



ALPHA'S REDEMPTION

SKYE WILSON

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CHOSEN BY THE ALPHA: BOOK 3

SKYE WILSON

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LUNA

James Ulfric's Estate

Travis County, Texas

I still couldn't believe what had just happened. *This must be a dream — no, some kind of freaking nightmare. Bane is supposed to be Remus' beta — his second! His most trusted wolf!* Beta wolves were not supposed to attack packmates; they were supposed to protect their alpha. Their pack. Out of all the werewolves, they were supposed to be the steadiest.

Well, maybe he doesn't think you are pack. The traitorous corner of my mind started to whisper to me. *After all, you never did submit to Remus.* Not in the way that counted, anyway. I bit the inside of my mouth, my thoughts still racing. It wasn't for lack of trying — I'd even offered before we'd made the journey from Oklahoma to Texas. Remus had simply denied me every time, waiting for the right moment.

The dark part of my mind snared the idea and wouldn't let it go. *Maybe he doesn't want you to submit. Why didn't you push him?*

Someone squeezed my hand, and I glanced sideways, dully aware of my surroundings. After Fiona had stabbed Remus with a syringe, Bane dragged my mother and me out of the building, hissing threats not to alert 'the normies,' or it would get a lot worse for us both. What choice did I have? I didn't want to leave Remus, but the police getting involved in pack affairs would be at least ten times worse than whatever Fiona had up her sleeves. No matter how this shook out, I'd be better off with Bane than with the local police force.

I was already known as the 'crazy girl' publicly rejected by an alpha at a Moonmate ceremony. I didn't need to add the 'unhinged she-wolf' who 'exposed werewolves to the public' to my track record, too.

No one said anything once my mother and I were jammed inside the black SUV. I had no idea where we were being taken or how long we'd be in the car. Bane paused before he shut the door, looking like he might want to say something — but the moment passed in a breath, and he shook something off, closing the door once all my limbs had been tucked safely inside. All I could think of was how Remus had crumpled like a wet piece of paper, knocked out cold by whatever Fiona had drugged him with. *His own mother!*

Arden might have lied to me, time and time again, but...

I shivered. That level of betrayal was almost unthinkable.

Someone squeezed my hand again, and I finally looked over — eyeing my mother. She offered me a weak smile, running her thumb over the inside of my wrist. The motion was probably supposed to be calming, but I could barely feel it. I felt hollow.

“Luna, look at me,” my mother said. “You need to stay calm. Nothing will be helped by freaking out.”

Before I could stop myself, I growled, pulling my arm away from her. I didn't *want* to be soothed. I didn't *want* to collect myself or keep cool or whatever else. Remus had just been attacked! *Her alpha* had just been attacked — by wolves he trusted! Why wasn't *she* freaking out? If that wasn't a time to freak out, when was it?

I twisted, glaring at the back of Bane's head. “How could you do this?” I demanded. “Remus trusted you! What kind of beta are you, betraying your alpha?”

The man simply stared forward, not even shifting in the passenger's seat. I growled again, my wolf pressing closer to the service as I stiffened, feeling my skin prickle as her hackles raised. Remus wasn't her alpha, not technically, but he was in all the ways that counted, and Bane had gone against everything we understood.

“I know you can hear me,” I snapped, stopping myself just short of reaching forward to grab the man's shoulder. The tension was practically rolling off him in waves, and without Remus here...who was to stop him from breaking my wrist or even worse?

Bane finally tipped his head, his brown eyes so dark they almost looked black in the low light. I didn't know how to read that expression. He seemed to force himself to peel back his upper lip, exposing his teeth in an ugly snarl. Hesitation was replaced with an expression I couldn't place — certainly never one I'd seen on Bane's face before. Something cold ran down my spine, and my wolf responded immediately — her ears flattening and her tail straightening behind her. If she could have, she'd have taken a step away. “I don't owe you a damn thing,” he hissed, his jaw clenched. “Least of all, an explanation. You have been nothing but trouble since the moment you arrived in Texas. All I wanted to do was protect Remus. This shouldn't have been a problem. It shouldn't have come to this, but it did — and now *I'm* doing what I need to do to protect Remus *and* the pack.”

I rocked back in the car seat, eyes going a little wide. His answer had taken the wind out of my sails; it was obvious that Fiona didn't care for me at all, but I had assumed that was because she was protective of her son. Sure, her behavior towards me (and towards Remus, for that matter) was pretty shitty, but I had still thought it was some misguided attempt to protect her only child. But Bane? I hadn't done anything to him. He'd barely said anything to me, either here in Texas or back in Oklahoma, and it wasn't as if I'd tried to avoid him.

After a moment, I shook my head, willing the prickling feeling in my eyes to go away. The last thing I needed to do now was cry — Bane didn't deserve that kind of satisfaction. I sighed and turned towards the window, ignoring the sad smile my mother offered me or the way she took my hand back, trying to rub my wrist again. Instead, I focused on my breathing, trying to steady my mind as I watched the world rush by.

EVENTUALLY, we pulled into a driveway. It felt like we were in the middle of nowhere, with long driveways leading to houses that sat far off the road or disappeared behind trees. I didn't think we were that far outside of the Austin metro, but then again — I didn't know the area that well yet, and my sense of time was indeed warped. I glanced over at my mother, but she had perked up slightly, clearly recognizing something.

I frowned and straightened, looking from her to Bane and then back out the window. "Where are we?" I didn't bother whispering. This close, an ant could have whispered, and the other werewolves in the vehicle would have heard it.

No one answered me; we rounded a slight bend, and the house came into view. Most impressive was the wrap-around porch, stretching from one side to the other. I might have admired it were the circumstances different — instead, I was distracted by the figure waiting out front, his arms folded over his chest. "Is that my grandfather?" I asked, the car rolling to a stop.

Josie nodded, looking between Bane and me. The beta said nothing, stepping out of the car and walking around to open the door. He lifted a brow at my mother and then stepped back, motioning with a hand for her to move.

My mother's brow furrowed as she glanced between us, the hand around mine tightening by a few degrees.

"Get out," Bane growled. I could almost see his hackles rising, and he

wasn't even in his wolf form.

Josie stiffened, opening her mouth when James called from his porch. "Josephine, come here. Now isn't the time to be smart."

My mother exhaled, but she closed her mouth again, pausing long enough to give me a look. "Do as you're told," she whispered, even though Bane would still hear it. "Just do as you're told until we know what's going on, and it'll be okay. I won't let them hurt you."

She let my hand go and stepped out of the car, walking across the dirt driveway and quickly joining her father on the porch. They stood right next to one another, eyes fixed on Bane as he hovered near the car door.

I didn't move. I had no idea what the beta had planned, but I didn't want to be any closer to him than I absolutely had to be. He hadn't indicated I was supposed to move, and I damn well didn't want to give him a reason to think I was being difficult.

He made no motion towards me and folded his arms over his chest, turning to address the other Ulfrics. "Fiona will be acting as pack alpha until Remus gets his shit together," he growled. The words sent a shiver down my spine, even with his back to me. "She is willing to release Luna to her family, on one condition."

One condition? Knowing Fiona, it could be anything — I had just witnessed her hit her son with a drug strong enough to knock out an alpha werewolf. The shiver became a shudder; I felt like someone had just dunked me in the Arctic Ocean.

"I'm listening," James replied. The growl in his voice gave me some flicker of hope. *Maybe he isn't complicit in this. Perhaps he isn't going to play along with — whatever this is.*

"She isn't to go anywhere near Remus. If she does, Fiona will banish her from this land. Technically, she isn't even a pack wolf; if it were possible, Fiona would demand her submission immediately." He didn't need to say the rest. Fiona wasn't actually an alpha wolf, acting or not. I couldn't submit to her, not in the way that mattered. It had to be Remus. "She's being far more generous than she has to be."

I stiffened at the insinuation. When no one answered right away, Bane growled, standing up a bit taller. "Either she complies, or she's a lone wolf. Period. Lupus Claw doesn't exist anymore. There is no other choice."

Even from where I sat, I could see my mother and grandfather go rigid. No one said anything. My mind began to race. *Is this it? Is this how it ends*

for me? Bane makes a proclamation and that's it? I'm banished?

"I will take responsibility for Luna." My head jerked up as my grandfather spoke, stepping off his porch. "I accept Fiona's terms, and I will accept any punishment handed down if Luna disobeys the alpha's request."

I stared, my jaw going a bit slack — I couldn't believe those words had come out of his mouth. James Ulfric did not have to do that. He was a pack member in good standing. For goodness' sake, he was Remington Silverstreak's beta. And... and it was *my* life! The responsibilities of my actions were my own!

My mother looked equally shocked, but I could barely process it, too overwhelmed by the warring sensation of aggravation and surprise. *Why? Why is he doing this?* My father certainly wouldn't have.

Bane grunted and walked forward, extending a hand to shake on it. "Fine. I accept these terms on behalf of the alpha," he agreed. Once the men shook, he walked back towards me and motioned with his head for me to get out of the car. "Go," he muttered.

He leaned forward as I slid across the leather seat, glittering eyes meeting mine. "Don't fuck it up, Luna Highborn — your grandfather will be the one to pay for your mistake."

His words sent another shiver racing through me, but I refused to give him any further satisfaction. Instead, I refused to meet his eyes, staring straight ahead at my family. As soon as my shoes hit the dirt, I walked toward them as quickly as possible, not daring to look back. A few moments later, I heard the slam of car doors, and the large SUV pulled out of the driveway, leaving us standing in a cloud of dust.

WE ALL STOOD in silence as the dust settled. The only sound was a mourning dove cooing gently; it was enough to snap me out of my stupor. I whirled around on my grandfather. "What did you just do?" I asked, still caught between horror and aggravation. "I'm a grown woman. You didn't have to — you shouldn't have taken responsibility for me. I am responsible for myself."

James narrowed his eyes slightly, folding his arms over his chest. "I don't do a damn thing I don't want to do," he rumbled back. For a moment, it felt like the man was sizing me up. "I knew what I was doing, Luna. I know Fiona. I *thought* I knew Bane, but..." He trailed off for a moment, shaking his head. "I wasn't sure he was going to let you out of the car."

I paused for a moment, not sure what to make of that. I couldn't say I knew Remus' beta, but what he did today was in complete contrast to the behavior I'd observed before. I couldn't see the man's face when he was bargaining with James, but... But I wasn't something to be *bargained* over. I knew I should appreciate that James was concerned about me, but it felt like I was twelve years old all over again, being stuck in yet someone else's care with no agency of my own.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady some of the emotions I was feeling. "I get that, but also, it's my business, and it's not fair that you should bear the consequences — if there are any." For all I knew, Fiona would get a bee in her bonnet and rescind her decision. Did that mean my grandfather would be cast out? I didn't want to be responsible for that!

My grandfather grumbled. "Luna, you need to stop acting like a lovestruck teenager and look at the bigger picture. I know you have feelings for Remus, but—"

"Seriously!" I snapped. I couldn't help it. I was trying *so hard* to be calm and see this from another side, but a *lovesick teenager*? I didn't growl, but it was a damn near thing. "This isn't about my feelings for Remus — and you don't know me that well at all, so I don't appreciate you making assumptions about that!" I'd met my grandfather exactly once and at my mother's family party, no less. It wasn't exactly a deep and heartfelt conversation.

"I'm sticking my neck out for you, Luna."

I reeled and turned towards the door. "Well, you don't do anything you don't want to!" I called back, unable to resist the urge to throw his words back at him. He shouldn't have taken the risk if he was so worried I had no self-control or self-preservation, and I'd go running back to Remus as soon as my feet hit the ground.

The house felt large and uninviting. I didn't recognize anything, not even the people in the pictures on the wall. I spun around once, looking down a hall when I heard the screen door swing back open. "Luna?" my mother called. I huffed — I really wasn't in the place to keep talking about this. I took a left at random, poking my head in rooms until I found what looked like a guest room. I slipped inside and locked the door behind me. I just... I just needed a minute. Or ten.

And just some damn quiet. Please.

I paused at the door, listening. Fortunately, it didn't sound like my mother was trying to chase me down the hall. Kicking off my shoes, I took a long,

shuddering breath and walked across the room to flop on the bed. I had no idea if it was that late, but I felt like I'd been awake for twenty-four hours. Maybe longer. It was a day that had stretched across a week. A month. All at once, I felt entirely exhausted, like I was the one who'd been drugged, not Remus.

After a moment, I rolled myself under the covers and pulled the pillow over my head. The sheets smelled foreign, like they'd been washed a long time ago and the detergent was still clinging on. The room around me felt weird. It was just a room, it wasn't that different from the one I'd had at my father's house. A little bigger, maybe, but not that different. They even both had a closet on the right wall and wooden floors.

The sheets felt a little too scratchy. The pillow was too flat to lie on but still felt kind of heavy if I used it as a shield. Everything was too loud, even my breathing. I took another shuddering breath and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to hold back the torrent of thoughts.

I couldn't.

What about Tala? If Bane is here and Fiona is here... who's doing anything to help Tala? Did they just leave Seff to handle it on his own? Remus said Tala was his cousin — that means Fiona must care, right? Unless Tala was related to Remus' father.... And, then again, Fiona had just assaulted her own son. What was a niece compared to that? Oh, ancestors, what if Fiona just hangs Tala out to dry? What if Marnet thinks she isn't valuable as a hostage anymore?

I shuddered. It wasn't a thought I wanted to entertain. Intrusive thoughts started to creep in, and I rolled over, hugging my knees to my chest as I curled into the fetal position. Hot tears had started rolling down my cheeks, and I couldn't bring myself to care. As soon as I steered my thoughts away from Tala and what might happen, they centered around Remus instead. The look on his face when Bane stared him down and grabbed me. The way his expression morphed as the drugs kicked in, and he realized what his mother had done. His prone form on the floor, slumped like he was made of putty, not flesh and bone.

A sob shuddered free, and I stuffed the comforter against my mouth, trying to muffle it.

*I want to help them — I **need** to help them... but what on earth can I **do**?*

I HAD no idea how long I'd been asleep, but the light that filtered through the cream-colored drapes was gentle and soft. As soon as I sat up, my stomach gurgled loudly and I winced; I was so hungry, it almost hurt. *I must have slept through the afternoon... and the night.* It didn't shock me that I was that tired after everything else that had happened.

I grimaced as I slowly got to my feet. I felt grimy and uncomfortable; I needed a shower and a change of clothing. My stomach grumbled again. *I need to eat before I do anything else. Then shower. Then... Tala and Remus.* I rubbed my stomach as I unlocked the door and stepped into the hallway, taking a moment to reorient myself. I had no idea where the kitchen was, but it made sense that the hall would probably lead to it.

As I ventured further into the house, I realized someone was talking. Pausing, I held my breath, leaning forward. It was my mother.

"I don't understand, Dad."

Someone — my grandfather — gave a heavy sigh. "This is why I was concerned about Remus and Luna getting close, Josie. It isn't Luna. Not really. But Remus wasn't — isn't — behaving the way Fiona wants him to."

My mother snorted. "Yeah, and? Welcome to parenthood?"

My grandfather grunted. "I'm being serious, Josephine. It's imperative to Fiona that Remus acts like the picture of alpha — like his real father."

"Real father? What does that mean? It wasn't as if Remington was an absent father."

I frowned, just as confused as my mother sounded. The memories Remus had shared with me had seemed relatively fond. Like the man had passed on good lessons, and if there were any bad times, they didn't outweigh the good.

My grandfather sighed and sounded even wearier than he had before. "Remington Silverstreak did not have any biological children, Josie. Remus might be an alpha, but he's not a born Silverstreak. The pack has no true heir."

REMUS

Remus' Penthouse

Austin, Texas

It had been days since my mother had betrayed me, but it felt like time had stretched on for weeks. I'd been knocked out for several hours, and during that time, my mother had an entire team sweep my apartment. It stunk of other wolves even now; it stunk of cleaning agents, too. They'd stripped it of all electronics. My phones, my tablets, my computers, my modem... even my television and my PlayStation 5. I'd probably used the thing twice before now, but I certainly could have used a little entertainment while under house arrest.

Perhaps I should have been flattered they thought I'd be able to contact the outside world with my smart refrigerator, but at the moment, I was extremely irritated they'd disconnected it and left me with nothing to keep food cold. Naturally, I wasn't allowed to order anything, either. I was left at the whim of my guards — my mother had been wise enough to contract wolves from other packs. Or maybe they were lone wolves. I didn't ask. I didn't really care. They weren't Silverstreak shifters, and they weren't sworn to me.

Normally, it wouldn't have mattered. An alpha wolf was an alpha wolf, and I should have been able to cast my Alpha over them... but I couldn't. My wolf wasn't gone, not exactly, but whatever my mother had drugged me with — no, *poisoned me with* — was strong enough my wolf was still buried so deep he could have been gone altogether. I'd never experienced anything like it. An emptiness. An unnatural quiet. He was an extension of myself, like a limb. You don't notice your limbs often, but you'd notice their absence. Hell, I couldn't *stop* noticing. It was an itch I couldn't scratch. A pain I couldn't soothe. And there was nothing I could do about it, either.

Is this what Marnet did to Luna?

Maybe. I'd witnessed the man cast his Alpha over her at the Moonmate ceremony, but I had no idea what happened to her in the barn before my men chased Marnet through the building. He could have dosed her with something, for all I knew.

The thought made me bristle. *I never thought you'd stoop so low to get*

your way, Fiona. I knew my mother could be bullheaded. Hell, I even knew she could be petty, but never once, not in a million years, would I have guessed she'd turn on me in such a complete and absolute fashion. At worst, I expected to be ignored or disowned. Cut off from the money my father left her. It would sting, being ignored like a child, but... I don't know. That seemed more normal to me.

More normal than betrayal and drugs, anyways.

The only way she could have stooped lower was to turn you over to the humans.

I stared up at the ceiling and rubbed my eyes. I hadn't gotten off the couch since I'd woken up and migrated there this morning. I still felt weak. Dizzy. It was like the worst flu I'd ever had but entirely unnatural. If I had more energy, I might have been able to do something with all my aggravation and unhappiness. Instead, I was stuck mapping the contours of the paint. *Exactly what Fiona wanted, no doubt. She's nothing if not calculating.*

The door opened. I tipped my head back to sniff and scowled at the familiar scent. *Speak of the devil...*

"How are you feeling, darling?" my mother asked a few moments later, appearing in my field of view as she perched upon an armchair across the coffee table.

I narrowed my eyes. "Like I've been poisoned — oh, wait, that's exactly what happened."

Fiona sighed, tipping her head in such a way that I knew she was fighting the urge to roll her eyes at me. "How many times do I have to tell you, Remus? It wasn't a *poison*; it was a *sedative*. You are my son — I would never hurt you."

My upper lip trembled, but that was all the snarl I could muster. "It's still a poison even if it didn't kill me," I grumbled, shifting to face her more properly. I didn't bother sitting up. I just didn't care enough. "Where's Luna? And Josie? What did you do to them?" It was the same question I asked every day.

My mother sighed. "Remus..."

And that was the same damn answer, too.

"Don't '*Remus*' me. They were guests in my house, and you *absconded with them.*"

My mother's expression went pinched. "I didn't *abscond* with anyone, Remus, and I don't care for your tone. I sent them both back to their family

members. This is pack business and not something they have any business being involved in.”

“They’re pack members!”

“Not. Luna,” my mother snarled, her expression turning stone cold. The change was enough to silence me, for a moment, as I studied her face. I wanted to argue, but as I racked my memory...I couldn’t recall Luna submitting to me. The woman had offered more than once, but the shift in power had never happened. She wasn’t officially a member of the Silverstreak pack. *Shit*. I racked my brain.

“If you had a concern about it,” I snapped, irritated she’d noticed that when I hadn’t, “you should have said something to me, not only as your son *but as your alpha*. You claim this is all for ‘the good of the pack,’” — I could barely keep a straight face saying that — “but you have no problem undermining me. How is that supposed to help anyone? Is this about the pack, or is this about *you*?” I didn’t add ‘you and Luna’, but I could tell she knew what I meant just from the hard glint in her eyes.

My mother watched me for a moment longer and sighed, her shoulders dropping again. “Remus. You need to stop thinking about Luna. You need to stop thinking about Marnet. You need to think about *the pack*, and the fact that you still can’t get your head straight tells me I was right to do what I did. You need to take a step back and evaluate what kind of alpha you actually are.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I snapped, my skin prickling.

She shook her head. “Your pack has lost faith in you — and do you blame them? You disappeared off to Oklahoma for weeks and only told a scarce few why. Silverstreak Motors is having a bad quarter, but you’re having a vacation with a girl you brought back from a trip. Perhaps it would be different if she was your fated mate, but she isn’t. She’s Marnet’s. She’s a distraction. Wolves are worried about their livelihoods. Wolves are worried about potential blowback from the remaining Lupus Claw wolves — or any of Marnet’s allies. He might not have been a strong alpha, Remus, but he was clearly a people person, and you did not weigh the risks of your move properly.”

I didn’t move, jaw clenching as I tried to digest the lecture I was receiving. I couldn’t deny some of the points she was making... but at the same time, why did she wait so long to make them? Why didn’t someone bring this up before it had reached a boiling point? *Or did they? Have I really*

been as distracted as they said?

I felt like I hardly knew myself at that moment, and I couldn't be sure if it were because what Fiona was saying was true or because I still hadn't escaped the sticky mire of sluggishness left behind by the sedatives.

But Fiona wasn't done. "I still have friends in other packs, Remus. Friends with access to councils and alphas. The Silverstreak pack is starting to look unstable from the outside — and that's exactly why you went after Lupus Claw, isn't it? Marnet Claw has you by the balls, and you are too caught up in whatever this is with Luna Highborn to see it. You will drive this pack to ruin if you keep thinking with your cock instead of your brain!"

I said nothing, startled by her outburst. After a few moments of silence, my mother simply sniffed and stood. "I see the drugs are still influencing you. I'll make sure to have the chef prepare something cleansing for your dinner. I'll see you tomorrow, Remus."

TIME BLED BY. It still felt hazy. I didn't own a calendar — why would I? I did all my scheduling on my phone; all my plans were in the cloud — and I'd lost track of what day it was. It had been a few more days, at least, and I didn't feel much better. The cold sweats had stopped, but I still felt exhausted. My wolf was still smothered beneath layers I couldn't even find, much less move. My mother continued to insist she hadn't poisoned me, that it was only a sedative meant for powerful werewolves, but the longer this hell dragged on, the less I believed her.

And the more I questioned if I'd ever be able to call my wolf back. The more I wondered if she'd planned for this all along. I hadn't considered my mother to be power hungry, but as far as I could tell, she'd taken to the role of alpha like a duck to water.

I stood, pacing back and forth. My front door loomed dark and ominous; no one stayed inside my apartment with me, but there were always guards. They were never alone. The only "entrance" that wasn't guarded was my terrace... but I lived in the penthouse. I would have to be Spiderman if I wanted to escape over my balcony. Frustrated I might be, but I wasn't delusional. At least some of my wits had returned.

The sun was starting to sink behind the city skyline when someone knocked on my front door. Only one person bothered knocking and I hurried over, opening the door. I flashed the chef a tired smile. "Come on in, Elena."

She returned my smile with a tiny smile that seemed forced, offering up a covered plate. “Here’s your dinner, Remus,” she said, taking a step back once I’d accepted it.

I sighed, largely uninterested in whatever she’d cooked. It wasn’t her. Elena was an amazing chef. She’d never made anything I didn’t like — but I barely felt hungry, even if I knew I needed to eat to regain my strength. I felt lonely. I felt stir crazy. I just wanted to *talk* to someone. I bobbed my head and took a step back, trying again to invite her inside.

Elena shook her head, her slight smile turning a little sad. “I can’t, Remus.” Her eyes flickered sideways. *Right. The guards.*

“Okay,” I replied, not wanting to push her. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” she said, waiting for me to shut the door. Once it clicked shut, I heard the sound of her shoes fading down the hall.

Dejected, I brought the plate to my table, sitting alone. It was a waste to let it go cold, so I grabbed a fork and removed the cover. Today’s meal was macaroni and cheese — one of my childhood favorites, but all gussied up. The kind thought was almost enough to make me smile. *Almost.*

I ate in silence, staring blankly into my kitchen. The meal should have been comforting, but I didn’t feel any different. All this time alone with my thoughts made it unavoidable to reflect on my mother’s words, no matter how much I resented them.

I still don’t regret taking over the Oklahoma territory. Marnet Claw was a poor alpha and a danger to all shifters. Hell, he still is. Nothing my mother said or did would change my conviction on that. The rest, though? Whether I wanted to or not, I was starting to question it.

Maybe she *had* been right to critique how I’d gone about it. I hadn’t told anyone much to keep Marnet’s people from finding out, but perhaps I should have had more trust in my father’s council. In the wolves I kept close by my side. *But how else was I supposed to handle it?*

A frustrated noise escaped me as I stood, abandoning the rest of my dinner as I resumed pacing up and down my hallway. Maybe my mother had been right. Perhaps I had gotten a little too proud — stopped looking for input from the older, more experienced pack members. *That has nothing to do with Luna, though.* I might have had something else to focus on once she showed up, but... I didn’t think that was where it started.

“Fuck.”

I hated when my mother was right — I hated it even more that it took me

this long to see my own mistakes. I was a good businessman because I was good at modifying myself. Handling my own faults. And if I couldn't see this?

“... *fuck.*”

“GOOD AFTERNOON, REMUS.”

I looked up from the book I was reading. I'd showered this morning; put on a fresh pair of jeans and a polo. I felt more human than I had since I'd been given the sedation dose. “Fiona,” I replied, marking my page and setting the book down.

“How are you feeling?”

I grunted softly. *If it bothers you so much, maybe you shouldn't have drugged me in the first place.* I kept the thought to myself. “Are Luna and Josie okay?” I asked instead.

My mother nearly hit the roof, slamming her purse down on my coffee table. “Remus Andrew Silverstreak. When will you forget about that damnable woman and focus on what's important?” she snapped, eyes blazing as she rounded on me. “Your future is more important. This *pack* is more important. Wolves are counting on you, Remus. Young, old, children, adults. All of them. You're supposed to look out for the best interests of *all of them*. Not one other wolf. Not one family of wolves. Not yourself. *All of them*. I swear, Remus, you are so much like your father it kills me sometimes.”

I frowned, more taken aback by the last sentence than the rest of her rant. Fiona's obsession with my future and how I was letting down the pack was nothing new at this point — but I'd never heard her speak ill of my father before, especially not after he'd passed. Hell, she'd been telling me for years to be *more* like the man. “What do you—”

“Not that you've *asked*,” my mother cut me off, still looking down her nose at me, “but Bane and I have put together a rescue team for Tala.”

I exhaled, nodding my head. “Good. That's good.” It would have been better if they'd done it more quickly, but I was hardly in a place to argue. “Has Marnet tried contacting you again? Has he tried leveraging her?”

My mother pursed her lips and shook her head. “No. We haven't heard anything since that day.”

That made me frown. It seemed strange that he wouldn't keep trying to push the issue; he *knew* Tala was important. “Have you asked Luna?”

“Remus—!”

I held up my hand before my mother could launch off on yet another tirade. “Marnet contacted her with the information the first time, not me. Maybe you haven’t received any contact on my phone because he hasn’t bothered with it. Maybe he’s still trying to leverage Luna.” Honestly, I wasn’t sure what I’d prefer — that he kept in touch or didn’t. I wasn’t sure which was better for Luna... or which was better for Tala. I scowled; it was my fault my cousin was in this position to start with. It was infuriating I couldn’t do more than give my mother advice she wasn’t listening to.

Just as I expected, my mother dismissed my suggestion with a wave of her hand. “We will handle this without that girl. Bane’s been in touch with your hacker. I’m sure the man can trace Marnet’s phone or whatever.”

I frowned. *She has no idea what she’s talking about.* Hopefully, the people with the computer knowledge would make some sense out of it — or talk some sense into Fiona.

Narrowing my eyes, I tipped my chin up, studying my mother. “But this isn’t about her, not really. It’s about who Marnet contacted before. It’s for the best of the pack — hell, it’s for the best of *family*. I thought that’s what we needed to focus on,” I reasoned, lifting a brow. No matter how much my mother didn’t like Luna, it didn’t change the fact that Marnet saw her as the person to channel his messages through. That made her our best link to Tala — it would be faster to work with Luna, no matter how good my hacker was.

My mother stared at me for a moment, mirroring my narrowed gaze before she snorted. She snatched her purse back up and stormed out of my living room, the front door announcing her departure with a window-rattling slam.

Something in the room shifted; after a moment, I realized it wasn’t the room. It was my wolf. He hadn’t emerged, not exactly, but it was the first sign that he was shaking off the heavy slumber. He still existed. Relief rushed through me, coupled with adrenaline, and I couldn’t help but smile. Fiona couldn’t keep me here forever. My strength was finally starting to return — and until then, I’d use my abundant free time to plan my next moves.

See, Fiona? I can learn the lessons you think you’re teaching.

LUNA

James Ulfric's Estate

Travis County, Texas

I had been living with my grandfather for the last two weeks. After the first night, he'd taken my phone, not trusting me not to contact Remus. I didn't have my tablet or computer, so by taking those, he'd essentially cut me off from the world. There was still the TV, and there was a 'family laptop' in his office, but I had little interest in watching the news or scanning social media. My life was currently stressful enough. I didn't need to add drama or the woes of the world to that.

Besides, I knew James would be able to monitor whatever I did on the computer, and that made my skin crawl. I felt like a teenager on lockdown. The last time I'd been this restricted, I'd made the mistake of talking back to Lynn when I was thirteen years old and still struggling with the change of going from living with my mother to living with my father and all of my step- and half-siblings. I'd also tried to run away, but that lasted exactly five minutes.

At least I'd learned some patience since then. Even though I'd overheard my mother and grandfather discussing Remus' parentage, I hadn't said anything about it. Frankly, I wasn't sure my grandfather would be willing to explain it to me, and it sounded like my mother was just as surprised by the reveal as I was. If it was private information, and I had to assume it was, the only reason my grandfather knew was probably that he'd been Remington's beta. Perhaps the man had confided in him — but why break that trust now?

I guess he's not around anymore — but could that be why Fiona's gone off the deep end? If Remus' lineage is a problem, wouldn't she want to bury it, not bring it up?

I paused, staring out the window into the backyard. If there was one thing my grandfather's estate had going for it, it was privacy. He had a lush green yard, which must have been expensive to maintain, and it was lined with trees and shrubbery. No noisy neighbors. No escaping sounds. Perfect for a man to have his grandpups come and visit without fear.

I wonder if Remus knew. It didn't sound like he did... or if he did, he clearly considered Remington Silverstreak to be his real father, given the way

he spoke about him. I mulled on the thought a little longer before shaking my head. Speculating would only get me so far; the only way to know for sure was to ask the man, which would mean I'd have to get out of this damn house.

WHEN I WANDERED into the kitchen, I found my mother at the stove, making breakfast. She cast me a worried look over her shoulder, and it took all my patience not to scowl. While she wasn't the one who took my phone away, Josie had been watching me just as closely as her father. She didn't trust me not to run back to Remus either, even though that would require me to *walk* back to Austin or steal someone's car. Or hitchhike, I guess, but that was a sketchy proposition when so few people lived on a given road. I felt like I could walk for miles without seeing a single car – this was practically the middle of nowhere.

Besides, I heard the terms Bane laid out, and my grandfather accepted. I didn't want to be banished or responsible for James being banished from the pack. The thought made my stomach turn — or maybe that was the food my mother was cooking. I swallowed hard and stepped back, ducking my head as if I could shield myself from the scent.

“What are you making?” I asked, wincing.

“Hm?” Josie looked back at me. “Oh, just some corned beef hash. Your grandfather had some leftover boiled dinner in the fridge, and I thought I'd cook it up.”

Ah. That would be the cabbage. I didn't mind the taste of the leafy vegetable, but I'd always thought it smelled pretty sketchy — but right now? It smelled absolutely *foul*. It was all I could do not to gag. “Are you sure that's still good?”

“Yeah, it wasn't that old,” Josie laughed, shaking her head. “Your grandfather can live like a bit of a bachelor, but he isn't *that* bad. I did give it a sniff though, just to be sure.”

Is your nose still working? How can you not smell that?

She seemed completely immune, though, still stirring as the corned beef, potato and cabbage sizzled away in the skillet. “There's a vintage Ford that's come into the shop. We usually only service Silverstreak vehicles, of course, but this belongs to one of the board members. He's a collector, and Remington never minded. I don't mind, either — oh, Luna, it's so gorgeous. I

can't wait for this to blow over so you can come back to work and see it. She needs a little love, but she's been taken good care of. What a treat."

My mother hummed happily to herself, plating up the meal. She slid one plate towards me across the kitchen island. I didn't think the smell could get any worse, but it did; I really did gag, struggling not to dry heave right there in the middle of the kitchen. I might have been hungry just a few minutes ago, but after smelling that — I shuddered. My mouth felt wet.

Oh, fuck.

I spun on my heel, sprinting down the hallway and all but throwing myself into the bathroom. I perched over the toilet, shivering as I did dry heave. The smell haunted me as I gagged, a cold sweat breaking out.

"Luna!" My mother knocked on the door. "Luna, I'm so sorry — was it the cabbage? Or the hot sauce? I'm so sorry!" she called. "Are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

I grimaced, feeling a bit poorly that the woman had gone out of her way to cook something and my body's reaction was to revolt. I wiped my mouth and got back to my feet. "Sorry," I called back. "I think I'm all right. I think it was just the smell of the cabbage." I turned the faucet on and started to wash my hands.

"I didn't realize you were so sensitive to it, Luna — I'm so sorry," she said again, and I shook my head. I suspected some of the guilt about the Remus situation was bleeding over. "There's some ginger ale in the fridge. Do you want that instead?"

I rolled the idea over. "Yeah, that'd be fine. I think I'm going to go back to my room, though... at least until the cabbage smell fades away."

"Of course, of course. I'll bring you some crackers, too."

AS MUCH AS I wanted to blame the cabbage, I couldn't. The persistent feeling of nausea lingered, ebbing and flowing like the tide but never disappearing entirely. It wasn't just the cabbage. It was the lobster James brought home the next night to try to lift everyone's mood. It was the smell of my hairspray. Hell, this morning, there wasn't any smell at all. I woke up feeling like absolute garbage — moving too fast made it feel like my stomach was about to leap up into my throat.

I sat on the bed, leaning against the wall and cradling the bottle of ginger ale my mother had brought me. She pressed a hand against my forehead and

sighed. “You don’t feel hot at all. I don’t think you have a fever, but I can go get a thermometer if you want.”

I shook my head, grimacing. The world swam for another moment before it settled again. “I don’t think it’s food poisoning. No one else is sick.” I wasn’t sure if werewolves could even get sick like that. We were generally sturdier than humans. Growing up, I could count on one hand the number of times I’d stayed home from illness.

My mother grimaced and nodded her head. “Yes, if it was a virus, I suspect your grandfather and I would be sick also.” She studied me for a moment longer. “Maybe it’s the stress, Lunaloo. You’ve had a lot going on lately... it wouldn’t be that surprising if it were starting to manifest physically.”

“Oh, great...” Just another thing to add to my list. I couldn’t see the stress dissipating any time soon, not with Fiona and her threats. I still didn’t know how Remus was. I didn’t know if Tala was okay. I couldn’t be certain that Bane or Fiona wouldn’t turn on me further, even under my grandfather’s protection.

Josie offered me a sympathetic smile. “Well, we can go to the doctor just in case. The pack doctor lives in Austin, and I’m sure no one could get mad about that. Just to be safe.”

I sighed and stared down at my brown glass bottle, the carbonation still hissing softly inside. After a moment, I shrugged a shoulder. “I guess.” In truth, I didn’t see why not. At least I’d get out of the house, even if I didn’t think it would help that much. *Can doctors even prescribe something for stress?*

My mother patted my hand before she stood. “I have to get ready for work, but I’ll take a half day. I have plenty of paid time off, and honestly, work has been intense lately. It will be nice. I’ll ask your grandfather to schedule us.”

“Sure,” I said, still feeling a bit despondent about the entire thing. I gave myself a little shake and forced a small smile for my mom. “Thanks.”

“Of course, Luna.”

THANKFULLY, I felt a little better when I got in the car. The driveway was a bit rough, but it was state roads back into Austin, so my stomach didn’t complain much. I watched the scenery this time, observing the shift from the

Texas trees to the suburbs until we were back in the city itself. I didn't recognize this part of Austin, but my mother seemed to know where she was going, driving us to a building that looked more like a condo than a doctor's office. I raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure this is the right place?" I asked, unbuckling my seatbelt.

My mother threw me a weary look. "I've been coming here since before you were born, Luna. There's a doctor's office with a physician and a nurse, a chiropractor, an obstetrician-gynecologist, and... what was the last? Oh, a physical therapist."

"Wow," I said, slightly taken aback. In my area, in Oklahoma, all we had was a pack doctor, and he functioned for everything. "And they're all shifters?"

My mother nodded. "Mhm. I think it was originally just the physician and the physical therapist. The OB-GYN was recruited, and I think the chiro and the nurse were born in the pack and went to school. I heard a rumor that the Silverstreak family paid their tuition costs, but that would make sense. It's helpful for a pack to have healthcare professionals who understand werewolves." She laughed and shook her head. "Now, no more stalling. We don't want to be late."

I sighed but allowed her to usher me inside, impressed by how quick and straightforward the check-in process was. I don't think we waited for more than five minutes before the nurse called my name.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Josie asked.

After hesitating for a moment, I shook my head. "No, it's okay. I'll be fine." It *probably* wasn't anything weird or embarrassing, but just in case it was, I didn't need the doctor explaining it in front of the mother I just reconnected with.

The nurse introduced herself and took my vitals before she stepped out. I had barely sat down on the exam bed when the door opened again, and a tall man with a graying beard and bushy brows walked in. He gave me a small smile, brown eyes dancing as he reached out to shake my hand. "Luna? I'm Dr. Hayes. It's nice to meet you."

His smile was infectious. I couldn't help myself, smiling back as I shook his hand. "It's nice to meet you too," I replied, whatever nerves I'd felt about meeting a new doctor already fading to the background.

"Wish I could meet most folk without them feeling poorly, but — such is the nature of the business. My notes say you're in for complaints of nausea

and vomiting. Have you been experiencing any sharp, severe pain in your stomach or torso?”

I shook my head. “Thankfully, no. No pain. Just feeling really woozy.”

He nodded. “Any other gastrointestinal issues?”

I flushed a little and shook my head. “Nope.”

“Okay. What about other symptoms? Headaches? Fever?”

“No, no headache. No fever. I’ve been tired, but I’m pretty sure that’s just because the only things I’ve had to eat over the past few days are crackers, water, and ginger ale.”

The man nodded and hummed. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like you to lie back so I can palpate your stomach. It should be quick, and please tell me if anything hurts.”

I nodded and lay back. Just as he said, it was quick, but there was no sudden pain. He offered me a hand back up. “Are you sexually active?”

“I— Yes,” I said, trying to remind myself these were routine questions a doctor was supposed to ask a new patient.

“Do you use protection?”

“Yes — well, usually,” I corrected myself, remembering the weekend in the mountains. I was certain my cheeks flushed, but the doctor simply nodded.

“Okay. Have you and your partner been tested?”

“Oh! Uhm, yes, we have.”

“That’s good. I’d like you to go down the hall to the lab anyways so we can take some blood. Nothing seems immediately wrong, but that will help us rule out other possibilities. Is there any possibility you might be pregnant?”

Is there? I paused for a moment, shocked by the question. “I... I guess? We only had unprotected sex once, though, and my cycle has been regular. It was right after my period, so...”

He just nodded. “That’s fine. Well, the blood work will give us a few more answers. It’s a bit late in the afternoon, so we should be able to call you in the morning and go from there, okay?”

“Okay, that sounds good.”

“In the meantime, just try to stay hydrated and take it easy. You could also try plain rice or toast if you’re sick of the crackers.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle a little at that. “I sure am.”

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Luna. I’ll go put this information into the computer, and the nurse will come back to walk you down to the lab.”

IT WAS late morning when the house phone rang. My grandfather picked up and called me over a few moments later. “It’s for you,” he said, handing me the receiver. “Doctor’s office.”

“Oh. Thank you,” I said, taking the cordless phone and drifting back towards the hall, watching him out of the corner of my eye. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Luna?”

“Speaking.”

“Hi Luna, this is Candice from Dr. Hayes’ office. We have the results of your lab. Is it okay to give them to you over the phone?”

I had no idea how else I was supposed to get them. No access to my email, no car to drive. She didn’t need to know that, though. “That would be fine.”

“Okay, great. Well, we didn’t detect any STIs or other pathogens. Your hormone levels were largely what we’d expect for a woman your age, and—”

“And?” My heart was racing. Did I want something to be wrong with me? I didn’t want to be feeling this sick for no good reason, but I didn’t exactly want a mystery disease, either.

“And you are pregnant! Congratulations! Based on the hCG level, you’re probably between three and four weeks. While I have you on the line, could I schedule you for your first appointment?”

“I— What?” The world spun around me as I forgot how to breathe. I threw an arm out, steadying myself against the wall. I was dimly aware of my grandfather hurrying across the kitchen, concern obvious on his face. “Are you sure that’s right?”

“Oh, yes. A woman doesn’t produce hCG unless she’s pregnant, and it’s fairly helpful for estimating when you conceived until we can do the first ultrasound.”

I stared ahead blankly before I shook my head, quickly trying to do the math. I’d had my cycle regularly until now, and I hadn’t been intimate with Marnet in... weeks before the Moonmate ceremony. It was possibly even months; it had been so frustrating that I had been trying not to count. *The baby isn’t his. Thank goodness.* I took a deep breath and tried to gather my thoughts. “Oh, okay. Well, I’m not exactly sure what my schedule is just yet, but can I call the office back later?”

“Of course! You have the number?”

“Yes — and, uhm, please don’t tell anyone about this. I... I want to be able to share the news myself.”

The woman on the other side exhaled softly. “Oh, honey, we won’t tell anyone. Doctor-patient confidentiality. We won’t even tell your family members unless you specifically authorize us to — though I do recommend choosing one person you can confide in. It makes everything so much easier.”

I exhaled in relief. “I will. Thank you very much.”

When she hung up, I leaned against the wall, clutching the phone to my chest. My grandfather stood several feet away, watching me carefully like I might burst into flames at any moment. “Luna? Are you okay?” he asked as if the very act might somehow make me sicker.

I sighed, offering him a wane smile. “Honestly — I’m not sure yet. I was expecting some sort of superbug stomach virus or something, not...” I trailed off and shook my head, unsure I could even say the word.

My grandfather’s eyes widened as he stepped closer, reaching out for me. “Luna, what’s wrong? What did they tell you? Whatever it is, we’ll get whatever treatment you need, I promise,” he said, his face going at least three shades paler.

I jolted, realizing he must be assuming the worse. “Oh! Oh, it’s okay. It’s not that,” I said, turning and taking his hand in mine. “I promise I’m not dying or something like that. It’s... quite the opposite, really.” I licked my lips, all of my nerves flooding back at once. It would be easier if my mother was here but she was at work. “I... I guess I’m pregnant.”

“...What?” James looked at me like I’d just spoken Icelandic or something. “Are you sure?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I... well, it’s *possible*, and the nurse told me that wasn’t something they could mess up in the bloodwork, so...”

He stared at me a moment longer. “Wow,” he said, shaking his head. “I... wow.”

“Yeah,” I said, exhaling shakily. “Yeah, me too.”

“Well...” He paused for a moment before speaking again. “I guess this is a good thing. I mean, of course it’s a good thing, but... I think this might help you with Fiona, too.”

I frowned, not exactly following his train of thought. “Uh... are you sure about that? She’s pretty damn mad at me.”

He snorted. “That woman is mad about many things these days. But if

you're pregnant, and it's Remus' child — it *is* Remus' child, right?" He paused and gave me a questioning look.

I scowled and swatted his shoulder. "Of course it is!" I snapped, folding my arms over my chest. "What the hell?"

James shrugged a shoulder. "Look, I know you had a boyfriend before meeting Remus. I had to ask."

I wrinkled my nose. "Don't you think I'd have figured it out by now if I was already pregnant?"

He paused and shrugged again. "I guess you have a point. Anyways. Remus' pup means it's Fiona's grandchild — her only grandchild, as far as I know — and she might not care for you, but she sure as hell wouldn't harm a hair on her grandchild's head. That's her heir, Luna. You think she'd be so uptight about this mateship thing if she already had one?"

He had a point there. I paused and looked down at my torso, trying to imagine a child in there. It would have to be so *tiny*. "Probably not."

"No way," James said, shaking his head. "Now, I don't think she's going to throw open her arms and welcome you with daisies and roses, but... it might be a path to some sort of peace between you and her." He stilled and looked at me, placing both hands on my shoulders. "No matter what she does, though, no matter what she says or how she decides to handle this, your mom and I will make sure you're safe, okay? You and the baby both. Whatever that ends up meaning."

I paused, slightly taken aback. For some reason, I thought he'd be angrier, or disappointed, or... I shook it off before I could start welling up. "Thank you," I said, stepping forward. He pulled me into a hug, and I wrapped my arms around him, comforted for a moment. "Even though... even though Remus isn't Remington's son?"

My grandfather stiffened and then he sighed. "You heard that, huh? Damn werewolves. That doesn't matter, Luna. This pup will be born in this pack, and they'll know exactly who their parents are."

I breathed a sigh of relief and hugged my grandfather a little tighter. For the first time in two weeks, I finally felt like things might work out.

REMUS

Remus' Penthouse

Austin, Texas

Eventually, after another few days, my mother admitted she'd known *exactly* how strong the sedative was. It was something she'd purchased from overseas, no less, because the pack doctor had a strong set of ethics; she wasn't sure that Dr. Hayes would have fulfilled her request, especially given the reason. Maybe she'd have been able to come up with an explanation, maybe not. The thought made me a little smug, though; at least there were some wolves in this pack who had maintained a sense of pack, even if my own sense had been questionable.

It was a sobering thought, which was for the best. Getting smug around my mother might alert her that my wolf had finally woken up. Every day he got a little closer to the surface, my strength returning alongside his. I got the sense that mother wasn't entirely sure how long the effects were supposed to last, but if they were wearing off quickly, that was a distinct advantage for me. I couldn't afford to give it away. Even if she told me some things, I knew Fiona was pulling more threads than she was letting on.

THREE DAYS after I had confronted her about getting in touch with Luna to keep a line open with Marnet, I woke up with a start, my skin prickling like I'd been electrically charged. My wolf snarled, the sound reverberating through my bones as he pushed against me, all but scratching at the surface in search of his release. His freedom.

"No," I growled, sitting up. It was just as much of an instruction for me as for him. "We can't let them know. Not yet."

Briefly, I considered if I could shift in my apartment — it wouldn't be nearly as satisfying as a run through the woods or a hunt on the mountainside, but at least it would allow my wolf to stretch his limbs. Unfortunately, there would be no way to mask the scent of a wolf, especially in such small quarters. As soon as my mother or one of her lackeys walked into the room, they'd know within seconds that my wolf had returned. I wasn't ready to give

that up yet.

My considerations were interrupted at the sound of my front door opening. “Remus, honey, sorry I’m a bit earlier than I told you, but my plans changed.” *It’s like thinking of my mother summons her these days. Is she a werewolf or some sort of witch?*

I scowled, closing my eyes as I tried to force my wolf back down. He snapped and growled, already aggravated and out of sorts after being under the influence of something foreign for so long. I couldn’t blame him. I was pissed when I first woke up, disoriented and feeling like I couldn’t control my legs... but we could not blow this calm. “*Not yet,*” I hissed again, throwing off the covers as I quickly went in search of clothing. I could hear my mother clinking around my kitchen. I combed my fingers through my hair and paused long enough to make sure it was indeed a clean button-down shirt before I opened the door, padding barefoot down the hall to see what else my mother intended to claim for herself. It wasn’t as if I was keeping much in the way of snacks in the house. I was hardly entertaining.

“If you wanted—” I stopped dead in my tracks as I rounded the corner. Someone was sitting on my couch, and it certainly was *not* my mother.

“Ah, Remy! I was just making some tea for Charlotte here, but this machine is so complicated. Come here and help me.”

I was thrown off guard enough to comply without question, walking over to help my mother with the Keurig. She’d already selected the tea — all she had to do was fill up the water tank, but I could sense now was not the time to mouth off. Whoever this Charlotte was, she was another shifter, but not one I recognized. She wasn’t a Silverstreak wolf, and if she were from any of the neighboring packs, I would have recognized the scent.

I returned to my living room with two mugs, placing them in front of Charlotte and my mother. Fiona glanced up and offered me a small smile. “Thank you, Remus.” She took a sip of the tea. “I’d like to introduce you to Charlotte Birch. Her parents are old family friends of mine.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” the young woman said, leaning across the table to offer a hand. It was immediately clear that she’d come from the United Kingdom. *Old family friends indeed.*

I could already hear red flags flapping all around me, but I took her hand anyways, giving her a firm shake. She was gorgeous, tall, and slender with dark skin and darker hair. Her eyes were the color of warm honey, and the smile she offered me seemed genuine. I knew immediately why my mother

had brought her here, even before Fiona spoke back up. “A pleasure,” I said gruffly.

Fiona beamed at us both. Charlotte sat back on the couch and sipped at her tea, and my mother cleared her throat. “Charlotte is here to invite you to visit her family’s pack, the Forest Heights pack. Their family has been protecting the Cambridge territory for generations.”

I couldn’t help but frown a little, looking between the pair of women. Forest Heights sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t focus on why that pack name rang a bell. “Now? You want me to go overseas right now?” *Didn’t she rip me a new one three days ago for going to Oklahoma? That’s within driving distance, not halfway around the world.*

“Yes,” my mother said firmly. Charlotte simply looked down at her cup, clearly sensing this conversation had nothing to do with her. “I think some distance would do you some good. Finding your fated mate would be even better, it will ground you. Help you become a better alpha.”

I bit my tongue; I was *not* going to have this argument with Fiona again, especially in front of a perfect stranger. Charlotte was looking more uncomfortable by the moment; she knew as well as I did that we weren’t fated mates. We’d have both felt it upon our first meeting — when I handed her tea, or she shook my hand. There was nothing. It was just two shifters exchanging pleasantries. If I went to England to look for a fated mate while staying with her family, it wouldn’t be with her.

When is my mother going to see how obsessive this behavior is?

When I didn’t argue, she flashed me a benevolent smile. My skin crawled. “I am not going to London right now,” I said firmly, trying my best not to let any anger creep into my voice. It was facts. It was just facts. “I am not going *anywhere* until Tala is safe. How can you even think about anything else right now?”

A bright shade of pink spread over my mother’s cheeks like wildfire; her fingers tightened around the mug. “Remus,” she hissed, her eyes darkening. “Do not speak to me like that when we have company.”

I wasn’t sure when Charlotte became *our* company, but I still felt bad for the woman. She probably had no idea what she was agreeing to when my mother invited her to visit Texas. I sighed and offered her a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry, Charlotte. I don’t mean to waste your time, but there are some... family concerns we need to handle before we can think about anything else.” I was quite sure my mother hadn’t mentioned that bit. To the

woman's credit, she simply inclined her head, offering me a graceful smile.

"No need to apologize, Remus. Some things are outside of our control. I hope it can be resolved as quickly as possible," she replied.

I found myself liking her, despite my inclination to dislike her simply because my mother wanted us to get together. She seemed like a genuinely nice person who had no idea what she walked into, and I couldn't blame her for that. Furthermore, she didn't seem to hold any ill will towards me, either. Whoever her fated mate truly was, he would be a lucky man — but it wasn't me, and I didn't want it to be.

My mother set her mug down with a thud. "Charlotte, thank you so much for coming over. I need to discuss a few things with my son — I'll have one of my men take you downstairs to the spa, and then we can have lunch together, all right?"

"All right," Charlotte replied, still amicable even though she'd barely had half of her tea. She stood and bid me farewell before my mother all but pushed her out the front door.

TO NO ONE'S SURPRISE, my mother came storming back just a few moments later — I wasn't even sure if Charlotte was out of earshot yet. She slammed the door behind her and paced back to the living room; I hadn't moved from my chair, even if having a bagel sounded like a great idea. Fiona narrowed her eyes and pointed a finger at me. My wolf began to bristle, and it took all of my focus to keep him under wraps.

Not yet — no matter how ridiculous she's being. I didn't have many cards in my hand just now, and I couldn't go revealing the one ace I did hold.

My mother bared her teeth in an ugly sneer. "Remus Andrew Silverstreak, what on *earth* is wrong with you? Why would you *ever* air our family's dirty laundry like that in front of a guest? Do you even know how powerful her family's pack is? They control all of London!"

I fought the urge to roll my eyes or snarl back at her; if we got into a dominance struggle, there was no way I'd be able to keep my wolf's return secret any longer. "Wrong with me? What's wrong with you!? Tala is still missing, and even if I'm not the 'acting alpha'" — I couldn't resist putting it in air quotes — "I'm still useful, and I certainly still care enough about my cousin not to fuck off looking for someone who might not even *exist* while she's in danger! *Very real danger!*" I could list all the reasons why traveling

the world looking for my fated mate would be pointless and a waste of resources, but it was obvious Fiona wouldn't hear even one of them. I wanted to scream.

She stared back at me, her eyes glowing with rage; if she was a true alpha, I was certain she'd attempt to cast on me right now. "You could have thought of a more tactful way to put it. Besides, do you think I'm so careless I'd send you off if I thought you could be of any assistance in Tala's rescue?"

I jerked, stung by the accusation. "I'd be more useful if you didn't decide to sedate me," I seethed, fingers curling into fists by my thighs. I forced myself to take a breath, counting the inhale and the exhale. I didn't want to fight with my mother – not physically. If it were anyone else, I'd have challenged them immediately for the indignity. For the wrongness of *drugging* an alpha. She probably knew that, too, knew her status as my mother granted her special protection. My anger roiled up again. "How do you think this is okay? How do you think *any of this* is okay? Where the hell are your priorities, Fiona?"

"I could ask you the same thing, Remus! Where on earth are your priorities? I thought if I continued to guide you, this would get better, but I swear, you're getting more ornery and more arrogant, just like *him*."

I frowned — that was the second time in the past week she'd implied this had something to do with my father; she'd never spoken ill of him before, and more importantly, he'd been gone for years. It had nothing to do with him. If he were still alive, I seriously doubt he'd be pushing the fated mate tangent as hard as my mother was.

"What are you talking about?" I growled. "That's the second time you've made some shitty remark about my father — what aren't you telling me?"

Fiona took a step back, placing her hands on her hips. "I'm not hiding a damn thing, Remus. Why would I need to hide anything?"

"I don't know," I shot back, standing from the chair. I folded my arms over my chest. "But you've never said a negative thing about him until this week, and now it's like everything that's wrong with me is his fault? Cut the shit. I'm not buying it."

My mother hesitated for a moment, narrowing her eyes as she tried to stare me down. I didn't move an inch. "No one's perfect, Remus."

"Obviously." This time, I didn't fight the urge to roll my eyes. "But this goes way beyond 'sometimes he forgot to put the toilet seat back down.' What. Aren't. You. Telling me?"

Fiona stared a little longer before shaking her head and dropping her arms. “You were never supposed to lead this pack, Remus. I thought if you were born and raised in it, that it wouldn’t matter — but I was clearly wrong on that account.”

I balked. “What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?” I hissed.

Fiona sighed. “It means I was already married when your father came to London, and I met him for the first time. Pregnant with another man’s pup.”

What? I could not believe what I was hearing. Somehow, this was even harder to process than the idea that my mother had sedated me. *What the hell is she talking about? I’m Remington Silverstreak’s son. Obviously. I look like him. I talk like him. This just has to be another one of her stories as she tries to manipulate me into doing something.*

My mother kept talking, taking my stunned silence as a ‘go on.’ “This is why I know exactly how powerful the bond with your fated mate is. I had no intention of ever coming to the United States. I was in love — or I thought I was — and pregnant. I was going to take him as my mate, and he’d be an alpha someday, and it would all be fine... but then Remington showed up, and my perfect idyllic life didn’t matter anymore. I could not imagine being with anyone else, not even for a moment. He felt the same — he felt so strongly he had no issue raising someone else’s baby as his own. He wanted no one but me, and I wanted no one but him, so that’s exactly how it was. I didn’t have to think any further; I knew it was right.”

I didn’t move an inch, completely flabbergasted by the story. It was simple, without the embellishments of all the others — it rang of truth, even though I’d never have guessed. Remington Silverstreak had never treated me as anything less than his son and heir. Our wolves had even looked similar. There was no reason to... I sucked in a sharp breath, finally remembering how to breathe.

“I don’t regret it, Remus. I want you to know that,” my mother said, holding her chin high. She turned for a moment, retrieving her pocketbook off my couch and fishing something out of it. In her hand was a small white envelope, which she handed over to me.

After a moment, I took it. “What is this?”

“Something I’ve been holding on to in case this day ever came. I need you to read it before I leave.”

I scowled and stared down at it as if this cursed piece of paper was the source of all my issues. As if it had lied to me for the past twenty-eight years.

It was my father's handwriting — Remington's handwriting — the only father I'd ever known. I stared at it for several long moments before finally flipping it over and retrieving the letter inside.

DEAR REMUS,

IF YOU ARE READING THIS, then I cannot tell you this in person, and your mother has decided that it's in your best interest to know the truth. Before I say anything else, know how sorry I am I couldn't have had this discussion with you in person, man to man.

*The truth is, Remus, you **are** my son. It does not and has never mattered to me that we don't share the same blood; you are the only son I ever could have wanted or needed. You are my child, and there was nothing in the world that could have changed that. Nothing.*

But you know now, then, that your sire is someone else. His name is Nicholas Archer. I didn't keep tabs on him because I had no reason to, but he was the man your mother intended to marry before we met. The Longbow pack is a strong pack based in northern England. In theory, he should be the alpha by now, but you know how things go — I am sure the name and the pack are enough to get you started if you ever want to get in touch with the man. You know you are not obligated to, but if you want to, know that it is your right.

I feared, once, that I made a mistake — not in raising you, but that I was not setting you up for success. An alpha is bound to his pack by his blood... or that's what they say. But then I thought, how are new packs formed? What happens when an alpha does not have a son of his own? Someone must take the pack, and that someone is you. I hope I have taught you well enough. You are clever and smart — you have such a way with people. I know the wolves of our pack will love you, and I know you are a good soul, Remus. You will take care of them the way they deserve.

I LOVE YOU, Remus. Do not think for a moment it was ever otherwise.

—*REMINGTON*

LUNA

James Ulfric's Estate

Travis County, Texas

I was sitting on the porch, contemplating if it was too late in the season for watermelon lemonade. *Probably*. They usually lasted through September, but we were getting to the tail end of the month. I sighed, about to fish my phone out to figure out what sort of produce *was* in season this time of year, when the screen door opened. I glanced over, watching my grandfather plunk himself down in the Adirondack chair next to mine with a heavy sigh.

“Long day?” I asked, raising a brow.

He looked over with a dry grimace. “Fiona called me,” he muttered. “Asking for advice.”

“Ah,” I replied, looking back down at my hands. I got the feeling James didn’t particularly care for her, but he was still loyal enough to the pack he wouldn’t say so out loud — or perhaps he was simply that loyal to Remington Silverstreak. Fiona was his mate, after all, departed or not.

When he said nothing else, I cleared my throat. “So... did you give her any?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Not really. She wants my help with Remus, thinks I might be able to sway him since I was his father’s beta. Maybe he’ll listen to me even though he’s not listening to her.”

I exhaled softly, resisting the urge to snort. Honestly, I had no idea what kind of relationship James and Remus had, but I couldn’t say I took advice from any of my father’s friends. Then again, given how hostile things had become between Fiona and Remus... maybe an outside opinion would be more welcome. “Are you going to talk to him, then?” I asked, glancing back over at him.

My grandfather eyed me for a moment. “She’s already told him about his father — his biological father — so I don’t see why not.”

I worried my lower lip, butterflies springing to life in my gut. “What are you going to tell him?”

“The truth, if he needs to hear it from someone else,” my grandfather replied, shrugging. “I can imagine that news is hard to take.” He frowned. “Well, no, actually. I can’t imagine being told my Da wasn’t my real Da,

especially after almost thirty years. So, I'll tell him the truth and do my best to counsel him after that. I'm sure he has questions that Fiona won't — or can't — answer." He paused for a moment before looking back at me, expression pensive. "He ought to know about the baby, too. Remus needs to get his head on straight — he has more than himself to think about. Maybe knowing will help him realize he can't handle this whole Marnet thing alone; it'll encourage him to seek help."

"I want to come with you." The words were out of my mouth before I could think about it, but I didn't take them back.

My grandfather frowned at me. "No."

I shook my head. "I'm going with you," I said, more insistent.

"Luna, no. It's dangerous, and Fiona doesn't know about the baby yet, so who *knows* what she told the guards to do if you showed up."

It was a fair point, but I wasn't so easily deterred. "I'm going with you," I said again. "That news should come from me and no one else. I don't want you telling him." It wasn't a point I was going to give up on.

James exhaled loudly, staring at me for another moment before turning and shaking his head. "Damn Ulfric women. You're just as bad as your grandmother was." He looked back at me. "Fine. You're right. That news should come from you — but you do as I say so I can keep you safe from that woman if push comes to shove, you understand?"

THE RIDE to Austin was nerve-racking, even if it was only an hour and we would see Remus. There was no one else I'd rather see, and I had no doubt I wanted to be the one to deliver this news, but... Intrusive thoughts kept bubbling up.

What if he doesn't believe me?

What if he doesn't believe he's the father?

What if he doesn't want to be a father?

If we'd discussed children before, it was only in passing. I couldn't recall him saying he wanted pups — admittedly, I couldn't remember him saying he *didn't* want them, either, but I was having trouble focusing on that part.

My wolf felt like a caged animal, pacing back and forth as we pulled up in front of the lavish apartment building. Since we'd learned the cause behind my illness, it felt like her entire focus had shifted. She wanted to be with Remus — Remus was safe, and she wanted this child to be safe. I wanted

that, too. I *wanted* to raise this baby with him.

But what does he want?

My grandfather and I rode the elevator in silence, and I fell in step behind him as we approached the penthouse. We weren't even within arm's reach when one of the massive guards stepped forward, his burly arms folded over his expansive chest. "She isn't allowed in," he growled, his eyes flicking from James to me.

My grandfather snorted, giving the taller man a bored look. "I was instructed to talk sense into Remus," he replied coolly, mirroring the guard's stance. "Fiona told me to do what I needed to do to get that man to see reason, and that's exactly what I'm doing." He raised a brow. "Do you want to be the one to tell her Remus is still being difficult because you stopped me from doing my job?"

The pair of guards exchanged a look. I could have sworn one of them grimaced. "Fine," the first one said, stepping out of the way. "But you better not fuck this up."

James waved them off, leading me to the door, and stepped inside. It was unlocked, but that didn't surprise me. Fiona didn't need to stop anyone from getting in — she had to stop Remus from getting out.

We walked inside, and to my surprise, Remus was nowhere to be seen. The familiar smell of him hit me like a brick to the chest, and I sucked in a sharp breath, overwhelmed with the intensity. All at once, our last conversation came back to me — or rather, our last argument.

What if he listened? What if he left to find his fated mate? I shook my head as I tried to shake the thoughts off. *No, be reasonable, Luna. If he'd left, Fiona wouldn't ask your grandfather to come over and talk to him.*

My heart fluttered like a caged bird anyways, my wolf whining softly as the sound of footsteps broke the silence. Remus appeared from the study moments later, a book in his hand. His head jerked up abruptly, eyes wide as he stared at us. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, breathless.

He didn't wait for an answer. The book fell to the floor, forgotten, and Remus closed the space between us in long, hurried strides. I'm not sure he even noticed my grandfather, his gaze glued to me as he wrapped his arms around me, cradling me against his body. I froze for a moment, stunned to be greeted so warmly, but then I inhaled, and that familiar warm scent of whiskey, wool, and *alpha* surrounded me. I returned the embrace, squeezing him in a tight hug until he finally stepped away, looking me up and down.

“Are you all right? Did anyone hurt you? I fucking swear, if they so much as laid a finger on you—”

“I’m all right,” I said, trying to cut him off before he got too wound up. “No one hurt me. They just put my mom and me in a car and took us to my grandfather’s house. I’ve been there since.” I nodded over at the man, who appeared to be trying to look casual and failing abysmally.

The mention of my grandfather seemed to snap Remus out of his reverie. He took another step back and gave the man a sharp look. “Why are you here?” he demanded, a cold edge creeping into his tone. “As lovely as it is to see Luna, I’m sure my mother did not permit this.”

My grandfather grimaced. “As a matter of fact, your mother has stipulated that if Luna seeks contact with you, both she and I will be banished from the pack,” he informed the man dryly, ignoring the rumbling growl that escaped the alpha. “I just happened to think it was rather shortsighted of her.”

“I would never allow them to do that,” Remus snapped, looking between James and me. “But all the same, you shouldn’t have risked it. Fiona has spies everywhere. She’ll know.”

It almost sounded paranoid, but then, my mother hadn’t drugged me. Perhaps he had the right to be paranoid.

My grandfather ignored the tone, wandering over to Remus’ living room and sitting down. He motioned for me with one hand, and I allowed myself to be summoned, sitting on a couch nearby. “Fiona instructed me to come and ‘talk some sense into you’ now that you know the truth about your father and Remington Silverstreak,” my grandfather said, leaning forward. “Sit down, Remus.”

Remus stared at us before joining me on the couch, leaving less than an inch of space between us. I didn’t mind. It was nice to feel his warmth radiating against my side again, no matter the time of year. “You knew?”

James snorted. “Of course I knew. I was his beta. What kind of second would I be if I didn’t know that?” He shook his head. “I was on that damn trip to London, you know. I thought it was all kinds of foolish at first, but if my alpha wanted to try to find his fated mate, it wasn’t my place to stop him. He had the money to travel. His uncle was capable enough to watch over the pack, and it was a peaceful time. The risks were minimal.”

“So, what happened?” Remus prompted, his hand squeezing my knee. “I need — I need to hear the story from someone else. From my father’s side, I guess. Or as much as it can be.”

My grandfather nodded and leaned back, drumming his fingers against the chair's arm. "We were in our early twenties, maybe twenty-two. Twenty-four? I don't know; it all blurs together. Your father had finished college, and I'd gone to trade school and finished long before. He'd been alpha for over a year. As I said, it wasn't a chaotic time. He hadn't had any luck attending Moonmate ceremonies here, and he thought finding his fated mate would bring more stability for the pack. He was like that.

"We went one summer. First time I had ever left the country, though he'd traveled before. I think that's why he had the idea to try England — his parents had taken him when he was young, and he had some family friends there. We tried Scotland before England, just because our flights, but — I'm rambling. Anyway, we got to London. Met with the families he knew, and still no luck. We stopped for coffee before we traveled to Wales that evening, and I was tuckered, but then he met her. Entirely out of the blue. Just like the stories say, I guess. One minute, my alpha goes in to get us coffees, and when he returns, he's forgotten why he's gone in there at all, but he's got a girl's number, and the drive to Wales is off.

"I was shocked, to say the least. I thought, 'how could he be so sure'? I know now — I met my Caroline the following summer at a ceremony in Florida — but at the time, I was still skeptical, at least until I saw them together." My grandfather sighed and shook his head. "It was sort of messy, given that she was seeing someone at the time. The beta in me was afraid we would have to challenge the man, especially once she told Remington she was pregnant. She didn't have to. She wasn't showing. It was early yet. She could have tried to fool him into thinking you were his all along, but... she didn't, for what it's worth." He shrugged.

"But that's what we decided to do with the rest of the pack so no one would question her. Or you. Claimed it a whirlwind romance — they sealed their bond before we even got on the plane back to Texas. Doctors just thought you came a few weeks too early, that's all. But you were healthy enough, as shifters are prone to be, so no one was too concerned. You know the rest."

I glanced over at Remus. His face was hard for me to read, tiny flickers of emotion passing across his eyes. After a moment, he licked his lips and inclined his head. "And my father — my biological father. Do you know anything about him?"

My grandfather hummed thoughtfully, scratching at the stubble on his

chin. “I only met him the one time. Nic? Nicholas? That’s it. He was an alpha’s son; his father was still around. It wasn’t his pack yet. He was... well, frankly, real reasonable about the whole thing. I thought it would be a challenge, you know — a proper one. Only one alpha would be left alive. Fiona could barely hold herself together when Nicholas and Remington met. But... as I said, he was real civil. Guess he could see the connection between the two of them. Suppose if he did challenge your father and won, he’d have killed the fated mate of the woman he loved — and how could she ever be with him after that?”

I frowned, the story tugging at my heartstrings. I didn’t know this man, but I felt bad for poor Nicholas, in a sense. It was a no-win scenario; my grandfather was right. Even if he won the challenge, Fiona would resent him forever. His only other option was to let her go. *Life’s a bitch.*

Remus sighed, squeezing my knee again. “Do you know how—”

The door slammed open before he could finish his query. Heels clicked across the floor, followed by another set of footsteps. “James Ulfric, I told you to talk sense into Remus, not encourage him!” I didn’t need to turn around to know it was Fiona, the chills running down my spine were enough to tell me that.

My grandfather and Remus were already on their feet. “You asked me to talk to Remus, so I’m using everything at my disposal to give me the best chance of success,” James replied calmly, if not a bit dryly. If my stomach wasn’t currently working itself into a ball of knots, I might have been amused by his sardonic sense of humor. “You want him to listen? You have to talk to him, not continue to shriek like a harpy. You know Remington would never handle it like this.”

Fiona’s eyes blazed as she turned her attention to me. “I warned you,” she hissed, pointing a finger. “Bane, remove her.”

Bane stepped forward, his expression dark. I pushed myself back against the arm of the couch, but the beta didn’t get another step in before his back hit the floor with a loud *thud!* Remus sat on top of his chest, lips peeled back in an ugly snarl as he grappled with the other shifter. The tussle didn’t last more than thirty seconds before Bane suddenly went limp, his hands falling to his sides as Remus snarled, “That is *enough.*”

I took a sharp breath, recognizing the bright red glow in the alpha’s eyes.

REMUS

Remus' Penthouse

Austin, Texas

A hush fell over the small crowd of people in my apartment. James had moved between my mother and Luna but hadn't moved since I'd tackled Bane to the floor. My beta remained limp beneath me; his chin tipped up to expose his throat as he refused to meet my gaze. The red still tinted my vision, so I did not look up lest I cast over someone I did not intend to.

"How?"

My mother was the first to speak. I bared my teeth in a wolf's grin, forcing myself to exhale as the red began to recede. "My wolf has been awake for over a week," I replied, only distantly aware of how gravelly my voice sounded. After a moment, I decided Bane had had enough and lifted myself off the other man. He said nothing, lying still for several moments even after I'd backed away before he picked himself up, retreating to where my mother stood.

She stared at me like I'd grown a second head, rather than exert a power she knew damn well I possessed. I lifted my lip a little further, and she shook her head, seemingly snapping out of her stupor. "That dose should have kept you sedated for at least another week," she hissed, as much to herself as anyone else. "I was assured —" She cut herself off.

I snorted and shook my head. "Maybe you don't know me as well as you think," I rumbled, forcing my wolf away from the surface. Aggravated as he was, I did not need him making any rash decisions for us. I moved, placing myself between Luna and Fiona. It was all well and good that her grandfather wanted to protect her, too, but I wasn't going to take any chances. "You are relieved as interim alpha, Fiona."

She spluttered, pointing a finger at me. "Wolf or not," she snapped, "you are still without allies, Remus. You don't have anyone in your corner, and the other packs haven't changed their minds about Silverstreak yet."

It was a valid point and not one I wanted to argue. Regardless of how she performed as acting alpha, my mother had many friends... and if they weren't friends, then she had countless allies. My father had trusted her, and

despite everything I learned, I knew they worked well together. They were a true match, and he relied on her to maintain several of his social connections. Those social connections were still serving her now, and the last thing I needed was for her to turn those against me.

I didn't want to fight with her anymore, but I wasn't going to lie down and let her manipulate me or those I cared about, either. "I know you care about this pack, if nothing else," I said, trying my best to keep the growl out of my voice. We didn't need to rehash the 'you poisoned me' debate; we would never see eye to eye on it. "If you want what is best for the pack, you need to *communicate* with me, not sedate me and try to get your way with no input." I paused. "My father left the title to me, Fiona — and he wouldn't have done that if he didn't think me capable of taking care of this pack."

Finally, she stopped arguing. The look on her face softened into something unreadable, but at least it wasn't outright rage — or disgust. She folded her arms over her chest, eyeing me warily for a few moments. "I suppose he did," she finally admitted, as if the small allowance physically pained her. Fiona exhaled heavily. "However..." She paused, finally looking over my shoulder at Luna and James like she'd just remembered they were there. "She has to go, Remus. She isn't your fated mate. There's no question about that. She *has* to go."

I sighed, about to argue — yet again — that Luna had little to do with whatever failings I might have recently demonstrated as an alpha, when her grandfather cleared his throat. "That is not going to be possible, Fiona," he replied casually, as if he were commenting on the weather, not refusing the Silverstreak matriarch.

"And why is that, James?" my mother demanded, her voice acidic.

I had to admit, even I was curious. I turned to look at him; Luna looked scared out of her mind. "I..."

I frowned, walking over to her to take her hand in mine. She looked like she'd gone three shades paler. "You what?" I prompted. "Whatever it is, it's fine. Neither Bane nor Fiona will lay a single finger or claw on you ever again," I rumbled, glaring over my shoulder at the last bit.

Luna shifted her weight back and forth from one foot to the other, looking down at my hand. After a moment, she gave a small nod as if giving herself an internal pep talk. "I haven't been feeling very well," she admitted, pursing her lips. "And it wasn't getting better, so I went to the pack doctor, and, uh... Well, I am... it turns out I am pregnant."

I felt like the entire world screeched to a halt around me. My mother was hissing something, and James was rumbling back at her, but I couldn't make sense of the words. It was as if they'd just started speaking German — no, as if they'd started speaking an alien language altogether. Something neither wolf nor human. I was still stuck on what Luna had said.

Pregnant? She's pregnant? Is that even possible? We'd been so careful — or for the most part, at least. When I thought about it, I remembered our short jaunt in the Guadeloupe Mountains — after the run. Or in the middle of the run, sort of. Or, whatever, the exact semantics weren't important, but that was several weeks ago at this point, so, technically...

It is possible.

The world started to come back into focus as I remembered I ought to breathe. "Impossible. Impossible!" my mother was shouting. "Why would you bring this up *now*? It's just too convenient — just another lie to keep your claws in Remus, or a place in this pack, or— Or—"

"Call the doctor," James replied, a growl starting to replace some of the calm in his voice. He pulled his phone out, already opening the contacts. "Call the doctor, Fiona. He's obligated to the pack. He'll tell you the truth, no matter what it is."

"Fine," she hissed, snatching the phone from his hand and tapping on the doctor's contact. The phone rang a few times before a receptionist answered. My mother wasted no time, demanding to speak to the doctor himself. When the poor woman on the other end of the line had the misguided sense to try to explain that he was busy, she was treated with an explanation of *exactly* who my mother was.

A few moments later, she held the phone out while clicking it on speaker, when the doctor said, "Hello? Fiona? This is Dr. Hayes."

"Good afternoon, Dr. Hayes," my mother said primly. "I am sorry to take you away from your busy schedule, but this is of the utmost importance."

"I understand," the man said grimly. "What is it I can help you with?" I rolled my eyes. *The poor man probably thinks there's been some sort of accident.*

"I need you to confirm Luna Highborn's pregnancy. I understand she's been to your office already."

There was a beat of silence before the doctor cleared his throat. "Fiona, I can't speak to you about someone else's health. Doctor-patient confidentiality applies to everyone, even if it's the alpha asking."

That's right, I realized, grinding my teeth. He thinks she's still the acting alpha. At least the doctor has a sense of his priorities.

Luna cleared her throat. "Uh, Dr. Hayes? Hi, it's me. Luna. It's okay. You can tell them the results of the test."

There was another pause on the line. "Oh — you're there too, Luna? Before I say anything, can you please give me your date of birth to confirm your identity?" Luna stepped a little closer so she didn't have to speak so loudly. She confirmed her birth date for the doctor.

"Thank you, Luna," Dr. Hayes said. He seemed still uncomfortable because there was another pause and a rustle of paper. "With her consent, I can tell you that we ran bloodwork and were able to confirm she is indeed pregnant. We can give a rough estimate of the date, but we will have a much better idea of the actual conception and due dates after the first ultrasound."

"I... I see," Fiona said, the blood draining from her face. Her eyes flickered from James to Luna and finally settled on me. "Well, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us, Dr. Hayes. I'll let you get back to your patients." She ended the call and handed the phone back to Luna's grandfather. I hadn't seen her that ghostly pale since my father had passed away. Her gaze drifted back to Luna, tracing down her frame and landing on her belly. Outwardly, she didn't look any different. Not yet.

"And the child — you're certain it's Remus'?"

"Yes," Luna replied quietly, a hand falling on her middle. "I'm positive."

My mother nodded repeatedly — I wasn't sure if she had actually heard the words. She drifted over to a chair like a specter, flopping into it like someone had dropped a bag of flour. It was nothing like the well-groomed woman I knew. Even her hair seemed tired, sagging around her face as she blew a loose strand away. "Sit. Everyone just... just sit."

James took the other armchair. After exchanging a glance with Luna, I led her back to the couch, wrapping an arm around her and securing her against my side. The only one who didn't sit was Bane, but that was fine by me. He'd retreated to the front door, looming like a misplaced gargoyle; I'd rather he were outside, the further away the better.

"This changes everything," Fiona sighed, her expression still distant.

"Of course it does," I agreed, tightening my arm around Luna's shoulders. She didn't say anything, but tucked herself a little closer.

"She knows, Fiona," James said, speaking up. "About Remus' lineage. She already knows."

She does? I stiffened a little, looking from James to my mother, but she seemed completely unbothered by the revelation, still a bit distant. Spacey. “Just as well,” she replied airily, waving a hand. It seemed to take another few moments before she snapped back to reality, her focus sharpening as she looked at Luna. “Under no circumstance are you to tell anyone what you know,” she said, but there was no heat in her voice. There was a cool sort of certainty. She didn’t need the venom to get her point across.

Luna nodded solemnly, not shying away from Fiona’s gaze. “I wouldn’t tell,” she replied, her voice soft. “It isn’t my business to tell. Besides...” She paused, grimacing wryly. “I know *exactly* how shitty it feels to have your family wielded against you like a weapon.”

Fiona frowned, opening her mouth to say something. Evidently, she thought the better of it and pressed her lips together, shaking her head. “I’m glad you understand,” she said instead. Her gaze shifted back to me, and I found the hair on the back of my neck standing up, unnerved by the expression on her face.

“Remus,” she said gravely, “meeting your father when I was pregnant with you was one of the hardest things I have ever experienced. I had never imagined loving anyone more than your biological father, but...” She sighed and shook her head. “Regardless, it was extremely difficult. If you were to meet your fated mate now, it would be impossibly difficult for you, too—”

“I won’t leave Luna. I won’t,” I replied, not letting her finish the sentence. “I won’t abandon my child, either.”

Fiona sighed, a weariness on her face I hadn’t seen before. “You say that, Remus, but I am telling you, you cannot understand the power of a fated bond until you experience it. I planned to take your biological father as my official mate and join his pack. I had no interest in leaving the country — as a matter of fact, I didn’t want that at all. But it was the choice I made to be with him — I *needed* to be with him.”

“Mom, I—”

“She’s right,” Luna interrupted, squeezing my elbow gently. “When I met Marnet. When I realized he was my fated mate...” She paused and shook her head, appearing both wistful and aggravated at the same time. “It was like the answer to every problem I ever had. He wasn’t the most handsome man in town, or the cleverest, or anything like that — but then suddenly he was, because he was mine. I couldn’t imagine not being with him, which meant I let him treat me pretty damn poorly because the idea of him not taking me as

his mate felt fatal.” She sighed and snorted, shaking her head. “Fate’s a real bitch sometimes, I guess. You can see exactly where it got me.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I glanced over at my mother, and even she seemed to be regarding Luna with a renewed interest. “I believe you do know, don’t you?” she murmured, tipping her head to one side like it was the first time she’d ever seen the other woman. “He was your fated mate. This entire time, you were telling the truth.”

To her credit, the woman beside me didn’t so much as flinch. She simply shrugged, as if this sort of disbelief was part of her daily routine. “Technically, Marnet still *is* my fated mate,” Luna replied calmly. “But he’s rejected me, and I have no interest in ever going back to that man, even if he were the last person on Earth.”

My mother sighed and shook her head. “I cannot begin to imagine what that must have been like for you,” she finally said, her expression still difficult to interpret. “Remington was my entire world, and not having him here...” She cut herself off and shook her head. “I cannot imagine, Luna. I am sorry you had to go through that, and I am sorry I did not believe you.”

I sat in stunned silence. I could count on one hand the number of times my mother had apologized to anyone, and over half of those apologies had been to my father. Luna stilled next to me, her hand falling away from my arm. “I...” She sounded just as shocked as I felt. “Thank you, Fiona,” she finally said.

Fiona sat back in the chair, tapping her fingers against her knee. Eventually, she spoke. “While I am still... less than thrilled you will not be going to England, Remus, it is obvious we need to refocus. Luna’s health and safety are of the utmost priority, as is the child’s. Given that Marnet reached out to her regarding Tala’s... safety, we need to make sure he doesn’t try anything else.” She grimaced as if the man’s very name tasted sour in her mouth. “Has he tried to contact you again, Luna?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. My grandfather has my phone.”

James grunted. “I don’t have it on me, but I’ve left it on, just in case someone tried to send messages.” He didn’t have to look at me for me to understand what he was insinuating. “As of this morning, she’d gotten a few spam calls about the warranty on her car and nothing else.”

My mother frowned. “I’m not sure if I’m more relieved or concerned for Tala,” she admitted. After a moment, she shook her head. “Very well. We’ll continue our efforts and make sure Marnet doesn’t get near her.”

To my utmost surprise, I agreed with my mother's assessment wholeheartedly. I gave her a slight nod. "That sounds like a perfect plan of action."

LUNA

Remus' Penthouse

Austin, Texas

No one expected Fiona and Remus to agree, least of all Remus and Fiona. They seemed to stare at each other for a moment before Fiona finally nodded and stood, brushing herself off like she'd had quite the ordeal. She looked around, and once she spotted Bane at the door, she gave a small nod. "Well, I will make some arrangements for you, Remus," she stated, already pulling out her phone. "Even if we can't get allies, we will make sure they don't become Marnet's allies instead." She paused for a moment, looking up from her screen to regard my grandfather. "James, would you walk down to the car with me? I would like your opinion on Sparrow and Chase Spade. You remember them, don't you?"

She paused, raising an eyebrow at him expectantly. My grandfather stood and looked at where I sat, still pressed against Remus. "I drove Luna here," he said, tipping his head in question.

I offered a small smile. "I'm fine, don't worry."

"If Luna needs to get anywhere, she can have any of my cars," Remus added, raising a brow. He didn't need to say the rest — he had no intention of letting me leave so soon. It was evident in the way his hand rested on my knee.

My grandfather gave us a long look, and I held my breath, half-expecting another lecture. Instead, the man just shrugged. "I'll have your phone waiting for you when you get back to the house," he said, tucking his hands into his pockets to amble after Fiona. "Now, tell me what the Spades have been up to," he murmured, allowing Fiona to launch into an explanation. Bane followed them out the door like a silent shadow, and then we were alone. *We were finally alone.*

I turned slowly, licking my lips as a few butterflies of anticipation began to flutter around in my stomach. Remus' eyes were already on me, burning not with Alpha red but a sort of hunger I hadn't seen since we'd first tangled up together. Slowly, I reached for his face, cupping his chin with my palm as I ran my thumb over his smooth jawline. "I missed you," I whispered as if speaking too loudly could ruin this moment. "I missed you so much."

Remus rumbled softly, shifting on the couch so he could pull me against his chest. “I missed you too, Luna,” he replied, brushing his fingers over my dark hair. “I thought about you every morning when I woke. You were my last thought every night before I fell asleep. I asked my mother every day if you were okay because I couldn’t stand the idea of you being anything else.” He leaned forward to press a gentle kiss to my crown, and my heart shivered in my chest.

The alpha didn’t stop there, kissing my temple, cheek, and then my jaw. I sucked in a sharp breath as he nibbled my earlobe, trying to twist away for a moment. “Hang on,” I murmured, and Remus pulled back, his brows knit together in confusion.

“Can you not... because of the baby?” He glanced between us, eyes falling to my stomach.

“What? Oh, no! No, that’s fine!” I said, turning bright red as I realized what he was assuming. “The doctor said that was totally fine. I just wanted to apologize — before everything, you know, blew up—”

Remus cut me off with a soft snort, tipping his head to press a searing kiss to my lips. “You don’t have to apologize for anything,” he murmured as he pulled me into his lap. His lips brushed against mine as he spoke, fingertips already finding their way under my shirt. “Nothing at all.”

I shivered again; I didn’t exactly agree, but it was hard to argue with him when the mere touch of his skin on mine sent heat coiling in my core. Remus’ hands were already on my hips, urging me closer to him. I glanced at the door just once before I allowed myself to follow his lead, shifting my legs so I could straddle his thighs.

He made a happy noise, and I could have sworn I felt his alpha thrum in his chest as he leaned in. His fingers trailed up my spine before slipping to map my hipbones, my flank. It had only been a few weeks, but it had felt like forever and a day. I leaned in closer, pressing our chests together as I pushed my fingers into his soft hair.

“Remus,” I sighed against his lips, eyes flicking up to meet his gaze. The expression there was so warm that I couldn’t help but smile. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you. How I’d do anything just to be near you again. Just to brush my hand against yours.”

He rumbled again; I could feel his lips move against mine as he grinned. “You can do so much more than that,” he teased gently, giving my ass a little squeeze.

I squirmed against him, unable to help my smile as I felt Remus' cock start to stiffen beneath me. All it made me want to do was squirm again, even if there were layers of clothing between us. *Why deny myself?* I gave another little wriggle, shimmying my hips as Remus growled, nipping at my lower lip.

"Minx," he murmured, getting a much firmer grip on my hips.

I wrapped my thighs around him automatically, squeezing his waist a little as I tried to find a way to slot us together even more closely. "I just missed you," I replied, trying to maintain the play of innocence.

"I can see that," Remus replied, moving from my lips to my jaw — to my neck. He pawed at my top, trying to access my shoulder and the skin beneath. A moment later, I felt the sharp prickle of his teeth against my flesh, and I gasped.

The breathy noise only spurred him on, and he growled, eyes flashing as he bit again, lapping at the reddening mark he left behind. "I missed you too. You were the only thing on my mind, Luna — whether I was awake or not."

The confession made me lean back and shudder, needing a breath. Remus took advantage of the moment to rise to his feet in one swift motion, his strong hands securing me against his front. The show of strength made my stomach clench and my thighs tighten. I didn't need to ask him where we were going; he deposited me on the bed a few moments later.

"Stay," he growled, untangling himself from my limbs to start stripping out of his clothing. I wasted no time, quickly shedding my shirt and unclasping my bra, tossing bits of fabric in every direction as I hurried to get naked. All I wanted was to feel his skin against mine.

Remus hadn't gotten more than one knee on the bed before I was reaching for him. "Touch me," I whispered, not caring how desperate I sounded. It had been too long. I *needed* him. "Finger me, Remus."

He sucked in a sharp breath, pupils expanding as he crawled closer, one hand on my thigh to tug me close. "You certainly don't need to ask me twice," he growled, kneading my skin a few times before dipping his hand closer, two fingers tracing the outline of my folds without actually giving me any satisfaction. I wiggled impatiently, trying to encourage him to go exactly where I wanted, and he gave a dark chuckle as he leaned in, kissing my skin again.

"You're already wet," he murmured, sweeping a single digit to collect some of the moisture and rub it between two fingers.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes, caught between desperation and exasperation. “You just have that effect on me,” I finally purred, tipping my hips towards him. “Are you really going to deny me?”

Remus couldn't help himself and laughed, but when he leaned forward to kiss me, I was granted the attention I so desperately craved. He slid two fingers inside me easily since I was already soaked for him. He rocked his fingers back and forth, his thumb rubbing perfect circles around my clit as I whimpered into his mouth. I might have had another witty remark for him, but at the moment, I wasn't capable of anything more than a whimpering moan. “Remus.” My voice sounded reedy even to my ears.

After a moment, I finally gathered enough of myself to reach for him, but I didn't so much as brush my fingers over his skin before he gently pushed my hand away. “Let me,” he murmured, his voice going gravelly with his desire. “Let me give you what you need, love.”

I whimpered again, writhing my hips as I encouraged him to go a little deeper. “You're all I need,” I finally managed, wetting my lips. “You're all I want.”

I could feel Remus smile against my skin as he paused in his worship of my neck. “And I'll make sure you get so much more than that,” he murmured, some of the pure *desire* tempered by an overwhelming sense of affection. My chest grew warm, and it wasn't simply how he was slowly taking me apart with his fingers. I couldn't stop moving, and the hand that found my breast and plucked at my nipple certainly didn't help matters. Remus didn't stop touching me, murmuring sweet nothings into my ear. I couldn't process the words.

All I knew was Remus. His scent, the taste of his skin, the feel of his skin on mine — the way his fingers touched me in all the right ways. He knew me from the inside out.

My orgasm caught me by surprise, shaking through me like an earthquake; my heart was the epicenter, threatening to pound right out of my chest as my eyes prickled with tears. It was so much, on the verge of too much, and yet completely perfect. “Remus!”

He coaxed me through the entire experience, his kisses gentle and soothing against my skin as I shook; all the tension from the past few weeks drained from me. It could have been moments or minutes. I didn't realize I'd closed my eyes until I opened them again, still breathless as Remus gently removed his hand. I surged forward, both of my hands on his shoulders as I

dragged him into a fierce kiss. “Lie back,” I whispered, splaying my fingers over his chest. He leaned back, and I gave a pleased purr, moving to straddle his waist. “Let me take care of you now.”

I couldn’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.

I LEANED against the pillow as I caught my breath, grateful Remus had the good sense to relocate us from the couch to his luscious sheets. After a moment, I rolled onto my side, slinging an arm around his torso as I anchored myself against him. His scent tickled my nostrils, and I sighed happily, burrowing my face against his shoulder. He made a pleased noise, shifting his arm to nudge me closer.

“I’m so happy to see you again,” I sighed, my eyes drifting shut. I know I’d already said it like twelve times, but it felt like I couldn’t express my joy. He hummed a pleasant sound, tracing lines up and down my spine. I drifted in and out of sleepy consciousness; eventually, another thought occurred to me.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Luna.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I opened my eyes again, but the happiness was short-lived. “How is Tala? Is she okay? No one has told me anything.” Admittedly, I didn’t think Fiona would be sharing that information with my grandfather, and she certainly didn’t consult my mother on any affairs either.

The smile fell away from Remus’ face, and my heart tripped over itself as he sighed. “I don’t know,” he admitted a moment later, shifting us both a little to better prop himself up against the headboard. “My mother has kept me under house arrest since the last time we saw each other.”

I grimaced, remembering Remus’ prone form sprawled on the floor, flashing across my mind’s eye. I tugged him a little closer. “I hope she didn’t keep drugging you.”

He growled; I felt it more than I heard it, a deep noise reverberating through his muscled chest. “No. The only reason she managed it at all the first time was because I would never have expected her to stoop so low,” Remus muttered, the hand on my back stilling. “She insists it was for the best, but...” He shook his head as he clenched his jaw.

My heart hurt for him, all tender and achy. I hugged him closer. “I’m sorry, Remus,” I murmured, leaning in to kiss his cheek gently. “There was

no reason she should have done that. Parents are supposed to protect you, not... not that.” I sighed. Arden may have never actually drugged me, but there were countless instances he could have protected me, and he didn’t.

Remus just murmured to himself, holding me closer as he turned something over in his head. I let him mull, aware there was little I could say to lessen the sting of what had happened. Eventually, he spoke again. “Apparently, she sought this specific drug out. It’s specifically for shifters, and she had to go to some sort of expert. I didn’t get the details — I don’t want them — but what if she’d gotten the dose wrong? I couldn’t sense my wolf for over a week, Luna. I’ve never experienced anything like it. It was terrible.”

I sighed and nodded; unfortunately, I’d had experience with that also. “After Marnet rejected me, I was afraid my wolf had died she was buried so far. I couldn’t connect with her at all — something similar happened when he found me in my father’s house, but... It’s not a feeling you ever get used to.” I shivered, and Remus tugged me even closer, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

“He won’t ever hurt you again,” he growled, staring at something in the middle distance.

We fell into silence, and I lay against him until the thoughts got too loud. I lifted my head from his chest. “What is going to happen to Tala?” I asked, pursing my lips together. I had kept running scenarios over and over in my mind over the past two weeks, but I hadn’t come up with any workable plans. At least with Remus here, I had someone who understood. My mother was sympathetic, but she hardly knew who Tala was outside of her title and relationship with Remus. “We can’t leave her with Marnet. He’s — He’s not a good person. Not at all.”

“He’s a fucking piece of shit,” Remus hissed, squeezing me too tightly. He seemed to notice himself a moment later and released his grip at once, running an apologetic hand over my side. “Sorry,” he murmured, kissing my temple. “There is no way in hell we are leaving her, though. My mother said she was working on it, and I do believe that. She’s always liked Tala. Maybe saw some of herself in her niece. I don’t know; it doesn’t matter.” He shrugged the thought off. “Now that I have my strength back, I’ll be assisting.”

I frowned, chewing on the inside of my lip. Part of me couldn’t really believe Fiona was so petty she hadn’t allowed Remus to help in the first place

— Tala was her family and was being held by a rival. Then again, the woman had drugged her son and taken over the pack. The rest of me had no trouble believing it at all. “I want to help,” I said after a moment. “However I can.”

“I know,” Remus huffed, finally looking at me. He studied me for a moment. “We’ll figure out what’s safe and go from there.”

I sighed, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. “I’m pregnant, Remus, not an invalid. It’ll be weeks before I show. Months, even.”

He shrugged, the corner of his mouth tipping up mischievously. “Still pregnant, though.”

The word made me pause for a moment. *Pregnant*. It still felt foreign, even to me. It didn’t feel entirely real, even if the morning sickness had been unequivocally *very* real. “You know,” I said, ducking my head, “I’m kind of shocked your mother handled it as well as she did. I mean, she made the doctor confirm, but I can’t really blame her. She’s so protective of you.” I couldn’t help but snicker at the face Remus made. “Seriously, though. I would have expected her to keep... I don’t know. Fighting the idea, I guess, even after hearing from Dr. Hayes?”

Remus hummed and nodded his head. “Honestly, me too,” he replied, pressing his lips together. “She was here just yesterday trying to convince me I should go to England to find my ‘fated mate.’”

I sucked in a breath. “Send you away? Even with Tala missing?”

“That’s exactly what I said.” Remus bared his teeth before shaking off the scowl. “But maybe that was why she kept pushing me so hard to try to find this person. By the time my mother was twenty-eight, she already had a little boy.” He gave me a wry smile, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“I bet you were adorable,” I cooed, imagining a toddler-sized Remus. I’d seen exactly one photo from his childhood, and he was barely in focus — the photo was of my mother, and he had just photobombed it like the little imp he was.

He laughed and shrugged. “What do you mean ‘were’?” he teased.

“Oh, do you need your ego stroked hourly? I’m so sorry, love,” I laughed, patting his chest. “You’re gorgeous. You know that, even without me telling you.”

Remus winked. “I do, but it sounds better when you say it.” His chuckles faded, and his expression sobered up a bit. “In all seriousness, I think having an heir for the pack is very important to her, and... Hell. Having something we can both agree on for a change will be refreshing.” He paused for a

moment. “Far better than anything else going on between us.”

I couldn't help but grimace on his behalf. “You mean the paternity thing?”

“I... Yes. I mean the paternity thing.”

I gave him a one-armed hug. “I can't even begin to imagine. How... how do you feel about it?”

He sighed, drumming his fingers against my ribs for a moment. “I don't... I guess I don't really know,” he admitted.

“That's okay. You don't have to,” I replied, watching his face. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Remus was quiet for a moment, and I assumed that was his answer before he nodded. “You know, I would never have guessed. It was never a question in my mind, you know? Sure, I wasn't a carbon copy of my father, but who's a mirror image of their parent?”

“Not me,” I huffed, and he gave a nod without looking at me, his mind clearly still whirling away.

“We looked enough alike, and I have a few of my mother's features as well. We shared some personality traits. He taught me as much as he could, and... he never treated me like anything other than his son. *Ever*. It was shit my mother said that made me question what was going on, not him.” Remus fell silent, his jaw working for several moments before shaking his head.

I paused, unsure how to comfort him, but it seemed Remus wasn't quite done. “You know, now that my mother's told me, I've started noticing things I didn't before. I always thought I was a blend of them both, but my eyes? They don't look like my mother's or father's — and now I can't help but wonder if that's what my biological father looks like. Or if we have the same build. Or if these traits my mother keeps complaining about really *are* his, or if she's just being nasty about it to try to get me to do what she wants. I've asked her for a picture of him, but she claims she doesn't have one. Said she cut off all contact once she moved to the US with my father.”

That made me pause, brows knitting together. “What? She isn't from the United States?”

Remus snorted. “Oh, yeah. It turns out she's from London. Who knew, right?”

“What? But she doesn't even have an accent!”

“That's what I said,” he murmured, giving me a wry look. “She told me she taught herself an American accent because she thought the pack would

like her better if she didn't sound foreign. But given how many lies she's fed me lately and how many truths she *hasn't* told me... who knows anymore."

I opened my mouth, but he kept going. It seemed now that I had uncorked the bottle, he couldn't stop the flow of grievances. "That means he probably doesn't even know I exist. I'm not sure if he even knew my mother was pregnant — if he did, he doesn't know what happened. If I was born alive, if I was healthy, any of that. I assume... I assume not, given what pieces of information she's felt generous enough to offer, but..." Remus exhaled sharply and shook his head. "It wasn't fair to him. I don't even know this person — and I love my father — but I still think it wasn't fair to him. And all because of some mate bond. My father came waltzing in and essentially whisked my mother away to Texas, and... what happened to him? All I have is a name. I haven't even been able to look him up."

I made a sympathetic noise as he finally fell quiet, reaching out to touch his hair. Clearly, he was still harboring some negative thoughts about mate bonds, but now was not the time to argue. Hell, my fated mate had treated me like a piece of garbage. When it came to that argument, I didn't have a leg to stand on, and at the moment, I couldn't blame him. I couldn't imagine what I'd do if someone told me tomorrow Josie wasn't my mother — or even if Arden wasn't my father, and we weren't close at all. Both of them were still living. Remus couldn't even talk to Remington about it.

"Well, I'm not sure how much it will help, but I think my grandfather is willing to answer any questions you have. He didn't seem impressed your mother had taken this long to tell you," I said, knowing it was a weak platitude at best. "Maybe we can try to meet your biological father once all this with Marnet is settled."

He frowned at me for a moment. "You'd want to do that with me?"

"Of course I would!" I frowned back. "Even if we go to England and can't find him — or he's wonderful — or he's a total jerk, none of that matters. You want to meet him, so I want to be there with you, regardless of what that means."

Remus studied me for a moment before nodding, squeezing me close. "Thank you, Luna," he sighed, kissing my head again. "I'll ask Fiona again when I see her tomorrow. There's a council meeting, so there's no way she can avoid me. She can't hide this from me forever."

REMUS

Fiona's Townhouse

Austin, Texas

It was nice to spend the morning in my apartment without a single guard. No one was standing outside my door to keep me in — not that I particularly wanted to leave, not with Luna there. My mother hadn't returned the technology she'd taken from me, and if she had come to interrupt the time between the two of us, well... it was for the best that she didn't. Luna hadn't gotten her phone back either, so we were stuck with bagels and butter. Even if my fridge had been turned back on, it hadn't been filled yet. The only creamer for our coffee was the shelf stable kind.

Despite all that, it was one of the best breakfasts I'd had with one plate in the middle of the table as Luna and I enjoyed the crisp morning air out on my terrace. "Nothing beats the view here," she sighed happily, her fingers wrapped around her mug. "I never thought I'd miss a city skyline, but... here I am!"

I chuckled. "It is a great view of the city," I agreed, "but it doesn't compare to Paris in spring or Sydney when the sun is shining."

Luna rolled her eyes, but there was a smile pressed into the rim of her mug as she took a sip. "My best comparison is Oklahoma City," she replied, poking out her tongue playfully.

"Would you like to go? Once this business with Marnet is concluded, I mean." I had told my mother I wasn't leaving for England until Tala was safe, and I had meant it. I wouldn't go for France or Australia, either.

Luna watched me for a moment, blinking. "To Paris or Sydney?"

I shrugged. "Either. Both. Or neither, if there's somewhere else you'd rather go. Don't people usually go on a trip before their baby arrives? You know, one last vacation, just the two of them — at least for a little while."

Luna laughed and shrugged. "How should I know? I've never had a baby before!" She shook her head. "Besides, I thought we were going to England to meet your father."

"Of course," I said, taking another sip of my coffee, "but that's not a trip for us. It's not romantic or anything." I shrugged. "I'd like to take *you* somewhere, Luna. Wherever you'd like to go. The sky's the limit."

“What if I wanted to go to the moon?”

“Then I’d see what I could do to get you on one of those SpaceX rockets, if that’s what you really wanted.” My eyes twinkled. “I know a few people.”

Luna nudged my shin with her toes under the table, and she shook her head. “You’re impossible. I think... maybe Paris, that’s supposed to be romantic, but do I have to decide right now? We have some more pressing issues to handle first. And I need to get my passport before we go anywhere.”

“You can think as long as you want,” I hummed, making a mental note to investigate passport expedition. I’d had mine since I was a child, and I had no idea how long it might take. Government bureaucracy was not going to stand in the way of my travel plans.

Luna smiled and leaned back in the chair. “Maybe I’ll do a little looking today,” she hummed. “Speaking of which, do you need to get ready? I thought you mentioned that the council meeting was in the morning.”

I sighed. The idea of gathering the council that had betrayed me to support my mother was unappealing at best, but I had no choice. It had to be done. “I suppose I do. Are you sure you’re all right? You don’t need me to drive you?”

“Remus,” Luna replied, raising a brow. “I will be fine. I’ll also have my phone back soon, so it’s not like I’ll be out of touch.”

“Fine, fine,” I groused, standing to pick up our plate. “I’ll see you later today, then.”

“Of course.” She stood, too, pausing to kiss me on the cheek before walking towards the door. “You can count on that.”

I ARRIVED at my mother’s Austin townhouse shortly before noon. I recognized a few of the cars parked in the guest spots; most, if not all, of the council had already arrived. That was fine by me. I was not in the mood for small talk and didn’t want to have to navigate nosy questions before the official meeting began.

I let myself inside and up the stairs into Fiona’s austere sitting room, ignoring the coffee and pastries her staff had set out for the others. A hush fell across the small room as the other shifters felt my presence, turning to watch me as I walked across the room. They were inconsequential. My mother broke away from the woman she was speaking to and approached me, giving a slight nod as she worried her hands. “Good morning, Remus,” she

murmured, clearly trying her best to form some sort of civility between us.

“Good morning,” I replied, willing to play along — for now. It remained to be seen whether she’d truly turned over a new leaf. “Are you ready to begin?”

“Yes... yes. No use in wasting time.”

I nodded and took my usual place at the head of her dining room table as she called for the rest of her guests to join us. There was some rumbling, but everyone did as they were asked — quite a few glances were shot my way. A few more eyebrows raised as my mother took her seat to my right instead of at the head, as I assumed she’d been doing in my absence. Even Bane looked a little flummoxed, gaze darting rapidly between myself and my mother as he shifted his weight awkwardly, like he wasn’t sure who he was supposed to stand behind.

That was fine. I wanted him nowhere *near* my back. I shot him a dark look and the man winced, turning away quickly. It served to send him to Fiona’s side, though, and that was well and fine for me. *Traitor*.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” Fiona said, breaking my venomous train of thoughts. “There are some matters we need to discuss.”

More eyes darted towards me and away again, I wasn’t bothered by it. I allowed my wolf to display his full power, just short of shifting, and they could all sense that. He growled as he paced just beneath my skin, his presence large and dominating even if he was restrained from actually pushing through. These people may not have explicitly helped my mother plan her coup, but they were complicit in that plan, and for that, they were all guilty of treason, no matter the degree.

“As you can see,” my mother pressed on, undeterred by the general sense of anxiety that surrounded the table, “Remus is back in full form and will be resuming his duties as pack alpha. As I am no longer needed as an interim alpha, I will be acting as his personal council instead.”

The shifty looks finally turned into whispers and rumbles. I pressed a hand against the table, this would not be allowed to last. My wolf snarled, and my eyes flashed with just the slightest hint of red; it was a reminder, not a threat. Or, at the very least, it wasn’t a threat yet. “If you have any complaints, I strongly suggest you keep them to yourself or see yourself out,” I rumbled, straightening my shoulders. “Plotting against your alpha is an act of treason, and it is only by my good grace that you are all still allowed at this table.”

The uncomfortable silence fell back over the other shifters like a wet blanket. Someone coughed into their hand, but no one else made a sound. After a moment, my mother spoke back up. “I take full responsibility for that decision,” she said, quiet but firm. “I had come up with the idea, and I saw it come to fruition myself. Council members were only involved if I needed their specific expertise, and it was not fair of me to ask them. That was a position one should not be put in, so I also request your leniency for them, Remus.”

“Mm,” I rumbled, not particularly moved by her speech. “Obviously, I am willing to grant it, but if anything similar happens again, you will wish banishment is the worst of your problems.” I bared my teeth. Hints of red swam in my peripheral vision. All the other shifters looked down at the table, tipping chins and baring necks. It was enough — for now.

“This is not the only order of business,” my mother said, steering the conversation back on track. “Marnet Claw continues to be a problem and holds one of our packmates hostage. After his initial contact, we haven’t heard from him since, not even trying to extort a ransom from us. If he isn’t going to come to us easily, we have to bait him back out. We can’t just leave Tala in his hands.”

“He got in touch with Luna the first time. Even though he rejected her, he’s still obsessed with proving something to her. If he doesn’t want the Silverstreak pack’s attention, maybe he’ll want Luna’s,” I suggested. I hated dragging her into it, but I knew Luna wouldn’t forgive me if we had the chance to rescue Tala, and I turned it down to protect her.

My mother nodded. “He does appear to care an abnormal amount about getting her attention,” she agreed.

I hesitated for a moment, thinking about the news Luna had shared only last night. It still felt private, and it certainly wasn’t something I wanted to share with this particular lot, but — I wasn’t sure how much choice I had. *Someone* was going to want to send her back to Oklahoma as bait, and there was no way in hell I’d let that happen, especially when she wouldn’t be the only one at risk.

I cleared my throat. “Luna and I are expecting a pup,” I announced and said nothing else, allowing that bit of information to sink in. A murmur of shock rippled around the group, expressions ranging from confusion to disappointment to outright surprise. All of these shifters were my mother’s age or older; I’m sure having a pup with someone you weren’t mated or

married to was horrifying, but I didn't care. It was my relationship with Luna and Luna's relationship with me — we didn't need any outside commentary on it.

After a moment, my mother reached over, setting her hand on mine. "Before any of you ask, it has been medically confirmed. Luna is pregnant," she said, holding her chin up high. It might have come as a shock to her, too, but it seemed Fiona was attempting to support me rather than counter me at every turn. I raised a brow but said nothing; the vision of us seemingly working together appeared to be just as effective as the threat of my Alpha. The murmuring died down as quickly as it had started.

One shifter cleared his throat. "I assume, then, that the baby will be born in the Silverstreak pack?" he asked, trying to disguise the hopeful look on his face.

I smirked, hoping it would mask my relief. "Of course. The pup will be born into our pack, and they will be my heir," I confirmed. It didn't particularly matter to me if they were a boy or a girl at this point. They were Silverstreak's future.

It was enough to satisfy the council for now, and the confused looks turned into nods and pleased rumbles. Someone else spoke up after a moment. "If Luna isn't going to return to Oklahoma, how will she get Marnet's attention?" a silver-haired woman named Lorelei asked. "I assume he still has her number, but we can't make him call."

I nodded; it was something I'd been thinking about all morning, too. I refused to use her as bait, but another idea had started forming since. "Marnet doesn't have to see Luna physically to think he needs to see her or reach out to her," I said slowly. Carefully. "A well-placed rumor or two should get his attention. Especially if those rumors are about Luna's... condition."

Lorelei raised her brows and gave a thoughtful hum. "Hm, yes. I see your point," she said, nodding. "How will we make sure this information gets to him, though?"

Before I could answer, the man seated next to her interrupted. "Isn't this recent news, though? Won't he know the baby isn't his?"

I sighed and shook my head, trying not to look smug as Lorelei did. "Women don't expand immediately upon conceiving," she snapped, giving him a fierce look. "They usually don't show until four or five months, and even then, a well-planned outfit can conceal the bump even longer. You and your wife had a daughter thirty years ago, Gary — you should remember

that.” Gary flinched, but she kept talking. “If Marnet wasn’t very attentive to her in the time before the Moonmate ceremony, it’s perfectly reasonable to assume he’d have no idea if she were off her cycle. Given how arrogant that man is, there’s no reason for Marnet *not* to assume the baby is his.”

Gary looked properly abashed that he’d questioned the issue at all. “Sorry, Lorelei,” he muttered.

“You ought to be sorry to your wife,” she sniffed, pushing a strand of hair away from her face. Lorelei turned back to me. “As I was saying, how will we make sure this information gets to Marnet?”

“I have some connections outside of the pack,” my mother said, “who I believe will be good... *sources* of information. Lorelei, Tim, I believe you both have some contacts to leverage as well. I would like to meet with you after lunch to arrange this.”

Both nodded, and I hummed.

“After Marnet gets this information, then what?” It was Gary again.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “He’ll reach out. If he has any belief it’s his child, he will reach out,” I said. “I didn’t have a shadow of a doubt. More likely, he will move to try to retain Luna if he can’t convince her to come back to Oklahoma on his own — which he won’t — but it *will* allow us to trap him away from the humans he’s using as protection.”

Another round of murmurs rippled across the group as council members nodded and considered the plan. “We will have to make sure it is foolproof,” someone else said. “We’ll only get this opportunity once — but I think it will work. There’s no way Marnet won’t come.”

I nodded, pleased they were seeing the wisdom in this plan. It wasn’t ideal, but Marnet was conceited enough that I knew he wouldn’t be able to resist the possibility once the rumor got to his ears. “We also still have Seff Blazepaw in Oklahoma. He’s been seeing Tala, and I am sure he’ll be open to any new plan to rescue her from Marnet as quickly as possible.”

“I believe I might also have a connection in Oklahoma,” said a third member.

“Me too,” added a fourth.

The ice had been broken; it was a plan they could see working, and suddenly they were all willing to contribute. *Good*, I thought, content to let my mother organize the next meeting for their joint gossip-spreading affair.

AS FIONA SAW her guests out, Bane hung back. The only reason I had lingered was because my mother had all of my things in her office for me to pick up — no one else needed to see that. I scowled as I stepped back into the sitting room to find the beta still standing there. I opened my mouth and then decided against addressing him. I had nothing left to say to the man I'd once considered my brother-in-arms — his betrayal had been absolute.

“Remus,” Bane spoke and I bristled, forcing myself to take a deep breath. I didn't turn, my wolf so on edge I was concerned I might deck the other man — and that was not something I wanted to do.

When I didn't respond, he sighed and kept talking as if he were resigned to it. “I didn't want to betray you, Remus. I swear on my life, I didn't. The only thing that concerns me more than your well-being is the well-being of the pack, and I felt the pack was suffering.”

I gritted my teeth and turned, at least giving the man my attention. He hesitated for a moment but then continued to speak. “You didn't seem to be thinking about them — the rest of the pack. There were wolves with concerns that weren't being met. Not just ‘not met,’ it's like you didn't even notice. I barely recognized you. I don't know if it was our plan for the Lupus Claw pack or Luna or what, but...” Bane trailed off and shook his head. It was the most I'd heard him say at once in... possibly as long as I'd known the man, which was most of my adult life.

“Look. I know I was wrong. I should have tried harder to say something to you, but you were on some sort of power trip. Fiona was the only one who would listen and I could trust with the pack's welfare. I thought she'd look out for your best interest, too.” I didn't comment on that; I supposed one *might* assume that of their friend's mother, but I had just managed to make it through the entire meeting without getting angry at Fiona, and I didn't want to ruin that now.

He might have a point, though.

Bane had made a few subtle hints that I had written off as ‘annoying’ or ‘worrying too much,’ and perhaps I should have listened more carefully to what he was trying to say. *I hate that he might have a point.* Bane did, though, and I had to accept that if there was going to be any moving past it.

He still hadn't moved. I realized he was waiting for a response. I scowled. “Look. It was not an ideal situation. I get it. But you escalated it entirely too far. You betrayed me — as my beta and as my friend. I can't trust you, Bane. Not with anything.” I shook my head. “You're released as Silverstreak's beta.

As Fiona seems fond of you, you can continue to work as her personal security.”

Bane winced but held his tongue. I turned away. With nothing else to say, I gathered my things and headed toward the front door.

Great. Another thing to add to my to-do list — find a new beta.

LUNA

James Ulfric's Estate

Travis County, Texas

When my mother and I arrived back at my grandfather's home, there were several cars I didn't recognize. My mother's face closed off a little as she switched off the ignition as if steeling herself before turning to me. "I almost forgot — your grandfather has us all over once a month. Dinner, lunch, it sort of changes." She sighed and shook her head. "We haven't told anyone about your..." She paused and glanced around, but there was no one else outside. "...pregnancy. I think that would probably be better kept between us for now." I told my mother not long after I got the news from the doctor; without access to the Internet, I needed *some* sort of advice, and talking to my mother was less uncomfortable than talking about pregnancy with my grandfather.

I snorted. "You don't have to tell me twice." After seeing how two-faced my cousin Brooke was at my mother's party, I had no intention of blindly trusting anyone else in the family, Ulfric or not.

My mother gave me a wry smile. "They can be a bit gossipy, can't they?" she sighed, shaking her head. "Well, with that in mind, they don't need to know we were under house arrest here, either."

I couldn't help but give a dry chuckle. "Your secret is safe with me, Mom."

Thankfully, no one seemed that surprised to see my mother and me walk in the door. No one bothered me as I went down the hall to put my bags down, allowing me some much-needed space — and a moment to gather my nerve before seeing the rest of the family. Before I could step back into the hallway, my phone buzzed. I glanced down, smiling at the name. *Remus*.

MEETING IS DONE. Fiona returned my things. I'll be there to talk to James and pick you up soon.

I PAUSED and typed a quick response. *Drive safe.*

SENDING THE MESSAGE OFF, I tucked my phone into my pocket and headed back toward the kitchen. My grandfather was easy to find; I wouldn't say he was *hiding*, not exactly, but he was standing back as the aunties and cousins all chatted at the table. I crept over to where he was fiddling with the coffee machine, trying to hide my smile. It was what my mother had done when she wanted to get away from her sisters, too. He inclined his head in my direction as I approached. "Remus is on his way to come and pick me up," I murmured softly. "He mentioned he wanted to speak with you about something while he's here."

My grandfather gave a small nod, frowning when the coffee pot sputtered and did little else. I raised a brow. "I usually drink tea," he muttered quietly, "but the girls all prefer coffee in the afternoon. At least until summer." He shook his head. "Anyway, thanks for letting me know, Luna."

I smiled up at him, nudging him with an arm to take care of the cranky coffee machine. His expression softened a little more, and for half a minute I felt at peace. Unfortunately, it was short-lived. As soon as there was a lull in the lively conversation at the table, one of my aunts looked up and spotted me helping at the counter. I offered her a small smile, recognizing her as Brooke's mother, Jackie, and she scowled. Cold dread blossomed in my stomach.

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

I blinked, taken aback by the question. I glanced at my grandfather; his expression had gone stony, but he said nothing.

"What do you mean?" I asked, wishing I had something else to do with my hands. "Mom and I were hanging out together and—"

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Jackie snapped. "I mean here. Austin. *Texas*. My father's house, for that matter. You never did answer us before, you know, and I've tried to give you the benefit of the doubt — I really did — but I just can't keep it to myself anymore."

My mouth snapped shut, and I glanced briefly at the table. My mother's face was turning red, but I couldn't tell if that was embarrassment or anger. My cousins were all looking anywhere else — at the table, at the wall, at their hands. Anywhere to avoid what was happening. One of my other aunts leaned over, trying to touch Jackie's hand, but she simply jerked it away,

eyes locked on me like a dog with a bone — or a wolf with scent.

“Why are you *really* here, Luna? Are you some sort of spy for Marnet? Is that how you got so close to Remus so quickly?”

“Wh— *What?*” I’d been called a spy before, but suggesting I had some sort of powers of seduction? It was almost laughable — next to me, my grandfather snorted loudly.

“Brooke and Celine are lovely girls, you know. Wonderful. They have their father’s smarts, and I’d like to think I’ve given them good culture. Wonderful, independent, agreeable — the two of them are *catches*, quite frankly, and any alpha should be grateful to have a woman like that interested in them; and what does Remus do? He doesn’t even give them the time of day. We’ve gone to every Moonmate ceremony this side of the Mississippi, every event the Silverstreak family hosts — and nothing. Barely a smile. That man has no sense. He’s completely out of touch with the pack these days. I mean, honestly—”

The front door swung open, and the entire energy of the room shifted. A *presence* rolled through, and I almost shuddered with it, my wolf responding immediately to the familiar feeling. Warmth thrummed through me, and if I wasn’t witnessing a grown woman’s temper tantrum just now, I might have smiled. The look of horror that crossed her face as she recognized an alpha’s presence as he entered the house. She whipped around almost comically, getting to her feet as Remus strolled casually into the kitchen. Everyone else was so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop.

“Mr. Silverstreak,” she gasped, clutching for the pearls that didn’t hang around her neck. “I am so—”

Remus held up a hand, effectively silencing her. “Some of your critiques are justified,” he said, and I swore I could have knocked Jackie over with a feather at that moment. I tipped my head, curious; Remus of a month ago might have put my aunt well in her place for going off like that, frustration or not, and I was curious what this version of Remus had to say instead. “It’s true that my father was a more... personable, if not involved, alpha. I had focused the majority of my attention on things I thought would benefit the pack as a whole, but I neglected some of the individual parts, and I apologize for that. I could have spent more time getting to know both individuals and families, but I didn’t. It was shortsighted of me.” He took a breath.

“As far as my mate — or lack thereof — it has always been my choice not to take a romantic partner. I felt it would be more of a hindrance than an

asset. My main focus was taking over the duties my father had left as pack alpha to the best of my ability, to the neglect of many other aspects, as I just mentioned.” The expression on his face turned wry. Some of the color had returned to Jackie’s face, though she still looked fairly faint. She tried to muster a small smile anyway. “Romance was not on my radar. I had no interest. I am sure both of your daughters are lovely women when one gets to know them, Jackie, but that’s no reason for you to be suspicious of Luna. I would have expected more empathy from kith and kin than that.”

My aunt opened and closed her mouth several times, looking like a fish out of water as her brain struggled to kick back into gear. After another moment, she finally shook herself, looking Remus in the eye. “I apologize,” she murmured quietly, dipping her head in the alpha’s direction.

To my surprise, she turned towards me next. “Luna, he’s right. I have no reason to be so suspicious, and I’m sorry I said those things to you. I know better than to speak out of frustration.”

Before I could say ‘it’s okay’ or anything else, she murmured something else and excused herself from the table, abandoning her coffee mug and disappearing down the hall. I heard the screen door a moment later. Brooke was the only one to move, murmuring something else before hurrying after her mother outside. No one else said anything.

Apparently immune to the growing sense of awkwardness in the kitchen, Remus strolled over to me, tangling our fingers together like we were the only people in the room. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I said, smiling up at him. “I’ve heard much worse.” Before he could start frowning, I added, “I appreciate what you said, though.”

My grandfather cleared his throat gently, bushy eyebrows raised once Remus glanced over. “Why don’t we go to my office for a moment?” James suggested, ushering us both out of the kitchen and towards the room at the end of the hall.

RAPID CHATTER HAD BROKEN out behind us as soon as the office door closed, several women all talking at once — it was probably for the best. As soon as we were seated, Remus began detailing the meeting at his mother’s house to my grandfather, including her surprising support of him as well as the plan he and the rest of the council had settled on going forward.

I sighed, leaning back against my chair. “I don’t love this plan,” I

admitted, fiddling with the fabric on the cushion. “But I think it sounds... well, plausible.”

Remus turned to me, his expression grave. “Believe me,” he murmured, “if I thought there was any way to do this without involving you and the baby, it would have been my first choice.”

“I know,” I replied, offering him a small smile. And I did. I did know that. I needed no evidence. It was a simple truth. The sky was blue. The sun rose in the east. Remus would never put me in harm’s way if he had any other option.

The alpha gave me a wry smile. “Besides. I am pretty sure you would claw the eyes out of anyone who attempted to lay a hand or paw on your child,” he replied, something mischievous in his dark eyes.

I made a face, but my chest felt warm anyway. It felt good that Remus had that sort of faith in me. I knew I wasn’t any sort of fighter, but I hadn’t lived this long by accident, either... and I was starting to feel like maybe I had gotten a bit stronger over the past several months since that fateful Moonmate ceremony. It wasn’t something I was willing to admit out loud, but if someone else could see it...

Maybe it’s not just in my head.

“You won’t have just Remus looking out for you, either,” my grandfather added, interrupting my thoughts.

Remus nodded. “Exactly. But we need to see if he’ll take the bait before we move on to Plan B — or whatever we’ve come up with by then. This is the most feasible.”

James hummed and leaned back in his chair, studying the ceiling for a moment as he fiddled with a fountain pen in his fingers. “I think I have a few favors I can call in,” he decided after a moment, looking back at Remus. “Should at least be able to get more detail on exactly what Marnet is up to these days, at least in Oklahoma — and ancestors help us if he’s made any headway in Texas.”

My grandfather’s expression darkened, and Remus looked like he might start snarling at the mere idea. The shared aggravation was short-lived; James’ face lit up with another idea. “Did you get any information on your biological father from your mother?” he asked.

Remus shook his head. “No. Bane intercepted me after the meeting, and I had no interest in lingering in Fiona’s townhouse after that.”

James snorted. “Well, try to get that information, would you? I seem to

recall his family had some connections. He was the oldest son of the alpha, so I imagine he is the alpha of the London pack by now.”

Remus quirked a brow. “Connections that could help us all the way in Texas?”

My grandfather shrugged. “Unless he turned out to be a terrible businessman — yeah, I suspect so.”

Remus was quiet a moment longer, and then he tipped his head. “The next time I’m able to speak to my mother alone, I’ll see if she’ll share that information with me.” He hummed. “Unless there’s anything else, I’d like to get back on the road with Luna.”

James waved a hand. “Get on the road then, you crazy kids. I’ll be in touch if anything pans out.”

AFTER DINNER, we cuddled up in bed. I insisted Remus stop at a supermarket on the way back; it was like I’d asked him to stop at Mars. It was fine if he wanted to send someone for a full shop later in the week, but I could not go another morning with powdered creamer in my coffee if I could help it. It didn’t hurt that we were also able to pick up my favorite flavor of ice cream and some fresh muffins for breakfast.

“I’m still not totally sold on this plan,” I murmured softly, my hand draped over the alpha’s middle. He closed the screen on his tablet and set it on the nightstand, looking down at me.

“What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “Marnet is ruthless. I know you think you know, but until you’re chained to a barn post...” I trailed off with a shudder, forcing myself to finish what I wanted to say. “If your idea works and he believes I’m walking around in Texas with *his* child... I’m afraid it might really tip him off the deep end. He’s been burning through his romantic contacts, and he took Tala hostage... those are not signs of a stable man.” I licked my lips nervously, trying hard not to let my thoughts slip into ‘what if’ territory.

Remus made a low noise and wrapped an arm around me, pulling me more firmly against his chest. “It’s a valid concern,” he said after a moment, nodding. “We have to be careful as long as he still has Tala, especially. And we’ll try not to tip him from rationality.”

I was glad to hear him say that as I burrowed closer, closing my eyes as I inhaled his familiar scent. “I hope Tala’s still okay.”

Remus exhaled through his nose. “We’ll get this resolved before it can get any worse,” he murmured, stroking my hair. Silence lingered between us for a few moments before he shifted the topic. “Your aunt today — are you really okay, that she spoke to you like that?”

I grunted, opening my eyes again. “That’s hardly new, Remus,” I murmured, shaking my head. “That she apologized is, though.” I squinted, tipping my head up towards him. “You have a strange effect on people, Remus Silverstreak.”

“Even you, Luna?”

I couldn’t help my smile. “Definitely me.”

Remus rewarded me with a brilliant smile, leaning down to press a tender kiss to my forehead. “I still have my qualms with fate, but... fate brought us together, didn’t it? And I certainly can’t be upset about that.”

REMUS

Fiona's Townhouse

Austin, Texas

After a few full days of meetings with Silverstreak Motors' board and the pack's council, my mother and I finally had a few spare minutes we could meet again. She invited me over for lunch, and while I would have much rather spent it with Luna — even if the meal was just a cheap takeout pizza — I didn't want to risk waiting another few days until our schedules matched again. In truth, I was simply relieved to see Bane wasn't currently present at my mother's townhouse when I arrived.

My mother was seated on the couch, sipping on a glass of red wine, when I let myself in. "I hope you're in the mood for steak tonight," she murmured, motioning for me to come in and take a seat. "After the week we've had..." She shook her head.

I offered her a wry smile. "You could always go for a hunt if you're craving red meat," I replied, raising a brow.

Fiona gave me a firm look over her glass. "I would love to, frankly, but you said you had something important you'd like to discuss, and we can hardly do that while running through the park like feral animals, can we?" I shook my head, and she motioned at the bottle on her side table. "Help yourself. It will be a few minutes before George is ready with lunch. Unless you need an appetizer first?"

"Mom," I replied, mirroring her look as I poured myself a glass of wine. "It's just lunch. Stop making it complicated."

She sighed but didn't argue; instead, she asked me what I thought about the day's earlier meeting. It was a good way to ease into the conversation — even if she'd been far more agreeable the last few days than she'd been in... well, at least the past year, I was still hesitant to believe she'd continue like this. *It has to have an expiration date.*

"I'm glad we're on the same page about the human members of the board," my mother said as the conversation wound down. "Now — what was it you wanted to discuss, Remus?"

I sighed and took a sip of wine, even if it only bought me a few more moments. I'd been thinking about what James had told me when I'd gone to

pick up Luna from his house — it was clear that Fiona had no interest in discussing my biological father any further, and in truth, I had little interest in the man. *Remington is the man who raised me; he's the only father I need.*

But allies? I could use those, and if this man was as influential as James seemed to believe, then I couldn't afford to dismiss him without learning more about him first. "I wanted to talk to you about my father — my biological father," I clarified, biting back a sigh as my mother's face clouded over immediately.

"I don't want to talk about him, Remus."

I forced myself to take a deep breath. "I know," I replied, realizing that, perhaps for the first time, this was probably someone she still missed. I could not imagine having to leave the parent of your child — and for what? *Calm down, Remus. If you get all worked up about mate bonds right now, she's just going to get defensive, and she's not going to tell you anything else.*

I took another breath. "But he is my father, and I'd like to at least know who he is."

My mother watched me warily as if expecting me to snap at her. It made me frown, realizing she probably felt just as cautious of me as I did of her. *How did we let that happen?*

"Well..." She took a long sip of her wine, draining the rest of the glass. She poured herself another before continuing. "His name is Nicholas Archer. He went by Nic, then. As I said, I did not keep in touch with him once I moved to Texas with your fa— With Remington."

"He's still my father," I interjected fiercely, my brows knitting together. "By blood or not, he's still my father."

Fiona watched me for a moment, her expression softening by a few degrees. "I wish he were here to hear you say that," she said sadly, gaze dropping to stare into her wine. "But Remus, I don't have more current information than that. It was too difficult for me to keep up with him and what he was doing — I really did love him, and after everything... I'm sure he hates me now. How could he not?"

"Mom..." I sighed. I wasn't used to seeing this side of her. "Well, why don't you tell me what you remember, then? Who he was when you knew him?"

She paused for a moment and then nodded. "I suppose I can do that. Let me see... while my family was fairly well-off, Nic came from a much larger pack. Much wealthier. It had to be, it was the pack controlling London.

Territories are much smaller in England — you have to be capable of holding on to them. But I loved him despite our differences. I loved him even though his mother thought he could do much better... and she continued to let me know that at every moment.”

I couldn't help but snort. “The irony...” I drawled, taking a sip of my wine before I could say anything else.

My mother huffed a self-deprecating laugh. “Yes, yes. I really was going to take him as my mate. Nic and I had made plans for a ceremony at the end of autumn. His family had several different estates, and they had the most *beautiful* home in the country, on top of the hill. Oh, Remus, it would have looked so pretty all...” She sighed and caught herself — shaking her head. “Obviously, we never made it that far. By the time autumn rolled around, I was here, sweating to death in Texas and doing my damndest to sound as American as possible.”

She stood abruptly, walking to the bookshelf on the other side of the room. She plucked a photo album from the rows of texts without having to search at all, cradling it in one hand as she walked back over to me. Perching on the arm of the chair I sat in, she held her glass in one hand and flipped through the pages quickly until she found what she was looking for.

Leaning over, Fiona pointed at one photo with a well-manicured finger. “This one,” she murmured, and I studied the image. It became immediately apparent why my mother had kept this well out of sight — if I'd ever found this photo growing up, I'd have wondered why this man looked just like me. If I didn't know better, I could have sworn someone had cut out a picture of me from college and photoshopped it into this scene. We had the same eyes and hair — even the same build. I had thought I'd looked like a fair mixture of my mother and father... but now I could see that wasn't true at all.

“That's Nic,” my mother confirmed, pointing to the man I'd been drawn to. “That's me and my best friend, Belle, and her boyfriend, Matthew.” She sighed, staring at the photo for a moment longer before closing the album and setting it to the side.

“Now, the pack was called the Longbow pack, and it was led by the Archer family. I assume it still is. Nic is the alpha by now, unless he's already passed it on to a son, but... I can't imagine so.” She paused for a moment, and I knew we both shared a thought for Remington, my father. *He* should still be alpha right now; he was taken entirely too young. “Anyways. I can give you the address of the home I visited in London, it's the only one I

remember. I'm not sure if he lives there or his family still owns it, but it's a lead."

I reached over to pat my mother's hand. "That would be great," I murmured, squeezing her fingers gently. "Any lead is better than what I have right now."

She looked down at our hands and nodded, clearly lost inside her thoughts for a few moments. "Are you going just to meet him, Remus, or will you get him involved in all of this?"

I hesitated, weighing my options — but there was no point in lying. She'd find out the truth soon enough. "James seems to think he'd be a potent ally and one Marnet would have no sway over," I admitted, shrugging a shoulder. "I... still don't know how I feel about that, but I decided it couldn't hurt to at least investigate the option. As you mentioned a few days ago, I'm severely lacking in trustworthy allies right about now."

Fiona grimaced. "I do not like that idea," she sighed, "but I trust James' judgment. I'd ask you to leave me out of it if you could."

"Of course. As best we can, anyways."

"That's all I ask." She sighed and shook her head, finally shifting off the arm of the chair. "Speaking of allies, though, there is something I wanted to discuss with you as well."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow. *Maybe one of her contacts has come through. That would be an excellent change of pace.*

"Bane indicated you've dismissed him as your beta."

I scowled, sitting back in the chair. "I have," I confirmed, trying to fight the frown off my face.

"Are you sure that was a good idea? You've known that man since you were a child, and he was just trying—"

I held up a hand, cutting my mother off before she could get any further. She may have gotten me to see her side on many things lately, but the topic of my beta was one thing I was not budging on. "Regardless of his reasons or intentions, Mom, he betrayed me. I cannot trust him to watch my back, and I can't trust what his interests are."

My mother twisted her wine glass in her hand and sighed. "Fine," she said, nodding her head once. "Having a beta you can't trust is worse than not having one at all." I could sense she still didn't agree, so I was grateful she decided it wasn't worth pressing further. "It would be best you fill the position as quickly as possible. An alpha without a beta will look weak to the

other packs — and Marnet.”

I couldn't argue with her there. “I'm open to suggestions,” I grumbled, draining the rest of my glass. I reached for the wine bottle.

Fiona nodded, looking a little stunned that I'd opened myself up to her suggestions. “I'll send you a few possibilities by the end of the day tomorrow,” she said, getting that distant look that indicated the wheels were already turning. Before I could question that, George appeared from the kitchen.

“Miss Fiona, Remus — your meal is ready if you'd be so kind as to sit.”

“Of course, George.” My mother motioned for me and offered me a smile — a genuine smile. “That's enough business talk for now, don't you think, Remy? Let's enjoy our lunch.”

I HAD CLEARED my entire afternoon, so once I'd left my mother's house, I could return to the apartment and finally spend some time with Luna. I had booked a table at one of my favorite restaurants for an early dinner, and secured two tickets for a popular musical at the Austin Theater. Musicals weren't really to my taste; though my mother had, however briefly, attempted to get me to enjoy opera as a child. Still, Luna had mentioned this particular show several weeks ago. I was glad my risk had paid off; she was absolutely delighted when I revealed the reason behind such an early dinner.

The sky was dark when the show let out, and stars twinkled merrily overhead. Luna leaned against me, our arms interlocked as we walked down the sidewalk.

“That was lovely,” she gushed, her cheeks still a little flushed. “I've never been to a Broadway musical before; I've only ever watched them on TV.”

I smiled over at her. “I'm sure they're even better on Broadway itself. I'll take you the next time I have business in New York City.”

Luna simply laughed and shook her head. “I feel like I'm learning or seeing something new every day,” she admitted, tugging me closer even as she looked down at the sidewalk. “You know, that was an idea that scared me at first. That I wouldn't catch on quick enough, or it would be too much — but I really, really enjoy that. You never make me feel bad for not knowing or not having experienced something, and I really appreciate that.”

I paused for a moment, studying her face as she looked up at me. “I think you're amazing, Luna,” I said when she finally met my eyes, leaning in to

press a quick kiss to her forehead. “I want to give you whatever you want — show you whatever you want to see. You deserve that, at the very least.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she murmured, shaking her head.

“No, I don’t,” I agreed, “but I want to. You don’t expect anything extravagant of me because of who I am or how much money I have — you just expect me to be Remus, and I love that about you.” I paused. “I’m not sure I’ve ever met someone who treated me like that before.”

The revelation seemed to stun Luna silent; she stared up at me like I’d hung the moon.

“What?” I finally prompted, a bit of self-conscious thought starting to prickle at the back of my mind.

“I think that was one of the most romantic things you’ve ever said to me,” she finally replied, sounding a bit breathless. “You, ah — you don’t have any other plans for tonight, do you? Because I think I’d like to go back to your penthouse now....”

Luna didn’t have to say anything else — the gleam in her silver eyes spoke volumes. I grinned at her wolfishly and grabbed my phone out of my pocket. “Our ride will be here in moments.”

TO MY GREAT DELIGHT, the private car seemed to arrive in a flash. Normally, the looks Luna was giving me right now would make time drag as I counted the seconds until I could get my hands on her.

She acted as sweet as any girl I’d ever known, doe-eyed and sleek, with excited smiles as I helped her into the back seat. She whispered a delicate little, “Thank you,” before I leaned forward, giving the driver a brief set of instructions. He seemed to get the message and closed the privacy window between us, leaving Luna and me alone in the comfortable seat.

It took only moments to get her gasping and open-mouthed, lips shiny with gloss and evidence of our kisses. Her slim hips were so lovely, emphasized by how my hands fit just right. It was like she was built just for me. Luna was so petite that sometimes it didn’t seem possible that she could take a cock, much less an alpha’s, but she did every single time, and she did it so damn beautifully. She threw her head back and moaned as I pressed into her, her silky, dark hair sticking against her damp forehead as her throat worked. Even though there was a privacy window, she tried to keep her voice down, the restraint driving me wild as I gripped her thighs hard enough to

bruise. A tiny little grunt escaped from her swollen lips as she tried to free her hands, but I knew her, and I knew she'd reach for me as soon as she could.

There was nothing here to tie her up with – not the seatbelt, and I didn't want to ruin her dress while we were being driven somewhere. I didn't care who saw me, I had nothing to be ashamed of, but the idea of anyone else seeing Luna made my skin bristle.

I love her. It was a realization, one that I had more and more frequently. I loved her when she was sleepy, first thing in the morning, mumbling senselessly before she got her first coffee or tea. I loved her snide little comments when she thought no one was listening; when I remembered her witty remarks in the middle of a boring meeting, I'd have to fight the urge to smile. But I loved her like this, sitting on my dick and trying so hard not to come as she squirmed, her pale thighs trembling and her smart mouth good for nothing but saying my name like a prayer, over and over again.

“Remus. Remus, Remus, darling,” she panted.

I couldn't help but tip my head as I smiled, mouthing at her jaw as I shifted in the car seat, trying to drag Luna as close as possible. Her knees dug into the back of the seat as she ground her hips down, her dress in one hand and out of the way, her panties pushed to one side. My slacks had only been undone enough to pull my erection free, but the restriction to our movements drove the sense of urgency — frantic energy. My heart was racing; I loved every second of it.

“F-fuck,” Luna gasped as I gave a particularly rough thrust upward, her hips rolling awkwardly as she tried to take me deeper. Her dress hung off one shoulder, her hair no longer perfectly styled but hanging by her face as she panted, cheeks flushed. Without her hands, she had no grace as she tried to move, but Luna was nothing if not enthusiastic, pushing down and rocking towards me, impatient with my slow, steady rhythm, even with her wrists trapped between my hands.

Luna whimpered again as she squirmed, a few curses peppering her soft tone as she begged for relief when I released one hand to grab her hip and pull her down against me roughly, pinning her in my lap so firmly she couldn't even squirm. She whined while I fucked into her body exactly as I wanted – slow, lazy rolls of my hips punctuated with sharp, deep thrusts that left her trembling. Her nails curled into her palms and her face went even pinker.

I could have sworn she got a little more flushed every time I rolled my hips up. She was pink from her cheeks to the tips of her ears, and I was certain that if her dress slipped any lower, her chest would be flushed, too.

“Please,” Luna whimpered, her pink tongue flashing over her lips before her mouth fell back open. “Baby, please.”

I growled softly, leaning forward again to capture her lips. She was always such a sweet thing, but today, that’s exactly what I wanted to hear. I finally released her hands and lifted her up, prying her off my lap. She mewled, eyes going wide before she realized what I was doing, pressing her back down into the bench of the back seat.

“Oh,” Luna gasped, arching her back as she struggled to get her knees beneath her, to push back into me. I didn’t wait, hands back on her body as I pulled her close, slamming into her. My nails dug into her skin, and it didn’t take any more than that; Luna choked on my name as she tightened gloriously, her pussy gripping my cock as an orgasm raked through her and shook her from head to toe. She clenched around me tightly until my vision started to close in on me, and I lost myself to her, allowing animal instinct to take over until I found my own release.

Luna made a low noise, melting down into the seat as she panted, trying to catch her breath.

“Do you think the driver heard that?” she whispered a moment later, finally pushing herself upright. Luna looked at me and gave a little giggle, leaning forward as if to share a secret. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

I couldn’t help but laugh in return, pressing a kiss to her damp forehead. “Oh, Luna,” I murmured fondly, smiling as she straightened her dress. “I have so much to teach you.”

And I can’t wait.

THE LITTLE ESCAPE in the car hadn’t been enough. As soon as we got into the elevator, I couldn’t keep my hands off her, and Luna wouldn’t stop kissing me long enough for me to catch my breath. It carried on all the way into my apartment. I’m honestly not sure how we made it to the bed.

Luna lay next to me as we caught our breath, one of her ankles brushing against mine as if she couldn’t stand not to touch, even if we were still too hot to cuddle. The thought alone made me feel warmer, even if I wasn’t quite

up for a third round. *Not yet, anyway. The night is still young.*

“Hey, how was your meeting with your mom earlier? You came back in a nice mood,” Luna asked a few minutes later, turning her head to look at me.

I snorted and glanced at her. “How do you know my good mood wasn’t because I knew I was taking you out tonight?” I teased, one side of my mouth lifting. Luna rolled over and pinched my side, and I grunted, trying to squirm away. “Okay, okay, fine. It was actually... pretty good. One of the most civil talks I’ve had with her in a while.” I paused and amended the statement. “Well, one of the best, really. She still doesn’t want to talk about him, but she did tell me my biological father’s name and where to find him.”

Luna hummed. “I thought your dad told you in his letter?”

“He did, but it’s good my mother confirmed it. Besides, the letter was sealed; I don’t think she’d ever read it.”

Luna nodded and reached over, tangling our fingers together. She squeezed my hand. “Well, I’m glad you two had a good talk,” she said, smiling at me.

“I think once we figure out how Marnet will react, I’d like to go see my biological father in England,” I said, squeezing her hand. “Your grandfather thinks he’ll be a good ally, and I trust him.”

Luna nodded. “It’s worth a try, at the very least.”

“And you’re coming with me, of course.”

Luna laughed. “I’d follow you to the end of the world, Remus.”

LUNA

Fiona's Townhouse

Austin, Texas

I stood in front of the austere door, standing a few steps behind Remus as a kaleidoscope of butterflies burst into action in my stomach, fluttering as wildly as my heart. “Are you *positive* that your mother asked me to come with you this time?” I asked, wringing my hands. I knew they’d had a pretty positive meeting a few days ago, but it still felt too good to be true that Fiona had invited me over to discuss plans with tea.

Remus glanced over his shoulder and offered me a wry smile. “I can show you the text,” he offered, shrugging one shoulder. “Look, I know it probably feels a bit weird, but...I do think she’s been making a bit more of an effort now that I am back as alpha.”

I hesitated a moment longer before nodding, standing one step behind Remus. “If she can try, so can I,” I said firmly, doing my best to settle the butterflies before they made my heart beat any faster.

He knocked on the door and let us inside, leading me up the half-floor into her living room. Fiona was already sitting in one chair, pouring her cup of tea from the prettiest teapot I’d ever seen. Any nerves I’d managed to settle burst back to life, and I swallowed hard. *Gosh, what if I drop her cup? Those look like they’re hand-painted or something. Or what if Fiona isn’t going to play nice? Ugh, what if — Luna, no. Breathe.*

I took a deep breath and allowed Remus to lead me over to the couch across from Fiona. “Hi, Mom,” he greeted her.

She inclined her head towards both of us. “Good afternoon, Remus. Luna.” She motioned towards the pot. “I’ve made Earl Grey, but I have several other teas in the kitchen if you’d like. I wasn’t sure if you like green tea — or how you were feeling, for that matter.”

I allowed myself a small smile; a bit touched that she’d remembered I’d been feeling quite unwell — that was why I’d gone to the doctor’s office in the first place. “Oh, the Earl Grey is fine. My fatigue isn’t any better,” I admitted, “but the nausea seems to be limited to the morning, and having a few crackers before I get out of bed does a lot to help that.”

“That’s good, very good,” she murmured, watching Remus pour two

cups. “When I was pregnant with this one, I was sick as a dog for about six weeks. It was miserable, but I was lucky it wasn’t longer. One of my first friends here, Laura Lane, was sick her entire pregnancy, the poor thing.”

I couldn’t help but relax into the couch. “Dr. Hayes has been great about answering my questions. He suggested the crackers and ginger ale — he has a few other suggestions for me if it gets worse.”

“Excellent. Well, let me know if you need anything else,” Fiona said, “but I’ve quite an array of snacks. I wasn’t sure.” She shrugged, watching Remus pick at the biscuits out of the corner of her eye. “Now, as you’ve mentioned, you’ve been tired; I won’t keep you any longer than I need to. I’ve had an idea on how we can get this information to Marnet covertly.”

“Oh?” said Remus, brushing a few crumbs off his face. “What’s that?”

“Well, I assume we’d like to keep this news from the pack’s ears, at least until Luna is out of the first trimester. Admittedly, it would be ideal if we knew the baby’s sex before the news was broken but getting past the first hurdle is the minimum.”

I stiffened, freezing as I leaned over to pick up my cup. “Does it matter?” I asked, my throat feeling tight. “If it’s a boy or a girl?” *I doubt Fiona would consider a girl as the heir to Silverstreak — I’ve never even met a female alpha before — but... Would she stop caring about this baby if it’s not a boy?*

Fiona snorted softly, her brows dipping as she watched me carefully. “To me? Not at all. This is my first grandchild. Nothing can change that.” I felt a little guilty for assuming otherwise, so I said nothing, picking up my cup and quickly taking a sip of tea. To my relief, Fiona continued. “However, if it is a boy, we *can* share that information with the pack as a whole. The potential for their future alpha would give a lot of people hope, which is a very powerful force indeed, especially if Marnet continues to be stubborn.”

I nodded, and Remus rumbled next to me. “I can see how that might work in our favor,” he said, leaning forward. “So, what was your idea about getting this information to Marnet?”

“Yes, right. I believe you mentioned that Luna’s stepsisters were previously in contact with Marnet. If they’re still trying to curry his favor, they might work as a direct line to him. If Luna were to speak with them and let it ‘slip’ that she was pregnant, I would be willing to bet the first person those girls tell is Marnet himself.”

I paused, rubbing my finger against the cup. *Why didn’t I think of that? That’s an excellent idea. Both Artemis and Athena seemed intent on*

ingratiating themselves to Marnet — they probably couldn't resist something like that.

“They do love to talk,” I muttered dryly. “Anything gossip.” *Especially when it comes to me. I can't wait for them to call me a whore again!* It was nothing new, though, and if it helped us get to Marnet faster and get Tala away from him, I was more than willing to speak to them. “I think it'd work.”

Fiona stared at me expectantly, and my brow furrowed. “What?” She made a motion with her hand. “Now?”

She raised her brows at me. “Did you have a better idea? Tala has been there long enough.”

“Oh, well...” *When you put it that way...* I shrugged sheepishly and set my cup back down, reaching into my purse to fish out my phone. *Artemis* was right before *Athena* in my contacts, so I clicked on her name. I set the phone to speaker; the line rang several times, and I was waiting for her voicemail to pick up when my stepsister answered.

“Hello?” she asked, voice dripping with suspicion.

I blinked, a bit surprised that she'd picked up. “Artemis? Hi! It's me, Luna.”

“Obviously,” she drawled. “What the hell do you want? After everything you've done to tear this family apart, how dare you call me.”

Maybe I should have expected this sort of outburst after the last time I'd seen my stepsister. After all, she and *Athena* had taken it upon themselves to burn all of my clothing. “I—”

“No!” *Artemis* shouted, launching into a full-on rant. I held the phone a little further away from myself, wincing as her voice took on a shrill tone. “No! Everything was fine — everything was *fine*! And then there was that Moonmate ceremony and you and Marnet and that stupid Silverstreak alpha! Mom and Dad would never betray Marnet; I don't know how you could even think that.” Seemingly breaking the rules of reality, her voice got even higher as it wavered, a telltale sign she was starting to cry. At least I didn't have to actually see her tears, crocodile or not. It was hard enough just to hear it. “I shouldn't have to be raising two boys at my age! Do you even know how wild the twins are? I feel like I've aged twenty years. You did this to me. You and that stupid alpha.”

I withheld a snort. *As a matter of fact, I do know.* But being smart wasn't going to get me anywhere right now. “Where's *Athena*? I need to talk to her.”

“She's not here right now — she has to *work*, you know. Full-time. At the

grocery store!” The despair started again, and I struggled not to roll my eyes. Clearly, the girls still didn’t realize how lucky they were, not having to work until after their college careers. “Why do you want to talk to her anyway? Why do you think she wants to talk to you?”

“It’s personal.”

“Well, you’re shit out of luck.”

I finally rolled my eyes. “I shouldn’t be surprised; of course, neither of you would be interested in your niece or nephew.”

The tears and shaky breaths suddenly stopped; silence stretched on for moments. “What did you just say?” Artemis demanded.

I took a deep breath, ignoring all the red flags. “I said I’m not surprised neither of you is interested in your future niece or nephew.”

“Luna!” she hissed, the tone of her voice changing entirely. It made me shudder, a chill running down my spine. “You fucking slut. I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you didn’t tell Marnet, either!” She snarled. “Well, I can. No more hiding from the truth. He’ll be so grateful when I let him know.” The line abruptly went dead and I sighed, staring at the screen for a minute before I shook my head and stuffed my phone back into my purse.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say Marnet is going to know in the next few minutes,” I muttered, having lost all interest in both my tea and the cookie platter Fiona had laid out.

Remus offered me a sympathetic smile, wrapping an arm around my shoulder to pull me close. I didn’t fight the affection, even with Fiona still staring forward like she couldn’t believe what she’d just heard. I flashed a wry smile, relaxing slightly as he kissed the top of my head. “Thank you,” he murmured into my hair. “I know that was difficult.”

“Do they always talk to you like that?” Fiona asked. “Or is that behavior new?”

I couldn’t help my wry chuckle. “Oh, it’s not new. They were okay when we were kids, but as soon as they hit puberty...” I shook my head. “That was honestly one of the easier conversations. At least we didn’t have to see her pretend to cry.”

Fiona’s nostrils flared, something gleaming in her eyes. She looked at her son. “Remus, I’d like to speak with Luna alone for a bit, if you don’t mind. Woman to woman.”

He stiffened next to me, his fingers tightening on my shoulder. “I’m not sure if that’s such a good idea.”

I reached over to pat his knee; at the moment, I detected no ill will coming from his mother. She forced herself to relax by a few degrees. “Remus, I’m not going to hurt her. You have my word. You’ll just be in my study, for goodness’ sake.”

He hesitated a moment longer but eventually nodded his head, leaning over to kiss me one more time before he stood. “Call me when you’re done.”

FIONA FUSSED with the teacups as Remus left, refreshing my cup even though I’d only had a few sips. She offered me the cookies twice, and I took a shortbread biscuit the second time if only so she’d stop asking. Once she seemed sure her son was out of earshot, she leaned forward. “I’d like you to tell me everything. About your upbringing, I mean. The truth, no hiding anything or glossing something over.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying not to frown. *That’s a bit rich, given what Remus said about her British reveal.* I sighed. “I haven’t exactly been hiding anything,” I said, reaching for my tea so I had something to hold. “But all right.” I leaned back into the couch cushion and started.

“Until I was twelve, I was raised by my mother, Josie. She had a small ranch home; we didn’t live far outside of town. Close enough but the school bus still picked me up. It was just her and me, and for the most part, I have really nice memories of it. She’d read me stories, and we had a fenced yard; it was intended so nosy neighbors didn’t “have to see” the garage and the cars she was working on, but it was perfect for me as a pup. We shifted whenever we wanted. She started to teach me about cars. My father didn’t take an interest in me until I was ten, and by the time I was twelve, I remember him coming over and trying to convince my mother he wanted full custody. His wife, Lynn, was pregnant with their third child — that would be the twins, so third and fourth.

“Anyway, one day I came home from school and my father was there. He said there’d been an accident in the workplace and my mother had died suddenly and unexpectedly... I think he had said it was an aneurysm. I was a kid, so I didn’t question why that would happen to someone her age. I just knew I would be going to live with him now, and that was exactly what happened. I was... in shock for a while, and I don’t remember much, but the girls were always... a bit aloof with me. I imagine they were used to being the oldest. By the time the twins were toddlers, I was considered old enough

to be responsible enough to watch the boys, so I did that. I took a job as soon as I was legally old enough just to get out of the house. Graduated salutatorian..." I finally trailed off, pausing to take a sip of my tea. My mouth was starting to feel dry. "I don't know, nothing that interesting happened after my mother's 'death.' What else did you want to know?"

"When did you find out about Marnet?"

"Oh, right." I grimaced. It was getting easier to talk about him, but it still wasn't my favorite topic. "We went to the same high school, so I'd known who he was. He was a few grades ahead. I actually ran into him on my eighteenth birthday, believe it or not. I knew you wouldn't be able to sense your fated mate until you were an adult, so the fact that I ran into him on that day felt like it was that much more... special." I snorted and shook my head. "He didn't want anyone to know we were dating — first it was his friends, then his dad, then because he was the alpha... I should have realized, but I didn't. I was just happy to have something that was mine... or that I thought was mine. We all know the truth of that now."

Fiona sighed heavily, her hands wrapped around her mug as she watched me. I had nothing else to say on the topic, so I busied myself with another cookie, willing Remus' mother to speak. Finally, she seemed to gather her thoughts. "Thank you for sharing with me," she said, her voice low. "I know I haven't done much to... inspire your faith in me. I may have been a little too quick to judge you when we first met." She shook her head. "I had seen you speaking with my son right before you confronted Marnet at the Moonmate ceremony, and I only wanted to protect him and the pack. As you can imagine, more than one status-seeking young woman has tried to get their claws in him."

I couldn't help but smile. "I certainly can," I murmured, thinking back to what Jackie had said about how she all but threw Brooke and Celine at Remus, trying to get the alpha to be interested in her daughters. There was no way she was the only one attempting such a thing.

Fiona shook her head. "Regardless, that wasn't my best behavior, and I apologize. I want... I want you and me to be on better terms. Not just for my son, but your child — my grandchild." She paused again. "I had very little interaction with my grandparents, and if I can help it, I would like to be a positive presence in the baby's life. I think Remus has made up his mind about you, and we both have bigger things to worry about."

It sounded too good to be true, but I could see Fiona struggling with each

word. Given what I knew about her, I could imagine this was incredibly difficult for her. I tipped my head to one side and offered her a small smile. “Thank you, Fiona,” I murmured. “I appreciate that. I really do.”

Finally, she offered me a small smile in return. “Good. Good. Well, I won’t keep the two of you any longer, but please keep me informed of your doctor’s appointments.”

“Of course.” I chuckled. “I’ll have Remus send you the calendar if you want.” *I guess she’ll always be intense, but I’ll take this over the ice queen act any day.*

EVEN IF IT felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, I still felt exhausted as I got in the car. I leaned against the door, staring out the window at the city of Austin as Remus drove us back to his penthouse — part of me wondered if I’d wake up any minute and realize this was all a dream. Things seemed like they might be improving, and it was something I was struggling to get my mind around.

“Hey, are you all right?” Remus asked sometime later. He reached across the seats to squeeze my hand. “My mother didn’t say anything shitty to you, did she?”

“Hm?” I glanced over and offered him a weary smile. “No, no, she didn’t. It was just... I don’t know, a bit exhausting saying all of that out loud, I guess.” I shrugged my shoulders. “It doesn’t seem that big of a deal until you tell someone else, and then you realize, ‘wow, my life has been really fucked up.’” I sighed, pressing my lips together. I let the thought linger a moment more, and then I shook it away. “But no, your mom was fine. She was... she was nice, actually. She even apologized to me.”

Remus snorted softly. “Do you know how often she’s apologized to me, Luna?”

“Never?”

“Once. Exactly once, and it was very, very recently.” He squeezed my hand. “I’m glad she apologized, though. She shouldn’t have been so distrustful of you.”

I shrugged. “I think she was just being your mother, Remus — the only way she knew how. Maybe not the best way, but you know...” I laughed, tired and quiet. “I think being a grandmother is already affecting her, and it’ll be months until the baby gets here.”

“I know,” Remus said, shaking his head. “Well, I’m glad it was a good talk.”

I nodded, smiling over at him. “Yeah... yeah, me too. It was hard, but it was good.”

“When all this is over, Luna, I’m going to give you the life you deserve,” Remus stated, suddenly sounding resolved. He squeezed my hand a little tighter. “The life you’ve always deserved, and nothing less.”

REMUS

Silverstreak Motors Headquarters

Austin, Texas

The next afternoon I finally got some indication of how my mother's plan was panning out. I was sorting through recent invoices in my office when my personal phone began to ring. As soon as I saw Seff's name flash across my screen, I couldn't pick it up fast enough. "Hello?"

"Hey, Remus. Do you have a minute?"

"Of course," I replied, spinning around in my chair to stare out the window. "Do you have any update on Tala?"

"Unfortunately, no." I could almost hear his grimace through the phone line. "I do have an update on Marnet, however. I've gotten a contact down at the chief of patrol's office — someone who wasn't very high ranking in Lupus Claw and has some strong feelings about Marnet involving humans in all of this. Anyway, he told me that yesterday afternoon, a young woman came flying in, halfway to hysterics, and demanded to see Marnet. She seemed extremely distressed; he said a few minutes later, Marnet came storming out of the back room, and he hasn't seen him since."

I smiled against my phone. "My mother came up with a clever plan yesterday; Luna 'accidentally' shared some pretty personal information with her stepsister. Now, I assume Marnet thinks Luna is pregnant with his child."

"You and your mom? Wow." He huffed. "Well, it seems like two heads are better than one. That would explain why he left the station like his tail was on fire."

"Do you have eyes on him now?" I asked.

"I do — he retreated to the chief's home, but if he believes what the woman told him, I'm sure it won't be long until he leaves again." Seff paused for a moment. "I don't have news on Tala exactly, but I've also been working on triangulating places Marnet is doing business, paying rent, things like that. I have a few ideas on where he could be holding her, but I need more manpower to get any further on this."

"Of course, Seff." He probably didn't like asking for more resources, but I didn't blame him. No matter how he felt about Tala, she wasn't his pack, and as far as I knew, there was nothing official between them. He couldn't

spend too much of his own resource on her, or he'd probably run into issues with his own council. "Just tell me what you need to expedite this."

"I'll send you the details on the locations, but I'm not sure I can narrow it down any further without more information, and getting that could take weeks — or even months. Tala might not have months." His voice got sober, something unfamiliar and serious in it. "You don't think Marnet's already done something to her, do you?"

I nodded firmly, even if Seff couldn't see me. "We'll get Tala out in time, Seff. There's no way we'll even consider anything else — send me that information, and I'll start organizing a move immediately. We'll hit all locations at once to ensure he doesn't have the opportunity to spirit her away from one place to another. We'll get her back, Seff. We won't rest until we do."

"Good. Good..." Seff trailed off before he cleared his throat, the uncertainty disappearing from his voice as suddenly as it had made itself known. "You're right. We'll get her back. I need to get back to work, but I'll send those files to you first. Keep me in the loop."

"Of course."

I OPENED the files on my tablet; nothing involving my pack or shifters ever made it onto my work computer, just in case. Once I'd reviewed them, I picked my phone back up and tapped on my mother's contact.

"Hello?"

"Your plan worked," I said by way of greeting, unable to help the small smile. It was one of the first real wins we'd had in some time. "Seff just called, said Marnet reacted to the news about as well as we imagined he might."

"Already? Good!" my mother said. "I'm glad he listened to that girl. After hearing the way she spoke yesterday, I was worried he might not take her seriously."

I snorted softly — I'd only met them briefly, but even I could tell that Artemis and Athena had a flair for the dramatic. Either way, they'd served their purpose in this plan. "Well, I think he did. Seff said he's temporarily holed up in the chief's home, but I imagine he's trying to gather his resources to make a move."

"We should do the same," my mother interjected.

“We should,” I agreed. “Seff also sent me some information on some locations Marnet has been visiting — he believes Marnet is holding Tala in one of them, but can’t get any more information easily. I think we should make a move, even coordinate our strikes on these places with trapping Marnet, if we can.”

My mother made a thoughtful noise. “That... would be difficult to prepare, but it has some merit. We wouldn’t want to tip him off by striking the locations, nor would we want someone to move Tala if we captured Marnet and try to use her as leverage to win his freedom.”

“Exactly,” I replied, nodding. “I think you need to hold a meeting with the council as soon as possible. I am going to start trying to make connections with some nearby packs — hopefully Marnet has aggravated those and not paid them off.”

“I can call them together tonight,” Fiona said crisply.

“Good, then I’m leaving that in your hands,” I said. “I have no idea how long these negotiations will take, so assume I’ll be absent for this. The council adores you anyway, so it shouldn’t be much of an issue.”

“Hmm. I’m not so sure about *that*, Remus, but I will have no issue motivating them. Send me those files, and I’ll send you anything we come up with after our meeting.”

“Perfect. I’ll do the same.”

THE REST of my afternoon seemed to drag and disappear in a blink at the same time. As I suspected, negotiations were difficult — honestly, *negotiations* were a strong word for it altogether. Packs were wary of dealing with us, lest they get dragged into whatever bullshit Marnet was creating down here. It was one thing not to support the man, but several alphas balked at the idea of actually getting involved. After offering some promises and throwing no small amount of money at the problem, I secured several small teams from packs on the Atlantic Coast and Florida to boost our numbers.

When my mother called me back, I was driving home, the sky almost dark. I flicked on the Bluetooth so I could continue on my way back to my apartment. “How was the meeting?”

“It was one of the more productive meetings I’ve had lately,” my mother murmured. I could detect a hint of a smirk in her voice and narrowed my eyes, squinting at the screen for a moment.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Several of the council members were able to drum up old friendships outside of Silverstreak to provide some allies for us. They’re willing to help us rescue Tala. It’s good to know there are still shifters who think it’s blasphemous to involve humans in these sorts of things.” Fiona paused. “You see? I know you don’t think much of them, but your father appointed these people for a reason, Remus.”

I shook my head, allowing myself a wry smile since she wasn’t around to see it. “So he did,” I agreed, marveling at the fact that my mother was able to make them fall in line so quickly. I didn’t want to say as much, lest all the success go to her head. “I was also able to make some contacts. We have assistance coming from Florida, the Carolina coast, Atlanta, and Delaware. They’re all aware of the time sensitivity, so we should expect them in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours max.”

“Good! Good. I know other packs have been, hm... difficult to deal with lately. That’s well done.” My mother hummed thoughtfully. “If we can take these locations, we should be able to cut off a good portion of Marnet’s income, that should hamstring him even further.”

“It should,” I agreed, “but he still has that ‘fiancée’ of his — Pam Whitewater. She has no small fortune.”

My mother snorted into the phone. “And there’s no telling how many other women he’s stringing along.”

I grunted. “Indeed.” Luna had seen the list. She’d even shared it with Pam, though that hadn’t gone over so well.

But what if I...

“Hey, Mom? I’m almost home, and I’ve got an idea that might help us deal with those other funding sources Marnet has. I’ll call you back in the morning, okay?”

My mother sighed. “At least send me the information on those wolves coming in when you get home, Remy. I’ll make sure security knows they’re supposed to be here.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll talk to you later.”

I grinned to myself as I pressed on the gas, dodging through the late evening traffic. *Luna isn’t going to like this plan, but I have a good feeling about it...*

AS I SUSPECTED, Luna had no interest in this plan at all. It was a good plan, and even she could admit that, but — “That doesn’t mean I have to like it,” she grumbled again, sitting on the bed in our hotel room with her arms folded across her chest. “If I never have to see that woman again, it would be too soon.”

I smiled at her, still pleased that I’d had the idea in the first place. “Good thing I’m the one that needs to flirt with her, then, and not you,” I replied cheekily, tugging on my collar as I turned around. “How do I look?”

She sighed. “You know damn well how fine you look,” Luna replied, raising a brow. “I’m having a hard time keeping my hands to myself.”

Normally, I’d tell her not to deny herself, but I didn’t want to risk this plan. Just because Pam was a human didn’t mean all her friends were, and I didn’t want to spoil this just because I had no self-control. “I promise you can help me undress when I get back.”

“You better,” Luna replied, blowing me a kiss. “Now get going — there’s fashionably late, and then there’s just late, and it would suck if you missed her.”

I nodded and offered her one last wink before exiting our room, heading to the lobby to pick up the car I’d rented. It was the most expensive model I could pick up on such short notice, but I needed to make sure people noticed as I rolled up to the club and handed my keys to the valet. The party Pam had been showing off on her Instagram account was already in full swing, but I had no issue getting past the fellow standing security as soon as I shared my name.

Once inside, I made my way to the bar, ordering myself a whiskey sour and getting comfortable as I glanced around. Pam wasn’t hard to spot, even when surrounded by a gaggle of people I didn’t recognize. Her sparkling silver dress glittered in the club’s multicolored lights, making her shine like some sort of star. That was entirely the point, I imagined. A few people noticed I was watching, and soon enough, someone leaned in to whisper to Pam. She looked my way, and I smiled, pleased when she giggled and turned to whisper something back to the woman leaning against her shoulder.

They drifted a little closer, still chattering back and forth, and I was able to make out part of their conversation over the thrum of the music. Pam was celebrating something, and her friend was clearly encouraging her to have a good time.

“— Are you sure? I mean, I am engaged.” It would be a valid argument;

if I weren't positive that Marnet had continued to fool around behind the woman's back. I doubted he'd ever stopped, even to propose to her.

Her friend leaned back in. Most of what she was saying was obscured. "—engaged, not married. You're still a single woman until you go to the altar, girl!"

Pam said something else, and they both laughed — but I owed that friend a thank you because the hotel heiress joined me at the bar a few moments later. "I'll have a Sex on the Beach, please," she called once she had the bartender's attention.

I hid my grin as I leaned against the wooden top. "Just put it on my tab."

She turned, offering me a small smile. "Well, thank you," she purred, sitting in the empty seat next to mine as she waited for her drink. "That's very gentlemanly of you."

I offered her a winning smile. "Chivalry isn't dead, miss," I replied, inclining my head. "I have to say... you look simply stunning out there. I don't think I've ever seen a dress like yours."

Pam beamed at me, sitting a little straighter to smooth her hands over her sides. "Do you like it? I had it custom made for this party. I was worried it wouldn't turn out, but..."

"Oh, it definitely did," I assured her. "You're dazzling. The brightest star in the entire sky — maybe even the sun! The rest of them are just revolving around you."

Pam tossed her head back and laughed, smiling brightly at me as she got her drink. "It's nice to meet you...?"

"Charlie. I'm Charlie," I replied, offering a hand.

"Pam. It's a pleasure to meet you." She took a sip of her drink. "You know, my friends were supposed to plan this party for me? It's a good thing I took over."

"Really?" I asked.

That was all it took. For at least the next hour, Pam told me every detail of her planning efforts — all I had to do was murmur and nod, occasionally sprinkle in a compliment, and she seemed delighted just to sit here, chatting away. At some point, she moved her stool a little closer, her knee brushing against mine.

Waiting for her third drink, she leaned in closely; I didn't miss the way she angled her shoulders, displaying her breasts. "I don't think I've ever met someone so handsome, Charlie — and in a bar, no less!"

I beamed at her. *Oh, if only Marnet could have heard that.* “You’re flattering me,” I replied, shaking my head.

“No, really! I mean it!” she insisted, swatting at my shoulder playfully.

I smiled and leaned closer, leaning in to brush a hand against her curls. “You’re too kind,” I replied, the corner of my mouth tipping up. “But I can’t help but notice that diamond ring on your finger.”

Pam sighed, leaning back slightly as she lifted her hand and regarded the jewelry in question. “I am engaged,” she admitted quietly, cheeks a bit pink. “It’s a new thing. It takes some getting used to.”

I exhaled dramatically, leaning back into my seat, but not without trailing my fingertips against her shoulder. “Well, who’s the lucky man?” I asked, doing my best to seem disappointed she wasn’t available.

Pam twisted the ring on her finger. “His name is Marnet. Marnet Claw. You’ve probably heard of him.”

“I have,” I said, pulling a confused face. “I’m sorry, you said your name was Pam, right?”

“Yeah?” She looked up, brows pulling down. “Why?”

I continued to frown, reaching into my pocket to fish out my phone. “My parents were friends with Marnet’s before they passed,” I said idly, tipping my head. “We still have dinner to catch up sometimes — I promised my mother I would. Anyway, he brought this young woman to his country home, Skye... he introduced her to me and my fiancée as his future bride. That was just last week,” I said, pulling up a photo. I had taken it months ago, at the Moonmate ceremony — but Pam didn’t know that.

All she saw was Marnet with a blonde Barbie doll clinging to his arm, a wide smile on her face and something sparkling on her finger. She handed my phone back, her face going ashen. “Are you sure? He promised — he promised there’d be no one else. That he wouldn’t see anyone else anymore.”

I shrugged my shoulders, pretending I had no idea he’d ever had issues with fidelity. I pulled up another photo — Seff had his team doctor his one up for me. It featured Marnet and Skye, but he’d added Tala and me to it as well. Adding Luna seemed too risky, as they’d already met. Pam stared at the photo, not even taking the phone from my hand. “This was last week?” she croaked.

I nodded my head. “Yes, I—”

“I can’t believe him!” Pam snapped, pulling her purse into her lap. “I can’t believe— he promised he loved me. He said he was done with those

other girls.”

I made a sympathetic noise. “Skye’s family is from a competing construction business,” I said, reaching out to pat her hand. “I imagine this is to help seal the merger. You know how those things are. He couldn’t back out without risking his entire company.”

Pam made a distressed noise, the color of her face shifting rapidly from white to bright red. “I just... I can’t... I invited him to my grandmother’s ninetieth birthday soiree to introduce him to my family, and he blew me off. Work! He said he was traveling for *work*, but he was having *dinner* with some other *slut!?*” She whipped her phone out and hit the first number on speed dial. I leaned back, not wanting to get caught as collateral damage.

“Hello? Marnet? Who the fuck is Skye? How dare you — no. No! You listen to *me*, Marnet Claw. You *promised me* you were done with other women after that lady confronted me in the bathroom. Do you even *know* how embarrassing that was? I had to call security before I could be blackmailed, and you *promised me you’d never do that again.*” Her pitch rose until she was absolutely screeching. I winced, noticing that even the bartender crept to the other side of his station, darting glances at us as Pam screamed into the phone.

I could hear the muffled sound of a male voice trying to get a few words out, but she wasn’t interested. “No, this is the LAST TIME you make a fool out of me,” she howled, already wriggling the ring off her finger. “The wedding is OFF, and you can tell your mother and your sister that they can kiss my ass, they aren’t getting another red cent from me! I’m calling my fucking lawyer, Marnet, and if I ever see you again, I hope you’re prepared for my daddy to drag your sorry ass to court!”

A small crowd of her friends had gathered when she started yelling, hanging over her shoulder, giving supportive squeezes and muttering variations on ‘that bastard!’ and ‘you deserve so much better, sweetie!’ — it was probably my best opportunity to slip away, before Pam’s rage turned into something that needed comforting. I motioned the bartender over and slipped him several bills — more than enough to cover my tab and hers — and he gave me a solemn, silent nod, clearly understanding I wanted out of this situation as badly as he did.

Pam was still screaming at Marnet through her phone as I walked out the front door.

Ball’s in your court, Marnet.

LUNA

Remus' Penthouse

Austin, Texas

While I was relieved to be back in Remus' apartment instead of stuck on house arrest at my grandfather's house, I quickly realized things weren't going to just 'get back to normal.' I had been looking forward to getting back to work and getting my hands back on some cars. Things had just started settling down there; Zack didn't feel like I needed to check in every day. I didn't need my mother to look over my work. It might not seem like much, but to me, it felt like twelve steps in the right direction — it was validation of skills I knew I had.

Unfortunately, my mother didn't feel the same way. She was concerned about my exposure to the fumes and chemicals we used in the garage. I had spent a day doing research and found conflicting reports on the internet; eventually, I called Dr. Hayes. While he was fairly certain the ventilation would be sufficient, he was concerned that I'd be doing physical labor and possibly lifting heavy objects. Once my mother heard that, it was all over.

I sighed, poking on my phone as I sat on my couch. "Amazing how you get pregnant and suddenly people think you're an invalid," I said to my stomach. Honestly, I was still having a hard time getting my head around it. I didn't look any different yet, and even though I felt sick most mornings... I'd felt sick before. The only difference was that this was a near daily occurrence. Admittedly, the smell of the cafeteria at Silverstreak Motors *did* make me feel queasy, but I figured I could avoid that and keep working until I was showing or something.

Unfortunately, no one else agreed. Zack promised I could pick up where I left off after maternity leave because he was happy with my work, and... it wasn't as if I expected him to be lying to me, but it still felt weird. It didn't feel like I'd earned it. It also felt like a year or so to sit around and get rusty while someone else was working on their skills and kept getting better. Sure, it freed up some time, but— I'd been working since I was fifteen years old. Not earning my way felt weird.

I got up and went to the kitchen, but I wasn't really hungry; I just didn't know what to do. I looked at my phone again and felt a pang in my chest. I'd

text Tala right now, but she was still somewhere in Oklahoma, maybe with Marnet — possibly being kept somewhere alone. The thought made my heart hurt.

Eventually, I found something that looked interesting for dinner and decided to make it; Remus had mentioned that Elena would be off tonight and he would order us takeout. It had sounded good at the time, but boredom took over, and once the sick feeling had worn off, it was a good way to pass the time. The pad Thai was almost done when the door opened, and Remus walked in, looking drained.

He smiled as he walked over, wrapping a hand around my waist and pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “That smells good. You know you could have ordered whatever you’d like if you were hungry,” he murmured, shifting to get a glass and pour himself a cup of water.

I shrugged. “I was just trying to do something constructive with my time,” I replied, smiling. He was right. It *did* smell good. I’d never made this particular dish, but the recipe I’d found on Pinterest was really straightforward. It felt good to branch out a little. “It should be ready in five minutes or so. Do you want to get plates out?”

“Of course,” he murmured. “I’m sorry we haven’t had much time in the past few days, Luna. I know I’ve been working several late nights.”

“It’s okay,” I replied, and honestly it was. I wasn’t trying to placate him. “I know things are really busy with the situation in Oklahoma right now. I’d rather have Tala back.”

And that was true. A few late nights — even a month or more — were worth the safety and well-being of my friend. Remus offered me a tired smile as he leaned up to retrieve the dishes from the cabinet. Before he’d even put them on the island, the door swung open again. Remus’ shoulders sank, and he grumbled to himself. “I really need to change the lock on that door.”

As far as I knew, Fiona was the only other person he’d given a keycard to, and moments later, it was indeed his mother who came striding through the door, Bane hot on her heels. I silently agreed with Remus and reached to turn off the burner — I had made enough for two, not four. My irritation lasted exactly three seconds until I saw how pale the two of them looked. I swallowed as my heart skipped two beats.

“What’s wrong?” Remus demanded, abandoning the plates. “What happened?”

“Seff—”

Fiona hadn't gotten anything else out of her mouth when the phone in Remus' pocket began to ring. He whipped it out, his face going a bit whiter before he swiped to answer. "Hello? Seff? I'm putting you on speaker, okay? Luna and Fiona are here."

I wasn't sure why, but the looks on everyone's faces made my stomach clench, and I watched Remus before my eyes dropped to his phone. Seff sounded out of breath. "Marnet has totally lost his shit," he panted. I clenched my fingers against my palms.

"What does that mean?" Remus growled.

Seff took another breath or two. "He was furious after Pam broke up with him — as far as we can tell, he hasn't been able to convince her to take him back yet, either. He must have figured out it was you; he went after a few random Silverstreak members and injured them on a neighborhood pack run last night before a few other wolves could come to the rescue." Fiona took a sharp breath, and I felt ice run down my spine. *Shit. I knew he was ruthless, but...*

"It gets worse," Seff added. "One of the men in the field reported back he heard what sounded like a woman screaming from one of the locations I flagged as a possibility of where Tala could be held."

Somehow, my blood ran colder. I felt like someone had dropped me in the Arctic Ocean. Fiona didn't look any better. Even Seff, whom I'd only known to be calm and cool the few times I'd met him, had started sounding a bit frantic. *Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no!*

"Remus, I received a package at home this morning," Fiona said quietly. "Hand-delivered. It wasn't a mail carrier. The car sped off before Bane or I could get a look at the driver or the plate." Remus took a deep breath through his nose, looking far calmer than I felt. My stomach felt like a flock of sparrows had exploded into flight as Bane stepped forward, holding a small package wrapped in plain brown paper.

"I'm driving to that location right now," Seff rumbled. "I know this is your call, Remus, but if Tala is in that building, we can't wait. *I can't wait. She's getting out.*"

Remus tore the paper off the package, revealing a small cardboard box. He opened the top, and suddenly his expression matched his mother's. My anxiety spiked, and I felt the world spin around me, my mind racing with all the possibilities. "Whatever you need to do, Seff, do it," he snarled, with every muscle in his shoulders tense.

I felt like I was going to be sick. “—Remus? What was in that box?” Seff hissed. “Remus? *What was in the box?*”

My stomach lurched. I could smell the distinct scent of copper moments before the alpha spoke. “There’s a woman’s finger in this box,” he snarled. I gasped, a hand covering my mouth as I tried to control my breathing.

“*Shit,*” Seff growled back. His voice made my skin prickle. “I’ll call you when I get there.”

I MANAGED NOT to retch while Remus had Bane do away with the severed finger. There was no way to know if it was Tala’s, but I couldn’t help but think the worst... and even if it *wasn’t* Tala’s finger, that meant Marnet had other women held captive and was punishing them for something that they likely weren’t involved in. All thoughts in the general area made my stomach turn over again.

Remus was pacing back and forth, waiting for Seff to call back as he worked on his tablet, moving funds. Fiona and Bane had stayed, Fiona making her own calls to try to coordinate the teams she’d met with. One of the teams from the east had gone right to Oklahoma — they were near enough that Fiona was able to send them to the location Seff had indicated he was traveling to.

She’d since gone to make some tea as we waited to hear back from anyone, and I was happy to help her use the machine to brew the tea — anything to do with my hands. My pad Thai still sat in the pan, now cold and soggy, but no one was hungry anymore. I would deal with the dishes later.

After what felt like years, Remus’ phone pinged with a message from Seff.

“Not Tala,” he read aloud, his shoulders falling visibly. “Going to extract the person still inside anyway.”

Remus growled and turned to Bane. “Is he hooked up to our security system?” he barked.

The beta shook his head, looking a little abashed. “No,” he replied, his voice rough. “We had a specific plan, and Seff has jumped up the timeline. He didn’t get the equipment. And—”

“And?”

“And I don’t have access to it anymore,” Bane muttered, dropping his gaze to the floor.

Remus growled again but did not argue, turning to begin pacing. *Right, I realized. Bane isn't his beta anymore. He probably only has access to what Fiona gives him access to.*

Remus swore under his breath. Fiona watched him, clutching the cup of tea she still hadn't taken a sip from. "Seff's concerned, Remus," she murmured quietly. "Don't pretend you wouldn't react similarly."

The alpha huffed softly, but he didn't argue — simply kept watching his phone for any sign of Seff or the team relocated to aid him.

Finally, the phone rang again.

"What did you find?" Remus asked as he picked up.

"It wasn't Tala," Seff confirmed over the speaker. "But there was a woman inside. It was the girl from the Moonmate ceremony — the one Marnet was trying to show off to us."

I swallowed hard; the image of Skye hanging off Marnet's arm was still seared into my brain. We had wondered what happened to her after he announced his engagement to Pam Whitewater. *Has Marnet been holding her hostage this whole time? He's more of a monster than I realized.* The thought made me feel sick. If things had gone differently and Remus hadn't decided to take over the Lupus Claw pack on that fateful day, would that be what happened to me instead of Skye? Would Skye and I be locked up together, a collection of Marnet's discarded women as he moved from one to another?

Remus snorted. "Did you burn the place to the ground?"

"Just as you said," Seff grunted. "We're still monitoring to make sure the burn finished. No evidence."

"And Skye — does she have all of her fingers?"

There was a brief silence. "Yes," the other alpha replied, sounding strained. "She's a bit bruised and dehydrated, but there are no other visible injuries."

Remus cursed again, gripping his phone before remembering his strength. "Have you been able to get any other information out of her? Why was she screaming? Has she seen Marnet?"

Seff sighed heavily into the phone. "No. She's really shaken up, Remus. I don't know what happened to her that caused the screaming, but it clearly scared her. She flinches every time one of us moves too quickly. I think she might need to see a doctor before we can talk to her."

"Of course." Remus paused and looked at me. "Can the pack doctor be trusted? He swore his loyalty to me, but..."

I nodded. "Yes. He doesn't like Marnet. Never did, as far as I could see

— was loyal because that’s what you’re supposed to do.”

“Good.” Remus nodded. “Take her there, Seff. If nothing else, maybe she’ll know something — and if not, the least we can do is get her back to her family. Maybe Marnet was leveraging her to get York’s compliance. I believe she’s related to his beta.” He snorted to himself. “Or maybe not. York’s a stubborn shit — and he’s unreliable. It wouldn’t surprise me if he handed Skye over.”

“Noted,” Seff grumbled. “I’ve already asked my tech team to make sure the call doesn’t go to Marnet’s insurance. As soon as this is burnt down, we’ll disappear.”

“Good. Be careful, Seff. Marnet has clearly lost his mind — we’ll have to be more careful than ever before. Whatever the case with Skye and York is, Marnet might be on to us. That can’t mean good things to come.”

REMUS

Remus' Penthouse

Austin, Texas

I did not go into Silverstreak Motors the next day; fortunately, there were plenty of tasks I could accomplish from my home office, even if my mind was elsewhere. I didn't need anyone asking why I was distracted, and I didn't need to explain to anyone else who Seff was or what had happened to Tala; ancestors forbid anyone to overhear me should the other alpha call. Even if I wasn't spending time with Luna, at least I was nearer to her — I was even able to have my coffee with her. *Well, Luna only had tea. Everyone knows pregnant women aren't supposed to eat tuna, but limit caffeine? I had no idea. I couldn't imagine cutting my coffee down, even if I was still allowed one cup.*

It was nearing noon, and I was picking over a financial spreadsheet when my phone rang, Seff's name flashing across the screen. I couldn't snatch the phone up soon enough. "Hello?"

"Hey, Remus." Seff sounded tired — no, Seff sounded *exhausted*. I couldn't blame him. Tala was my cousin, but the two of them were involved. He had been *with her* when Marnet had struck; I couldn't imagine the amount of guilt he was carrying on his shoulders right now. I'd have attempted to absolve him of it, but if it were Luna and someone tried to do the same, I'd probably bite their head off for any placations.

"Still no news on Tala," Seff said, interrupting my thoughts. "The doctor was able to take care of Skye; she's much calmer now. She told us she's been the only woman being held in that location — she didn't recognize any of the people holding her or keeping guard."

"Damn," I huffed. Even if Seff had prevented the insurance claim or building alerts from getting to Marnet immediately, it was only a matter of time before someone realized they hadn't heard from the guards there and went to check. "Has she said anything else?"

"Actually, yeah. She had said she'd known they weren't fated mates, but her uncle had told her it was essential for the Shadow Rock pack to go through with it. She had no idea anything was going on until a few weeks ago; Marnet asked her to do him a favor and pick something up at the

warehouse on her way to see him when she was essentially kidnapped and imprisoned.” He paused for a moment. “She said she thinks it’s a few weeks, anyways. She hasn’t had a window.”

“The timeline adds up,” I said, growling softly. “What a piece of shit.” I had never thought my opinion of Marnet could get worse, but here we were. Not only had he rejected his fated mate — publicly and brutally — but he’d kidnapped his ally’s family member and was holding her prisoner. It wasn’t even for ransom; no one had known where she was. I had no idea how close York and his beta were, but if they were as close as Bane and I—

I shook the thought off. *As close as I thought Bane and I were, anyway. There was a lot I would have done if someone had kidnapped his family.* York’s resources weren’t as strong as Silverstreak’s. It wasn’t hard for me to see how the man had quickly bowed to what Marnet had wanted.

“Yeah,” Seff agreed, sounding distant. “Remus, if this is what he did to a woman he supposedly *loved*, what do you think he’s done to Tala?”

Images of the first time I’d met Luna, her battered body discarded in the strewn hay, flashed across my mind’s eye, and I bared my teeth. *Marnet does that a lot, doesn’t he?* Seff’s worry wasn’t unfounded, but we couldn’t let it rule us, or we would start making bad choices. The last thing we needed to do was give Marnet the upper hand after all of this. “We aren’t going to imagine it, Seff. That just takes energy away from working on how to get her back.”

“Right. Right,” Seff said. I could hear him nodding his head. “What do you want me to do with Skye?”

“Keep her secure for now. Make sure she has whatever she needs; I’ll pay you back for it. I will arrange her return to her family and pack; maybe we can get York to see sense.”

Seff snorted. “Maybe,” he grumbled. “Well, I’ll do that and keep monitoring the other locations. Don’t take too long, Remus.”

“I won’t. Keep me informed.” As soon as he hung up, I pulled up my contacts and tapped on my mother’s name. She must have been working from home today, too — the phone only rang once before she picked up, almost sounding breathless.

“Hello? Remus? Have you got Tala yet?”

“No,” I grumbled to myself, shaking my head. I leaned back in my leather office chair, staring at the ceiling. “But Seff was able to get some information from Skye after she saw the doctor,” I said before reporting back the details the other alpha had shared with me.

My mother inhaled sharply. “What an animal,” she hissed into the phone. “Holding a woman hostage like that. I almost feel bad for this Skye woman.”

I shrugged; it was easy to not want to like her. She was from the Shadow Rock pack, and Marnet had used her to hurt Luna, but it was becoming increasingly clear that she was just a means to an end. First, she was a pawn moved between York and Marnet for some sort of peace, and when Marnet decided he didn’t want that, she became leverage to ensure York’s loyalty instead. I seriously doubted that was something she would have agreed to if she had any idea how it would play out in the months following the Moonmate ceremony. “I don’t think she had anything to do with his plans,” I told her, “and I hope York will see sense and be grateful if we return her safely to him and his beta. Grateful enough to stop supporting Marnet, at least.”

“Oh, he will,” my mother scoffed into the phone. “He’s an ass and a drunk, but if he sticks with Marnet after all he’s done to his pack, he’s just as bad as Marnet himself — maybe worse. Let me handle speaking with him. I’ve known him for decades.” She paused for a moment. “And I don’t think he sees me as much of a threat, Remus. Little old me, just a widowed wolf.”

We both snorted at the idea of my mother being *nonthreatening*, but if that’s how York viewed her... “Better than the dick-swinging contests he gets in with me,” I grunted, rolling my eyes. “I could imagine him refusing Skye’s return just to prove he doesn’t need my help.”

“Exactly. Let me take it off your plate.”

“Thank you,” I hummed. It wasn’t as if I didn’t have a dozen other things to keep my mind busy.

“Let me go do that, then. I’ll call you back after I’ve spoken with him.”

THE NEXT TIME I looked up from my computer, it was well past mid-afternoon. I leaned back, stretching my arms over my head as I sighed. Luna hadn’t made so much as a peep, even though I was sure she was worried about Tala.

I’ve been a terrible partner these last few days. Every time I said as much, Luna assured me it didn’t bother her, that Tala’s safety was imperative, but... That didn’t make me feel much better. I was only one man, I had the same twenty-four hours as everyone else, but I still felt like I wasn’t getting enough done. Tala wasn’t safe yet. Marnet was still on the run.

Silverstreak Motors' financial issues hadn't been completely resolved, and to top it all off, I wasn't spending that much time with Luna. At best, we had dinner and fell asleep on the couch before relocating to the bed. All this stress made me feel like I was eighty years old, not twenty-eight.

The thought made me pause. *Soon to be twenty-nine. Ugh.* Normally, I'd plan to take Luna away for a fun weekend to celebrate — I wasn't the type of man to enjoy large parties, not for that — but there was no way I could even think about relaxing right now. I groaned and rubbed my face before I stood. *You can afford a five-minute break, Remus. You aren't going to help anyone if you start making mistakes in your planning, least of all Tala.*

I opened the door to my office, heading to the kitchen to warm up another cup of coffee. I was about to call Luna and ask if she wanted me to make her a cup of tea when I heard her shaky voice.

"Remus?" she called, her distress obvious. I abandoned my coffee cup and strode towards the balcony where she'd been sitting; she was on her feet but hadn't moved.

"What is it?" I asked as soon as I was outside. "Luna, what's wrong?"

She was staring down at her phone, silver eyes wide and wet. There was a hand over her mouth, and she'd gone as white as a sheet. Before I could ask again, she turned towards me slowly and handed over her phone, her fingers trembling so badly she almost dropped it before I could take it from her.

I frowned, watching her a moment longer. "Luna, do you—"

"Watch," she gasped, breathless. She jabbed a finger at the phone. "Just... just watch."

My pulse started to gallop as I tapped on the blurry image in the most recent message, restarting the video. It came into focus a moment later, and my breath caught as I realized what I was looking at. Tala sat in a chair, legs tied and one arm behind her back. Her beautiful red hair was matted and tangled, sticking to her wet face. Her other arm was cradled against her chest as she bent forward, her shoulders shaking — a river of red down her front.

It's her finger. Holy shit. Marnet sent me her finger. I'll fucking kill him, that—

"Hey, kitten," a smug voice purred. The video wasn't over yet, and the frame shifted to a smug face. "A little birdy told me you were pregnant with *my* child. I always knew you were a bit foolish, but that is a stupid game you and your pompous little boytoy are playing, you know?" The man grinned into the camera like he was just having a friendly chat instead of mutilating

someone. “I gave you the chance to come back on your own, but since you insist on being a stubborn little whore — I’m done being patient with you. The longer you take to get back to Oklahoma, the worse it will be for your pretty little friend here. If you think I’ll stop after I run out of fingers, there are plenty of other pieces I can start removing. I’ll send them one by one. So, make the right choice, would you? I’m sure your friend here would appreciate it.”

The camera panned back to Tala — her head jerked up, something fiery in those green eyes. “Why don’t you come over here and finish the job, you fucking —”

The video cut suddenly, leaving me with the blurry image of Tala as Marnet closed back in. My stomach twisted into knots as I stared for a moment, still trying to process what I had just witnessed. “Remus...” Luna croaked.

I pocketed her phone and stepped forward, wrapping my arms around her. A wet sob escaped her a moment later, my shirt quickly becoming damp as she pressed her face into my chest. “It’s my fault,” she choked between her tears. “It’s my fault. She’s hurting, and it— it— it’s *my* fault.” She stuttered out the last sentence before going limp, the sobs taking over.

I held her closer, supporting her weight as she shook. “Luna...” I sighed and kissed the top of her head. “It isn’t your fault, Luna. He is a sick, twisted man. You didn’t make him do that.” No one had. He’d woken up and chosen violence. I had known he was dangerous, and now he was proving exactly how dangerous he could be.

“But if I hadn’t told my stepsister...”

“Shhh,” I hummed, rubbing Luna’s back. “That was Fiona’s idea, and we all agreed to it. It’s not your fault.”

Luna shuddered against me, and I leaned down, scooping her up and cradling her against my chest. “Let’s go inside,” I murmured, pressing another kiss to her hair. We were towards the end of September, but it was still warm outside, especially in the middle of the afternoon. Luna said nothing, even as I carried her towards the bedroom and set her down on the sheets, moving to remove her sandals.

“Don’t leave,” she finally croaked.

“Of course not.” I lay down behind her, wrapping an arm around her middle as Luna continued to shiver and wipe tears from her face. “I’m not going anywhere, Luna.”

I STAYED with Luna for at least an hour after she fell asleep, but I couldn't stay still any longer than that. My mind kept racing — there was no way I could give Luna up to that monster, but I didn't know how I would get Tala out of his clutches without any further injury, either. Picking up my cold coffee in the kitchen, I retreated to the balcony and shot my mother a quick text.

MARNET'S BEEN IN TOUCH. Threatened to keep injuring Tala until Luna comes back to him.

I SIGHED and sat heavily in one of the chairs, staring out at the city as I sipped at my drink. I couldn't even taste it. My mother replied within moments.

THAT BASTARD.

We cannot give Luna up to him. Too dangerous.

York and I are meeting first thing in the a.m. I will have Bane with me.

I BRISTLED SLIGHTLY as I read the third text. I had agreed with her until that point, but *meeting* with York? That could easily be another trap, especially if he didn't believe that Seff had rescued Skye from where she was being held. He wasn't reliable at the best of times, and we were far, *far* from that.

HE COULD BE TRYING to trap you.

I WAS sure she'd already thought of that, but what sort of son would I be if I didn't say so?

HE COULD BE. That is why I will have Bane with me and a few other precautions in place. I assure you, Remus, this is not my first rodeo — and I will not become a liability for Silverstreak, either.

I SIGHED, halfway through typing out my response, when her next text popped up.

I AM GOING, Remus. I would be a poor aunt and a poorer grandmother if I allowed any alternative. Your father taught me many things, and I am not afraid of this man or what he might be planning. It will be done.

I GRUNTED and set my phone down on the table next to me. *That's that, I guess.* When Fiona Silverstreak got an idea in her head, there were very few things that could convince her otherwise. I wasn't sure if she felt like she had to do this for the pack, or my dad's legacy, or because it was her family, but even through text alone, I could sense there would be no talking her out of it. It was best not to waste our energy arguing.

A few minutes later, she texted again.

YOU NEED to go see your biological father as soon as possible. This was something I wanted to avoid, but he will have resources I do not.

I SNORTED and tapped out a quick reply.

I CAN'T GO to England while Marnet threatens to take Tala apart. No way.

HER RESPONSE WAS RAPID.

YOU MUST. We have already ruled out letting Luna go, so now we must move as quickly as possible. He has resources — and I think he will be willing to help if you ask him. Do whatever you need to; just get there.

FROWNING, I tapped out one more reply.

OKAY.

I SIGHED and stood back up, abandoning my empty mug on the balcony. As soon as I was inside, I grabbed my tablet and started flicking through airlines, but the wait was too long — private charter it was. It was obscenely expensive, this last minute, but my mother was right. If we weren't giving Luna up — and we most certainly were not — we needed to do more as quickly as possible.

As soon as our early morning flight was confirmed, I set the tablet aside to get a large suitcase from my closet. Creeping back into the bedroom, I started to pack a few things. Luna shifted and rolled over, rubbing her eyes with a sleepy noise. She gave me a confused look. “Remus? What're you doing?”

I couldn't help but smile at her sleep-soft voice. “Change in plans, love. We're flying to London tomorrow morning, first thing.”

Luna's brows furrowed as she sat up, looking at me and then the bag. “Are you sure we should leave? Given what we... What Marnet...” She shuddered. “Are you sure?”

I walked over to her, wrapping my arms around her shoulders to give her a quick hug before she could dip back into the dark memory of the video she'd been sent. “Yes. I am. I talked to my mother, and she is handling things here. She's certain that my biological father will have resources she doesn't. If that means getting Tala home faster, I am all for trying.”

Luna sniffed and nodded against my stomach, chewing on her lip for a moment. “Okay. If you and Fiona think it will help.” She paused before adding, “Are you sure you want me to come?”

“Of course.” I had no doubt. Turning, I moved my hands to cup her cheeks, pulling her into a soft kiss. “There is no way I’m letting Marnet anywhere near you, Luna — and if there’s anyone I want with me when I meet my biological father for the first time, it’s you... so there’s no way I’d even consider leaving you behind in Texas.”

Her eyes began to well up and she sniffled. “I... I just want Tala to be safe, Remus. I want this to end,” she whispered.

“I know,” I replied, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “I know. Fiona thinks my biological father can help us end this war, so that’s exactly what we’re going to try to do.”

LUNA

Four Seasons Hotel

London, England

I tossed and turned most of the night, my racing thoughts alternating between Tala and Marnet's threat; and the fact that we'd be leaving for England in the morning. At some point in the night, I woke up in a cold sweat, shaking Remus' shoulder. "I don't even have a passport!" I gasped, remembering that we'd only gone down to the post office shortly before Fiona had attempted to separate us.

"Luna, Luna — Calm down. Katherine will meet us at the airport with it in the morning; I paid to have it expedited. She's picking it up. It will be okay."

I had twelve other questions — how had he gotten someone to have it ready by tomorrow? Did I need anything else to travel? I had never traveled overseas! Remus had fallen back asleep, but I slipped in and out, leaving me absolutely exhausted by the time we finally made it to the airport and onto the chartered jet. Usually, I'd feel a bit more self-conscious about so much luxury, but I could barely look at the two other businessmen boarding the flight. I could barely keep my eyes open at all.

As soon as the plane leveled out, I was sound asleep; when I woke up, it was with my face pressed against Remus' shoulder. I had assumed I'd be able to stay awake once I'd gone to the bathroom, but as soon as I got back in the spacious leather seat and got comfortable again, I was out like a light. Dr. Hayes had told me most women report the first trimester to be the most exhausting, but I don't think I'd ever napped that long in my life.

At least I was feeling moderately awake when we landed in London. It was dark when we landed, and as our cab escorted us from the airport to the hotel, I noticed the streets weren't busy. *How late is it?* After having slept for most of the flight, I felt fairly refreshed, but I knew there was quite a time difference between Austin and London... I just wasn't entirely sure what that was. I fished my phone out of my purse and tried not to gawk. *Past midnight! Maybe I shouldn't have slept so much on the plane... how am I going to get to sleep?*

Even from the outside, the Four Seasons Hotel looked... amazing — and

that wasn't even in the full light of day! Someone opened the door for me and offered me a hand as I stepped out, despite the hour; he carried our bag as Remus led me through the front door and towards the desk to check us in.

"Ah, Mr. Silverstreak," the receptionist said, pulling up a file. She began preparing a key. "Are two cards enough for you and your partner?"

"That would be perfect, thank you."

She smiled warmly and handed over the two cards. "I am sure you are eager to get comfortable, but please do not hesitate to call down to the front desk if you need anything at all. The kitchen will be open at 6:00, but if you need something to eat prior, we can help arrange that for you."

Despite his weary expression, Remus pulled out a dazzling grin as he accepted the cards. "We appreciate that," he said. "Have a good evening."

THE ENTRANCE and the service at the front desk probably should have been a clue about what kind of hotel we were stepping into, but I was still shocked when Remus unlocked the door and led us into our room. Or suite... or, honestly, it could have been an apartment. A family of four could have lived there comfortably. The room had its own *foyer*.

It was a good thing the bellhop had handed the luggage off to Remus, or I might have dropped it right then and there. I could see the alpha grinning to himself out of the corner of my eye as I wandered through, peering around the corner. A luxurious sitting room was complete with a gray couch and two black leather sitting chairs. The rug probably cost more than I made in three months at Robby's Garage, and the TV rivaled Remus' in size.

I padded to the next room, my jaw almost dropping. "There's a full kitchen in here!" I called, wincing when I realized I had shouted. Sure, no one else could probably hear me in any other rooms, but it was still late.

It wasn't even "just" a full kitchen. There was a stove top, a sink, a dishwasher, a microwave, and a double oven. A double oven! They all looked brand new; like no one had ever used them. While I doubted the hotel could afford to replace their appliances between each client, I couldn't imagine the amount of work it must have taken to get everything looking so spotless.

"You haven't even seen the bedroom yet," Remus called. He sounded far away, and it took me rounding a few corners before I found the hallway — a hotel room with a *hallway* — which eventually led to the bedroom. He wasn't in there.

“Remus?”

“Keep going,” he replied, and I turned at the sound of his voice. A few yards further down the hall was another bedroom, and if the first one was comfortable, the second was clearly the master, complete with a king-sized bed, a sitting chair, and another enormous TV. Remus was near the elaborate built-in, the suitcase propped up on a stand as he unpacked. “Well?” he asked, the impish grin on his face.

“Two bedrooms!” I gasped, moving to sit on the bed. I smoothed my hand over the cover, pulling down the duvet to inspect the sheets. They felt just as silky as they looked. “Are you sure we can sleep on these?”

Remus laughed gently and shook his head. “Of course we can, darling.”

I glanced over my shoulder, watching him for a moment. “Remus, this is like an entire apartment. You could live here.”

He shrugged. “Some people choose to, yes.”

“Do I even want to know how much this cost? At last minute?”

Remus quirked a brow. “I don’t know, do you?”

I huffed and finally smiled, bending over to remove my flats. “No, I guess don’t. You know you didn’t have to get such a luscious room. I’d have been perfectly happy in any hotel room. Hell, I’d be happy with a Motel 6 — or whatever the British version of those are.” I tried to imagine Remus standing in a motel and made myself chuckle.

“Perhaps, but I know you haven’t been feeling well, and I can’t fix everything, nor can I just make the morning sickness go away, so the least I can do is make sure you’re comfortable.”

I snorted. “Oh, I’m more than comfortable,” I replied, finally lying back against the mattress. We had a beautiful view of the city from the bed. Even in the middle of the night, London looked beautiful, lit up and sparkling like a gem. I sighed wistfully, unable to keep the small smile off my face. “It’s beautiful. I bet it will be even prettier tomorrow in the light.”

The moment of awe only lasted for a single breath, the beauty paling as I remembered exactly *why* we were in London – it was something Remus had wanted to do *after* everything with Marnet was settled, but that message the bastard sent me? That accelerated the timeline. I took in a sharp breath, trying to force myself not to relive the images I’d seen on my phone over and over. *Tala...*

“I’m sure it will be,” Remus murmured, his voice breaking my train of thought as he finally abandoned the suitcase to join me on the bed. “When all

this is over, I will take you to travel the world, Luna.” He lay down next to me, effectively blocking the view — and replacing it with something much better. I smiled a little more, feeling warmth blossom in the pit of my belly.

“I’m pretty happy that I’ve gotten my first stamp in my passport,” I admitted, reaching across the bed to trace my fingers across the lines of his chest. He’d removed his jacket somewhere, but I hadn’t noticed. “I never thought I’d travel, much less with such... amenities.” I laughed at myself, wriggling a bit closer. Our legs brushed and I felt that warmth spread from the pit of my gut, tendrils reaching to my limbs with liquid warmth.

“I’ll take you anywhere you want,” Remus murmured, tangling our legs. His hand settled on the small of my back and pulled me closer. I could feel my skin flush as I slithered closer, wrapping my arm around his body. I wanted his warmth. More than anything, I wanted to pretend this was just a vacation, anything to keep those horrid images from popping back up behind my eyes.

“I never thought I could have something like that,” I admitted, almost feeling shy. “Anywhere?” The conversation almost felt forced, but I needed it. I needed the distraction desperately. I needed *Remus*, and I needed him to fix this for me. For Tala.

“Anywhere,” he confirmed, leaning in to kiss me deeply. We’d kissed dozens of times before, but each time felt like the first time, leaving me breathless and my heart skipping beats as his fingers curled against my skin. When he finally pulled away, his dark eyes were glued to mine, but I couldn’t look away. “I will give you anything within my power, Luna. Anything at all.”

I clung to his shirt like he was my lifeline while he whispered sweet words between kisses. Having Remus’ warmth around me was more comforting than anything else I could imagine, and I dug my fingers into his back.

“Why don’t you take this off for me, love?” Remus murmured softly, his fingers plucking at my top.

I paused for a moment, leaning back into the sheets. “Now?” I whispered, the feeling of guilt threatening to steal away any comfort my lover was trying to offer me.

Remus shifted one hand to stroke my cheek. “Yes. I want to take your mind off everything else,” he replied, kissing my neck. “But if you tell me no...”

He trailed off, leaving the ball firmly in my court. I waffled for a few moments but finally decided that maybe he was right. I just needed to get a good night's sleep if I was going to be helpful to anyone, and I wouldn't even get that if I stayed up all night worrying about what might or might not be happening back in Oklahoma.

"Okay," I whispered, wanting to simply sink into the safe haven Remus offered for me, if only for a little while. I reached between us to find the hem of my shirt and tugged it over my head.

Remus murmured a pleased noise, lavishing kisses over my neck before I released my bra, slipping my arms free. He shifted further south, first pressing chaste kisses to the tender flesh before offering little nips. Once I began to squirm, he slid one hand down my middle and fiddled with the button of my pants, slipping his hand beneath the waistband. A moment later, he pressed two fingers inside as I arched up against them. But he pulled away almost as quickly as he'd offered the sweet taste of friction.

"Not quite wet enough," Remus murmured, shaking his head.

I frowned, propping myself up on one elbow to try to reach for him. "You're still completely dressed."

He flashed me a wicked grin. "I don't need to take off my clothes for what I have planned, Luna."

My brows popped up. "Remus?"

He buried a hand in my hair and kissed me again, ferociously. Possessive and protective all at once. I could feel how hard he was through his slacks as I writhed against him. I managed to get my hand between us and rub the line of his cock through the fabric of his pants. He groaned quietly, pausing as he rutted into my hand.

He didn't stay tamed for long, though. "Luna," he murmured, "you know what you're going to do?"

I didn't, and I shook my head. "It sounds like you're going to tell me, though," I whispered, barely able to catch my breath.

Remus smiled at me. "You're going to lie down, and you're going to spread your legs for me, and you're going to let me lick your clit until you can't even remember your name." He said it so calmly, like it wasn't one of the most erotic things I'd ever heard.

I opened my mouth, and all that came out was a whimper.

When he gently pushed me back towards the sheets again, I went easily this time, my hands already falling to my waist as I struggled to get my pants

off as hastily as possible.

His weight was heavy on top of me, heavy and warm and *safe* as he cupped my face and began to kiss me again. I scrabbled against him, digging my fingers into his hair as he rolled his hips. His clothes felt smooth against my thighs, but not nearly enough friction to give me any sort of satisfaction, but I didn't care.

He was here and with me. Remus' weight covered me, and his hips rolled against mine while the rest of the world was already fading away from me. He was just so damn good at kissing — he stole my breath away every time. I was sure I was a lot wetter now than I was moments ago and I squirmed, rubbing my thighs together. I pulled back, nibbling on his jawline before I whispered, "You could just make love to me right here. You know you could."

Remus propped himself up on one elbow and raised a brow at me, a smile hiding in his honey-brown eyes. "I could do that," he hummed, nodding his head as if he agreed with me. "But... I'm not going to. Not yet, anyway." He kissed me again, shifting from my lips to my throat, and to my chest.

As Remus continued to worship my skin, his fingers weren't idle. They began to drift further south, exploring the rest of my exposed skin. He trailed lazy maps over my entire body. He started with my shoulders and arms, then he drifted to my sides. My ribs. My navel, and finally my thighs to my core. Remus was slow and methodical in his movements, but there was something comforting in that. A contented sigh escaped my lips as he finally moved the tips to my pussy, brushing his fingers against the outer lips. For a time, that was absolutely perfect... but that was all Remus did. He just made a gentle motion, circles and shapes, never dipping deeper or going further north, like he'd forgotten my clit was right there, or my pussy was surely soaked.

"Remus," I whimpered, and he glanced up, still smiling.

"Yes?" he asked like he couldn't imagine what it was I could possibly want right now.

"Remus, please. Don't make me beg."

His expression softened as he dipped his head down, pressing a light kiss to one of my thighs. "Of course, sweetheart," he murmured, brushing his hands against my skin. I spread my legs further for him, and he shuffled, arranging himself neatly between my knees. I barely had time to take another breath before he ducked his head down, sweeping his tongue against my lower lips.

Remus began to taste me like he was at a damn buffet, sampling every inch as I began to writhe. An unbidden whimper escaped me and I dug my fingers into the sheets. I was unable to watch him, or I might simply expire from the sheer image of seeing him worship me like that. I managed to hold it together and keep most of the noises in until he flattened his tongue and licked a wet stripe, the tip of his tongue barely teasing my clit.

He kissed me there and I moaned, tipping my head back as I stared up at the ceiling.

Remus' worship turned into something much more dedicated after that. I always knew he was a clever boy and quick with that silver tongue... but this was something else entirely. He swept his tongue back and forth until I was moaning openly, unable to keep all the noises locked inside. One of my hands was fisted in the sheets, but I'd moved the other to his dark hair, my fingers twitching as I tried not to dig my nails into his scalp. I tried to hold myself still and let Remus work, but my hips kept rocking and wriggling like they had a mind of their own, and that mind told them to get as close to Remus as possible.

He shifted slightly and moved one hand to my hip, pinning me down. I opened my mouth, the question still unformed in my mind, but he was already licking a little harder, a little faster, and anything I wanted to say was washed away by the sudden rush of my orgasm.

"Remus!"

It crashed through me without warning, a rogue wave on a quiet beach, and my entire body tensed as I shook. I dug my nails into his hair before I released him, still whimpering and trembling as I fell back against the bed, panting—but Remus wasn't done with me yet.

All he did was adjust his position before pushing two fingers inside me. Suddenly, two fingers became three, and before I could catch my breath from the first orgasm, I shrieked, coming for a second time. I quickly lost track of where Remus was, what he was doing, and hell, where we even were.

When I opened my eyes again, he was bowing his head back down to worship my clit, and I howled, throwing my head back. Every touch was too much and not enough — I felt like every nerve was a live wire, and Remus was playing me like a piano, ringing each sound out of me like a practiced expert. I was shaking again — or maybe I'd never stopped. I could hear the distant sound of someone chanting Remus' name, only to realize it was me.

When I opened my eyes, he was lying with his head against my belly,

breathing just as heavily as I was. “Oh...” I whimpered weakly, unable to so much as twitch a finger. “Oh, Remus. I think I came so hard I might have blacked out a little bit.”

I could feel Remus’ smile, even if I couldn’t see it. “Then close your eyes, love. I think my work here is done.”

TO MY SURPRISE, I didn’t sleep in until a horrific hour, despite the change in time and our... late-night activities. Just the memory of Remus dipping his head between my thighs made heat spread through my gut, and I forced myself to roll over and get out of bed. *We’re here to meet his biological father, remember? Not have a sexy vacation. This is important.*

The reminder of *why* we were in London was enough to sober me, and when I stepped out of the bathroom-sized shower thirty minutes later, Remus called me out to the kitchen. “I wasn’t sure what you were in the mood for,” he admitted, “so I had them bring up fresh pastries and fruit — coffee and tea.” He sighed, looking a bit frustrated for a moment. “There are plenty of other options if none of this appeals, though.”

I offered him a smile, bending down to kiss his cheek. “No, this is perfect,” I replied. He’d chosen things without strong scents; since he’d remembered that alone was rather touching despite everything else on his mind. “I’m actually feeling pretty good today, so...” I plucked one pastry off the tray and inspected it quickly. “...a raspberry Danish sounds perfect!”

The crispy, flaky pastry was unlike anything I’d had before; the filling was so fresh, I could imagine someone picking sun-ripened berries just yesterday to make the jam. I was debating having a second one as I sipped my tea, when Remus’ phone rang. He swallowed as he looked at the caller ID. “Ah,” he said, clearing his throat. “It’s my contact in London.”

The conversation was quick, but I think for the first time since we’d met, I witnessed Remus look... nervous. He set his phone down on the table and stared at the screen. I frowned, wrapping my fingers around my mug. “What’s wrong, Remus? I thought you wanted to meet your biological father?”

“I did. I mean, I do.”

I sighed and set down my cup, recognizing that exact feeling. I reached across the table and cupped his cheeks gently, rubbing my thumbs over his morning stubble. “Remus, my beautiful man,” I murmured, waiting until his

eyes met mine, “you will be fine. You are going to be more than fine, okay? If he is even half the man you are, half the man your mother described, then I have no doubt he will take one look at you and love you too.”

He didn’t say anything, and I leaned forward over the little round table, kissing his cheek. “Babe, if he doesn’t like you, it’s his damn loss — you are an amazing, talented person and the best alpha I’ve ever met. His approval, or lack thereof, is not going to change any of that.”

Remus made a low, rumbling noise and leaned forward to meet me, pressing our foreheads together. I smiled softly, shifting my hand to wrap around his nape, my thumb rubbing the soft skin there. “I shouldn’t care,” he finally murmured, looking down at the table. “I really shouldn’t. But... I still do.”

I smiled. “I know, babe. I know,” I whispered back, holding him a little closer. “I promise I do.”

Remus finally moved closer; I could feel my wolf adjust herself, too, as if our wolves were tangling with one another as we embraced. “I suppose you do, don’t you? More than most.”

“I do.”

“Thank you, Luna. It means more than you know.”

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, we arrived at a large park. Some children were yelling and running back and forth — they looked to be practicing soccer. Several mothers sat on the nearby benches, watching the kids as they dashed across the green. I saw a woman jogging, as well as a couple walking two dogs. There were several other people scattered across the grass, some reading, others with what appeared to be a snack. I gave a little shiver and pulled my coat closer, glad Remus had packed them for us. The weather had assured us it was within average temperatures for London this time of year, but late September was practically still summer in Texas.

I paused, about to ask Remus if we had the right place, when I spotted a tall man standing by himself several lengths away. My wolf froze, and I had to fight not to gasp; even from here, I could sense he was a powerful alpha, and we were in his territory. I snuck a sideways glance and saw Remus stiffen as he noticed the man as well, his shoulders tensed. He began to rumble.

“Remember, this is his territory,” I whispered, reaching out to squeeze his

hand. “We aren’t being threatened. It’s okay.”

It was enough to snap Remus out of the reflexive response and he gave me a small smile. By that time, the man had noticed us as well; foreign shifters in his territory. His eyes roamed over me first, impassive, but his expression hardened as he studied Remus. A mix of emotions washed over Remus’ face as the man stepped closer, his expression becoming increasingly difficult to read. I had to remind myself to breathe; Remus was already nervous enough. I didn’t need to feed into that energy.

No one spoke as he approached us, stopping just outside arm’s reach. His thick brow furrowed as he continued to study Remus. Finally, he swallowed, his voice thick as he spoke. “Can I help you two?” he asked gruffly, eyes flickering towards me again.

“Do you know who I am?” Remus asked; I was proud to see he had gotten his wolf back under control. The question was asked softly, without the aggression I knew could so easily pop up.

The man shook his head. “I’m afraid not, no.” He paused for a moment, eyes narrowing again. “My wolf seems to think he does, though. Can’t say that’s ever happened to me before.”

I raised my brows. *I didn’t know wolves could do that. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, however. They can do a lot more than we give them credit for.* After a moment of silence, I squeezed Remus’ hand again.

He took a deep breath before pulling his hand free from mine, offering it for a shake. “My name is Remus Silverstreak,” he introduced himself.

“Nicholas Archer,” the man replied, confirming everything we had already figured. They shook, still staring at one another.

Remus cleared his throat. “I’m here because you knew my mother. Fiona. And...” He trailed off, his jaw working as he tried to figure out what to say next.

Nic’s eyes went wide; clearly, Remus did not need to explain further. He stared at Remus, and I could see the wheels turn behind his eyes. “Oh my god. You’re...”

Remus nodded. “Yes. I believe I’m your son.”

REMUS

Cobblestone Coffeeworks

London, England

Nicholas led us to a coffeehouse near the park. It had a warm atmosphere, and since we had caught it between the breakfast and lunchtime rushes, it wasn't too crowded. There were still several patrons inside, which was always a good sign, but at the moment, I could barely focus on anything outside of the fact that the man ordering coffee for me and offering Luna a London Fog was, in fact, my father. If it wasn't for her right now, I'm not sure I could have handled it.

Even my wolf reacted in a way I'd never experienced — when Nicholas had told us his wolf recognized me, I knew exactly what he meant. My wolf had responded the same, whining and prancing like he was a young pup instead of a full-grown alpha. I'm not sure if he'd even been that wild when we were children. My emotions rattled from nervous to overwhelmed to shocked before we cycled through those emotions all over again.

I'd barely shed a tear at my dad's funeral, but at the moment, I was feeling more emotional than I ever had. I didn't think I would tear up, but my throat felt thick and my nerves felt frayed for absolutely no reason. Luna's hand brushed mine as we took our seats at a cozy corner bench, and she offered me a quick smile. It was enough to fight back the worst of my emotions. I picked up my coffee, appreciative I had that to distract me from how my wolf was making a damn fool of himself.

Nicholas took a sip from his cup before finally looking back at me. He took a deep breath and sat back in the chair. I finally got a good look at him in the flesh, now that the initial shock had worn off. He didn't look too dissimilar to the man my mother had shown me in the photo. His eyes were the same honey-brown shade as mine, and he might even be an inch or two taller than I was. He was dressed like an unassuming businessman — sharp slacks, a matching jacket, and a tweed coat to fight off the weather. His dark hair was a little longer than it'd been in the photo; before, it had been close cut, and now it looked a little looser. The only real sign of age was the start of salt-and-pepper appearing in his hair and the hint of crow's feet around his eyes. I hoped it'd meant a lifetime of smiling; immediately after I'd had that

thought, I wondered why I hoped anything for him at all. I hardly knew him; I hadn't even known he'd existed a month ago.

"I just want you to know, Remus, that I had no idea," Nicholas finally said, looking a bit remorseful. "I had heard Fiona and her fated mate had had a son, but... I'd never thought much of it. It was about nine months after she left, give or take. I had figured they'd gotten right to work." The corner of my mouth twitched, and I carefully did *not* think about my parents in that fashion.

"I know," I said, inclining my head. "My mother did say she'd never shared the news with you."

"If I had seen you," Nicholas replied, his voice gruff, "I'd have known. There's no question we're related. I mean, look at you." He motioned between us, and I couldn't help but offer a small smile. I could see it, too.

I shrugged. "What would it have helped to know?"

"I'd have come to get you," he replied simply, raising a brow. "I know Fiona would have fought me tooth and claw, but there is no reason for me not to take part in my child's life. If I couldn't bring you back to London, I'd have figured out how to spend time with you, at the very least. I'm not the kind of man who'd just... steal a child away from his mother. I'd have been willing to co-parent, even if it wasn't that common twenty years ago or so." He paused, eyeing me for a moment longer. "I can tell you're an alpha, son."

"I am," I shrugged again, sipping at my coffee.

"Technically, that would make you the rightful heir to the Longbow pack, as my eldest son," he sighed, still studying me. "I get the sense you aren't here for a simple family reunion, either, or it might have been better planned."

I couldn't help but grimace, feeling like a pup with his paw caught in the pack's cache. "I wish it were as simple as that," I admitted, and that much was true. It would have been far more preferable to meet my biological father on my own terms, without any stakes outside of my personal feelings. Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple. I couldn't endanger Tala any further because of my pride if there were any chance this man could help us. "I came on Fiona's recommendation. I am an alpha, as you noticed, but I'm the Alpha of the Silverstreak pack; my territory stretches across Texas and Oklahoma. A rival alpha has taken my cousin hostage and started *torturing her* with the promise to continue unless I give him my partner, Luna." I nodded in her direction.

Nicholas grimaced, glancing between us as Luna stared down at her drink. “I suspect there’s more to the story than that,” he murmured, raising a brow. “That is quite the escalation.”

“He’s my fated mate,” Luna interrupted, looking absolutely stricken. “He rejected me, but since Remus and I got involved, he’s... suddenly interested again. I didn’t think he’d ever go so far as to involve other people....” She trailed off, and I reached over, squeezing her hand gently.

“It’s not your fault,” I reminded her gently, looking back at my father. “My mother and I are doing the best we can, but...” I shrugged. “Many of our neighbors are trying not to get involved at all, as Marnet has proven himself to be an utter bastard.”

“Mm,” Nicholas hummed, nodding slowly. He took a sip of his coffee. “I would like to help you, Remus, but I have one condition.”

I made a slight noise, inclining my head. The idea rankled me on instinct, but I wasn’t in the position to go making demands. This man didn’t owe me anything. I inclined my head. “I’ll accept the condition if I can.”

“I can help you, but in my line of work, it can take a few days to make sure we get all our ducks in a row, and it sounds like we cannot go off half-cocked in this situation. While I do that for you, I’d like you to spend some time with the pack. I don’t expect this should take more than a few days, as I said, but I’d appreciate it if you could meet the Longbow wolves — and my family. *Your* family. I will be happy to use my resources and assist you in rescuing your packmate.”

I blinked; there were a lot of possible requests I’d run through rapidly in that moment, and ‘spending time’ wasn’t anywhere on that list. “Really?” I asked, a bit shocked by the simplicity. “That almost seems too easy.”

Nicholas sighed and tipped his head to one side, his expression falling slightly. My traitorous heart twisted uneasily. “Remus, I just learned I had a son I had no idea existed when I woke up this morning. The last thing I want to do is extort you for my personal gain — I just want to get to know you.”

I stared at him, almost more unnerved because he sounded entirely genuine in his desire. Beside me, Luna sniffled, and when I glanced over, she was wiping at one of her eyes. “Hormones,” she murmured, her face flushing pink as she turned, trying to distract herself with another sip from her cup.

“Hormones? Do you—” Nicholas stopped before he asked, but he looked rapidly between Luna and me. “Is *that* why this other alpha is giving you such a hard time?”

“We are expecting,” I confirmed, nodding as I squeezed Luna’s hand again.

“And yes,” she sniffed, looking back at Nicholas, “I think that’s why Marnet has suddenly decided he wants me back.”

Nicholas simply studied us for a moment, his eyes looking a little wet. At the first glimmer, he shook himself and cleared his throat. “Well, that’s wonderful news. Congratulations to the two of you.”

“Thank you,” I replied, finally feeling myself smile.

“I would... love to be a part of that child’s life, but I understand we’ve only just met, Remus. I won’t say anything else on the matter — and my condition stays the same. Just come meet the Longbow pack and your family while you’re here.”

My smile grew a little more. “Those are terms I’d be happy to accept — though I have one question. What do you prefer I call you?”

“‘Dad’ would be a bit strange, wouldn’t it?”

“Yep,” I agreed, matching his wry smile.

“Strangers call me Mr. Archer. My mother is the only one who called me Nicholas, so Nic is fine, if you don’t mind.”

“Nic it is.”

AS PART OF MY AGREEMENT, we went to Nic’s home for dinner that night. I was relieved he didn’t want us to go right away; Luna desperately needed a nap, and the time was helpful for me to calm my mind. By the time we had arrived at his London home, I felt more myself than I had since we’d landed on foreign soil.

The Archer family owned an actual home in the city of London, not just a flat or a floor within a home. I couldn’t imagine how much that would be worth in such a busy metropolis; even the land alone was likely worth a fortune. My mother had indicated Nic’s family was more affluent than the one she’d grown up in; I wondered how the Silverstreaks stacked up to the Archers.

Luna’s awe was much more visible than mine. As we stepped out of the car, she smoothed her hands over the blue dress I’d chosen from her closet. She looked like a Greek goddess in that moment, her silver eyes shining as she looked back at me over her shoulder. Her dark hair fell in loose waves, and she pursed her lips. “Remus, are you sure I’ve dressed appropriately for

this? I don't want to embarrass you," she said, worrying her hands in front of her torso.

I withheld a laugh, stepping forward to wrap an arm around her waist and pull her into a kiss before I knocked on the door. "Luna Highborn, I am *honored* to have you attend this — or any — event with me, do you understand? You could be wearing a trash bag and fuzzy bunny slippers, and you would still be the most stunning woman in the entire city."

She snorted and swatted at my shoulder, but her playful smile had replaced the creeping dread spreading over her features. "Remus! I would never," she laughed. "At the very least, I would fashion matching black flats out of a tire."

I chuckled and kissed her again before releasing her to knock on the door.

It felt like the moment we stepped inside, the wolves descended upon me. Literally. First was a woman about Nic's age who introduced herself as my Aunt Delphine. "Aren't you a spitting image of Nic? He wasn't kidding! Well, it's very nice to meet you, young man — my two children will be arriving a bit later. Please stop in and see me again before you leave; they're about your age, and I'm sure they'd love to meet you."

"Of course, I—"

"Oh! There's your Uncle Gage," she chirped, taking my elbow to steer me further into the house. Luna trailed behind, and I could have sworn I heard her giggle as my aunt took it upon herself to introduce me to Gage, the middle child, before finding the youngest brother, Sam — "Don't even think about calling him Samuel, though, he's as prickly as a cactus about it." — and his mate, Louise. Gage had two adult children; Sam had three. I was already starting to lose track of who was who and who had how many kids, and I didn't even know who those kids were yet!

By the time Delphine released me back to Luna, I felt like my head was spinning as I tried to process the information. *I had no idea I had such a large family.*

"Now you know how I felt when I met the Ulfrics," Luna murmured, leaning on her toes to kiss my cheek. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but Delphine and Louise were calling her name, waving her over to the kitchen.

"Let me know if you need a rescue," I whispered as she walked off, watching as she joined the women at a table. Someone offered her a drink as Louise touched her hair, gushing over what a pretty young lady she was.

“Remus is lucky to have a lovely lady like you,” she said.

Guess she doesn't need a rescue.

I looked around the gathering, trying to spot Nic, when a hush fell over those already present. I frowned and turned, realizing someone else had come down the stairs; it was like looking into a mirror, if a mirror could take five years off. The man staring back at me could have been a doppelganger. After a moment, he scowled fiercely, storming from the stairs and down the hall.

I snorted. “What the hell was that?”

My Uncle Gage stepped next to me, holding a glass of whiskey out. I nodded my thanks. “Sorry about that, son,” the man grunted, his voice much gruffer than my father. “This was all rather last minute. I didn't have a chance to talk to him yet.”

“That's all right.” Nic trotted down the stairs, joining us. “That's not your job anyway, Gage. Remus, would you mind coming with me for a minute?”

“Of course,” I replied — I couldn't help but be curious about this grump amongst the sea of shining faces. He wasn't difficult to find, hiding out at Nic's bar and helping himself to a drink.

“Eli, come here,” Nic said, and the younger man turned, his brows still pulled into a dark look.

Nic sighed and shook his head, looking back at me. “Remus, I'd like to introduce you to my son, Eli Archer. Eli, this is Remus Silverstreak.”

LUNA

Nic Archer's Estate

London, England

The hush that had settled over the aunties I'd sat with was unnerving. I looked up, following their gaze to the stairs; the man I saw standing at the bottom could have easily been Remus' fraternal twin. They had the same dark hair and honey-warm eyes... they even had the same brooding stare. The look of absolute irritation on the stranger's face was one I recognized, having witnessed it in Remus' face many times when we'd first met.

I leaned in towards Aunt Delphine. "Who is that?" I asked as quietly as I could. The young man had already stormed off, and Nic had followed down the stairs, steering Remus off towards the bar.

"Oh, that's Eli," Delphine said, cupping her mug. She sipped on her tea. "Nic's son."

Uh-oh. I sat up a little straighter, straining to hear what the men were discussing. I could have guessed based on the sheer similarities, but my heart started to beat a bit quicker now that Delphine had confirmed my suspicions. Nic had made some introductions, but Eli looked like Remus had spit on his shoe rather than offered a hand for a shake. The frown had turned into an outright scowl, and my skin felt a bit colder.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Eli demanded, not bothering to keep his voice down. Everyone looked over towards the bar, not bothering to mask their interest.

I could almost sense Remus' wolf rankle before seeing the tension gather in his shoulders. There was a tic in his jaw, and I knew he was fighting not to snarl at the disrespect Eli was offering; if Eli was anyone else's son, he might have. *I'm proud of you.* I willed him to feel that, even though I wasn't sure if that was how bonds worked — and even if it was, we weren't bonded.

"Nic invited me over for dinner," Remus answered evenly, his eyes darkening.

Eli snorted, leaning back against the bar. "I'm not stupid," he growled, his eyes still fixed on Remus. "You and I both know that's not what I meant."

Remus forced himself to breathe, allowing his wolf an inch. His presence

took up a little more space; it wasn't more than Nic's, that would have been horrifically rude, family or not, but it was clear he was no pushover. "My business in London is my own," he replied, a hint of a growl in his voice. Eli's nostrils flared as his eyes widened.

Nic made an irritated noise, raising an eyebrow at his younger son. "Calm down," he murmured, holding out his free hand. "We will have this discussion later — for now, Remus and his partner, Luna, are guests in my home, and they will be treated with respect. Do you understand?" Even from here, I could detect the absolute authority in Nic's voice.

Eli stared at Remus a moment longer before finally breaking his gaze, eyeing his father warily. "Yes," he gritted out. A second later, some of the tension seemed to bleed out of him, and his shoulders slumped. He looked away from them both. "I apologize for being so rude," he said before lifting his head, searching over the gathered folks until his eyes landed on me. "Luna, it is nice to meet you," he added.

Satisfied, Nic nodded and leaned over the bar, picking something up to show both of his sons. The conversations in the room picked up as if nothing had happened, and Louise leaned over to squeeze my elbow. "So, Luna — Nic told us you were expecting. Are you excited to become a mother?" She motioned to the tea, as if that explained why they hadn't offered me a drink. Honestly, I appreciated it — it was getting exhausting, constantly declining wine and cocktails whenever they were offered. I never realized how one was expected to drink socially until I couldn't.

I turned, offering Remus' aunt a small smile. "For the most part... yes. Like 85 percent excited," I admitted. "The rest is definitely nerves, though."

Louise laughed softly, patting my arm. "Well, that's to be expected, dear! I'd be a bit concerned if any new mother told me she wasn't worried at all. I don't really think there's anything that can prepare you for it. Babysitting, I suppose, but it's very different when it's your child as opposed to someone else's. You can't give them back at the end of the day!" She laughed again, and Delphine joined in, agreeing heartily with the sentiment.

"You'll have to let us know when you have your baby shower," Delphine added. "I know that's probably quite a while away, and you've only just met us, but we'd love to contribute to your little one!"

"Oh, yes," Louise agreed, smiling at her sister. "And we promise not to offer any unsolicited advice about pregnancy and babies. I'm sure you're getting plenty of that already — from your mother, Remus' mother..."

probably from total strangers, too!” She paused, elbowing Delphine. “We promise, don’t we, Delphine?”

The woman looked pained for a moment. “I... can I please just offer one itty-bitty thing?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “What if I ask you both for your one best piece of advice? Then it isn’t unsolicited.”

Delphine brightened. “Oh, I like you already. Mine is about diaper pails — this is what no one will tell you, Luna, the less-than-lovely bits — no matter what they say on the label, none of them, and I mean *none of them*, can disguise that smell, especially when you’re like us.” She tapped her nose. “They were clearly made for humans. When you need to change a diaper, just get in the habit of taking it right outside, okay? You’ll thank me for it later.”

Louise hummed, looking thoughtful. “You know, that’s a pretty good one,” she said, nodding. “Mine is don’t be afraid to tell people you aren’t accepting guests, especially right after your baby is born. I didn’t do that with my first, and I cannot tell you how *exhausted* I was, especially with all the relatives coming to meet her. When my second was born, I asked my mate not to accept guests the first week, and it made a world of difference. It’s an important bonding time, so it should be about you and your little one.”

I smiled at them both; this was an entirely different experience than sitting in my mother’s kitchen and meeting the Ulfric family. Admittedly, I hadn’t been pregnant then, but I was pretty sure my cousin would have been even meaner if I were. “I’ll remember all of that,” I said, sipping at the tea they’d made.

The chatting didn’t stop there. The two of them were peppering me with questions about where I was from, and what I did for a living — but it didn’t feel like an interrogation. They freely shared little tidbits about themselves, and I felt warm and fuzzy as I sat between the older women.

“You know,” Louise said quietly, finishing her drink, “as soon as I saw Remus out the window, I knew exactly what was going on. Sam didn’t even have to explain. He is the spitting image of Nic —”

“Eli, too,” Delphine added.

“— and just the age when that drama with Fiona Moor went down. And then that drama with Violet after that! Poor man.” She shook her head, looking a little disappointed as she stared into the mug. “Anyway, I hope Remus doesn’t think we’ve avoided him. If his taste in partners is anything to go by, I’m sure he’s a wonderful man.” Louise glanced up and winked at me.

PERHAPS I SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO surprised, but the rest of the evening flowed smoothly. Perhaps my family reunion had made my outlook a bit pessimistic, but Aunt Delphine and Aunt Louise were genuinely lovely. Remus seemed to be at ease with his father and his uncles as they joined him. Even Eli seemed to relax a little once the posturing had stopped; maybe it was the whiskey his father had offered, or perhaps he really was at ease around his family. The idea almost seemed foreign to me, but I was glad to see it, for Remus' sake.

When his cousins arrived, the mood within the Archer family home only seemed to get brighter. Part of me appreciated how different this was from the Highborn family reunion, but the rest of me still felt guilty I was even here when Tala was still trapped somewhere in Marnet's claws.

If I started thinking about him, though, I wouldn't be able to stop – and if I couldn't stop, I was afraid I would bring down the mood or, even worse, ruin the night. The last thing I wanted to be was an ungracious guest, especially when Nic had promised to help us rescue Tala. I could never live with myself if my emotions ruined that chance.

Louise's youngest couldn't make it — she attended university in Scotland and couldn't make the drive on such short notice — but her two older daughters could have been twins. Only a year apart, they seemed to share thoughts, but resisted the urge to finish each other's sentences like Nyx and Nox. I felt a pang of something I couldn't identify for a moment, hoping the boys were doing okay. Artemis had sounded distraught when I'd spoken to her, and while I suspected most of that was for show... I *had* done most of the babysitting when Lynn wasn't available to care for her children. It was probably a brand-new experience for both Artemis and Athena, and I hoped the youngest members of the family weren't suffering from it.

I sighed and shook the feeling off before I could bring down the party. Delphine's oldest was a young man about Remus' age, and her second was her daughter, only two years younger. She was the spitting image of her mother. Gage's sons were the last to arrive, and both had strong resemblances to their father. *I guess that hair and those eyes must run in the Archer family!*

Once everyone had gathered, obtained a drink, and gotten comfortable, Nicholas cleared his throat and stepped into the middle of the sitting room, where we'd all migrated. The kitchen was quite large, but it didn't contain a

bar. “I would like to thank you all for coming on such short notice,” he called, tipping his head towards Sam and Louise. “I know Maya would have joined us too if she could have — tell her hello when next you talk.” He winked, and the couple laughed.

“Silliness aside, I do appreciate you all dropping whatever plans you might have had to gather here. Family has always been important to the Archer clan, and our father — your grandfather — really focused on keeping us together, and it has always been my intention to do the same. I thank you all for keeping his spirit alive tonight by embracing Remus and Luna with open arms.” He paused to smile warmly at the group. Even from where I sat, I could feel the genuine gratitude in his tone. His joy wrapped around me like a favorite scarf, comforting and gentle, a stark contrast to the constant undercurrent of anxiety I’d been experiencing. “I cannot express how glad I am to see that and how grateful I am to call you all my family. As many of you have already guessed — Remus is my son. I did not know I had two children when I woke up this morning, but it is amazing the things that can change over the course of a day. I am grateful also that he has chosen to come all the way from the United States to meet me in person instead of a simple exchange over email. The visual certainly helps, doesn’t it?”

There was another round of chuckles, and he shook his head, still smiling. “This changes nothing. This only strengthens the Longbow pack — Remus, Luna, I’d like to extend an official invitation. Whenever the two of you are on this side of the pond, you are welcome in my home, in my territory, and my pack.” He lifted his glass. “I’ll cut myself off now; I know you’re all thirsty,” he teased. “Cheers — to kith and kin.”

“Cheers!” the group called. I lifted my glass, too; Nic had fished out a bottle of sparkling cider for me when we’d finished the tea. He tried to convince me he just had some lying around in case any of his friends came with their pups, but I knew better than that.

“Cheers!” I called, too. I felt buoyed by the atmosphere. Perhaps it was the bubbles, but I felt — I felt truly happy to be here. To be included. No one even asked if Remus and I were mated, married, planning, or whatever. It was simply enough that he was my partner. I felt more comfortable with the Archers than I ever had with the Highborns... or even the Ulfrics, for that matter. It felt so good here; I wished I could stay — but I couldn’t run away from everything back in the States.

Remus was absolutely glowing. It made my heart warm to see him so at

ease; this was a version I'd only seen of Remus in private, when it was just the two of us, and he didn't need to be on guard. I was so happy to see him able to simply relax with other shifters. *This is his family. Maybe this feels like his pack.* It didn't really matter, though. To see him like that was enough.

The only one who didn't seem to be enjoying himself was Eli. Though he'd lightened up after the initial introduction, the scowl had since returned to his handsome face; to be frank, the smile on Remus' lips was much prettier. The toast hadn't gone over well with him — Nic had said nothing was changing, but it seemed apparent to me, at least, that his son didn't believe him. It made my heart ache, but more than that, it made me worry.

I hope this doesn't come back to bite Remus in the tail later.

REMUS

Nic Archer's Estate

London, England

I'd lost track of time ages ago; Uncle Gage seemed to have a story for everything. The best were those involving a young Nicholas Archer, long before becoming the pack alpha. I enjoyed learning a bit more about my father from someone else's perspective... even if it was his younger brother. I suspected that Gage was yanking his chain some, but Nic took it all in stride, smiling and laughing. He even had a few embarrassing stories of his own to retaliate with.

After someone had brought out a cake for dessert, I shifted from the bar to find Luna. She had moved to a couch at some point, and the poor thing looked ready to tip over — and that was without a drop of alcohol! I checked my watch and winced when I realized it was past midnight. We had come for dinner since Nic had asked us and because I had agreed to his terms, but I hadn't expected to enjoy myself so much. Part of me felt guilty for genuinely having a good time knowing that Tala was still in trouble — that was why we were here in the first place, even if I couldn't do anything until Nic let me know precisely *what* his resources were.

Shaking the thought off for later, I strode over, gently removing the empty glass from her hands. "Sorry, darling," I murmured, bending over to kiss her head as she propped herself back upright. "I'll get you back to the hotel."

Nic clapped a hand over my shoulder. "You're welcome to stay here," he said, nodding towards the stairs. "I always have guest rooms made up in case someone drops by." He nodded to his sister and sister-in-law on the other side of the couch, still giggling over something. "You never know — and I never deny a guest dinner or a drink!"

I smiled, finally starting to feel a bit of the exhaustion and anxiety of the situation come creeping back in. "I appreciate it, but all of our things are back at the hotel," I replied. "We took a cab anyway, so we should be fine. I'll just call for one now." Besides, if my mother or Seff called with an update, I wanted to be able to pick up immediately.

Nic nodded, taking another sip from his glass. "Well, why don't you

come back tomorrow so we can start working on this plan? I'm happy to help however I can, but I will need some more details than those we already discussed." He paused, looking back at Luna. "She can come as well, of course — Delphine and Louise both live within the city, so perhaps they can all have a day out if Luna would like. It would be better than just sitting around here."

Luna seemed to wake up a bit, blinking sleepily at Nic and myself. Her lips curled down into a small frown. "Are you sure? Maybe I can help with something."

My heart squeezed uncomfortably in my chest. *Of course, she wants to help, but...* I sighed. There wasn't much Luna could do from here, and I didn't want her to end up even more stressed or frustrated than she already was. I shook my head. "I think it will be easiest if we just hash out the details," I replied gently. "The fewer people, the less possible confusion."

Luna frowned a little more, looking down at her hands.

"Oh, Luna, let us show you around." Delphine cut in, leaning across the couch to squeeze Luna's knee. "Stress is never good, but it really isn't good for a growing baby. The boys will make plans, and we'll stay close by in case they need anything, okay? Just let us know what you'd like to see, and we'll make sure we get you there. Louise and I know how to get around most of those tourist traps. We'll take care of you."

Nic rolled his eyes, clearly trying to hide his smile with his drink. "How about 10:00?" he asked me. "Gives everyone plenty of time to wake up and do what they need to do."

"Sounds perfect," I agreed.

The cab I ordered arrived in no time — it took longer for everyone to say their goodbyes as we tried to get out the door. I offered Luna a hand as we stepped into the back seat; she leaned against me as soon as I closed the door, her eyes half-shut as she took my hand in hers. I inhaled deeply, turning just enough to kiss her head. "Are you all right?" I murmured. "Are you feeling okay? I'm sorry we stayed so late — I totally lost track of time."

"Oh, I'm feeling fine," she replied, squeezing my hand again. "Nothing smelled strong at all — I highly suspect your father arranged that, even though he didn't need to." Luna snuggled closer, clearly pleased to be tucked against my side. "Just a little worn out. It's been a while since I've been at such a lively gathering."

"Mmm," I agreed, nodding a bit. "I have plenty of board meetings — but

the feeling is entirely different.” It was my job, and those people looked to me for leadership. This was just... meeting people and getting to know them. It was entirely different.

Luna tipped her head, studying my face as the driver navigated the empty streets. “What about you? How are you feeling? I know it was pretty overwhelming for me when I met most of my mother’s family at once.”

I paused. My automatic answer would have been ‘I’m fine’ — and I was, in a sense — but Luna deserved the truth. Unfortunately, the truth was far more complicated than one or two words. “I’m... hm.” I squeezed her hand. “I don’t think I have a word to describe it. But it’s good, whatever it is,” I added, not wanting her to worry unnecessarily. “It’s just so different than what I’m used to. It feels... honestly, it feels refreshing,” I said, settling on that. My chest felt a little tighter at the admission. It was nothing like what I had with my mother — my relationship with Tala was probably the closest, but I’d known her for ages.

This wasn’t the same. In the corner of my mind, I felt like I ought to be disappointed I’d never had that before, but... I wasn’t. I was just happy to have experienced it tonight. *What was that Nic kept saying? Grateful. I guess I might feel a little grateful.*

I was grateful they all seemed genuinely happy to meet us — and their interest didn’t feel fake or forced at all. The entire family took us in with open arms, sharing stories that might have been considered embarrassing, like we were old friends. No one tried to challenge me or make me feel ‘less than.’ Even Eli, who’d been rather bristly to start, had been withdrawn rather than aggressive.

I couldn’t blame him, either. He had walked down the stairs, presumably expecting his father had invited some relatives over for dinner, and ended up face to face with a mirror image. Except for a little bit of a height difference, we were nearly identical. If he grew his hair out a little more? I shook my head at the thought.

Eli was an alpha, too. I could sense that much as soon as he entered the room. He knew nothing about me. I’d be suspicious, too, were I in his shoes, suddenly faced with an older brother who just waltzed in from another country. Probably more than just suspicious. The oldest son almost always took over the pack when the father died, and he had no idea about the Silverstreak pack in Texas. For all he knew, I’d appeared after twenty-nine or so years to take over the pack he’d grown up in.

I hope he'd understand once it was explained, but — I'd met alphas before. All I could do was hope.

LUNA WAS RELIEVED to return to our hotel room, changing into something more comfortable the moment we returned. It took me a bit longer to settle my busy mind, but eventually, I got out of my nice clothes and hung them before crawling into bed beside my partner. She'd already made herself quite comfortable, a small, sleepy noise escaping as I pressed my chest against her back.

"I was started to wonder if you'd gotten lost in this massive room," she teased, voice far away and dreamy. Luna wriggled a little farther back until we were perfectly matched, and I huffed, splaying one palm over her belly. Realistically, I knew it was too soon for anything to change. I'd spent a little time researching pregnancy as my experience was incredibly limited, and I didn't want to sound like the jackass boyfriend who had no idea what was going on. It still felt... surreal, really, that there could be a little person in there, somewhere.

Luna shifted again. "Remus," she hummed, "I can practically hear you thinking. What's wrong?"

I sighed, stiffening as she caught me. "I'm... worried," I admitted after a minute, leaning forward to kiss her shoulder.

She paused. "About your biological father?"

"No. I mean, not really. He said he would help, and I believe him; I think he'll do what he can." Admittedly, I still wasn't sure what that *was*, but if my mother was convinced it was worth flying to England to get his help, I was fairly confident it would make a difference. She was chronically against me doing anything that might be construed as a waste of time.

"Then what's worrying you, Rem?"

I huffed. "It's just — it's just so nice here," I murmured. It probably sounded like a complaint, so I pressed on. "I could imagine staying here, Luna. It isn't hard for me to picture at all. I've known these people for a few hours, but they feel more like family than any of my 'extended family' I've met at Silverstreak functions." The thought made me sigh, knowing the truth. The only one who knew was Remington, and he hadn't treated me any differently at all — but I'd never been close with any family members on that side of the family. Frankly, I'd never been all that close to anyone on my

mother's side of the family, either. The one exception to the rule was Tala, and she had been all but taken in. *Tala*. "And I feel guilty just thinking that, right now. I hate that the idea even popped up, but..." But it did, and I wasn't about to lie — not to Luna.

"If we stayed here, we wouldn't have to go back to the mayhem I created. Our baby could be raised in a cultural epicenter, surrounded by a close-knit pack." I sighed and spread my fingers across Luna's abdomen.

Luna hummed quietly and moved one of her hands, folding it over mine and interlocking our fingers. "It's a stressful situation," she murmured, "and everything has changed. There's nothing wrong with looking out for your child — wanting to do what you think is best for them. But..."

"But?" I prompted, raising a brow.

"Running away isn't like you. A feeling of doubt is one thing, but acting on it is entirely another." She gave my hand a little squeeze, and I felt a little warmer. "I know you won't run away. You won't abandon Tala."

I nuzzled into the back of her neck. "What if Nic doesn't come through? What if it's not enough after all, and we can't...?" I murmured. Part of me hated that I had to voice any concerns to Luna — she had clearly been stressed about the situation without my uncertainties added on top of her anxiety — but the rest of me was grateful to have someone to admit this to. I couldn't share this with my mother, and if there was ever a time I could have relied on Bane to have this kind of heart-to-heart discussion, those days had long since passed. I nuzzled her again, inhaling the smell of her shampoo and skin, the scent of *Luna*. "I'm sure he'll do his best, but what if it's not enough?" I paused for a moment. "What if I never know peace like this again?"

I couldn't say the rest. I didn't dare speak it out into the universe. Tala was going to be okay because Tala *had* to be okay.

"You will," Luna replied without hesitation. She gave my hand another squeeze. "I don't think your mother would have sent us here for nothing, but on the off chance that Nic isn't able to help us, we'll figure something out, Remus. You're a strong alpha, and you're a *good* alpha. You have to have faith in yourself." She finally wriggled away, giving herself just enough space to roll over and face me. She reached up with one hand, stroking her thumb across my cheek. "You made those decisions, Remus. You must see them through. There's no other way."

I exhaled deeply and nodded, nuzzling into her gentle hand. *She's right.*

I'm the one who disturbed the peace to start with — I have to see this through to the end.

After a moment, I leaned forward, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. “Thank you,” I murmured, pulling her against my chest. “For keeping me grounded.”

“I’ll always be here for you, Remus — always.”

THE NEXT MORNING WAS QUIET, and I appreciated that; Luna and I had breakfast together before she took a long shower. When I took my turn to clean up, she borrowed my tablet to quickly check her email, but there was no news from anyone stateside.

Louise and Delphine were ready and waiting when we arrived, eager to whisk Luna off to see all that London had to offer. Two of my cousins were also tagging along, unable to resist the draw of a day on the town.

I watched as the car pulled off, unaware of how tense my shoulders were, until Nic gave me a pat. “Don’t worry,” he rumbled, shooting me a sideways smile. “I know Delphine acts like an airhead, but she’s practiced martial arts for most of her life. ‘As a hobby,’ she said, but we all know she just wanted to kick her brothers’ asses. Your cousins are clever, too. Luna is in very good hands.”

I paused before nodding. It did help, hearing that; more importantly, Luna was more capable than she looked. Probably more capable than she thought. Shaking off the moment of doubt, I turned to follow Nic inside.

He led me through his home to a room towards the back: his office. It looked rather austere with minimal decorations, but on his large executive’s desk were several monitors. He took his seat and motioned for me to join him. “I assumed, based on our conversations, that you were referring to Marnet Claw,” he said as I rounded the corner. “I took the liberty of doing some research when I woke up early and couldn’t fall back asleep.” He motioned at the screen with one hand.

I paused, taking a moment as I tried to take in what I was seeing. It wasn’t just the accounts I knew the former alpha held, but more hidden accounts than I had realized. It wasn’t just that Nic had found them, either — they were all frozen. I took in a sharp breath, not believing what I was seeing.

“How is this possible?” I asked, looking at the man. “We’ve been working on his accounts for weeks.”

My father gave a one-shouldered shrug. “I suppose I should have asked before I froze everything.”

“No, no — that’s quite good,” I replied, finally sitting in the chair he offered me. “He’s been able to dodge my efforts so far.” I paused, looking back over at my father. “I thought you said this could take days.”

“Ah, well. Longbow pack — Longbow Investments.” He winked. “Also, Archer Unlimited. The first is quite an old financial institution; the Archer family has funded businesses for decades. Centuries, even. We do business with banks and lenders. I could pull a string or two for the accounts I don’t have direct control of. These accounts aren’t so big that anyone was worried about losing this client; it would be worse to stop being friendly with Longbow.” He hummed. “And I said *could* because that is true, sometimes — I didn’t want to promise *today* if I couldn’t deliver that to you.”

“Ah...” My mother *had* mentioned that the Archer family was better off than hers, but I hadn’t imagined that meant they were literally in the financial industry. Perhaps I should have asked before I left. “Well, damn.” My brain whirred as I tried to think of something else to say.

“That’s the most I could do remotely,” Nic said, looking a little disappointed. “But once this Marnet makes some attempt to retaliate, I’ll know a bit more. I know your situation is time sensitive; I’m sorry I couldn’t get more done.”

“This is quite a lot already,” I replied, not wanting to sound ungrateful. I felt anything but at the moment. “Without access to his money, he isn’t going to be able to continue to pay those helping him. I imagine his ‘friends’ and ‘allies’ will quickly disperse if there’s nothing holding them on his side.” I bared my teeth before restraining myself. “He was never known for his charming personality or pack management. Hopefully, if he’s dealing with that, then that buys Tala a little more time before he does anything else.”

“One of those alphas, hm?” Nic snorted and shook his head. “Those sorts always start to panic the moment they lose their grip on the people they think they control. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before Marnet makes a bad move and slips up.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re a bit of a force of nature, aren’t you?” I asked, raising a brow. I understood why my mother kept grumbling about how much *alike* I was to my father; Remington was always patient and well-considered. I did try to emulate the man, but I had a fiery nature. I saw what needed to be done, and I did it.

Much like Nic Archer, it was starting to seem.

“Perhaps. I don’t have much patience for pack politics, I’ll admit. I appreciate that packs here are much smaller than those you wrangle in the United States. We’re close. We protect each other. And now that includes you, Remus — your mate and child.”

I froze at the word ‘mate’ — that was not a conversation Luna and I had broached yet. There just hadn’t been time. My father eyed me for a moment. “What is your relationship with Luna?” he asked, having not missed it.

“Complicated.” I shrugged. “It’s not exactly a rainbows-and-butterflies fairy tale story.” The thought made me grunt, but I briefly explained exactly how Luna and I had met; I would never embarrass her like that in front of the family, but it felt like something important for my child’s grandfather to know. I told him about the barn and Marnet — about Luna and how close we’d gotten in the past few weeks. Months. How time felt like it just slipped away these days. I told him about Marnet’s repeated attempts to win Luna back, about what her family did trying to get in her good graces. What my mother did to try to keep us apart.

“That’s quite the story,” Nic finally said, raising his brows as I fell silent. I shrugged, not having much more to add to that. “But I believe everything happens for a reason. Maybe this was simply your path to Luna all along. Luna might not have been why you went to Oklahoma in the first place, but... fate works in strange ways, doesn’t it?”

My wolf rumbled at the thought, pleased with the idea that somehow all of this *had* been our doing — he’d always been more of a control freak than I was, and that was saying something. “Once this bullshit is over, I plan to make it more official,” I said, nodding. “But I can’t ask her when everything is up in the air. Until Marnet is finished for good, and she’s safe from him. Anything else isn’t fair to her.”

My father rumbled his agreement. “I guess we’d better hurry up and make that happen, huh?”

LUNA

Nic Archer's Estate

London, England

We spent a few nights in London. It felt like it went by in a blink, and at the same time, I felt like we had to get back as soon as possible, for Tala's sake. Remus checked in with Fiona every morning, and she assured him no one had left any more packages at her place. She'd also increased security around Silverstreak Motors and informed the council of the threat Marnet had made. It didn't erase my worry entirely, but I felt slightly less guilty that Nic was hosting a party in our honor before we returned to Texas tomorrow.

Remus got along so naturally with his father. It was like they'd known each other their entire lives, not less than a week; we'd visited almost every day this week. Sometimes Nic would take us around the city, and other times Nic and Remus would work on something related to the pack while I spent time with Louise and Delphine. Honestly, I felt more relaxed with them than most of my own family.

Those two could talk until I forgot how to breathe and probably talk me back to life afterward. I generally enjoyed it, but sometimes I needed a quick break. No one questioned it if I needed to use the bathroom more frequently. At least they'd both had children — and you know biology!

After washing my hands, I opened the door, ready to head back down the hall and rejoin the party. Eli stood there, looking slightly stunned, hand outstretched as if he were about to knock or reach for the doorknob.

"Uh, hello," I said, feeling a bit awkward.

A scowl quickly replaced Eli's startled look. "Hi," he grunted.

I bit the inside of my lip. I hadn't seen much of him at the party; he appeared when the appetizers were served, and I hadn't seen him since. I'd assumed he was off with one of his uncles or something, but it occurred to me he might have been hiding from the rest of us. "Are you, ah... are you all right?"

His scowl deepened. "As if you care?" he snapped back, folding his arms over his chest.

I blinked, a bit taken aback. "Well, yes, I do," I replied calmly, not to

incite him further. “You look upset... and no one should be upset alone.”

I stepped forward, finally making my way out of the door frame. If Eli really did need to use the bathroom, I didn't want to hinder him, but he seemed far more interested in me. After a moment of looking me up and down, he must have decided that there was a grain of truth in what I said. He sighed, his shoulders sagging slightly. “You two haven't even been here a week, and everyone is falling all over themselves like the “true alpha” has arrived,” he growled, shaking his head. “I had no idea I had a brother, and now it's like they've all forgotten I ever existed.”

My heart stuttered in my chest, a few old thorns catching the tender organ. I knew exactly how that could feel. “I don't think you've been forgotten, Eli,” I murmured. Part of me wanted to reach out and squeeze his hand, but the rest of me got the feeling that it wouldn't be particularly well received. He was still closed off, his arms folded over his chest. “I think they're probably all just as shocked as you. They just wanted him to feel welcome, that's all. Besides, we live in the United States. We won't be here in your home for long.”

Eli rolled his eyes. “Doesn't mean you won't come back, though.”

I shrugged. As far as I could tell, Remus would very likely want to come back and visit. “No, it doesn't. The Archers have been much more familial than his mother's side,” I replied calmly. “Remus enjoys spending time with them — as do I.” More than my family, really... but Eli didn't need to know that. “That doesn't change the fact that we aren't here to steal anything from you — or anyone else, for that matter. Remus wanted to meet his biological father after his mother shared that information with him.”

“Uh-huh,” Eli replied, obviously brushing me off.

Clearly, he was convinced of whatever he thought he saw happening between Remus and the rest of his family. I sighed. “Maybe you should chat with your brother before we leave tomorrow. It might help clear things up,” I suggested.

Eli just eyed me like I'd suggested he go skinny-dipping in the black lagoon or eat a live crab. It was just a conversation. “I have no desire to get to know him any better,” he finally replied. He stood up a little straighter, shaking himself out. “I hope you both have a safe trip home.” And with that, he spun on his heel, heading down the hall towards the stairs.

I watched him go, my heart still feeling sore; I wanted to ignore it, it wasn't my business, but I honestly felt bad for Eli. I knew *exactly* how it felt

to be overlooked for another one of your siblings. Or, in my case, all of them. It stung, and no amount of time ever changed that.

WHEN I RETURNED to the party, I was happy to see that Remus was alone for a moment. Smiling, I wound my way through the other party guests, settling my hand on his forearm. “Can I talk to you for a few minutes?”

“You can talk to me for hours, Luna,” he replied easily, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

I couldn’t help but giggle at his silly behavior while allowing him to walk us to the corner of the room. He found us an empty armchair; he sat in the seat, and I perched on the arm. After all, it was his father’s party — even if Remus wouldn’t bat an eyelash at me sitting in his lap, *I* would feel rather self-conscious about it. “What’s on your mind?” he asked, settling a hand on my knee.

My smile faltered, and I looked down at him, studying his face. “Ah, I’ve just had a quick chat with Eli,” I said. I could already feel Remus starting to tense, and I shook my head. “Oh, hush, alpha,” I teased. “He was perfectly polite. He just looked... he just looked miserable, Rem. I feel bad for him. It made my heart hurt.”

His expression darkened and he sighed, looking towards the wall for a moment. “Because of me, right?”

I nodded. “I think he’s afraid he’s being replaced,” I murmured, glancing around. “I imagine his father has thrown plenty of parties for him, too, but he seems convinced you’re here to replace him as the prodigal son — and take over this pack.”

“I’m not taking the Longbow pack,” Remus said automatically.

I nodded again. “I know, honey. I know. I just... I guess I know how it feels when you’re the sibling being overshadowed, and I don’t think this would continue if we were to stay here, but...” I shrugged. “I don’t know. I want to help. Have you tried talking to him?”

Remus nodded, looking somber. “I have, more than once. He uses as few words as possible and always escapes at the first opportunity. Clearly, he loathes me. Nic said to give it some more time and a few more visits, that Eli has always been stubborn, but...” He trailed off with a shake of his head. “I understand that he’s afraid I’m trying to steal the pack or something. Really, I do. We basically appeared out of nowhere.”

“We did,” I agreed, reaching to squeeze his shoulder. “Well, I think you probably did all you could. You can’t make someone like you. I just...” I shook my head and stopped myself before I kept saying the same thing repeatedly. “I’m glad you tried,” I said instead.

Remus tipped his head up at me, studying me from his seat. “You care so much about other people, Luna, despite everything. Marnet couldn’t stamp out that empathy you have,” he said, his tone shifting from something somber to something... reverent. It was like he was talking about a great artist or a famous sculpture — I had a hard time imagining he was speaking about me. To me. “You are such a beautiful person, Luna. Inside and outside. Your empathy is something I love about you. I hope you know that.”

Warmth blossomed like a lotus flower in my chest, each petal unfurling to reveal something beautiful and generous. Leaning forward, I pressed my forehead against his. *He’s never used that word before.* I knew, in a way, that he cared for me deeply. That much was evident in his actions. The way he treated me and spoke to me. However, it was different to hear the word from straight from his lips.

“I know that now,” I whispered, unable to keep the smile off my lips.

SOMEONE CLEARED their throat before I could tell Remus exactly how I felt. I jumped back, almost tipping myself off the arm of the chair. Remus’ arm shot out, steadying me as we glanced up at Nic. The man, normally happy and charming, practically radiating light, looked entirely too serious. My muscles went rigid, and my whole body felt cold. “What happened?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“I hate to break up this charming moment,” Nic said, motioning to us with one hand, “but there’s been a complication. I thought it would be best to let you know right away.”

That didn’t make me feel any better. My gut twisted itself into knots as my heart jumped into a full gallop, knocking against my sternum. Remus’ hand tensed against the small of my back. “Of course,” Remus said. “What is it?”

Nic held up his phone. “Would you two mind coming back to my office? Just for a moment.” He took a step back, clearly intending for us to follow. I stood up and smoothed out my dress, following Remus and his father down the hall. Once Nic had closed the door behind us, he placed his phone on his

desk and brought up a different screen, tapping on it. A moment later, a very familiar voice began to play.

“—out how the hell this happened. Remus doesn’t have this kind of manpower, and he definitely doesn’t have this kind of brainpower. He shouldn’t have interfered with that bitch, Pam, but this is going entirely too far,” the voice ranted. It became apparent rather quickly that this was a recording, not a phone call. There was a constant crackle, like the sound of clothing brushing against a microphone. “Who the fuck does he think he is? I told Luna what the stakes were, and this is what Remus does? Bastard. Stupid fucking bastard. How the *hell* did he pull this off?”

I glanced up for a moment, just in time to see Remus and Nic exchange a look, smirking. It was like seeing double.

Marnet’s voice continued. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter. Remus wants to pretend to be a big boy? We’ll play big boy games. Kill the girl.”

The transmission ended, and my blood ran cold. I forgot how to breathe, reaching out for the edge of the desk to steady myself as the world lurched dangerously around me. *Oh, no. Oh, ancestors. Tala!*

“My stateside team is still trailing Marnet,” Nic said, looking from Remus to me. After a moment, he looked back at his son. Remus didn’t look nearly as started as I did; they must have discussed this team on the days they were planning together. “They won’t let him out of their sight.”

Remus nodded and retrieved his phone from his pocket, tapping on the screen. He held it to his ear a moment later. “Seff,” he rumbled, “it’s time. Marnet is going to finish the job.” He was cut off by a snarl so ferocious I could hear it from where I stood. Remus held the phone away from his face for a moment, squinting. “I have a team. He won’t make it there.”

Nic was already moving around his office, ushering me to the other side of the monitors. “Here, sit,” he murmured, his voice softer as he offered me a chair. “We won’t let Marnet hurt your friend any further,” Nic reassured me, pointing to the screens. They blinked to life, one by one. If I hadn’t just walked in here myself, I would have thought I’d stepped into a hacker’s lair or something. There were numbers, codes, and sheets on several screens, but one of them blinked again as Nic typed something in, revealing a helmet cam.

“Oh, no,” I whispered, pressing myself further into the leather seat. It was difficult to make out with all the movement, but I recognized the terrain as Oklahoma. “I don’t want to see this.”

Remus had finished his call and rounded the desk, reaching out to take

my hand. “It’s okay, Luna,” he tried to reassure me.

I thought my heart couldn’t beat any faster, but it did. It had taken up residence in my throat, and that hard lump was probably the only thing keeping my anxiety from emptying my stomach. Clutched at his hand, I covered my eyes with my free hand. A moment later, I cracked my fingers open, peering at the screen again. I couldn’t look away; it was the worst horror movie I’d ever watched, and that was my least favorite genre.

Every time they opened a door or rounded a corner, I jumped. The group was silent even after they entered the building. When a speaker finally crackled to life with a whisper, I almost shrieked.

“Nic, this is the location we’ve tracked. It was previously registered to an unknown source but has recently come ‘back online,’” the man hissed. “We traced the source to Sedona Financial.”

Nic frowned, twisting to type something back in. Before I could offer him his chair back, he huffed and pointed at a different screen. “There it is. Sedona Financial has supported the Shadow Rock pack. Remus, you said they were involved, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Remus snorted. “York Rock, their alpha, was one of Marnet’s alphas — but we found his beta’s niece held hostage in another warehouse. My mother was arranging her safe return; I assume she must have gotten Skye back home safe and sound.” He pursed his lips. “And I will assume that York does care more about his pack than looking good in front of Marnet. That’s — well. That’s refreshing.”

I didn’t know much about York — or Skye, for that matter — but I was relieved to know she’d gotten back to her pack, and York wasn’t still backing Marnet after he kidnapped York’s pack members. Unfortunately, my stomach was so tied up with my anxiety, that I couldn’t feel any relief at all. “But where’s Tala?” I whispered, peeking between my fingers at the helmet cam again.

The next ten minutes felt like it stretched on for a year. Longer. For eternity. I felt like I was going to be sick, pass out and expire all at once. Somehow, I managed to do none of those, though it was a miracle I didn’t break Remus’ hand with how hard I clutched it. Every time the man wearing the helmet dipped into the dark, I think I stopped breathing. Every time the frame came back into focus, I closed my eyes, expecting the worse.

“Nic, come in.” The mic crackled back to life, and my whole body tensed.

“Proceed,” the older alpha commanded.

“We have retrieved Tala Tanner,” the leader of Nic’s team reported. I almost couldn’t believe my ears. “I repeat, we have retrieved Tala Tanner, and we are removing her to a secure location.”

“Well done!” Nic barked. Beside me, Remus whooped. All I could do was fight back a sob — and I did a poor job at that. I finally released my death grip on my partner, covering my face with both hands as my shoulders shook. Relief washed over me like a warm wave as tears streaked down my cheeks. Remus swooped in close, wrapping his arms around my shoulders as I sobbed.

“It’s okay,” he said, over and over. “It’s over now. Tala is safe.”

I heard him, but I could barely process the words — more than that, I could hardly believe it was real. I was so afraid that at any moment, I’d roll over and wake up, realizing Tala’s rescue was nothing more than a dream. “I’m so glad,” I repeated, furiously trying to wipe my tears from my cheeks. “I’m so, so glad. Oh, Tala. I can’t wait to see her.”

REMUS

Nic Archer's Estate

London, England

Once Luna had calmed down, I brought her upstairs, following Nic to one of the guest rooms. Though she insisted she was fine and just needed a quiet moment, she was out like a light in less than five minutes. I grimaced.

"She'll be all right," Nic whispered, patting my shoulder as I closed the door. "That was a lot to witness, and early pregnancy is exhausting on top of that. When Violet was pregnant with Eli..." He paused for a moment, an expression I didn't recognize flickering across his face. He shook it off a moment later. "She was always exhausted, especially in the first three months. Never took a nap for as long as I knew her, except when she was pregnant. I'm sure Luna is just worn out between a party and that excitement on top of her pregnancy."

I nodded, tucking that away for later. It didn't seem appropriate to ask about it now, especially when I'd known him less than a week. "Thank you for letting her sleep," I replied, following him down the hall. "No, strike that. Thank you for everything. I'm not sure I could have caught Marnet off guard without your assistance."

Nic huffed, shaking his head as he led us back down to the office. "I promised I would help as long as you spent some time meeting the Archers, and you've done more than your fair share in that agreement," he replied. "It was the least I could do. Besides, the more I dug, the more that Marnet fellow seemed like a real jackass."

"That's the understatement of the decade," I snorted, shaking my head. "Retaliation against me is one thing, but torturing wolves? That is far, far over the line." We were powerful in our own right, but humans still far outnumbered shifters. It would be tragic if shifters started turning on shifters in mass; even an accidental reveal to humans would be earth-shattering for us.

At least, though, Tala was with Nic's men, and soon she'd be back with her own family. "I should call my mother and let her know," I realized, fishing my phone out. "Do you mind?" I motioned to his office; it was much

quieter than the rest of the house, but I'd understand if he didn't want me in there while speaking with her.

"By all means," Nic replied, taking a step back. He offered me his chair.

Nodding my thanks, I sat and hit my mother's contact. She picked up after two rings. "Remus? How are you? Is everything okay? You're due to travel soon — your flight wasn't canceled, was it?"

In my entire life, I don't think I'd ever seen her fret so much; perhaps Tala's kidnapping was finally getting to her. Or perhaps it was because Luna was with me and her unborn grandchild. "I'm fine," I replied, switching to video chat so she could see my face. I held the phone up, though Nic remained out of sight. That was probably for the best. "I'm calling with some good news for a change."

"Oh?" she asked, her eyebrows lifting. "Your father was able to help you?"

"Yes." I nodded, unable to keep the smile from lifting the corner of my lips. "Yes, he was. He works fast — we have Tala, Mom. Or, rather, his team does. Seff is with them. She's safe."

"Oh. Oh, my goodness," my mother said, sounding rather breathless. The camera jerked as she flopped back onto her couch — she must be working from home again. She touched her face with a hand, blinking a few times as the news settled in. It seemed to take years off of her, her shoulders uncurling. Some of the wrinkles on her face disappeared as her worried frown transformed into a relieved smile. "Oh, Remus. That was not the call I was expecting at all. I've been on edge all week, afraid that bastard would leave another finger at my door. Or an ear. Or worse." She gave a little shudder. "I'm so glad to hear that. I'll have her room made up immediately and call Dr. Hayes when we're done here."

"Good. That's good," I said, nodding. The doctor was always attentive; I was positive he'd drop everything to give Tala the best care possible when my mother explained what had happened. "I couldn't have done it without Nic's help, though, Mom. Honestly, it was mostly his doing." I could see the man out of the corner of my eye, watching Fiona on my screen openly. I didn't bother trying to hide it; she couldn't see him from where I was holding the phone.

I could see her shift, looking away from her camera as she sighed. It made her uncomfortable, even though she was the one who'd suggested I come to London for precisely that reason. The silence stretched on for several

more moments before she looked back at the screen. “And how is he? Nic?” she finally asked.

In my peripheral, Nic flinched. I had to fight not to snort. “He’s doing well, Mom. He’s doing really well. We’ve spent quite a bit of time together, and I’ve really enjoyed it.” I wasn’t going to sugarcoat it for her, but I didn’t need to torment her, either. “He doesn’t hate you, you know. Not at all.”

She looked away again, pursing her lips. A hundred thoughts must have played out in her mind because she nodded and nodded again before facing me. “Well, I’m glad to hear that — that he’s been good to you.” She paused for a moment. “I am proud of you, Remus.”

It was my turn to be shocked. I blinked, not sure I’d ever heard those words in that order come from her mouth. “I— This was almost entirely Nic’s doing, Mom,” I replied, shaking my head. I couldn’t take credit for it. It wouldn’t be right.

She offered me a wry smile and shook her head. “Remus from a few months ago wouldn’t have taken my advice to visit London. It takes a strong, secure alpha to know when he needs to accept help from others — you set aside your pride to do what was best for your pack, and I’m proud of you.”

Before I could respond, she turned. “Ah, that will be Bane. I’m going to call Dr. Hayes now and get everything ready. Call me when you land.” The call ended abruptly, leaving me staring at my phone, wondering if I needed to get my ears checked.

The silence stretched on for another few moments before Nic finally snorted, shaking his head. “Well, that sure seems like the same Fiona I knew,” he finally said, rummaging behind me on the bookshelf. “She was never good at being vulnerable.”

He leaned over my shoulder, handing me a photo. “I didn’t keep much,” Nic admitted, “but this was a good photo. A great day.”

The edges looked well worn, the sign of a photo viewed over and over. A much younger Nic stood next to a much younger Fiona, an arm wrapped securely around her waist. She was twisted, leaning up on her toes to kiss his cheek as she kicked up one heel behind her, clearly still looking at the camera. It was hard for me to imagine my mother as a ‘party girl’ in her youth, but looking at this, I could certainly see that fire in her expression.

“It took me quite a while to move past what happened. It was easier once I met Violet, but...” Nic exhaled, taking the photo as I offered it back. “I’ve been on my own for a while now in that department. I have Eli, of course, but

that is a very different sort of thing.”

I grimaced. “My — Remington passed a few years ago,” I replied, finally putting my phone back in my jacket. “Sometimes, it doesn’t bother me. Other times the pain is just as sharp as when my mother first told me he was gone.”

Nic nodded, staring at his bookshelf for another moment. An idea struck me. “Would it be okay if I copied that photo?”

“Of course, Remus. That would be fine.”

THE NEXT MORNING WAS BITTERSWEET. When we’d left Austin a week ago, at best, I’d hoped for my biological father to receive me cordially. After all, I was breaking the news to him, and I could easily imagine an outright rejection. As an alpha in another alpha’s territory without permission, it would have been well within his rights to have his pack run me off by whatever means necessary, family or not.

Instead, he’d welcomed Luna and me with open arms. It still seemed too good to be true, but I knew better than to argue with it. If anything, it was difficult to say goodbye to Nic and the rest of the Archer family. After the relaxation I’d experienced here, I’d expected to feel a bit of remorse going home. With Tala’s safe return, it felt less urgent to get back to Texas as soon as possible, even if Marnet was still a threat. We couldn’t linger, though, which left me feeling strangely remorseful.

Uncle Sam and Aunt Louise had also come over to say goodbye; the others had said their farewells at the party last night, wishing us safe travels and our speedy return. It felt nice to be wanted back. Louise brought over some scones for us before we left, and once they were gone, it was time to get our luggage and get on the road. Luna said her goodbyes and I stood to shake my father’s hand. “I appreciate everything you’ve done,” I said. “You didn’t have to.”

Nic snorted, grabbing my hand and pulling me into a hug. I woofed softly, surprised by the embrace. The older alpha seemed unbothered, wrapping me up tightly. *When was the last time one of my parents hugged me?* Obviously, it had been years since my dad had, and back then, I was in my early twenties and an alpha coming into his own. Displays of affection were something I resisted. And my mother? Well, Nic wasn’t kidding when he said she didn’t like to be vulnerable.

“Of course I had to,” Nic replied, snapping me out of my stupor. I

wrapped my arms around him, no longer standing like a limp noodle. “You are my son, and you asked for my help. What kind of man would I be if I turned you away?”

We finally untangled, and I raised a brow. “I would have still considered you a reasonable one,” I replied. “You didn’t know me from a hole in the ground. I could have been a rat bastard.”

Nic shook his head. “My wolf knew you immediately. Rat bastard or not, I couldn’t have looked at myself in the mirror if I turned you away without giving you a chance.” He shrugged his shoulders. “As it is, you’re someone I’m glad to have gotten the opportunity to meet.”

I didn’t have the words to describe how that made me feel. The only thing I could even try to say was ‘warmth.’ It made me feel warm — and wanted. “I am glad I got the opportunity to meet you, too,” I replied, meaning every word. My mother had encouraged it, and I was glad I had come. The same overwhelming feeling swept over me, and I had to clear my throat before I lost my ability to speak.

Nic did the same, gripping my shoulder. “Let me know when you get home, okay?”

“Of course,” I replied. “I’ll keep in touch.”

“Good. I would like that,” he hummed. “Just so you know, my help isn’t limited to you being here. My resources are your resources. If you need anything, just ask. Marnet won’t see me coming.”

“Nic, seriously, you don’t—”

He cut me off, holding up a hand. “I don’t do anything I don’t want to. And I want to help you if I can. You are my son. Now...” He twisted his wrist, checking his watch. “I believe you and your lovely lady have a plane to catch. Safe travels, Remus. I hope to see you soon.”

“We’ll make it happen,” I agreed. I did not doubt that.

THE FLIGHT HOME was just as uneventful as the flight out. Luna fell asleep shortly after takeoff, and this time, I was able to catch some shut-eye. I knew there was still plenty left to do before this business with Marnet was fully resolved, and I could claim Luna as my mate, but I still felt as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I nodded off with Luna’s hand tucked in mine, and it was still there as the attendant gently woke me to prepare for landing.

Once we landed and the doors opened, I was surprised to see both Seff

and Bane standing outside the car waiting for us on the tarmac. I still had no interest in sharing any more space than I had to with my former second, but I had assumed Seff would be glued to Tala's side. I raised my brows as our bag was loaded into the car. "Should I ask?"

Seff laughed, reaching out to grab my hand and patting my shoulder. "Tala was sick of being 'hovered over by a bunch of mother hens,'" he explained, the grin on his face brighter than I'd seen in weeks. "She actually looked mad, so I thought it would be all right to give her some space. She's a tough cookie."

I couldn't help but return his grin, even Luna smiled slightly beside me. If my cousin was feeling well enough to kick people out of her room, she must have been feeling much better than she looked. "She's always been fierce," I agreed, using Seff's hand to pull him into a hug. I gave him a quick pat on the back, trying not to grin as he froze in shock. "Always. I'm glad that hasn't changed. Thank you for all your help in getting her back, Seff. We couldn't have done it without you."

When I pulled away, the other alpha looked a little dazed. His smile returned a moment later. "Of course, Remus. I wouldn't dream of doing anything else." His brows furrowed, and he gave me a curious look. "Are you feeling all right?"

Luna snorted next to me, and I couldn't help but chuckle, shrugging my shoulders. "I am. Better than I have in a while, actually. I've had... a very enlightening few weeks. I've been trying not to take those around me for granted," I replied. "Except for traitors. Traitors can still rot."

I could see Bane flinch in my peripheral vision and didn't feel bad at all. Seff sighed and shook his head, brushing his dark hair out of his face before motioning to the car. "We should get going before they kick us off the tarmac."

Once we'd all piled in and gotten on the road towards my mother's house, Bane finally cleared his throat. "Fiona has been busy this past week," he said, clearly trying to sound as unassuming as possible. The sound of his voice still made my spine prickle.

"I imagine so," I replied, trying to cut him off.

Bane clearly didn't get the message and kept speaking. "There was a meeting with the council two days ago, and—"

"I'm sure Fiona can tell me the details if she feels they're relevant to share," I snapped, the hair on the back of my neck bristling. Luna reached a

hand across the seat, settling it quietly on my thigh. I inhaled through my nose, willing my wolf back down before the red could creep back into my vision. Bastard traitor or not, Bane was still driving the car.

Seff cleared his throat. “Dr. Hayes is very positive about Tala’s prognosis,” he said, looking back from the passenger seat. “He said it shouldn’t take her much time to feel like her usual self.”

“That’s wonderful!” Luna chirped, the smile back on her face.

I knew it was just small talk, but I didn’t care. Seff could start reciting computer code to me right about now, and I would happily listen to that if it meant I didn’t have to hear Bane’s voice.

Unfortunately, my ex-beta didn’t seem to know when to let sleeping wolves lie. “How long are you going to hate me?” he asked flatly, ignoring the conversation Seff and Luna were trying to carry on.

A growl rumbled up from my chest. “Until the memory of you with your fucking arm around Luna’s neck isn’t the first thing that pops up whenever I look at your fucking face.”

The car got so silent you could have heard a pin drop. Luna squeezed my knee again, and I leaned back, pressing my head into the rest. After a few breaths, I cleared my throat. “It’s been a long day. Fiona will brief me on anything she feels relevant when we get to our house.”

No one else said a thing for the rest of the drive back to Austin, which suited me just fine.

LUNA

Fiona's Townhouse

Austin, Texas

I managed to keep it together until we got to Fiona's house, but all bets were off as soon as Remus opened the door. I rushed inside, looking around. "Tala?" I called — my friend wasn't sitting in the living room. My heart began to pound. "Tala?"

"Luna?"

My heart stuttered at the sound of her voice. I heard the sound of a door opening, and a moment later, Tala appeared from the hallway. The moment my eyes landed on her bandaged hand, the tears sprang free, spilling down my cheeks. The redhead rushed forward, and I met her halfway, pulling her into a tight hug as I tried not to cry all over her shoulder. I wasn't particularly successful, a wet spot forming on her blouse as tears continued to drip off my chin.

"I'm so glad to see you," I whimpered, squeezing her tightly. "I was so scared. Marnet is such a..." I trailed off, not wanting to think of that man. Instead, I squeezed my friend, not letting go until she gave a little 'oof.'

Tala smiled at me. "I'm glad to see you too," she murmured. I sniffled and tried to wipe the tears from my face.

"Tala! You're looking well," Remus called from the living room.

She turned and held up her hand, sighing as if she had just noticed the bandage. "Damnit," she grumbled, dropping her hand again. "You know the reason that coward cut it off in the first place was because I flipped him off? Like damn, are you really so insecure you can't handle someone telling you to get lost?" She tsked her tongue against her teeth, casual like she wasn't discussing that a rival alpha had *removed her finger*.

I whined, and the tears came tumbling back, rolling down my cheeks. "Oh, Tala..." I whimpered. "I'm so sorry." It didn't matter how many times Remus told me it wasn't my fault — I still felt horrible that Tala had gotten wrapped up with that man.

Tala raised a brow and looked back at me. "Luna — Luna, seriously, I'm all right. It's fine." Her reassurances only made me cry harder. "Luna! Luna, are you all right? What's gotten into you?"

“H-h-horm-mones,” I hiccupped.

When Tala just looked confused, Remus clarified. “She said it’s the hormones. They make her tears a little more hair trigger than usual.”

It didn’t clarify anything for Tala, her brow furrowing as she looked between Remus and me. A wolfish smile spread across his lips — I would have explained, but the hiccups were taking over as I tried to calm my tears. Realization dawned over her face as she pointed her good hand at me. “Luna!” she gasped, her face brightening. “You’re pregnant, aren’t you? Oh my god, why didn’t you say, like, immediately?” She leaned over and pulled me into another hug, squeezing me gentler than I had squished her.

I sniffled, trying to wipe my face for the fiftieth time. “I don’t know,” I huffed, “I wanted to see how you were! I missed you so much! Busting in and announcing a pregnancy after everything that happened to you seems... I don’t know, tasteless?”

Tala just laughed and kissed my cheek before pulling away. “Sometimes I forget you’re one of the most selfless people I know, Luna,” she murmured, her expression genuinely warm. “Seriously though, I am so happy for you two — and it makes a lot more sense, all that blathering Marnet was doing about ‘a baby trap’ and ‘what kind of idiot does she think I am?’” She snorted, the warmth replaced by disgust. Given the man we were discussing, I agreed with the sentiment.

She tipped her head, eyeing me. “I’m assuming you let it slip on purpose, then?”

I nodded.

“That was my idea,” Fiona said, emerging from the kitchen. “Remus needed to lure Marnet out, and we agreed that was probably the best bait.” She sighed, worrying her hands. “I didn’t think he’d take it out on you, though, Tala.”

My heart stumbled — I hadn’t thought that, either. If I had, I wouldn’t have ever agreed to it.

Tala simply waved it off like it was no big deal. “I’m assuming it’s not his, either.”

I snorted, scowling at her. “Of course not!” I replied, glancing down at my stomach for a moment. “I’d be way more pregnant, don’t you think? Besides...” I trailed off and gave a full-body shudder.

“Seriously,” she agreed. “So, how far along are you?”

“Three months almost.” I paused, doing the math in my head. “I have an

appointment with the doctor very soon.”

Tala made a happy noise, but before she could ask me any other questions, Fiona started herding us from the hallway to her living room. “Come sit down,” she urged us. “I’ve made tea for everyone.”

“YOU MUST BE EXHAUSTED after your trip,” Fiona said once we’d all settled.

Remus simply shrugged, but I couldn’t help my breathless laugh. “I needed to see Tala as soon as possible,” I admitted, “but once we’re done here, I think I’m going to sleep for the next twelve hours.”

Tala laughed before eventually turning to Remus. “If you were overseas, then who were those men? I didn’t recognize them as anyone Silverstreak has worked with before, and they didn’t smell like Seff, so I assumed they weren’t Red Paw.”

Seff shook his head, but Fiona gave Remus a wary look. They seemed to communicate something through the long look, and Fiona cleared her throat, inclining her head towards her son. He sighed, taking another sip from his cup before speaking. “I went to London to meet my biological father,” he rumbled, his eyes dark as he studied Tala.

She simply blinked, looking back and forth between Remus and his mother. Fiona looked supremely uncomfortable, her eyes settling on anything *but* Tala. Even Remus looked like he could do with a much stiffer drink. “You’re yanking my chain,” Tala said, her eyes narrowing. No one said anything, and she sat further back in the chair. “You’re not. You’re serious.”

“Deadly so,” Remus replied quietly, nodding. “We were running out of options, so Mom suggested I go to meet the man. I’d only learned about him a few weeks prior, but I was putting off any sort of reunion until the business with Marnet was resolved.” He narrowed his eyes. “Obviously, I didn’t expect him to escalate like that, and I had to meet his drastic measures with my own. Truly, Tala, I am sorry that—”

The redhead narrowed her eyes and pointed at Remus with her bandaged hand. “That is the only apology you’re giving me. Period,” she growled out. “And that goes for Fiona and Luna, too. Marnet Claw is a sick, twisted fuck, and *no one* thought it would go this way, or we wouldn’t have put ourselves in that position to start with. Am I clear?”

“Tala...”

Her eyes narrowed. “I said: *Am I clear?*”

“Crystal,” I squeaked.

Even Fiona looked slightly taken aback. “We hear you,” she mumbled. “No more apologies.”

“Good,” she sniffed, turning her gaze back to Remus. “So those were your father’s men, then? I thought you said he was in London.”

“He is,” Remus replied, not having agreed to her terms but wise enough not to argue with her. “The first thing he was able to do was cut off Marnet’s finances, but he could also get a team to Oklahoma overnight to assist. We agreed it was best to use a team Marnet would have no knowledge of to retain the element of surprise.”

Even Seff looked impressed. “We’d been working on tracking down all of Marnet’s hidden accounts for weeks. How...?”

Remus shrugged. “Turns out he’s some sort of multi-billionaire whose family has been financial lenders for a literal century,” he replied casually as if reporting the weather. He narrowed his eyes at Fiona.

She sniffed and took a sip of her tea. “I always knew you’d figure it out eventually. The situation had simply changed enough that I thought it prudent to share now — for the pack.”

“For the pack,” Remus replied dryly.

Tala, ignoring the underlying current of tension, shook her head, staring between all of us with a look that waffled between disbelief and awe. “This story keeps getting crazier,” she murmured, shaking her head. “If you were trying to derail Marnet, though... that man is seriously off the rails. I thought he was just an asshole at first, but honestly? That man is evil. Losing his power isn’t making him rethink anything — he was only doubling down and going harder on his beliefs. Even his beliefs about Luna. You know what they say about a man with nothing to lose...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

Remus frowned, leaning forward. “What do you mean? His beliefs about Luna?”

Tala grimaced. “I think he’s obsessed, Remus,” she replied. “Every time he came in on his phone, the conversations about Luna were becoming more and more frequent. It’s like he believes she’s ‘his,’ this is some temporary ‘lover’s spat,’ and the only reason she hasn’t come back to his loving arms yet is ‘that bastard Silverstreak’ is ‘brainwashing her.’” Tala rolled her eyes so hard that I was surprised it didn’t hurt.

My wolf growled as my spine stiffened. I was desperately relieved that she’d finally stopped feeling so attached to the man. He didn’t deserve her,

and he didn't deserve me, either.

"He's clearly a desperate man reaching at straws and trying to stick it to Remus any way he can," Fiona sniffed.

Fiona frowned. "I don't know much about fated bonds, but it sounds like he thought he could use it to call on Luna. I don't know if he can do that over such a distance, but he certainly sounded desperate enough to try."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Absolutely not. I have no idea if he has the power to do that, but I'm not giving him a chance," I decided, setting my cup down. The room fell silent, and all eyes turned toward me. I shrugged. "He rejected me — but he doesn't get to change his mind. He doesn't get me back. *I reject him.*" My wolf rumbled her agreement, pressing against me with her warmth and strength. We were both ready to be rid of him for good.

I turned towards Remus. "My fated bond with him was some sort of sick joke — he couldn't appreciate me before, and he doesn't get me now when everything around him turns to shit." The more I spoke, the more I believed it. That ass didn't deserve me at my worst, and he *certainly* didn't deserve me at my best. "This time, fate got it wrong — because I belong with you."

Remus stood, abandoning his mug on the side table. He strode across the room, squatting down in front of me to look me in the eyes. "You're mine," he agreed. "And I'm yours. And if that man so much as *thinks* about touching a hair on your head, I'll rip his throat out with my bare hands and feed it to him." He bared his teeth for a moment, and I could feel the presence of his wolf hovering near the surface. My wolf pressed forward again, clearly yearning for him.

"You're mine, Luna," Remus repeated. "And I won't make the same mistake as Nic." Fiona sucked in a sharp breath nearby, but he didn't notice. "I won't let you go. We are going to have a life together. Once this is over, I will officially claim you, and we will have our happily ever after."

I leaned forward, forgetting everyone else in the room at that moment as I kissed him, soft and sweet and gentle. "I can't wait."

REMUS

Fiona's Townhouse

Austin, Texas

Tala and Luna decided to take their tea outside, along with some of the cookies my mother had seemed to produce from nowhere, to catch up without the rest of us interrupting them. I was happy to see Tala looking so well despite everything, and even better than that, Luna and Tala together seemed to light one another up.

My mother took the rest of us to her office. Though we had Tala safe with us again, it would be foolish to assume that Marnet would simply lie down and take it, especially if he was acting as erratic as she reported. That he wasn't tempering his behavior at all around someone he held captive spoke volumes, especially since she was someone he was ostensibly attempting to use as a bargaining chip to get Luna back. In theory, she would have been returning to us if Luna did what he wanted — and he clearly expected Luna to do just that.

The thought made me bristle, and I had to fight to keep my cool as my wolf growled at the implications. Fiona sat in her office chair, looking like a queen about to hold court. As it was her house, I allowed it; I was trying not to take the people around me for granted. That included my mother, too.

“I think Marnet will be out of commission, at least for a short period, while he tries to recover his funds. We aren't even sure if he knows what happened yet,” she said.

I rumbled and nodded. “For all he knows, he was hacked.” It was only a matter of time before one of the other financiers came clean and explained someone higher up had put on the squeeze, but I assume that would take a day, at the very least, and most likely more. “He might waste a day or two trying to figure that out before he shifts gears and starts trying to gather something new.” I frowned. “That reminds me — have we been able to keep tabs on Pam Whitewater? Has he been trying to make nice with her after her public freak-out?”

Seff smirked and pulled his phone out of his pocket. “We've been able to monitor some of Marnet's contacts' phones. It would be too risky to monitor Pam's line, but...” He trailed off, hitting play on a voice clip. Marnet's voice

filled the room a moment later, the man ranting and raving about what a ‘dumb bitch’ Pam was. He couldn’t believe her nerve — something about how much better off she was with a man like him, she couldn’t tell her ass from a hole in the ground — something else about how he *deserved* the money for putting up with a pain in the ass like her.

I whistled and raised my brow. “I can’t imagine Pam liked hearing that,” I noted, smirking at Seff.

The other alpha laughed, the skin around his eyes crinkling. “No, I imagine not — but you know who else didn’t like it? Mr. Eric Whitewater, her doting father. Just one email from a concerned partygoer is all it took. I’ve heard her security has tripled in the past few days, and her social media has been littered with very ‘empowering’ posts about ridding yourself of toxic relationships. I think it’s safe to say that’s about Marnet.”

I snorted. At least Pam made it easy to keep an eye on her. “I don’t think we need to worry about her,” I decided. “What about York? I know there’s some indication he’s withdrawn some financial support, but...” I shook my head. “He’s also an ass.”

Seff snorted. My mother rolled her eyes. “He’s not entirely unreasonable, Remus. He was very relieved to have Skye back — his beta more so — and I didn’t get any feeling from the man that he had set Skye up to be taken. I think she was telling Seff the truth when she said she was tricked.”

“He hasn’t made any moves yet,” Seff said, shaking his head. It was probably for the best that my mother couldn’t see him, but I entirely agreed with the face he was making. “And I do agree that Skye was solely a Marnet action. However, I think Marnet still has some dirt on York, so I don’t think we can count him as a neutral party. It’s possible that whatever information he has could be powerful enough to convince York to continue aiding Marnet. I don’t think he’ll lean on the man until he realizes his money is well and truly cut off, but he’s going to be scrambling once he does, and I don’t think we can trust York not to crumble once Marnet puts the screws to him.”

I made a thoughtful noise, nodding. “Do you think we can figure out what those secrets are? At the very least, it might give us a hint which way York might tip so we can plan accordingly.”

“If we already know,” my mother pointed out, “we might be able to imply Marnet let this dirt out and further damage the relationship between them.”

Seff nodded, his phone still in his hand. He was typing rapidly to someone. “Now that Tala is safe, I can divert some of the resources I was

using to try and triangulate her location to working on that. I can't imagine Marnet encrypts his files himself, and if he has no funds..." He snorted. "No one in IT works for free. They'll abandon him for new work the moment they realize he can't sign their paychecks anymore. It's a matter of time."

"Good," I said. "That would be very good, Seff."

He glanced up once he hit send. "There's something else; those properties belonged to York. Your father's team also uncovered money in a different part of the warehouse than where Tala was being held." Seff grimaced, his dark eyes flashing at the mere memory. "Armand — he was the team leader — said there were several indications that money was being smuggled out of state." He shrugged. "I got the impression that was something he was used to dealing with."

I hadn't thought to ask Nic what his team did, but if he was in the financial industry, I supposed he might sometimes have to deal with smugglers. "Was York or Marnet doing the smuggling?"

Seff shrugged again. "We didn't exactly stick around to snoop, but given it's York's building, I think he'd be the safer bet."

I snorted. "That could be the pressure point Marnet is pushing," I noted, "especially since he wasn't benefiting from it himself. Shifter or not, we aren't above the law — if York is smuggling money and that's something the state police got wind of, no one would come to help him. He'd be done for."

Suddenly, it made more sense why York was still waffling on which side he'd take. Kidnapping or not, if Marnet revealed this information to his chief of patrol buddy... York would be sunk. I scowled. "Well, work on confirming that, Seff. We'll keep it in mind. Do we have any information on Gith?"

Seff's expression fell, looking a bit grimmer. "Gith has remained firmly neutral. Where York is clearly unsure... Gith's not. He has made it *very* clear that he has no desire to be caught in any potential conflict between you and Marnet. I tried to discuss it with him myself, and he said in no uncertain terms that if either pack steps foot in his territory, he'll consider it an act of aggression towards the Black Thorn pack and respond accordingly. He said he's lived too long to get killed in a fight that he had nothing to do with."

"I can respect that." It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it was better than Gith siding with Marnet. I'd take it for what it was; there was no reason to push Gith any further on the matter.

"What about Nicholas?" my mother interjected, leaning forward. "Did

you discuss it with him at all?”

I pursed my lips but nodded. “I did.” I didn’t want to involve the man if I didn’t have to; after all, he’d only known of my existence for eight days, and he’d already done so much for me. “He’s already offered me the team that helped rescue Tala and told me ‘if I needed any resources at all, they’re mine,’ but...” I shook my head. “I don’t want to abuse his generosity. However, if it does come down to sheer manpower, I think we’re in a good position.”

Fiona nodded, rubbing her chin. “I’ll continue to reach out to my connections further north. We don’t want to make any more assumptions about what will and won’t happen — the last attempts of desperate men and all that.” She grimaced and looked towards the door.

I knew she was thinking of Tala, and my chest felt tight. Even though my cousin had already told us off for apologizing, I still felt like there could have been some way to avoid that situation. Avoid the harm that came to her.

My mother was right, though. If Marnet was willing to stoop to torturing women in an attempt to get his way, who knew what he would try now that all his funds had been cut off?

“I appreciate that,” I told her.

She seemed to shake off the thought and looked back at me. “You’ll have one day to readjust to the time zone, but then you are back to work at Silverstreak Motors. I told the board you were courting an international investor who’d recently taken an interest in our newest model... which isn’t entirely a lie, but you know how edgy they are.”

I wouldn’t have told them anything — frankly, it wasn’t their business — but she wasn’t wrong. Several board members had been quite unnerved by the havoc Marnet had wrecked on our last quarter. “I’ll be there,” I agreed.

“Good. Now that you’ve crippled that man’s funds, I suspect some of our buyers will come crawling back without their private source, so I expect our third and fourth quarters to start looking better. That should get you some breathing room with the board.”

I hadn’t thought of that as a side effect of my father’s influence, but Fiona was right. If it *was* Marnet, he couldn’t keep it up, and if it wasn’t, at least we’d finally know, and we could address that problem head on without tiptoeing around the human members of the board. “I guess we’ll see,” I replied, offering a half smile.

Apparently, my mother was all business now and continued. “I have a list

of potential betas for you. I took the liberty of weeding through for the top candidates while you were away — I assumed you would have quite a bit on your plate after a week away — but if you find all five unsuitable, I'll pass on the secondary list to you."

Bane growled behind me. He'd been so silent up until now that I'd almost forgotten he was present. I bit back a smirk, simply dipping my head towards my mother. "I appreciate that," I said. "I trust your judgment. It will be much more helpful to have a small list to start."

My mother smiled back, clearly pleased. Perhaps my slight attitude adjustment *was* helping some things. "Of course, Remus. I said I would, and I'd never go back on that. Do let me know if you have any questions about any of them; I'd be happy to share my notes — I just figured you would want to form an unbiased opinion."

"That sounds perfect. I'll let you know." I paused, looking back towards the door. "I'm starting to suspect Luna isn't going to want to leave Tala's side — not yet, anyway. Do you mind if she stays the night?"

"Of course not." My mother snorted, and I had to fight not to roll my eyes. It wasn't even a month ago that she had to be convinced that Luna wasn't trying to suck my soul out of my body or betray me to Marnet. Whatever conversation they'd had after Luna had called her stepsister seemed to have done their relationship some good. "Leave your luggage here for the night, so she has her things."

"What about me?" I teased, and she waved a hand.

"Remus Silverstreak, I am quite sure you would sleep in your suit if you thought no one would notice."

I laughed and didn't argue. It might be true — it was never a theory I'd tested.

"Besides, you've had a very busy week. I'm sure both of you need some rest. We don't know what's coming next — you'll want to be in tip-top shape for whatever it is." She paused, looking thoughtful. "Perhaps you might consider training with some of your closest wolves after settling things at Silverstreak Motors. Preparation can't hurt."

"Yes... yes. I have the exact wolves in mind," I said, reaching for my phone.

Fiona sighed and grabbed my hand. "Not now, Remus. You're exhausted. You're thinking like an alpha, but remember, if you have nothing left to give, that will affect them, too." She gave me a wry smile. "Now. Take a shower

and go to bed. I'll help you organize in the morning.”

WHEN I FINALLY SLID INTO bed, Luna was almost asleep. She made a drowsy noise, wriggling a little closer. I couldn't help but chuckle, pressing a kiss to the back of her shoulder as I slid an arm around her. “Not bothered by sleeping in a strange place, huh?” I teased gently, my fingers spreading over her nightshirt. “Pregnancy sure has made you tired.”

Luna snorted. “I hate it,” she groused, trying, and failing, to stifle a yawn. “I feel like I'm sleeping my days away — and if I'm not sleeping, then I'm thinking about sleeping.”

I chuckled again, pulling her against my chest. “You're making a whole new person,” I replied, wriggling my fingers to remind her. “I'm sure that takes a lot of energy, even if you don't feel it yet.” I paused and traced my fingers over her belly again. “Actually — maybe you can feel it.”

Luna swatted my hand playfully. “Stop that. The forums I've been reading said most women don't show until the fourth month. That's probably bloat or something.”

“Those are human women,” I replied, resuming my attempts to cradle her against my body. “Not shifters. Besides, you've been so tired; you're probably having an alpha. They're supposed to be more exhausting.”

I could practically hear Luna roll her eyes as she laughed. “Maybe,” she replied, but her voice still sounded hoarse. Tired. Weary, maybe.

I paused and nuzzled her neck. “What's wrong?”

Luna exhaled softly. “I just... I hope this baby is everything you want it to be, Remus,” she said, her voice quiet.

“Of course it will be,” I replied without hesitation. I didn't need to think about it. “I don't care if the baby is an alpha or not — I don't care if they're a boy or a girl — the only thing I care about is that both you and the baby are safe and healthy. Everything else is gravy on top.”

Luna didn't say anything, but I could feel her frame relax, sinking a bit more against mine. “That's all I want, too,” she replied, sounding dreamy again.

“Besides,” I teased, nibbling on her ear, “once I claim you, we'll have all the time in the world. We can keep trying until we do have an alpha.”

Luna giggled, squirming and swatting at me again — but she wriggled write back against me. I laughed and squeezed her tightly as she rolled over,

tangling our legs together. She gave me a kiss. “I have my next appointment in a week. Do you want to come? I don’t know if they’ll be doing anything exciting, but...”

“Of course I want to come,” I replied, kissing her in return. “I wouldn’t miss it. There’s nothing boring about it — it’s our baby.”

She smiled, tucking herself against my chest. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

LUNA

Dr. Hayes' Office

Austin, Texas

The week leading up to my doctor's appointment was largely uneventful, but I couldn't help the growing sense of anxiety. I had no reason to believe anything was wrong — even my feeling of nausea was starting to subside. Though I was still sensitive to most strong smells, I could eat most things without feeling like my stomach was about to revolt. The only strange thing I had to report was that some fruit tasted strange to me... but when I called Dr. Hayes, he'd assured me that it was perfectly normal for a woman's tastes to change during pregnancy. More often than not, her tastes would revert back after her baby was born.

So far, it had been a normal pregnancy, but my leg bounced anyway as I checked my phone again. It was time for my appointment, and I was sitting in the waiting room with my mother — but Remus hadn't made it yet. He'd texted an hour ago confirming the time, but I hadn't heard from him since. I knew things were going gangbusters at Silverstreak Motors; one of their large-scale clients had already returned just a few days ago. Production was ramping up, but with the end of quarter three, things were probably going to be flat out until the holiday season.

My mother reached over and patted my knee, clearly trying to stop my jittering. "It will be fine, Luna. Nothing today is going to hurt — they're just going to have a look at the baby. You'll get some nice pictures, too."

I sighed. I knew she was just trying to help. "I know — but I'd have liked Remus to be here." At least I would have the images to share when him afterwards.

Josie offered me a small smile. "I know, honey. The entire pack has been busy; if he's not here, I'm sure it's because something came up, not because he didn't want to. He's not the sort of man who'd say 'yes' if he wasn't interested — he's very straightforward."

That, at least, I knew was true. Remus always spoke his mind and never said something just to placate someone. He wouldn't have told me he wanted to come if he didn't. I nodded, though I didn't feel much better. "I know... I know. And I'd never try to make him feel guilty. I was just looking forward

to us sharing the moment, you know?”

“Luna?”

A door opened before my mother could reply. I glanced up, seeing a young woman in scrubs standing in the doorway holding some papers. I swallowed and stood, clutching my purse to my chest simply because it was something to hold. “That’s me.”

“My name is Adelaide. I’ll be performing your ultrasound today. Would you follow me?”

I paused, looking towards the front door again — but it didn’t burst open. I swallowed. “Is it okay if my mother comes in with me?”

“Of course!” She beamed, nodding at Josie. “Are we expecting Dad today too, or will it be just you two?”

I waffled and rechecked my phone. Nothing. “He was going to try to be here,” I said, shrugging helplessly. “I think he had trouble leaving work on time.”

“That’s okay,” the tech said. “We have a few things to go over before we get started, so he still has time.”

I wasn’t sure if she thought as much, but I couldn’t just loiter in the waiting room for hours. After all, they had other appointments after me; I wasn’t the only pregnant shifter in the territory. Adelaide led us inside a room and indicated where my mother could sit. “So, today we’re going to be doing your first ultrasound! You’ll get to see your little peanut today, and we’ll make sure to print plenty of the images for you to bring home. This is a very standard procedure. We’ll take some measurements, confirm your due date, and record their heartbeat. If you would like, we can also see if we can tell their gender — now, mind you, this isn’t an exact science. For 100 percent accuracy, you would need a blood test, but we are pretty good at this! And if you want it to be a surprise, I won’t say anything at all.” She winked.

I couldn’t help but chuckle, feeling a bit more at ease. It was clear this wasn’t Adelaide’s first rodeo. I gave a small nod. “We’d like to know the baby’s gender.”

“Okay, great! We can definitely look at that. Now, this one is a bit long, as we have quite a few images to take. We want to look at the baby’s heart, bones, and face. All sorts of things — and sometimes the little ones don’t want to give us all the angles.” Adelaide laughed and shook her head. “We’ll do our best, though. We have a bathroom right here for you to use. I suggest my patients use it first, so you’re as comfortable as possible, and if at any

point you need to take another break, please let me know.”

I hesitated but decided I wanted to get this through in one shot if I could. I could use a quiet moment alone, too. When I stepped out of the bathroom a few moments later, someone knocked on the door, and another nurse poked her head in. “Adelaide? Have you gotten started? I have Luna’s partner; he just got here.”

“He can come on in!”

I almost couldn’t contain my relief, striding across the room to give him a quick kiss. “I’m so glad you made it!” I whispered.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he replied, kissing my cheek.

The tech cooed and shook her head. “Remus, glad you could make it. There’s another chair right there — you can carry it over to sit next to Luna. Luna, if you could lie down and push up your shirt — thank you, very good. First, I’m going to apply the gel; it should be warm for you — there we go — and there will be a bit of pressure. If you’d like to look, everything will be on the monitor right there.” She motioned to a screen right across from the bed.

The moment she pointed it out, my eyes were glued to it. Adelaide hummed to herself, swiveling the probe over my belly — it only took her a few moments to find what she was looking for. Her face brightened. “There we go. How about we listen to the heartbeat first since your peanut is right here?”

She flicked something on her machine, and a moment later, a rapid little heartbeat echoed through the room. My eyes began to water, and I reached blindly for Remus’ hand. He laced our fingers together and squeezed.

The tech hummed thoughtfully, and I glanced over, biting my lower lip. “What’s wrong?”

“Hm? Oh, nothing. I’m getting a bit of feedback....” she replied, clearly focusing on the screen as she continued to swivel the probe. The baby dipped out of view and... right back into it. I frowned, glancing at Adelaide and then at my belly, but she was still moving the probe back and forth. My mother sucked in a sharp breath, and I glanced back up, my eyes widening.

“Oh,” I whispered, squeezing Remus’ hand more tightly.

Remus looked positively perplexed. “Wait — what am I looking at?” he said, turning to the tech. “Is there something wrong with your machine? It looks like there are two babies in there.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as the tech gave the alpha a raised brow. “That’s because there *are* two babies in there,” she replied, stating the obvious.

“Here’s baby number one,” she said, shifting back to my left side. “They said hello first. Here’s their heartbeat.” After a moment, she shifted to the right. “And here’s baby number two! You can hear their heartbeat as well.”

“Two!” I gasped, dabbing at my eyes with my free hand. “Remus said I was showing, but I had just assumed I was bloated.”

Adelaide chuckled and shook her head. “No, my dear, you’re showing because you got two for the price of one. I can have the nurse point you to some good information for carrying twins — you’ll find your experience a bit different from mothers who have a singleton.”

“Thanks,” I replied, still feeling largely stunned by the reveal.

“Now, I will take most of my measurements, if that’s all right with you two?”

I nodded, relieved not to have to think too hard. For the most part, I simply had to lie still while Adelaide swiveled her probe, snapping images of the babies. At one point, one of them shifted and she asked me to lie on my side — but that was the extent of my involvement. Once the baby shifted back, I was allowed to lie back. “I’m going to see if they’ll allow me to see their sexes today. I may only be able to see one — it’s a bit more difficult when you’ve got an extra baby in there. Do you still want me to look?”

“Yes, please,” I said, nodding.

“Of course!” She hummed and began looking at the screen again. As she swiveled, I glanced over at Remus — Adelaide might have known what she was looking for, but I didn’t. The babies looked... well, baby-shaped to me, but there wasn’t much more I could tell unless Adelaide pointed something out for us.

Remus was still staring at the screen, absolutely enraptured. His eyes were wide and his face open; his hand still tangled with mine. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched him, his profile lit by the faint glow of the screen. Outside of my belly, there probably hadn’t been much change for him; he couldn’t feel all the changes like I could. But there, on the screen — that was undeniable. Remus couldn’t tear his gaze away.

After a few more moments, Adelaide rocked back in her chair. “Now, as I said before, I can’t say with 100 percent certainty, but — it sure looks like you are having twin boys! Congratulations, you two.”

Remus’ shoulders relaxed, and a wide grin burst over his face. I couldn’t help but laugh, shaking my head. “I thought you didn’t care if we had a boy or a girl,” I teased, raising a brow.

He shrugged sheepishly. “I didn’t. I don’t,” he replied, leaning over to kiss my forehead. “But I have some idea how to raise a boy — and I have no idea how to be a father to a little girl. I don’t even have a sister.”

I laughed again, shaking my head. “Remus, I’m sure you’d figure it out,” I replied. “You’re a resourceful man.”

He shrugged again, but his face was practically radiating with joy. I couldn’t blame him if he found a little relief in this news. Fiona had also mentioned that it would put the pack more at ease, and I was sure that played at the back of his mind. As I’d told him before — I didn’t care, as long as the baby — or babies, apparently — were healthy.

I turned back to Adelaide. “And there’s nothing we need to worry about?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. Your little peanuts are looking good, as are you, Mama. There is nothing out of the ordinary to report. When you check out, they’ll schedule you for your next appointment — but that’s it!” She leaned over, finally putting the wand away and getting some paper towels to wipe the gel from my skin. “You’re free to go.”

AFTER I CHECKED out and said my goodbyes to my mother, I got into Remus’ car with him. Though Josie had driven me over, Remus offered to bring me home so we could have a quick lunch together — of course, I said yes to that.

We held hands as we drove; all my nerves from earlier had evaporated into a fizzy sort of joy like I was full of champagne instead of blood. I gave Remus’ hand a little squeeze. “Two. Two! I still can’t believe it,” I said, glancing down at my rounding belly. “Though maybe that makes some things make sense.”

“You certainly have a reason to be tired,” Remus agreed. His smile hadn’t dimmed by a single watt since he’d seen the little ones on the screen. “Not one, but two. Two! My mother is going to lose her mind when she hears. She was so excited for just one grandbaby.” He laughed, and I couldn’t help but laugh, too.

“Two boys, no less,” I agreed. “It’s everything she wanted — doubled!”

“I’ll call her when we’re back,” he said. “Would you mind having dinner with her tonight? I think I’d like to share this news with her in person.”

“Of course,” I said, squeezing his hand. “That sounds really nice. I’m glad the two of you are getting along better now.”

“Me too,” Remus agreed, sighing happily. After a moment, he gave me

quick glance. “You know, we could try again for a girl afterward if you’d like. I know you said you didn’t care, but...”

I laughed and shook my head. “Remus, we still have months before these babies get here — and then we’re going to have **two** babies! Why don’t we get through that before talking about if we want *more*?”

He ducked his head, looking a little sheepish. “Okay, okay. You’re right,” he agreed. “We’ll focus on these two first.”

I tipped my head, smiling at him as he watched the road. My heart felt so full in that moment; I couldn’t possibly imagine how the day could get any better.

“What?” Remus prompted.

“Can’t I just look at your handsome face?”

He laughed. “You can. But that’s not the look you’re wearing.”

I grinned; he’d called me out. That he could make my heart pitter-patter. “I love you, Remus. I do. And I think you’re going to be an amazing father.” It was the first time I’d said as much out loud. I thought it would be more frightening to say, but... it wasn’t scary at all. It felt *right*. I might have said the words to Marnet before, but I hadn’t known what love *was*. Now I did, and that was all thanks to Remus.

He squeezed my hand, his grin brightening just a little more. “I love you too, Luna. I love you too.”

DINNER WITH FIONA WAS LOVELY; she treated us out to her favorite restaurant and couldn’t stop gushing over the news. I expected her to be excited to hear we were having a boy — or two boys, rather — but she’d surprised me with her excitement. She’d already started talking about a baby shower, ensuring the twins had a comfortable place to stay at her home — should she move to a bigger house? Should she get a yard? — and any other baby-related topic you could think of.

Instead of being overwhelming, I felt... relieved and gratified. I had been so worried when we first revealed my pregnancy to Fiona, that the news wouldn’t be well-received, so to see Fiona so excited made my heart feel full. These babies were going to be so, so loved. I couldn’t ask for anything more.

When we got back, I went straight to bed, and Remus was happy to join me. We lay face to face, trading baby names as I drew idle lines across his chest with my finger.

“We’re going to need to come up with double the names,” I giggled, the combination of exhaustion and giddiness making me feel a bit drunk even though I hadn’t had a drop of alcohol in months. “Have you come up with any?”

Remus snorted and shook his head. “I thought that was a jinx or something.”

“No, that’s just buying baby clothes,” I replied. “Do you think they need to match? Like... hmm. Ranger and Red?”

Remus barked a laugh, nudging my shin with his toes. “They do not need R names, Luna. I think my dad and I got the two best ones.”

I gave him a sly look. “Oh? You don’t want to name your son Romulus?”

“Luna.”

“I think Roman is a very handsome name, myself.”

“Fine, fine. Roman is pretty nice, but we definitely aren’t going with *Romulus*. Do you want our son to be picked on?”

I giggled. “No child of ours is going to get picked on. I know you better than that.”

“What about an L name? Lucas is nice. So is Leon.”

“We are not naming a *wolf shifter* after a *lion*,” I huffed, pinching him and reveling in his startled squawk. “At least Romulus and Remus have some good wolf lore behind them.”

Remus leaned forward, raspberrying me in retaliation. “You’re a menace,” he teased. “But, fine. Leon is out. What about Landon?”

“Remus!” I swatted him. “If we aren’t stuck on R names, why are we stuck on L names? There are twenty-four other letters.” Admittedly, an X, Y, or Z name might be tricky, but still. We didn’t need to limit ourselves... and we certainly didn’t need to settle on anything tonight. “We don’t have to decide today, love. We have months.”

Remus gave a happy sigh, leaning in again. Though I shied away, he still captured me, pulling me into a soft, sweet kiss. I melted against his chest, purring happily as I touched his face. “I love you,” I told him again, peppering his jawline with kisses. “I love you so, so much.”

REMUS

Silverstreak Motors Headquarters

Austin, Texas

Work had been chaotic for the entirety of quarter four. Silverstreak Motors had made a spectacular rebound, but that didn't come with any less work. Several clients returned, and several new clients also placed large orders for the start of the new year. Our latest models were met with great excitement; that would have boosted our numbers even if we hadn't shut down Marnet's money scheme.

Though the board was happier than they were over the summer, that didn't mean my job was any easier. There were more meetings with more clients, and now we had to start working on next year's design. We were preparing to see quarter four's earnings — there was also the company holiday party. It didn't mean much to me, specifically, but it brought a lot of joy to the human members of our company, and anything I could do to promote harmony these days was a good thing.

At least I did have my mother to help me keep Silverstreak Motors in check; her desire to be helpful had persisted well beyond what I'd thought. It hadn't wavered at all. Even though I hadn't selected a beta yet, she continued to assist me with the possibilities. While she had picked reasonable betas with excellent qualifications, none of them resonated with me. We didn't have any chemistry; certainly nothing close to what Bane and I had before he stabbed me in the back.

It was a thought I tried not to dwell on, but it was becoming increasingly more challenging to juggle pack affairs, Silverstreak Motors, and Claw & Co. Construction. Though Tala was chomping at the bit to get back to work as the construction company CEO, she still needed time to heal. I'd informed Steve that she'd been struck with a serious illness when she'd disappeared so he wouldn't ask questions, though I probably needn't have worried. He'd clearly wanted a more senior role from the start, and I had to hand it to the man; he had handled the company well while Tala started back remote. Though I wasn't against Tala returning to Oklahoma, Seff refused to allow her back until security could be increased... and we hadn't figured out a way to manage that without scaring the human component of Claw & Co.'s

workforce.

Additionally, I had a sneaky suspicion that it was only a matter of time before Tala departed Silverstreak to join Red Paw, but that wasn't my business until Tala made it my business. I'd learned long ago not to stick my nose into her business uninvited.

If I thought the new year would bring me relief, I was wrong. Though I was able to enjoy a quiet New Year's Eve at home with Luna, the first week in January was an absolute madhouse. If it wasn't something with the pack, it was a new issue with Silverstreak Motors as the design team hammered away on the year's new models so we could get them to production and testing as early as possible.

It was the middle of Wednesday afternoon, and I still hadn't gotten twenty minutes to myself to wolf down lunch when my secretary knocked on the door. "Mr. Silverstreak? There's someone for you on line two. I tried to ask them to schedule a teleconference as you're quite busy, but they refused and insisted it's urgent."

I sighed and rubbed my brow. "Who is it?"

"A Mr. Warwick from Claw & Co. Construction."

I grimaced. "I'll take the call. Thank you, Katherine."

She paused for a moment. "Make sure you remember to eat, Mr. Silverstreak."

I offered her a small smile, and she shut the door, allowing me to pick up the call privately. "Remus Silverstreak speaking."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Silverstreak; it's Steve. Your assistant indicated your schedule was packed, so I'll cut to the chase. It would be extremely beneficial if you could come to Claw & Co. in person this month. Sooner would be better."

"Why?"

"While Ms. Tanner is performing admirably as she works remotely, only so much can be done away. I would be happy to act on your behalf to make these decisions, but as they're quite financially... sensitive, I thought it would be best if we could at least discuss them."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Going to Oklahoma right now was one of the last things I wanted to do, but I couldn't let Claw & Co. collapse. As well as Steve had been doing in the past months, I still didn't know him well enough — and I certainly didn't trust him enough — to handle financial decisions that important on his own.

“Very well,” I said after a moment. “I’ll have a flight booked out as soon as possible. I will send you the details once it’s all confirmed.”

“Excellent.” I could practically hear his smile and fought the urge to roll my eyes. “I look forward to seeing you. Have a good afternoon, Remus.”

Once he’d hung up, I stood, stretching out my limbs. I needed a walk — and I needed a sounding board. “I’m going to speak with my mother,” I informed Katherine as I stepped out of my office. “Could you please book me a flight to Oklahoma City as soon as possible? My jet is fine. I don’t want to be there more than a week.”

“Do you need a hotel while you’re there?”

“No, but I will need a rental car.”

“Understood, sir.” Katherine smiled up at me. “I’ll have it arranged by the time you’re back.”

“Thank you, Katherine.” I couldn’t help but return her smile, feeling a bit buoyed by her competence as I headed down the hall toward my mother’s office.

“OKLAHOMA? I don’t like that, Remus. I don’t like that at all.”

I sighed, rubbing the space between my brows. I could already feel a tension headache starting to come on. “Neither do I,” I agreed, “but we can’t allow Claw & Co. to collapse in on itself. Silverstreak Motors is doing well, but I don’t want to rely on it solely to provide for both territories.”

My mother sighed, leaning back in her chair as she drummed her fingers against her desk. “Of course, Marnet would leave it in such dire straits. You know, if you’d been a bit more patient, he probably would have driven his pack to ruin all on his own.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. He’s already proven to be unstable. Who knows what he might have tried if his business started going under?” It wasn’t worth speculating the ‘what ifs,’ and I shook my head. “Either way, this is a problem we need to deal with. I don’t want to leave it in the hands of a man I barely know, and even if Tala says she’s ready to go back, I think Seff will have my balls if I allow her to when we haven’t met his security requests.”

Fiona chuckled softly and shook her head. “Does Tala know how protective he’s being? I’m surprised *she* doesn’t have his balls for that.” She shrugged. “Regardless, I am inclined to agree with you. Seff has proven to be

a steadfast ally despite my earlier reservations, and I am not interested in jeopardizing that. I suppose it will need to be you.” She sighed. “You should go with extra security, though.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “I don’t need to look weak in front of any plants Marnet might have.”

My mother raised her brow. “Is it worth the risk? So what if they think you are weak — you aren’t. It is their mistake to make.”

“I know, I know. We’ll arrange the security. Ancestors forbid anything happens; the pack would descend into chaos.”

Fiona gave me a small smile. “Exactly,” she murmured, her voice warm with pride. “I’ll arrange that for you. You’re leaving Luna home, of course. That’s quite a lot of stress.”

“Of course!” I snorted. “There’s no way I’m letting Marnet anywhere near her. The more states between them, the better.”

“Good.” My mother nodded again. “I’ll arrange for extra security to watch your apartment while you’re away — for peace of mind if nothing else.”

“DON’T you think it would have been good to consult me before making that decision for me?” Luna snapped, folding her arms over her chest. She stared me down from across the table, totally ignoring the meal in front of her.

I scowled. “I want you nowhere near Marnet,” I growled, stabbing a potato with my fork. “I didn’t consult you because it’s not up for debate, Luna. He’s dangerous and unstable, and I am physically incapable of being in two places at once. I can’t bring you closer to him and leave you undefended.”

“If you could have extra security for me at your penthouse, why can’t you just assign them to your mansion in Oklahoma?” she replied, arching a brow. “It’s not as if I’ll be out on the town, Remus.” She motioned to her large belly. “I mean, look at me. I’ll be perfectly happy to spend my time in the library. If I’m feeling really spicy, I might go out to pet the horses — you did keep the horses, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I kept the horses. You asked me to.” I sighed, abandoning my fork on my plate. I was losing this fight. It was rare Luna showed her stubborn streak, but when it showed up... I would have had more luck arguing with a wall and convincing it to do what I’d asked. “Luna, I do not think this is a

good idea. I need to focus on the issue with Claw & Co. — and that is going to be incredibly difficult for me if all I can think about is if you're safe. If the babies are safe."

Luna growled softly and pressed a hand to her stomach. "Remus. They will be safe. I do not want to be separated from you right now."

I fought the urge to growl back, my wolf bristling and conflicted. "The territory is still divided. What if Marnet gets wind of your presence and shows up? What if he issues a challenge right then and there? We don't need the wolves of that territory turning on each other because some are still loyal to Lupus Claw and the rest have moved on."

Luna stared back at me, narrowing her eyes. "What if Marnet gets wind that you've left me in Texas and shows up at this apartment? He's killed your guards before."

I ground my teeth. "I don't want you in the crossfire if Marnet decides to do something stupid."

She sighed, shoulders relaxing a little. "Remus... look, one way or another, he will probably hear about you being in Oklahoma. That's impossible to avoid. If he's going to do something stupid, he's going to do it. If that happens, I'd rather be close to you. I'm not going to change my mind on the matter."

I stared at her a moment longer and finally slumped back in my chair. She had a point. I hated that — not that she was right, but rather, what she was right about. If Marnet were going to do something outrageous, he would do it, regardless if Luna was in Texas or Oklahoma. It would be safer if we were together, and we didn't have to spread our security resources so thin.

"Fine," I said, tipping my head to one side. "I see your point. After we eat, I'll call my mother and ask her to reorganize the security team."

Luna's expression morphed into a small smile. "Thank you," she replied. "I'm not... look, I'm not looking forward to going to Oklahoma. I'm not doing this just to be stubborn — I want you to know that. I could go the rest of my life without ever seeing that state again, but I believe this will be the safest."

"I know," I replied, brushing our ankles together again. "I'll help you pack, and we'll make a plan. Contingencies, and whatnot."

She smiled across the table with me, brighter. Less uncertain. "That sounds excellent, love."

LUNA

Remus' Oklahoma Mansion

Woodward County, Oklahoma

It was strange being back in the Claw mansion after... *No, it's not the Claw mansion. It hasn't been for a while.*

It was strange being back in Oklahoma; it was the peak of summer when I'd left. Winter in the south was nothing compared to the reports of snow and wind up north, but it was still dull, dreary, and gray. The rolling green fields were brown and dry; even the horses weren't shiny, instead puffed out with their thicker winter hair. Somehow, the somber aesthetic matched my mood. I didn't *want* to be in Oklahoma. When I said I never wanted to come back to the state, I had been serious, but I knew it was the best course of action.

At least the inside of the mansion had changed considerably, even if the outside didn't look much different for the change in seasons. Remus had already started removing Marnet's personal touches before we'd even left for Texas, but there was almost no trace of the Claw family left inside. The house simply smelled fresh — like the human staff, if anything — and not of Lupus Claw, its matriarch, or its leader. Most of the rugs had been replaced or deep cleaned. Marnet's art had disappeared, likely sold, and replaced with artwork Remus had chosen.

Even most of the furniture had been replaced, only the built-ins and antique pieces remained. I wondered if the antiques would be next or if Remus was content to keep pieces of history. In any event, none of it smelled like Marnet, so I didn't mind. The house's layout hadn't changed much, so it wasn't difficult for me to navigate. Once I hauled myself up the stairs — carrying twins around was no joke; I felt as big as a planet these days! — I didn't want to go back down until I absolutely had to.

Fortunately, my favorite place in the entire home was on the second floor. Remus hadn't had the library touched outside of general care. The books hadn't been reorganized, and I could browse at my leisure. The comfy chairs had been cleaned and nothing more. Best of all: no one else went in here. The staff was a mixture of new hires and those who'd been just as happy to work for Remus as for Marnet, but some word must have gotten around because I

had received quite a few stares. I probably looked farther along than I actually was — the doctor did tell me I'd be significantly larger than a woman carrying a single child at the same stage, and he wasn't joking.

I tried to tell myself they were just worried I'd give birth any moment — normal worries. I didn't buy my own stories, though, so I did not argue when Remus said he'd be going straight to the Claw & Co. headquarters and for me not to leave the house. If any of Marnet's loyal lackeys saw me, it would only be minutes before they texted someone else. I could imagine how quickly it would evolve into a public dragging, and images of being pelted with trash and harsh words as I walked down a street made my heart quiver.

Staying at home and staying in the library was something I was perfectly happy to do. Public humiliation could remain in my past.

I'd spent several hours tucked in the corner chair, having started reading a new trilogy, when my phone buzzed. I picked it up, expecting an update from Remus — instead, I saw Artemis' name flash up on the screen. I frowned, looking around like maybe someone was playing a trick on me... but I was the only one in the library, and my phone's screen still read my stepsister's name.

What does she want? I'd thought after our last conversation, she'd finally be done with me.

I stared at my screen for another moment, toying with the idea of simply ignoring the message. There was a 98 percent chance that the younger woman just had something nasty to say — but that last 2 percent really ate at me. *What if something is wrong with Nyx or Nox? She probably doesn't have anyone else to ask.*

I stared until my guilt wore me down, and I finally swiped across my screen, opening my text. My heart lurched into my chest as soon as I eyed the image. It was of both Artemis and Athena, huddled together. There was a fresh bruise across Artemis' cheekbone, and Athena's knuckles looked like they were bleeding. She was cradling both of her hands against her chest. Neither of my stepsisters were looking at the camera. I couldn't quite tell where they were; the image wasn't in focus.

As I stared at it, I realized it wasn't just the girls there. Further in the blurry background were two prone forms. Either they were sleeping, passed out, or... My stomach lurched into my throat, and I had to stop that train of thought. Even if Nyx and Nox had been nothing but cruel to me recently, they were still children; my heart still hurt to see them like that.

There was a message attached to the image.

COME TO THE LOVE NEST, kitten. I think we need to have a talk.

A MOMENT LATER, the gray bouncing bubbles appeared, and another text arrived.

COME ALONE, or else.

IMMEDIATELY, I took a screenshot and sent the image to Remus. I wasn't a damn fool.

I MIGHT BE JUST A FOOL, though. The longer I looked at the image, the harder my heart began to pound. Knowing what Marnet had done to Tala when he hadn't gotten his way, I couldn't imagine what he might do to my father's children. They were loyal to him. They'd been hopelessly loyal to him this entire time, and he'd roughed them up anyway. He had no mercy. He had no scruples. Every time I thought he'd sunk as low as possible, he went even lower.

I felt sick.

If he kills one of them, I'll never forgive myself. Athena and Artemis might be old enough to choose whom to follow, but Nyx and Nox are just doing what their older sisters are doing. They're children. They're still just children.

It clearly didn't matter to Marnet anymore — if it ever did — but it sure as hell mattered to *me*. With a sudden sense of certainty, I got out of my chair, abandoning my book to change in the bedroom. While I put on something more suitable for the woods in January, I stared out the window. The love nest wasn't far from here. The difficult part would be getting outside.

At least security was posted here to keep strangers out; no one was worried about keeping me in. At least, so I thought.

I crept down the stairs even though everyone made a point of ignoring me. Casually, I moved across the house like I was going to the kitchen — no one was there yet, so it was easy to step out the back onto the patio. Glancing over my shoulder, I stepped out of the direct line of view, quickly shifting to my wolf's form.

Several months ago, I asked Dr. Hayes if it was still safe to shift. Having a fellow shifter as my doctor proved priceless, especially one with as many years of experience as Dr. Hayes. He told me it was acceptable once I was out of the first trimester, as it was a magical, spiritual process, but it required a good bit of energy. As long as I felt fine otherwise or in absolute emergencies, it was all right. He still wanted me to limit it as much as possible, but this felt like an 'emergency.'

Besides, outside of the babies punching me every morning when I woke up, I felt pretty okay — much better than during the first trimester. I set off at a brisk jog as soon as I had four paws underneath me, my belly swaying as I moved through the dead grass and into the woods. I didn't hear anyone shouting after me, so I assumed I'd at least made it without notice thus far.

Idly, I wondered if the babies had shifted too — if my ability affected theirs. It must, or how else would I shift? I couldn't be a wolf carrying around two humans. That made no sense. Maybe I'd remember to ask Dr. Hayes at my next appointment.

Though the trip to the love nest wasn't very long, I did find myself pretty tired by the time it came into sight. I held back for just a moment, catching my breath before shifting back to my human form. I wobbled a bit but kept steady, smoothing my shirt over my belly as my nerves fluttered. *I can do this*, I told myself. After all, I was already there.

Unsurprisingly, the little cabin was unlocked. The door creaked as it swung open, and I was greeted with an eerie silence. As I glanced around, I spotted the boys. They hadn't moved from when the picture had been taken, and my heart lurched back into my throat. I hurried over and knelt next to them, shaking Nox's shoulder. He didn't stir. I tried to rouse Nyx, but he didn't react, either. Their chests were still rising and falling, but...

"They won't be waking up for a while," a gruff voice said behind me.

My entire body prickled as my wolf flattened her ears, growling with immediate recognition. I struggled back to my feet and turned, resisting the

urge to mirror her expression and bare my teeth at Marnet. “What did you do to them?” I couldn’t make out any apparent injuries, but that meant nothing.

Marnet flashed me a cocky grin. “Just a little tranq to take the edge off,” he replied, shrugging a shoulder.

Of course, he’d stoop to drugging children. I ground my teeth. “Where are Artemis and Athena?”

“They’re fine. They wouldn’t stop making *noise*, so they got some nice sleepy drugs, too.”

I bristled. “What the hell is wrong with you?” I demanded. “You can’t go around giving people sedatives!”

Of course, he ignored me, eyes raking my body up and down. It was a disgusting feeling. “Honestly, I wasn’t sure you’d come. Those girls have always had such nasty demeanors. I’m not sure I would have come — actually, I know I wouldn’t. I’d have let them rot and felt satisfied for it.” Marnet flashed me a wolfish smile, and I glowered back at him. “But yours was always a bleeding heart, wasn’t it, Luna?”

“I’m not a heartless creep, unlike some people,” I snapped back. “I see injured children, and I get concerned. Believe it or not, it’s a normal reaction... and I’m glad I give a damn about people, Marnet. I’m glad we’re nothing alike.”

Marnet’s look turned positively predatory. “Speaking of children — are you *actually* pregnant, Luna? That just seems... I don’t know... all too convenient, don’t you think?” He was clearly only listening to half of what I had to say. His gaze dropped back to my belly, and he sneered.

“Does this look fake to you?” I hissed, taking a step back as I motioned to my midsection. His eyes had taken on a weird gleam; being this close to him made my skin crawl.

“How far along are you?” he demanded.

I said nothing. It was none of his damn business. He took another step into the cabin, and I took another step back, though I was quickly running out of room before hitting the back wall. It was someone’s hunting lodge once — it had room to sleep and not much else. Certainly not much space to get away. My pulse began to quicken.

“Is it my pup?” he growled, narrowing his eyes. When I said nothing, his expression transformed into a feral snarl. “It is, isn’t it, you stupid slut. You thought you could keep this from me.”

The air in the room started to shift, and my blood ran cold. *He’s going to*

cast his Alpha on me.

When I still refused to answer, he gnashed his teeth. “It doesn’t matter what you say — you’re coming with me.”

I glanced past Marnet at the door — but I couldn’t see any way to dash past him before he could cast his Alpha on me. Certainly not in this space. I was about as speedy as a tired turtle on my best days right now. *Shit*. I was in trouble. I was in so much trouble.

I had to do it now.

I gathered what was left of my nerve and stood tall, straightening my shoulders. “I reject you, Marnet Claw!” I shouted. I hadn’t meant to be so *loud*, but there was no taking it back now. “I reject you as my mate. I’ll never be yours. Now leave me *alone!*”

Marnet snarled, eyes flashing as he lurched forward towards me. I shrieked, stumbling back. Out of nowhere, a large brown wolf burst through the open door, slamming his entire mass into the back of Marnet’s knees. The alpha went down with a surprised shout, trying to scramble to his feet as two more wolves rushed in. My pulse roared in my skull as the brown wolf raced towards me, and I backpedaled, holding my arms up in defense — but the wolf didn’t attack.

Instead, he pivoted, putting his bulk between me and Marnet as the pair of gray wolves snarled and bit at the man’s arms and grabbed his pants. Marnet screamed, furious, eyes searing red as he cast his Alpha over one wolf. “Get out of the way!” he roared, lunging towards the door.

I didn’t see what happened next. The shift earlier must have taken most of my strength, and the adrenaline had sapped whatever was left. My legs felt like soggy noodles as I wobbled, throwing my arm out to catch myself on the wall — but it was too far away. The brown wolf in front of me had disappeared, but I couldn’t bother to look for them. I was falling—

—but I never hit the ground.

Someone had caught me. I tried to squirm, fearing the worst, but as I looked up, I realized it wasn’t Marnet looking back down at me — it was Bane. “Wh— When did you get to Oklahoma?” I muttered. My voice sounded foreign to my ears.

Bane frowned and held me a little closer. “It’s always trouble with you, isn’t it?” he sighed, sounding as gruff as ever.

Part of me wanted to lean closer — I felt so *cold*, I couldn’t stop shaking, and like any shifter, Bane all but radiated heat off him. Some sensible part of

me — maybe that was my wolf — tried to remind me that it was he who'd forcibly removed me from Remus' home. He wasn't Remus' beta. He was pack, but he wasn't Remus' beta.

“Yeah,” I replied, feeling breathless. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

There was a distant snarl, and I couldn't help but smile a little, tipping my head against Bane's chest as my eyelids grew heavier by the second. *There's Remus.* I knew he'd come. I could always count on him.

“I'm going to catch hell for this, aren't I?”

Bane might have answered, but I didn't stay awake long enough to hear him.

REMUS

Woods Outside Remus' Oklahoma Mansion

Woodward County, Oklahoma

The moment I'd received the screenshot from Luna, I knew what she would try to do. I didn't even have to ask. I told Steve something about a family emergency and left — I didn't need his damn permission, and if he couldn't understand that, then he wasn't the right person to leave in charge of Claw & Co. As soon as I got in the car, I'd called the man I'd left in charge of security; to no one's great surprise, least of all my own, no one could locate Luna in the house. It was a big house, but it wasn't *that* big — she couldn't hide from a shifter in his wolf form tracking her scent.

Said scent had led the man outside, which was all the confirmation I needed. Luna had told me about the “love nest” before — it was the only place Marnet would spend time with her. At the time, I found it irritating, but now I was glad to know its general location. I didn't waste time driving to the mansion first; I pulled off at a nearby park and took off on foot, not giving a damn if anyone was around to see me shift.

It was a short sprint; the stink of Marnet was all over the woods. Galloping up to the cabin, I snarled as my pulse quickened. Ready or not, I was going to end that man. I burst into the cabin, but the other alpha was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I saw Luna, slumped and unconscious — and Bane was holding her. He was lucky she was in his arms, or I might have jumped him right then and there.

I forced myself to shift back, striding over. “What the hell happened? When did you get to Oklahoma?” I demanded, carefully taking Luna into my arms. I didn't smell any blood, but she barely stirred, pressing against my bulk.

Bane, to his credit, simply stood his ground, managing to look neither threatening nor particularly cowed. “Your mother sent me right after you left,” he replied. The man didn't sound particularly happy about it, but I knew he didn't have the authority to defy her, regardless of how I'd feel about it. It was a shit position to be put in, though, at the moment, I couldn't bring myself to be too irritated with her audacity.

“How did you get *here*?” I demanded. “Did she have you following

Luna?”

He shook his head, looking down. “No. I had just arrived at the mansion. I was going to introduce myself to the security team, but I saw a wolf running across the field behind the house. It was almost black — we don’t have a lot of those in the Silverstreak pack.” He looked back up and raised a brow. “She looked pregnant even from that distance. It didn’t take a genius to figure out who she was.”

I sighed, trying not to grind my molars together. “And her?”

Bane’s mouth twisted. “I got here in time to hear her denounce Marnet. He was about to lunge. I didn’t wait for that to happen or hear what he had to say.” His gaze dropped, and I followed it, realizing he wasn’t alone — there were a pair of gray wolves I recognized near the door. Outside, there were a few more fallen wolves. Lupus Claw wolves.

At least some of the training had paid off.

“He didn’t touch her?”

Bane shook his head. “No. She got unsteady right after she rejected the bond. I don’t... know anything about that, but maybe that was why she fainted?” He shrugged. “Or maybe the stress. Pregnant women aren’t exactly supposed to be fighting, werewolves or not.”

I tucked Luna closer against my chest. “I have others coming to help secure the area, since I was unaware anyone would beat me to the punch.”

Bane simply shrugged. Before I could say anything else, someone let out a low whimper. Immediately, I glanced down, but Luna’s expression was peaceful. Someone whimpered again, and I realized it was further away. Looking in the farthest corner, there were two small bodies. I scowled, realizing who it must be. “Luna came looking for her half-siblings and her stepsisters are missing. Go look for them — there aren’t many places to hide in here.”

Bane set off without a word as I approached the boys, grimacing as they twitched and started to stir. There were bruises on their faces; one of them had a bloody pant leg. They couldn’t even be teenagers, and Marnet had put them through the ringer. *Scum of the Earth. What sort of monster tortures kids?*

“Out here!” someone called, and I turned, striding back outside. Two of the security members held women in their arms — I recognized Artemis and Athena at once. They looked no better than the twins, bruised and matted with blood. There were dirt and twigs matted in one of the women’s hair. I

wondered if she'd attempted to escape or if Marnet had thrown her out once she'd stopped being useful. *And to think, this is how he treats those loyal to him...*

"Get the four of them back to the house," I instructed my team. "Call the doctor out immediately. I don't care what the fee is." I turned to those who remained. "Fan out ahead and make sure no holdouts are lurking in the woods."

I didn't think so, but at this point, we couldn't be too careful. As the others walked ahead, I readjusted Luna in my arms and began to walk towards the house. I'd send someone to rescue my rental car from the park later.

Bane fell into step behind me, as silent as a shadow as he trailed me through the woods; he said nothing, but I knew what he was doing. He was watching my back. Making sure that if any idiots were thinking of an ambush, they'd have to go through him first. It *should* be my beta's job, but I didn't have one of those — not anymore.

"Thank you," I said after several silent minutes. "I know you've never been a fan of Luna. I appreciate you being there for her anyway — especially when she needed someone."

Bane inhaled sharply. I could hear him working his jaw several times before any words came out. "I never *disliked* Luna," he replied quietly. "I would never let any harm come to her, nor would *I* harm her. My concern was about *you*," he huffed. "I was concerned about the pack. It had nothing to do with Luna personally."

I frowned, letting that sink in for a moment. "Well... thank you for being here, anyway," I finally said, unsure what else to say.

A minute or so later, Luna started to stir, her silver eyes blinking open as she gazed up at me. "Remus," she said, her voice light and ethereal. She leaned back against my chest, and I struggled to keep glowering at her. "How're the twins?" she asked, still sounding sleepy and far away. "What happened to the girls?"

"We found them all," I sighed, unable to remain *that* irritated with her, at least while she was this soft. "They're all starting to wake up and are disoriented, but I think they'll be okay. I'm having the doctor called out to check them anyway," I added, before she could ask.

She sighed and nodded against my chest. "Can we go see them?"

I frowned. "When we get back. Luna — what the hell were you thinking?"

If Bane hadn't been there, Marnet could have kidnapped you. Or worse." He was a loose cannon at this point. If he'd hurt children, pregnant women probably weren't off limits to him, either.

Luna huffed softly. "I couldn't just leave them with Marnet. After what he did to Tala..." she trailed off, shaking her head. "They're still my family. Nyx and Nox are *children*, so I couldn't just leave them."

I took a deep breath, struggling not to lose my patience. "I understand that," I replied carefully, "but you are pregnant, Luna — with *our* babies. I know it probably feels selfish, but you have to consider your own safety. If not for you, then you must for them. They need you." If you got hurt...

No, I couldn't even consider that right now.

"I..." Luna closed her mouth again, tucking her chin against her chest. I could sense her trying to make herself smaller, even if there was nowhere for her to go — not while she was in my arms, anyway. She swallowed hard. "I see your point," she replied, her voice quiet. "I just... I saw that picture and felt sick. I reacted."

I hummed, holding her a little closer. "I know, Luna. I know you have a big, beautiful heart, and that's one of the things I love most about you. I'm not trying to be cruel or tell you that their lives don't matter, but these aren't ordinary times. Marnet is clearly escalating. It's only a matter of time before he attempts to make this a war. We have to be smart about this... and for you, that means accepting that you *are* pregnant and you can't do everything you used to be able to do."

Luna sighed softly, staring at her own hands. She still wouldn't look up at me. "Yeah... yeah, you're right. I didn't think of it in that light," she sighed. After another moment, she finally tipped her head up, eyes studying my face. "I'm sorry, Remus. It won't happen again. I don't want to make things more complicated for you. Or the pack. Or them." She rested a hand on her swollen belly.

"Thank you," I murmured. "That's all I ask."

WHEN WE GOT BACK to the mansion, someone had already called ahead for the doctor. He arrived not more than thirty minutes after we did, and I insisted he see Luna first, no matter what she thought. Once she was given a clean bill of health, he moved to check out the Highborn siblings, leaving Luna and me in the kitchen.

“I swear, Remus, I’m fine. Just let me go see them,” Luna insisted, growing cross.

“Let him finish what he’s doing,” I growled, folding my arms across my chest. “You passed out, Luna. You can take it easy for a few moments.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” a young woman said from the doorway, worrying her hands. “But maybe some juice and a snack would help? My sister had a baby last year, and she had a lot of trouble with her blood sugar. The juice should help rescue it, and something like peanut butter toast will help keep it level, so it doesn’t bounce around.”

I paused, recognizing her after a moment. She was one of the few members of the household staff who was a shifter; her mother had worked as a housekeeper before. I remembered they both submitted without protest, but her mother had asked to retire. Her daughter was eager to take her place, citing concern for her mother’s expenses. For a moment, I considered if this was some sort of trap — but if that were the case, she’d had months to do so. “That would be good,” I replied.

“I don’t want anything,” Luna snapped, folding her arms over her chest.

“I’ll have a glass too,” I said after a sigh.

She hesitated before hurrying across the kitchen, grabbing two glasses from the cupboard. “Uhm, I believe we have apple and pear juice in the fridge,” she said, already moving to get some pieces of bread to put in the toaster oven. “Any preference?”

“I’m fine!”

“Apple,” I said since Luna insisted on being uncooperative. I had never seen her this ornery, and I was starting to believe this blood sugar thing more and more.

The housekeeper returned with two full glasses, darting back across the kitchen when the toaster oven beeped. Picking up a glass, I took a sip, sighing at the pleasant taste. It was almost as good as eating an apple — it was downright *crisp*.

Luna stared at her glass like it had personally offended her.

“Try it,” I goaded her, taking another sip. “It tastes great.”

“I told you I didn’t want anything,” she replied.

“Just try it,” I grunted. “You’re being downright hangry right now, and if you want to see your siblings, you should probably be in a better mood.”

Her head jerked sideways, and she glowered at me, but one of those points must have landed — she reached for her glass and took a sip. By the

time the housekeeper returned with a few pieces of peanut butter toast, Luna had downed half of it. She reached for the toast without complaint. I mouthed a ‘thank you’ to the young woman, and she offered me a small smile in return, disappearing into the hallway to finish whatever she’d been up to before we’d interrupted.

I let Luna eat in peace, a bit wary she might bite my head off if I didn’t. When she finished, she leaned back in the chair and regarded me with a small smile. “I might have needed that,” she admitted sheepishly. “I do feel a bit better than before.”

“That’s good,” I replied, mouth tipped in a half smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you get that cranky before.”

Luna just shrugged, looking embarrassed. “Can we please go see my siblings now?”

“Of course,” I replied, offering her a hand up. “They’re in one of the guest rooms. Are you all right on the stairs?”

Luna tested her balance once she stood and gave a small nod. “Yes. I don’t feel great,” she admitted, “but I feel much better than before. The snack helped.”

We went up the stairs slowly, anyway — the doctor was just finishing up attending to one of the boys when we entered the room. Luna made a low noise, and I could practically hear her heart breaking as she looked them over, some with stitches, the others with bandages. “What happened to you?” she asked, her voice soft.

No one said anything. None of them even looked up.

I rumbled quietly. “She asked you a question,” I said, regretting it as soon as I said it. One of the twins flinched, leaning against his brother.

Luna rested a hand against my arm, effectively hushing me. “I risked my life coming there; it was obvious what Marnet had planned. You can’t even talk to me now?” she asked, her voice still even despite the fierceness in her eyes.

The oldest sibling — Athena — looked up suddenly, her face a war of emotions. “You want us to talk? To talk and say what — that we were idiots? That Marnet played us like total fools and used us until he got bored? That we trusted him and believed in him as alpha, and he betrayed us?” She scowled, wrapping her arms around herself. “You were right. Is that what you want to hear? Do you want the play by play now, so you can gloat about how right you were?”

Luna sighed, her shoulders dropping a little. “Athena, when have I ever gloated about something?” she replied, head tipped to one side. “I would never gloat about something like this — this is terrible.”

One of the twins broke his silence. “Marnet came to the house,” he said, the words bursting out of him like a terrible truth. “I let him in. I didn’t know I shouldn’t! He said he would get his territory back, but he needed our help — and I wanted to help! He’s an alpha, and he wanted our help!”

He looked so earnest that I couldn’t help but feel bad for the kid, even though I didn’t want to. It was obvious from his expression that he truly believed in Marnet — even now, he still had trouble understanding what had happened. His brother leaned forward, picking up the story. “Yeah. He said he heard Luna was back, and he needed our help to get her to come over. We said yes, of course. Even Athena said yes. And then...” He turned and looked at his twin.

“Then he punched Athena. *In the face,*” the first boy said, trailing off with a whisper. “You’re never supposed to hit a girl, and he hit her out of nowhere.” They both quieted for a moment, staring past us like they were watching the whole thing in their minds. “I told him not to hit her, and he said it was for the good of the pack.”

The second twin nodded, watching his brother before he continued. “Athena was crying, and Artemis came running. She tried to get Marnet to stop, and...” he trailed off, looking up at Artemis. She was the one with stitches across her temple, so I could only imagine what happened when she dared try to stop Marnet from doing what he wanted.

“We tried to help,” the first picked up, a little snuffle in his voice. He reached out to grab his brother. “Artemis was bleeding. But then he stabbed me.”

“And me, too.”

I bristled, and Luna squeezed my arm. “Tranquilizer,” she whispered to me. “He said he tranquilized them when they got too rowdy.”

Beating and tranquilizing his own, loyal packmates. What won’t this man do to get his way?

The very idea made my blood boil. I didn’t particularly care for these four, not after they’d treated Luna so horribly. Still, even I felt bad about how Marnet had treated them like punching bags and thrown them out like garbage in exchange for their unwavering loyalty. Over and over again, Marnet Claw continued to prove why he was unfit to lead a pack — and why

there was no way we could allow him to take Oklahoma back.

LUNA

Remus' Oklahoma Mansion

Woodward County, Oklahoma

I couldn't hear anything over the sound of my heart breaking as Nyx and Nox told their story, alternating back and forth. Usually, I found that habit irritating — but today, I was sure that was an echo of the trauma they'd just witnessed. They'd always been feisty, but I'd never seen them fight anyone. They never got in trouble at school. If they attempted to fight Marnet, they would have been trounced; he must have really pushed the boys to even get them to the point they'd even try fighting a full-grown alpha, and given how shaken up Athena looked...

I believed every word they'd said.

Swallowing my tears, I quickly covered the distance between us, wrapping an arm around each boy as I bent the best I could to hug them. "I'm so sorry that happened to you," I whispered. No matter our relationship, I would never wish Marnet's wrath upon anyone — not Athena, Artemis, and not even his vicious sister, Sophia.

"It's not fair," Nyx whimpered, throwing his arms around my shoulders. At best, I'd have expected him to be disinterested and at worst... push me away. Instead, Nox did the same, clinging to me like he didn't care who saw. "We were good pack members. We did what we were supposed to do."

"Yeah," Nox added, his tears forming a wet spot on my shoulder. "I want Mom and Dad back. Marnet never came around when they were here," he whined.

Loyal as they were to Marnet, I suspected even Arden and Lynn would draw the line at using their children as bait. I squeezed the twins, glancing over my shoulder at Remus. He already had his phone out; silently, he inclined his head towards me, mouthing 'I need to make a call.' He shut the door behind him, giving the rest of us a little more privacy.

Athena finally seemed to break out of her shock, rubbing her hands up and down her arms. "I never thought he'd hurt us," she whispered, staring down at her knees. "Never. Even when he hit me, I thought, 'I must be imagining this, this is some terrible dream, I'm going to wake up any moment, and everything will go back normal'. But it didn't. And he just kept

hitting me. And then he hit Artemis.” She winced as if replaying the memory before looking up at her sister, grimacing. “I’m sorry, Artemis,” she whispered, her face pale. “He shouldn’t have hit you. I shouldn’t have let him.”

Artemis finally looked over, the expression on her face unreadable. “No, he shouldn’t have. He punched you right in the face, Athena — out of nowhere! I wasn’t going to just stand there and watch.”

I studied the two for a moment. Artemis had always been the quieter of the two; what Athena said went. It went with being the younger sister, I assumed. I almost couldn’t believe that’s what happened, but all four repeated the story reliably.

“She’s right,” I said quietly, still trying to soothe the boys. “He shouldn’t have laid a hand on anybody. That’s not okay, alpha or not. No one should ever hit you. Only a coward punches down.”

Athena made a low noise, finally turning to look at me. “He hit you at the Moonmate ceremony. He cast his Alpha on you too, didn’t he?”

I flinched; it felt like a lifetime ago, even if it was less than a year in reality. “He did.” There was no point in lying.

“No one did anything,” she said, looking at her hands. She licked her swollen lips. “And someone should have. He just keeps doing it because he kept getting away with it.” I nodded, but she kept speaking. “He told me he thought I should send Luna a photo of one of us injured, and I told him that wouldn’t work. Fake injuries wouldn’t work, and after the last thing we did to Luna... That’s when he punched me. Right in the jaw. I was too stunned to see anything else.” She stopped, her gaze still far away.

I didn’t say anything, still processing the words spoken out of my oldest stepsister’s mouth. In the last thirteen years, that was the closest she’d ever come to apologizing to me. She looked uncomfortable — but it was hard turning over a new leaf. At least she was becoming self-aware — that wasn’t nothing. My eyes prickled again, and I swallowed hard, almost overwhelmed by the sensation; despite everything, I was proud of her. Proud of Artemis, too, for breaking out of her shell to defend her sister.

THE ORIGINAL PLAN was to spend as little time in Oklahoma as possible, but I couldn’t possibly just leave my half-siblings to their own devices after everything they’d just gone through. It gave Remus more time to work things

out at Claw & Co. Construction in person, even if he wasn't thrilled about lingering any longer than necessary.

I was sitting with the boys in their shared guest room, going over their math homework, when the door flew open. My head jerked up, and my heart leapt into my throat as the handle banged against the wall, two people rushing inside. It took me a moment to realize it was Arden — and Lynn.

“Oh my god. Oh my god,” Lynn kept saying, over and over. Her face was drawn as she hurried over to where we sat, pulling Nyx against her chest. I stood quickly, taking a step back, and she immediately drew Nox against her too. “My boys,” she cooed, clutching them against her. “My poor, poor boys.”

Arden stood in the middle of the room; Remus followed them, trailed quickly by the girls. They had been in the neighboring room.

“Mom? Dad?” Artemis ran in, wrapping her arms around Arden — Athena followed behind her sister, only holding out for another thirty seconds before embracing him. I hid my smile behind my hand, moving around them carefully to join Remus. Lynn was already crying openly, the boys doing the same. I leaned into Remus, whispering.

“How did you get them here so quickly?” I asked, watching my father's back as he seemed to break out of his stupor, dragging his stepdaughters against him.

Remus turned to kiss the top of my head, clearly trying to hide his smile against my dark hair. “They weren't that far,” he admitted, eyes drifting back to the reunion. “Only a state away. Even if they were banished, I kept an eye on them.”

I hadn't realized he'd kept tabs on my father and his wife. I hadn't planned on seeing them again, not after the way my father treated me — but there was something touching about the fact that he'd kept an eye on them anyway. I reached over, squeezing his hand. “Let's give them some privacy,” I whispered, tugging on my partner's hand.

We hadn't even turned when Lynn looked up, her face still streaked with tears. “This is all your fault, Luna,” she hissed. “None of this would have happened if—”

“Mom, stop it,” Athena said, cutting her mom off. She frowned. “She didn't do anything. Marnet showed up at *our* house. We even said we'd help, and he punched me anyway because my idea wasn't as good as his!”

Lynn looked temporarily shocked, her nostrils flaring. “Well,” she huffed.

“He wouldn’t be in this position if not for Luna. If she hadn’t—”

“What the HELL!” Artemis shouted, stepping away from Arden. “Shut up and listen to yourself, Mom! Luna wasn’t even *there*. Marnet showed up on his own. No one *made him* hit Artemis. Or me. Or the boys. No one made him *drug* the boys,” she snapped, her face glowing red. Angry tears started rolling down her cheeks. “He made all those choices on his own. Wake up! He’s a grown man! He’s an asshole!”

The room fell silent, everyone looking at Artemis. Athena regarded her solemnly, stepping forward to take her sister’s hand. “She’s right,” she said, cold and serious where Artemis was fiery and passionate. “She’s right, you know. I *agreed* to work with him, but it wasn’t good enough, and he hit me. I didn’t even know Luna was in Oklahoma. He’s the bad guy here. Why can’t you see that?”

Lynn looked like she’d swallowed a bug — actually, she looked like she’d swallowed a whole hive of bees. I don’t think I’d ever heard Artemis and Athena talk back to her before, and in my defense? Now I felt like *I* was the one who was dreaming and might wake up at any moment.

When no one said anything, Artemis finally spoke up, wiping the tears from her cheeks furiously. “How can you look at us and blame anyone but the man who laid his hands on us?”

Lynn blinked and said nothing, closing her open mouth. I frowned, glancing at my father; Arden hadn’t said a word since he’d gotten here. His gaze shifted from my stepsisters to me — he was studying my stomach. I felt my blood run cold as he realized I’d noticed and looked up, expecting to see disdain or disgust written across his face... but none of that was there. He looked... he looked empty. Broken.

The silence stretched on uncomfortably. Finally, Artemis made a frustrated noise, breaking away from Athena and Arden. “You have nothing else to say if you can’t scream at Luna? Seriously?” Lynn’s face turned bright red, and Artemis scowled, finally turning towards Remus and me. Artemis walked over, wiping at the wet tracks on her face. She stopped about a foot away and kept speaking. “I have no faith in Marnet. He’s no leader. An alpha in name only.” She shook her head before bending down and taking a knee.

Blood rushed to my head, and I felt momentarily dizzy. *If I wasn’t sure if I was dreaming before — I’m positive I’m dreaming now.*

“Remus,” she said quietly, her expression suddenly becoming unsure as she looked up at the man, “I submit to you as my alpha. I’d like to join

Silverstreak — if you'll have me. I offer you my loyalty in exchange.”

Remus studied her for a moment, his dark eyes searching her face. Apparently, he approved of whatever he saw there as he stepped forward, setting a hand on her shoulder. “I accept you, Artemis Highborn.”

Lynn sucked in a sharp breath. “You can't do that,” she hissed.

Athena scowled, storming across the room with far less grace. “Actually, you'll find we can,” she snapped and knelt next to her sister. It took her longer to gather herself, but she also looked up at Remus. “I submit to you as my alpha. I'd like to join Silverstreak alongside my sister. I offer my loyalty in return.”

This time, a small smile quirked at the corner of his lips. He leaned forward, touching Athena's shoulder. “I accept you, Athena Highborn.”

The boys exchanged looks, studying their mother before they both untangled themselves. Lynn tried to cling to them, grasping at their clothing, but both squirmed away, trotting over to join their sisters on their knees. Remus shook his head. “You don't need to submit,” he said quietly, tipping his head. “You don't need to submit before you are adults.”

Nyx shook his head, looking up earnestly. “But we want to,” he said.

“Yes, we want to,” Nox agreed. “We want to.”

“Okay,” Remus agreed, reaching out to touch their heads. “Nyx Highborn, Nox Highborn, I accept you both to the Silverstreak pack.”

All four of my siblings slowly got to their feet, Athena and Artemis glowering back at their parents. Nyx and Nox looked much more nervous, sending their mother pleading looks. “Please come with us,” Nyx whined. “Please.”

Lynn stepped forward; her face beet red as she pointed a shaking finger at Remus. “How dare you!” she snapped with fury bright in her eyes. “They're children! They can't pledge! You can't take them away from me! They're *my* children!”

I fought to roll my eyes as she threw a temper tantrum, but Remus remained calmer. “They asked respectfully. I didn't take them. The only reason you're here is that your boys asked for you, and I thought they deserved to see their parents. If you can't show the same sort of maturity as your *children*, then I will have to ask you to leave.”

Lynn bristled, looking between Remus and myself. I remained as passive as I could — this was her decision, and I was fairly certain she was going to explode again. I braced myself, but her shoulders slumped forward, all the

wind taken out of her sails. “Fine. Fine. I want— I want to be with my children,” she said, glancing over at my father. “Arden, we have to tell him what we know.”

REMUS

Remus' Oklahoma Mansion

Woodward County, Oklahoma

I gave Lynn a long hard look before finally offering a single nod. “Very well.” I turned to the boys. “Why don’t you go down to the kitchen? I asked the cook to make everyone dinner. If you hurry, you can probably catch them in time to ask them for what you’d like.”

“Even dessert?” Nox asked, looking coy.

“You can ask them for dessert, yes,” I replied, trying not to smile as the twins took off, clearly racing each other to the kitchen. I glanced over at the girls, raising a brow. They caught on a moment later, both nodding before exiting the room, closing the door behind them. Once the sound of their footsteps faded, I turned my attention back to Lynn and Arden. “Now, what is it you think you need to share with me?”

Lynn stood up and walked over to Arden, touching his elbow. Luna’s father cleared his throat, shaking his head like that might also clear his thoughts. He finally looked at me, though he wouldn’t quite meet my eyes, staring at my chin instead. “We know you aren’t Silverstreak’s true alpha. Biologically, I mean,” he muttered, flinching like this news might send me into an unholy rage. When no one said anything, he shuffled and continued. “James knew. Noah Claw knew. Not sure if he meant to say, but he and my father were on good terms.” He licked his lips.

I shrugged, clearly unfazed. “I know,” I replied simply, stifling a smile as bafflement spread across Lynn’s face. “I am my father’s only son, biological or not. He never treated me as anything different, and he raised me to be the next alpha of my pack. That was always his intention. Legally, he took me as his child when I was born. He left me his company in his will. I am his only son, and I am the only alpha for Silverstreak.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Well, that’s good,” he said slowly. “I’m sure that’s something Noah Claw shared with his son before he passed. If he hasn’t tried to use it against you yet, I’m sure he will soon.” Arden paused and looked at his wife. She touched his elbow again. He sighed and looked back at Remus. “He’s using it when he’s talking to other packs. Some believe him. Some don’t.”

I finally bristled, growling a little at this revelation. “Of course he is,” I rumbled, skin prickling as I clenched my jaw. At least some things made sense now, and it would make things more difficult going forward if this news continued to become public.

When he seemed to sense I wasn’t going to assault him for simply sharing the news, Arden continued. “Do you know about the secret accounts? I’ve been helping Marnet spread his money in several locations. The original intention was for, uhm... tax reasons,” he said, looking down at his boots. “Though, obviously, it worked out differently once everything went down. I’m not his tax guy, but. He asked me to look, so I did.”

I took a deep breath and steadied my temper. “I know about the accounts,” I told him, trying not to feel smug at the man’s impressed look. “They’ve also been dealt with. A few weeks ago, in fact. He’s been cut off from all of them, and his investors have also been spooked, so any future investments shouldn’t be coming in.”

“Guess I should have given you more credit, Remus,” Arden finally said. “Looks like I didn’t have much to share with you.” Instead of saying anything else, he finally looked at Luna. She simply stared back, not batting an eyelash. The tension started to bubble up into the air again. “How are you doing, Luna? You okay?”

Her face didn’t change. I thought she’d give the quiet response she usually did. “Are we just giving pleasantries, or do you actually expect me to believe you give a shit about my well-being?”

I fought the urge to smile, squeezing Luna’s hand. Lynn looked aghast at the way Luna spoke, but Arden simply looked abashed, like he was expecting such an answer.

“I probably deserve that,” the man sighed, shaking his head. “I have a lot to explain to you, Luna, if you’d give me a chance. About why I lied about your mother’s death, for one. Why I took you into my home.”

I glanced at Luna — it didn’t matter to me either way. Whatever she decided she did or didn’t want to hear, I’d support it. She narrowed her eyes, and then she gave a nod. “If you’d like to tell me, I’ll listen,” she said. Her expression didn’t get any softer. *Good for you, Luna.*

Lynn looked away, withdrawing her hand to fold her arms over her chest. Arden looked at her, pausing before looking back to Luna. “Noah Claw didn’t care much for Josie. Well. I’m not sure if it was her, personally. But he didn’t trust the Silverstreak pack. He knew about Remington’s son — or fake

son.” He grimaced a little and gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry. That’s how he put it. He was concerned that Josie was being sent to spy on my family and me; my father worked for Noah before I did, and I took up his role when he needed it. At first, I shrugged it off, but... Noah got to my mother. She made my life hell; she was *convinced* that Josie was spying on us, and she’d get us all banished. Eventually, I caved.”

Arden paused, shrugging his shoulders. It seemed to take him a moment to get out of his memories. “Anyways, as I said, I caved. I started to believe that Josie just might be a spy for the Silverstreak pack. I gave in. They wanted to banish Josie, and by that point, I was so detached, I couldn’t bring myself to care anymore.” He grimaced. “Even if we had fallen apart, she was still the mother of my first child, and that meant something to me. And more than that, I couldn’t handle the thought of my daughter being banished alongside Josie. She was twelve. Being a lone wolf is hard on anyone, much less a child. I just couldn’t let that happen.”

He swallowed. Hard. “The only thing I could think was to take Luna home with me so she wasn’t banished and cast out. Josie was already banished from Silverstreak. They’d have nowhere to go. I couldn’t do it, not to you. I told you that she died, Luna, because I didn’t want you trying to run after her and getting hurt.”

Luna was trembling next to me, my fingers caught in a death grip as her father revealed the story. She cleared her throat. “Why was Josie banished from her pack?”

Arden sighed heavily. “I wasn’t there when it happened. She said her alpha had banished her for ‘switching loyalties’ so easily, all for a man. Knowing that, I was afraid they’d reject Luna too if she showed up looking for her mother, regardless of what they decided about Josie and if she was rejected... I didn’t know what would happen to her, especially if she hadn’t found her mother. She was part of Lupus Claw, too, and I didn’t know if that’d impact what Remington Silverstreak would end up deciding. I didn’t want to find out. I was just trying to protect her.”

He finally fell silent, watching Luna for several breaths. She was struggling to find the words to reply; I could see her jaw working as her eyes glistened. I gave her hand a gentle squeeze but said nothing; this wasn’t my moment. This was between Luna and Arden; however, she wanted to handle it.

Eventually, she spoke, slow and careful as she chose each word. “I... I

can understand why you lied about what happened to my mother — that she was banished. I can understand why you would be worried about what I would do at twelve, grief-stricken, and that you wouldn't want me to make poor choices....” She trailed off, and for the briefest of moments, Arden looked relieved. She held up one finger. “*However,*” Luna continued with an edge of steel entering her voice, “that does not excuse the fact that you allowed your wife to treat me like a piece of garbage. That does not excuse how you turned a blind eye when your other children picked on me relentlessly. You might have kept me safe from life as a lone wolf, but it was not a good childhood, Arden. It wasn't. I did not deserve that verbal abuse, and you did nothing to stop it.”

Luna took a deep breath and turned, kissing me on the cheek. “I need some air,” she whispered, excusing herself without another word.

Arden watched her leave, expression torn between stunned and ashamed. “She's changed,” he murmured, finally looking back at me. “She's stronger than she used to be.”

“Luna always has been,” I replied, raising my brow. “Maybe you just weren't looking closely enough.” It was not my place to say anything else; Luna had made that progress on her own. I was simply fortunate enough to witness it.

The man nodded to himself and looked back at me. “The baby is yours?”

“Babies,” I clarified, raising a brow.

Arden let out a surprised chuckle, taking a step back. “Seriously? Well, damn. I guess twins do run in my family. My mother had a twin sister; didn't get along, though. I've only met her once.” He sighed and shook his head, expression falling again. “Look. I've made many mistakes in life. I've been a shit father — especially to Luna. But I don't want things to stay that way. Being separated from my kids, even for a few months... that's one of the hardest things I've ever had to endure. I don't want to be estranged from Luna if I can help it.”

“That isn't up to me, Arden.”

“I know. I know,” the man sighed, shaking his head. “That's up to Luna — and me to be better.” He finally turned his attention back to his wife. “We both have to do better, Lynn. You can't keep taking your jealousy of Josie out on me. It's been twenty-five years. You can't keep punishing me, and you can't use Luna to do that anymore.”

Lynn startled, nostrils flaring again as she glared daggers. “I'm not

jealous,” she spat out, clearly horrified he would even say such a thing in front of another person. “I don’t take anything out on anyone.”

I cleared my throat, uninterested in watching this dissolve into a lovers’ spat. “I will be officially taking Luna as my mate once this business with Marnet is concluded,” I informed them both. “And as she is my future mate, I will not tolerate anyone disrespecting her. Period.” I finished my statement by staring at Lynn, watching her squirm beneath my gaze.

“I understand,” she replied quietly, looking away again.

“Good,” I responded. “Now, I think it would be best if you spent some time with your children. It will give you some time to think about your loyalties as well.”

LUNA FOUND me where I had retreated to one of the balconies. I knew it was her just from the sound of when she walked; her scent when she hugged me from behind only confirmed my suspicion. I rumbled softly, leaning back into her embrace. “I am exhausted,” she sighed, and I rumbled again, feeling that statement down to my soul.

I turned in her arms, moving to pull her into a hug when I realized her cheeks were wet. “Luna?” I questioned, reaching forward to wipe the tears away with thumbs. “What’s wrong, love?”

“Nothing. I mean...” She sighed, taking another step into my space. I wrapped my arms around the small of her back, tugging her as close as I could. We didn’t quite slot together like we did before being pregnant, but I could still cradle her closely. “...it’s been a really weird day. And on top of that an emotional roller coaster.” Luna laughed gently, pointing at her belly. “I don’t think my hormones are helping much.”

“It has been a trying day,” I agreed, kissing her softly.

She hummed against my lips, lingering in the kiss before breaking away. “Remus, thank you for giving my sisters the time to see the light,” she said softly, running her fingers up and down my spine. “I know they were... well, they were brats, frankly, and they probably wouldn’t give me that second chance, but I believe they were just products of the way they were raised. I wish it hadn’t come to Marnet *hurting* them, but... I am glad they finally saw him for what he was. I’m glad we were here.”

I offered her a small smile, aware of what she wasn’t saying. There were so many ‘what ifs.’ What if Marnet had turned on the Highborns when we

weren't in Oklahoma? What if he hadn't measured his sedatives closely, and one of them was seriously injured — or killed?

I stopped the thoughts there, kissing Luna's cheek. "Of course," I replied quietly. "You believed there was still something reasonable left inside them, and I believe in you. More than that, I love you. I will give you anything within my power to give."

She smiled up at me, the tears drying up as she held me close. "You're so sweet," she sighed, expression turning a bit dreamy.

The door onto the balcony opened, breaking the spell between us at once. Bane cleared his throat, looking anywhere but at the two of us.

"Yes?" I prompted, trying to mask the annoyance in my voice.

"Sorry to interrupt," he grunted, "but Marnet sent a message. He wants to meet. I thought you'd want to know immediately."

If it were anything else, I'd have said it could wait, but this — Bane was right. I did want to know so I could act. "Did he give a location?" The beta wolf nodded. "Good. Go get the car ready. I'll be right down." Bane nodded again and disappeared without another word. I looked back at Luna and sighed softly, kissing her forehead. "I have to meet with him. I need you to stay home."

"I know," she replied wryly, settling her hands on my chest. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Of all the things I expected her to say, that wasn't it. She earned a startled laugh, and I kissed her one more time for good measure before meeting Bane down at the vehicle.

THERE WAS something strange about getting into the SUV with Bane at the wheel. He said nothing, yet it reminded me of the time right before the Moonmate ceremony. Once we were on the road, Bane spoke.

"The message was short. Didn't detail what he wanted to talk about, only that he wanted to talk, to come alone, and the address." He snorted softly. "I instructed part of the security team to tail us in a second car, stay out of sight. I gave them the address, just in case Marnet tries anything else fucking stupid."

Bane's irritation made me smirk. "Good," I said. "We can't count on anything with him."

It wasn't a long drive to Marnet's specific location, but that didn't

surprise me. He couldn't go far, not with his resources hamstrung like they were. As we stepped out of the vehicle, I took a deep breath, willing my wolf back down. I needed to keep calm now — especially when I realized that York was standing behind Marnet, clearly acting as his second.

Officially, Bane wasn't my anything anymore, but he was still a beta wolf, and he took his former position behind me as he approached. I allowed it, honestly feeling better with him there. I could take Marnet, but York's presence had thrown me.

"You must think you're awful high and mighty, huh?" Marnet barked, baring his teeth at me. "Look at you, sitting pretty on your throne of lies and secrets. It's going to come crumbling down sooner or later, Remus. Just you wait."

I rolled my eyes; Arden might not have told me anything I didn't already know, but one important nugget *was* that Marnet knew, too. I didn't have to guess what he was trying to taunt me about. "I know about Remington Silverstreak and my biological father," I replied dryly, arching a brow. "In fact, I've had the pleasure of meeting my biological father. Have you noticed your funds have dried up recently, Marnet?"

Marnet's face shifted rapidly from smug to bewildered, finally settling on outrage; I had to fight to keep the smugness off my face. Shifting my gaze to York, my lip curled slightly. "You've chosen the wrong side, Rock," I growled. "Did you know your financiers do business with Longbow Investments? Owned by Archer Unlimited, of course — headed by one Nicholas Archer." I flashed him a toothy smile.

York went as white as a sheet, clearly recognizing at least one of the names; my father had said he had direct contact with some of York's finances. The older alpha reached forward, grabbing Marnet's shoulder. "I don't think he's fooling," he growled.

Marnet snarled, shoving his hand away. "Anyone could look that sorta shit up on the internet," he argued, taking a step forward. "Remus is grasping at straws and looking shit up. *Making* shit up! I've had enough." He cut his hand through the air. "I've had enough of *you*, Remus. I challenge you for the Oklahoma and Texas territories and the *Lupus Claw* pack."

All the remaining blood drained from York's face, and he grabbed at the man's arm again, trying to reel him back. "Marnet!" he hissed, looking as frantic as I'd ever seen him. "Think about what you're doing!"

I grunted; I knew this day was coming. I relished it, even. The dawn of

this day meant the entire struggle would be over soon. I stepped forward with no delay. “With York Rock and Bane McGrath to witness, I accept your challenge. I have two pups on the way. I’d rather see them born before I take your life.”

Marnet snarled, spitting on the ground between us. “Your pups or my pups?” The look on his face cast doubt on his belief that the children were his, but I didn’t take the bait. “Fine, you can have time since you begged so nicely for it, bitch. On the first of May, I’ll end your life. Time won’t save you, Silverstreak. It’s only going to hurt you in the end.”

“You have just over three months, Marnet. You’d better use them wisely. I will see you on the first of May to settle this challenge.”

The air around us seemed to still, and I felt something settle over me. It wasn’t that different from when Seff and I agreed to a blood oath. There was no way Marnet could back out, even if he wanted to.

Come May first, this would finally be over.

LUNA

Remus' Oklahoma Mansion

Woodward County, Oklahoma

It had been a few days since Remus' meeting with Marnet, but his mood had not improved. I wouldn't exactly have called him cranky, but he seemed more on edge than I'd ever seen him. I'd tried to ask what had happened more than once, and I got flaky answers at best. Whatever it was, he came home in one piece, so it hadn't resulted in a fight. That's all I could ask for.

In the meantime, Lynn and Arden had decided they would officially submit to Remus and pledge their loyalty to the Silverstreak pack. I thought I'd have felt... well, *more* than I did. I thought maybe I'd be angry, upset, or anxious. I was none of those. I felt a strange sense of calm about it. If anything else, I felt a sense of relief. That meant Nyx and Nox would have their parents to care for them, and Athena and Artemis weren't forced into the roles of parents themselves. While I was sure they were trying their best, they were still young adults; they'd hardly had any responsibility in the household before. It was clearly trying for them.

They were planning to leave the mansion today to return to their home in the suburbs. While it would be significantly quieter, I felt relieved. This wasn't my home — I wasn't sure this mansion would ever feel like home, as large and sprawling as it was — but I still missed my peace. Though everyone was ready to get going, Arden and Remus had disappeared earlier to the office; I found myself constantly looking at the closed door as I sipped my tea. No one *had* to tell me what they were meeting about. It still left me feeling a little unnerved, even if my father had no sway over what I did with my life.

Eventually, the door opened again, and they strolled out. I tried to look like I hadn't been waiting, fussing with my tea mug and a few plants on the built-in shelf. Remus gave me a sly look over my father's shoulder, and I flushed, picking at a few yellowing leaves. "I don't think they're getting enough sun," I announced as if that might prove I hadn't been loitering.

My father didn't seem to notice, stopping right next to me. He stood shoulder to shoulder with me, staring at the vegetation without seeing it.

“Luna,” he said, “it’s been good seeing you. I appreciate you taking in the kids, even after everything.”

I blinked, a little stunned by the acknowledgment. It had always been expected that I would take care of them, but I didn’t know what to do with his admission. To keep from gawking, I fussed with another plant instead, picking at a few little yellow leaves.

“Look, I know it’s asking for a lot, but... if it’s possible, I’d like to start over with you. It’s something I should have done years ago, and I’m sorry it took me so long to figure it out. Hopefully, you can forgive me one day. I’d like to be able to be a part of my grandsons’ lives if you’d let me.”

My brain screeched to a halt, and I could not process exactly what he was saying. Once they learned about the twins, I’d expected Arden to demand access to them or lack any interest. I didn’t expect anything in between, and I certainly didn’t expect him to ask permission for anything.

Before I could come up with a response, my father leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. He’d never done much in the way of public displays of affection through my youth — that, at least, wasn’t limited to me; he’d been like that with all five of us — and I stood, frozen to the spot.

Arden backed away, going to the kitchen to gather up the rest of his children. A few moments later, the twins came thundering down the hall, wrapping their arms around me as they offered their goodbyes. “Thanks, Luna,” Nox whispered against me.

“Yeah, thanks,” Nyx agreed. “Be... be safe, okay? Maybe we can visit when you come back to Oklahoma.”

They both withdrew, and I sniffed, trying not to tear up. The twins could be so sweet when they wanted to be; it was nice to see a glimpse of the happy boys they were. Artemis and Athena hung by the front door, looking at one another. Artemis offered a little wave. “Let us know when you have the baby shower, okay?”

“Yeah,” Athena agreed. “I’m not sure we can make it to Texas with work, but we’d still like to send gifts. Aunt Athena has a nice ring to it, I think.”

I couldn’t help but smile a little. “It does,” I agreed. I offered them a wave as they stepped out the door, trailed by the twins. Lynn was the last to make her way towards the door, and I stiffened instinctively — I assumed she’d already gone out to the vehicle. She paused at the door before turning, walking towards me without meeting my eyes. A chill ran down my spine.

“Luna,” she said, my name coming out like a sigh. “Thank you for being

there for my children when Marnet turned on them. Things... things will be different between you and me from now on. I have no excuse for how I treated you before, and I am aware you are the only reason Mr. Silverstreak gave us a second chance to join the Silverstreak. I am grateful for that.”

She paused and then reached over to touch my elbow. “Thank you, I mean it.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing, watching Lynn as she turned and went out the front door. I watched the door long after it closed, almost forgetting the plant in my hands. Remus appeared seemingly out of nowhere, wrapping a hand around the pot and taking it gently before I dropped it.

I startled anyway, frowning when he chuckled gently. “Sorry,” he muttered, putting the plant back on the shelf. “I was trying to avoid that. I didn’t want you to drop it.” He shook his head. “Things are finally settled with Claw & Co. Construction — we’ll be returning home to Austin tomorrow.”

I smiled, turning to face him. “That sounds great,” I admitted. I’d started thinking of the penthouse at my home, and I was really missing it. “I’ll start packing our things.”

“Remus?” Bane’s voice called; I saw him poke his head around the corner, hesitating when he saw Remus and me together.

Remus hummed and leaned forward, kissing my cheek. “Thanks, love,” he whispered, turning to join Bane. I watched them retreat to the office, head tipped to one side. Ever since Bane had come to my rescue a few days ago, most of the tension between them had dissipated. While I still wasn’t sure where I stood about the man, I was glad to see Bane and Remus not at each other’s throats. It was just less stressful for all of us.

I WAS INFINITELY grateful that Remus had taken the private jet to Oklahoma; every day, it felt like the twins had grown bigger, and I had become more awkward. If I had to be crammed into a regular airline seat — even first class — I’d probably be absolutely miserable. I wasn’t feeling particularly great, but the seat was lush, and I had room to stretch my legs. I could get up and walk as needed, though thankfully, it was a short flight.

Once we’d gotten in the air, I leaned over, brushing my hand against Remus’ arm. “So,” I prompted, waiting for him to look up from his tablet. “Are you going to tell me what you met with Marnet about now?”

He sighed, flipping the cover over the screen. “Honestly, Luna, it’s nothing for you to worry about. The doctor said your blood pressure was already something to be concerned about with twins, right? I don’t want to add to that.”

I frowned, that sounded more like an excuse than anything else. “He said I needed to monitor it, but nothing has come up yet,” I argued, shaking my head. “I’ve been taking care of myself. I don’t think this is about me handling anything.”

Remus frowned back. “Luna, you passed out like a week ago. You can’t tell me that this thing with Marnet isn’t stressing you.”

“Yes, Marnet stresses me out.” I huffed out a breath. “But I didn’t feel weak until I told him I rejected him. I think when I broke the bond...” I paused, shaking my head. “I felt lightheaded. Woozy. I think it was just that, not the stress.”

Remus shook his head, not buying it. “I don’t think the stress helped, either. I love you, but from here on out I’m handling it, if it involves Marnet. As you said, you rejected him. There’s no reason for him to be involved with you anymore.”

I sighed. “We’ve been a team in dealing with this the entire time,” I argued. “I don’t want to just... stop with that. I want to be your teammate. Your partner.”

A small smile tugged on the corners of Remus’ mouth. He set his tablet down and leaned towards me, cupping my face with both hands. “Luna. You *are* my teammate, and you *are* my partner. Life isn’t stagnant, and our roles change sometimes. Right now, you are taking care of the twins — which means you also have to take care of yourself. That means I have to take on a few more things I didn’t have before, and that’s fine. I’m pretty sure that’s what being partners means.”

I couldn’t help but smile back, even if my eyes were getting a little misty. “You might be right,” I whispered, my voice feeling thick with emotion.

“I’m pretty sure I’m right this time,” Remus replied. “I’m not just an alpha. I’m also your mate, which means looking out for you and the babies. I don’t think I could live with myself if something happened to you or them.”

I made a quiet noise, leaning across the space between our seats to kiss him. “Okay,” I agreed quietly, my throat feeling tight. “It’s so annoying when you make so much sense.” I didn’t really mean it though, and I smiled at him through my misty eyes.

Remus laughed gently, returning my kiss before sitting back in his chair. “I appreciate you listening,” he said. “I know it’s hard, especially because we *have* been working together on this, so I really do appreciate you trusting in me.”

WHEN WE GOT BACK to Texas, there was a separate car waiting for Remus. “I have some business to take care of after being gone,” he told me regretfully, leaning in for another kiss. “But Bane will take you home so you can relax.”

I raised my brows, glancing over my shoulder towards the second car. I could see the man already inside and glanced back at Remus. “I know you two have been talking a lot the last few days — but you’re okay with this? You were ready to take his limbs off one at a time just two weeks ago.”

Remus huffed a soft laugh, glancing down as he shook his head. “That is true,” he was forced to admit, his head tipped as he looked back at me. “But two weeks ago, he hadn’t acted to rescue you.”

“I’m not sure if it was a *rescue*, exactly....” I replied, my skin prickling at the memory of Marnet trying to cast his Alpha over me.

Remus snorted, clearly seeing right through me. “He got there before I did. We’ve had a few... thoughtful talks since then.”

I gave a small nod, aware that they must have started to mend the bridge between them if Remus was defending the man. “So, is he your beta again, then?”

“He’s always been a beta, Luna.”

I snorted, whacking Remus on his shoulder. “I know *that*,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “I asked if he was *your* beta — the Silverstreak beta.”

Remus paused, looking at the car for a moment. “...we’ve been talking,” he finally replied, nodding to himself. “None of the other betas my mother suggested fit. So, we’ll see.”

“Okay,” I replied. That was good enough for me. If Remus was seriously considering reinstating the man as his beta, he must have regained some trust in him.

I leaned up and kissed his cheek. “Well, don’t be late for your business,” I prompted him, nodding towards his car. “I’ll see you back at home.”

I had hoped things wouldn’t be awkward when I got into the car with Bane, but once I’d buckled in and he’d navigated us out of the airport, an uncomfortable silence blanketed us. I tried just staring out the window,

watching the city around us.

“Luna.” Bane’s gruff voice startled me as he broke the silence, and I glanced over at him, trying not to brace myself. “I hope we can move past... everything,” he said, staring straight ahead at the road. His knuckles went white as he gripped the steering wheel like it was his lifeline. “I was not the most welcoming. I just... want you to know I was worried about Remus and the pack. It wasn’t personal. It could have been anyone. I’d just never seen him like that.”

I frowned, not exactly sure how that made me feel. It was nice not to be personally attacked, but...

He cleared his throat. “I want you to know, Luna, that I’ll protect you with my life if it ever comes down to it. And it doesn’t matter where things end up with me and Remus, beta-wise. Even if he takes on someone else, that’s still true.”

I glanced over at him, my chest feeling warm. “You don’t have to do that, Bane,” I whispered. “I would never ask anyone to make that sort of sacrifice for me.”

The beta shook his head. “I don’t have to,” he agreed. “But I would. You’re important to Remus, and Remus is important to me. Plus...” He gave me a quick sideways look. “You’re going to be the mother of his children.”

I ducked my head, not sure what to say to that. “I... Well, thank you, Bane,” I finally replied. It was the least I could say. “I’ll try to keep it from ever coming to that.”

“That’d be good,” Bane replied. “Yeah, that’d be good.”

BANE HELPED me get our bags up to the penthouse and then left me to have some privacy. I’d felt achy since we’d gotten off the plane, or maybe since we’d gotten on it, and I’d hoped a warm bath would help. When it didn’t even take the edge off, I decided to call Dr. Hayes, starting to get concerned that maybe there was something wrong with me beyond the usual pregnancy pains.

Once I’d described the issues to him, he gave a thoughtful hum. “That sounds like Braxton Hicks contractions, Luna. Those are pretty normal. Most pregnant women experience them; you can consider them like your body practicing for the big event,” he told me.

“So... do I just ignore them?” I asked. The information made me feel a

little better, but I wasn't entirely relieved. "Are they going to just... turn into regular contractions? It's too early for that."

"For now, yes. Do your best to ignore them. I can give you a few techniques to help you find some relief. As for turning into regular contractions, that's extremely unlikely. The remedies should help. However, if they get worse, if you have contractions every five minutes, or you experience gushing or bleeding, please come in right away. Otherwise, you should be just fine."

We stayed on the phone a few minutes longer, Dr. Hayes giving me a few recommendations for things that should help with the general aches. "You're going towards the end of this, Luna, so it would be best if you could stay off your feet as much as you can. This is especially important with the fact you're carrying twins."

I nodded to myself. "Thank you, Dr. Hayes. I really appreciate it. I'll see you at my next appointment."

"Of course. Have a good day, Luna."

At that point, staying off my feet sounded just fine. When Remus got home several hours later, I was tucked up on the couch, reading one of the books I'd brought with me from Oklahoma. "How was work?" I called.

"Everything was fine." Remus paused, studying me on the couch. "I need you to go get dressed. There's something I want to show you."

I paused, placing my bookmark so I wouldn't lose my spot. "Dr. Hayes told me I should be staying off my feet," I replied, trying not to frown.

"Don't worry," Remus replied. "Just get dressed. I'll make sure you aren't on your feet for too long."

I did as he said, picking something comfortable and a little classy. I had no idea where he was taking me, and I didn't want to embarrass him. As soon as I stepped out of the bedroom door, Remus swooped in, scooping me up bridal style to carry me out of the apartment. I couldn't help but laugh; I knew this wasn't what Dr. Hayes had meant, but I couldn't argue. It was just too lovely.

We ended up in the car for about an hour, leaving the limits of the city. Eventually, we pulled up to a large, ranch-style home. It looked like the picture of Texas with a sprawling front porch with a beautiful wooden door. Baskets of flowers hung intermittently, standing out against the neutral paint color. "It's beautiful," I said, peering out the window as Remus killed the engine. "Who are we visiting?"

Remus didn't say anything, simply smiling at me before he got out of the car and walked around to give me a hand. As we strolled up the manicured walkway, I tried to peer into one of the large windows. He still wouldn't answer, and my mind raced. "Seriously, who is it? Your grandmother, maybe?"

He unlocked the door and led us inside, walking me around the home like a professional tour guide. When we made it back to the front door, he turned. "What do you think?"

I laughed. "What do I think? This place is beautiful — but you still haven't told me who lives here, and you didn't even let out any clues." I looked around the front entrance again. "I love it; I'm a bit jealous, honestly."

"Good," Remus replied, "that's good. Because it is ours."

I whipped around, covering my mouth with one hand as I stared. He simply beamed back at me, holding up the keys on a ring. He motioned, and I held open my other hand, and he deposited the keyring in it. "Are you — Are you serious? You bought it? Remus, it's beautiful."

His smile grew, and he stepped closer, settling one hand on my hip. He placed the other over my belly gently. "I love Austin — and I love that penthouse, but that is not the right place to raise pups." He laughed softly, leaning over to kiss my forehead. "They need a yard to play in. And they need their own rooms, too. And it even has a library."

"It does. It has a library," I replied, feeling a bit dazed.

"I want to have a home for our family, Luna."

I nodded, leaning up on my toes to soundly kiss him. "It's perfect, Remus. I'm sure the twins will love it."

REMUS

Silverstreak Ranch Home

Travis County, Texas

Even with a professional moving company, it took us weeks to move everything from Austin to our new home outside the city. I wanted to make sure Luna had everything she needed. It was impossible to make the house perfect, but I could make it as close as possible. I had it cleaned from top to bottom, and her favorite pieces of furniture moved over. What we didn't have, I purchased. There was only one thing left to do, really, and that was furnish the nursery for the twins — but that was something I didn't want to leave to a company.

I wanted to make sure everything was ready when it was time for the baby shower. Tala had declared herself the twins' godmother as soon as we'd gotten back — of course, Luna and I agreed immediately. Fiona took her role as future grandmother very seriously; she said she hadn't started planning until a month ago, but I was certain she'd been planning this baby shower since the moment she had learned she was having a grandchild.

While Tala had been happy to let my mother take over the planning, the same couldn't be said for Josie Ulfric. As Luna was her daughter, she felt she ought to be the one planning the event. Luna did her best to stay out of it, but as things started to get out of hand, Tala stepped back in. It was all I could do to keep Luna from throwing her hands up and planning it herself; she needed to take it easy.

I'm not sure what changed, but by the time the seventh month rolled around, all three women seemed to have come to an agreement. None of them would tell Luna what they were planning — which was driving her positively crazy — but I was just happy knowing it was being taken care of, and it didn't have to be my responsibility.

"It will be too extravagant," Luna sighed, giving me a long look across the island.

I shrugged my shoulders. "They're all excited," I replied, trying not to smile. "At least you know the twins will be loved."

She sighed again. "Remus — I think your mother is trying to invite the entire pack. It's going to be the biggest party."

I laughed and shook my head. “Even if she tried to, I’m positive Josie and Tala would rein her in,” I replied. “I’m sure it will be a party you’ll like. Besides — it’s good that they’re working together, don’t you think?”

“I suppose, yes. I am glad for that,” she agreed, looking up at me. “Are you inviting anyone?”

Her question made me pause. “The shower is about you, Luna. I’m just there was the proud papa.”

Luna shrugged. “I know. But the shower is about the *babies*, and I couldn’t have done that without you.” She winked, and I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “Seriously, though... if you want to invite someone, like Bane or Nic, you should. At the very least, you should let your father know. Your aunts were dying to send us cute things for the babies.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, immediately warming to the idea. “Now that Fiona and Josie have finally settled on a date, I think I’ll do that right now.”

Luna waved me off, busy getting herself a snack. I walked down the hall to the room I’d claimed as my office, settling down in the chair before doing some quick mental math. Deciding it wasn’t too late across the pond, I drew up my father’s contact and tapped on the phone icon.

Nic picked up on the third ring. “Remus! How are you?”

He sounded delighted to hear from me, and something about that put me at ease. “I wanted to invite you to the baby shower for the twins,” I replied, smiling broadly. “I know it’s quite a way to travel for one afternoon, but I wanted to extend the invitation anyway.”

Nic laughed into the phone. “Invitation accepted. What’s the date?”

“How do you know you don’t have plans on the day?”

“These are my first grandchildren, Remus. There is nothing that is going to stop me from being there.”

I had to give that to him, chuckling as I gave him the date the future grandmothers had finally settled on. “Oh, and Eli is invited too, if he’s interested. He is going to be their uncle, after all.”

“He’ll come,” Nic replied easily. I could almost hear the smirk in my father’s voice. We’d spoken about once a week since my visit to London, and I’d learned to detect many of those little things over our long calls. “Now, I was thinking about replacing my car, and I wanted to get your opinion.”

I leaned back with a smile, settling in for another long call with the man.

NIC AND ELI arrived at the Austin–Bergstrom International Airport about a week before the baby shower. I took the afternoon off from work to meet them, grinning broadly as Nic and I embraced. Eli simply looked embarrassed to be in our presence, and somehow, it only made me smile more. “Welcome to Texas!” I rumbled, escorting them to my car.

Nic laughed heartily, clapping a hand over my back. “You’re looking excellent, Remus. I expect a tour of the town, of course.”

“It’s no London,” I replied, “but I can point out the landmarks.”

It made our drive back to my ranch home a little longer than it needed to be, but I did love the city I’d grown up in. If they were going to be in the area for a week, they might want to do a few tourist things. There was the river, though it wasn’t in its full splendor at the end of February. Also, there were plenty of restaurants and bakeries, as well as the glassworks and a museum of ice cream.

My father had made a list two pages long of places he wanted to visit by the time we pulled into my driveway; Eli had pretended to fall asleep in the back seat, though I could see his eyes flicker open occasionally when he thought no one was paying attention.

“Beautiful,” Nic declared, walking up the front steps.

“I’ll never get sick of driving up to it,” I agreed.

Luna greeted us as we walked in the front door, and he swept her into an embrace, too — albeit a much gentler one than he’d given me. “You’re looking absolutely radiant,” he told her, kissing her hand as if she were the Queen of England herself.

Luna giggled, face turning a bit pink. “It’s very kind of you to lie like that, Nic,” she demurred, but her smile got several watts brighter. “Remus, can you show your father his room? Eli, if you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to yours.”

As she led my half-brother down the hall, I sighed, watching his hunching shoulders retreat. “I don’t think time has done much to warm him up at all,” I remarked.

Nic simply laughed, shaking his head. “Don’t let that prickly exterior fool you,” he replied, walking around my kitchen. “He was pretty surprised you’d invited him, but I didn’t force him to come, regardless of how he’s acting.”

I raised my brows; I had expected that Nic required his younger son to come. It was nice to hear that Eli had come of his own free will, even if he’d barely said two words to me. “Well, I’m glad he came. I hope he feels a little

more relaxed in the next few days.”

I DECIDED it would be best for the entire family to meet one another before the baby shower itself. Regardless of what Luna said, I wanted that day to be about her — and the babies. If there was going to be any drama, I wanted to make sure we knew about it. I didn’t expect there to be any, but... well, Fiona was still my mother.

Elena had been in the kitchen cooking all day when the guests started to arrive. Tala and Seff were first. Tala had even brought some mocktail mix for Luna, distracting her from her nerves as they disappeared into the kitchen to try the mixed drinks. Bane was next; I’d reinstated him officially before Nic had returned, so there was no question he had to be here. Josie and James didn’t arrive long after. Nic and Eli were already here, of course, and though Eli had resisted my attempts at being social, he didn’t stand a chance against Tala’s charm.

I thought I’d even saw him accept one of her hand-crafted drinks before Fiona finally showed up. As I opened the door to usher her inside, she gave me what I might call a worried look — it was an expression I wasn’t used to seeing on her face. “Are you sure you want me here?” she whispered, peering over my shoulder into the kitchen. Laughter echoed down the hall. “It sounds like a good time. I wouldn’t want to make it awkward.”

I sighed, trying not to roll my eyes. She’d almost jumped out of her skin when I’d informed her that I was inviting Nic to the baby shower, already fretting about seeing him. I’d had to remind her it wasn’t about her, and I’d spent long enough not knowing him. The twins were his grandsons, too, and he deserved to be present in their lives if he wanted to be.

Even Fiona could see the logic, but it clearly didn’t stop her from fretting.

“You aren’t going to make it awkward, Fiona.” I paused. “Well, I suppose you could, but you’d have to make an effort, so please don’t.”

She scowled at me, but it got the worried look off her face, so I considered it a win. After my guests had arrived, I returned to the kitchen, grinning as Bane sidled up with barely suppressed laughter. “I’ve never seen Fiona so frazzled,” he murmured, eyes darting to where my mother fiddled with her hair.

A few minutes later, my father stepped back in off the porch — he’d apparently taken the grill over from Elena, though she didn’t seem to mind.

The moment his eyes landed on Fiona, he seemed to freeze, completely captured by her presence. I could have sworn I heard his heart from where I stood, even over the chatter and laughter surrounding us. His eyes flickered to me for a moment, something soft in his expression.

It took me a moment to realize what was happening — I don't think Nic had ever stopped loving Fiona, even if he'd taken another mate. She was gone now, though, and so was Remington. I didn't want either of them to be lonely, even if—

Ah.

It dawned on me at once that my father was looking for my permission. I gave a small nod of my head, turning back towards Fiona. “Hey, Mom? Would you mind taking that plate of corn from Elena out to the grill? I think Nic could use a hand.”

She gave me a traitorous look but excused herself from the conversation, taking the plate and heading out the sliding glass doors. I watched the pair of them as I held my breath, noting the plate abandoned on the table as they stared at one another. After a moment, I turned away; this was their moment. I shouldn't watch.

When my mother approached me later in the evening, she was all smiles and warmth. Luna and Tala had retreated to one of the couches, and the rest of the party followed them. The kitchen had gone quiet, and she took a moment to take my hand in hers. “It was a good night,” she murmured, squeezing my hand. “And an excellent idea. Remus, I—”

She paused at the sound of Nic's laughter, looking positively thunderstruck. I waited patiently for her to shake the moment off. “I know about the upcoming challenge. Don't ask how. I just want you to know I am proud of you. I believe in you — but I'm still your mother, and I worry.” She took a deep breath. “You need to win, Remus. Not just for your family, but your pack. For all the wolves in your territory — and not just Texas. Oklahoma, too. When you told me all those months ago that Marnet was too dangerous to be alpha of a pack, I didn't believe you, but you clearly saw something I didn't. He is... he is a *menace*.”

She spat out the last word, several emotions passing over her face, before looking at me. “I just need you to know I'm proud of you, son. You need to win. You need to end Marnet Claw — and I know you can do just that.”

I regarded my mother solemnly before giving a nod. “I intend to do just that.”

LUNA

Silverstreak Ranch Home

Travis County, Texas

Every month, I thought I couldn't possibly get any more awkward or round, but every month it happened. I felt as big as a planet — like I could command my own center of gravity. Getting up a flight of stairs was practically an endeavor, and I hadn't been able to see my feet in ages. Before, the babies' movements had felt like little flutters — imagine if your stomach was growling, but in only one area, and that's pretty close — but now they were much larger, and each movement felt like a punch or a kick. I didn't know how I would last another week, let alone another month — or more.

Of course, forty weeks was ideal, but Dr. Hayes had informed us both that, on average, twins were usually born around week thirty-six. Anything after that would be gravy. We were much closer to thirty-six weeks than forty, and while I would appreciate the relief, I wanted the babies to be as close to full-term as possible, for their own sakes.

My mother, Fiona, and Tala were on the other side of town, putting the finishing touches on the decorations for the baby shower. I was enormously glad the baby shower was being hosted at Fiona's house; it was a bit late in my pregnancy for a baby shower, and my desire to travel *anywhere* right now was less than zero. I'd been to Fiona's home several times, and it also meant that once we left to come home, the chaos would be left behind us. I'd been promised today would be as low-stress as possible for me. While I was the tiniest bit anxious about it, I'd been served breakfast in bed by a very charming Remus.

I didn't mind at all. It allowed me a leisurely morning. I took a long shower before getting dressed, reading a few chapters before ambling over to the nursery. I'd organized most of it already after I decided on a theme. Woodland animals and wilderness seemed too on the nose for a pair of werewolves, and I didn't want anything that screamed 'baby boy.' Bright colors were also out; they just weren't us.

Eventually, I'd settled on the sky. Remus helped narrow it a little further to the night sky, and he'd even painted the walls a muted shade of blue. We'd

already received the large pieces of furniture — Fiona had sent us a handsome pair of cribs, and Nic had purchased basically every other piece of furniture, from the dresser to the changing station. My mother had given me her rocking chair she'd had when I was an infant. It certainly wasn't new, but it was clearly cared for, and it made my heart warm to see it sitting in the corner of the nursery for my babies.

My favorite accessory was the adorable handmade mobiles we had hanging over each crib — one had little planets, and the other had clouds, stars, and a moon. I was almost jealous of my babies — almost. If I really wanted a mobile of my own to hang over my bed, I knew Remus would have the entire bed frame rebuilt to make it happen for me.

The thought warmed me as I looked down into the empty cribs, smiling at the cute, printed sheets. “You two have no idea what you're in for,” I told the twins quietly, shaking my head. They were already so, so loved, and they weren't even here yet!

Never in a million years — no, a billion years — did I imagine anything like this in my future.

I heard soft footsteps, tipping my head, I smiled over my shoulder as Remus tried to sneak up behind me. “Talking to yourself again?” he teased, wrapping his arms around my middle. He splayed his hands over my belly, and one of the twins stirred, kicking against him.

I couldn't help but laugh, leaning back against his chest. “I was talking to them. You know, I read online that by the time they're born, babies can recognize their parents' voices.”

Remus rumbled, leaning forward to kiss my neck. “Just making sure, huh?”

“Something like that,” I agreed, laying my hands over his. I loved the feeling of his warmth around me — of his hands against my belly. That he was interested beyond the vague ‘being a father’ hype.

He kissed my neck again. “They're going to love you,” he murmured, nuzzling his cheek against mine. “You're going to be an amazing mother.”

I smiled, turning to kiss his cheek. “Thank you,” I mumbled, my eyes slightly misty. “They're going to love you, too. You're an amazing father already.”

FIONA'S entire home was done up for a grand affair, even though they'd

promised the event wouldn't be too extravagant. Once the word had gotten out to the pack that Remus was having not one son but two, many pack members wanted to come to pay their respects. Some of the older, more superstitious members of the pack believed it was a sign of good luck, while others were simply happy to see the bloodline protected and carried on. I'd been irritated when she'd suggested it all those months ago, but it seemed Fiona was right — knowing that the pack alpha was expecting a baby boy seemed to do wonders for the Silverstreak pack's overall morale.

None of the Highborns attended, but that didn't surprise me. Frankly, I wasn't sure if I'd have been able to enjoy myself if Arden and Lynn had shown up. However, I'd sent the invitation to the girls as requested, and they'd each sent a gift. Even Nyx and Nox had sent something — they'd sent two pairs of matching wolf plushies with one of the cutest notes. "A pair of wolf twins, for your twins, from their uncle twins!"

Nic and Eli had come, though they'd taken a separate car. Nic hadn't arrived with much luggage, but he showed up at the party with an actual armload of gifts from Remus' aunts, uncles and cousins back in London. When I tried to ask how he'd managed that, he simply winked.

"That's for me to know, Luna. Let me have a little bit of my magic, hm?"

James and Josie were there, and several of my aunts and uncles as well. Tala and Seff were amongst the guests, as was Bane — and countless other shifters I didn't recognize. At first, it had unnerved me, but the entire atmosphere was so joyful and light. I couldn't help but smile and join in the festive mood. Before the end of the afternoon, Fiona tapped her glass and cleared her throat.

"First and foremost, I want to thank you all for coming to help welcome the newest additions to the Silverstreak pack — your presence alone is quite the gift," Fiona began. I realized after a moment that she meant to make a speech and braced myself, but she continued smiling, looking warmer and more radiant than I'd ever seen her.

"We have all had some... rocky roads and meandering paths lately. Perhaps some false starts. The pack has been more divided than united, but it is important to remember that our differences make us strong; it is individuals who make the whole. Each and every one of you is a piece of what makes Silverstreak as wonderful as it is, and the bonds between us give this pack its strength.

"We are not just wolves who share a territory. We are neighbors and

friends; we are family and blood. You are all my kith and my kin; you are my family. You are one another's family. As we move forward into this new era, take care of one another. Support one another. When we do this, there is nothing that can stand in Silverstreak's way."

Fiona paused, looking more maternal than I'd ever seen — like a radiant mother goddess as she smiled at dozens of faces smiling back at her. She raised her glass, and the pack wolves did the same. "I'd like to toast our guests of honor. To Remus, Luna, and their children." She raised her glass, and smiled even brighter. "To the future of Silverstreak."

She raised her glass even higher, and the crowd burst into a happy cheer. "To the future of Silverstreak!" the pack echoed back, and I felt my heart swell.

That's what the twins are, isn't it? The future of Silverstreak. I was immensely glad that was the end of the party, as I found myself near tears for the next half-hour, at the very least.

THE SUN WAS STARTING to set over the first leaves of March when we finally returned home, and I was *still* fighting off a few tears as Remus opened the door and offered me a hand. We'd gotten so many gifts for the twins; it had filled up our car, as well as the rental Nic and Eli had taken to the party. I think a few things had even made their way into Seff's vehicle.

"Are you doing all right?" Remus asked, tipping my chin with one finger.

I nodded, sniffing again. "I'm just — I'm just a bit tired," I admitted, hugging my arms against my chest. "That was a lot of people. Your mother was just — so sweet to me, Remus. And these gifts! I've never owned this much in my entire life, and all of these were gifts given to our children. I'm so... so..."

"Overwhelmed?" Remus asked, gathering me into his arms. I nodded again, mumbling against his shirt as I pressed my face against his shoulder. He hummed, rubbing a hand up and down my back. "It's okay, Luna. I know it was a lot."

I took a shivery breath and leaned back. "I just... I don't want the boys to be spoiled," I whispered, feeling my cheeks heat now that I'd admitted one of my fears out loud. "But I don't want them to want for anything. My upbringing with my mother was humble, and my father's family was comfortable enough — I just don't want them to take anything for granted.

But I don't want them to have to struggle the way I did, either." I knew I was contradicting myself, wavering back and forth — I could only hope that Remus understood what I was trying to get across.

Remus simply listened, still rubbing my back as I got the few rogue tears back under control. "We make a good pair, Luna. Remember, months ago, we were going out shopping? We looked like opposites, and I loved it. I still love it. Our childhoods couldn't have been more different, and I think we'll even it out. Our boys will get the best of both worlds."

The memory made me smile. As soon as Remus had started describing it, it came rushing back. The tears stopped threatening. I leaned up to kiss his chin, and one of the twins gave me a swift kick. The other seemed to think that was a good idea, and I gave a soft 'oof,' a hand falling to my belly.

Remus huffed, kissing my forehead. "Go sit down. Between me, Nic, and Seff, I'm sure we can get all of the furniture moved and the gifts inside."

"I can make sure everything gets unpacked, too," Tala added, sliding over from her car. "You just put your feet up, Mama."

I gave a little frown, looking at the two of them. "I can help," I protested. "Maybe if I sit in the rocking chair, I can fold the onesies or something."

Tala laughed, grabbing me by my elbow. "Come on. I will make sure all the clothes are folded, and if you hate it, you have tomorrow to fix it, and however long it takes until the babies are born." She gave a tug, and I followed, not having the energy to fight her as she escorted me to the living room where I could sit and watch the backyard through the sliding door.

"You need anything before I go help unpack? Tea? Lemonade? A snack?"

I laughed and shook my head. "I don't need anything, Tala. I swear I'm fine. I just need to sit."

"Are you sure?"

"Tala!" I waved my arm at her, wriggling into the recliner. It really did feel good to get my feet up. "Fiona had so many treats at the party that I'll be full for the next three days."

My friend winked. "Somehow, I doubt that. Just holler if you want anything," she replied, turning around to start unpacking the gifts the men were unloading from the cars.

Sometime later, my mother and Tala returned to the living room, a basket of clothing between them. "We thought you might be a bit lonely," my mother said, pulling a chair over to sit next to me. Tala sat on the rug,

pushing the basket between us.

“I know how badly you wanted to fold things,” Tala teased, and I couldn’t help but laugh as I bent over, groaning softly as I picked up a few onesies to fold on top of my belly. It felt like a damn shelf at this point.

“I just don’t want to be useless,” I replied, cooing a little as I realized the clothing I was folding had little fox ears on the hood.

Josie laughed. “Lunaloo, you will be so busy in no time, you won’t even know what to do with yourself. You’ll be thinking back on these moments with great fondness.”

“Do you have their names picked out yet?” Tala asked, starting her own pile of folded clothing.

I shook my head. “No,” I admitted, feeling sheepish. “We have the names narrowed down to a few options, but nothing final yet.”

My mother clucked her tongue against her teeth. “You’re going to want to get on that, my dear,” she said, giving me a knowing look. “You’re about to pop any day now.”

“I am not!” I huffed, balking a bit. “Dr. Hayes said thirty-six weeks was normal for twins, and we aren’t quite there yet.”

“We’re reeeaaaally cloooooose,” Tala teased, giving an excited little wiggle. “I can’t wait to meet them. I don’t know how you’re being so patient, Luna!” She shook her head. “I give you ten days, max.”

Josie shook her head. “I’d say a week,” she argued, wiggling a finger at my belly. “Those babies can’t wait to get out.”

“That would barely put me over thirty-six weeks,” I huffed. “Don’t jinx me!”

My mother gave me a fond smile. “You aren’t having human babies, Loo. I mean, I’m sure the doctor is right, and that would be ideal, but they’re still shifters. They’re hardier. I am sure they will be happy and healthy when they’re born, whether they come early or not — we’re just excited to meet them. That’s all.”

I couldn’t help but smile, placing my hand over my belly. “I am too,” I admitted, my grin growing as I felt one of them kick. “I really am.”

I SPENT the weekend turning all of the possible names over in my head, but I couldn’t settle on what we’d call the boys. Josie and Tala had done a great job setting all the gifts up and unpacking everything, but I couldn’t help but

fuss with all of it. My urge to nest had gotten extreme, and I couldn't leave anything well enough alone. I moved things and put them back — hung clothes up, then took them back down and folded them again.

Once my mother and Tala had left, I'd packed my hospital bag the night of the baby shower. They hadn't meant to make me nervous, but I couldn't stop thinking about the boys arriving early, especially because they both figured it would happen. Preparing myself felt like a way to inoculate myself from their speculations, no matter how silly that was.

The twins were just as busy as usual, kicking and moving when I tried to sleep and settling down once I finally got up to do something. I was exhausted, and something as simple as Remus going to work at Silverstreak Motors was bothering me. He came home in the evening, greeting me with a kiss on the forehead. Once he found something to eat, I coaxed him into bed, tired enough to just roll onto my side and lean against him.

"We really need to pick their names," I murmured, barely able to keep my eyes open. "I just can't decide. How do we know what they'll be like?"

Remus chuckled softly, settling a hand on my belly. One of the twins moved against him, and he laughed again. "They're busy, aren't they?" He leaned in to give me a gentle kiss. "If you want to wait to meet them, why can't we do that?"

"My mother said they'd be here in a week — and that was over the weekend." I put my hand over his, trying not to whimper. As excited as I was to meet the twins, I was scared, too. No matter what anyone said, I was still nervous about being a mother and the labor.

Remus just sighed, kissing me again. "You know," he admitted, raising one of his brows. "My mother said the same thing at the party."

I couldn't help but snort, momentarily distracted by my anxiety. "They better not have a betting pool." That didn't seem like Fiona's sort of thing, but I could definitely see my mother, Tala, and even Seff getting in on it. "Maybe they know what they're talking about — they have both been through it before."

"She did tell me I was two weeks early," he admitted shortly after, looking a little sheepish. "So... sorry? Maybe?"

I sighed, somehow feeling better despite the implications. I tangled our legs together. We kept talking until I drifted off — I had no idea how long it had been, but it was pitch dark when I woke up, my bladder aching. I untangled our legs carefully, smiling a little at how sweet Remus had been,

and hoisted myself out of bed, waddling to the bathroom.

I was halfway across the tile floor when I felt something gushing down my legs. “Oh, no,” I whimpered, looking down. I’d been warned that some pregnant women experienced *leakage*, but this felt pretty major. Before I could even contemplate cleaning up, pain rippled across my belly, ripping a gasp from my throat.

Oh. Oh.

I didn’t have to pee. That was my water breaking. And if that was my water breaking...

“Remus!”

REMUS

Silverstreak Ranch Home

Travis County, Texas

“Remus!”

I jolted awake, my eyes flashing open at the sound of worry in Luna’s voice. My hand flew out, but I touched only warm sheets. It took me only seconds to get on my feet, my heart leaping into my throat before I spied the bathroom light on.

“Luna?” I called, hurrying over. “Luna, what’s wrong?”

I found her standing in a pool of water in the middle of the bathroom, staring blankly down at the wet tile. My brows furrowed; she looked stunned. I reached out a hand, offering it to her so she could move without slipping. “Luna,” I called again, trying to shake her from her reverie. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

She looked up at me, her silver eyes wide and glistening. “I think it’s time,” she whispered, reaching for my hand with a motion that could almost be called automatic. “I think... I think my water just broke.”

As she stepped towards me, I glanced back down, the puddle taking on an entirely new meaning. I hadn’t even considered it, my still-sleepy brain not firing on all cylinders. I’d only been looking for danger or symptoms of injury or illness... not *that*. Fiona and Josie had both predicted the twins would come early, yet I hadn’t thought much of it.

They’ll get here when they get here — no use in hurrying things.

That’s what I thought. I guess my sons had another idea entirely.

My brain finally kicked into gear. “Okay. Okay. Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m not hurt, Remus,” Luna finally said, looking slightly amused. “Well, the contraction didn’t feel very nice, but I’m okay. I think we should probably go to the clinic, though.”

Calling it a hospital probably wasn’t quite right, but Dr. Hayes’ practice was far more than a doctor’s office. There were several specialists housed within, as well as what would otherwise be called hospital rooms. It allowed shifters to give birth without fear of accidentally revealing themselves to humans or to bring sick or injured family members to a practice that would

probably care for their loved ones.

Once we got back to the bedroom, Luna extracted her hand, waddling over to the closet. “What are you doing?” I asked, frowning. “You don’t need to dress up.”

She snorted, glancing over her shoulder. “No, but I’m going to get dry underwear, and I’m not going to the hospital in a nightgown,” she replied, raising a brow. “You might want to put on more than boxers, love. Dr. Hayes is a pretty understanding guy, but...”

I blinked, glancing down at myself. Indeed, I’d gone to sleep in only my boxers, and in my frenzy at hearing Luna call for me, I’d forgotten entirely. Hell, if she needed it, I’d jump in the car and drive her to the hospital naked. I would sit in that chair with my bare ass and freeze if that’s what would make it easier on her. She wanted to change, so I would take a moment to pull on a pair of pants and a shirt.

Luna had our to-go bag packed; it was ready and waiting for us at the front door. She paused as we stood in the hallway. “Wait,” she said, her eyes finding mine.

“Don’t worry,” I hummed, my hand already on the handle. “I put the car seats in the night we got home from the baby shower.”

“No, it’s not that.”

I held out the bag. “Do you need to double-check?”

“No, no. It’s not the stuff, Remus,” she murmured, gently pushing the bag toward me. “There’s something else I need to do before we leave. Before the babies are born.”

I couldn’t help but balk. “I don’t think we have much time for that,” I replied, glancing at her belly, expecting to see the twins moving.

She huffed out a short breath. “It won’t take long, but we aren’t leaving the house until I submit to you, Remus.”

“I... What?” I almost couldn’t comprehend what she was saying. “Luna, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” she replied firmly. “Now, give me your hand so I can get down on my damn knees without falling.”

I did as I was asked, even if I disagreed. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“It matters to me, and it’s important for them.” Luna rested her other hand on her belly. “I don’t want anyone to ever question if they are Silverstreak, Remus — and I don’t want to be questioned as their mother, either.” She cleared her throat, silver eyes meeting mine. “Remus Silverstreak, you are the

love of my life. I submit to you as my alpha and wish to join Silverstreak alongside you. I offer my loyalty in return.”

My wolf rumbled, and I echoed his sentiment, brushing my hand over her shoulder. “Luna Highborn, it is my utmost honor to welcome you to my pack,” I whispered, bending down to seal her submission with a kiss. “And very soon, I will take you as my mate. In the meantime, though — please allow me to take you to the hospital now.”

Luna laughed gently, nodding as I helped her back to her feet. “Please do, darling. I don’t think these babies are going to wait any longer.”

LABOR HAD LASTED at least twelve hours before it started to get really intense, and even then, it was entirely a blur to me. If you asked me what happened during that time, I couldn’t tell you. Luna squeezed my hand when she needed to; she could have called me names if that had helped her feel better. I wouldn’t know either way. I hated to see any pain on her face at all, even though at the end of this road would be the birth of our children.

After an eternity and in the blink of an eye, the first twin was born. He arrived in a chaotic squall, wailing and screaming as soon as he entered the world. For some misguided reason, I assumed the babies would arrive one after another, but that wasn’t quite the case. Labor didn’t just stop — the younger twin still had to be pushed out. A few more contractions later, he arrived, quieter than his brother and a little less chaotic.

Nurses and doctors seemed to bustle all around me as I held Luna’s hand, murmuring encouragement as she tried to catch her breath. “How are they?” she panted. “Are they okay?”

“They’re perfect,” I reassured her, looking up at the sound of footsteps. Two of the nurses had walked back over, beaming, each cradling a wailing baby.

“They need skin-to-skin contact,” the first nurse explained, leaning over to hand the first twin to Luna. “Here you go, Mama.”

“Dad, respectfully — can you take your shirt off?” the second nurse asked, holding one of my sons in her arms. “It’ll be easier if mom doesn’t have to juggle them both. We’ll help you switch in a minute so they can both nurse.”

“Okay,” I replied, feeling stunned as I leaned back, pulling my shirt over my head. She smiled as she leaned in, gently handing the newly born infant

to me. As she backed away, I stared down into his little face, almost unable to believe it was my son I was holding. “Hello,” I whispered, cradling him against my skin as his angry wails turned into softer whimpers. “I know that was probably hard on you too.”

Luna made a soft noise, and I looked up, realizing her cheeks were wet as she cradled our other son against her breast. “They’re so beautiful,” she whispered, tearing her eyes away to look at me. “Remus, they’re perfect.”

“They are,” I agreed, leaning in as close as I could.

She brushed her fingers over the older twin’s head, leaning down to kiss his brow. “His name is Ryland,” she decided quietly, kissing him again.

After a few quiet moments, one of the nurses returned to help facilitate the exchange, giving me the chance to cradle Ryland while his brother got the opportunity to nurse. “Ryland is a beta,” I informed her, smoothing my hand over the older twin’s little head. Now that he’d been cuddled and fed, he seemed significantly less agitated than he’d been only a few minutes before.

“And this little one?” Luna asked, her eyes almost starry as she watched the younger twin.

“He’s an alpha,” I murmured. The moment he’d taken his first breath, I could sense it. Ryland, too, I could sense, but it took holding him to confirm he had a beta’s quality to him.

Luna smiled down at him, looking radiant despite her evident exhaustion. “His name is Rory,” she announced a moment later, her voice wavering. “Ryland and Rory Silverstreak. What do you think?”

“I think those names will be perfect for them,” I said, finally leaning forward to kiss her cheek. “You did amazing, Luna. *They’re* amazing.”

She made a low noise, a few tears rolling down her cheeks. “They are,” she agreed, rocking Rory in her arms. “They really are.”

LATER IN THE afternoon and early into the evening, our family members started to arrive. My mother was the first, keeping her visit short and sweet. She’d arrived with flowers for Luna and a very expensive red wine. “This is for my grandbabies’ mother,” she told me firmly, giving me a stern look. “The moment she wants this, you give it to her, you understand?”

I couldn’t help but laugh — nine months ago, my mother threatened to banish Luna if she didn’t “leave me alone.” Now, I wondered if she liked my future mate more than she liked me. “Of course,” I agreed, escorting my

mother to meet the twins while Luna rested.

She hadn't been gone for a few minutes when Josie arrived. She also allowed Luna to rest, going to check on the babies as I retreated to Luna's room. When I got there, Arden knocked on the door, carefully letting himself in. "I got in the car as soon as I heard," he said, looking a little abashed as I checked my watch, calculating exactly how fast he must have been going. "I never forgave myself for not being there when Luna was born. I couldn't miss this."

He had flowers for Luna, too. If this kept up, the room was going to start looking like a florist's shop.

Luna offered him a tired smile, clearly still a little woozy after all the energy she'd spent. "I promise I'll be a better grandfather than I ever was a father," he said quietly, not meeting Luna's eyes. "Providing you and Remus allow me to spend time with the twins."

Instead of putting Luna on the spot, he turned to me, inclining his head. "I appreciate the opportunity to be here," he told me gravely. He and Lynn had submitted after we'd rescued his other children from Marnet's clutches, but Arden hadn't stopped deferring to me since. Something seemed to have finally clicked for him.

Before he could say anything else, the door opened again, revealing Josie, back from watching the twins. Her face clouded up like a thunderstorm rolling in, and she placed her hands on her hips. "You have some damn nerve," she hissed, growing three inches right then and there as her fury built. "You better get out of this damn room before I castrate you."

Arden made a low noise, eyes flicking to me like he needed my permission to leave. I simply shrugged, not interested in getting between Luna's parents. After a moment, he muttered a quiet farewell to Luna and slunk towards the door, giving Josie the widest berth her could while still getting out the door.

"The only reason I don't kill you is because this is my grandbabies' special day, and I don't want your tombstone to have the same date on it," she hissed, glaring daggers at his back as he retreated. "I don't know what I ever saw in that man."

If looks could kill.

"Mom," Luna croaked, frowning a little.

My frown was much more evident, and I turned to Josie. "I think that's enough excitement for all of us," I informed her gently, keeping my voice

calm. “We appreciate you coming to welcome the twins, but I think it’s time for everyone to rest.”

Josie studied me for a moment but then gave a small nod. “Let me say good night to my daughter, and I’ll be on my way,” she replied.

I stepped aside, allowing the two women to embrace before Josie saw herself out, leaving Luna to me and the peace and quiet of the room.

EVEN THOUGH LUNA had fallen asleep hours ago, I couldn’t find any sort of drowsiness myself. Staring at my sons, watching their chests rise and fall — that was a soothing experience in itself, but I still could not shut down the chatter in my mind. I finally shifted from my seat next to Luna, leaning over to kiss her forehead softly as she slept.

“Thank you, Luna,” I whispered, brushing a strand of dark hair away from her face. “I’ve never been given gifts as wonderful as I was today. I am a lucky, lucky man.”

I could have gone on, but I didn’t want to wake her after the day she’d had. Instead, I decided to go outside for some air, barely remembering to grab my jacket before heading out into the night. I’d never been a wolf for howling at the moon, but I really felt like it tonight.

The full moon beamed down at me, bathing me in a gentle glow as I walked the sidewalk outside the clinic. The day had almost been perfect. Luna was as elegant and brave as ever — she and our twins were all healthy and happy. Our parents had been able to meet their grandchildren, but...

I glanced up, my chest feeling tight. If I could change anything, I’d have wanted my dad here. It would mean I wasn’t the alpha of Silverstreak yet, but that didn’t matter. He would have loved the twins — or I thought so, anyway.

As I stood there, it felt for the briefest moment like someone wrapped an arm around my shoulders, tugging me sideways. It was almost startling, and I glanced beside me, but no one was outside but me and the moonbeams. Unless...

I miss you, Dad.

I allowed myself the wistful thought, closing my eyes as I took a deep breath. Wherever he was, if there was an afterlife or if there wasn’t, I knew at that moment he was proud of me. The sides of my mouth ticked up, and I hummed. I missed Remington Silverstreak, but in a way, he was still with me. He always had been. I just hadn’t been paying attention.

LUNA

Silverstreak Ranch Home

Travis County, Texas

After a week in the hospital — as the twins were a bit early, even if thirty-six weeks was normal for twins — we were given the go-ahead to take them home. I had been terrified over the first twenty-four hours, worried I'd do something wrong, but over the past two weeks, I'd settled most of my nerves. We were still settling into our schedule, but we were getting there. Remus had even taken a leave of absence from work to be at home. It helped that Fiona could handle the company for the month or so Remus planned to be away, even if it was clear she wanted to be around to help with the grandchildren.

Both Fiona and my mother had stayed with us the first few days we'd brought the boys home. It had helped my nerves immensely at first, but now that I was starting to get the hang of it, I wanted a little more space. After all, this was the rest of my life — even if I was having a hard time coming to terms with that. It wasn't a bad thing. Not at all.

It was simple disbelief.

I had never pictured myself as a homeowner, nor ever saw myself with anyone besides Marnet. Once he had rejected me, I couldn't imagine myself with anyone. Even when things with Remus had progressed towards something romantic, I still hadn't imagined our lives together, and certainly couldn't imagine myself as a mother. I didn't want to. I was afraid to imagine it; it would hurt all the worse if such dreams never came to fruition.

My mother still checked in with us daily, but she'd returned to her home. I wouldn't say my house had become quiet again — certainly not, not with twin infants — but it felt a little more settled. It was starting to feel like mine again.

By some miracle, both of the boys had gone down for a nap at the same time. I'd learned quickly that the only time I got any sleep was when my babies were sleeping. Remus did his best to give me relief whenever he could, but there were still two of them. If both Rory and Ryland needed to be held, rocked, or fed, it was incredibly difficult for one person to manage.

I snuck into the master suite, gently pulling my slippers off before I

slipped into bed. I rolled onto my side, checking the baby monitor, but all I heard was the soft sound of sleep. Smiling at the comforting sound, I closed my eyes, nuzzling into my pillow. Even if it was only five minutes, it was worth having.

At some point, I roused suddenly. I had no idea how long I'd been asleep, but the sound of one of the babies starting to snuffle had pulled me from my slumber. Rubbing one eye, I slid out from under the covers, sliding my feet back into my slippers before I hurried down the hall towards the nursery.

When I stepped into the doorway, I realized Remus was already there, leaning over to pick up the baby that had started whimpering. He hadn't woken his brother yet, and Remus hushed our son gently.

"Rory," he cooed, scooping the boy up to cradle against his chest. "What's wrong?"

Almost at once, the little boy's whines had startled to trail off as he was snuggled against his father's warmth; I couldn't see him move, but I could see the smile that spread across my partner's face slowly. My heart skipped a beat as it grew. Every day, I found I loved this man even more. I didn't think it was possible, but my heart grew each day.

"That's a good boy," Remus hummed, bouncing the infant gently in his arms. "You don't know it yet, but you're a little alpha. You're going to have to look out for your mom and your brother." He laughed gently as the baby sniffed. "For now, I think you can do that just by letting them sleep when they're tired," he murmured, still rocking Rory in his arms. "Let me tell you a story, little man."

I was smiling so hard that my cheeks were starting to hurt. Remus seemed to have the situation entirely in hand so I stepped away from the door, and headed back down the hallway. Perhaps I could get a little more shut-eye.

I'd stepped into our bedroom, about to get back into the sheets, when I heard footsteps come racing down the hallway from the kitchen. I frowned, checking my phone — there were no texts from either Fiona or Josie, and I wasn't expecting either until dinnertime.

Frowning, I poked my head back out the door just in time to see Bane rush by, taking enormous strides. "Remus?" he called, and Remus appeared a moment later, scowling as Rory made a soft, sleepy noise.

I could tell Bane cringed just from the motion in his shoulders. "Marnet has landed," he whispered, following Remus back into the nursery.

Marnet? Here? Does he mean Marnet is here?

My heart leapt into my throat. Any chance of falling back asleep had gone down the drain in a minute. I hurried towards the nursery, only catching one other thing Bane had said.

“Yes.” He confirmed whatever Remus had said in between. “Marnet and six other alphas.”

By the time I reached the door, Remus had put our son back in the crib, pressing one finger to his lips as he steered the beta back out of the room. His eyes met mine and widened, like he hadn’t expected to see me there. I frowned, but I took two steps back, not wanting to wake the babies, nerves be damned. As soon as the door was shut and we’d moved several lengths away from the nursery, I grabbed Remus by the elbow. My fingers were trembling.

“What is going on?” I demanded, still trying to keep my voice low. “I heard Bane — is Marnet here?”

Remus sighed heavily, his face darkening as we continued to walk towards the kitchen. “Yes,” he finally confirmed, his brows knit together. “Well, no. Not *here*, here. Marnet is in Louisiana.”

My stomach did a flip. “*What?*” We’d heard so little about the other man over the past few months, that I’d almost forgotten he’d existed. *Almost*. I looked to Bane, hoping he’d correct Remus, but he simply looked solemn, his mouth pressed into a thin line. “Remus — why is he in Louisiana? What is he up to? Why does he have so many other alphas with him?” My knees started to tremble.

Remus said nothing for a moment, staring at the wall like it held some answers for him. Bane didn’t look much better, staring into the same void.

“Remus!” I was trying not to reach the point of hysterics, but it was damn close. “Why. Is. He. Around?”

His tongue flashed out, wetting his lips before he turned back to me. “When we were in Oklahoma,” he rumbled, his jaw set into a hard line, “Marnet called a meeting with me. He issued a challenge.”

I felt all the blood drain from my face, my hand shooting out to steady myself on a chair. “A challenge?” I whispered, feeling dazed. “Like... an official one?”

“Yes,” Remus replied. “Bane and York were there to witness. He challenged me for the territories and the role of alpha. As haphazard as Marnet can be, it was all very official.”

Next to me, Bane gave a heavy sigh and nodded his head. “He did. Remus asked for three months, so Marnet set the date. May first.”

Somehow, I managed to feel even colder. “But that’s tomorrow,” I replied, breathless. “Remus, that’s tomorrow.” Blood rushed from my head, and I felt the world start to tilt to one side. Bane took a step, grabbing my elbow to help prop me up. “I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Remus offered me a rueful smile, his head tipped to one side. “Because my mother and I have been gathering our allies over the past three months. There was nothing you could have done — it was most important for you to focus on yourself and the twins.” When I simply shook my head, my eyes welling up with tears, he sighed and stepped over to cup my cheeks with his palms. “Luna — Luna, I’m sorry. We always knew this was a possibility as long as Marnet stayed alive.”

“I know,” I whimpered, remembering the discussion clearly. Tears rolled down my cheeks in fat, wet droplets. “I know. But that was before. That could have been ten years ago. Everything is different now. It’s so different,” I babbled. “I need you. Rory and Ryland need you.”

Remus rumbled softly, brushing his thumbs across my cheeks. “I know, Luna. That is exactly why I will not lose. I will come back for you and for our boys. I have everything in the world to fight for, but Marnet has nothing to lose.”

The tears wouldn’t stop as I trembled, my hands finding his shirt and tangling them into little knots. “Come back, Remus. You have to come back.”

“I am going to end this tomorrow,” he assured. “Trust my vow, that man will never be anywhere near you or our children, and I will do whatever I must to keep that promise. Bane, Fiona, and I have been preparing for months. We will not lose.”

DESPITE ALL OF REMUS’ assurances, I felt like I was walking on eggshells for the rest of the day. He kept acting like everything was fine, changing Ryland when he woke up and helping me feed the twins when they were ready for their next meal before retreating to his office with Bane.

Fiona arrived just before dinner, her face grave as she walked over and took my hand.

“Did Bane tell you, too?” I asked, squeezing her fingers.

She gave a solemn nod, looking down the hallway towards the office. “He did,” she replied, her expression drawn. “Why don’t we go get some

tea?”

Now that I knew she had been raised in Britain, her predilection for tea whenever emotions were high — good or bad — made much more sense. Not knowing what else to do with myself, I gave a small nod. Ryland and Rory were asleep again, though I suspected they’d be awake at any moment.

Fiona fiddled with my kettle, and I stared out the large window to the backyard, hugging myself as I sighed. “He didn’t tell me until today,” I told her quietly, the corner of my mouth tugging down.

I could hear Fiona sigh behind me. “If he had told you, Luna, what would you do about it?”

“Try to talk him out of it?” I turned, shrugging. “I don’t want him getting killed, Fiona.”

She rumbled quietly, shaking her head. “Neither do I — but you and I both know accepting a challenge is as binding as a blood oath. You might be able to sell ice to Eskimos, but you couldn’t talk him out of a challenge, Luna. No one could. He was bound the moment he agreed, and he did that all on his own.”

I sighed, throwing my hands up in frustration. “I’d have done something, surely.”

Fiona sighed, shaking her head. “I know it feels — well, it feels shitty to have it thrown on you at the last moment,” she said. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever heard her use such coarse language before. “But in this instance, I don’t think he was wrong. There was nothing you could do except stress about it, and that would be bad for you and your children.” Her expression turned a little sympathetic. “It was a no-win scenario, Luna.”

I frowned, dropping my gaze to stare at the floor. I didn’t want to hear it or agree with her, but I didn’t want to be angry with him either, not if... My breath caught. No, I couldn’t think about that or even put it out into the universe. I didn’t want to be cross with Remus, it’s as simple as that.

Fiona made a low noise, walking over to the table with two steaming cups. “Come sit,” she urged, motioning to the chair next to her. “I’m sure your boys will get us up in a moment anyway.”

She was right, of course. Giving a small smile, I finally retreated from the window to join her. I wasn’t sure I wanted to drink the tea, but at least I might find comfort in the familiar ritual of wrapping my fingers around the warm ceramic. “I don’t want him to go,” I admitted, staring into the tea.

“I know,” Fiona replied, sounding morose. “I don’t want anything to

happen to my son, either. If Marnet were a smart man, he'd see Remus has him outplayed and will retract this foolish challenge — but I suspect any hope in that possibility would see me sorely disappointed.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “He’s a far more stubborn man than a smart one.”

We both fell into silence. Fiona might have sipped at her drink, but I simply fiddled with the tea bag, swirling it around, just like my thoughts inside my head. “People are going to die,” I told Fiona, all but whispering.

“I know, Luna,” she replied just as softly.

Neither of us said anything else, but I knew we were thinking the same thing.

As long as it’s anyone but Remus...

REMUS

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After dinner, Bane began loading the SUV. We weren't planning on spending more than the night, but both of us agreed that we couldn't trust Marnet not to try to pull a fast one. He'd kidnapped and tortured both women and children, some of whom were his pack members. While a challenge would bind most wolves by their honor, it was clear the former Lupus Claw alpha had none left.

I checked on the nursery first. The twins were usually quite sleepy after being fed, and we'd put them down in their cribs half an hour ago. Both were still sleeping peacefully, and I was greeted with the soft sighs and whimpers I'd come to associate with their slumber. I visited Ryland first, brushing my fingers over the older boy's tuft of hair. "You're such a good boy," I whispered, smiling as he stirred gently. "You keep treating your mama and your brother so nicely, and you'll do just fine."

Rory was next. He seemed a little less relaxed than his brother, fidgeting in his sleep. I couldn't help but smile, picking up his fallen pacifier to remove it from the crib. I brushed two fingers against his chubby little arms, smiling as he leaned into the touch. "You're a fiery little man," I hummed to him, smiling as he made a sleepy little huff. "Don't give that up — just try not to give your mother so much hell, hm? Give that to everyone else. Except maybe Ryland." It was a long, long way off, but I already hoped the twins would become the best of friends — that it would be Ryland who'd one day become Rory's beta when Rory took over the Silverstreak pack from me.

I loitered in the nursery for several more moments, eventually deciding against bidding my sons goodbye — because this wasn't goodbye. I had every intention of coming back to my home and my family after this challenge. After I closed the door carefully behind me, I walked to the kitchen and the air of finality seemed to settle over everyone, like a ghost had wandered in instead. I'd spoken with my mother a few minutes prior, but that hadn't removed the morbid look from her face. "Mom, would you mind going to check on the twins? Rory has been a little fussy today," I asked.

It was a weak excuse at best, but she got up from the table gracefully. "Of

course,” she replied, pausing only to squeeze my hand before heading down the hall to the nursery.

When I looked at Luna, she looked on the verge of tears. My heart shuddered to see her face look like that and know I was the cause. I walked across the room, and Luna all but launched herself out of the chair, throwing her arms around me into a fierce hug. I swallowed hard, pulling her against my chest. I didn’t know what to say. What I *could* say in this moment that might make her feel better? Frankly, I wasn’t sure if there was anything that could do that right now.

“Are you sure you have to go?” she whispered, pressing her face against my shoulder. I could already feel the tears starting to seep through my shirt.

“I’m sure, Luna. It’s not just about me,” I replied, stroking her dark hair. There are simpler ways to resolve this if it was just about me. “Marnet has proven he’s a danger to everyone: wolves who were loyal to him, abject strangers... even the humans he comes into contact with. He’s gone so far that he risks exposing us all. I can’t allow that to continue, Luna — not when I have the power to stop him.”

She said nothing, her fingers tangling more into my shirt. I sighed, dipping down to press a kiss to the top of her head. “It’s not just my responsibility to my pack, Luna. He’s made it clear he refuses to leave you alone. I would be unworthy of being your mate if I let him continue to harass you. If I let you live with the constant question of if he’d pop back up — when he’d pop back up — if he’d dare come for our children. I couldn’t live with myself as an alpha or as a man if I let him go on with all his bullshit.”

Luna sniffed, but I felt her nod against my chest. If she needed a few more moments of silence, I could allow that, stroking her back gently until she finally pulled her face away enough to speak. “I wish it didn’t have to be like this,” she admitted, finally releasing my shirt to wipe the tears from her face. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I know,” I replied gently. “I’ll do my best to come back in one piece — but I will not leave that place until we’ve buried Marnet six feet in the earth.”

She sniffed again, wiping a fresh wave of tears from her cheeks. “I love you, Remus,” she whispered, finally looking up to meet my gaze. Her silver eyes twinkled, glistening both with her tears. “I love you more than I thought was ever possible to love someone.”

Leaning forward, I pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. “I love you too, Luna,” I replied, shifting to hold her hands in mine. “I am so glad I went to

Oklahoma for that Moonmate ceremony. My mother had told me I just might find my mate — and she was right.” That earned me a tired chuckle, and I smiled gently, kissing her again. “There is nothing more important to me than you and our boys, Luna. I need to go now, but I’ll be back. I’ll come home.”

Luna held on to me a moment longer. “You’d better,” she whispered before finally letting my hands go. “I’ll be waiting.”

EVEN THOUGH THE neutral location that had been arranged was a nature reserve on the west side of Louisiana, it still took about six hours to drive there. Marnet had simply chosen to fly, but there wasn’t an airport particularly close, and there was something about the drive that spoke to me. Bane took the driver’s seat while I navigated; despite the late hour, we discussed tactics the entire way.

Gith had been chosen to host the challenge months ago as the only local alpha who’d remained staunchly neutral. Arkansas or New Mexico would have been better choices, with state lines bordering Texas and Oklahoma, but Seff and York had both taken sides. Gith had allowed me to scope out the area in the weeks leading up to the challenge — under strict surveillance, of course, he’d tolerate absolutely no tampering — and I had to assume he’d allow Marnet the same if the other man asked.

We’d done everything we could to prepare. Our allies knew the date and location of the challenge, including Nic. He’d flown in a day or so ago, giving himself and Eli a day or two to ward off any jet lag. Gith had allowed him to stay within the Black Thorn territory as a visiting alpha, even if he wasn’t truly neutral. Goodwill, perhaps.

After midnight, we reached our room and checked in; Bane insisted he search the room first. Finding nothing, we resolved to go to bed right away; we’d need all our energy for the challenge. Sleep didn’t come easy, but it must have taken me eventually. When I opened my eyes again, the sun was streaking into the room, and birds were singing in the trees outside. For everyone else, it was a beautiful day in May. A perfect day for a picnic, perhaps, or a hike in the woods.

For Bane and I... it was Judgment Day.

We arrived at the nature reserve and began to walk down the trail, away from where any human eyes might find us. Gith had chosen this specific reserve because it wasn’t particularly busy in the middle of the week, much

less in the middle of a workday. Nic met us there, walking by my left shoulder as Bane took my right.

“Are you ready for this?” my beta rumbled, his voice gruffer than usual.

“You are,” Nic huffed, not giving me a chance to reply. “You just have to remember who you are fighting for. Your pack. Your mother, your mate, and your children. They are all relying on you. You won’t let them down. I can feel it.”

I thrummed deep in my chest, appreciating the confidence. He was right, though. There was only one man who’d fight harder than he, who had nothing to lose, and that was the man who had everything to lose. I could not let them down — so I wouldn’t.

Marnet was already at the designated location, that typical smug look smeared across his mug. As my allies started to appear, one by one, the self-satisfied expression disintegrated by degrees with each new arrival. I ignored him for the moment, searching out York amongst Marnet’s gathered wolves.

“I had hoped you’d smarten up after that incident with Skye,” I growled, raising one brow. “I don’t want to send you home to your sons in a body bag, York, but you’re not making this any easier.”

The other alpha said nothing, but his face went a few shades paler as he glanced at Marnet, clearly trying to ask some question without words. Marnet just growled, peeling his upper lip back in an ugly snarl. “Don’t be stupid,” he jeered. “This is my fight to win. How does it feel, Remus, knowing we’re just hours away from me claiming Texas and Oklahoma?” The growl morphed into an ugly sneer. “Luna will be returned to her rightful place — groveling at my feet.”

It was a struggle not to roll my eyes; his bait was so obvious. “How does it feel, having most of your pack abandon you?” I asked, sidestepping the needling neatly. “It must suck realizing you were such a poor leader. Did it hurt when Luna rejected you as her mate? I’ll bet it stung.”

Marnet flinched visibly, and York’s concern seemed to double. He took a step back. “How could she reject you if she wasn’t your fated mate?” he asked, glancing from me back to Marnet. “You said that woman was just crazy, making things up for attention.”

“It doesn’t fucking matter what she is,” Marnet snapped, steeling his expression. “I don’t need a mate, fated or not. I’ve been stronger than Remus since the day I was born. No woman is going to change that.” His bright green eyes turned to me, something wicked in them. “You’re going to die

tonight, Remus Silverstreak.”

He said nothing else, taking on his wolf form before rocketing towards me on all fours.

The challenge had begun.

ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE SHORTLY THEREAFTER.

Where men once stood, wolves leapt from. There were some I recognized – York and Marnet, for example – but dozens more I’d never seen before. These were the other alphas Marnet must have gathered and those they’d chosen to bring with them. There were wolves of every size and shape – the majority resembled gray wolves, large, thick, built to disappear into a forest. Others looked similar to the natural wolf species of the southeast: the red wolf. They were smaller but to my surprise, a fair bit quicker than the rest of us.

I’ll have to keep a lookout for that.

I could sense Bane near my side as I plunged into the fray, a cacophony of snarls and growls flooding the opening that had been near silent moments before. The air already stank of recently disturbed dirt and adrenaline; it wouldn’t be long before pheromones were replaced with the stench of copper and death.

Marnet had been the first to charge, but the wolf had disappeared as his allies emerged. *Coward.* I lifted my muzzle and howled out a challenge, ears flat against my skull as my voice carried over the din. There was no answer, and as I dropped my head to survey the landscape, one of those small, reddish wolves came charging at me from the corner of my vision. My hackles prickled as I tried to whirl and face them head-on, but before I could, a large, dark wolf bounded forward, slamming his weight into the aggressor.

It only took me a moment to realize that was Nic; I hadn’t seen the Archer alpha shift before, but we could have been twins if he hadn’t started graying a bit around the muzzle. A lustrous brown coat with a splash of white. That was all the time I had to think on the matter because as my father tackled the little ruddy wolf to the ground, the sound of someone else thundering nearby caught my ear.

I turned and lunged, my wolf’s instincts taking over as I collided with another wolf. I recognized him at once, Wilson Slate, Marnet’s former beta. I had exiled the man months before; so much for my mercy. A snarl ripped

from my throat as I grabbed him by the ruff, pulling the tawny male off his feet. He was of a fair size for a beta wolf, but he was no alpha, and he was certainly no match for me.

To his credit, he didn't give up without a fight, large paws scrambling on dirt and grass as he tried to regain his footing. I tightened my grip and tugged again; Wilson snarled and tucked his ears back as he began to thrash from tail to nose, his claws digging in as he tried to find purchase. I shook, finally feeling copper flood my mouth as the wolf beneath me yelped. The pain seemed to be enough to fling him into desperation, and he threw his weight towards me instead of trying to pull away, sending us both stumbling a few feet.

Yanking his neck free, damage be damned, the other wolf staggered, his tawny pelt now stained with bright crimson red. I arched my tail high over my back, my hackles standing up straight as I growled, red already starting to tinge my vision.

Instead of charging again, Wilson flipped his ears back and dropped his front legs, lowering his shoulder as he tipped his head to one side. His bushy tail was no longer standing out behind him but was curled beneath his back legs; he whined, low, rough, and pained. My eyes flashed. I had given this wolf mercy once, but—

He stood, waiting.

This time, he was bound by the laws of a challenge. I could deal with the rest later.

A wolf who forfeited was not to be harmed, and they could not reenter a fight. I snarled my warning to him, but he seemed to get the message, wheeling around and taking off in the direction I'd last seen Gith, overseeing the entire brawl. When I looked up at the oldest alpha, I realized there were several more wounded wolves with him and even a few of the foreign alphas.

Adrenaline surged through me. Marnet's forces were already fading. Now I just needed to go find *him* before it was *my* wolves who started falling to the ground.

THE SUN WAS HANGING low in the sky, threatening to dip below the trees. My entire body burned, my muscles screaming at me to just *stop*. Even if I had been training for months, this was the most grueling thing I had ever endured — and it wasn't over yet.

Most of Marnet's allies had retreated once their packs started sustaining losses; whatever he'd told these northern alphas, they'd eaten up his lies. They believed in his righteous cause or his easy conquering of this land, and as soon as the blood of wolves began to dye the earth red, they retreated to where Gith stood, observing the conflict from the hilltop. First, it was the Grizzly Hollow pack from Washington, then Battle Brook from Pennsylvania, and Dark Sky from West Virginia. Half of his allied alphas were out of the fight in the first hour; the other three held on longer, but none long enough to lose his life. Whatever Marnet had promised them, it wasn't worth death. It wasn't worth losing their packs.

The shape of Marnet's wolf caught my eye, and I whirled, thundering towards him. His green eyes widened as he turned, trying to sprint back into the cover of the brush, but one of his hind legs wobbled. The injury oozed blood, and though he ran, he was no match for me. I slammed my bulk into his ribcage, sending him sprawling to the earth. The other alpha wheezed, blood spluttering from his nostrils and his muzzle as he panted, fighting to catch his breath. I towered over him, ears pinned against my skull, tail arched high over my back. My hackles stood on end as I peeled my lips back. Struggling as he did, Marnet could not find his feet.

It was over.

There was no need to drag this out any longer. My strike was quick and precise; I came here to end this challenge I didn't come to torture or gloat. The taste of copper spilled over my tongue, and I felt no joy in it, holding firmly until the pulse shivering against my grip slowed to a stop. I held him a few moments longer and then released Marnet's throat, backing several steps away. I lifted my head and howled as something intense and electric rushed through my veins. I'd never felt anything like it — I felt as if I'd been hit with a bolt of lightning, but it didn't hurt.

At first, I thought it was simply the adrenaline, a fresh wave of energy knowing that this was finally *over* — but it wasn't that. It wasn't merely the chemical energy provided by my own body. This was more powerful than that. This was the allegiance of every remaining Lupus Claw wolf. This was whatever power Marnet had gained as an alpha, including his own. It was over. It was *over*, finally *over*.

I tipped my head back and howled again, singing Silverstreak's song to the sky, and the sky sang back to me, finally flooding my heart with relief. With joy.

It's over. I won. It's over. It's finally over. I won.

THE BATTLE WAS OVER, but the challenge wasn't. Gith had been good enough to host us, so we didn't have to travel far, but we couldn't leave the bodies of dozens of wolves for a human to stumble upon, especially when they weren't aware of any packs in Louisiana to start with. I was exhausted, but it was still my duty as alpha, and victory would mean nothing if I abandoned my duty now.

As the marshal of the challenge, Gith made sure the injured members of both parties got appropriate medical care. Bane and Nic were the first to help me move bodies, while some of the others dug a large trench to contain the flame. Setting a nature reserve on fire wouldn't exactly help with keeping this covert, either. Bane moved slowly, clearly favoring one of his legs. He struggled to carry a large, reddish-brown wolf, and I realized with surprise that he was carrying York.

"What happened?" I asked, moving to help my beta with his burden.

He bared his teeth and shook his head, warding me off. "I killed him," he hissed, struggling with the alpha's bulk. "It is up to me to see he's respected."

I raised a brow. Killing an alpha — especially one that hadn't been involved with the challenge itself — was not something to overlook. That Gith hadn't called for Bane to be detained told me he had considered it justified, or Bane would have found himself on trial in a matter of days. Gith was staunch in his position that shifter laws be followed.

"What happened?" I asked, moving to help my beta with his heavy burden — I'd respect his desire for now, but if he looked like he was going to hurt himself...

"He tried to rush you when you had Marnet by the throat," he replied gravely. "That was not his place."

"No. It wasn't," I agreed.

Bane made a low noise. "I had no desire to kill him," my beta rumbled, and I could see the remorse in the way he walked. "He damn near ripped my leg off when he realized I had tackled him. That was the only choice I had."

He carefully placed the wolf's body with the others, and I reached forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. "He gave you no choice, Bane," I rumbled. "He didn't have to be here. It's unfortunate he didn't see another way out."

We stood there for several silent moments, staring at those who had lost their lives. Most of them had been Lupus Claw holdouts, but not all. There were several wolves I did not recognize and had been brought by either my allies, or Marnet's. There was one member of Nic's team here in the States and several Silverstreak members. My chest ached as I made mental notes. "We'll visit their families when we return. Honor them properly."

Bane nodded, our shoulders brushing. "We will," he agreed, eyes falling to the earth. "We will set it right."

Gith appeared a few moments later, sighing as he overlooked the dead. "I hope this is the last of the violence," he rumbled, his face drawn as he looked at us both. I gave a solemn nod.

"Good," he muttered. His beta approached him with a torch. "Then we commit the fallen back to the earth and back to our ancestors."

The fire crackled, smokeless and bright. These weren't wolves, after all — they were shifters. The magic was released. They were released.

"We will make sure this place is sealed," Gith huffed. "I ask you and your allies to depart now, Remus. May our next meeting be on much happier terms."

LUNA

Silverstreak Ranch Home

Travis County, Texas

They should be back by now.

Time seemed to crawl by, even with two babies to keep me busy. I asked Fiona to stay with me while Bane and Remus attended the challenge in Louisiana. I knew it wasn't exactly close — Remus indicated the drive would be about six hours — but the challenge should have started sometime in the morning. No matter how things went, it should have been over by sundown.

I looked at the clock yet again, and it was approaching midnight. My babies were sleeping; they had been for hours. If I could even consider sleeping, it'd be such a relief to simply close my eyes and open them again when Remus walked through the door. He had to come back. He had to.

The not knowing was killing me. If we were fated mates, or maybe if we'd even gone through the mating ritual, I'd have known. Remus said his mother had felt it immediately when his dad passed, at least I'd know. I'd know if he'd been taken from me, or I'd know that he hadn't been and must be on his way back.

Surely Bane would call me. Or Nic. Or even Gith. Someone. I checked my phone for the eighty-ninth time, but there was nothing except the time staring back at me.

My torture continued for another three hours and despite the hour, I felt no sleepier. Needing something to do, I was making myself some green tea when I thought I heard a sound. My heart leapt into my throat, and I abandoned the kettle immediately, pacing towards the hallway as I cocked my head. It sounded like the gravel walk. I didn't dare hope — except I did. My heart was thundering as I stared down my front door, willing it to open...

...and open it did.

There, framed by the night, stood the one and only Remus Silverstreak.

My knees wobbled, and I forced myself forward, throwing my arms around him as I kissed his face. "You're back," I gasped, breathless. Tears flooded down my cheeks, unbidden, and I didn't care. I buried my fingers in his shirt and inhaled his scent, trying to confirm in my mind that this was

real. I hadn't accidentally fallen asleep while waiting and started to dream. "You're back. You're really back."

I heard footsteps in the house behind me. "Remus," I heard Fiona murmur, her voice thick with emotion. "Oh, Remus. I'm so happy to see you."

"I'm back," Remus agreed. I could hear the smile in his voice, even with my face buried in his neck. He gathered me close in his arms, and I realized the man felt different. It wasn't just my sheer relief to have him back; his power felt different. I didn't have a word for it, except it felt like *more*. He simply took up more space in the room without being any larger physically. He was stronger, somehow... more. "Can I come inside?"

I couldn't help but laugh, releasing my death grip to take a step back. He rumbled happily, finally able to close the front door. As soon as his hands were free, I was back in his space, cupping his stubbly cheeks in my palms as I gave him as many kisses as possible.

"I'll make tea," Fiona murmured, and I smiled again, tears still rolling down my face. All was right with the world again.

IT TOOK another hour to get the tea made — Bane had come back with Remus. Fifteen minutes later, Nic and Eli had shown up, having decided not to stay in Louisiana. They were always welcome in our home. Always.

We'd moved to the living room so I could sit next to Remus, nestled against his side as Fiona made sure everyone had a cup. She'd tried to get cookies out, too, but it was almost four in the morning. None of us were hungry — not yet, anyway.

"Marnet is dead," Remus confirmed as we all settled, one arm wrapped tightly around me. "It took several hours. Once the fighting began, he kept trying to hide and ambush me."

"Coward," Fiona grumbled, holding her cup to her lips.

Remus offered a tired smile but did not comment on the matter. "I'm not sure what he promised his allies, but at least half of them had retreated and withdrawn from the fight within the first hour. Unfortunately, some of those wolves were killed. That was never the outcome I was hoping for. I'd have preferred it remained between just the two of us, but..." He shook his head. "I don't think Marnet ever intended to do anything but fight me, and it never mattered who got in the way."

I sighed, looking down into my cup. Marnet had thrown my stepsisters and half-brothers away the moment they had been less-than-useful to him, their loyalty until that very moment be damned. He'd thrown away girlfriends and supposed mates whenever they weren't convenient. He didn't care who he had to run over; he'd always been determined to get his way.

Remus cleared his throat. "Several of his loyalists also died, and unfortunately, we did lose one member of the Longbow pack and three from Silverstreak. Later in the week, Bane and I will visit their family members."

"Of course," I murmured, leaning close. I couldn't imagine what that must feel like. "Let me know if I can do anything to help." I didn't know most of the families personally, but I could arrange flowers or services — or whatever Remus wanted to do to commemorate those wolves.

He gave me a small smile, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "Thank you, Luna," he murmured. "The other casualty was York."

Fiona looked up from her cup, looking a little surprised. "York? York Rock?" she asked, taking in a breath.

Bane nodded solemnly. "York Rock," he agreed, refusing to meet anyone's eye. "He tried to interfere with Remus and Marnet when Remus had Marnet by the throat. I stopped him. He wouldn't relent."

Nic, who hadn't said anything until that point, reached over to squeeze the beta's shoulder. "You did what you had to do to defend your alpha," he rumbled, giving a single nod. "York decided to try to interfere with a challenge. No wolf in their right mind should do that."

"No one made him do anything," Eli muttered, looking more exhausted than anyone else in the living room. There were dark circles under his eyes. "Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

Remus snorted and shook his head. "He shouldn't have been involved at all," he agreed, "much less try to change the outcome of the challenge. Regardless, I think Bane and I will try to visit his sons to extend our regards soon. Maybe next week or the week after, once some of the shock has worn off. If we can avoid bad blood, that's exactly what I want to do."

Fiona nodded. "I suppose Kaden Rock will be the pack's new alpha now. He's young. I hope he's up for it."

"I was a year older when Dad died," Remus remarked, his expression wry. "We can only hope that York gave him the lessons he needs to lead the Shadow Rock pack."

"If he didn't, then I hope those boys learn from their father's mistakes,"

Fiona added, shaking her head. “Either way, I think your plan to try to keep the peace is a good one.” She paused. “I’ll get in touch with the council later today, but for now, I think we all should get some rest. It’s been a long, long day.”

I nodded, some of the adrenaline I’d felt finally starting to give way. My eyelids felt a bit heavier, but I didn’t want Remus out of my sight. “There’s plenty of room for everyone,” I added, nodding to Nic and Eli. “You’ve stayed with us before, so please make yourself at home.”

“Thank you,” Nic murmured, offering me a smile. “I think we’ll do just that.”

Collectively, we all started to get up, shuffling toward our respective rooms. Eli was the first to disappear, with Fiona and Nic not far behind. Fiona hung back for a moment, gently touching the older man’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re all right, Nic,” she whispered. “I really am.”

A little flicker of warmth sprang up in my chest, and I turned, giving them their privacy as I followed Remus back to our room.

REMUS’ first stop was the nursery, checking on both the children. They were still sleeping, blissfully unaware of the drama that had unfolded during the day. We probably only had an hour or two before they started waking up, but I still couldn’t dream of falling asleep.

Remus had even offered to let me go to bed while he showered with the promise he’d be there shortly, but I couldn’t imagine letting him out of my sight. I didn’t need a shower, but I didn’t care, stripping down to join him under the hot spray, running my fingers over every inch of skin while mapping out his bruises and cuts. I didn’t want to close my eyes. If I closed my eyes, I might wake to find that this was a dream, and I couldn’t live with it if this were a figment of my imagination.

Eventually, we made it to bed, and I couldn’t hold my tears in any longer. Once we were under the sheets, I buried my face in his chest and began to sob, the emotions shaking my entire body. Remus cooed gently, rubbing my back as he placed little kisses on my head as he tried to soothe me. “Luna. Luna, darling, it’s okay. I’m here. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

I sniffled and choked on a sob, slapping him on the chest half-heartedly. “Were you planning on telling me at all?” I demanded, my jaw aching as I tried not to weep openly. “What if you’d left home last night and never came

back? What if I had to wait until Bane, Nic, or someone else showed up and gave me their condolences — or worse? What if Marnet showed up at my door?”

Remus rumbled and cradled me a little closer. “I’d never, ever let that happen,” he growled, nuzzling my cheek. “I was going to tell you. I was just waiting for the right moment.”

“Right moment?” I scoffed. “You waited until the last possible moment.”

He made a sheepish noise, kissing my head again. “I suppose I might have,” he admitted. “I didn’t want to stress you out before the twins were born, and I didn’t want to distract you after they were born, either. I just...” He exhaled and shook his head. “... I didn’t have the nerve, I suppose. I’m sorry, Luna. I won’t keep anything like that from you again.”

“Damnit, Remus, you better not get challenged again,” I growled.

“Well, that’s the idea,” he agreed, “but I won’t keep important information from you again, even if I’m worried it will stress you out.”

“Thank you,” I sighed, finally looking up to kiss his chin. I paused and then wriggled closer, capturing his mouth for a much longer kiss, only pulling back when my lungs were screaming for air. “I love you, Remus. I’m so glad you’re home.”

He made a pleased noise, squeezing me tightly against his body. His palms spread against my back. “You were all I could think about. The night before — during the challenge. I knew I wouldn’t lose because I could not leave you and the boys. I had to return to you. There was no other option for me.”

I tried not to burst into a fresh wave of tears, touched by his declaration.

Remus shifted, wrapping two fingers under my chin to tip my face towards his. “I have a question I’d like to ask you,” he murmured.

“Of course,” I replied.

“Luna, I’ve wanted to ask you this for months — and now I finally can. Would you do me the honor of being my mate?”

My heart screeched to a halt before it felt like a supernova had occurred inside that beating organ. “Oh— I— Yes!” I stuttered, almost too shocked to speak. “Of course, Remus! I would happily accept you as my mate; there’s no one else I could imagine myself with.”

REMUS

Driskill Hotel

Austin, Texas

I hadn't seen Luna since last night at our rehearsal dinner. It was the first night we'd slept apart since I'd returned home from the challenge, but Luna had insisted. It was an old tradition, but it was supposed to generate luck for the happy couple, and if a little luck would help Luna feel better on her wedding day, then who was I to deny her?

The nerves began to creep in as the hour drew closer. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. Heather, the wedding planner, was a force of nature — she had to be, to deal with Fiona and Josie, and plan a wedding in less than six months. Now that the day had finally come, she was like the general of an army. Dark hair tied back in a crisp bun as she made sure the correct flowers landed on the appropriate tables, and no one bothered the cake decorator as he put the finishing touches on the lavish vanilla-and-berry cake and arranged the table.

Elsewhere in the Driskill Hotel, Luna, Tala, and our mothers were getting ready for the ceremony, but I didn't have much left to do. Restless, I left my suite, trotting downstairs to inspect the ceremony site. Within a minute, Bane appeared, grabbing my elbow.

“Want a drink?”

I couldn't help but laugh, giving him a sideways look. “Did the wedding planner tell you to get rid of me?”

Bane huffed softly, trying not to smile as he shrugged. “Might've,” he rumbled, nodding back towards the stairs. “C'mon. Go back to the suite before Heather yells at me again.”

I laughed and followed after my beta dutifully, having no desire to cross the women organizing my wedding day. After the door shut behind us, Bane pulled a flask from his jacket, offering me the little metal container.

“Is it the good stuff?” I asked, taking the flask and sniffing at the cap before taking a sip.

Bane rolled his eyes. “Of course it is,” he replied, his mouth quirking up. “It's your wedding day. None of the shitty human-grade alcohol for you.”

I grinned and took a swig, the burn rolling down my throat as I rumbled.

After a moment, I handed the flask back to my beta. “You think any of the hotel staff will notice the different drinks?”

“Nic has assured me he’s hosted events like this before,” Bane replied, shrugging a shoulder. “He says he has all the liquor under control.”

“Hm.” I motioned for him to pass the flask back. “Have you seen Seff today?”

“No.” Bane shrugged. “He’s officiating your wedding; he got licensed just for this day. He isn’t going to be late.” The man paused for a moment, scratching his chin. “And if he was, I’m sure Tala would castrate him and feed him his testicles for stressing Luna out.”

I couldn’t help but laugh again, taking a sip of the whiskey Bane had brought. “She really does have him by the balls, doesn’t she?”

“Mhm. Reckon he likes it that way, or he wouldn’t like Tala.”

I laughed heartily; I couldn’t argue with that logic. “How long until he officially asks her to join him?”

“Oh, days,” Bane replied, shrugging one shoulder. “Days. You see how he looks at her. And everyone gets all weird at a wedding.”

Handing him his flask back, I began to fiddle with my buttons. Bane sighed and tucked his little treasure away before stepping over, swatting at my hands. “Settle down,” he grunted. “You’re making this worse. You’d think the tailor would use sturdier buttons — she’s a shifter, too.”

“It’s fine,” I huffed, but I didn’t pull away.

“It’s crooked, Remus.”

“It’s *fine*.”

“Do you want to listen to your mother complain about your crooked collar in your wedding photos for the rest of your life?”

I relented and allowed my best man to continue fiddling. Once he was satisfied, he stepped back, nodding at his work. “Well. That’s the best I can do.”

“Thanks.” I paused, glancing back towards my bag. After a moment of rummaging, I pulled out a little wrapped package and handed it to Bane. “Here.”

He hummed, raising a brow as he unwrapped it... only to reveal a silver flask, the date etched on the front. Bane barked a laugh.

“I didn’t think you’d smuggle one in,” I explained, unable to contain my laughter. “It’s filled with your favorite bourbon. I got one, too.”

“Don’t be drunk at the altar, now,” Bane hummed, sampling his gift

anyway. “Luna’d never forgive me if I had to prop you up to say your vows.” He made a pleased noise as he drank, slapping my back with his free hand. “Let’s get you hitched, Rem.”

THE MONTHS of planning had paid off. The hotel’s ceremony venue had been done decadently with local greenery and flowers, transforming an already stately room into an otherworldly space. Even I felt transported as I walked down the aisle, flanked by my best man as we took our places in front of Seff. My mother sat in the front row next to her closest friend from the council, the two of them whispering furiously. She kept shooting me sideways glances and dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. Nic sat on Fiona’s other side, Eli next to him, and I wasn’t sure what was making my mother more emotional — my father’s presence or the sight of her only son standing at the altar. Even Arden, Lynn, and their children had accepted our invitation to attend.

After what felt like an eternity, Seff cleared his throat and asked all the guests to rise. The telltale music began to play, and I felt my skin prickle as I turned. Tala was the first to walk down the aisle, looking positively radiant in her navy-blue bridesmaid’s gown. She was beaming as she held her bouquet of deep blue and charming yellow flowers, pausing only to offer Seff a wink before taking her place on the other side of the aisle.

My friend Elena came next; Rory and Ryland were propped up in a little white carriage behind her, sporting matching tuxedos. The rings were tied to a pillow by their feet as she gently guided them down the aisle, smiling back at the babies as they cooed and hummed. Neither let out a wail or a cry, their chubby faces bright and wondering. My heart felt like it swelled, and then the music changed as the woman of the hour appeared at the end of the aisle.

With Josie guiding her by the arm, Luna began her procession down the aisle. She wore a stunning, lacy wedding dress — she’d told me she wanted something simple but elegant and gave me absolutely no other hints. The dip of the neckline extenuated her curves, the slender dress clinging in all the right places before flaring out in a short train behind her. Her dark hair was done up in a bun decorated with flowers; her veil was held on with a glimmering tiara.

She could not look more like a princess if she tried.

‘You look amazing,’ I mouthed to her as Josie handed her off, responding

to the question Seff asked. I could barely process what he was speaking.

Luna's cheeks went a little pink as she smiled; she might have responded, but Seff began the ceremony in earnest, thanking our guests for being there to witness our union. Honestly, I could barely comprehend his words until it was time to recite our vows. "Remus," Seff said, flashing me an encouraging bright smile. "I understand you've written your vows."

I nodded, pulling a little piece of paper out of my chest pocket. My heart began to race again, my eyes flickering between my beautiful bride and the words I'd written.

"Luna," I said, my voice steadier than I felt. "Today, surrounded by our friends and family, I choose you to be my wife. I am proud to be your husband and join my life with yours. I vow to support you, inspire you, and love you always. I promise never to lose our spark and always do the little things to make you happy. As we grow a family, I promise to work together, be equal partners in life, and remember the amazing person I married. You are my one and only, today and every day. I will love and honor you for all of the days of my life. I give you this ring as a symbol of my life."

Bane stepped forward to hand me the ring I'd chosen for Luna, and she held out one trembling hand, allowing me to slide the band onto her finger as her silver eyes glistened with tears.

"Luna," Seff said as I stepped back, "I understand you've also written your vows to Remus."

She nodded, taking a moment to sniff and dab at her eyes. She handed her bouquet back to Tala, who gave her a small piece of paper.

"As Oscar Wilde once said," she began, her gaze finding mine. "'You don't love someone for their looks, or their clothes, or their fancy car, but because they sing a song only you can hear.' Remus, you sing that song for me. You are my person; just your presence brings me joy. I look forward to waking up and spending each day with you. You are my sunshine, and you are what makes my world go round. You are more precious to me today than you were the day before, and you will be more cherished tomorrow than you are today. Please wear this ring as a symbol of my eternal love for you, a love that transcends all our yesterdays, all our todays, and all our tomorrows."

I felt a lump well up in my throat and was grateful I wasn't expected to speak as I held out my hand, allowing her to slip the wedding band onto my finger. The weight felt foreign but welcome — a certain sort of security.

Seff beamed at us both. "Remus, Luna, it is my utmost honor to

pronounce you husband and wife. Remus, you may now kiss the bride.”

I grinned and stepped forward, wrapping a hand around the small of her back as I dipped Luna back, kissing her like it was the very first time. The crowd whooped and cheered for us as my blood sang with joy. She was mine. Luna was finally mine.

THE REST of the night passed in a blur of happy flashes. We took our photos at the golden hour, Tala and Josie bouncing the twins when they weren't being featured in our pictures. By the time we returned to the hotel, the space had been transformed from ceremony to wedding reception — it looked like a damn good time is what it looked like.

When it was time for the wedding party to make speeches, Bane's name was introduced first. To my great surprise, he even got up in front of the crowd, accepting the microphone. He looked as nervous as I'd ever seen him, but the beta's voice remained steady and calm; he looked more beta today than I'd seen in a long, long time. Just seeing him here made me feel warmer.

My beta cleared his throat. “Hello, everyone; my name is Bane. You may not know me, but Remus and I go way back, since high school. We have been mischief makers together since the very first day we met — detention.” He paused as the crowd laughed, and some of the tension seeped from his shoulders.

“Despite our best efforts, today has gone off without a hitch. A special thanks to everyone who made today possible. I was supposed to read a few words from well-wishers who could not join us today, but someone made a poor assumption that I could actually read.

“I'm sure their kind words are right, though. Remus is a hell of a guy and a damn good alpha. I guess I first knew that on the day we met. There he was, in the back of the classroom, doing his best to impress the senior who'd had the misfortune of being sent to detention with us. And he had only been there a few minutes! None of these ventures ever lasted long.

“At least until he met Luna, and thank goodness for that. Remus, I hate to tell you this, but I have seen your ex-whatever-you-want-to-call-them, and the best woman won out. No question about it. She looks stunning today, by the way.

“Before I hand this back, and I'd like to do that as soon as possible, I would like to offer you both a bit of advice. Remus, keep treating Luna like

the treasure that she is. She is priceless. Luna, always remember that Remus loves you and could not do it without you. Seriously, I have seen him without you, and that was a mess. This is the best version I've seen yet.

"I wish you all best. Your life together will surely be a strange new chapter for both of you." He turned back to face the rest of our guests. "Now, if you would all join me in toasting the happy couple, Remus and Luna."

People whooped and raised their glasses. Next to me, Luna dabbed at tears, a bright smile on her face. "That was the nicest thing Bane has ever said about me," she whispered.

"That's the most I've ever heard him say at once," I whispered back, equally surprised. "And I've known him over a decade."

LUNA MIGHT HAVE ASKED her mother to walk her down the aisle, but she allowed her father the honor of the father-daughter dance. When it was my turn, my mother and I took to the floor. Her eyes were bright as she held me close, our feet moving automatically to the music.

"You look stunning today, Remus," she murmured. "I'm so proud of you — and I know Remington would be, too."

I hadn't expected her to bring up my dad, and my heart caught; this was precisely the sort of moment I missed him the most, but in a way, I felt like he was already here. I missed him, but the ache had changed into something a little less painful. "Thank you," I murmured, giving her a little squeeze. "That means a lot."

Perhaps I was just feeling a little more generous than usual. You only got married once, after all. It was a special day.

The music went on a little longer before Fiona spoke up. "I just want you to know, Remus — you've grown a lot in the past year. You've grown as a man and as an alpha. I'm proud to call you the leader of Silverstreak and the company." Her smile grew. "And oh, my grandbabies. What a gift you've given me. I'm so happy to call you my son, my love."

I huffed gently as I spun her. "You aren't half bad yourself," I teased, finally winning a laugh from her. "Don't look now, but I think one Nic Archer would like to ask you for a dance."

Before she could argue, I stepped to one side, allowing my father to cut in with a wink. While other couples took to the dance floor, I found my way to the open bar, spotting Eli already standing there. "Thanks for coming, Eli," I

greeted him, waiting for the bartender to get my drink.

Eli turned, leaning against the bar. “A party’s a party,” he replied, but a little smile was on his face. “I’m glad you didn’t die, so... seemed like a good reason to come.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, sipping at my whiskey once the bartender handed it over. “I’m glad for that too,” I replied.

“I thought maybe we could hang out a little more,” Eli said, looking into his drink. “If you have time, but I’m sure you have some fancy honeymoon to go on first.”

I laughed again; I hadn’t felt this light in years. “I’d like that, Eli. I’d really, really like that.”

LUNA

Silverstreak Ranch Home

Travis County, Texas

Eleven months later

I stared out into our yard at the lavish decorations. Heather had done such a good job planning our wedding on relatively short notice that I'd decided to hire her again to plan the Moonmate ceremony. I'd been up in the air about hiring a shifter as our wedding planner at first, but again and again, I was grateful Fiona had pushed that particular decision last year. Goodness, I knew next to nothing when it came to planning an extravagant party, and I needed a bit of help when it came to dealing with Fiona's expectations. I didn't want to let the pack down, either.

I hadn't wanted to host anything yet, much less something as important as a Moonmate ceremony. My boys were eighteen months old and motoring around all on their own; they weren't quite as dependent on me as they were when they were infants, but I felt no freer. They were Remus' sons, after all. Rory had a wild sense of curiosity, and Ryland wanted to be wherever his brother was. The moment you take your eye off them, they might start wandering off.

Still, Fiona had insisted. She argued it would help Remus foster some goodwill with the surrounding packs, especially after all the turmoil that occurred in the months prior. I couldn't argue with her logic — he was in a strong position, and he had done well since Silverstreak had finally and totally superseded Lupus Claw.

So here we were, as summer tried to shift into fall, staring at a harvest-themed garden party meant for the young men and women looking for their fated mates.

"I feel a bit weird about this," I finally admitted to Remus once he'd given his speech to welcome our guests and allow them to mingle. "I mean, we aren't fated mates. I even *had* a fated mate and rejected him."

Remus hummed softly, handing me a glass of wine. "So?"

"So...?" I gave him a confused look, even as I accepted the glass. "Aren't

we... I don't know, being sort of misleading?"

He laughed and shook his head. "We met at a Moonmate ceremony, didn't we?"

"I mean, yes, but we didn't fall instantly in love or anything like that."

Remus raised a brow. "And we didn't promise instantaneous romance to anyone, either. This is just an opportunity to meet your future mate. I might still have a few reservations about the fated mate business, however — I can't argue that we met at one of these parties, and I thank my lucky stars every day that we did."

I flushed, swatting at his shoulder as my cheeks went pink. "Charmer," I murmured, finally taking a sip from my glass. "Go mingle with your guests. I think Seff wanted to talk to you about something."

"I'll bet he does," Remus murmured, leaning over to kiss my cheek before joining the crowd and finding his friend.

I BEGAN to relax after my conversation with my husband, mingling with our guests as well. To my surprise, both Kaden and Jason Rock attended the event, greeting Remus with respect. I'd been worried they'd try to start something with Bane, and though they seemed to avoid the pack beta, they'd been no trouble at all. Kaden had been quite funny when we chatted. If not for the name and the matching eyes, I wouldn't have believed he was York's son.

Gith's youngest son, Gavin, also attended our party. When I met him at the bar, he was standing by himself. "All of my brothers have already chosen mates," he admitted to me privately, grateful for the drink I'd offered him. "It feels strange being the odd one out. But nothing has felt right."

I smiled gently, touching his elbow. "That's okay," I reassured him. "It's good that you aren't trying to force something that isn't right for you. I'm sure that perfect person will show up eventually."

He'd given me a genuine smile. "My father said you were Remus' better half. I wasn't really sure what that was supposed to mean, but it's starting to make a lot more sense."

I laughed, startled Gith would have anything nice to say about me. "You're flattering me. I should go see some of our other guests, but please let me know if you want me to introduce you to anyone."

My night kept improving after that. Athena and Artemis had both

attended, and to my surprise, they weren't glued to one another. Artemis had found some girls from other packs to chat with, and though she hadn't appeared to find a mate, she seemed to be having the time of her life. As long as she was happy, that was all I could ask for.

Athena seemed considerably more nervous. I was about to approach her when I saw her go stiff. I sucked in a sharp breath, bracing for the worst as I followed her gaze across the courtyard — only to see Jason Rock staring back at her, looking equally as thunderstruck. *Ah... I wonder if I got that same deer-in-the-headlights look?*

Hiding my smile behind my hand, I weaved my way over to my stepsister, touching her wrist gently. She jumped, a hand falling to her chest as she made a startled noise. "Luna!" she gasped, surprise morphing into a little frown. "You startled me."

I chuckled. "Would you like me to introduce you to Jason Rock?" I tipped my head in the direction she'd just been looking.

Athena paused, her tongue wetting her lips as her gaze darted back towards the young man. "You know him?" she asked, sounding as uncertain as I'd ever heard her.

"I do." I gave a little nod, taking her by the elbow. "C'mon, we'll go say hello. It's easier than making up an excuse, right?"

Athena babbled some sort of argument but followed after me anyway, touching her hair as she tried to tame any frizzes — of course, there were none. She hadn't a single hair out of place. Not a single eyelash, even.

Ultimately, I didn't need to introduce them at all. Once Jason realized we were working our way towards him, he marched right up, still looking like he'd just seen the world for the first time as he introduced himself. It was easy to excuse myself and slip away after that. *I never thought I'd witness two fated mates meeting. I guess you learn something new every day!*

AS THE PARTY began to wind down, some of the wolves coupling off, I found Eli on the very edge of our property, staring off into the night.

"Eli?" I called, not wanting to startle my new brother-in-law.

He glanced over his shoulder, stepping to one side for me to join him. "Hi, Luna," he rumbled, looking back at the stars.

I followed his gaze, smiling. We have an excellent view of the night sky from our property. "Are you enjoying yourself?" I asked, aware there was a

high chance he'd give me a grumpy answer.

Eli shrugged one shoulder. "It's not really my scene," he admitted, finally looking at me. "You throw a nice party, and the alcohol is great, but..." He shook his head. "I don't really buy into the 'fated mate' business, if you don't mind me saying."

"You sound just like your brother," I replied, unable to help but laugh at the admission.

For the first time since we'd met, I heard the younger Archer laugh, the corner of his mouth tipping up. "You know, I do like it here. I thought the heat would be too much, but..." He trailed off, motioning at the land around us. "There's so much more open space. I've enjoyed getting to know Texas during our visits."

"I'm glad to hear that," I hummed. Given the way I saw Nic looking at Fiona earlier in the night, I had a sneaking suspicion we would be seeing a lot more of the senior Archer in the coming months. "You know you're welcome to stay whenever you're in the area. Remus enjoys having you around."

Eli eyed me, raising a dark brow. "And you?"

I laughed again. "I happen to think you're quite a nice house guest, even if you pretend to be the grumpiest man alive." I heard someone call my name and glanced back over towards the lights. I gave Eli a little nudge. "Why don't you come back to the party for a little longer? If you're sick of it in the next thirty minutes, I'll make up some excuse about the twins, and you can escape."

Eli looked thoughtful for a moment before he nodded, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "You have a deal, Luna Silverstreak."

As we returned to the gathering, I found my husband and leaned up on my toes to kiss his cheek. "Are you having a good time?" I asked. He laughed, returning my affection.

"Of course I am. I love a good party."

"What did Seff want?"

"Exactly what you think he wants," Remus replied, waggling his brows. "He's going to officially propose to Tala but wanted to make sure he wouldn't cause some strife between our packs."

I couldn't help but giggle. "As if," I replied. "Tala would make your life hell if you tried to make her feel guilty about joining the Red Paw pack."

"Right? That's what I said," Remus huffed, laughing. "I'm glad Seff and I are close again; I really am. I don't mind dealing with the insecurities if that's

the price.”

I smiled up at him, leaning into Remus’ warmth. “I think Athena might have found her fated mate,” I revealed to him. “Jason Rock. They — Oh, Remus. Look. Look at Eli,” I gasped, my eyes going wide.

After my prompting, Eli returned to the bar. After receiving his drink, he was standing only a few feet away, looking like he’d been shot or struck by lightning. Remus took a sharp breath as he followed my gaze, both of us tracing his brother’s line of sight to a young woman chatting with someone on the other side of the gathering.

When I looked up, Remus’ pleased smile had morphed into a shit-eating grin; he looked down at me and wiggled his brows.

“Was that—?”

“That is the look of a man who just found his mate, Remus,” I sighed, patting my husband’s arm. As he looked over at me with a look of wonder, I smiled at him warmly, leaning up to press a kiss to his lips. “And if one couple manages to have a fraction of the love we share, we’ve held a very successful ceremony indeed.”

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ALPHA'S REDEMPTION

CHOSEN BY THE ALPHA: BOOK 3

Skye Wilson

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