement.

At the daughter-in-law part, I almost freeze—yeah, that would be nice. At the same time, I’m filled with pride by how much respect they are showing Celine.

“The question is, how many people do we want to send there?” my father contemplates. “Probably not too many.”

“Yeah, not more than six, I’d say,” my father agrees.

“Celine is sending Marcel and Steve,” I confirm.

pressed “Annalise’s brother?” Liam asks. He tilts his head in consideration, looking young, but also very strong and capable. Plus, he wants a chance to prove himself. Marcel, on the other hand, is one of Celine’s elite warriors. I wonder why she’s chosen them.”

helped us “As representatives of the Council, I would like to send the twins, Marcel and Elodie,” Eric says, adding to the conversation. I didn’t expect him to take this so seriously. But it seems I have always underestimated him. When it comes to work, he is deadly serious. “I will ask them beforehand if they are available for it, but I think they will be.”

to help My dad nods, leaning back. “I wonder who else we should send?”

raid the “How about Finn?” I ask. Liam and my father look at me. I shrug. “Finn is desperately searching for his mate right now, and he needs to take a break with her. Why not send him? It might take his mind off not finding her yet, and in the same time, take him to a part of a country he’s never been to before.”

es they Dad nods. “That’s not a bad idea. I was actually wondering who to send Aurelia or Finn. But Aurelia loves it here at Silverlake. She enjoys being smart, involved in pack business and training with the elite warriors. Plus, she wants to start college soon and I would like to step up her training. I wish to involve her more in pack matters while she’s at college. As for Finn, this might be a challenge he would really enjoy. It’s a difficult mission—at least, but he’s ready. If Celine is okay with it, I’d have him lead the team.”

giving “Let’s ask Finn,” Liam agrees, happy with Dad’s decision. “He is loyal and strong; he will be a great support to this team.”

” Liam I smile. Liam has always had a soft spot for Finn and appreciates his strengths.

“Then it’s settled,” Eric nods. “We will start preparing them for the mission. They need a good cover.”

l. “He’s “Let’s also have a backup plan in case they need help,” Liam points
o prove “Absolutely.” Dad nods. “But the first step is done for today.” He
can see “Now, I would like to take my son before he chickens out and go for
with him and my Luna.”

s, Elise I look at Liam with wide, puppy eyes. “Don’t you want to join us?”
to take Liam smirks. “No way.”

hen it’s He waves me off as I follow Dad to his car. Big brothers. They’
r are upnice when people are watching!

For all the rejection and drama I feared receiving beforehand,
dinner with my parents is surprisingly pleasant. Neither of them
‘Finn is questions I don’t want to answer. We just talk about everything in g
i break.and I am so glad they are giving me this time with them, no pressure. I
d at the stupid for thinking they would judge me.

I feel like this is exactly what we all needed. When I return h
ether to actually feel relaxed for once. No matter what Calvin said in the p
s being matter what he did to me... my family still loves me the same way.

s, she’s For a moment, my thoughts almost return to a dark place, but I ma
ng andshoo them away this time. I have a date to look forward to, after all, as
I thinkand I are meeting up tomorrow. We don’t call it a date, of course, a
sion to Celine doesn’t. Cyrus and I obviously view this as a date, which
m.” another chance to spend quality time with our beautiful mate.

yal and We have agreed to go shopping for Liam and Annie’s soon-to-l
twins. It’s the first time I am becoming an uncle, it’s very special.

ates his Fortunately, Celine didn’t have a present yet either and agreed to j
on a shopping date, which is clearly not a date, in case anyone asks her
for this It absolutely is!

out.
smiles.
dinner



CELINE

Marius is already at our meeting spot when I arrive, and as much as I want to deny it, my heart skips a beat at the sight of him. He's leaning against the wall of my favorite coffee shop, wearing a pair of light blue jeans and a white turtleneck shirt, and they look so freaking good on him. From what I can tell, wearing, it's hard to believe it's summer right now, but we have announced cold weather at the moment.

Marius has a similar build as all of Elden's sons. Tall and so imposing. But he's leaner than either Liam or Finn, and his beautiful features look like a sculpture.

As he turns around, his eyes catch mine, and he beams happily, waving at me. How did he go from growling and frowning whenever he saw me to being so happy? His emotions are a mystery.

I walk over, surprised when he pulls me into a hug. I'm a little shocked by the contact, and he lets go almost immediately. "Sorry," he blurts out, looking carried away. I was just happy to see you."

"It's okay." It's kinda sweet and endearing how he acts like an inexperienced teen. "If you overstep any boundaries, I will let you know."

He smiles. "That's a relief to hear."

"So, what shall we do first?" I ask curiously. "Do we have a plan?"

"How about we grab some coffee and then go to a place with baby toys?" he suggests. "I want to buy a few toys too."

I smile at his eagerness. “Already spoiling them, huh?”

“They will be my nephews... or nieces. Of course, I want to spoil
he beams.

That’s kinda cute of him to say. This is a completely new side

“Maybe we could also get something for Annie?” I suggest.

“I was thinking the same. I remember that my mother once said that
; I want baby showers and such, everything is about the babies. Which is p
inst the fine and all, but sometimes the moms get forgotten on the way.”
a white

I’m a little stunned by his insight. Since when is he so thought
at he’s deep?

oyingly *That’s all Cyrus’ influence,* Danica states proudly. *He is such
spoken lycan.*

newhat I don’t buy it. I’m starting to think that beneath Marius’ snotty a
face is there is actually quite a big heart, and Marius can almost sense how
feel.

iving at *Are you thinking he would make a good luna?* Danica asks out of th
r me to *Or mate, or other ranked wolf?*

I blink. Am I? *I’m not sure. That’s definitely not what I was getting
cked by I like that he considers Annie’s feelings.*

.. “I got She nods her approval.

“Do you have any ideas on what to get her?” I ask.

like an “How about a rocking chair?” he suggests. “She could use it to sle
w.” with her babies in her arms, but also just relax and read a book.”

I grab his arm excitedly. “That’s a fantastic idea, Marius!”

His eyes light up at my praise. “You think so!?”

r stuff,” “Yes.” My heart is beating faster, both at the prospect of Annie
such a fantastic present, and at the way he’s looking at me. It seems

approval just really made his day. “If you get the chair, I can buy them,” accessories for it, like a soft blanket, pillows, and a pair of nice pajamas. Maybe even a special reading lamp.”

to him. “Oh!” He beams. “You could get her one of those lights that illuminate the ceiling with beautiful pictures. But nothing too baby-like, it should be something during her.”

perfectly “Absolutely, how about a night sky with stars?” I suggest.

engrossed in this idea that I haven’t noticed how much I’ve let myself get carried away. “I love buying presents.”

“Me too,” Marius says with emphasis. He grabs my hand to pull me along. I’m a well-looking equally excited. “I know the perfect shop for furniture.” He leads me down his tracks. “I’ve just had another idea.”

attitude, “Lay it on me,” I say, waiting expectantly.

others “We could make her an emergency box, you know... for times when the alpha twins and her alpha mate get on her nerves. We could bring Ella and the blue. Dave in on it, I think they’d be perfect at this.”

I laugh slightly. “Like, with a bottle of liquor and chocolate and stuff? Not at, but that?”

“Knowing your friend Dave, I bet he will add a vibrator to it.”

We both laugh and continue planning our surprise. We call Ella to help with our idea, and she is immediately on board. She promises to get straight up in it. Dave to brainstorm and buy some of the items. I hang up as Marius takes my hand and pulls me toward his favorite furniture shop. Sparks emanate from his touch, and my whole body feels warm and relaxed. I am so excited in happiness that I haven’t even realized we are holding hands, and that getting should be more awkward than this.

like my After buying everything we wanted for Annie, we proceed to shop

y sometwins. This time, it's me who is taking the lead. I lead Marius to one of the baby shops I know to have beautiful baby stuff. It has three stories filled with clothes and toys for babies and toddlers. Marius and I roam the whole store but we're struggling to decide on the clothes.

He says, "I hate the whole color theme for babies," Marius states with a frown. "I mean, it's all pink for girls and blue for boys, and it's all the same shades. I'm so pastel on top of that. At least make it various shades of pink or blue." I guardclarifies. "If I ever have children, they will be allowed to dress in whatever colors they want and play with whatever toys they like."

I nod along, "Me too. I mean, I am a girl, and I hate pink. When I was a child, my parents bought pastel pink stuff for me, but soon realized I preferred more manly stuff. Fortunately, they complied. I mean, when did colors become so gender-specific, or not manly enough."

When he says that, Marius nods. "It's so stupid. Take Eric, for example... I know we have a little bit of a strained relationship, but even during our worst times, I always remember that he dressed in whatever clothes he likes. His favorite color is purple. I nod, remembering how Eric had dressed for his own party. He doesn't care at all about what others might think. "Besides, there are so many other colors for kids. What about orange?"

I tell her, "Exactly," he smiles at me. Apparently, this topic is really important to him. "Or yellow! Like if I had a daughter, why can't she be more like sunshine? She doesn't need to be a pink princess, unless she wants to be, of course."

I nod, "Or if my boy would like to play with a doll... who cares?"

I nod, "Right, it's just a freaking toy!" he agrees.

I nod. "Exactly."

For the first time, Wow, Danica chimes in. *Never thought two people could get so pas-*

of the about colors and toys. She snorts. *Seems like the Moon Goddess didn't*
end with a mistake after all.

the shop, I blush at her words but choose to ignore her.

Once Marius and I have finished shopping, we are exhausted. We take
down. "Bags to his car, intending to take them directly to Red Claw and wrap
made of up there. It's easier to have them there since that's where the party will
be," he says. "Please tell me I am not the only one who's starving," I groan.

Whatever. "No, I could eat literally anything now," he says.

"How about Italian?" I ask.

Well, my "Works for me." He says with a happy smile. I don't know why
and other looking at me so happily, but I don't inquire further.

And either. During lunch, we chat about all manner of things. It suddenly feels
like we're on a real date, but to my surprise, I'm not upset about it. It's
not like I have forgotten or forgiven, but I have to admit to myself that I've enjoyed
myself with Marius. He is really making an effort to change, and never once
does he pressure me or try to corner me, and I like that he's kept this promise.

And really. I don't know if this makes me weak or not, but it's up to me how I
feel about my mate. I am not sure if I will be able to let go of my whole grudge
against him soon, but I can start the process of letting go, little by little, and open
myself to him gradually.

By little. After dinner, we grab an ice cream cone each and decide to walk
to town for a bit. Marius chooses Stracciatella and pistachio.

And I...

"Oh no, you're a mint chocolate-chip girl!" he exclaims dramatically.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I bet you also have all your Christmas presents bought and wrapped
months before the holidays," he grins. "And you always re-

't make everyone's birthday." He pauses, eyeing me in horror. "You write gift

"Who doesn't write gift cards?" I ask in confusion. "Are you just wrapping up gifts without even writing a card?"

"I am not wrapping them up at all," he admits. "It's a waste of paper

"Goddess, help me," I groan.

"I bet you also think licorice is candy."

"It is!" I argue. "Licorice absolutely qualifies as candy!"

He grimaces. "In that case, I think broccoli should be counted as too."

"Licorice is a salty snack," I try to reason. "But with a gummy texture counts as candy."

"If you throw a bag of gelatin in a jar of Bolognese sauce, then put it in the fridge, it would come out as Jell-O. By your argument, that's candy!"

I punch his shoulder lightly, frowning when he laughs. "Alternative to did he could just try some of my ice cream before being so judgmental," I grumble.

"Is that a challenge?" he grins.

I hand him the little spoon, and he scoops some of it up. He grimaces but eats it nevertheless. He tilts his head back with eyes closed and contemplates the flavor. He frowns slightly before admitting, "Not bad

"So, does that make you a mint chocolate-chip boy then?" I ask dryly

He pouts. "You are learning way too fast. Typical alpha."

I elbow him again while chuckling. As we walk by the park, I remember something I wanted to ask. "Marius," I say earnestly. "I... I don't want too much from you, so don't think you need to say yes now."

He looks a little worried, probably because I normally don't approach people so carefully and am still a bit standoffish with him. But this is different

cards!” would like for you to meet someone.”

rapping “Who?” he asks curiously.

I nod towards the cemetery, right behind the park. “My mom a
.” brother.”

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rent. “I

would like for you to meet someone.”

“Who?” he asks curiously.

I nod towards the cemetery, right behind the park. “My mom and my brother.”

A VULNERABLE ALPHA

MARIUS

I gulp at Celine's request. I've wronged her so much in the past, yet here with me now, having such a great day. And now she wants to accompany her to her mother's grave, which is possibly her most sacred place on earth.

Don't mess it up, pisshead, Cyrus snaps at me.

Did you just call me a pisshead? I raise my brows. I thought you were trying to sound more sophisticated for Danica.

For Danica, yes. Not you!

She wants to show me her mother's grave, I explain. It's such an honor. But I don't feel like I've earned it.

Stop overthinking it and go with her, he groans. If you decline, she'll be hurt. And when she gets hurt, you'll come whining to me again. Do you

*her to get hurt? No! So, stop overthinking it and go and say hello
mother!*

Wow, I think to myself. Cyrus isn't holding back. I can't really blame
for it. I almost got us killed while jeopardizing his mate bond for him.
is still here. And I've asked him to make sure I don't mess up again
guess that's what he is doing now.

I look at Celine. "Yes, of course," I say. "I would be happy to accompany
you to meet your mother, if that is what you would like?"

Her big, beautiful blue eyes probe deep into mine. Celine always manages
to see everything as it is, and every possible eventuality beyond. She has a
sharp mind for sure, and I love that. "But do you want to?" she asks.

I nod. "It would mean the world to me," I admit. Inviting me to meet my
mother is a huge step toward commitment from Celine. She's letting me see
a part of her world she has kept hidden, not just from me, but from
other people too.

She is trying to trust me.

She smiles and looks relieved. Cyrus was right. It's a good thing I
let my insecurities get in the way. "Then let's go."

I offer her my arm, and she takes it before we head to the cemetery.
companionable silence. Her mother and brother are probably buried in the
pack lands, but many of us also have memorial plaques in the city center
nearby, simply to not alert the humans or raise suspicions.

We make our way through the cemetery until Celine stops in front of a
grave. Celine spreads a blanket for us to sit down on it. "Hi Marius,
Connor," she says while lighting a few candles. "I've brought some flowers
for you today. It's time for you to meet my mate. This is Marius."

I swallow. "Hi," I squeak nervously before clearing my throat. "

to her honor to finally meet you, Mrs. Anderson... and Connor.”

“My mom’s name is Amanda,” Celine smiles. “Connor was my brother.”

Yet, he “Amanda,” I nod.

... so I “Very difficult guy,” Celine says to her mother and brother as I sit down next to me. “We had a dreadful start, Mom, and I wished you were here for me throughout it. I could have used some advice. But now... I know anymore... I think he’s not so bad once you get beneath that exterior.”

He has a “I won’t hurt her,” I say.

“He already did,” she says towards the gravestone.

Meet her “I won’t do it again,” I promise with emphasis. “I promise to be with you for the rest of my life and to follow her on her journey through life. I will respect her both as my mate, and my alpha.”

Her eyes widen as she stares at me. “Did you just say you would act as your alpha? Just like that?”

I didn’t I shrug. “You are the Alpha of Moon Blood, and in the off chance I manage to woo you and win your heart, it won’t change who you are, but my position as alpha.” Her relief is so evident that I am surprised by it. “I don’t think it would be a problem?” I ask, shocked by her assumption.

neveries “Of course I did,” she admits openly. Celine hardly ever lets go of her demeanor, but I understand it more now. As a she-wolf, it must be hard to maintain her position. She’d be constantly scrutinized and judged by her pack. Her alphas... despite being so obviously lethal and strong. She’s half-wit with which just makes her even more dangerous.

I misjudged Celine because of her imposing and formidable presence. It’s not before, without understanding her. “I have a responsibility towards my pack.”

I can't just give them up, not even for my mate," she explains quietly. "I've only a little pledged my loyalty to them."

"Celine," I say earnestly. "I know I might have said some negative and hurtful things about you when we found out we were mates, but now I know she sits was genuine. I was just trying to find excuses not to be with you. I'd been truth is, I really don't mind if you become my alpha and I become your beta. I don't care for whatever the male version of that is. I literally couldn't give a shit about it."

"But you're a lycan, with alpha blood," she points out.

I shrug. "So what? I've never really bothered to train much, and I don't have control over my gift because of that. Why do you think my father never protect even considered me for the position of alpha at Silverlake? It's embarrassing. I will admit it, but I don't want the responsibility of being alpha. Talking to and of others terrifies me. I hate politics and could never lay down the law like an alpha needs to do. I'd get an anxiety attack even thinking about having to step up as alpha. I'm honestly not even sure if I can do the job of a luna."

"I don't think you give yourself enough credit," she says.

"I'm just being honest," I say earnestly. "I have a lot to learn to become your rank, let alone the rank of a Luna. I wouldn't even mind just being your beta for a while without the responsibility."

Celine looks a bit flustered. It's the first time I see her blush, and she looks a little embarrassed. "It's good to know how you feel about everything, but I would never introduce you as my mate, and then not give you a rank. It would be disrespectful to you... almost as if you were my dirty secret."

I grin. "I'd love to be your dirty secret," I say, wiggling my brows. She snorts, punching my shoulder lightly before we both fall into a comfortable silence.

y. “I’ve Eventually, Celine looks back to the grave. “My brother was stillborn
finally says. “And my mom died during a rogue attack.”

ive and “I heard. It must have been so hard for you.”

ne of it “I was left alone with my father then,” she admits. “Dad is a great alpha
But the always was, but when he lost his mate, it took everything out of him
ur luna, little remaining strength went into keeping the pack afloat.”

it about “And he forgot about you,” I conclude.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Celine,” I say with emphasis. “I am not here to judge.”

[barely She looks at me thoughtfully before nodding. “He’s never mistreated
or never anything, he just had to deal with his pain, and that meant I was left
rassing with mine. I never dared to cry for her or for me. I thought I needed
in front strong for the pack and for my father to prove I was worthy of being
like an alpha’s heir.”

; to step My heart clenches at that confession. She was only nine years old
she lost her mother, yet she never allowed herself to grieve. She coped
father and dealt with her pain alone, the same way he dealt with his. I
earn away just a little kid and would have needed his love and guidance.
ur mate they get along really well now, but still, it saddens me to know how
the child Celine probably felt while growing up.

[it’s so “Do you have a photo of your mom?” I ask her softly.

d never She looks a little surprised at my question, but nods with a smile. She
ould be her necklace off and opens the little pendant, revealing a photo of her
mother.

“She looks like you,” I say quietly while studying the picture for
time. “I am so sorry you had to lose her, Celine.”

ill into “She had the same necklace,” she explains. “With a picture of the two
of us. When my little brother died during labor, she was heartbroken.

rn,” she were, but it had to be even worse for her. I don’t know how she managed but she was so strong for us. We took that photo shortly afterward but she wanted to show that we were still her beloved family. She was holding the teddy bear in her hands, a present that was supposed to be for Connor. He was there for us, despite how traumatizing it had to be for her. And when the rogues killed her, they stole her necklace along with a piece of this memory. It was also the only photo I had which had a tiny piece of Connor. I could get it back.” Tears fill her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, turning her head away.

And I watch as Celine’s moment of vulnerability is gradually pushed deep inside her mind to make way for her more usual stoic demeanor. It worries me to learn that this is how she has had to deal with her pain during the years. She doesn’t even allow herself to cry. Perhaps she fears others will see it as weakness.

“Come now, lean on me for a moment and let it out. No one is here to judge you anyway,” I say before pulling her into my arms, afraid that she will push me away, but she doesn’t. She just leans into my arms and I know myself a moment of vulnerability. I am such an idiot, I think to myself. I should have been there for Celine from the first moment we met. Having her in my arms and having her trust me enough to let go is a gift, and I don’t want to throw it away. I look over at her mother’s grave and think, *I am not going to take that again, Amanda, I promise.*

Celine slowly pulls back from me as she regains her composure, turning her head back to being her usual self again. I notice however, that she is looking a little more relaxed now, like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. “Why don’t you join us for dinner tonight?” I offer. “I think Annie and I really like to see you.”

aged it, *Oh, Annie would be happy, Annie would be overjoyed!* Cyrus min becauseand rolls his eyes. *Sure, that's why we've invited our mate. For Annie!* olding a I try hard not to look flustered at his teasing. Celine smiles in amu or. Shetoo. But to my surprise, she doesn't say anything, just nods. "Can we hen thethe coven before going to Red Claw?" she asks. "I want to drop sor emory.off."

wish I "Sure," I say warily, feeling nervous about going to a coven, ing herenough to chicken out.

I'm surprised to discover that the coven is in an apartment and not a downcreepy basement or cave. A beautiful woman who looks like she's in her forties greets us. She could be younger... or maybe a little older. In a second glance, it's impossible to even guess her age. She seems to be a mighthead witch here, or is it the boss witch? The chief witch? I have no idea.

to call them. I literally know nothing about witches. Since Celine is a friend, I should probably start learning. Celine seems to know the lady, and the mighthwomen hug each other and start chatting. "Oh," Celine turns toward Jade and allows "Marius, this is Jade. She is my great-grandmother."

myself. I I stare at her wide-eyed, "What...?"

ring her "Yes, that's the reaction I always receive," Jade says, amused.

tried to "Jade," Celine smiles at the witch. "This is Marius."

going to Jade nods at me. "You are her mate?"

I nod. "It's an honor to meet you," I say, already expecting her to lunge at me for having hurt her beloved great-grandchild. I am prodding myself to tell her that I won't hurt Celine ever again, but to my surprise, she doesn't say anything. She is the first one who doesn't seem to judge me. I wouldhate me. Does she know our history?

She just looks at me, regarding me like she is searching my eyes.

ics mesomething. I'm not sure what she finds, but eventually, she smiles and
"Nice to meet you, Marius." She turns to Celine. "Will you both join
sementsome tea?"

stop by "I'm sorry, we need to get back to Marius' pack," Celine apolog
nothingjust wanted to give you this," she says, handing Jade a box. "It's the
photos you wanted. You can keep them. I made copies."

but not Jade smiles warmly. "Thank you, my dear."

"Are you coming for lunch on Sunday?" Celine asks. "Dad and C
ot someone are expecting you, and Dad wants us to meet his girlfriend."

aybe in "Oh," Jade beams. "I don't want to miss that. He deserves some hap
der. AtIs she a nice woman?"

be the "Absolutely. Super sweet," Celine tells her. "I've already met her
ea whatlost her mate too, and they've bonded over it. I guess if everything go
hybrid, on Sunday, they will probably want to mark each other as chosen mate
as bothpauses. "She makes him happy," she says with a warm smile.

nds me. "All of you deserve some happiness," Jade tells her. "I will ma
everything goes well on Sunday."

"Thank you," Celine returns her smile. "Marius and I need to leav
See you, Jade."

"Bye sweetheart, and I hope to see you again, Marius."

I smile. "You will," I promise with conviction, making Jade g
ash outCeline flush slightly.

eparating

ise, she



me orWe manage to drop everything for the baby shower at my apartment

Claw without Annie noticing. Dante and Ella have been doing their
yes for

d nods. distract Annie and keep her occupied.

me for “So, what are your plans for this weekend?” I ask Celine.

“Well, aside from pack business and work, nothing much,” she ch
izes. “I“But I wanted to go to dinner with Harmony and Garret on Friday. I’d
family strengthen our bond a bit.”

I nod thoughtfully. They are her second and third in command, a
good that she wants to make sure they all connect well. Not that I ha
brandpadoubts. Harmony loves Celine as a friend and respects her as her alp
Garret is a gem.

appiness. “And I want to meet up for coffee with Dave and Ella,” she ex
“Nothing else, though.”

l. She’s “And the family lunch on Sunday,” I point out with a grin.

oes well “Yes,” she chuckles. “Poor Mona.”

is.” She “Mona?”

“She’s my father’s girlfriend,” she explains. “She hasn’t met Grand
ke sure or Jade. She is so nervous.”

“And you like her?” I ask her carefully. “For real, I mean.”

re now. She smiles knowingly. “I know what you’re thinking... everyone fe
I should feel weird about my father dating another woman. But honestl
just so happy for him. Dad loved my mom, and nothing will ever tarn
rin and love. He’s just found another person to love as well. And that’s wor
Mona is a bit older than he is, and she is so loving and sweet.”

I smile genuinely at her. “I am happy things are looking brighter f
family,” I say. “So... if you have some time to spare...” my voice tra
in Redas always, I feel so fucking nervous.

best to “Yes,” she says.

Good thing she is our mate, Cyrus grumbles. We certainly woul

able to woo any other woman like this. Not everyone speaks Marius-is

I ignore him skillfully. “Really?” I take a deep breath. “Can I... I nuckles. it okay if I ask you on a date? I mean, officially? Is it ok if I call it a da I like to She contemplates for a moment, seemingly lost in her thoughts. The a nod, she says, “Yes. And yes, you can call it a date.”

and it’s I am honestly about to pump my fist into the air like a movie charac ave anyfortunately, I stop myself at the last second before I embarrass myself ha, and“Can I pick you up?”

“Sure, what’s the plan?”

xplains. “I would like to invite you to dinner,” I say. “And afterward, the electronic art exhibition on. You said you like art, and it’s modern art you also said you like, and Finn told me that it’s really good.”

She smiles. “I really want to see that.”

“Great,” I sigh in relief. “I’ve already got us tickets.”

lpa yet, “What would you have done if I had said no?” she says with amuser

“Probably gifted the tickets to Liam, and then cried into my pil night,” I say, hoping to sound as pitiful as possible while looking at h els likepuppy eyes.

ly, I am She giggles, and it’s the sweetest sound ever. It’s also the first tir ish thatheard her giggle. “Dork,” she admonishes me softly.

nderful. “What would you think if we let our wolves out too?” she sugg mean, for our Saturday date. I could show you Moon Blood pack prop or your “Oh,” I say. “I like that idea. And I know Cyrus is eager to run w ails off,and Danica.”

We’re both smiling, lost in our moment of silent agreement, when catches up with us. Reality in the form of Ella, that is. “Hey guys,” she *dn’t be*and rushes towards us to hug Celine. “I missed you, Cel,” she says

h. grinning at me. “Didn’t miss you much, Marius, but hey, it can’t always be perfect, is it?”

te?” “Likewise,” I shoot back. “Can’t Dante keep you occupied for five minutes, with minutes?”

“Oh, believe me,” she makes a dismissive gesture with her hand, but I know very well how to occupy each other. He has so much stamina.”

further. “Goddess,” I groan while Celine laughs. “Forget that I asked.”

Ella grins. “Come, let’s go pick up Annie and drag her to dinner.”

“How is she doing?” Celine asks as we approach the staircase leading to the alpha suite.

, which Ella shrugs. “So, So,” she admits. “She always says she is fine. You know Annie, but I think her body is getting really tired now, and the hormones are driving her nuts sometimes.”

“She’s pretty close to going into labor,” I agree. “And she is pregnant with twins. Alpha lycan twins at that. I feel really bad for her sometimes. Pregnancy always takes a huge toll on her body, for sure.”

ier with Ella throws me a surprised glance, making me realize, yet again, how insensitive my ass I was before. I didn’t think I was even saying anything when I’ve particularly sympathetic just now. Isn’t it normal to be worried about Luna when she’s struggling with such a difficult pregnancy?

ests. “I We walk into the suite and are immediately greeted by the sight of a naked Liam, while Annie is clad in nothing but his shirt, barely covering her body.”

I turn around quickly, groaning from having witnessed both my sister-in-law half-naked and my sister-in-law half-naked. Not only is it rude to stare at them, but I might get in trouble if I didn’t.

before “Oh, fuck!” Ella squeals, covering her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

ways beyond were getting it on? We would have come later instead.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” Liam explains calmly. “We just have a wardrobe malfunction.”

You can look again, Celine links me. She has on some pants now.

d. “We I sigh in relief, turning back to Liam and Annie, noticing Annie swimming in tears. “It’s my fault,” she admits, her voice a bit hoarse.

“No, it’s not,” Liam says softly.

“I couldn’t bear the scent of my clothes anymore. They were making up to feel sick, so Liam had to give me his.” She flushes at the confession, miserable. Goodness, I feel sorry for her. Mom always said that the first child to a lycan alpha messes you up during pregnancy, but for Annie, the messes are worse since she is only a werewolf of omega rank.

Liam pulls her into a hug. “But I love seeing you in my clothes, you don’t mind with that. It’s a win-win situation.”

It must “Really?” she asks carefully.

He nods, and apparently, he’s said something right because Annie looks a little happier again. Liam takes her hand, leading her toward the elevator. Everything else, while Celine and I decide to take the stairs. We meet in the dining room for dinner, and Annie’s mood perks up a lot. She’s joking with Ella and Aryanna about how glad she will be when she finally has a half-babies in her arms.

It feels strange to have Celine join our dinner, but it’s a good thing. I’m finally dating my mate.

The evening has been wonderful, and I’m feeling really content with Liam. Annie pulls me aside. She’s looking around, eyeing the room, before taking a deep breath and turning to me. “Did you know, Celine’s birthday is next week,” she whispers.

“No, I didn’t know,” I say, looking at her. “That’s great. I’ll make sure to be there.”

“I’ll be there,” she says, smiling. “I’ll be there.”

“No,” I exclaim.

“I thought not,” she smiles. “Don’t worry. You can’t be expected to if no one tells you. It’s next month.”

“Thanks for telling me, Annie.” I beam at her. “Best sister-in-law ever’s eyes She smiles brightly. “Do you know what you want to get her?”

I tilt my head, thinking about it for a bit. “I want it to be special,” I

“Like...” I pause, suddenly remembering what she told me at her morning megrave. “I just might have an idea,” I admit. “But I think I’ll need help.” looking “Awesome,” she nods. “I can help if you want me to. I have been since I was firstborn. Liam and I don’t want to take any risks, so I am mostly alone. It must be maternity leave, you could say.”

“I would really appreciate your help. I need to research something; you know Moon Blood,” I muse.

“That I can definitely do! It’s my old pack. I can ask my parents for help too,” she promises.

“Who do you think would be good at getting something that’s difficult to obtain... maybe someone with really good contacts in the business world, but they also need contacts on the shadier side?” I ask her.

“Eric,” she says thoughtfully. “And his Beta Emilien.”

I raise my eyebrows at the revelation. She is right. Eric has tons of contacts all around the world, and I know that Emilien has a few shady connections. Just what I need!

Goddess, please, let this work!

“; when

making a

soon?”

“No,” I exclaim.

“I thought not,” she smiles. “Don’t worry. You can’t be expected to know if no one tells you. It’s next month.”

“Thanks for telling me, Annie.” I beam at her. “Best sister-in-law ever!”

She smiles brightly. “Do you know what you want to get her?”

I tilt my head, thinking about it for a bit. “I want it to be special,” I admit. “Like...” I pause, suddenly remembering what she told me at her mother’s grave. “I just might have an idea,” I admit. “But I think I’ll need help.”

“Awesome,” she nods. “I can help if you want me to. I have been so bored lately. Liam and I don’t want to take any risks, so I am mostly already on maternity leave, you could say.”

“I would really appreciate your help. I need to research something about Moon Blood,” I muse.

“That I can definitely do! It’s my old pack. I can ask my parents for help too,” she promises.

“Who do you think would be good at getting something that’s rather difficult to obtain... maybe someone with really good contacts in the business world, but they also need contacts on the shadier side?” I ask her.

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Goddess, please, let this work!

BOYS WILL BE BOYS

MARIUS

“**T**ell me again, why I agreed to join you guys for this poker
Finn mutters, exchanging some poker chips with me.

Neither of us are winning much tonight. Good thing we play for
cause. The money gambled tonight will go directly to our charity proje

“I’m only here because Celine is going out with her Beta and Gar
mutter, annoyed when I check my cards. “Otherwise, I would have ha
plans.”

“He’s right,” Liam groans as he grabs a glass of whisky Dad offers
could have spent my night with Annalise instead.”

Dad has invited Liam, Finn, and me to join his poker evening. I didn’t
know he had these... it seems however, that he finally thinks we

enough to join him. Apparently, he holds them once a month together
Annie's dad Brian, retired Alpha Cedric, and his old friend Jace.

We all know Jace well since we grew up around him and his family
also helped Liam in his battle for Red Claw. It's a bit weird hanging out
Celine's dad though... Cedric isn't my biggest fan. Surprisingly, he
said or done anything to me regarding my situation with Celine. Apparently
he has decided to give me a chance too.

Brian smiles brightly at Liam. "You're such a dedicated mate
daughter," he beams with pride. "I can't wait to be a grandfather."

"I agree," Dad smiles. "And it's two grandchildren on top of that."

"Yes," Liam smiles warmly. "I'm truly blessed. So, let's get this
going because I want to be home early tonight."

"Look at your boys," Jace grins and elbows my father. "All of
children are doing so well. Look at Marius finding such a strong mate
night?" Celine and suddenly being so responsible. And Liam. He is succeeding
everything he does." He turns to Finn. "What about you, Finn?" I
a good curiously. "I've heard you have some great plans?"

Finn chuckles. "I'm not sure if it's great, but I finish college in
weeks, then I will take on more responsibilities within the pack."

Dad smiles proudly. "I'm very proud of my sons. And of Aurelia
course."

"Ahh, the little war machine," Jace grins. "I saw her fighting in one
tournaments two weeks ago. Shit. Your girl whooped everyone's
didn't matter their rank or gender; she just wiped the floor with them."

"Aurelia is extremely gifted," I say proudly. Her skills are lethal. I
her gifts are useful in battle, and she even has one gift that can bend
She's far more blessed with her gifts than Finn and me. I don't know

er with Finn felt as a kid, but back in the day, I was jealous of her sometime
I'm just proud of how strong she has become.

ily. He Whenever I think about my own gift, I feel guilt stabbing my chest.
out with trained it much... at one point, I just gave up, and although Dad tried
: hasn't me into training it, forced me even, I only did the bare minimum. I sh
arently, able to connect with other people's minds and get a glimpse of their th
and feelings... but it's tricky and hard to control.

to my Frankly, I suck at it.

You look troubled, Liam links me.

Just the old story, I admit. Should have trained more growing up.

s game *It's not too late though, he says. Your gift is still there, it jus
polishing.*

of your *I know, I would need someone to train me though, I admit. And
e in oursure if I'm ready for Dad to whoop my ass... in a metaphorical sense.
ssful in think he's aware of how little I truly trained it.*

he asks I can see Liam frowning a bit, and I can't really blame him for it.

Then I'll train you, he offers.

i a few I can barely believe my ears. *You would?*

Sure.

too, of *You have so much on your plate. You're alpha of a huge pack,
going to be a father and—*"

e of the *Marius, he chuckles. I can spare a bit of time for my brother. So, eit
ass! Ita yes or no. Which is it?*

I contemplate his offer for a moment, then I nod. *I'd love to train
Most of more. So, yes, I'll take you up on your offer.*

reality. Liam nods contently before both of us join the conversation
ow how Fortunately, the others didn't realize we were having our ow

s. Now conversation. Dad and Jace are still discussing a few pack issues, polit
Aurelia.

I never “I have high hopes for Aurelia,” Dad admits.

to push “We all do,” Finn agrees. “She’s going to start college in a mon
ould beshe’s so diligent with both her studies and training.”

thoughts “Is she really that strong?” Cedric asks curiously.

“I have seen her fight a few times,” Brian tells him. “She’s like a nin
can actually teleport or freeze time during a battle... I'm not sure which

“Wow, that’s handy,” Cedric admits. “I wish I could do that.”

“Celine is very skilled too,” I say proudly, not able to stop myse
*t needs*boasting a bit. “She can see the possible outcome of every battle move
it happens. It gives her a real advantage.”

I’m not “And she has those kickass witch powers,” Finn adds.

I don’t Cedric smiles warmly at our words, his eyes shining with pride.

“And what about your kids, Brian?” Jace asks Annie’s dad.

He beams as his eyes light up. “Harmony is Celine’s beta, and she’
incredibly well. I’m so proud! And we don’t really need to ment
Annie, I’m guessing. And Steve. Steve has come into his own skill
become so strong and has devoted himself fully to his training. He’s a
*you’re*going to train with the elites now.”

“Awesome,” Jace says sarcastically. “Are you three doing this to
*her it’s*purpose right now? Telling me about how fantastic all of your child
doing?” he asks dryly. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you..
*my gift*would be even happier if I could say the same. Meanwhile, I’m stu
my reckless boys.”

again. It’s obvious he doesn’t really mean it and that he loves them. I kn
n littlewell enough to know how much they mean to him.

ics, and I link Liam. *Are they that problematic?*

Liam sighs. *The younger one of the twins likes to sleep around, and the older one has an anger problem. They are not particularly bad, but they definitely need some attitude adjustments. That's why Jace is so worried.*

"They just turned eighteen," Cedric points out. "Don't worry too much. They are strong and capable firstborns to a lycan alpha. They'll come through. They just need more time to find their path."

"I agree," I nod. "Look at me. I was quite a mess too, until recently."

"Why don't your boys join Finn on his mission?" Dad asks out of the blue. Liam's eyes brighten at the idea. "That's not a bad idea. Steve was here before, and he's the same age as your twins. They might enjoy the challenge, and Finn will lead the group as he's very capable. We've actually entrusted the whole mission to him."

Finn's eyes light up from the glowing support Liam just offered. When Dad asked if he wanted to lead the mission to Blood Snow, Finn immediately agreed to take up the challenge and help the victims. Somehow, I don't think it sunk in until now, how much faith everyone has in Finn's skills as a leader.

We start explaining the mission to Jace and why we're sending a group to Blood Snow. Jace's eyes light up. "I think this is perfect for them. They need a little wake-up call anyway and some attitude adjustment. Traveling with your group, Finn, and helping these victims might be what they need... but I pause, showing us a lopsided grin. "But... are you really up for the work with babysitting them?" He grins as Finn just sighs. "Don't worry, you will have all the authority. You have my blessing to whoop their asses if you want. Please feel free to do so anytime."

We all burst into laughter at Jace's offer. Eventually though, Finn

and rolls his eyes dramatically. “Goddess, it feels like I’m traveling *and the* kindergarten group,” he chuckles. “But sure, Uncle Jace. We can take *ut they* with us. Bad attitude or not, they are strong lycans with alpha blood. *ed.* might need them.”

much. “You know,” Jace says after a while. “All this talk about the you around; here missing their mates had me thinking about Janice.” He sighs dr

“How I love that noise she makes when I kiss her. Can’t get enough of”
“Mona just makes me drop all my reasoning too,” Cedric agrees. ‘
ie blue. keep my hands off her.”

will be “You know, it doesn’t matter how much time passes, but Rosalee
allenge, still has a body to die for,” Brian beams. “And her laugh is the cutest.”

trusted “I know what you mean,” Dad agrees. “Flora just recently bought
lingerie set and—”

ed him. “Dad!” Liam exclaims in horror.

n, he’d Finn and I grimace.

ns. Yet “Oh, I apologize deeply,” he deadpans, and we all know he doesn’t
e has init.

“Alright, alright, we’ll stop talking about our mates,” I exclaim
roup to Goddess, don’t talk about Mom’s lingerie anymore.”

y could “Stop mentioning it,” Finn huffs toward me.

ng with Liam furrows his brows, while engaging in a scary glaring battle w
ed.” He “I should have stayed at home.”

task of “One more round.” Jace hands us all a new set of cards. “Then Li
ill have go home. Only Liam though.”

vant to. “Pregnant mates are our top priority,” Cedric agrees and takes his
and smirks.

n grins Goddess, he is going to win this round too. Is this some sort of gift

with aIt's truly scary.

se them

od. We



True to his word, Liam leaves early to head home to Annie. He's so
ingstersit's unbelievable. Before, I thought that having a mate would ma
eamily.weaker, that Annie made Liam weaker by bringing out his softer side,
'her." truth is, Liam has never been so strong, healthy, and happy as he is now
'I can't I see things differently now.

After losing most of my money, I step outside, letting the old men l
e... sheout. As I'm standing there, I feel a mind link from Celine coming th

It's unexpected and a little surprising since she hasn't mind-linked me
t a newwithout reason, and only when she felt my nightmare that one time.

How is your evening? She asks.

Fantastic, I laugh. *Your dad has bankrupted me for the night.*
basically winning one round after another.

't mean She laughs too. *That's the power of love,* she says. *He has his M*
think of.

1. "But *If it's the power of love, then I should have won,* I say without thin
blush furiously when I realize what I just said. *Or Liam,* I breat
desperate to save this conversation. *Oh shit, sorry, I wasn't trying t*
ith dad.*things awkward.*

It's alright, she says. She doesn't sound angry or disgusted, she
am cansounds pleased, and a little surprised.

And your evening?

s cards, *Let's just say Harmony and Garret's competitive streak came throu,*
they suddenly battled each other during a game of billiards. Harmo
he has?

*because... she's Harmony, and then Garret got teary-eyed and told u
his newest relationship drama. He and Elias have so many issues.
me, we're a dream pair in comparison.*

in love, I chuckle at her words. *So, are you free now?*

ake me *Yes, why? Do you want to meet up?*

but the *Do you?*

w. She's silent for a while. *I wouldn't mind*, she says. Cyrus has falle
in shock, while I can't believe my luck. It's the freaking first time she
battle it of asked for a date. She doesn't need to ask me twice!

hrough. *Cool! How about we meet up for a walk? If you want a midnight sn
e before could grab a few hot dogs and then just walk around and enjoy the nig*

Sounds great, Celine agrees.

I'm at Silverlake, I can be in town in twenty minutes.

He is *Great, I'll wait for you by the hot dog stand opposite the coffee s
went to last time.*

lona to I rush back inside and grab my stuff. "Sorry guys," I blurt at the gi
have to go. I have a... a... meeting." My shit-eating grin must have gi
aking. I away, because Jace just whistles while Dad and Finn exchange a k
he out, grin.

o make Brian gives me the thumbs up.

Great. Way to go guys. Could you make it any more embarrassing?

e rather Obviously, they can because as I'm heading out the door, Cedric
and adds, "Say hello to my daughter."

The group burst into laughter, but I couldn't care less. I run to my
gh, and drive off to meet my mate.

ny won



s about

Believe

VALERIE

“Do you guys want something to eat?” the waitress asks. “Kitchen closing in half an hour, then it will only be drinks.”

n silent “I wouldn’t mind something to eat,” Aurelia considers.

e’s kind The others agree. Wolves can eat a lot.

“I’d love some fries,” Nox says.

ack, we “How about we let this beautiful lady bring everyone some fries and other starters and finger foods to share?” Jazz asks, winking at the waitress.

Wow, Aryanna has really rubbed off on her. I grin.

The waitress giggles.

hop we “Yeah, just bring us everything from the starters and finger food section of the menu,” Eric agrees with a grin. “And a whisky for me, please.”

roup. “I “Plain?” she asks.

ven me “Lemon.”

nowing “Awesome, anyone else?” The waitress eyes us expectantly, and waves another round of cocktails.

Eric’s hand rests on my knee, occasionally squeezing it while we await our cocktails. We’re out with my friends tonight. It’s the first time I’ve officially introduced Eric to them. Most of them have met him already. I’ve met Aurelia and Jazz, but I wanted him to meet everyone else in a casual setting.

car and Tori and Marilou are having the time of their life, it seems. I have a few questions at us and asking Eric about the Council. I tell them about my plans and how I will leave with Eric soon.

“We have to throw a party for you,” Lionel announces.

I'm so relieved it isn't awkward between Lion and me. I know we've been a little before I met Eric, and I might have seriously considered going something with him had the circumstances not changed for me, but I like he's happy that I've found my mate. He even winked at me when I went to the bar together earlier saying, "It looks like I missed my chance."

I chuckle. "You will find a better choice for you," I'd promised. "I'm no doubt you will have an awesome mate and will fall head over heels for her."

He'd beamed at me and nodded in agreement.

I'm glad I didn't start anything with him, though. It makes things awkward. Meanwhile, Terry and Marilou are obviously crushing on each other hard. It was only flirting before, but now I can see Terry holding her hand sometimes and staring at her with a dreamy gaze.

They are such a cute couple. Marilou is one of the sweetest people I know and Terry is such a nice guy. I just hope neither of them gets hurt in the future when they turn eighteen and find out if they are mates or not. It's not my place to patronize them though. I'm sure they know the risks.

"You scored quite a catch," Tori says to me grinning broadly.

Aurelia groans. "Tori, he's my cousin, please."

"But he's hot," she giggles.

To my surprise, I don't mind her finding him hot. I know she's threatening me, she's just being Tori. A bit naïve, but sweet and genuine.

"Well, thank you, Tori," Eric grins and puts his arm around my shoulder. "But my mate is hotter than me."

"Absolutely," Lionel and Nox agree in unison, making us girls laugh. Eric looks slightly appalled by me having so much male attention.

"I can't believe you are abandoning Aurelia, Lion, Nox, and me"

I flirted/teases. “What am I going to do without my Val fix at college?”

ursuing She sounds like she’s joking, but I know that deep down, she m
t seems Leaving Jazz and my parents behind will be the worst. I reach out my
hen we take hers and squeeze it. “FaceTime. At least once a week,” I say. “An
ce.” come back to visit regularly. Eric wants to visit his family more regu
[here is well.]”

eels for “And you are coming to my birthday party,” Aurelia points out.

“I promise! Not going to miss it.”

“You are all welcome to visit us anytime,” Eric offers, and my hear
far less at how well he treats my friends, even the guys. “Why don’t you try t
on each for the Christmas holidays? Maybe after you’ve celebrated wit
ing her families. Christmas season in Paris is wonderful.”

“Are you serious?” Jazz asks, her eyes looking at him hopefully.

I know, “Of course,” he chuckles. “I don’t have much family in Paris, and I
a year would be lovely to have you all over.”

not my Marilou tugs at her sleeve, looking sad. “I’m not sure if it’s poss
me.” I know what she means, she’s an omega and an orphan, sh
particularly swimming in money.

“It’s my gift,” Eric says calmly. “To all of you, as a present for my
mate to make her feel less lonely at that time. I hope you accept.”

ie isn’t A smart move, I think. Instead of only inviting Marilou, Terry an
ne. who are not rich, he simply invited everyone to come for free.

oulders. Before anyone else can say anything, Aurelia nods. “I will. I’ll
accept your invitation,” she says. And once she’s accepted, the others
h while suit.

Goddess, I’m so blessed, thank you! I don’t even mind my shortc
;,” Jazz anymore. I’ve gotten so much more in return.

The rest of the evening is spent chatting about all kinds of things, and means it fits so well with my friends it makes me happy. When it's time to head hand to Aurelia makes sure that everyone gets home safely. She and Nox car and I will their driver, and she takes her fellow pack members with her.

Early as Eric and I take Marilou and Jazz with us as we all live in the same

The evening was great, but I'm also happy to have some alone time with Eric. When he's about to sit down at his desk to get some work done, he curls my lips. I approach him before sitting down, straddling his lap.

It swells He flashes a smirk. "Someone feels playful."

So come I make sure to look as innocent as possible. "It's just... the zip of my pants is stuck. I might need help."

I can feel his fingers press against my back, tugging my dress. "Anything for my Snow White," he says.

I think it "Good thing I have my prince," I whisper into his ear. "What would you do without him?"

It's possible for He tugs my dress down, before lifting me up to remove it completely. He's not making sure to get rid of my underwear as well. Meanwhile, I fumble with his clothes, opening the buttons of his shirt to reveal his toned chest. My sweet fingers roam over it, enjoying the feel of his skin. His hand finds its way to my butt, kneading and squeezing it teasingly.

And Tori "Fuck Eric," I breathe out, groaning in pleasure when I feel his lips on my marked neck, and his thumb starts to circle my clit.

I'm happily following before There is a brief rustling sound as he opens his pants and pushes them down before guiding me down onto his hard erection. The stretch is momentary, but soon I find myself moaning in pleasure. I wrap my arms around his neck, feeling his lips sucking at my nipples. One of his hands

nd Eric against my back, supporting me for balance, and the other rubs against my home, exposed pussy.

ne with Everywhere he touches leaves tingles and tiny jolts of electricity.

intense it makes my head spin. I tighten my grip, holding on to him like a pack. I move my hips faster. When Eric starts to push his hips up to meet me, I swear I see stars. I moan his name, begging for more, until I can feel a smirk of a orgasm approaching. It washes over me, leaving me a shivering and numb mess. Eric slams his hips into me a few more times before he comes to

“Fuck,” he breathes out. “That was hot. You may distract me from my dress like that anytime.”

“Glad to see that it works,” I giggle.

s open. He holds me in his arms a little longer before helping me climb off

We take a shower together, which doesn't remain innocent for long. I would soon find myself being pressed against the shower wall as Eric penetrates me again.

pletely, Afterward, I'm so tired that I think I could fall asleep on the spot, but I have just one more thing I want to do. When Eric carries me to our bedroom. My look at him consideringly, “I would like to try something,” I say nervously.

He eyes me curiously, “And what do you want to try, princess?”

against I fumble with my bathrobe to distract myself. “I feel bad that you won't meet Ailia, my wolf. And so, I thought... maybe we could try something. You are up for it, of course?”

burns “What do you want me to do?” he asks softly, and I'm glad he takes my arm seriously. I know he means it when he says that he doesn't mind that I would shift. But it matters to me, and I at least want to give his wolf a piece of

“Would you shift?” I ask nervously.

inst my He puts me down on the bed. "Here?" he asks, surprised.

I nod.

It's so He looks at me curiously, then, to my utmost surprise, he agrees. while I you. If you want to try something Valerie, I will support you. Just, d mine, I scared please, Caius is a lycan, and it means he's bigger and stronger feel my average werewolf."

roaning He takes his bathrobe off and takes a few steps back before shifting to his beautiful brown Lycan. He's tall and strong, yet carries the same ease in work Eric does. I'm in awe as I look at him. I notice he can stand up on two

"Hello Caius," I say softly, carefully touching his fur. "I'm happy to be in your lap."

his lap. "I'm happy too, princess," Caius says, his voice is low and deep, and I'm surprised he can talk without the mate bond. Probably a lycan that mates maybe a royal thing. I make a mental note to ask later.

"I don't know how long I can let you meet Ailia for today, but I would like to see you try."

room, I I feel his joy through the mate bond, spurring me on further.

a little Ailia, I link my wolf. *Do you think you could take over for a moment?*

I feel her surprise at my request, but also how happy she is with my suggestion. *Valerie, you would lend me your body?*

u can't *I would do anything for you,* I tell her. *No one is as special to me as you are. Not even my mate. And you deserve to meet your love too.*

I take a deep breath when I feel her presence getting stronger, allowing her to take over. It feels weird to give up control, but I trust her.

I can't "Hello Caius," Ailia says as she sits down in front of Caius. She hugs me first before she cuddles up to him, while his snout nuzzles her hair. I

gentle with her, it's sweet. "I'm happy to meet you. One day, I will meet you in my wolf form."

"I trust you. "I love you, mate," he says. "And my human and I are ready to cherish you. I won't be with Valerie in any form."

than an hour. I retreat to the back of our mind to let her talk and bond with Caius while I listen to me listening in. She deserves this moment with her mate as much as I do. I'm not going to be intimate with Eric.

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gentle with her, it's sweet. "I'm happy to meet you. One day, I will meet you in my wolf form."

"I love you, mate," he says. "And my human and I are ready to cherish you and Valerie in any form."

I retreat to the back of our mind to let her talk and bond with Caius without me listening in. She deserves this moment with her mate as much as I deserve mine with Eric.

SCARS I

MARIUS

I retreat to the back of my mind to allow Cyrus to be with his mate t
he deserves to be. Unlike me, he was always fiercely loyal to Dan
cherished and loved her. There was not one moment when he didn't w.

Danica is a proud and regal wolf, and fortunately for me, she t
instant liking to Cyrus, embracing his childish demeanor and enjoy
attempts to show off in front of her. Despite his snotty and dismissive
toward me, Cyrus is actually a proud alpha lycan. But our alpha bloo
as strong as my other siblings, meaning that Cyrus and I are not as do
Growing up, I thought the lack of dominance was a shortcoming, b
I've learned to accept this as part of me. However, just because Cyru
might not have the desire to lead a pack, I've learned that it doesn't n
weak either.

Watching Cyrus turn into a tail-wagging pup in front of his beloved wolf mate is hilarious. He's practically strutting around like a p showing off. I don't know how or why she enjoys seeing him behave way.

Celine wants to show me Moon Blood in our wolf forms, which happily agreed to. It's been a while since I let Cyrus out so he could j through a forest. He follows Danica's lead, and I can't believe how in fast she is. Faster even than most lycans, I would guess. Cyrus is enjoy chase, even with Danica outrunning him. She doesn't seem to mind slowing down every so often to let him catch up. They chase each playfully, running here and there, tackling and nibbling at their fur, obviously enjoying each other's presence. I retreat to the back of my mind and Cyrus to have this moment alone. If I ever get the chance to get intimate Celine, I definitely wouldn't want him nosing about or spying on me e

he way It's hours later that we return to Celine's pack house, shifting back ica. HeHuman forms. Honestly, I didn't even think about the fact that I want her, standing here all naked in front of her so soon... but it felt so natural ook anin front of Celine that I'm not concerned. Until I notice her slightly s ing hisexpression, I figure she probably didn't consider that we might attitudestanding in front of each other in our naked glory. I can't help mys d is noteyes shift from her perfect face down her body, taking in her beautiful minant.boobs. I want to cup them with my hands and feel her nipples harder ut nowmy touch. Her body is very athletic, she has abs and muscles, and it's c is and Ishe trains a lot. Plus, she has killer legs. And her private area... I h nake uswouldn't mind if she had a jungle down there. She'd look hot either but fuck... it's fully shaved! I didn't expect that! Goddess, I want to ta

ed she-My eyes slowly come back up to her face again, only to find Celine peacock little flustered.

ive this Her gaze seems to be aimed at my chest, before moving downwards

Is she checking out little Marius? I hope she isn't disappointed. So much I've must be getting her approval because she keeps staring for quite a while just run feel myself starting to blush. Awesome, two adult wolves in their mid-twenties, acting like they grew up in a monastery.

ring the As she looks up, our eyes meet, and we both start laughing at the absurdity of the situation. Breaking the moment of awkwardness and turning it into something more natural. She takes a step closer to me, and I swear my heart previously skips a beat.

d allow "Can I..." her voice trails off.

ite with "Of course," I nod, secretly crossing my fingers that she means to touch me.

to our "This here..." she touches my stomach, tracing the scar there with delicate fingers.

to shift Goddess, her touch drives me crazy. I have to fight the urge not to get shocked and slam our lips together.

end up "Is this from Valerie's abduction?" she asks quietly.

elf; my I nod, anxious not to break the spell by speaking and ruining our moment.

il perky "May I?" she asks once more.

n under Again, I nod. It doesn't go unnoticed that Celine is asking for something I am not used to. But her touch isn't triggering me; it's honest and leaves me wanting more. I close my eyes as I feel her fingers

way...touching my chest, her touch sending little tingles and sparks throughout her body. I carefully reach out my arms, touching her waist first, before

moving up to explore her firm breasts. Her nipples harden under my

looks and it feels so good to finally touch her this way. I almost want to cry
how good it feels.

is. Fuck! My thoughts are disrupted when a growl forms in her throat. For a
nothing I am scared she doesn't like me touching her here, but then I realize
while. My fingers are tracing a long scar down my back.

in mid- "What is that from?" She wants to know.

Yeah, that bossy tone is definitely a turn-on.

absurdity "Calvin did that," I say quietly. "He, he didn't regularly hit me, except
it into this one time. He said it was because I was slacking in my training.
My heart was a lie. He did it because I tried to distance myself from him, and that
he wanted to show me that I had nowhere to go and that pushing him
would only hurt me more."

to touch "Your father let him punish you?" Celine asks in shock.

"No," I sigh. "Technically, though, his betas are allowed to use
with her discipline, if necessary, in their training classes. Needless to say, I
never once did. As for Calvin..." I pause. "He whipped my back, but
to grab her final lash, he used a silver-coated whip."

Her eyes turn silver as she listens, indicating that Danica is coming
surface. I see her body tensing, and her jaw tightens, her fingers clench
moment. into fists.

"Don't get upset for my sake," I say quietly.

consent, "Did no one ever ask what happened?" she hisses. "Surely someone
calming noticed?"

ears start "I lied," I explain. "I told them it happened during a rogue attack
though my indeed had one around that time, and Liam and my mother got hurt too
slowly one questioned it. I was very convincing. I was so scared of how my
fingers, would react if they had known what happened that I put a lot of effort

ry from my lies. I would build whole back stories around them and sometimes act a scene out to be more convincing.”

second, She stays quiet for a long while. “Nothing like that should have happened,” she says sadly.

“I know.”

“Thank you for being honest,” she says, leaning her forehead against mine.

“It must be difficult to talk about.”

except for “You are the only one who knows these details,” I admit honestly. “I’ve never told anyone else. It’s only for you to hear.”

because She looks at me, before grabbing my neck and pulling me into a short kiss. It’s over before I even grasp what happened.

But shit, she kissed me!

I almost don’t believe it.

instill Cyrus nearly fainted from the shock, before popping up again and biting Vincent at me. *Yes, human, way to go!*

for the She smiles at me, before turning around to grab her clothes. Goddamn, her ass is gorgeous too. I fight back my growing erection, hastily grabbing my clothes. She catches my reaction though, and grins. “Like what you see?”
enching “Well, you do have a great ass,” I point out playfully.

She laughs. “It’s only fair that you show me yours now.”

“You want to see my butt?” I grin, loving how she is not embarrassed to ask for something like that.

“Equal opportunity,” she teases.

ck. We I smirk while turning around slowly, wiggling my hips a bit for the camera, so I turn my head to toss her a glance over my shoulder like a professional stripper. “And? What’s the verdict?”

ort into She gives me the thumbs up, speckles of silver dancing through her hair.

es even “Perfect.”

I chuckle as I put on my clothes. We have spent the whole night to pened,” and dawn is setting in right now. “Care for a very early breakfast?” I ask.

She smiles. “I will so regret not sleeping all night, but yes, let something to eat.”

st mine. We enter the pack house to find one of the chefs is already here, setting the table.

She looks surprised to see us. “Alpha, I didn’t know you would be here so early. I apologize for not being ready!”

“There is no need to, Helen,” Celine says. “It just so happened that I had a short kiss. Marius and I had some... work to do. Do you have time to fix us something to eat?”

She nods eagerly. “I could prepare you some eggs and bacon.”

“Fantastic,” Celine nods her approval before leading me to the dining hall. It’s weird to be here so early, but Celine and I just chat while drinking coffee, and eating fantastic eggs with bacon.

ess, her The more time we spend with each other, the more I realize I need Celine for a favor. It’s a huge thing for me to ask of her, and the longer I wait to ask, the heavier the task becomes. I know it is something I have to ask of her.

and I need her by my side. Especially after today, after spending quality time together and the progress we’ve made. “Celine,” I almost whisper. “I need to ask you something I need to ask of you. Something important. And... you don’t have to agree. By no means do you have to... it’s just...” My voice trails off, leaving me frustrated.

show. I “What do you need me to do?” she asks softly. “Don’t be afraid to ask me.”

“You don’t need to...” I pause. “Listen, I... I know I’m asking a lot of you, and I know I’m being selfish asking you for this, and it’s alright.”

decline. It's just that, I feel better with you around, stronger. You m
ogether, mind and body relax just by being present, and it feels like I can do a
sk her. with you by my side. I don't think I could do it alone." Oh, my godde
's grabwhining and just get it out, I chastise myself.

She looks at me, both curious and worried.

ting up. "I want to visit Calvin in the dungeon. I think I need to, so I can l
e up so know this is a lot to ask of you, but I don't think I could do it with
being there." I turn to look at her to make sure she knows she doesn't
at Lordagree on something so difficult. "You don't have to say yes. I just ne
nothing ask. That's all."

"I'll come with you," she says promptly. "Of course I will. I want
that asshole a piece of my mind too."

empty "But don't feel obliged because—"

ogether, She reaches out her hand to touch mine. "Marius, I will come wi
Stop panicking."

l to ask I let out a shaky breath. "Alright."

onger I "Do you want to do it today?"

e to do, I contemplate her offer, then I nod. "I might chicken out otherwise.
ity time if you can spare the time."

There is "I can," she says. Her strength and resolution always amaze me
i't have when she is feeling insecure, she doesn't waver. She's agreed to h
ails off, because she knows I need her there as my mate, because the mate bo
help me get through this.

l to ask What I like the most, though, is that she never looks at me with pit
when she saw the scar... she was angry, and maybe even hurt for m
ot from but she never looks at me in pity.

t if you "How about we both go and get some rest? Then I need to get som

ake mydone. Let's meet this evening at Silverlake." She pauses. "Shall I pi
nythingup?"

ss, stop "Okay." Old me would have declined the offer because my pride
have gotten in the way. A girl picking me up? No way. Now I'm
relieved to have her at my side. I love that she's offered to come and
et go. Iso we can drive there together. I think meeting Calvin will shake me up
out youbad, so I am glad I don't need to drive. "That would be nice. That
have toCeline. I'll be at Red Claw all day, getting some training in. L
eded to whenever you are ready to set off."

She smiles and nods.

to give



th you.

CELINE

I am surprised by how readily Marius accepts my lead. Many male
don't like to do that, but it doesn't seem to bother him at all that I
That is, alpha she-wolf. I know I can come off as domineering sometimes, but
want him to think that his opinion doesn't matter. Marius is my m
e. Even equal, and I don't want him to submit or feel pressured. I want him t
help me he can always talk to me and suggest things without worrying that
nd will feel threatened by him. Much to my surprise though, Marius seem
y. Even perfectly happy with me the way I am. I feel it through the mate bo
y sake, through the connection of our wolves.

I arrive at Red Claw just before sunset to pick Marius up. I can
ie work anxiety going through the roof, and it's worrying me.

ick you I want to say something reassuring to him, anything, but what?

“You don’t have to do this,” I say, inwardly face-palming myself.
wouldnot reassuring... it’s just... plain stupid, useless words.

just so “I know,” he says with a smile. “And you don’t have to be here with
get me “I want to be here,” I say.

p pretty He nods. “And I need to do this.” A pause. “Thank you, Celi
nk you, everything. For encouraging me, calling me out on my shit, and fo
ink me here now. It really means a lot.”

I’m lost for words because I don’t feel like I’ve done much for him
just here, nothing else. We’re both feeling anxious, not saying much but
bit of random chit-chat here and there. I’m relieved to see Silver
borders come into view. The guards already expecting us and let
through without asking any questions.

It’s evening, and most pack members are either having dinner at the
house or spending time in their homes. It’s the perfect time for us because
arrival goes unnoticed. No one knows except for those who need to know
wolves Elden and Beta Vincent greet us, and I can immediately see the con
am an feelings in Elden’s eyes. I can’t even fathom how guilty he must be
I don’t for having all of this happen beneath his roof without noticing anything
ate, my men like Calvin know exactly what they are doing, and when. Ever
o know discovered what happened to Marius, I’ve tried to educate myself on
I might abuse. I’ve read some books on how to talk to victims, about p
s to be triggers, and what words to avoid—the last thing I want to do is hurt
nd, and further.

I’ve read how most cases of sexual abuse towards children happen
feel his people the child knows, and it’s so sickening.

Elden pulls Marius into a hug. “Are you sure about this, Marius?”

Marius nods, suddenly looking far more confident than he did in the past. That'sHe looks at me before confirming, "I need to do this."

Vincent has been quiet throughout our greeting. I haven't seen him in a while." him recently, but now that I see him up close, he looks quite drained and ragged. "I should have noticed," Vincent begins. "I spent so much time with him, forhim. I can't believe it... I thought he was my best friend. If anyone else should have noticed..."

"No," Elden says sharply. "I should have noticed."
"I am not," Vincent says. "It's always easier said in retrospect," Marius says.
"I think so too," I decide to back him up. "We all know how cunning and strategic Calvin was. That's why he was beta in the first place, right?"
Elden nods. "Yes," he growls.

"He used his talents for a lot of shady stuff," Marius points out. "Calvin was a packright. I don't blame anyone aside from him. He breached everyone's trust, and we all realize now, had you found out, you would have killed him on the spot."

"What was his gift?" I want to know. "He must have been gifted and afflicted for such a strong lycan alpha."

Elden's face hardens even more. "He is able to diffuse his scent, and he can mind-link without anyone noticing, and he can even change his temperature since I was a child."

"Like a chameleon," Vincent explains. "He is able to remove any trace of his presence, making him nearly undetectable. That's why he is... a perfect spy."

I'm shocked. So that's why no one ever smelled him on or around Marius.
"He is a monster," I mutter. "A real monster, without any empathy."
Elden nods bitterly. "It was all a game to him."

"How did you first get to know him?" Marius suddenly asks. "

the car asked... mostly because I never wanted to talk about him,” he sheepishly. “But now I realize, I don’t even know how he came in. I was such a fool back then. I should have protected him. I should have saved his life. I should have protected his lives.”

“I know,” Elden clenches his fingers, there is turmoil in his eyes. “He was a true friend when we met, and I was still a child. My parents assigned him to me... I was his protector because of his gifts.”

That’s like what happened with Dante and Liam! But Dante is one of the most kind-hearted people out there. He’s loyal, smart, empathetic and full of love for those close to him. Calvin was the exact opposite; taking advantage of his brotherly bond with Elden, he knew exactly how to pretend to be someone he wasn’t. He is a true psychopath.

“To add insult to injury,” Vincent adds. “It seems like he also had a role to play in something to do with the attack on Annie last year.”

“I don’t know,” Marius and I exchange a surprised gaze. “What?” Marius presses. “You mean the incident when Annie was abducted?”

“We found out today,” Elden says. His voice is calm now, but I can see his eyes turning black in anger. “Flora questioned him. She always gets the truth cut through the results.”

“But... how... what?” Marius exclaims.

“He knew the humans would be coming, so he made sure they would have easy access to entry onto the pack grounds, and that Annie would be close to the border when that happened,” Vincent explains. “To think, Alpha Elden and I were worried about all this time how they managed to get through our defenses, especially with Marius, a genius like Calvin in charge of most of our defense strategies, and it was all because of that bastard all along.”

Elden’s jaw tightens at his words.

“I never knew,” Marius asks in disbelief. “Why would he do that?”

admits “Maybe he was scared of Liam’s gift,” I hear myself say. “Abducting and killing off his mate would weaken Liam tremendously. We all know we can detect lies.”

teenager “He can also invade someone’s mind,” Elden explains. “And he did as my Calvin. He was getting weird vibes from him. I know they argued.”

Calvin was probably afraid that Liam would use his gifts on him one day of the “No kidding,” Vincent mutters.

full of Marius’ mouth drops open, and through our mate bond, I can feel the shock... and guilt... He’s blaming himself for what happened to Annie and to be his hand in mine, trying to calm the whirlwind of his emotions.

“Liam is a true lycan alpha,” Elden adds. “His bond to his pack, so his bond and his mate are stronger than for many other alphas. If he had gotten a hint of Calvin’s crimes towards you Marius, nothing would have stopped Fenris from ripping Calvin’s head off his shoulders.”

It’s the first time I’m hearing about a werewolf or lycan having such a strong bond to those around them. “Are you a true alpha too?” I ask Elden.

He nods.

Marius rubs his hand over his eyes. He starts to laugh without any sound in his voice.

“Marius?” Elden asks worriedly.

He removes his hand, looking sad and angry. “Fuck! I knew this, I was wondering all of it. I knew about Liam’s gifts and yours, yet it never even registered with me that I could stop my suffering. I never realized I could have just talked to you and you would have instantly known it was the truth through your bond to me alone. Fuck. I’m so stupid!”

“If you’re stupid, what about me?” Elden mutters. “I just needed one more! To stop all of this.”

ing and “Calvin is a master manipulator,” Vincent speaks up again. “I
v Liamgenius. He knew what he was doing. In a way, he manipulated
Remember how he tried to frame half of the pack when Ann
n’t likeabducted?”

d a lot. “I was so pissed at him for doing that. I completely forgot to questi
ay.” on why he would do that,” Elden explains.

Marius lets out a deep sigh. “He is not going to hurt anyone anymore
feel his “I’ll make sure he won’t,” Elden says in an icy tone.

2. I take “Can we stop Mom from getting any more involved?” Marius asks.

To our surprise, Vincent laughs. “Good luck with that,” he snorts.
family, even an alpha’s command could make me tell her to stop questioning
i even aSomeone hurt her pup, and she is taking it very personally. My A
ed himscary, but his enraged Luna is even worse.”

I can see pride in Elden’s eyes at Vincent’s comment, before he t
1 stronglook at Marius. “I know we failed you, which is why it’s going to be c
to trust us in this. But please, try to believe me when I say I promise
won’t ever fail you again.”

3. humor “I believe you, Dad, and this won’t ever happen again, because
know that I can come to you for anything,” Marius says. “But
something from you too. Once I go down there to confront Calvin an
I knewmy decision about what to do with him, it’s over for me. I have to draw
red thaton this guilt and blame I’m constantly feeling. It’s draining me mo
one ofmore. And Dad, I want you to draw a line too.” He looks at Elden. “W
ir bondto let it go. I am finally starting to repair my bond with my family aga
while Calvin did horrible things to me, it doesn’t excuse how I’ve
ne hint.those close to me, who would do anything to protect me. I need to fi
bonds, not be excused for them. I did a lot of shitty things, and not

He is aware related to Calvin. It's just... I don't want to be treated like a witness. I am not a victim, constantly reminded of what happened to me or excused for my behavior. I am not what was done to me, nor am I still a victim survivor. I want to let things go eventually and move on. Please respect my wishes and treat me like you normally would. No excuses, no guilt, no blame. It's still me, and I'm okay." He pauses before he corrects himself. "I'm okay."

Elden lets his words sink in before he nods carefully. "Alright, Marius. This is how you want us to handle it, we will follow your wishes."

Marius. "Not Vincent nods too."

Calvin. "So..." I break the silence. "Any rules down there?"

Alpha is. For the first time during this talk, Elden looks a bit amused. "Why, do you have any plans I should know about?"

turns to. "Just covering my bases," I say. "If Calvin runs into my fist or falls off my knee, it's not going to be on me."

to you, I. "As long as he stays alive, you two can do whatever you want to do." Elden explains, his voice cold as ice again. "I just need him alive to atone for his crimes."

I need. I look at Marius. "Are you ready?" He clenches his fingers into fists and reaches out and takes his hand again. His tension eases a little.

on a line. "Let's go," he nods.

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was related to Calvin. It's just... I don't want to be treated like a wounded victim, constantly reminded of what happened to me or excused for my behavior. I am not what was done to me, nor am I still a victim. I'm a survivor. I want to let things go eventually and move on. Please respect my wishes and treat me like you normally would. No excuses, no guilt, no blame. It's still me, and I'm okay." He pauses before he corrects himself. "I will be okay."

Elden lets his words sink in before he nods carefully. "Alright, Marius, if this is how you want us to handle it, we will follow your wishes."

Vincent nods too.

"So..." I break the silence. "Any rules down there?"

For the first time during this talk, Elden looks a bit amused. "Why, Celine? Do you have any plans I should know about?"

"Just covering my bases," I say. "If Calvin runs into my fist or falls against my knee, it's not going to be on me."

"As long as he stays alive, you two can do whatever you want to him," Elden explains, his voice cold as ice again. "I just need him alive to pay for his crimes."

I look at Marius. "Are you ready?" He clenches his fingers into fists before I reach out and take his hand again. His tension eases a little.

"Let's go," he nods.

SCARS II

CELINE

The dungeons of Silverlake are situated in their own building, guarded, and far below the ground. I know the lycans don't keep prisoners here. They either kill their enemies immediately or have transferred to the Council-owned prisons. At the moment, Calvin is the prisoner down there. Elden reassures us that his cell is heavily guarded day and night and that he is dosed with wolfsbane and tied by silver chains.

Elden accompanies Marius and me to the staircase leading down to the actual cells. When we reach the final door, Marius turns to face his father and nods. "We can continue on our own from here."

"Vincent and I will wait here at the staircase," Elden says. "If anything happens, link me, or yell. Just give me a sign."

Elden motions the guards to give us some privacy too, so when Marius
I take the last few steps to the cells, it's just the two of us... and the moon

Even from a distance, I can see shimmering around the cell Calvin
in. My witch senses tell me there is a spell on it. It seems Elden isn't
any chances. Calvin is a lycan wolf, after all, not to mention he's the
beta to one of the strongest alphas in the world. Psychopath or not, he
get his former position for no reason. Besides, he probably has plenty
tricks up his sleeve, or he wouldn't have been able to betray everyone
way he did.

"What's up with his lycan?" I whisper to Marius.

"Dad says he's broken; he succumbed to Calvin's evil long ago,"
murmurs.

To say I'm stunned would be an understatement. I know that the
spirits of rogues tend to go quiet and lose their voice, some even go
heavily and never returning to their former strength and personality. But Calvin
is a lot pack wolf. How did he do that? Break his wolf spirit? *Danica, have you
ever heard of such a thing?*

he only *No. I have no clue how this can happen, she admits. I can just
lead day something truly scarring happened to him, and then he just... succumbed
to his human and his sick demands.*

I have a lot more to ask on this, but I decide to keep these questions
for later. Now is not the time for them.

Calvin doesn't seem to notice our presence. He looks heavily beaten
in case haggard. Half of his face is so swollen, it's hard to even see his
features. I can only imagine what Elden did when he found out the truth.
On closer inspection, I notice that both his arms and legs are tied with
chains, making it nearly impossible for him to move.

ius and Once we are standing right in front of him, Calvin slowly raises his monster. can see a slight change in his eyes. Something flickers in them which he recognizes Marius. “You came,” he smirks. “Did you miss me?”

t taking I ball my hands into fists—the audacity of this sick psycho. *Don’t, formertells me.*

e didn’t *Why not!? Alpha Elden officially gave me the okay to punch him if enty of to.*

one the Yes, Danica growls. *And believe me, I want to bite his arm off, but i make any difference. Look at him. Look what the Alpha and Lun already done to him.*

Marius I follow her advice and examine him properly. His skin is pale, gray, his cheeks are hollow. It’s clear the guards here feed him just enough to keep him alive, but no more. The lycan dungeons maintain a certain strength also the cell is surprisingly clean. But Calvin’s clothes reek of blood and there are burns all over his body which must have come from Flora’s *ou ever silver*, and plenty of wounds that haven’t healed yet. There is literally a hole through one of his hands, and it looks nastily infected. He has *assumemissing*, and when he smiles, I can see teeth missing too.

nbed to The front of his pants is caked in dried blood, reminding me of what said Flora had done.

ons for Torturing a werewolf can last a long time if done properly. Our wolves heal us pretty fast, but the right amount of wolfsbane will slow down the process, while not stopping it entirely. At least, that’s how I’d do it.

former *I don’t know what the lycans have already done to him*, Danica says with a sigh. *On you really want to hurt him, you need to find another way. Our best way is silver is the usual... being cold and distanced.*

Her words make me frown thoughtfully. She’s right... If I punch hi

head. The crazy sicko would probably just laugh at me for being upset. I then keep the upper hand and show him that Marius and I are completely unaffected by his presence. I might suck at feelings, but I know how to handle psychopaths. Danica “You were such a beautiful child,” Calvin rasps out towards me, successfully pulling me out of my thoughts. “But look at you now. We’re pathetic. I ruined you for anyone else. Who would want you this way?”

I can’t describe the immense rage I feel coming over me. That fucking bastard won’t add insult to injury!? He’s repeatedly hurt my mate in the most horrible way possible. He freaking raped him! He’s scarred him so much that he doesn’t even deserve a place in his own family, feeling the need to get almost everyone away because he felt dirty. And to top it all off, this bastard has assaulted other children too! What a total asshole! I really want to punch his fucking teeth down his throat.

I take a quick glance at Marius, only to find him frozen on the spot, his body rigid as a statue. I’m not even sure if he’s breathing. It makes me will my anger down and use my bond to help him. I need to keep it together and calm him through our bond.

I’m still hurt by how Marius treated me, but I’m beginning to understand him more. Spending time with him has shown me how much of a nice person Elden can actually be... he was just deeply hurt and never had a chance to express himself with this anger and pain. All he could do was lash out at others, even at himself in the process.

I feel Danica growling inside me. So much for staying calm. She pretends like she doesn’t care for Marius, but I know she does, and she’s furious at what Calvin just said. I will my emotions down, well aware that a warrior like Calvin does not listen to anger, and Danica is right, he probably doesn’t even care about being punched anymore.

Instead, I tighten my grip on Marius’ hand and lean into him. “I want

need to say while looking Calvin directly in his eyes. “There is no one else here.”

Calvin. I feel Marius’ squeezing my hand.

Marius, “He’s so weak,” Calvin hisses. “He didn’t even scream for help! You can’t even break a mate that’s so broken, so sullied? Can a regal, proud female like you be happy with my leftovers?”

Calvin dares. *Let me out,* Danica growls, letting go of her previous level-headed and composed. *I will show him how to treat a child, our mate! I will make him scream!* Calvin felt see who is going to be the leftover here!

Calvin to push. *Keep it together,* I warn her. *It’s working. He’s losing his cool. Control with me, Danica!*

Calvin rip his. I turn to face Marius. “Of course I want him. I think he’s incredibly strong,” I say with a warm smile. “For surviving the abuse of such a ruthless monster and coming out the other end alive and successful. He has so many friends and family around him, so much support. Besides, everyone is broken in this world. It doesn’t matter to me at all. All of these shortcomings you talk about are yours. Marius survived your reign of terror and he has saved others from your evil, making him even more wonderful to everyone’s eyes. Marius formed himself into the person he is now, the person you want.”

Marius stares at me through wide adoring eyes, the tension is falling away from his body as he rests his arm over my shoulder. Calvin narrows his eyes and she’s angry glare, but he stays quiet. His words have no power over me that anymore.

Probably. Marius has stayed quiet until now, but I can feel him waking up from shock. He takes in Calvin’s frame from head to toe. “Funny,” he says to him, looking Calvin straight in the eyes, “I remember you being so scared.”

I want monster of my nightmares. But look at you now... you're just p
You're not scaring anyone anymore." He looks at Calvin coolly. "Prin
will have you transported to the Council in Paris. They can deal with y
ou want "What?" Calvin hisses.

u really I don't know why this announcement comes as a shock to him, But
to admit, I'm not accustomed to the laws of lycans.

ttitude. "As a lycan wolf who committed a crime against a member of one
n! *Let's*royal families, you will be held accountable there. Say goodbye to yo
spirit. He's probably better off without you anyway. Your wolf spir
*Stay in*lycan, should be allowed to be set free to rejoin the goddess, and one
free... I wonder what will be left of you then?"

redibly "Then everyone will know what I did to you," Calvin yells, and I
pulsivethe panic rising in him. Was he hoping to rot in a cell here or what? Or
o manyexpect to lure his way out of here? Was he really that delusional?

; a little "I don't care. The people who matter to me already know, and th
o-calledlove me. I couldn't give a shit about the rest of the world. Tell a
f terror,people as you want; I couldn't care less. Your punishment will be cari
erful inby the Council," Marius says with finality. "I doubt it will be fast, or p
erson I So, good luck with that. I will make sure to find out later if you screa
not."

ig from I look at him in awe, honestly admiring how he's handling the si
es to anand for how strong he is. For a moment, I forget where we are. I
MariusMarius and me. Marius leans in as I lean toward him, our lips b
against each other. I don't even realize how weird it is to be so intima
rom hiseach other... right here, right now.

e says, Calvin tugs at his restraints. "I had him first," he yells. "He'll alv
ary, themine!"

athetic. *Just once?* Danica begs.

ice Eric I smirk and nod, allowing my witch senses to take over. I easily mo
ou.” the enchanted barrier, balling my hand into a fist. Together with D
punch him as hard as I can, feeling content when I hear his nose
t I have Calvin groans, spitting out two teeth from his mouth while I decide
something new. I’ve trained my witch powers a lot recently... I can n
e of the and attach my mind to other beings... maybe... I let my powers pou
ur wolfme, Calvin is close by, so it should be easy. It’s like a wind that su
it, you’re engulfed us, a fog, and little by little, droplets of the fog make it into C
ce he is body. He screams in pain, and I make sure to tune his screams out s
stay focused. The droplets of the fog swirl through his body now, and
can see move them upwards to his mind.

r did he Calvin pants heavily, his eyes widening in panic. I pull my powe
again, making sure to leave the droplets in his body, though. A part
ey still anger and hatred is with him now in his mind, where they will haunt
s many long as he lives.

ried out I slip through the barrier again and take my place next to Mariu
ainless more.

imed or Marius looks at me, stunned. *I have no idea what you did. But we
and Danica are stunning.*

tuation, Danica looks pleased and happy at his words, although she would
it’s just admit it.

rushing I return my attention to the sick psycho in front of us. “No on
ite with Marius. He belongs to no one,” I finally say calmly. “But I hope
choose to be with me for the rest of his life.”

ways be Marius entwines our fingers. Aside from all the sadness and sorrow
through our connection, I also feel a spark of joy. He turns to me. “Le

he says. “Dad said the kitchen prepared apple pies. He promised to save one for me.”

Danica, I nod, well aware that neither of us has any clue what kind of dessert the kitchen prepared. “Hopefully, he’s saved us more than one piece. He has to be thinking about his future daughter-in-law too.”

“I’m sure he has, he loves you already,” Marius says, while opening the door out of the room that leads us away from the dungeons. The guards scurry inside as Vincent heads toward us.

I nod to Vincent as he passes us in the hall, to reassure him that I’m okay, while he follows the guards into the cells. I can hear Calvin trying to tug at his restraints.

Vincent’s voice reaches my ears, cold as ice, along with the sound of his backbreaking. Marius winces, but doesn’t look back. He just keeps walking forward, his face devoid of any emotions, but his fingers are wrapped around my hand tightly as if he is holding on for dear life.

Once we’ve closed the door behind us, he starts gasping for air. I let go of his hand and grab his face instead, forcing him to look at me. “Look at me. It’s alright. One breath after another.” I can feel Danica reaching out to help. “You’re doing well. Hopefully, together we can get him to calm down again. “You’re doing well down there. Breathe, breathe with me, slowly.”

He clasps to my arms, holding on to them while he breathes with me. I keep looking into my eyes—open and vulnerable. Eventually, he slowly calms down and rests his forehead against my shoulder. I carefully run my fingers through his hair. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “I can’t begin to tell you how much it meant to me that you were in there with me and how wonderful you were when I fell down there. Thank you for playing along.”

“It’s go,” I reach out my hands to cup his cheeks and make him look at me. “

ive us aplay along,” I say. “I stand by everything I said.”

He looks up at me in surprise and cautious joy.
sert the I feel myself getting flustered. “But don’t let it go to your head too
shouldI tease.

He squeezes my hand, smiling, “I won’t.”
ing the As we slowly make our way back upstairs, I ask, “Do you want
e again,here tonight, with your family?” I ask quietly.

“No,” he mumbles. “I... I don’t think it’s a good idea to stay at Sil
we aretonight. As long as he’s here, I won’t find any peace.”
yelling “Then let’s go to Red Claw,” I offer.

“Will you stay with me?” he asks, both surprised and hopeful.
f bones I nod. There is no way I would leave him alone in this state. We bot
walkingup to Elden, and Marius tells him about his decision to have the Coun
aroundwith him. Elden seems to agree with his decision. Apparently only th
serious cases get brought in front of the Council.

et go of Before we leave, Elden motions me to the side. “Watch him for me,
at me,I’m worried.”

o Cyrus I nod with a reassuring smile. “I promise.”

1 did so Again, we drive in silence. There is not much to say right now. V
you tell a person who just came face to face with their tormentor? I
me andcan ease these wounds or heal them but time. However, I’m really p
tarts towhat Marius has done today, and how he’s worked on dealing w
/ brushtrauma. Previously, he lashed out against everyone, now, he’s trying to
ou whathis pain for what it is and face it.

ou were I’m ready to help him in any way possible.

I stop on the way to grab us something to eat, neither of us wanting
I didn’tthe dinner at the pack house. Once we’ve arrived, we head directly to I

apartment, carefully avoiding everyone along the way. He prepares us tea, while I grab the plates. It feels natural to do this with him, which is probably a mistake, but it doesn't.

We sit down on the sofa in his living room that's right next to the windows, opening up to a beautiful night view over Red Claw's pack. I don't want to stay. "I'm so glad it's over," Marius says, finally breaking the silence.

"I'm proud of you," I tell him honestly.
His cheeks flush, "What for?"

"You were incredibly strong tonight," I point out.
"I didn't do anything," he mutters. "You're the one who boosted my confidence down there and punched him. Without you, I would have probably just curled up in a ball and cried, or ran away, giving him the satisfaction of seeing me broken."

"But you didn't," I point out. "There is no use thinking about the worst-case scenario. The fact is, you faced him, and that alone takes incredible strength."
"I couldn't have done it without you," he points out. "To think I was a crappy mate to you, and yet you're still here, helping me through this shit."

I consider Marius' comment. "Marius, today you asked your father for a line underneath what happened. I would like to ask you the same. Would you know what happened between us and your subsequent reaction to discuss it with your mate bond. Let's not bring it up anymore. I have forgiven you. I may be a bit guarded around you sometimes, but I would like us to move forward."

His eyes are glassy with unshed tears, but he nods his agreement. "I'm glad to join you," he says, opening his mouth to say more, but then he hesitates. "Thank you, Marius, Celine. Thank you."

is some I take his hand into mine, offering a little comfort as he stares
shouldwindow, trying to compose himself. “He will never hurt anyone again.

“We got rid of one monster,” he says quietly. “But how many are
ie hugethere? I wish I could do something more.”

ands. “But you can,” I tell him. “I know you dropped out of college, but th
still so many opportunities for you. Why don’t you find an area to v
that helps victims?”

I see the wheels of his mind turning. “I could do that,” he considers
that idea, but I want to think about it for a little longer.”

ted my I nod, glad that he’s at least considering it.

e either “Celine, I’m not going to lie to you... down there in the dungeo
tion ofmuch as I truly hate Calvin and want to make him suffer, I realized I c
it.”

what ifs. “Can’t do what?” I urge softly.

“I can’t hurt anyone, not even him,” he points out. “I’m not talkin
k, howhurting someone in a fight or during an attack. I have no issues wi
ugh myJust... I don’t feel I have it in me to torture someone. I just can’t.” He
bitter. “The alpha blood in me isn’t strong enough.”

to draw “But you don’t need to torture anyone,” I say, surprised. “You don
Ve bothneed to question anyone. You have your own strengths to rely on. I kn
overingwill be a great help to Moon Blood and to me.”

lay still He turns to look at me. “You think so? Really?”

o move I nod and smile, feeling my heart skip a beat. “Of course. I for or
basic social skills sometimes. It’s incredibly difficult for me to be pati
“Thankunderstanding toward pack members with smaller problems. I suck
“Thanktalks, or relieving heavy tension, or even just finding the right words t
someone open up.”

out the “But you’re so patient with me,” he points out.

” I smile. “I think that’s because we’re mates,” I admit. I have never still out anyone my vulnerable side, he is the first.

“Does this mean I’m seeing a side of you, hardly anyone else here are knows? I must be doing something right,” He beams. His words work in heart. It no longer bothers me that I’m starting to like Marius. I think I always had it in him to be a great mate. He was just so hurt by Calvin. “I like hid everything that was good about himself. He was so defensive and before, and now... he’s completely changed.

He’s putty in our skillful hands, Danica chimes in. He treats you ns... as queen you are!

can’t do *Oh Danica, I snort. I’m not that important.*

You are! Best woman ever! I will be keeping my eye on him. If hurts you again, I will bite his butt. I have Cyrus’ approval.

g about I fight hard not to laugh at her words. *I think he’s learned his lesson th that. Right, then we can go back to killing that piece of trash who laid his soundson him. No one hurts our mate!*

He will be brought to the Council, I state.

it’s even She sneers. *Good. He will wish he’d died by our hands then!*

ow you I agree with her before focusing back on Marius. His mind is so far he hasn’t even noticed my silence. I gently turn his hand with me noticing once again that he has beautiful hands and arms. My eyes close, lacksomething on his wrist.

ent and I push his bracelet aside. “Marius,” I say in astonishment. “You have at pep there?”

o make Marius shifts his gaze to me, startled by my sudden question. He confused at first before his gaze shifts to his wrists, squeezing his eyes

notice. They'd already started suspecting that something was off with me. I lied to them yet again, telling them that a girl had broken my heart."

"You used a silver knife," I murmur.

of you. "A silver dagger actually," he says. "I thought I was alone. And Calvin, at that time, had only just awoken, so he wasn't able to heal me in time. However, as fate would have it, I didn't die. A young couple walked by."

The woman was a doctor, and she immediately stopped the bleeding. She called for an ambulance, but I used that brief moment of distraction to disappear." He pauses. "That's all." He shakes his head. "At the time, I was too scared to tell anyone the truth. I thought no one would believe me."

"Because Calvin's gifts made it easy for him to hide," I finish for him. "I was shocked when everyone believed you."

"I didn't expect it," he says quietly. "I also didn't expect them to surprise me the way they have."

"They are your family, and they love you," I smile. "Did you know when your mother first found out, she made a silver dagger appear and slung it into Finn's hand, nailing him to the wall?"

He gives me a crooked smile. "You're kidding?"

"No, Annie told me."

He might not show it, but I know it makes him happy that his mother immediately had his back. "It's a fancy gift she has, right?"

"How does it work, anyway?" I ask curiously.

"She can conjure silver," he explains. "And form it into anything she wants."

My mouth drops open. "Fancy doesn't even remotely describe it."

He looks at me, his smile warm and soft. "Thanks for staying with me."

"Of course."

h me. I “Are you ready for food?” he asks with a smile. “I’m getting |
hungry.”

“Great,” I beam, glad that he’s finally ready to eat something.

yrus, at “What did you order us?” he asks curiously. “Sorry, I was so out
stantly.didn’t even notice...”

ed past. “Chinese takeout,” I state dryly. “It’s greasy, unhealthy, and tasty.”

ng. She He grins, slowly returning to his usual self. “Perfect. There
tion to chocolate cake in the fridge.”

), I was “I’ll sort the food; you grab the plates.” Before I get up to move, he

” my hand, pulling it towards his lips and placing a kiss on my knuckles.

or him. “Thank you,” he says again.

I swear my heart just skipped another beat.

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ne.”

“Are you ready for food?” he asks with a smile. “I’m getting kind of hungry.”

“Great,” I beam, glad that he’s finally ready to eat something.

“What did you order us?” he asks curiously. “Sorry, I was so out of it, I didn’t even notice...”

“Chinese takeout,” I state dryly. “It’s greasy, unhealthy, and tasty.”

He grins, slowly returning to his usual self. “Perfect. There’s also chocolate cake in the fridge.”

“I’ll sort the food; you grab the plates.” Before I get up to move, he catches my hand, pulling it towards his lips and placing a kiss on my knuckles.

“Thank you,” he says again.

I swear my heart just skipped another beat.

HECATE, HAVE MERCY!

VALERIE

“So, we’re traveling back with a pedophile child molester in
Eric asks, scrunching his nose in disgust.

Emilien groans. “That is, unless you want him to travel back in
plane.”

“No way,” Eric frowns. “He’s the guy who hurt my cousin. I
deliver him to the Council personally.”

“He needs to arrive in one piece please, Prince Eric,” Emilien beg
always so quiet, yet anxious. I wonder how these two managed to l
close friends. Eric said as a Prince of the Council, he was never pa
pack, but like all the other alphas, he chose his closest allies from the
Apparently, it’s a huge honor to be chosen by a prince or princess.

I can’t wait to learn all the secrets of the Council.

Eric, Emilien, and I have a lot to do today. Well, actually, Eric and I have a lot of work, but I've decided to tag along. As Eric's mate, I'll eventually take on some of the responsibilities of a Council representative too, and one of those responsibilities is to understand what's going on. Fortunately, Eric appreciates my enthusiasm, it seems.

"Beta Emilien?" I look at him curiously.

"Oh. Please just call me by my name," he cuts in politely.

"Wouldn't that be considered improper?"

"Not at all," Eric chimes in. "You're right in that the Council is hierarchical, and it is considered very disrespectful to not use titles with those who hold a higher status. But in this instance, my princess, you are my princess so you outrank Emilien. Emilien is to be called beta by everyone aside from you and me. His rank might only be a technicality because we aren't technically Council members, but the Council likes its proper hierarchy, which is why he needs to be called beta by lower ranks."

I blink. "Wait... what does that mean for me?"

"You're going to be a Princess of the Council soon." He smiles politely.

"Emilien just wants to be polite."

"Is this why he calls you prince every time?"

"Yes. However, when we're in private, we go by first names. He explains. "We're friends, after all."

I smile and nod before turning towards Emilien. "Then I want to become friends too."

Returning my smile, he says, "Thank you. I would like that very much, Lady Valerie."

I sigh inwardly at being called Lady Valerie. But well, I have my life to befriend Eric's staff. "Are the twins not joining us today?" I ask

Emilien Emilien shakes his head. “The twins have a mission to prepare for and want to will remain here a little longer.”

eminent Eric nods. “That’s why we have to get some paperwork done.”

going on. We visit Alpha Elden first and go through a few details about transferring that creepy pedophile. After that’s settled, Eric moves on to his commission, trying to convince Alpha Elden to become King of the Council although he was very reluctant at first, it seems like Eric has persuaded him to give in. He just wants a successor in place for Silas is very first. I also talk to him about my gift, mentioning how I managed to handle those Lenny with just a touch. Alpha Elden thinks that it’s most likely another mate, of my gift. I can use it to heal and harm. Eric wants us to return to the Council as soon as possible. He’s worried for me, and he wants to make a pack, that I’m safe from any more kidnappers, especially those who might be called turn me into a weapon.

Later on, we’re going to pick up Jazz from Red Claw and drive to Moon Blood. Jazz is going to practice her witchcraft with Desmona and proudly, while I spend some time with my family. Then we can hang out together her lessons.

“There is still some paperwork left to finish,” Emilien frowns. “No,,” Eric can return later to do it.”

“Why don’t you stay here?” Eric says. “I can take the girls to Moon Blood.” Emilien looks horrified. “No, Prince Eric, please allow me to accompany you. I don’t want to leave you without backup.”

“What if Vincent accompanies Eric?” Alpha Elden offers. “Then I can still stay here and go through the last of the documents with me.”

Eric smiles. “That’s a good idea.”

I nod. Vincent is a strong lycan. He looks pretty scary at first glance

r. They most of his body covered in tattoos and his head shaved, but he's a
very nice and is a loyal friend to Alpha Elden. He seems a little sad re
which I assume is why Elden's probably asked him to drive us.

reporting "Thank you, Vincent. Could you please take us via Red Claw first
original tells him. "We have cargo to collect there."

oil. And "Jazz is not cargo," I squeal in mock protest. My goodness, Eric
slowly sassy remarks kill me sometimes.

verlake Vincent chuckles at our banter. "Glad to see you two getting along
to hurt each other." He looks at Eric. "I'm happy for you, man."

ner side "Thanks." Eric smiles at him before turning serious again. "You kn
to thenot your fault, Vincent. You didn't know what Calvin was up to. Don'
ke sure yourself for not noticing he was a psychopath. People like him are ex
want to hiding their true nature."

I stay quiet during their exchange. The recent revelations about
over to definitely must have hit deep for him. As fellow betas, I'm sure Vir
nd Jade devastated that his old friend was capable of doing something so horre
er after Eric and Vincent exchange a nod. "Let's go." Vincent smiles at us
doesn't quite reach his eyes. "We don't want to keep your cargo waiting
Maybe I At Red Claw, Jazz is already waiting for us, eager to start her lesso
Desmona. She's also started training with the pack warriors here
Blood." Claw, and she's doing great so far. She's taking full advantage of s
ompany vacation to get as much training done as possible before starting col
the fall. Just as we're about to leave though, someone stops us.

Emilien "Eric," Lord Marius calls out, approaching us. He flashes me a tooth
"And hello there, little chipmunk."

"Wait, why am I the chipmunk!?" I frown while Jazz bursts into hy
e, with laughter.

actually “Yeah, I was aiming for something small and cute,” he grins recently, alternative was to call you a Pokémon, but I literally only know Pikachu

“I like Pikachu,” Eric tells him thoughtfully. He sounds way too serious?” Eric my liking.

I grab Eric’s arm and pinch. As if I’d let him call me Pokémon name and his now on, “Oh no, you don’t.” *You dare call me Pikachu, and you can sit on the sofa!* I link him.

ing with Eric looks at me amused. *So, does that mean if I behave myself, I get you all night?*

ow, it’s I’m stunned at how his mind works sometimes. Nowhere did I imp t blame but well... *That’s up for negotiation*, I say, feeling slightly flustered.

perts at He flashes me a smirk before turning towards Marius. “It seems mistaken. I don’t like any Pokémon,” he deadpans. “So, how can I be Marius cousin?”

incident is Marius’ smile turns serious. “During the last few weeks, I’ve ndous. researching a rogue attack. One that happened over ten years ago.”

s, but it “Here, in Red Claw?” Eric asks curiously.

ing.” “No, it happened at Moon Blood. I was able to track down some ns with culprits,” he explains.

at Red “Wait... you were able to track them down even though it’s been c summer years?” Eric asks, stunned.

llege in Marius sighs. “Well, my gift helped me.” He swipes his hand thro hair, looking a little embarrassed. “I haven’t trained it much, so I real ly grin, at it. But technically, I can hypnotize people with weaker minds they’re under my control, I can ask them questions, and they have to sterical with the truth. I’m not very good at it though, because...” he pauses. “I training and dedication, and my own mind is not all that healed.”

s. “My Eric visibly saddens at his admission, and nods understandingly.
uu.” “I’m good enough to hypnotize most humans and rogues with
ious forwolves,” Marius points out.

“So, what did you find out?” Eric asks curiously.

es from “The attackers of Moon Blood are all dead. Alpha Cedric hunted
*leap on*down and made sure that no one survived. He did a proper job, he

Annie and I have been tracing a certain item in particular... and it’s left
*et to do*Europe.”

“What do you mean?”

ly that, “They stole something, and I want it back.” He looks at Eric insistently
need your help, Eric, please.”

s I was
elp you,



e been

CELINE

of the I watch my father and Mona do the dishes. She’s teasing him, to which
responds by putting his arm around her waist and kissing her forehead.

Occasionally, he smiles at her in a way I haven’t seen in a long time.
Over ten heart warms at the sight of the two of them together. He deserves

ugh his much. Mona is a sweet omega woman. She’s kind and gentle but a
ly suck once she lets go of her initial shyness. They both connected through

mutual grief at losing their mates, but now they’re connected by something
i. Once much deeper.

answer I like Mona.
Lack of

And even if we hadn't clicked, I would have still accepted her. My weak real worry was whether Jade and Grandpa would accept her.

However... my worries were unfounded, it seems.

"Are you certain you want a man who can't even tell a cucumber from zucchini?" Jade asks Mona.

However, Grandpa sighs. "Mother, please, leave them alone."

And us to "Don't be such a stick in the mud, Justus." Jade rolls her eyes. "Oh allow your mother some fun."

Dad turns eyeing the two of them, but instead of looking angrily. "Frustrated, he looks amused. "For two people who haven't dated for centuries you're quite judgmental."

"Uh!" Jade snorts. "Look at that. He's getting sassy! Typical alpha love."

"Celine is in love too, and she's not sassy," Grandpa argues with her.

"Celine's special," Jade says dryly.

It's hilarious how they never seem to agree on anything, but at the time, never really argue about it. Most of the time, Jade states something which he Grandpa disagrees politely, only to be ignored by Jade.

rehead. Dad and I exchange grins with each other. He puts his arm around me. My shoulder and whispers something into her ear, making her blush. Sitting this so with my family feels so weird, yet it's also fulfilling. A year ago, it was also fun Dad and me. Now Grandpa lives in the pack house, Jade visits us regularly their and Dad's gone and found himself a woman he wants to mark as his nothing mate.

My life has taken such a turn. I'm truly blessed.

"Alright, everyone," I smile, standing, "I wish I could stay longer have work to do. Harmony is already waiting for me." I turn to Grandpa

ly only Jade. “You two, behave.”

“See,” Jade says evenly. “Sassy.”

I chuckle at her antics as I take my leave. As I’m about to close the door from behind me, Mona approaches. She must have followed me to the door.

“Sorry, Alpha Celine,” she stutters. “I don’t mean to bother you.”

“You aren’t,” I smile at her.

Hecate, “I... I just wanted to tell you,” she swallows nervously, “How important it means to me, that you’ve allowed me to be with your father... and that I can be in the same room as you.”

Centuries, “Mona,” I take her hand, squeezing it. “I love my mother dearly. But I also love my father, and I wish him all the happiness in the world. I know my mother would never want him to live a lonely life. I’m happy that you two have found something in each other.”

Her cheeks flush. “Cedric told me you would never do anything to stop us being together. He always speaks so highly of you. I’m glad we finally meet.”

Now it’s my turn to be a little flustered. Goddess, what did Dad tell me? It sounds like he made me out to be some sort of angel. “I’m having Mona’s birthday together for my birthday next week,” I tell her. “With my family. I would be happy if you joined us too.”

Mona’s eyes widen, and her cheeks flush. “I would love to.”

Normally, I don’t like to celebrate my birthday. Year after year, I just go through the motions, as it was expected. I never really saw anyone celebrating the day of my birth, not since my mother and little brother.

But the future alpha of the pack could not skip their own birthday party, but I did what I was good at. I put on a stoic façade and pretended to be okay and

all the fancy birthday celebrations the pack held for me, even though I wanted to forget all about it.

he door This year, everything feels different. I'm actually looking forward to the door. There will be a huge pack celebration that Harmony, Garret, Eli, and Marcel are organizing. Then, I will have a smaller gathering with my friends, and a few days after that, I'll have another one with just my friends. Of course, there is Marius, who's already asked me out on a birthday date. It's not just a single date. He asked me if I could take a whole weekend off with him at a surprise location. I wanted to chicken out at first, but I also because of nerves, but Harmony convinced me to say yes.

ow my And now, honestly, I can't wait to see what he has planned.

to have "Celine, Harmony!" Eric waves as we step out of the pack house. We arrived earlier than anticipated. We're planning on going through some of the basic parameters of our mission concerning Blood Snow pack.

e could "Alpha Celine," Valerie beams, obviously happy to see me.

"Val, you're looking great," I say, genuinely happy to see her so close. "You too, Jazz."

; a get- "Well," Jazz giggles. "It must be the power of love."

ould be Harmony and Vincent groan while Eric grins. He pulls Valerie into his arms. "Absolutely, dear Jazmine. The power of love rocks."

Jazz grins back at Valerie. "Your man understands me, Val."

st went Valerie struggles to free herself from Eric's grasp. "Didn't you have something to do, Jazz?" she retorts.

er died. Jazz watches her friend struggle and continues to grin, "Yes, I did. So, IDesmona's not here yet."

ay with "She'll be here any moment," I say, linking my arm around her and sending Jade out. She might be able to teach Jazz a bit, too. I've learned

h I just about witches recently, and I know that Desmona and Jade have different powers. They gather their powers from different elements of the world. Jade, my grandpa, and I are from a coven with offensive powers, gathering them from the earth and the wind. Whereas Desmona and Jazz are family-defensive witches. They have a strong connection to the spirit world and can chant spells and brew potions. Perhaps if Jade and Desmona work together, they can each learn some new tricks.

to stay “Is that Alpha Cedric’s chosen mate?” Valerie asks curiously as Dad, Grandpa, and Mona step out of the pack house. They must have decided to accompany Jade down to us. Dad is holding Mona’s hand, and it’s the best thing ever.

e. He’s I’m about to answer her when my eyes catch Vincent’s expression of the staring at them in sheer disbelief, his eyes wide, mouth dropped in shock.

Harmony and I exchange a glance. Oh no, it can’t be... it’s impossible. joyful. is it?

“No,” Jade states once she reaches us. She doesn’t greet anyone, just looks at Vincent determinedly. “No,” she repeats. “Just forget it.”

into his From the way Vincent is staring at her longingly, I don’t need to realize what’s going on. Vince is a great guy, but he loves his freedom. He once told me the reason he never looked for his mate was that he wanted things Silverlake, but he hates the idea of being bound to another person, so he would never willingly leave the pack, not for any mate in the world. I know, but he said he doesn’t want any children. The Moon Goddess must have chosen that... because...

him to “No way, wolf,” Jade points out in a matter-of-fact tone. “I have had a lot enough of guys in my life.”

re very “You have one son,” Dad snorts. “Don’t act like you over nature.yourself.”

ithering The glare Jade graces him with would have sent anyone else packi mainlyDad seems to be completely unfazed.

and can Jade takes a deep breath. “The fact is, I’m not going to leave my ogether,Your Moon Goddess has a hilarious sense of humor.”

“Mom,” Grandpa sighs. “Please don’t—”

d, Jade, “Mom?” Vincent raises his brows. He must be confused as to w ided tolooks half my grandfather’s age.

e cutest “Yeah, see?” Jade nods at him. “You don’t want an ancient grandn want a sweet she-wolf who provides you with pups and stays with n. He’syour pack grounds.”

open in “Fantastic!” Vincent beams. “Does that mean you’re not like that? E it’s the last thing I want!”

ible, or “I have hardly any sex drive anymore,” Jade argues, ignoring Gr and Dad’s groans.

st looks “Good, because me neither, but tell that to a group of wolves v constantly horny and could bang each other any time, any day,” long topoints out. “And the last thing I want is a mate who sticks to me all th om. HeGoddess, I need room to breathe.”

e loves She stares at him. “What?” she asks in disbelief.

and he He winks at her. “An older woman, huh? How old?”

He also “Close to 1000,” she says.

known He grins. “Nice. You’d have some wicked stories to tell then.” He out his hand. “I’m Vincent, Beta of the Silverlake pack.”

ve had Jade stares at his hand before begrudgingly shaking it. “Jade, ancier and leader of the Circle of the Silent Forest.” She points at Grandp

workedDad, then finally me. “You know my son, grandson-in-law, and granddaughter already.”

ing, but Vincent flashes me a grin. “It looks like we’ve become family, Celi grins. “Good thing we never hit it off.”

coven. “Yeah,” Harmony snorts. “Now, that would be awkward.”

“Your great-grandmother is more my type anyway,” Vincent says di

“You don’t find this weird at all?” Jade inquires, her eyebrows furr
/hy sheshe stares at Vincent like she wants to read his mind.

“No, I can only speak for myself, but considering the last few mont
ia. Youis definitely not the weirdest thing to happen,” he states.

you on I tilt my head. “He’s not wrong,” I agree.

Jade just sighs. “Hecate, have mercy,” she mutters.

because Vincent offers her his arm. “May I steal you away for some tea?”

She tilts her head, her brows still furrowed as she contempla
andpa’s suggestion. “Well, I like tea,” she finally admits.

“Me too,” Vincent grins. “See, we have something in common.”

who are Jade just looks at him for a moment, before shaking her h
Vincentamusement. She takes his arm. “I hope I don’t regret this...”

ie time. As they walk off, Vincent looks at her curiously. “So, who’s that
person you just mentioned?”

His comment even makes Eric groan. He pinches the bridge of hi

“Be glad Uncle Elden didn’t hear you say that, Vince!” he shouts after

Vincent makes a dismissive gesture with his hand while leading Jac
reachesinto the pack house. This should be weirding me out... my ancien
grandmother together with the tatted-up, skinhead lycan beta. Ins
it witchfeeling weird, I just feel happy for them.

ia, then It’s been many years since I’ve felt like part of a family. Ever sinc

l great-passed away, we've all been living separate lives. Even though w
practically living next to each other, we've been stuck in our ve
ine," he bubbles of grief. I never realized how much I missed them. And beir
to Marius, although sketchy at first, has shaken things up for the first
many years, and helped me reset my priorities and focus on fixing m
ryly. bonds too.

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passed away, we've all been living separate lives. Even though we were practically living next to each other, we've been stuck in our very own bubbles of grief. I never realized how much I missed them. And being fated to Marius, although sketchy at first, has shaken things up for the first time in many years, and helped me reset my priorities and focus on fixing my other bonds too.

THE BIRTHDAY

CELINE

“**Y**ou dare throw confetti at me, and I’m leaving,” I threatened heartedly. “Garret already did that this morning. Confetti glitter.” Some of it’s still stuck in my ear and nose. I kicked his ass in the past for that stunt alone.

Marius’ lips tug up in amusement, and he carefully places the bag of streamers aside. Instead, he opens his arms to me, looking both hopeful and expectant. He waggles his brows, making me chuckle. I love how he’s so awkward and sassy around me. I pull him into a tight embrace. His body is so warm and so good. Like his arms were made just to hold me, and his were made to hold him.

“Thank you for agreeing to a coffee date,” he smiles happily. “You’re really busy today with the pack celebration.”

“You gave me the perfect excuse to leave the chaos for an h
chuckle. Everyone has already gone crazy. Harmony, Garret, and the
went beyond themselves to prepare a crazy party for the whole pack.
something for everyone’s taste... a barbecue, cocktails, a bouncy ca
the kids, a dance floor, and a bonfire. I thought my father would be th
of reason, which is why I asked him to help my team, but apparent
made things even worse. He was so happy to throw a party for me,
Garret went crazy trying to outdo each other.

“Is it really that bad?” Marius asks as he waits for our coffee order.

“You have no idea,” I groan. “I will mingle with everyone for a l
then, hopefully I can retreat and have a glass of wine with a few of my
friends.”

“I feel you,” he chuckles. “I’m not a fan of big parties either. I pron
to hold any crazy parties on our weekend.”

“What should I pack for it?” I ask curiously.

“Go for comfortable and casual clothes,” he says. “We’re going
training outside for some of it, and I want you to enjoy yourself. There’s n
code. I’m bringing a pair of jeans and track pants, plus a few shirts. I
nothing planned that you’d need fancy clothes for.”

I sigh in relief. “Thank you. A casual weekend away from eve
’s both sounds perfect.”

He beams at me. “I hope you’ll like it.”

“Well, I won’t deny I’m already curious about where we are going.”

He chuckles. “Honestly, I’m surprised you even agreed to come v
I know without knowing any details. I know how hard it is for you alphas to
control.”

“Believe me, it took some convincing from Harmony’s side,” I adm

our,” I He laughs. “I knew it.”

others Harmony convinced me to go with him and get away for a week. There’s wants me to pursue him properly, as it’s obvious I’m not going to re-
stle for anymore. She’s right, of course. Marius has proven that he’s serious
e voice me. He has repeatedly shown me he has changed and has become
ly, he’s man... for me. The only reason I’m still hesitating is because of my
he and I’ve always had a hard time letting go of a grudge.

We chat for a while, before I have to head back to the pack. The hour
with him has really made me feel more relaxed about this whole bit
bit, and craze, and it touches my heart that he’s making such an effort to be
closest to me as often as possible. Before we part, he grabs my arms and pulls me
surprise kiss. It’s a short one, and it’s over fast, but I love how daring
rise not was. I grab his face between my hands and peck his lips once more.

“So, it was okay?” he asks nervously.

I nod, smiling, watching relief come over his face. “What made
g to be change your mind?” I suddenly hear myself say.

o dress “Hm?”

There is “I mean, why did you decide to pursue me in the end?” I look
curiously. I didn’t dare to ask the question before, too scared that I might
rything like the answer.

He looks at me before looking down at his feet nervously. “I had a vision
he admits.

’ His answer surprises me. “A vision?”

with me “When I was about to die, I had a vision of the future I could have
give up with you, had I not been such an insecure ass.” He looks back up at me
there is only sincerity in his eyes. “It was like a wake-up call. I thought
it. Moon Goddess was showing me what I was missing in my life. What

have if I work hard toward that possible future. The vision showed me
nd. Shemate wouldn't be my downfall and that I could be happy if I just ga
ect himchance. At that moment, I swore to myself that if I ever got another
s aboutwith you, I would do everything in my power to make it right. I pr
a bettermyself to fight for you, and not let go again."

y pride. I didn't expect that answer at all, and something in my heart swell

knowledge that it isn't just because he feels indebted to me. "So,
ir spentbecause I saved your life?" I whisper.

irthday "You, saving my life, twice if I may add, just solidified my decisi
et withit's definitely not the main reason." He looks at me warily. "Bad answe

e into a I pull him into a swift hug. "Not at all," I say before letting go again

he just "I will never understand women," he mutters. "I thought you'd hit n

"I can if you want me to. I didn't realize you were into that," I state

He laughs. "Didn't know *you* were into that," he retorts.

de you We both chuckle a bit, before we return to staring at each other in

Marius recovers first, taking a little box out of his bag. He looks

flustered. "Um, Celine... I... I have another present for you for when

at himon our short trip, but there is something I wanted to give you now." He

ight notme the box. "I wanted you to have it on your birthday. But please pron

to open it later, not now. Please."

vision," I nod, confused.

"Just so you know, it wasn't just me... I had some help... and.

you'll see," he squeezes my hand before hurrying away.

ive had What was that all about?

ne, and I'm curious beyond belief but I promised to open it later. I'll stick

ink thepromise since it seemed important to him. I watch Marius leave, turni

I couldonly to wave at me briefly with a happy smile on his lips. My he

e that ajumps rapidly in my chest. I think I really like him, and not just bec
ve us athe mate bond.

chance *I think I've punished him enough*, I mutter to myself and Danica.

omised *Yes, Danica agrees. At some point, you need to be careful you're i
punishing yourself by keeping him at a distance, Celine.*

s in the

it's not



The whole evening goes by smoothly. I was worried about this party
on, butbut Harmony made sure the festivity would be to my liking. The who
er?" has been having fun, and honestly, that's the most important thing

. Now the party is winding down; I'm finally able to sit down with my
ie." and closest friends.

dryly. Garret approaches with a tray full of cocktails. "Strawberry Daiqu
the beautiful ladies and myself," he says, placing the cocktails down
silence.of Harmony, Jade, Mona, and me.

a little "Thank you," I smile.

n we're Jade takes a sip from her cocktail and nods approvingly. "Strong ene

e hands "Only the best for my favorite girls," Garret says while winking at u

nise me Harmony and I exchange an amused glance, while Mona doesn't s
know how to react. But Dad puts his arm around her and smiles.

worry, he's like that to everyone." She's carrying his mark now, a
.. well,both look so happy to be with each other.

Garret ignores us and proceeds to hand out the drinks. "Soda for the
gentleman," he hands Luca a glass. "Beer for the uncultured brutes."

κ to mylaugh when he passes the beer to Steve and Marcel. "White Russian
ng backold gents."

heartbeat

ause of Dad and Grandpa burst into laughter. “Thanks, Garret,” Grandpa ch
“It’s never boring with you around.”

“Oh, and a glass of apple juice for that dashing hot dude in blue
not just single?” he winks.

Harmony laughs and elbows Elias. “He’s talking to you!”

“Oh,” Elias blinks. “Sorry. I didn’t notice.”

“Wow, here I am, putting so much effort into my flirting, and he
at first, even notice,” Garret sighs dramatically, but laughs as well. “I said you
le pack hot.”

for me. “Thank you,” Elias flashes him a smile. “You, too.”

family “Well, that’s new,” Garret looks flustered as he sits down next to
putting a hand on his knee.

iris for Harmony exchanges a quick look with Steve, and he nods. We
in front earlier about introducing Luca to some of the younger guys in the pack

still so shy, and social anxiety is a massive problem for him... no s
after being locked up and abused for many years. He’s not going
ough.” magically overnight. However, Steve is a nice guy, and he’s genuinel

s. “Hey Luca,” Steve looks over at the kid. “Want to check out the
seem to stands?”

“Don’t Luca shifts around a bit. “I don’t want to be a bother to you,” he stut
nd they “You are not bothering me,” Steve grins. “I’m hungry.”

“Me too,” Luca admits shyly.

young “Awesome.” Steve gives him the thumbs up. “Let’s go.”

We all Harmony smiles proudly at the kindness her brother is showing and
for the goodbye to them before shifting her attention back to us.

“So, how are you and your mate doing, Jade?” Harmony asks Jade.

The whole table bursts into laughter. “Goddess, I almost forgot about

chuckles. Garret hollers. "Jade and her beau, with a measly age difference years."

ie. You "For real, Mom," Grandpa chuckles. "Talk about unexpected."

"He's a great guy," I say, coming to Vincent's defense. "And y really fit well together. hat's the most important thing."

Jade rubs her temples. "Better fetch me another drink, Garret."

doesn't "What's this?" Elias asks curiously, pointing at the little box I ha ou look carrying around the whole day. Something told me I shouldn't l anywhere, so I've been carrying it around with me all evening.

"I don't know," I admit. "Marius gave it to me."

o Elias, "Ooh, a present?" Harmony asks curiously.

"I'm not sure," I tilt my head. "He gave it to me this morning when talked coffee together. He said he will give me an actual present during our w k. He's strip, but that it was really important for him to give me this today. He surpriseto open it later."

to heal "Well, now is later, isn't it?" Garret says.

ly kind. He's right. I didn't even notice that my birthday is almost over.

ie food "You took it too literal," Jade chuckles. "That poor guy was proba embarrassed to have you open it in front of him."

iters. "I think so too," Mona smiles warmly, exchanging a knowing lo Jade. "I think it's something really personal."

"Open it," Garret begs.

"Shouldn't she open it in private?" Elias points out. "Mona just s l waves probably something very personal."

The others at the table glare at him.

"Don't argue," I smile. "I'll open it." I carefully pick up the box fi it that," table, turning it in my hands to examine it. It looks like a jewelry bo

of 900doubt Marius would make such a fuss if it were just some jewelry... no
wouldn't appreciate it though. It's not wrapped in paper either, but t
did say he hates wrapping gifts. "He said he had help with gettin
ou twomurmur as I open the box. "I wonder what he meant by..." My voic
off as my eyes take in the object lying perfectly placed on a tiny velvet
inside the box. I'm so shocked I almost drop the whole thing.

ve been Dad looks at me concerned. "Celine?"

eave it "It can't be," I breathe out, carefully touching the pendant. There's
card next to it.

Celine,

*I spent days thinking about what to gift you with. Wondering what
we hadgive you that would show how much you truly mean to me. I'm b
weekendwords, and I don't know how to express myself, or how to tell yo
told methankful I am that you gave me a second chance. The day you agreed
me, you made me the happiest person ever. In return, I wanted
something to you that already rightfully belongs to you. With the help
and Annie, we managed to trace it back to an antique shop in Geri
bly justhope this will provide you with the closure you deserve to have.*

Love Marius

ok with *PS: This is the first gift card I ever wrote.*

No way, no freaking way! I take the pendant out of the box, open
look directly at the old picture of me, Dad, and Mom. She's holding th
aid it'sbear in her hands, a symbol for little Connor. She insisted on holdin
there was a part of him with us in this family photo. My eyes fill with t

He returned my mother's necklace to me.

rom the Dad looks at the pendant and then at me, his eyes widening in real
x, but IHe obviously recognized the item immediately. "Goddess, Celir

ot that Imurmurs. “I don’t know how he managed to find that. I looked for
hen, heard...” He has tears in his eyes. “It’s a miracle that he found it. F
g it,” I really love you a lot.”

ce trails I stand abruptly. “I need to leave,” I say.

t pillow Dad nods his understanding, flashing me a warm smile as I rush away
my own party. Fortunately, I still have the presence of mind to call ahead
announce my visit to Liam’s pack. Once I have his okay, I start running
a little

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tears.

ization.
ie,” he

murmurs. “I don’t know how he managed to find that. I looked for years, and...” He has tears in his eyes. “It’s a miracle that he found it. He must really love you a lot.”

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TOGETHER

MARIUS

There is a constant knocking on my door. “What!?” I huff at midnight! What’s so important? Did one of you guys run out of condoms or something?” I yank the door open to look directly into the bright blue eyes of my gorgeous mate.

She’s staring at me with a swirling mixture of emotions dancing across her face. All of her defenses are down, and I can sense her determination to protect our bond, but determination for what? Then suddenly, without warning, she wraps her arms around me and pulling me into a heated kiss. My mind finds their way under her shirt. I am so eager to feel her all around me that my mind is going crazy.

Please tell me I’m not misinterpreting these signs.

Tell me she wants me too.

“Marius,” she pants as she draws back slightly. “I... to be honest, I don't want to fight you long ago, and I don't want to fight this anymore.”

I pull her into my suite and close the door behind us. “You want marriage to be true?”

“I've been certain since we went baby clothes shopping,” she admits. My heart skips a beat at her revelation. Does that mean she has accepted me as her mate? Does it—

“I, Celine Anderson, accept you, Marius Alcott, as my mate,” she declares. I shout out before grabbing some strands of my hair and tugging me into a deep kiss.

My eyes close, feeling the bond between us growing stronger until it finally falls fully into place. Now that she's accepted me, I can feel her so much closer to my mind. “You are stuck with me for life,” I whisper against her lips.

She smirks. “Don't make me regret it.”

f. “It's never,” I murmur, wrapping my arms around her. I hold Celine as close as I can, pushing her out of down on the sofa, feeling her straddle my hips while flashing me a deep smile. “Shit, that's hot.”

I tighten my arms around Celine's waist as I drown in her alluring smile. She's so close to me right now, I can't believe my luck. I'm about to start removing her clothes when Cyrus chimes in.

g, she's *But I can't help falling in love with you...*

7 hands I stop. Seriously!? *Did you just start singing Elvis Presley in my head?*

me, my “Is something wrong?” Celine asks, sounding worried. “Did I trigger you in any way? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have jumped you like this. Marius, you don't need to—”

“No, no!” I interrupt her, panicking that she might get the wrong idea. I realized since our first not-a-date date that nothing about her triggers me.

forgave slept with so many women just to forget Calvin, but with Celine, it' di

I crave her touch; I want to feel her all around me. "I absolutely wa
ie? Is it right now! It's just my wolf." I groan. "He started singing cheesy lov
in my head... Goddess, he just went from Elvis to Taylor Swift. So
its. Mysave me, please."

I me as Celine laughs.

*I thought you might need some help, Cyrus grumbles. I was just set
e blurts mood.*

another *You're not helping!* I groan.

How about this? Suddenly, my mind is flooded with images of
it snaps Very naked images of that one time we shifted together.

earer in "And now?" Celine laughs even louder. She isn't one to openly sm
laugh a lot, so in a way, I should probably be thanking Cyrus f
moment.

s we sit "He is providing me with a peepshow of you," I chuckle. "From t
i smile. we shifted in front of each other."

Still giggling uncontrollably, she says, "I can't take it! Your wo
g scent. funny." Finally, Celine's laugh dies down, she grins and adds, "Oh C
to start love you."

She said she loves me, he beams.

Awesome, and now give your man some privacy, I demand.

id!/? *Alright, she's all yours! But I swear, if she isn't marked by ton
ger you morning, I will find a way to project out of your mind just to bite you
ius, we butt!*



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fferent.

CELINE

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e songs

omeone

His wolf is one of the most hilarious personalities I know. I love th
a sweet yet serious guy like Marius was paired with such a sassy wol

The Moon Goddess truly knows who to pair with each other. And n

ting the Cyrus has effectively loosened the tension, we are both even more e
jump each other.

I unbutton Marius' shirt, pushing it over his shoulders and down hi

Celine. When I feel his hands underneath my own shirt, I smirk. Oh
doesn't.,Tthis is my show. "Bed?"

ile and "I thought you'd never ask," he smirks right back at me, before pick

for this up in his warm, strong arms. I wrap my legs around his waist, letti

he time carry me to the bedroom. I'm amazed at how strong he is. I
particularly small or light.

Marius sits at the edge of the bed with me on top of him, and I slip

If is so lap to take my shirt off. I sway my hips and put on a little show f

Cyrus, I Starting with revealing my back first, while undoing my bra and g

over my shoulder. Once my clothes are all gone, I loosen my ponyt

gently shake out my hair, letting it flow down, before tossing him yet

sultry glance over my shoulder.

narrow He stares wide-eyed and mesmerized, his eyes darkening as h

r naked instincts come to the surface. I wiggle my brows in invitation. "Bet

those pants off, big boy."

"Fuck, if you only knew how hot you are when you're boss

around," he grins.

“Be nice, and maybe I’ll let you boss me around next time,” I wh
like to be in control, but I’m slowly realizing that with my mate, I m
able to let go a little. After all, Marius is a strong alpha lycan. I anticip
at such occasional struggle for dominance in the bedroom. And to him, I ma
f spirit. occasionally like to submit.

I turn around fully, revealing my naked figure to him. He has remo
ow that pants, and I take a few steps forward before standing right in front
ager to

Marius reaches out, placing his hands on my hips, making me close n
is arms. and relish the feeling of his palms caressing my hips and ass.

I open my eyes again to see he has that certain smirk on his lips. T
no, he that makes me want to slap him sometimes because I just know he is a
cing me say something ridiculous.

“Hopefully, you saved yourself for me,” he teases.
ng him

I knew it! For a split second, I wonder if I should smack him over h
’m not or just laugh. He is so infuriating sometimes. “And you got your wor
off his reputation from nowhere?” I retort.

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. Yes infuriating, but also hot. T
or him. lancing
tail and laughs all of a sudden. “Like I even give a shit about your former
encounters.”

“Same,” I smile. “It just matters that you’re here with me now.”
another

I push his hands off my ass and kneel on the bed before I straddle l
is base and place my hands behind his neck. He leans forward to kiss my thr
ter take then down to my nipples. “You are so beautiful, Celine. You are perfe

Goddess, he can make me go from pissed to smitten in seconds. T
ing me gift. I bury my fingers in his hair and lean down for a kiss. His han
down my back, his fingers moving from my neck to my ass again. He
to have a thing for my ass, which I don’t mind at all. However, anothe

isper. I part is screaming for attention. I reach for his hand and gently guide it
ight before, feeling myself getting wet just from the gentle ministrations
ate the fingers.

ay even “You are so wet for me,” he whispers huskily.

“And you are incredibly hard,” I mutter against his lips.

ved his He chuckles, his hand grabbing me tighter. Feeling his body vibrate
of him. mine shouldn't feel as hot as it does. I can feel his growing erection
ny eyes beneath me, and I just want to feel him inside of me.

He stops momentarily, before peppering my shoulder and neck with
The one “I love you,” he whispers.

about to “I love you, too,” I say without a moment of hesitation.

His eyes light up. “Really?”

“Yes,” I bend down, kissing him softly, before moving my lips ac
his headcheeks to his ear. “Should I show you how much I love you?”

nanizer Something in his eyes flashes, he's hungry and lustful all of a su
mirror of my own feelings. We smash our lips together, my tongue p
hen he past his lips and engaging in a battle for dominance. Marius' hand f
sexual way to my breasts, kneading one teasingly before his fingers tar
nipples, squeezing. His other hand is between my legs, rubbing my p
lift up on my knees while still straddling his hips to give him better ac
his hips seems to turn him on because he breaks free from our kiss to tar
oat and nipples with his mouth and teeth again. Meanwhile, my fingers trail do
ction.” chest to his growing erection, stroking it to full hardness.

That's a “Fuck, Celine!” he groans.

ids trail I let go of his dick, grabbing his shoulders and pushing him down c
e seems back. His hands immediately grab me by my thighs, supporting my we
er body

t to my fingers curl around his penis. I lower myself down slowly, until
of his filling me up completely.

Fuck, this feels good. My head falls back in bliss as his hands touch
breasts and nipples while I ride him. His hands don't stay there though
soon move back to my ass, grabbing my ass cheeks to spur me on further
against his hips push up against mine, making me see stars through the sheer intensity
of our thrusts.

I keep one hand on his chest for balance as I use the other to reach
for kisses of his. I move his hand up to my lips, sucking at his fingertips. His
eyes darken at the sight, and a growl emanates from deep inside him. He
slides two fingers into my mouth, letting me suck on them a moment before
pulling them away.

Across his chest I wonder what he is up to until I feel him parting my butt cheeks
with two wet fingers slide into my back entrance, stretching and filling
me from behind too. I gasp at the sensation. I close my eyes and relish
the pushing touch. Just when I think it can't feel any better, his free hand moves
between his legs and starts rubbing my clit.

He gets my attention. "Yes, Marius," I moan, not even a bit embarrassed by the sounds
of his pussy. "That feels so good. More."

He comes. It "Baby, I'm going to come any second," he breathes out. "Shit! You
get my hot."

Down his chest I force my eyes open, grasping his chin and bending down again
to kiss him. Sparks fly all around us. Everywhere our fingers and bodies touch
with an added burst of electricity, almost blowing my mind away. We
merge into his mate bond for so long that now we've finally given in to it. I can't
hold my breath, as crazy from the intensity of everything I feel.

There is no way I will ever let him go again, even if he is a snarling

il he issometimes.

“Marius,” I breathe out. “I want you to be mine.”

get my His eyes light up before stretching his neck for me to have better
gh, and“Then make me yours.”

er. His It’s all the invitation I need to bite down on his neck, finally marki
nsity ofas mine. The sound he makes is something between a guttural groa
and a moan, and it’s so freaking hot. My head spins, and a tingling se
for onebuilds in my belly.

is eyes “Now you,” I breathe out.

pushes He pushes up onto his elbows, before grabbing my hips and rol
pullingover. I wrap my legs around his waist, keeping his dick buried deep
me. He brushes my hair to the side before I feel his canines gen
and hisagainst my neck. When he marks me, it’s like tiny sparks igniting m
me upall over. The pressure in my abdomen grows almost unbearable
1 in hisreleasing in a climax that fills me with white bliss. I can hear
etweengroaning my name as his seed fills me. The orgasm lasts long
expected, my walls squeezing and tightening around his dick as we b
we areout our orgasm.

Eventually sated, Marius shivers and collapses onto the bed beside
ou’re soarms wrap around me tightly, pulling me on top of him as we both g
air. I keep lying on his chest, not wanting to move even a little bit. It fi
to kissgood to finally be one with him. Now that we’ve marked each oth
1 is metsouls are truly united.

ought I lift my head slightly to find Marius looking at me, a warm smile
ould gohis lips. I reach out my hand to touch his cheek. “My man,” I murmur.

He stills at my proclamation. “Alright,” he suddenly exclaims, rol
ky jerktop of me. “I’m ready for round two.”

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MARKED

MARIUS

We wake up early, mainly because Celine has to go back to her job and we want to take a shower together before she has to leave. I should thank Liam for building showers big enough to host two alpha males comfortably. Good handiwork, good man, good brother.

Celine dresses quickly before opening the window to my room and to climb out.

“No way,” I laugh.

She chuckles. “I’m not doing the walk of shame through the whoopee house,” she jokes.

I love seeing her funnier, more relaxed side. She’s normally so reserved. “I don’t think anyone would question you.”

“Really? You think I can walk past Eric or Aryanna, and neither of them would make a scene?” she says.

I tilt my head, chuckling at the imaginary scene. “On second thought—you’re right. But I still can’t believe you are climbing out of my window with a grin. “Shouldn’t it be the other way round?”

“Well, I came to you, so that’s on me, but if you insist, you can visit tonight and crawl out of my window tomorrow morning.”

“Is that a date?” I wiggle my brows.

She smiles, pointing at my neck. “Well, you are stuck with me.”

“Hardly a horrible fate,” I smile warmly.

She looks uncertain for a moment. “We haven’t talked about the future,” she admits. “We should have... about what we are going to do.”

“There is not much to discuss,” I say. “I’m obviously going to live with my favorite alpha in her pack.” It’s not like it was up for debate anywhere. My alpha isn’t going to throw it all away just for me, and I wouldn’t want her to. I mustn’t want to be alpha of a pack; I’d suck at it. It took me almost a year of having that vision from the Moon Goddess to realize just how little I care about personal rank, or what others might think of me.

“I’m just happy to start over in a new place with my mate.”

“Are you serious?” she whispers.

“Absolutely. I will be a kickass male luna! Just wait and see! I’ll make your gamma cry in despair at least twice a week.”

Celine stares at me, shocked by my announcement, before grabbing my face and pulling me into a heated kiss. “I love you,” she whispers. “I think you will make an amazing luna. You don’t need to call yourself a luna. I want you to reign by my side.”

“I don’t mind,” I say, wrapping my arms around her waist. “I h

of them don't. So what if I'm the alpha's mate? If anyone else has a problem then that's their problem, because I don't see anything wrong with it."

She kisses me again. "That's so hot," she murmurs against my lips. Her comment surprises me. "What? Me becoming your luna?"

"No, you not giving a shit about what others think is hot," she says, pressing her forehead against mine. "I'm so glad I didn't let my pride get the best of me."

"Me too," I say happily.

She smiles. "I need to go. See you later tonight?"

I smirk. "Definitely, my Alpha."

She laughs and smacks my shoulder before gracefully leaping out the window.

with my

ay. She



I'm full of nervous energy as I hurry down to the dining room for breakfast. When I went to bed yesterday, I never expected to wake up this morning with Celine's mark on my neck or my mark on hers. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine we would mark each other so soon.

I need to talk to Liam. I meant everything I said to Celine. I will return to the Moon Blood and take up the position as her mate, officially making me the alpha or whatever the male version of that is called. I'm actually a little nervous about it. After Celine and I confronted Calvin in the dungeons, she suggested I could try working in a field that helps other victims... and I honestly think it's a brilliant idea. I've been giving it a lot of thought, and I'm sure I'll have Annie and Mom on board too. Once we have a plan in place, we can go out to other lunas.

Honestly

with it, Becoming luna is the perfect rank to turn my plans into reality.

The only thing that saddens me is that I will have to leave Red behind. Red Claw offered me sanctuary and an opportunity to heal desperately needed it. Especially after everything that happened with leaning in Silverlake. I finally felt safe in my own home. Of course, it took a while to find that inner peace, and I definitely messed up big time in the beginning.

But recently, I've started pulling my weight and getting involved in business. It's like the Goddess gave me this chance, and I've embraced it. I'm really going to miss living here. Especially since my mother and sister-in-law are here, and I've managed to make a few friends. Honestly, I believe that Moon Blood is my future and my destiny. My fate lies there.

I head to the buffet, grabbing a few bread buns, some ham, cheese, and scrambled eggs. Plus coffee, lots of coffee. I didn't get much sleep last night.

I make my way to the alpha's table, where everyone is sitting, which is rare actually. It's not very often that Liam and Annie are sitting with the whole entourage plus their closest friends. There's usually someone away on business reasons, or training, or on patrol, or just sleeping in a bit longer.

Aryanna gawks at my plate wide-eyed. "Wow, someone is hungry."
"Yep," I grin. "Good morning, beautiful people."

The others stare at me like I've lost my mind. It's hilarious. No one excited don't understand their confusion, because until very recently, I was suggested quiet, and pissing everyone off. Even after I came to my senses, I was only think polite and approachable, yet still very quiet and subdued. They've never can get me so jovial.

Liam examines me, noticing the mark first. It figures he does know best. I'm surprised by how happy he becomes, though. "Congratulations," he says with a smile. "It's about time!"

“What are you congratulating him for?” Ella blinks. “His ex
d Clawappetite? Or his jovial mood? Whatever it is, I want some of those pills
when I Dante chuckles at her words and kisses the side of her head. He’s ga
CalvinElla endearingly as she returns his smile, entwining their fingers togeth
while to Now Annie examines me curiously before squealing in delight. “F
ginning,she beams. “You marked each other. Congratulations, Marius.” She r
in packbelly absent-mindedly, smiling at Liam as he reaches out his hand to t
finallytoo. I don’t know how long she has left, but she must be due any day.
brother I proudly show off my neck to the others. Eric even whistles when
however,it. “And who is surprised?”

ere. “I am!” Ella blurts out. “But congrats! I’m really happy for you both
se, and Ella will never be my biggest fan. I messed that up a long time ago.
it night.seem to have reached a mutual understanding and her h
is quitecongratulations means a lot to me. The others follow suit, bombard
th theirwith questions.

way for “You weren’t marked yesterday during patrol.” Dante raises his bro
er. “Well, you know what they say: there are 24 hours in a day.”

“What does this mean though?” Aryanna asks curiously. “Are you g
move to Moon Blood?”

t that I “I would like to discuss that with Liam first,” I say. He may be my l
moody,but he is also my alpha. It’s only right to tell him about my plans first.
is more “Alpha Celine is the alpha of her pack,” Jun muses. “What does tha
er seenyou?” he asks curiously.

I shrug nonchalantly. “Well, say hello to the world’s hottest luna,” I
me the“Believe me. I’m gonna rock this rank.”

ns!” He “Are you really going all-in?” Annie asks with a bright smile. “I
you’d maybe just be called the alpha’s mate.”

cessive I shrug. “What else is a luna if not the alpha’s mate? Honestly, it’s s.” honor to become luna. I know the kind of work you and Mom put in amazing atpacks, it’s a lot of responsibility and I’m ready to take it on.” I lean f er. grinning mischievously. “Besides, just think, Annie. When you go inally,” Luna meetings, how many of you are there?”

ubs her “Depending on the occasion, I’d say between 10 to 50,” she conside touch it I lean back with a grin. “And how many are guys?”

“None, just female lunas.” Annie grins as she notices my smirk.

he sees Aryanna tilts her head. “Hanging out with a bunch of beautiful wo can definitely see the appeal,” she chuckles and receives a punch in t l.” from Jazz. “Don’t worry baby,” she coos, kissing Jazz’s cheek. “You But weonly beautiful woman for me.”

heartfelt I munch on my breakfast happily, and for the first time, I’m feeling ing meabout my future.

“It’s called lune,” Annie announces, suddenly pulling me out ws. thoughts.

I blink. “Huh?”

going to “A male luna is called a lune,” she explains. “I researched it, and isn’t common, it has happened before.”

rother, I nod, letting her words sink in. I like the sound of that. Lune.

“Say,” Ella breaks the silence. “Will Celine get a blessing from the (at maketoo... like Annie did when she and Liam marked each other? How work?”

I smirk. That’s a good question, and I’m embarrassed to admit that I h answer to it. Annie and Liam look at each other briefly, and Ann thoughttoward Liam to explain. “She will get blessed,” Liam explains. “But going to be this huge event like it was for Annalise.”

a great “Right,” I say after Liam’s words sink in. Now I remember. “Liam to your his mate and becoming alpha... that was a huge deal for the Council forward, the firstborn child to our father, and it makes him one of the direct heir to your throne one day.”

Dante looks at Ella. “For the other royal siblings, it means that with Council is happy to see them mated, they won’t be able to attend ceremonies. They only go through the whole hassle for the firstborn. But Celine will get blessed, just not immediately.”

Eric tilts his head. “The organizing is the true problem. We can’t send the three elders every time and have them travel such long distances, that’s the assumption we could travel with the help of the witches, but it also drains energy from the elders who hold the ritual. In the future, we hopefully have a base of the Council in this area too, then everything will go smoother.”

Liam nods. “I assume, Mari, that you and Celine will need to travel to Paris if you want it to happen fast.”

“Alternatively, you can wait a few months, then I’ll be able to organize a beautiful ceremony for her,” Eric promises.

I chuckle a bit, realizing how little all of this means to me. I’m just going to lead Moon Blood together with Celine. “I will talk about this with Council and see how she prefers it, but I assume she won’t mind waiting for a few months.”

The day passes by excruciatingly slow, but at least I’ve managed to tell Liam about my plans. He is totally supportive, telling me I can lead Moon Blood whenever I want.

“I hate to leave you hanging though,” I admit as we retreat to his office. “You’re not leaving me hanging,” he says. “You’ve found your mate.”

finding want to be with her, and you are considerate enough to let me know in advance that you are leaving. You don't owe me or the pack anything—

“I owe you and the pack everything,” I say quietly.

He ponders my words for a while before nodding. “Then pay me back while being the best mate and luna you can be.”

“You really don't think it's weird?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Not at all. Celine is an alpha. There is nothing shameful about the luna rank. Annalise is my luna, and I wouldn't be able to rule without her. I couldn't have become alpha of Red Claw without her. A luna is just as good as an alpha, but with a fancy name.”

I chuckle. “I have always been the black sheep anyway. It's time to stand up for everyone for real. Can you imagine the looks on some of these snobs when I attend a meeting as the Luna?”

“You, Mom, and Annie will definitely give the luna rank a whole new meaning,” Liam agrees.

“You bet!”

“I'm pretty certain that Celine will also want you to take on the role of an advisor,” Liam adds. “It's not usual for werewolf packs to have an advisor, but you're a lycan and therefore bring a lot of knowledge to the table.”

I nod at his words. The work of an advisor is difficult, as it means staying up to date with current political issues. I'd be willing to do it, especially if it means strengthening ties between Moon Blood and pack politics.

Liam and I talk for a little while before it's time for him to head to the meeting. As I'm preparing to leave the office, I turn to Liam. “Thank you, Liam,” I say quietly. “You've stood by my side through it all, even when I was at my worst.”

now in “That’s what brothers are for, right?” he says.

—” Maybe, I think, but Liam has been more than a brother. He is a friend.

back by I spend the rest of the day just going through the motions. I’m trying to concentrate on my tasks and not just daydream like a lovesick puppy. On the other hand, is pretty much the epitome of a lovesick puppy.

it about *You’re one to talk*, he grumbles. *Oh, Celine! Your eyes are so beautiful* out her. *Celine, I would do anything for you. No, Celine, I don’t mind. I lost a co-Celine. Whatever you want, Celine. You’re so beautiful, Celine.* He me.

o shock I blush at his teasing. *That’s rich, coming from the wolf who tries to tuck-uplot of fancy words just because his mate likes smart men!*

Hey, I am smart! He grumbles. *I never wanted to reject our mate.*

le new I hate it when he pulls that card. There is nothing I can say in my defense. It’s true that I would have rejected Celine on the spot, had it not been for my family. But Cyrus wanted to accept Celine and Danica from the very beginning. It’s terrifying to imagine how easily I could have rejected Celine, butmate... I am so incredibly lucky that circumstances at the time stopped me from doing so.

always Thank the goddess, I didn’t go through with it. I want Celine and Danica, though, much as Cyrus wants them, and now that Celine reciprocates our feelings with time to move forward.

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when I

“That’s what brothers are for, right?” he says.

Maybe, I think, but Liam has been more than a brother. He is also my friend.

I spend the rest of the day just going through the motions. I’m trying to concentrate on my tasks and not just daydream like a lovesick puppy. Cyrus, on the other hand, is pretty much the epitome of a lovesick puppy.

You’re one to talk, he grumbles. *Oh, Celine! Your eyes are so beautiful. Celine, I would do anything for you. No, Celine, I don’t mind. I love you, Celine. Whatever you want, Celine. You’re so beautiful, Celine.* He mimics me.

I blush at his teasing. That’s *rich, coming from the wolf who tries to use a lot of fancy words just because his mate likes smart men!*

Hey, I am smart! He grumbles. *I never wanted to reject our mate.*

I hate it when he pulls that card. There is nothing I can say in my defense. It’s true that I would have rejected Celine on the spot, had it not been for my family. But Cyrus wanted to accept Celine and Danica from the very first moment. It’s terrifying to imagine how easily I could have rejected my mate... I am so incredibly lucky that circumstances at the time stopped me from doing so.

Thank the goddess, I didn’t go through with it. I want Celine and Danica as much as Cyrus wants them, and now that Celine reciprocates our feelings, it’s time to move forward.

MOVING

CELINE

I still can't believe that Marius agreed to join the pack as my mate. Actually, it's beyond unbelievable, it's bordering on fantastical. It's finally happening, and he's already brought some of his stuff to Moon Block. He placed it in the alpha suite, ready for when he moves in with me.

Finally.

My fingers instinctively wrap around the pendant he brought back from his pack. It's the most vivid memory I have of my mom. Tears well in my eyes, the first time since her death, it's not just tears of sadness from thinking about her.

You'd better let me mate with Cyrus soon, Danica chimes in. You gotta get a mate. Now it's my turn! My guy is better anyway.

I laugh at her attitude. She probably still needs some time to warm up Marius, but I know she is only putting on a show for me right now. *I tell Cyrus that too?*

Are you kidding? Of course not! He already thinks he is a gift for a goddess. I'm definitely not telling him how great he is.

Just don't tease him too much, I chuckle.

You just worry about yourself, she smirks. *When I'm finished with tonight, he will be even more putty in my hands.*

I grimace. Despite the bond we share, having a sex talk with Dani is weird... Not that she doesn't deserve to have private time with Cyrus, but I don't want to know the details.

Fortunately, we're interrupted by Harmony, Garret, and the others shuffling inside. They're all carrying boxes. "I don't believe it," Harmony groans. "I've just finished helping Jazz move, and what am I doing here? Moving stuff again!"

"Don't complain," Harmony scolds. "It's a fantastic workout."

"I knew you'd say that," he mutters. "Why are you always so rational?" "It's a gift," Harmony grins.

In the background, I hear Garret say to Elias, "Oh honey, I don't think you can reach the cupboards up there."

Elias nods at his words, grabbing one of the boxes and lifting it. His perfect abs are exposed as he wriggles the box into position, causing an appreciative grin from Garret. We've all gone silent as we watch them knowingly. Elias closes the cupboard before looking around to see if the room has gone silent. He catches on to Garret's trick himself. His eyes raise at his mate. "Sly," he states. "Be glad you're hot."

Garret's eyes widen. "Did you... did you just flirt with me!?" He t

n up to his heels. “Hey, everyone! You heard that, didn’t you? He just flirted with me. *Did you* only calling me hot, but the way he said it, that was definitely a teasing smirk.”

From the “Yup. No denying it,” Harmony agrees in a matter-of-fact tone.

“He even wiggled his brows suggestively,” Marcel agrees.

Marius places a box in our bedroom before coming over to steal a kiss from me. He grins, “I love your Gamma, you know that?”

“I was kinda worried you would,” I mutter.

Garret and Marius exchange smirks, then fist-bump each other. I’m sure they are hitting it off. As a gamma, Garret’s prime task will be to protect me, after all. Obviously, Marius doesn’t need much protection, but just in case I have Harmony at my side, he needs someone too. Maybe in time, Marcel can choose his own assistant or beta to support him.

“So, I was thinking about how to introduce you to the pack,” I tell them.

“Garret, Harmony, and I have been brainstorming.”

“What’s there to think about?” Marius asks curiously.

“Well, normally the luna of a pack gets a luna ceremony,” Garret explains.

“I don’t want you to feel awkward or embarrassed,” I explain. I have been thinking about this a lot. I don’t want him taking on a role or rank he doesn’t want, and I don’t want him to feel like he needs to do something just to please me. He is my mate. He’s already giving up his pack for me. “The male version of a luna is lune or lunar,” I say, “But we don’t need to announce you as luna. We can officially announce you as the alpha’s mate, or something like that.”

“Or an advisor,” Garret points out.

“Woah, woah, woah,” he raises his hand to stop us. “Are you serious? Telling me that I won’t have a luna ceremony?”

Harmony stares at me for help. “Well...”

ed! Not “I’ve already invited my family so, fuck yes, you will organize on slightly you can’t, I’ll arrange it and get my mother and Annie to help me. I have tons of ideas for the upcoming luna meetings after the ceremony want all the usual alphas to be present during the ceremony, so I can s right into their stupid faces that Moon Blood got a new kick-ass lyc a quicklune, lunar, sailor moon, or whatever else you want to call it, w happily punch them the moment they say something stupid.” He fle muscles and smirks at Harmony, Garret, and Elias. “I can’t wait f so gladswear, I was born to rock this rank!”

tect my Instead of responding, I find myself sneaking up from behi ust likewrapping my arms around Marius’ middle. I kiss him softly on the he will “You’re the best mate I could ever wish for,” I whisper.

I didn’t know I would find it so hot that he literally doesn’t give Marius. about anyone’s opinion. The fact that he would take a rank that’s n reserved for females only and his sheer confidence in himself to take a role is totally turning me on. He turns to wrap his arms around me, plains. brightly. “But seriously, what does Moon Blood traditionally do for th ve be ceremony that would be impossible for me to do? Does the alpha ca e might luna bridal style? Or does the luna traditionally do some fertility danc because pauses. “Scratch the last part. I would absolutely do a fertility dance.” sion for “I think we should make that a new tradition,” Garret adds, immedi me. We board with it.

.” “No, we won’t!” I huff. The last thing I want is my mate dancing naked and everyone seeing his perfect body.

eriously Marius grins and squeezes me tighter. “By the way, what are the luna colors for Moon Blood?”

“Red,” Harmony points out. “Normally, the luna wears red durin

e. Or if ceremony.”

already “I look slammin’ in red,” he smirks. He is really having fun with . And Irelieves me to see him this way. “And the best part is, I can force Li shove itDad to join me on a shopping trip so that we can find a red suit for me. m luna, Garret smiles brightly. “You’re awesome,” he announces su ho will “Honestly, I’m proud to be your gamma, man.”

xes his “Proud to have you too.” Marius nods at him.

for it. I We grudgingly return to shuffling boxes around until Harmon

“When are you two leaving on your trip?” she asks us.

nd and “I’m stealing your Alpha away on Friday,” Marius explains, surpr cheek.earnest. He always acts a little more serious around Harmony, probab

aware that she is still wary of him. She isn’t disrespectful in any w e a shit she’s my best friend and beta, and saw me at my worst when I th ormally couldn’t handle the mate bond anymore.

on such “Garret and Elias will join us on the mountain path,” I add. I don’ smiling where Marius is taking me, but I know we are traveling to a mounta eir luna we can’t go all the way by car. Garret and Elias will follow us to tha arry his then guard the area while we head up a bit further. “Meanwhile, y e?” He Marcel will keep the pack running smoothly.”

After we return from this trip, Marius will wrap up his work at Re ately on before moving to my pack and joining us permanently. I won’t deny t more than a little excited for that to happen.

around It’s evening by the time we finish, and I send everyone away to gra dinner. It’s just Marius and me remaining. He comes closer, wrapp official arms around me and pulling me into his body. “I’ve missed yo whispers.

ig their I wrap my arms around his neck. “We’ve been together all day,” I si

His grip tightens. "It's just... every day I'm shocked that this is this. It now. And every day, I'm scared I will wake up to discover it was all an and dream."

"It isn't a dream," I say seriously. "You carry my mark, Marius suddenly. things might still be a bit weird for us, but my mind is set. I didn't just you because you brought me my mother's necklace. And I certainly mark you because of the mate bond. I marked you because I love you y asks, mate bond was the reason I gave you a second chance, but not the reason my decision."

risingly "I want to be perfect for you," he admits.

ly well "No one can be perfect," I tell him. "There will be times when I ay, but argue and be upset at each other, and that's okay."

ought I He tilts his head. "Let's promise to never walk away from each other anger. Let's try to communicate instead. I don't think I could handle it 't know walked away."

in, and I nod. I share his sentiment. He hates the feeling of being left, and so it point, He sighs. "Still, no matter what you say, I feel like I got lucky and you and mate lottery."

I grin. "Well, then, let's make our wolves lucky too!"

d Claw "Oh goddess, yes," Marius nods. "Cyrus keeps prancing and what I'm around in my mind, calling out for Danica nonstop. Why did I get bone-headed wolf!?"

by some I snort. "Yeah, I wonder..."

ing his "Very funny," he pretends to be offended, but then chuckles.

ou," he Staring deep into his dark brown eyes, I feel like I'm drowning in His gaze is so intense, looking deep into my own eyes, and I can't mile. heart rate increasing. Now that we are marked, I'm feeling his presence

my life much more. His aura is engulfing me in his intensity. It should be scary, but instead, it feels so... warm and safe. I reach out, entangling my fingers in the nape of his neck before pulling him into a kiss. He grabs my waist, pulling me back until I gently bump into my office desk and sit down on it. My stomach rolls back as I feel him start kissing and licking at my marking spot. "I didn't have some fun before letting our wolves out," I whisper. "They will have you. The rest of the night together."

Reason for *I promise Danica. Afterward, he is all yours.*

You go girl, she laughs. But keep your promise.

Marius smirks, lifting me up to tug my pants off. I love how impatient we will can be. Two can play this game, I think, impatiently tugging at his belt button before sliding his pants down. His erection pokes at my cheek, causing a moan to leave my lips. I don't bother undressing him fully. It's quick and dirty, but I do unbutton his shirt enough to touch his incense chest. I just love how his skin feels beneath my fingertips.

"Celine," he breathes out as he enters me in one swift movement. His hands run up my fingers, one hand brushing through his hair, the other clinging to my shoulder. "Fuck, you're so hot."

"You too," I moan, feeling him rock against me, his erection filling me deeply. "Harder."

Marius picks up the pace, his hips thrusting forward in long, hard strokes, making me shiver all over from the intensity. I want more of this. Taking his hand into mine, I guide it under my shirt. His hand moves upward, freeing my breasts from my bra. His callused fingers brush across my nipples teasingly before he takes one of them between his fingers and I feel his. The sensation makes me gasp into our kiss. His other hand leaves my hip, and I feel so

ary, but and slips under my ass. Lifting me up so he can bury his dick even
s at the inside me.

pushing He sucks at my neck before moving down to start licking my mark
ly eye tongue. Jolts of ecstasy run through my body driving my nails deeper
“Let’s back. “Fuck,” He both curses and moans. He throws his head back, giv
ave the the perfect angle to take control of the movement.

His hand leaves my nipples and grasps the back of my head. The b
dominance turning us both on. I clench my inner muscles, squeezing h
hard in anticipation of my orgasm. “One day,” he pants. “You will al
tient he to have control.”

felt and I smirk, biting down on his shoulder softly. “Don’t pretend like yo
n trance love this.”

want it “I absolutely do. Fuck Celine, you are so hot when you’re in char
redible thrusts his hips forward roughly, trying to push me over the edge. ‘
much as I love it when you lead, having you on all fours as I pound r
I move deep inside of you is going to be a gift.”

g to his “You never know,” I whisper, licking over his mark again. “A
could happen on our trip.”

ing me The promise alone pushes him over the edge. He comes, filling m
brim with his seed. The feeling pushes me over the edge, and I come
thrusts, afterward, my body shivering as I sink into his arms. Marius remain
feeling me while his strong arms hold me to his chest.

pushes I lean into his neck, pressing my lips against it in a soft caress. H
ver my beautiful neck, rather lean and delicate, and currently glistening with s
l twists. “Do we really have to let our wolves out?” he mutters.

ny hips I smile, considering. “A promise is a promise.”

“True,” he chuckles, pecking my lips softly.

deeper We clean up our mess, and I thank the goddess that I'm on birth control. Lauren and Val's mom, who's always been more like an aunt to me, tells me to get birth control from the pack doctor when I was sixteen. That's something you do with your father.

ring me I do want to have children with Marius one day, but our souls have just found each other, and Marius is still healing from his trauma. Even if we need the right timing, and now isn't it.

his cock Marius and I leave the pack house hand in hand and head toward the low me Danica's jumping around excitedly in my mind, which is a rare sight for a normally dignified wolf. She's even chasing her tail around. Both Marius and I undress and shift into our respective wolves.

Finally, Danica stretches her paws before prancing in front of Cyrus. "Hestance proud and strong. She isn't intimidated one bit by how strong you are. But as huge as he is. He may be a lycan alpha, but we are a very rare hybrid, and only a dick knows it. *Now, now, big man*, she coos at Cyrus. *Let's see if you can protect a woman.*

nothing He growls, his eyes glowing at her taunt.

I take that as my signal to take a backseat and let Danica have full access to the She deserves some privacy, and I certainly don't want to watch her do her nighttime activities.

s inside



ie has a Later that week, we are invited to Marius' parents for lunch. They've officially welcome me into their family. All his siblings will be there, and I can already feel Marius' nervousness growing the closer we get to Silverlake's pack house.

control. Once we walk towards the pack house, his hand tightens around my shoulder. “Why are you so nervous?” I ask with a smile. “They already know you’re not mates.”

“Yes,” he mutters. “But they also know I’ve hid it, and just because I’m only trying to be a good mate now, it doesn’t mean they don’t know I’ve hid anything before. And...”

“Marius,” I smile at him. “Your family knows what happened, and in the forest there is no need to pretend, but they also know that we reconciled. And for my part that matters, I think you are a great mate.”

Marius and I “It’s all that matters,” he admits.

“See, and—”

Marius, her The door gets ripped open and Flora stomps outside. “Are you talking and talking!” she asks with a pout. “I’ve been watching out of the window and she you didn’t move for minutes.”

please a “Sorry Mom,” Marius says. “We were about to come inside.”

Flora spreads her arms, completely ignoring Marius for now and squaring me instead. “I’m so happy you are finally part of our family! Welcome to the pack, Celine!”

h their “And what about me?” Marius teases.

“You were keeping her all to yourself,” Flora scolds, but then breaks into a smile. “But who can blame you.” She squeezes Marius too, grabbing our hands and tugging us inside. The moment we enter the dining room of the alpha family, we’re surrounded by them all.

me, and I “Look at that,” Finn grins. “Another one of my brothers who succeeded in getting mated to my pond.”

“Right,” Aurelia chuckles. “First Annie, now Celine.”

“And don’t forget Ella,” he points out. “She is mated to Dante,

l mine. beta, so technically, he is family too.”

we are Aurelia wraps her arms around him and squeezes him. “Maybe one of your friends is your mate?” she says with a smirk. “You know, that would be fair.”

was shit “Goddess,” Finn laughs. “They are like little sisters to me. Would be awkward.” He turns serious again and approaches us. “Don’t listen to me, I’m teasing. I’m very happy for the both of you.”

l for all “We all are,” Flora chimes in. “I swear if you weren’t mated to Celine, I would have made sure to set you up with someone here!”

“Good thing she has a mate,” Marius puts an arm around me and looks possessive all of a sudden.

u done The hint of a smirk curls around Flora’s lips as she exchanges a glance with Elden.

I take my time to chat with Marius’ siblings properly. While I’ve known Finn for a while and am friends with him, I don’t know much about his other siblings. Sure, Aurelia is one of Val’s closest friends, but it’s the first time I welcome to interact with her on a more familiar level.

And the twins I’ve only loosely met until now. “These are my youngest brothers,” Marius introduces me to them. “The sunnyboy is Felix.”

before “Very funny,” Felix comments, but laughs brightly.

private “Don’t let him fool you. He is a mischievous brat,” Marius says with a grin. “And this fabulous young man here is Dario.”

essfully “So, I’m the mischievous sunnyboy, and he is the fabulous young man,” Felix asks. He doesn’t sound like he is bothered though.

“It’s nice to finally meet the both of you,” I say. “I’m Celine.”

Liam’s “We know,” Felix grins. “Marius talks nonstop about you when

here.”

of my Marius looks flustered while I smile at that sudden bout of information only be “It’s an honor to finally meet you,” Dario says quietly. His expression much more serious than his brother’s.

be too Actually, they don’t look like twins at all. Felix is tall and athletic to my slightly curly blond hair and tanned from the hours he probably spends outside. His younger twin, Dario, seems to be more reserved. He is a bit shorter than Marius, and not as tall; his hair is dark brown. The only thing they share looks like are their blue eyes. These two look like opposite sides of a coin.

looks all “Felix is probably the most sportive of us all,” Marius tells me. “He likes surfing. He and his friends travel hours to be at the sea and then surf for hours with hours. And Dario...” he squeezes his little brother’s shoulder. “Is probably the smartest of us.”

known Dario looks flustered. “I’m not the smartest. I just like to study and read is other “He is super smart,” Felix backs him up instantly. “There is nothing I can’t do!”

“You are exaggerating,” Dario says, but he smiles when he looks at his twin brother. They seem to be pretty close. Soon they start chatting between themselves. They are still in school and are looking forward to their summer break. It seems like Felix went on a date recently, and Dario helped him with his styling. When Felix tells him about how he heard one of the girls with a crush on him, Dario shrugs it off though.

Dario is a bit of an introvert, Marius links me. He isn’t shy, per se. He likes to... to keep to himself.

Are you worried? I ask him.

I thought that Calvin... maybe...

n he is I nod.

*But Calvin admitted to all his misdeeds, and he didn't mention Dari
ion. A psychopath like him would have rubbed it into your father's f
ssion issure, I agree. Had he done something to one of your siblings.*

*I guess something else is troubling him, he says.
ic, with He is your little brother. I point out. I know you didn't mingle wi
spendssiblings a lot, but you can always change that. Just spend some tir
it palerthem. I think they would be happy.
ok-wise "Celine!"*

*I turn around as the voice rips me out of my silent conversatio
e lovesMarius. "Annie!" I can't believe she came. I thought she and Liam
or a fewrather stay at home because she might be going into labor any day.
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admit.*

*read." "Liam and I are only staying for lunch, then we will head back," sh
hing he"How does it feel to be mated into the Alcott family?" she asks with a
"Surprisingly chill," I laugh.*

*s at his "I know, I thought the same."
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saying*

He just

But Calvin admitted to all his misdeeds, and he didn't mention Dario.

A psychopath like him would have rubbed it into your father's face for sure, I agree. Had he done something to one of your siblings.

I guess something else is troubling him, he says.

He is your little brother. I point out. I know you didn't mingle with your siblings a lot, but you can always change that. Just spend some time with them. I think they would be happy.

"Celine!"

I turn around as the voice rips me out of my silent conversation with Marius. "Annie!" I can't believe she came. I thought she and Liam might rather stay at home because she might be going into labor any day.

I hurry towards her and hug her. "I thought I might not see you today," I admit.

"Liam and I are only staying for lunch, then we will head back," she says. "How does it feel to be mated into the Alcott family?" she asks with a grin.

"Surprisingly chill," I laugh.

"I know, I thought the same."

Before we can chat any more Flora waves at us and calls us towards the table. Once sitting down next to my mate, I realize my family has just grown vastly, and my life has gotten so much richer.

THE NEW HEIR

MARIUS

I'm back to not sleeping much again, but instead of feeling exhausted like before, I'm actually happy and motivated. I'm guessing has to do with my reasons for staying up late, which are all connected to the most breathtaking woman in the world.

Just be glad I managed to woo my beautiful Danica early on, Cyrus. Or we would have had no chance. My good looks and dashing persona saved us!

What the heck? I raise my brows. What's with your ego? It seems getting worse than usual.

Oh, shut up human. You should kiss the floor I walk on!

I chuckle. We walk on the same floor, Cyrus.

Shoot, I forgot about that, he grumbles. Still, my point stands!

Yeah, I give in. You are right. Between the two of us, you were definitely the better mate. But I wouldn't let it go to your head, Cyrus; Danica didn't set the bar too high.

He completely ignores my last comment, as he's too busy strutting like a peacock with his chest puffed out. I don't tease him for it, I don't argue with him... and in a way, it's kind of cute.

Celine and I have decided to divide some of her alpha duties between Liam and I. Liam was right when he assumed that she would want me to be an advisor. My job will be to deal with some of the more elitist packs, especially the lycan ones. I can't wait to introduce myself to them as the new alpha. I'll look on their stupid faces when they realize who I am, especially considering none of them would dare say anything, as I'm still Alpha Elden's son and Alpha Liam's brother. HAH! It's going to be brilliant! Garret and I will have the time of our lives.

Our new work arrangement is the reason I'm heading over to Reeling now for an early morning meeting. We'll be discussing the details of the mission. His team is a crazy mix of talented and skilled individuals, but they're going to need all the help he can get from us just to keep this group together. However, Finn's a good and capable man, so I'm sure he will work it out.

I arrive just in time for the start of the meeting. I look around and see my father and Liam, of course, and Finn. There's also Liam's betas, Alpha James and Beta Vincent. I see Ella is here too, representing Annie, as she's excused herself from the meeting for very obvious reasons. We had her baby shower a week ago, and she was in tears when she received our presents. The baby chair, in particular, was a big hit.

I sit down and glance at my father. "I can't believe you're still complaining," I say, pretending to be shocked. "No, *oh*, you've

definitely decided to grace us with your presence, son?"

clearly He raises his brows. "I figure, if you still can't manage to be on time in 23 years of life, that's on you. I have other problems."

around "What other problems?" Liam wants to know.

it's want "Flora... your mother wants to artificially create a river around the castle. I don't want to do that," he states blandly.

been us. "What, like a castle moat?" I ask with a grin.

me her Finn cackles at the idea. "She watched a movie recently and got especially excited about it."

See the "There is no way I'll agree to that," my father exclaims.

considering "Well," Beta Vincent snorts. "I don't want to question your authority as son and Alpha, but maybe you should try to compromise with her, or quickly find something else to distract her with. Otherwise, what she wants, she'll get."

Hey Vince," my father growls. "How about you worry about your own life and Claw 1000-year-old mate before making fun of mine?"

*Fin*n's Vincent grins but wisely keeps his mouth shut.

but he is "Oh yeah, right," I nod earnestly toward him. "I heard we are extending our family now. You are dating my mate's great-grandmother!"

out. Aryanna and Ella burst into laughter. "I can't quite believe it!" Dad Aryanna grins.

ace and "What do I call you now?" I ask Vincent seriously. "Gramps?"

excused Vincent punches my shoulder.

lower a "Hey, hit the lute one more time and I will tell my alpha," I threaten.

rocking My father buries his face behind his hands. "Goddess, give me strength. Give me a glass of cognac now, and it's only 10 AM."

're not "Make it two," Liam groans.

finally "Three," Alpha Jace adds.

Finn shrugs. "I don't think one glass is enough."

Everyone chuckles, before finally getting down to business. Both Liam and my father are good at keeping even big groups focused on a meeting. Now, the plan is simple. Finn and his little task force will spend the next few weeks gathering information about Blood Snow and preparing strategies, and working on their cover stories. Meanwhile, my father and Liam will think up some reason for the group's visit... hopefully, something that won't raise any suspicions.

I know Finn is a capable guy, but I do worry a bit about him. This feels like a dangerous mission.

We are still discussing worst-case scenarios when the door opens and Annie steps in. Jun is gripping her arm to make sure she doesn't forget!" Annie looks calm and composed. We're all a little surprised to see her here. Her own she's supposed to be resting, until Liam's gaze shifts toward the bag in her free hand.

His eyes turn black, and overprotective alpha waves suddenly extend out of him. Fuck, Fenris is so powerful I want to bare my neck to him, though I'm his brother.

"It's time," Annie says in a matter-of-fact tone. "I need to go to the infirmary."

All hell breaks loose after her announcement.

Ella is so shocked she accidentally throws her sandwich out of the window. Dante knocks over my father's glass of water while scrambling for his feet. Jace and Finn accidentally crash into each other, and Ari grabs one of her pregnancy books to look something up.

Liam manages to get his lycan under control and hurries toward Annie. "What do you need? Do you have everything? Where... what...?"

She takes his hand. “Take me to the infirmary, please. Mom and Ella are already waiting there.”

“When did you call them?” my father asks in surprise.

“Around two hours ago. The contractions started very slowly.”

That was before the meeting even started. I’m shocked that Liam doesn’t comment on it, but his mind is obviously prioritizing right now. He scoops her into his arms and takes the bag from Jun. He shoves Jun into the room and turns to look at our father. “Dad.”

“Yes, I will continue to lead the meeting,” he nods.

“What, you expect us to stay here!?” Ella asks in shock.

“It’s going to take a while, El,” Annie murmurs into Liam’s chest. “I’m not giving birth with twenty people around me.”

Liam’s eyes darken again, his aura getting stronger once more. It’s clear Jun doesn’t want to discuss this anymore. Everyone wisely keeps their mouths shut, allowing him to leave with Annie. I’m glad her mother will be there to help her. My mom and Annie will be a great support to me even if I have to clean up the mess we created.

Dante rubs his hands over his face. “Don’t ask me.”

“Let’s have a fifteen-minute break to gather our thoughts and clear our heads,” my father suggests. “Then we’ll come back in and focus. Annie’s labor is probably last for hours, and we shouldn’t bother her and Liam with our own problems now.”

Everyone agrees and scatters in different directions for the break, probably just to get some fresh air or something to eat. Only Dante and Ella disagree. Together, they seem to be in a hurry. If Dante believes he can squeeze into these fifteen minutes, I’m impressed.

lora are Meanwhile, I link my own beautiful mate, telling her about the r
case she doesn't know yet.

It's so sweet of you to think of me! She sounds happy. *But H
already told me.*

doesn't *Right, Annie's mom is here after all. She surely told the rest of the f
arefullywonder if I should feel stupid for not thinking about it, but then shru;
into theMaybe you could tell your human friend?* I ask.

Dave? Celine sounds sincerely surprised by my suggestion.

*Yeah, I thought Annie might want him to know, but obviously, she's
preoccupied right now. Or was that a bad thought?*

t. "And *Not at all.* To my surprise, Celine sounds touched. *I will call him.*



obvious

mouthsMy father was right when he said nothing will happen fast. Obviousl
e there,experienced with these things. Mom popped out six of us. Eventua
them. takes pity on the rest of us and starts telling some hilarious pregnancy
s whileabout my mom. Apparently, during Finn's pregnancy, she
strawberries, including things with that scent. So, the whole pack
smelled like a strawberry field, and there were strawberries provide
an up," every meal.

or will "You're laughing now," Dante states dryly. "But I can remember i
r issuesthirteen around that time, I think, and literally, everything had strawbe
it."

robably Vincent nods. "We were all excited for the first few days of strawbe
sappearbut then it turned into months of strawberry cupcakes, strawberry n
eeze astrawberries with whipped cream, strawberry tarts, strawberry

news in strawberry cream. And you know your father,” he looks at me with a
“Her wish was his command. Goodness, even now, I cannot look at
armonystrawberry.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” my father snorts. “We had plenty of other
amily. I too.”

g it off. “I will never forget the day she actually squeezed strawberry syrup
her steak,” Vincent mutters, his face paling at the thought.

The others grimace and laugh. Before my father can say anything
: *a little* response, I feel a mind-link from Liam coming through. By the way
eyes gloss over, I assume she receives it too.

Ella jumps up. “Finally!” she exclaims. She grabs Dante’s hand, pulling
him up. “Let’s go!”

He nods, smiling tenderly at her. I don’t need to read his mind
y, he is understand what he thinks and feels. Ella getting so excited over her
ally, her friend’s baby, means there is hope for them too. Due to their past
stories probably haven’t considered children yet, but maybe they are slowly
craved to that point.

house “Goddess,” my father sighs and closes some folders before following
ed with outside. “Now you lot are making me nervous too.”

We all bid Jace goodbye, who didn’t want to disturb this private
t. I was moment with his presence, before walking over to the infirmary
cries in reminded of my own vision, the one I had when I almost died. I still s

believe that it was the Goddess’ doing. It was her final warning and n
erry pie, reminder of what I might be missing out on. I’ll never forget C
nuffins, beautiful smile, her hair in the wind, and that little boy holding her hand

cake, “Flora!” my father exclaims as we reach the top floor, where my
already waiting for us. Mom rushes into his arms and laughs giddily. A

a wink. Mom, Rosalee, peeks out of the door to Annie's room and waves another parent. We can hear hushed voices and a baby's cry.

"They are so perfect," Rosalee says. "Come, Elden, take a look at our grandchildren."

"Yes." Mom grabs his hand and pulls him along. "You need to see. We're finally grandparents."

My father can pretend to be unaffected all he wants, but I see the ring in his bravado disappears at the thought of being a grandfather. He smiles. Ella looks excited and eager to finally meet his grandchildren.

Rosalee pops her head out of the door again. "Come, Ella. Annie will see you too."

Ella squeals with joy and hurries toward the room.

"Man," Ari grumbles. "I wish I were the Luna's best friend."

Finn grins. "I'm one of her best friends, and I am still not allowed in there," he points out. "No one can beat Ella."

"They are like sisters," I state while leading the others to the waiting area and we sit down there. "I don't think we can just raid her room," I chuckle at the thought.

Five minutes later, Annie's father, Brian, runs past without even sparing a look. Harmony and Steve are right behind him. They both disappear into the room, and we hear happy voices, laughter, and squeals coming strongly from inside. I could swear I heard Brian burst into tears.

I don't know how long we wait, but eventually, the door opens, and Liam's steps outside with two bundles in his arms. They look so tiny in his arms. Liam's eyes are red-rimmed, and he is bursting with pride and joy. I can't remember the last time I saw him cry, but it's such a great experience to see Liam show such emotions with his newborn children.

at my He smiles proudly at us. “Meet my two angels. Princess Asteria, our firstborn and future heir of Red Claw,” he beams. “And our beautiful daughter, yoursunshine, Aurora.”

“Two girls!?” Ari squeals. “You are so lucky.”
e them. “Yes, they are perfect,” Liam smiles gently at his daughters. “Congratulations, they’re fraternal twins.”

noment I nod tentatively. When Liam announced Asteria as his heir, it was a surprise. I suddenlythat they weren’t identical. Identical twins could, in rare cases, rule a kingdom together, but for fraternal twins, it’s different. Especially in Liam’s court, the law of primogeniture means only the firstborn child will inherit his royal power.

But it’s not important. What’s important is that they’re here... and healthy. And so cute. Liam hands me one of the girls, and I can just coo at her. “Hello to you little Asteria?”

inside,” “No, that’s Aurora,” Liam chuckles.

“Say hello to Uncle Marius,” I beam.

g room, “And Uncle Finn,” Finn smiles, and gently touches one of Aurora’s cheeks. “Hello to you little hands.”

Dante smiles warmly, stepping up to squeeze Liam’s shoulder. “Congratulations, Liam.”

ear into “Thank you, Dante.”

g from “Can I also hold one of them?” Ari asks hopefully.

“Of course.” Liam carefully hands her little Asteria, and then grins. “Congratulations, Asteria. And Liamas we all take a turn at holding the babies. They look so tiny; it makes my eyes glisten with tears—such little miracles.”

d joy. I “I can’t let you all inside now,” Liam tells us. “Annie is tired after a very long labor.”

l. “Of course,” Ari nods. “We are just happy that everything went well.”

ur first-you both, and we got a glimpse of the babies. Congratulations, Alpha!

ul little I smile warmly at Liam. “Congratulations, brother.”

He returns my smile. “Thank you.”

You’re going to follow soon, he links me.

Oh, and I nod, warmth filling me when I think of Celine and our future

Hopefully.

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I nod, warmth filling me when I think of Celine and our future child.

Hopefully.

WEEKEND TRIP

MARIUS

With the whole pack suffering from baby fever, time has flown. Annie and the twins were discharged from the infirmary and spent the last two weeks settling into family life with Liam. Over the last few days, they've started joining the pack for breakfast again so pack members can meet and connect with the new heirs. These are the first lycan royals from our generation, so it's something special to be celebrated. Other packs have already started sending gifts, along with their best wishes.

My siblings have visited a few times, showering their little nieces with gifts and cuddles. Being the first-born baby, or in this case babies, your family is always celebrated as something special. Mom and Dad have been staying at the pack house for a few days, along with Annie's parents.

Annie's parents will stay a bit longer, especially since Rosalee has embraced her grandma status.

With all these recent changes, Liam has asked Aryanna and me to take—and his mate to the airport for him, which is why I'm at Red Claw today, joining the whole gang for breakfast.

Currently, Ella is holding little Aurora in her arms and cooing at her smaller than her sister and tends to be a little more needy. It's been since we had a baby in the pack house, I'd completely forgotten mesmerizing they can be... with their little toes and fingers. I hope Celine and I will have our own children.

Dante's thoughts seem to trail off in a similar direction to mine as he watches Ella and Aurora with a hopeful smile. He doesn't comment. He's always been a very patient man who would never put pressure on anyone. I hope he and Ella have their own little family eventually.

It's a pleasant breakfast, though I'm missing having breakfast with my mate and our ranked members and friends.

"It's time for us to leave," Eric says as everyone is finishing. "We have quite a long journey ahead of us."

Here it comes. The inevitable fucking farewells and goodbyes. Oh, I hate them. As expected, everyone accompanies Val and Eric outside for their lengthy goodbyes. Eric takes his sweet time to coo at the babies while walking around to shake hands and give hugs to literally everyone.

"I'm so happy for you, Liam," Eric says before giving him a hug.

"Thank you," Liam says sincerely. "It's meant a lot to me that you were able to stick around so long and meet the twins."

"Likewise." Eric agrees, squeezing Valerie's hand. "Besides, I found my most precious gift here."

is fully “Makes two of us,” Liam adds with a chuckle.

“Three,” I say from beside them.

ike Eric “Four,” Aryanna adds. “Wow, this was a good year!”

so early Eric laughs elatedly. “I couldn’t agree more. I will miss you and
Liam. Make sure to visit us soon!”

r. She’s “You know our doors are always open for you too,” Liam says.

so long “Please don’t get too teary,” Aryanna begs. “Jazz already cried the
en hownight. And I bet it will be even worse at the airport. Especially with
one dayfriends and her parents.”

“She’s right,” Eric chuckles, claspng Liam’s shoulder again. “S
e keepssoon, Liam!”

though. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll be meeting up for the coronation
sure onfather,” Liam grins.

Eric shoots back, “Glad you’re on board with the idea, too.”

with my They both exchange a wicked smirk before I finally manage to dr
and Val to the car. I hate goodbyes, like I’m seriously bad at them.

we havewait for this whole bon voyage mess to be over, so I can take Celine a
our weekend getaway afterward. My nieces being born was the rea
, how I postponed our trip for two weeks, but now it’s finally time!

to say Thank the Goddess, Valerie decided not to take too much of her stu
beforeher to Paris. Most of her luggage consists of family mementos, some p
things she doesn’t want to part with, and a few items of clothing. S
Eric have decided to buy everything else in Paris. Their original plan
ou weretravel to Spain first, but with Calvin in tow, they’ve decided to postp
trip.

und the I don’t think Valerie realizes just how much Eric wants to spoil her

He told Liam and me that he’s rented out a major department store

high-end brands for her to roam through in private. He is so going to it, the poor girl. At least he means well.

Valerie's parents are already waiting for us as we walk into the airport. Annie, sister, Jazz, and their friends start throwing Valerie a makeshift send-off right here in the terminal. It's so sweet. Val is both crying and laughing, only getting worse as Jazz starts hugging her goodbyes. I feel a bit sorry for the whole Eric since he is probably going to spend the whole flight consoling Valerie. Val's parents are flying out on a private jet, so at least they'll have some privacy.

I hope they finish with their goodbyes soon. Moon Goddess, have mercy on me. *I can feel your disgruntled thoughts*, Celine links me. I was so engrossed in the drama I didn't even notice her arrival at the airport. What an asshole of a roommate I am.

I try to ignore Cyrus' death glare in the back of my mind. *Old habits die hard. It's hard to get rid of them*. When she stays quiet, I hurry to escape. *Big emotions have always made me feel uncomfortable. It's a defense mechanism*. I can't help it.

She gives me a comforting smile. *I know*.

So, you're not mad at me? I ask in relief. *Please say no, or Cyrus will swap humans*.

This is who you are, and I'm not going to change it, she chuckles. *Never catch you targeting one of your defense mechanisms at me, you little shit*. She falls back on the sofa.

Cyrus' death glare towards me grows, and he narrows his eyes at me in warning. I shove him to the back of my mind before the snarling starts.

To my surprise, Celine laughs. "Just kidding," she says out loud. She chuckles before looking serious again and adding, "Or maybe not."

"I'm bad at goodbyes," I admit honestly.

overdo “I figured as much.” She takes my hand and squeezes. “Don’t worry too much. Eric will be fine, and I’m sure he’ll come back soon for a visit.”
I try not to blush at her words. Goddess, is it so easy to see through me?
Maybe Celine has just learned to read me better.

Before Valerie starts climbing the stairs into the jet, Celine approaches me. “Alpha Celine!” Valerie squeals, looking seriously happy to see her former alpha. I have to give it to her, though, despite her occasional sadness at leaving her family and friends behind, Valerie looks excited and happy.

“Valerie,” Celine addresses her. “I realize I’m not the best at voicing my feelings, so bear with me... Officially, I grew up without any siblings, but even though I hate what Lauren did, I’m so thankful to have had you around. You’re a family in my life growing up. You always felt like a little sister to me, and I wouldn’t have changed it for anything.” She hands her a little velvet box. “I know you’ll like it.”
When Valerie opens it, her eyes widen. She carefully takes out a beautiful sapphire earrings and a matching bracelet. The pack symbol from the Moon Blood pack is elegantly engraved into each piece. “I don’t know what to say,” Valerie exclaims. “This is so... thank you... I mean...”

“It’s a little something for you to remember us,” Celine says. “You can visit whenever you want. The pack will always welcome you.”

“I won’t forget you!” Valerie promises. “Ever! Moon Blood is my home, and it will always be my safe haven.”

Eric clasps my shoulders one last time. “Be a good mate,” he says, surprisingly serious.

I nod. “You, too.”

“It’s a deal. We’ll both do our best to be worthy of our gorgeous women.”

orry too I laugh. “Deal.”

He smiles before taking Valerie’s hand and leading her into their
me? Orjet. I wonder where Calvin is. Is he traveling on this plane with t
desperately shove those thoughts out of my head. Knowing Eric and h
nes her.Emilien, they’ve tied him up somewhere and sedated him. Calvin’s
: alpha.over, while mine is finally beginning.

obvious I feel Celine’s hand slipping into mine, intertwining our fingers
ed andleans against me. Aurelia, Jazz, and their friends all wave goodbye ar
waving until the jet finally takes off. We all watch until the plane i
ing myspot on the horizon. Everyone seems to be just standing there motionle
, and asI gently start to disperse the group. My sister doesn’t seem as tear-st
id yourJazz, but she definitely looks sad.

e, and I I put an arm around her shoulder. “Are you alright?”

ox. Aurelia shrugs. “She was a good friend, you know? It’s weird to th
pair ofshe isn’t here anymore.”

bol for “But you have plans to visit her,” I say, trying to cheer her up.

w what She smiles. “You’re right, Mari. We’re all going to Paris in Deceml
already organized. Eric invited everyone.” She squeezes my hand
beforegetting into her car. “Hey Marius,” she calls out.

ick will “Hm?”

“It’s good to see you happy.”

r home, And with that, Aurelia drives away. It’s weird seeing my little
driving off in a car with only her Beta Nox with her. Goddess, time pa
e says,fast.



men.”

CELINE

private
hem? I
his Beta
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I watch the scenery pass us by as we head up the mountain weekend away. Summer is ending, and while it's getting colder, we driving for quite a while before seeing any snow. Elias is used to the snow, so he easily maneuvers our jeep up the icy mountain. I'm not sure Marius has planned or why we are heading up this mountain, but I'm not be pleasantly surprised. Eventually, we arrive at a small bed & breakfast where Elias parks the car. "We can't go any further by car," he tells us Garret nods. "Elias and I will stay here and guard the area." He nervous. Ever since Marius and I marked each other, he's taken his gamma even more seriously. He doesn't like that we are going on him.

"Garret," Marius grins. "If someone manages to get past you to get up there, they will have my respect."

"Not funny," Garret mutters.

"No, seriously," I say. "Marius is right. There is no way someone past here unless they have serious witchcraft abilities."

"Besides," Marius adds, wrapping his arm around my waist, his dipping slightly lower than is considered decent, not that I mind. "I have Alpha to protect me." He smirks. "Not that I want us to get interrupted have plans, and they don't include us wearing a lot of clothes."

Garret grimaces. "Things I never wanted to know." He rolls his eyes. "Now go, lovebirds."

Marius winks at him. "Feel free to have a break occasionally too! doing it outdoors gives sex a whole new kick."

Garret rolls his eyes. "Yeah," he says, patting Elias' chest. "Someone is going to be in working mode the whole time."

Elias looks confusedly at Garret. "But you were the one who said we have any fun here as long as the alpha couple are on their own."

Garret glares at him. "Thank you for blowing my cover, my love."

I chuckle, waving goodbye before Marius takes our two backpacks and leads me toward a small barn. As we enter, I see two fully saddled horses being tended by an old man. Going by his aura, I'd say he is an omega. He smiles, greeting us politely. From the look of the old man, this must be a good place. I'm guessing he occasionally rents it out to guests. It's been a while since I sat on the back of a horse, so I listen as he patiently explains the role of the horses should do. Fortunately, the horses are used to being around wolves, without any scent is not going to scare them away.

"The young master knows how to ride a horse," he tells me and nods with a smile toward Marius.

That surprises me. "So many things I don't know about you," I comment while mounting my horse. The horse is a beautiful Norwegian Fjord. Marius explains to me, and apparently, it's a breed that's perfectly suited for rough terrain and cold weather. The beginning of the trail is tough for me. I follow Marius, who carefully and slowly guides me over the rugged terrain until I start to feel more confident.

"You're a natural," he says, impressed by my balance.

"Don't look at me like that," I chuckle. "I'm just riding."

"It's just... you, on a horse in this snowy scenery with your hair blowing in the wind. It's such a beautiful sight." He tilts his head, suddenly glancing wickedly at me. "Maybe when we arrive, you could ride something else."

I narrow my eyes. "Oh, you don't say. And here I thought you could ride a horse."

ne here five minutes without making a dirty comment.”

“I can’t help myself,” he grins. “You are just too hot.”

I pretend to be annoyed, but in reality, I wish we’d arrive at our destination soon. He looks so rugged and manly riding in front of me, and I just jump his bones. I never thought he would be the type of guy to take his time and spend it in nature, but seeing him in his casual jeans and dark horse sweater, he looks so comfortable. Moon Blood is a relatively small pack. He is surrounded by forest, and although Marius reassured me that he might be missing living in a bigger, more urban pack, the message truly drives home forever that I see how happy and relaxed he is out here.

“Alright,” I say, more to myself than to him.

He turns his head, looking at me curiously. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” I smirk. “But maybe we could pick up the pace so we can reach our destination with our next activity. You said it’s two hours from here, right?”

He freezes before a look of determination crosses his eyes, turning his head to look at me. “We will make it in one!”

“Oh, you’re good,” Danica says, amused. *Look at our men. We know how to motivate them.*

I honestly doubt we could reach our destination in an hour, but I shouldn’t underestimate my mate’s newfound motivation because he suddenly picks up the pace and rushes us up the mountain path like there’s a hoard of rogues on our tail. The horses enjoy the run, as do I.

Marius leads us to a beautiful little cottage. It’s cozy, comfortable, and surprisingly well tended to. There’s a little hot spring outside and a barn for the horses. “How did you find this place?” I ask in surprise.

“From the guy who owns it. You met him at the bed & breakfast where we could go to get Garret and Elias. I’ve known him for years. Whenever I neede

time to myself, I'd visit this place." He chuckles as he helps me down my horse, spinning me around like we're in some cheesy Hollywood imitation. It makes me laugh, and I cling to his neck. "You know," he whispers, I want to tear. "How about I tend to the horses while you go inside and get naked to enjoy." I laugh. "Can I shower?" He tilts his head, pretending to think about my question, before grinning back that "Alright. I should probably take one too." "Yes. You should. Danica doesn't like you smelling like a horse," he says to him, "But don't make me wait too long."



love on

MARIUS

ing them

In record time, the horses are tended, fed, and secured for the evening. I head into the tiny cottage to shower before searching for Celine. To my surprise, she isn't in the bedroom, and my heart sinks at the thought that maybe she changed her mind. Fortunately, the cottage is so small I shouldn't have to search long. I enter the living room to find a fire burning in the hearth and Celine on the carpet, sitting in all her glory. She pulls her knees up, resting her head against them, and blinks through sultry eyes. "I thought you promised not to make me wait." Her back arches as she moves up on all fours. *I told you having a mate would be better than porn!* Cyrus chimes in with his usual words of wisdom.

here we

d some

from I shove him quickly to the back of my head. I can't help the hungry
movie.that leaves my mouth when Celine returns to a sitting position and
into myout her arms for me. I barely reach her when she flings herself into m
l?" and pulls me down to the floor. I'm undressed in an instant, thank
goddess I'd only put on pants.

inning. The fire illuminates Celine's beautiful skin, like the sun shining d
her. I playfully crawl towards her, making her giggle. My body hove
I smirkCeline as she lies down on her back, giving me the chance to pepper h
with kisses. She is perfection with her smooth skin, supple breasts, a
the taste of her is delicious. I run my tongue down her chest before
lower. I flash her a grin as I spread her legs for me, listening to her
grow louder as my tongue trails down to her core. I take my time to
tasting her.

"Marius," Celine breathes out in frustrated need, pushing herself up
elbows. I use this moment to attack her clit with my tongue, mak
ening. I moan louder. "I want you inside me!"

To my I growl at her. Fuck, yes! I want to be inside her too. I pull her o
ght that lap, having her straddle my hips. I kiss Celine hungrily before my li
that it down her neck and directly to her nipples. Fuck! The whole freaking
a cozy this cottage felt like never-ending foreplay! I need her now.

r naked Celine seems to think the same, as her fingers circle the base of m
s at me stroking it to full hardness before lowering herself down onto my cocl
wanted me to ride you," she whispers.

"I want a lot of things," I smirk, pushing my hips up to meet he
in with steadies herself on my shoulders and moves her hips up and down my
groan at the feeling of her walls clenching around me. Goddess, sh
amazing. Just the touch of her hand sends tingles flying through my

y growl was so stupid to avoid the mate bond for so long, because there is no reaches feeling than this. I want to fuck Celine every day for the rest of our lives. I know I will never grow tired of her.

ing the Her long fingers brush through my hair. “How about,” she whispers, “I fulfill another wish of yours. I know you want me a certain way.”

own on I growl, unable to contain my feral side anymore. I grab her hips and pull her around without pulling out. She throws her head back as she gets on her hands and knees and arches her back at the perfect angle. I spread my legs wider and settle between them before thrusting my cock as deep as it will go. I fuck her relentlessly, making deep, hard thrusts. Sweat starts to pour down my forehead, and I can see droplets running down Celine’s back. She moans, moans out my name, and it’s the most enchanting sound I’ve ever heard.

She leans down on her elbows before moving one of her hands between her legs to rub her clit. “Fuck,” I growl. “You are so hot, no one can compare to you.”

To have her in front of me like this, allowing me to take control, is so rewarding and so fucking hot. I feel like I’m about to explode. Celine’s lips trail pushing back against me, meeting my thrusts halfway and taking me to complete surprise. Her head turns to look back at me, and I can just see a smirk curling on her lips. Oh, she knows exactly what she is doing.

y cock, Goddess, I love her.

κ. “You Celine’s muscles clench around my cock, spurring me on further. I feel my body tensing up and a shiver spreading through it as she comes with a gasp. She moans. I keep fucking her, unable to let go of this insane feeling just yet. It only lasts a couple of seconds more before I can’t hold back and come inside her.

body. I We both drop onto our backs, lying next to each other in a sweaty heap.

o better panting heavily. I turn to look at my gorgeous mate, my hand reaches, and until my fingers are gliding over her beautiful breasts. “Thank you,” she whispers.

pers. “I She turns her head to me. “Thank you,” she responds. “Satisfied,” she adds with a smile.

nd spin “No,” I smirk. “That was the wild rodeo round. Now I want to carry you down the hot spring and spend the rest of the night slowly cherishing your body. Her leg tasting every part of you.” All our sexual adventures up until now have been fast and rough, and I’ve loved it. We’d suppressed the mate bond so long, but we just couldn’t help but jump each other in the wildest ways, but it’s time to explore her body and discover all of her sensitive spots. I want to know what drives Celine wild; I want to find and taste all of her sweet spots.

etween She smiles softly at me. “I like the sound of that.”

ompare I scoop her up in my arms. Celine is built tall and athletic, so it’s kind of a rocky walk to the hot springs, and we eventually drop into the water. She is graceful. But we’re both laughing at our ridiculousness, and soon she is snuggled against me as we relax in the hot spring.

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She smiles softly at me. “I like the sound of that.”

I scoop her up in my arms. Celine is built tall and athletic, so it’s kind of a rocky walk to the hot springs, and we eventually drop into the water very ungracefully. But we’re both laughing at our ridiculousness, and soon Celine is snuggled against me as we relax in the hot spring.

WEEKEND TRIP II

MARIUS

Breakfast this morning feels so natural and comfortable between and me. It's a simple affair made up of bacon, eggs, and to somehow it feels so much more intimate than that. It's a blessing to be in this small cottage, miles from civilization, with my mate. We won't often have opportunities for true privacy like this because of our high-ranking positions. That just reinforces how important it is to cherish this moment of peace. "What do you say about letting our wolves out?" I ask as we do the dishes together.

Celine smiles brightly. "I wanted to suggest the same. Danica wants to see Cyrus."

"And Cyrus is so enchanted by Danica, he is about to take over the moment," I joke.

Celine grins. “So, if you suddenly start behaving more feral, I’ll
— what it’s about.” She puts the last of the clean dishes away before stepping
— little closer to wrap her arms around my neck. She stares into my eyes
— searching for something before asking, “Cyrus? I just realized I’ve
talked to you.”

I’m a little surprised by her statement, but clearly not as much as Celine.
His ears perk up, and I allow him to come forward. Celine notices the tension
between us and smiles warmly. “Oh, hello there.”

He wraps his arms around her waist, pulling her closer.

“I wanted to thank you,” she whispers.

“What for, mate?” Cyrus asks, his voice much lower than mine and
somewhat hoarser.

“For never giving up on the mate bond between Marius and me.”

He leans his head against his shoulder, smiling as he strokes his fingers through
Celine’s hair.

“I would have never given up on you and Danica,” he admits.

She smiles. “I know. Do you want to see her now? I think she is ready to
run through the snow.”

He nods smoothly.

What’s wrong with you? I link him. Normally you are such a chatterbox.
Why aren’t you talking more? Are you trying to sound cool or something?

He growls. *One of us has to!*

And you think our mate won’t see through your lousy acting? I dead-end you.
Oh, shut up.

Celine flashes us a grin. “When you two are finished debating with
each other, come outside. Danica and I will be waiting.”

Cyrus growls in my mind, but his excitement about meeting Danica

I know more outweighs his annoyance with me. We head outside, and I take a deep breath in order to snatch Celine up in my arms and twirl her around. “Ready?” I ask as if “Ready!”

I never I watch as she shifts into her beautiful white wolf. Danica is truly beautiful. Her fur is so white it almost blends with the snow, and her eyes are a brilliant silver in the morning light. Everything about her is graceful, a bit like a ballerina. Before letting Cyrus out, I kneel down in front of Danica. He had his first experience with her, now it’s time for me to meet Danica. “Danica,” I say cautiously, noting how she’s eyeing me cautiously. “I know you’re not my biggest fan, but my words and words cannot describe how sorry I am for how I’ve treated you because I promise to never hurt Celine again, and I will work hard every day to make sure that both of you deserve. I know you don’t trust me, but I hope you can give me the chance to prove myself to you too.”

Through She sits up, tilting her head and scrutinizing me while I wait nervously for her to come to whatever decision she’s making. *Fine, but you better believe your promise*, her voice echoes in my mind sounding regal and commanding. I dare not carelessly reach out my hand to touch her velvet-like fur.

I promise, I say softly, sighing with relief as she snuggles up against me. I take a little time to cuddle and bond with Danica before standing up again. I move back a little to give Cyrus plenty of room to shift. Cyrus’ lycan body replaces mine. His fierce and combative appearance is no pretense, as he is clearly head over heels for Danica. Goddess, she has a grip wrapped around her little finger more than Celine has me, and that’s something I will never tell him though.

With each Danica and Cyrus take off running through the beautiful snowy landscape. Although we’re high up on the mountain, the terrain around us isn’t really as dangerous for us to run around. The cottage is surrounded by a forest,

control huge clearing on one side. It's covered in thick white snow and has a pond in the middle. Danica gracefully glides over the icy surface of the pond while my dunce of a lycan slips and slides and almost tumbles into a special pile of snow. Talk about embarrassing. He is lucky that Danica doesn't shine to be turned off by his clumsiness, scooting closer to him instead of Celine, nuzzling her nose into his fur before helping him off the ice.

moment I retreat to the back of Cyrus' mind to give them complete privacy, each other. Despite my previous teasing, I truly am happy for his best fan, deserves Danica's love. They both stay out in the cold for hours without. But finally returning to the cottage and giving Celine and me our bodies to be the We're both exhausted from the amount of energy our wolves expend on you'll we spend the next couple of hours relaxing in the hot spring before curling up together on the little sofa. Before Celine, I never thought I'd ever happily formate in my arms like this. It just makes these little moments together *er keep* much more to me now. I will cherish her forever.

calm. I Initially, Celine insisted she didn't want any birthday gifts aside from her mother's pendant and this weekend away, but I pleaded and used my puppy eyes on her until she relented. I gave her a picture I had drawn of the two of us together, our wolf spirits visible in the background. To my surprise, her relief, she loved it, saying it was the best present she'd ever received. I merely at the pendant, of course.

was him It's Sunday evening and our little weekend trip and belated birthday celebration for Celine has sadly come to an end. We return on horseback with Garret and Elias. Garret is standing on the path we're riding on, waving as we approach with a definite look of relief in his eyes. Elias looks rocky and exhausted.

, with a *He looks like he really didn't get any*, I deadpan towards Celine.

is frozen Celine snorts.

the pond, *What, look at the poor man, I tease.*

massive *You have no idea how much he put Garret through,* she chuckles.

't seem *would probably say it serves him right.*

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that comes over me just thinking about Garret being hurt. The bond c

cy with Gamma seems to have kicked in already. I didn't expect it to be like

him. He this how it feels for my mother when she is with Gamma Aurel or for

before when she is with Jun?

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ny best *about what's going on between pack members. Give yourself some tir*

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... after *started putting serious effort into everything I do. I'm not sure if I'll g*

to college, but even if I don't, there are other things I can do to contri

irthday *the pack and help Celine protect everyone in it. And there are my p*

back to *help other victims of assault... that's going to be a featured topic at t*

ing to *us luna meeting.*

s looks

Celine snorts.

What, look at the poor man, I tease.

You have no idea how much he put Garret through, she chuckles. Or you would probably say it serves him right.

Wait, Elias hurt my Gamma? I blink in surprise at the sudden jolt of anger that comes over me just thinking about Garret being hurt. The bond to my Gamma seems to have kicked in already. I didn't expect it to be like this. Is this how it feels for my mother when she is with Gamma Aurel or for Annie when she is with Jun?

It's more complicated than you think, Celine says, feeling my reaction. Elias doesn't mean to hurt Garret. He just doesn't always respond the way Garret expects. We think it has something to do with his time in Blood Snow pack.

Oh! I frown. Right, how did I forget that? There's still so much we don't know about Blood Snow and how they treat their pack members.

She smiles warmly at me. No one expects you to know every little detail about what's going on between pack members. Give yourself some time. You will do great. I know it.

I sincerely hope so. I don't want to disappoint her ever again. It's time I started putting serious effort into everything I do. I'm not sure if I'll go back to college, but even if I don't, there are other things I can do to contribute to the pack and help Celine protect everyone in it. And there are my plans to help other victims of assault... that's going to be a featured topic at the next luna meeting.

RED FOR THE LUNA

MARIUS

It takes a couple of days, but I have finally moved all my belongings to the Moon Blood, before I decide it's time to torture my brother and father. "I got a list of places," Dad frowns. "Your mother wrote them down for you." "Do we have to visit all of these?" Liam furrows his brows.

"Yeah, well, you know what happens if we don't," he points out.

Liam raises his brows. "I'm in my own pack now, so I'm not so concerned about your really mind."

I have to laugh at his words. It's rare that Liam lets loose that he teases Dad, and Dad's glare of doom is hilarious too. Before he can say something, I take the sheet of paper out of his hands. "I'm the center of attention here," I point out. "This is my day, so suck it up and indulge."

Liam looks at me amused, while Dad raises his eyebrows. “I always
there was a brat hiding in you,” Dad mutters and shakes his head. “We
let’s get going.”

“The one shop mom highlighted. What’s with that one?” I want to k

“It’s her first recommendation,” Dad explains. “Do you want to che
one out or head to the others first?”

“No, let’s go with that one.”

We are taking Dad’s car, with Vincent driving us around and
accompanying us for further protection. Both of them wear pretty
expressions. “What’s the matter, Vince?” I grin.

“To imagine I could spend the day with my mate,” he mutters. “Ins
going clothes shopping.”

Dad, who is sitting in the front passenger seat, shakes his head. “
up. It’s not like Jade would have had time today. Didn’t you say
things to currently working?”

her. Vincent just grumbles, but wisely shuts up before arguing wi
.” further. Instead, he takes us directly to the shop Mom recommende
It’s an all men’s clothing store, much to my shock. I didn’t know
existed. The formal clothing is upstairs, and we head straight up there
ure if I Blood’s luna color is red, so my choices are limited. A nice clerk helps
brings us all the red tuxes and pants they have.

ay and “No,” Dad says when I try on one of the pieces and show it to Li
n retort him. “You look like a porn star in this. What even is that color!?”

nter of He is right, it looks tacky as fuck, but the porn star reference doesn’
me.” too bad. Liam must have sensed my thoughts because he sighs.
encourage him, Dad.” He pauses. “I get that you want to buy sor

is knew funny, Mari, but this event is important to Celine too, so we should all then, something... bold but also elegant."

"You think it's okay to wear something risky?"

now. "Absolutely," he nods. "It's all about making it your style. Luna's dress is a good example. During Annie's inauguration ceremony she wore that dress of gold, and it was sheer in some parts. The earthy colors fit her so much it was also a bit risky and made her look beautiful." He pauses. "So, Garret we should go for something you truly like, but make sure it still works for the occasion."

"You're right." I return to the changing room and shimmy my way out of the tacky combination I just put on. "This isn't it."

The next one I try, I just show them for the fun of it. It has a slight, dark, rich tone to it that makes Dad snort and Liam smile in amusement. "Do I look like she is a crab, or do I look like a crab?"

"Certainly a very handsome crab, though," Dad points out.

th Dad I try on some more combinations, and there is one piece that I kind of like. It's wine red, a bit darker. I'm not a fan of the pants but I like the top. These are velvety and a bit more form-fitting and structured than what the members of the Moon family normally wear. I'm leaner than they are, so I have to admit... I don't know how it looks on me.

"The blazer," I say. "I think I look hot in it!"

am and "That's what I meant," Liam nods. "This is you."

"But I don't like the pants and the shirt," I frown.

t sound "Then we just take the top," Dad decides. "We'll head to the next store. Don't stand and you can continue looking."

nothing I nod my agreement and have Dad go and pay for the blazer. I'll change. He wanted to be the one to pay for my outfit for the ceremony.

go for claiming he is sure that Aurelia will never have a luna ceremony probably has a different path ahead of her, so he is happy that at least his children will have said ceremony.

do this The next few shops we visit are all the same. At one place, Liam find fancy cufflinks that have the form of wolves, but that's about it. Finally, he takes a look at the list again, frowning. "Flora has one last shop I think down... and wrote *alternative* next to it."

fits the "Well, we have nothing to lose," Liam says, taking the lead from me and having Vincent and Garret take us there. Once in front of the shop I find out why mom has called it 'alternative'... it gives off grungy vibes. It doesn't look tacky or cheap but not as high-end as the other stores we went to.

orange "Goddess," Dad groans. "I should be more surprised than I am."

look like "You really want to check this store out?" Liam asks.

"Like you said: It's not like we have anything to lose," I say, pushing them and entering the store. My curiosity easily wins over feeling awkward for being seen at this place. I pause in my tracks once inside. It's not a tux. It's just not the classic, usual stuff. A glance at the price tags tells me that it is not some cheap place the teens frequent, it's for adults who like it in a kind of special.

I see a lot of festive gothic wear, beautifully designed corset (Victorian and other historically based clothes, even wedding dresses and

I grab a piece of wine-red clothing off the rack. "This!" I say.

Liam stares at the item with wide eyes. "Well," he mutters. "At least in that place, the same color as the tux we bought."

I feel pumped all of a sudden when I hand the clerk the men's corset while I to try on. "I need pants that go with it," I tell him and show him the ceremony, already bought. "And this has to go with the whole outfit."

as she The clerk beams at me, obviously excited for my enthusiasm. “Of course of Sir,” he says. “Do the other gentlemen want something too, or can I offer you a coffee?”

he finds “Coffee would be nice,” Liam says, patting Dad’s back. “This or there, Dad here probably needs it.”

written Dad raises his brows. “Who are you calling old man here, pup? I don’t want me to whoop your ass!?”

here on Liam smiles in amusement and ignores him. “You know, Mari, you know, I get also wear some red underwear, just to tease your ma... girlfriend.”

doesn’t What the fuck is going on with him!? It’s the second or even third thing he said today.

Liam eyes a delicate piece of red lingerie. He tilts his head. “A red one would look fantastic in this.”

ng past “Flora, too,” Dad says.

awkward I gag while Liam grimaces. “Thank you, Dad. You just ruined it for me... bad. The clerk laughs at our antics and promises to find some underwear for me. hat this Soon he is back, showing me some matte black leather pants and a pair of more...dark-red festive jeans. He further hands me a black long-sleeved shirt and a corset under the corset. “If you want the look to be more red, I suggest the red dresses, Otherwise, the leather pants will look slamming too.”

re here. I nod, thankfully accepting all the items and swiftly putting them on. I choose for the red jeans that look perfectly festive but are a bit on the tight side. I’m glad at least it’s Then I put on the black shirt and the corset above it, actually needing the clerk’s help to close it. He shows me some tricks and how it’s done properly. I want Then I add the tux to it.

ie tux I I’m not one to ogle myself in the mirror but, yes, fuck, this is it! The fit of my pants and corset is tight at the right places, but the tux is structu

course, loose.

refer you *We look sharp*, Cyrus approves, wagging his tail a bit. *We look more sharp! Who knew you had it in you!?*

old man I grin. *Never should have doubted me. And Liam's idea with the shorts and underwear?*

Do you Cyrus smirks. *Good brother. He watches out for us with his fab ideas.*

"So," I say while I step out of the changing room, revealing myself to my father and brother and my gamma. Vincent is waiting outside. "Do you think this will drive Celine crazy?"

It's funny Garret's mouth literally drops open. "I swear, if I hadn't found you already, you would definitely be worth a little sin."

analyse *We should use this line for Celine and Danica*, Cyrus snickers. *Do you want to sin with us, mate?*

That's not the worst idea he ever had. I make sure to remember it for myself. "We have our luncheon ceremony, or rather for after."

ear too. "You look fantastic," Liam exclaims.

pair of Dad nods. "Liam was right to tell you to go for your own style and add your touch to the theme."

jeans. "So, it has the Alcott stamp of approval?" I tease.

"I didn't know this was a thing," Dad says. "But it certainly has mine."

on. I go "Now make sure to pay, and let's leave," Liam pushes. "I'm hungry on my side. Finn's already called me five times asking when we are coming."

ing the I nod, I'm pretty done with this whole shopping spree myself. Finn is not properly able to come with us for the whole day because of his work, but he will be here.

make sure to meet us for a late lunch. I've missed this, I realize, hanging out with my brothers.

red but Now that my secrets are out and Calvin will be dealt with, I feel like

finally breathe and live again.

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THE LUNA CEREMONY

MARIUS

Garret has draped a red blanket over me while I shimmy through the room and shake my ass to a cheesy love song Garret has chosen.

Of course, Celine and Harmony choose this exact moment to come into the room. Celine pauses, while Harmony bursts into hysterical laughter. “Are you two silly guys doing?” she asks, gasping for air.

“We are practicing for the luna ceremony,” I say, feeling flushed. “Actually, we indeed practiced at first, until... I point at Garret. “It was your idea.”

“Excuse me,” Garret splutters. “Am I the luna or are you!?”

“You said we should absolutely practice the fertility dance, just in case,” I say.

“It was you who was eager to practice—”

“Okay, enough children.” Harmony claps her hands. “Now, let’s clean up the mess and make sure you are ready for the ceremony, which is in one hour if I may say so.”

In one hour? Goddess, in one hour already. I feel a surge of panic through me. I’m not prepared for this... I will let Celine and our pack

“I thought the fertility was supposed to be danced naked,” Celine says in the silence, a smirk curling her lips.

I stare at her. “You are not mad?”

“Why would I be?” she laughs. “This is hilarious.” She steps forward wrapping her arms around my middle. I put my arms around her waist grinning.

“We can do that fertility dance after the ceremony,” I offer. “In private.”

“I will take you up on that offer,” she chuckles. “I need to see that dance of yours once more without clothes on.”

“The booty shake,” I grin.

“That one in particular.”

I smile, suddenly not feeling nervous at all anymore. I’m going to

“What my life with Celine now. She already proved to me that I’m so much more than what I thought I am. She gave me reason to grow and move forward. The Luna ceremony is just one step toward our future.

“There is a Council member coming too, an elderly woman

Geneva,” Celine explains. “To bless me as the mate of a royal lycan.” I pause. “Annie didn’t tell me much about her ceremony, so I’m not sure what to expect.”

“For Annie, it was different because Liam is actually in line for the throne. For you, it will just be Elder Geneva chanting a spell and opening the gates to the Moon Goddess.”

lean up “It sounds really special though.”

ie hour, “The blessing itself is, but there won’t be a ceremony,” I reassure her

“Thank Goddess,” she says, squeezing my hand. “And now, let’s
c goingsure we are ready for the ceremony. I assume you still don’t want to sl
down. what you are wearing?”

breaks I pull her closer to me again and kiss her. “It’s a surprise, but I pr
won’t be naked.”

Celine chuckles and pecks my nose. “Well then, I’m going to see
closer,there.”

er too, I make sure to kiss her one more time before letting her go.

organizing some last-minute stuff together with Harmony and Garret,
ate.” get ready. Fortunately, my outfit is so extra that it comes without a ti
ance ofthing less to worry about. I have watched a few YouTube tutorials
what to do with my hair, and I tie it back to a fancier bun, and Garre
both got our beards trimmed yesterday.

A knock at my door pulls me out of my routine, and I shuffle tow
o spendHis scent gives him away, so I’m not surprised when I open the
h moreCedric. He smiles at me as he takes me in. “You look fantastic, Marius
orward. I let him in. “Thank you.”

“I volunteered to pick you up,” he says. “And I wanted to tell yo
namedhappy I am for my daughter to have you as her mate.”
n.” She I’m shocked to hear these words. I knew Cedric wasn’t my biggest
re whatobvious reasons, the more his words surprise me now. “I don’t know
say...” I admit.

crown. “You will be a fine lune, exactly the type of luna the pack nee
gates toreassures me. “And you are exactly the mate Celine needs.”

“And she is the mate I need,” I admit. “I’m a bit scared of my new p

and the responsibilities, but at the same time, I'm also excited."

Cedric smiles brightly. "Shall we go?"

"Yes, lead the way."

Cedric and I make it downstairs. The weather is getting colder again approaches, but it's warm enough to hold the ceremony outside. Cedric promises me and leaves to take his seat while Garret joins me. Celine begins the ceremony by speaking a few words to her pack. It makes my heart swell with joy to see how much she radiates and how happy she looks.

"Here goes nothing," Garret breathes out, sounding more nervous than I am when Celine calls us forward.

He walks behind me while I take the steps onto the stage. When Celine sees me, her eyes widen, and swirls of silver appear in her eyes.

"Our mates like what they see, Cyrus says smugly. *For once, you mate and I to look dashing.*

I inwardly roll my eyes at him, but keep a straight face. In the audience, I can see most of our pack members, my family, but also a lot of alpha males from our allied packs. A few of them carry sour expressions, but I make sure to wink at them before walking toward my alpha and mate.

I expected the ceremony to be just a formality, the more I am surrounded by how touched I feel by the whole atmosphere. When I say the official words that makes me the pack's luna and Celine cuts my palm to bind me to the pack, I can feel a surge of warmth and belonging going through me. As my members reach out to me to congratulate me, their cheers erupting around us. I raise my hands to stop them for a moment. "Thank you," I tell them. "Thank you for giving me the honor of becoming the luna of this wonderful pack. I'm proud to be able to say that I am one of you now, I'm proud to have been blessed with Alpha Celine as my mate, and I reassure you that

give my all to be the best luna possible for you. If you ever need someone to talk to or listen, or if you are faced with difficulties, don't hesitate to come out to me."

As I fall, I can feel Celine's fingers wrapping around my hand, her feelings flowing through the bond.

The pack cheers again, this time for both of us. Now that the ceremony is all wrapped up, we finally have time to celebrate a bit. Cedric and Mordecai are the ones who volunteered to organize the catering and buffet. Ever since I found each other, Cedric is so much happier. Sometimes I can even see him smile.

"Marius," my father's voice reaches me and pulls me out of my thoughts. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," I say, letting him pull me into a hug.

The rest of my family soon follows. "This is so cool," Felix says with a wide smile, I bright smile.

"You think it's cool that I'm a luna now?"

"I think it's cool that you are so confident," he beams.

"Congratulations," Dario says softly. "You really owned it."

"No kidding," Aurelia chuckles. "You should have seen some of the reactions in the audience. Mom made sure to emphasize that you, the young alpha, will be joining all the luna meetings from now on. I think some of the old-fashioned alphas almost had a heart attack."

"Good thing I can always count on Mom," I grin.

"Of course, you can count on me," my mother says, popping up from behind me and hugging me. An elderly lady is with her, and by her stature I assume she has to be the elder the Council sent. "This is Genevieve," she introduces her to me.

one to “I’m overjoyed I was able to make it to your lune ceremony,” s
o reach with a smile. “It’s rare that a man takes this position, and it’s wond
see that times are changing.”

seeping “Thank you, Elder Geneva,” I say.

“Shall we find your mate and have her blessed?” she asks me.

nony is I bow my head politely, offering her my arm. “It would be an honor

ia were She emits so much kindness that I’m instantly drawn to her. When
ice they about to leave, she squeezes Dad’s arm. “We will catch up later, Elden

see him “Of course, Geneva. I’m going to be here the whole evening.”

“You know, Marius,” she says while I accompany her toward
oughts. “Your father is like a son to me. I watched him grow up.”

“Really?” I ask, surprised. I know my grandmother died long ago, a
my father has no real relationship with his father. I’m glad he had so
with alike Geneva in his life when he was a child.

“Your mother, too,” she chuckles. “They were such an unlikely
even as children.”

“I’ve heard they were childhood sweethearts,” I say.

“It started way before that,” she explains. “They were in primary
alphas when your father started to feel protective over your mother, and s
g fresh constantly seeking his comfort and protection.” She smiles gently. “A
k some passed so fast.”

I’m surprised, to say the least. Is she implying that Mom and Dad
mate bond that early? If yes, that’s truly unheard of. I don’t have
p from inquire further though, as Celine approaches us too. “May I introduce
ig aura, my mate, Elder Geneva?”

a,” she “Of course, it would be an honor.” She lets go of my arm and
Celine’s hand, a curious smile curling her lips. “Oh my, a hybrid, and

he says strong one on top of that. I bet you have an interesting story to tell, my
erful to “It has been an eventful year,” Celine says with a smile.

“I can imagine. Now come, you two.” She takes Celine’s hand and
her further outside, away from the many tents surrounding the stage, until
reach a beautiful garden. It belongs to Mona. Ever since she and Cedric
.” their relationship official, she started to build it. “This is a good place
we are says, making Celine sit down next to her on one of the benches while
.” standing. “It’s full of love and hope.” She pauses. “Do you know what
expect?” she asks.

Celine. “As much as I can know,” Celine says. “Marius told me a bit about
being blessed means, how it will extend my life, heighten my senses
and that give me a defense boost, as he calls it.”

Someone She nods contently. “Close your eyes, my child.”

Celine follows her orders, closing her eyes. Both of her hands rest
couple of Geneva’s hands, while Geneva places her other hand on Celine’s forehead.
I try to listen closely when Geneva starts to chant something, but I
understand what she is saying. It doesn’t look like anything is happening
school first, but then I can see little dots of light floating around us, like fireflies.
he was Through the bond, I can feel Celine’s curiosity and surprise, but other
h, time that, she seems to be relaxed. When she opens her eyes again, how
gasp. Her eyes are white, glowing brightly, a gentle smile curls her lips.
felt the “Thank you,” she whispers to no one in particular.

time to Geneva waits for her to return to normal before squeezing her hand
: you to letting go. “Welcome to the Council,” she says. “You are now officially
Princess of the Council and blessed as such.”

shakes “Thank you, Elder Geneva,” Celine says, an aura of peace still enveloping
l a very her. Whatever she experienced had to be amazing.

child.” Geneva nods at us once more before getting up and leaving us alone. I sit down next to Celine and pull her into my arms. “I think I heard the God leadsshe admits.

until we “Mom said that might happen,” I say while entwining our fingers. “I madeknow, now all that’s missing are a few pups running around us.”

“e,” she Celine laughs. “You want to have pups?”

“I keep “Yes, one day. And you?”

what to She smiles. “Yes, one day, I would love to have a big family.”

Cyrus almost purrs at her words. We still have a lot of work ahead of us, but once we settle into our roles and tasks, I hope we can start a family, andCeline squeezes my hand. “Marius?”

“Yes?”

Her eyes turn silver, indicating that Danica is on the surface. “I’m in onesurprise, Danica reaches out her hand to cup my cheek. “I love you,” she says earnestly. “I think it was about time to tell you.”

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More than

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My hands and

feet are finally a

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MOVING FORWARD

MARIUS

It's been a few days since I had my official ceremony to join the pack. I was formally introduced as the new lune. I'm still amazed that so warmly the pack welcomed me. They were happy for their alpha to have a luna and completely unfazed that they now have a male luna also a royal lycan. They're probably already used to their pack being different, seeing as both their alpha and beta are women, and their gamma is a gay man. Besides, Moon Blood hasn't had a luna in a very long time, which possibly influenced the pack's decision to receive me with open arms. It seems like Moon Blood is really quite proud of how different they are.

Cyrus and I are back in top form again, which is why I've started training the elite warriors together with Marcel. We're splitting the classes between them and learning new tricks from each other. Moon Blood consists mainly of

werewolves with just a few hybrids, so training with a lycan is new for me and I'm hoping my knowledge will help them become stronger.

I've also started training with Celine, and I'm very impressed with how strong and lethal she truly is. She is definitely on par with me, and I'm not sure which of us would win in a fight. Her werewolf gifts are lethal and her witch senses make her even more dangerous. I'm not a weakling either, especially now that I'm finally polishing my gifts and my connection to Cyrus.

All in all, things are going well. I do still have my moments where sometimes the memories come back, mostly at night when it's dark, and nightmares come to haunt me.

Yellow eyes glint at me. A vicious smirk curls over Calvin's lips. "Who would ever believe you?"

I want to scream. I want to push him away, but I stopped fighting back and ago. I dread his punishments and his revenge when I do.

By how "Who would ever believe you?"

Finally, Suddenly, I hear growling in my mind, much to my surprise, tearing me out of my nightmare and into a waking state. "What..."

That was me, Cyrus yelps. Did it help!? I thought I would try it.

I'm too shaken to answer him, but it did help. He's pulled me out of my nightmare before it got really bad. I take a few breaths and will my heart to calm down. If it keeps up much longer, Celine will wake up.

I carefully crawl out of our bed and grab a glass of water before venturing out onto the balcony for some fresh air. The alpha suite has a huge balcony that looks out over the back of the pack house. The way it's angled makes it hidden from prying eyes. Sometimes we have breakfast out here or just sit and spend time with each other when we want some peace and quiet.

r them, I gulp down the glass of water before placing it on a small table, dropping down on one of the chairs.

th how “Fuck,” I mutter. “Get out of my head. Just leave.”

n really My sharp ears catch quiet footsteps behind me. Celine’s approach is gradual, and surrounds me, instantly calming me down. She gently reaches out, touching my shoulder. Fuck. I woke her up and ruined her night. I’m surprised instead of being asked a myriad of questions I don’t want to answer, she just snuggles against my back, wrapping her arms around me.

ts, and She doesn’t say anything, just keeps hugging me and allowing the bond to magically calm me down.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” I whisper.

. “Who “Don’t say that,” she begs. “I want to be with you, not only in good times but also during bad moments.”

im long I smile. “Did you just propose to me?” I tease.

I can feel her glare burning through the back of my head. “That’s not my job,” she grumbles. “You can’t expect me to do everything.”

ing me “Alright,” I say with a secretive smile. Good to know where she stands on that topic. I want to make her mine. I know we have no reason to rush, just getting to know each other better, but in the not-too-distant future, I would like it if she had my name.

frantic I turn and pull her closer, kissing her shoulder softly. She is the first person whose touch truly doesn’t repulse me. I’m so thankful to have her here, walking and that the Moon Goddess gave me a second chance. I’m even more grateful that Celine gave me a second chance too.

ans it’s “You know,” Celine says into the silence. “Before I met you, I thought my mate would magically fill the void inside of me, somehow healing my broken. But I’ve realized that it doesn’t work that way.”

ble and “Obviously, because I was a shitty mate.”

“No,” she shakes her head. “My mother and brother died, and no one ever be able to replace that void left behind in me. I never dealt with my grief properly. Through the mate bond and through getting to know you and accepting you, I’ve finally learned to let go and accept the fact that they’ll never return. My mom is gone, and no other person will ever be able to replace her. However, instead of feeling a void inside me, I’ve found something new.”

My heart flutters in agreement, and I look up into her eyes. “That’s exactly what you mean,” I admit quietly. After all, Calvin left me broken. I thought no one would ever be able to love a broken me. Celine has managed to magically make the pain go away, but she’s helped me face my nightmares and my fears little by little.

With her, the darkness is a bit less dark.

“Yes,” she says with a warm smile. “You’ll see. With time, we will move forward with each other. And what we’ll gain from each other will be so much more than the wounds we carry.”

I return her smile, kissing her softly. “I’ll never stop fighting for our future, for our future.”

She snuggles against me. “Me too.”

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My heart flutters in agreement, and I look up into her eyes. “I know exactly what you mean,” I admit quietly. After all, Calvin left me broken, and I thought no one would ever be able to love a broken me. Celine didn’t magically make the pain go away, but she’s helped me face my nightmares and my fears little by little.

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She snuggles against me. “Me too.”

EPILOGUE #1 - THE COUNCIL

VALERIE

We land close to Paris at a private airport which belongs to the Council. Some guards welcome us officially, and I can immediately feel the change in atmosphere here. Everything is way more formal. They immediately bow toward Eric, revealing their necks to him, and even I feel a lot more serious all of a sudden. Completely different from how he was with Alpha Liam and the others back at home.

He keeps my hand in his though, squeezing it softly, and I instantly realize he is still my Eric, just that here he has an official role to play and a duty to keep. Emilien and Eric, fortunately, briefed me a bit on the flight so I'm really thankful for now.

The guards greet me too, bowing towards me and welcoming me off. Two of them remain with us, while the rest of the group and a few er

take Calvin with them. Calvin has been sedated and has not been awake during our flight. It was still weird to have him fly back with us; this man harassed, abused, and raped a child, and that's just beyond disgusting. I would like to castrate him, and I hate violence! But fuck, that disrespects the psycho!

Once we are mostly on our own again and the crowd has dispersed, he takes my hand again. "Sorry, love, that our flight wasn't as planned, thanks to our surprise guest."

"It doesn't matter," I reassure him. "We had to bring him here personally to make sure he can't trick anyone."

Eric smiles at me happily. "Now I'm all yours again, Princess." He looks at me, and he is my Eric again and not the stoic Prince. "I promise you I'll take you to the castle."

When Eric said castle, I wasn't sure what to expect, but the guard drove us through Paris into a more suburban area. There is a large forest and a small cottage. It's tiny. I tilt my head, confused.

Eric laughs. "It gets everyone during their first time."

Emilien chuckles too. "Don't worry, Lady Valerie. You will soon see what we can see."

Once we climbed out of the car, Eric reaches out his hand. "Welcome, my knight, as my mate, I officially invite you to the Council and the castle."

I take his hand, for a split-second wondering if he's actually pranking me.

When I shift my gaze back to the cottage though, my eyes land on a large building. "What..." I'm so shocked that I take a step back. "How?"

The building in front of me looks like a huge baroque castle, almost like the pictures I saw of Versailles castle, just more modern and adapted.

like oncenowadays living standards. But it's massive. I don't even know how many hasreaches. It certainly can host a whole huge pack of wolves.

Even I The massive front gates open for us, and Eric leads me inside.
gusting "It's a spell," he tells me. "To prevent outsiders from seeing this here. It would raise too many questions."

ed, Eric I nod dumbfounded, and just take in the enormous hall we just
sant asinto. It's covered in old frescoes and paintings, looking like a museum
floor is out of marble. The place itself is buzzing... I can see people
sonallyaround with folders in their hands, dressed officially.

"These are all ceremonial halls and dining halls to welcome guests
e winkscall them salons in Europe. Further down the ground floor, there are
I'll lovemeeting rooms. There are also training areas on this floor, but not
segment we're standing in now. The offices are on the first floor
rives useexplains. "Once we walk past them, there is a staircase leading us to
... littleseveral floors and different segments of the castle. I will show you even
tomorrow, it's easy to get lost here. It's like a town on its own. The
and Princesses of the Council have the highest floor to themselves. Oh
ee whatis waiting for us."

I shake my head in disbelief. "I can't wait for my friends to see this.
Valerie When we step further inside, a young guy hurries down a gigantic
hiddenand runs toward us. "Prince Eric!" he exclaims. "Welcome back home

"Thank you, Vander. It's nice to be back." Eric smiles at the teen
ing me.don't run around too much here. You know the elders don't like it. We
nassivewant you to get scolded. If you get scolded, then they will scold me
not teaching you any manners."

ost like I listen to their exchange curiously. Eric doesn't have any siblings;
pted tothat for a fact. He just has his father, who he has an estranged relat

as far as it with. I nudge him with my elbow.

“Right,” Eric laughs and pulls me into his arms. “I’m sure you heard the news already, Vander, but meet my mate, Valerie.” He turns his head towards me and places a hand on my shoulder. “Valerie, this is Vander. He is from one of the lycan packs in France and one of my young trainees for the Council.”

Oh, I didn’t know that Eric has students here. But it makes sense for him to already work with the next generation and with young wolves in packs. So many things I don’t know yet, but instead of finding it scary, I feel curious and excited. “It’s nice to meet you,” I say.

“It’s an honor, Lady Valerie,” Vander exclaims. “I hope you will be here soon.”

He seems to still be in his teens, sixteen maybe, tall and has a beautiful face with sharp cheekbones and gray eyes. Yes, he’s a heartthrob in his own right for sure.

There is more noise reaching me from the huge staircase. Another Princesman is carrying a large number of boxes and bumps against the balcony railing. Eric frowns. “Arden,” he calls out toward said young guy. “Be careful.”

To my surprise, the young guy doesn’t react. He doesn’t even seem to notice us. “Vander,” Eric commands. “Help your brother.”

“Of course.” Vander rushes up the stairs. He gesticulates something towards his brother before taking some of the boxes and helping Arden down them. “But them downstairs.”

Arden looks a bit flustered when he reaches us. He seems to be a bit taller than Vander. He’s taller and more muscular, his eyes have the same color as his brother’s, but one is partly blue. His posture looks almost regal and dignified, making me wonder if their father is an alpha. It would be interesting to know more about their relationship.

why they are working here with the Council. "I apologize," he says, dreading the words a bit, almost like it's hard for him to pronounce them.

to look "What happened to your hearing aid?" Eric asks. When Arden furrows his brows a bit, Eric repeats his words, articulating them clearer this time using his hands to gesture as well.

to him to Arden nods his understanding. "It broke during training," he explains shortly, but not impolitely so. I assume he's just used to using little hearing aids. It's rare for werewolves to have a sickness or ailment... I'm one of the few, and it seems Arden is too. It makes me instantly curious to learn more about it like this story.

"We'll make sure to get you a new one," Eric says while Vander looks beautiful what he just said to his brother. "Be more careful next time, okay?" I assume he's pack, how he tries to sound strict, but it's so obvious how much he cares about these two. This is a whole new side to Eric, and I love it.

to young Arden nods his understanding. "Thank you, Prince Eric."

to trade. "Did you make any progress while I was away?" he asks Arden.

to . " Arden furrows his brows, his eyes attached to Eric's lips, then he reaches to read through all the folders and already dismissed those who didn't meet the requirements. I sorted through the rest and categorized them."

to nothing Vander shakes his head. "I wish I'd have your brains," he mutters.

to in carry I listen in interest, although I don't quite understand what they're talking about. It must be about Eric's work. Eric asks Arden a few questions about older historical details concerning a certain area in France, to which Vander answers without even blinking. When they're finished, I link Eric. *Thank you, Arden, how does he know so much?*

to explain *He is a genius, Eric explains. He has a photographic memory and can remember any detail he has ever read.*

ragging *Cool, must have come in handy in school!*

I said the same.

ows his Eventually, Eric shoos the guys away, not without telling Vander
me and his brother get a new hearing aid. Then he scoops me up into his arms
now, let me show you your new home.”

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Eventually, Eric shoos the guys away, not without telling Vander to help his brother get a new hearing aid. Then he scoops me up into his arms. “And now, let me show you your new home.”

EPILOGUE #2 – THE SURPRISE PARTY

MARIUS

*T*wo weeks later.

“Where are we going?” I inquire for what feels like the hundredth time. Celine made sure I dressed elegantly today. For a second, I contemplated annoying her by dressing inappropriately, just to tease her, but she didn't do that, she stayed true to her threat and didn't take me along.

You don't tease my girl.

She is dressed in a pastel pink knee-length dress, which is absolutely in her comfort zone color-wise. It makes me curious as to why she would wear such a dress, especially now that we're approaching fall and it's getting colder. The dress snuggles around her body in a perfect fit though definitely won't complain. Goodness, her ass looks fabulous in it.

I move my hand toward her perky ass, but she smacks it away
laugh. I shake my hand, mock-pouting. “Baby, do you always have to
hard?”

“I wouldn’t,” she smirks. “If you hadn’t already tried to grope me
times before.”

I grin. “Guilty,” I admit before I eye her curiously. “So, you really
going to tell me where we are heading to?” I ask again.

“No, technically, only a very few guests know,” she explains.

“And what am I if not a guest?” I grin.

“My plus one,” she teases.

I wiggle my brows. “I like that. Sounds dirty.”

Celine grabs my face and kisses me, but doesn’t answer my very
flirting. Instead, she grabs my hand and drags me out the door and to
the pack house. “Have fun!” Harmony yells from her office.

“Wait? She knows where we are going?” I raise my brows. “She isn’t
a guest, it seems.”

“True, but she is my beta and needs to know where I am going,”
I say in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Let me repeat my question: And what am I?” I grin. “Your boy-toy?”

She rolls her eyes at my comment. “I’ve only known for a few
years, so really, I promise you’ll know what’s going on in an hour
if you had to keep it a secret.”

“Keep what a secret?” I pause. “Baby, you are not dragging me some-
where to propose to me, are you?”

Again, she rolls her eyes. “No, that one thing will really be your job.
Don’t be such a baby and come.”

When I try to link to Cyrus to complain about how we are both left

with a dark, I just receive a *Who cares?* from him before he keeps going on to hit so about how hot his mate looks in her dress... like a lovesick pup.

Alright, no help from my lycan either, though he is technically right. He looks fucking perfect.

I resign myself to my fate eventually and follow Celine to the car. My aren't Garret is waiting for us, our driver for the day, it seems. "You both slamming," he beams. He is wearing jeans and a green polo shirt.

"I honestly prefer your attire," I mutter.

"Just get us away from here," Celine laughs and nudges Garret. "Marius changes his mind and jumps out of the car."

I wrap my arms around her waist, tickling her a bit and pulling her close. "I'd never."

Celine laughs and lets me pull her closer until she's in my arms.

The drive is surprisingly short though. Twenty minutes later, Garret isn't even in front of a fancy building. It has several floors with glassy windows, modern. There is a concierge at the entrance. "We need to go to the rooftop." Celine explains to him and shows him an invitation.

The man bows politely and calls the elevator for us. When we reach the rooftop floor and step out, my breath sticks in my throat. The rooftop is beautifully decorated with flowers, everything in light colors, very subtle and simple. It's tasteful and elegant. All of our friends and family are there, and I can spot Dave.

"Wait," I pause to look at Celine. "This is a wedding."

"Yes," she smiles.

"Who's marrying?" I ask curiously.

"Can't you guess?"

I frown. My first bet would be Aryanna and Jazz, but I doubt they

and on for a typical elegant wedding. I bet Ari would rent a club and then
in a slapping black tight dress, and then they would have some
light. She metal-rock party. "I honestly have no idea."

"Celine, Marius," Dante hurries towards us, a bright smile on his lips
"I'm whereso glad the both of you made it."

the look "We wouldn't have missed it," Celine smiles.

"I'm sorry for not telling you." Dante looks at me now. "But we kept
secret, both to surprise everyone and to keep the rumors from spreading.
'Before and so that we could keep it a real private event."

I nod as it starts to dawn on me. "No problem, man, I understand."
"Closer. "Where are my fellow bridesmaids?" Celine asks.

"There," Dante nods towards a little group. Annie and Mom are
wearing a dress in the same pastel color, and... Dave... I only notice
that his suit is all pastel pink too.

Before I can say anything, Liam approaches us. "Are you ready?"
"Of course," Dante. He has to be his best man, I figure, and he looks genuinely

"Ella told me to make sure you won't run off."

"Like I'm the one who is going to do that," Dante chuckles. "It's
just the same to Annie's parents. I'm still surprised she said yes."

I smile slightly. I don't like people keeping things from me, but Dante
and even Ella I can definitely understand. They probably had their reasons to keep
as far away from the public as possible, and they certainly didn't want
official guests. When I scan the room, I can only see around twenty
and all of them are friends of the couple.

I never thought these two would marry... not because they weren't
but because Ella was so opposed to anything romantic when she met
him. Now she is ready to marry him.

I sit down at the place assigned to me, next to Dad, Finn, and one of the warriors from Red Claw, who I recognize as Dante's friend. "Please tell me you didn't know either," I say with a grin.

Dad chuckles. "I had no clue, and I tried everything to make Flora understand what's going on. But you know her, she's so stubborn."

"Celine didn't tell me either," I chuckle.

"I had no clue either," Dante's friend tells us with a grin.

Finn stretches a bit and smiles slyly. "Well, as one of the bride's friends..." his voice trails off, and he smirks.

I smack his shoulder, which just makes him laugh more.

"Their wedding, their rules," Dad says simply. "Dante truly deserves to be there, and Celine..."

"They both do," I point out.

The others nod at my words before starting to chat about something else. Meanwhile, my gaze trails toward the bridesmaids, my heart warming when I see Celine laughing with her friends.

Ari and Jazz sit down in the row behind me. "Makes you want to get married, right?" Ari winks and entwines her fingers with Jazz.

I feel my cheeks flush a bit. Maybe one day, I think, Celine would agree to marry me. I know we've marked each other, and it counts more than a marriage certificate could, but I'd love to share this moment with her.

I can't see us marrying in such a surrounding though, but also not having a huge classic wedding. I know Celine by now, and I know she likes simple, just like I do. I smile a bit... maybe a wedding by the ocean...

I don't have time to linger on my thoughts any longer though. Music starts playing, and Annie's dad, Brian, leads Ella down the aisle.

Dante. She looks beautiful. She has chosen a very simple white dress. Although it's rather short, it's still elegant. It's something she can probably wear

of the summer too. In her hands, she holds a small bouquet in the color
tell me bridesmaids' dresses.

Her smile, however, is the thing that strikes me the most. It's radiat
tell me contagious. One day, I hope Celine will look at me like that too.

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EPILOGUE #3 – THE LUNA MEETING

MARIUS

“**Y**our brother is here, Marius,” Garret informs me.
I raise my brows. “Which one?”

“Right,” he grins. “I always forget that there are a bunch of roaming this world. As if one of you isn’t enough.”

I smirk. “Careful how you talk to me, or I’ll tell your Alpha.”

“Ugh, scary,” Garret pretends to wince, but then he laughs. “I’ll dr to that luna meeting later. See you afterward for training and dinner?”

“Dinner?” I chuckle. “That bad? What did Elias do this time?”

Garret and I hit it off pretty well immediately. He tried to hate me half an hour for hurting his Alpha, then he faltered. Maybe it’s the bond between gamma and luna, but I know it’s more than just that both are on the same wavelength. I have never had any friends before

aside from my siblings. And even Aryanna, with whom I managed to bond, is Liam's beta and probably watched out for me because I'm an alpha's brother, out of pity for the both of us and to help us. At least what I assume. I don't want to sound unfair though. The fact that I manage to open up to anyone and let them in is on me, not on the other. Ari was the only one I somewhat allowed in.

She's an amazing person, and I hope now that I'm starting to heal at my own life, I can befriend her for real.

"I will tell you everything later." Garret pulls me out of my thoughts. I chuckle. "So which brother?"

"The edgy one with the piercings. Why are all your brothers so hairy when I grimace. "He is waiting in front of your office."

I nod, immediately going to look for Finn. Celine and I have separate offices and divide the work between us. I still have a lot of catching up to do though. While growing up, Liam, Finn, and Aurelia showed far more interest in pack business than I ever did. Now, my ignorance has come to catch up with me. But oh well, I'll learn.

When I find Finn, it suddenly strikes me how much he's changed. He's so much like a man and less than a boy all of a sudden that it shocks me. It's almost like it was yesterday when he came home with his first pack and Dad almost had a heart attack.

"Finn," I greet him. "Nice to see you."

He smiles. "Hi Mari!"

"You are here for the last intel we gathered and to talk to Elias in person, as we discussed, right?"

"Yes," he says. "I also would like to speak to Steve and Marcel and show them a bit."

build a “Are you nervous?” I ask him.

was her Finn just shrugs. “A bit, but it’s okay,” he says. Things are still strained between us, I notice. Finn is not showing it much because that’s the way he is, but I treated him even worse than Liam, and that says a lot about our relationship is not going to get magically perfect again in the blink of an eye.

and have “If you need anything, you can tell me,” I promise.

He smiles slightly. “I know, thank you.” An awkward pause. “What do you want to talk about?”

I flash him a grin. “Luna meeting!”

“Man, it’s like you are getting a taste of the forbidden fruit,” he chuckles.

We chat for a bit longer. It feels good to have my siblings back in my life, separate for real this time and to bond with them again. Before I can leave, Finn reaches around again to clasp his shoulder. “Finn, I know I didn’t always trust you, but I’m interested in you. I would like to apologize for it.”

He looks sincerely shocked for a moment.

“What?”

“Who are you, and what did you do to my brother!?”

I groan. “Very funny. I mean it.”

“Yeah, I know.” He smiles slightly. “Apology accepted. Now go to the meeting and rock it.”

“I will.”

I might joke about it sometimes, but the fact is, I love the meeting with the lunas. They have a lot of insight into pack affairs, and they offer a different view on things, a different perspective. Pack members talk to me about things they won’t tell their alphas, as lunas are more approachable. Like one of the lunas of a nearby pack, Luna Maya, has recently told

one warrior keeps harassing some of the unmated she-wolves. I know from a bit of experience that these men are always sly and very sneaky. It's just that they catch them in the act, and they also know how to guilt trip their victims a lot. They think no one will ever believe them.

That's why we are currently working on a few projects.

The meeting is held in town in the restaurant of a hotel where we book a separate room for the whole group. The expenses are split between the packs, but bigger packs like Red Claw or Silverlake pay more than the others. Every luna should be able to attend.

After Garret drops me off and positions himself somewhere in the kitchen, next to the other guards and gammas, I hurry to the meeting room. Inside, I greet everyone, hugging my mother and Annie before I let them go. I then drop down on the sofa, accepting a cup of tea from one of the waitresses. "This is the best job ever," I joke when I look at the other lunas around me. "But don't tell my Alpha that I said that."

The whole group begins to laugh. "Don't tell our alphas either," one of the ladies tells me.

We joke for a bit longer about how I am the only male allowed to talk to the alphas, how their alphas always groan and whine when they tell them about it. Then we get down to business. I wasn't sure at first how far I should go, but then I remembered my talk with Celine many dates ago about the future and the things I could do, how I could help fellow victims. I then talked to her again about it to see how she'd feel about this project, especially since it will cost some pack money and we'll need the alphas on board. She encouraged me once more, excited about my ideas. Goddess, I love her. She is just the best.

"I was thinking," I start. "That Annalise, my mother, and I could

myself advantage of our connections to the Council.”

hard to Mom beams. “I can finally abuse my power!? I’m all ears.”

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victims of abuse and sexual crimes.”

Annie nods excitedly. “We could broaden that for women and m
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Annie nods excitedly. “We could broaden that for women and men who are victims. You know, some wolves abuse the mate bond, but it is also a problem for some unmated wolves. Like Maya told us the last time.”

There is some chatting going through the crowd, and I thank Annie inwardly for having my back again. She’s particularly popular with the younger and newer lunas here, who look up to her and who share their problems with her. It’s thanks to her that Luna Maya opened up to us about what might be going on in her pack.

“I brought some folders,” I explain. “I went through a few ideas and possible scenarios we could work on.”

I have brought enough so two lunas can look at one pamphlet together. When I see them reading everything and discussing some points, slowly coming up with even more ideas, something like pride fills me. It’s not a feeling I am used to, not towards myself. But for the first time in my life, it feels like I can actually achieve something good.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My writing journey last year was full of sweat, joy, tears, desperate doubt, excitement and nervous breakdowns. I started with "An Omega Lycan Prince", never expecting it to attract so many readers. It's not perfect, and I know it's not perfect, but despite its rough edges it's dear to my heart.

With my second book I wanted to challenge myself. And a challenge was!

At this point I would like to thank my fellow author friends, who talked me through more than one crisis. Without you I wouldn't have made it! Thank you for your tremendous support.

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